

FILM REVIEW ESSAY

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DIVERSITY WITHIN YORUBA-LANGUAGE VIDEO FILMS

Olu Olowogemo. *Bosun Omo Yankee*. 2011. Nigeria. Yoruba, with English subtitles. Nigeria. High-Waves Video Mart. 275 min. No price reported.

Funke Akindele and Abbey Lanre. *Omo Getto*. 2011. Nigeria. Yoruba, with English subtitles. Olasco Films Nigeria Ltd. 174 min. No price reported.

Tunde Kelani. *Ma'ami*. 2011. Nigeria. English, Yoruba, with English subtitles. Main-frame Productions. 92 min. No price reported.

After two decades of prolific growth, Nigeria's video film industry, commonly called Nollywood, has garnered significant scholarly attention. The emergence of Nollywood studies is indebted to several seminal surveys, including Jonathan Haynes and Onokome Okome's *Nigerian Video Films* (2000), Foluke Ogunleye's *African Video Film Today* (2003), and Mahir Saul and Ralph Austen's *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (2010). What is called for today, however, are investigations focused on the great diversity among the myriad titles that appear for sale across West Africa every year. Language has offered a natural means of categorizing these videos. It is true that a Yoruba-language film follows a distinctly different social life from screenplay to first screening compared to, say, one of Kannywood's Hausa-language films. But more important, each film responds to and carries forward a particular cinematic tradition. In the case of contemporary Yoruba-language video film, Wole Ogundele has argued convincingly that we might find its antecedents in the *alarinjo* traveling folk opera of the recent past. The films reviewed here—Olu Olowogemo's *Bosun Omo Yankee* (2011), Funke Akindele and Abbey Lanre's *Omo Getto* (2011), and Tunde Kelani's *Ma'ami* (2011)—complicate the notion that Yoruba video film represents a monolithic body of videos. In the rapidly changing environment of Nigerian video film, what has emerged is a splintering of productions, differing in production value, financial investment, target audience, and aesthetic form. While the films selected here demonstrate the diversity of Yoruba-language video film today, they do share a thematic preoccupation with Nigeria's place amidst the wider global cultural economy.

We might ask how each constructs its narrative and positions its viewers around images and ideas of global and local culture, especially popular cultural forms like music and sports.

Written, produced, and directed by Olu Olowogemo, *Bosun Omo Yankee* is the director/actor's only film to date. Bosun (Olu Olowogemo), once a destitute young artist plucking his guitar by the roadside, now returns from America as an international pop star, bringing with him unimaginable wealth, an American swagger, and an ostentatious sense of pride. He refuses even to perform for his own community and rejects his family's ultimatum to build a home in the village or remove Amubieya, the family name, from his own. Indeed, Bosun gladly renames himself according to his stage persona, Omo Yankee (Yankee Boy), donning sunglasses, flashy gold necklaces, and an American flag tee-shirt. Meanwhile, Bosun's childhood friend Olanrewaju is deported from America under suspicion of fraudulently appropriating \$15 million. With little proof or due process, the Nigerian authorities detain Lanre for the crime and even charge him with "tarnishing the nation's image abroad." Lanre's mother and wife are unable to convince Bosun to post bail for his friend and must enlist the help of a sympathetic detective who fights for Lanre's release. Bosun's meteoric rise and Lanre's demise suggest the film's melodramatic aesthetics, whereby reality is recast as a moral struggle between virtue and vice. We learn that Bosun's wealth and fame are the fruits of an occult pact with a sorcerer, whereas Lanre's faith in prayer only grows with his time in jail.

When all hope for Lanre's freedom seems lost, two representatives of the Harejan Company in America fortuitously arrive to acquit him of all charges, having discovered a phone message between Bosun and Lanre that implicates Bosun in the disappearance of the \$15 million. Lanre is to be exonerated and restored to his former position with the Harejan Company. This triumph of virtue is paired with the downfall of Bosun. The police interrupt his highly anticipated public performance to apprehend him and bring him before the court. The judge confiscates his wealth and sentences him to six months of hard labor for his "attempt to ruin the image of this nation," letting this serve, he says, as a deterrent to others who go abroad to misbehave. Outside the court, Bosun's father disowns him and his wife and personal security chief abscond with his money before it can be confiscated. In a moment of utter destitution, Bosun pleads for Lanre's blessing and forgiveness. Remembering his Christian obligation to forgive, Lanre recites a brief blessing before departing for the airport where he, his wife, and mother will fly back to America.

Bosun Omo Yankee bears the marks of a hasty production. Many scenes are shot in predictable interior spaces like living rooms and offices using a stationary camera; costume and set design, such as the makeshift prison cell, seem haphazardly assembled; the rhythm drags along and much of the narrative unfolds through dialogue rather than action. However, to dismiss

these characteristics as flaws ignores the fact that, “flawed” or not, they are the elements with which the film constructs its cinematic world.

While Nollywood’s stories, sounds, and images have become increasingly sophisticated in recent years, there still exists a considerable range of production values. Funke Akindele’s *Omo Getto*, produced by an established studio called Olasco Films, is an example of the higher-quality productions that audiences are demanding more and more. The film centers on a young loving couple with a promising future, Ayomide (Funke Akindele) and Yanju (Taiwo Ibikunle), who are living comfortably in Victoria Garden City, one of Lagos’s havens for the wealthy. The couple’s carefree lifestyle, however, is punctuated by Ayomide’s inexplicable fits of rage set off by the slightest provocation. Her emotional distress puzzles her friends and family who know her as a beautiful, sincere, and caring woman. When she catches her friend Kayinsola’s adulterous boyfriend with another woman, she is possessed with anger and attacks the man, only to be beaten and hospitalized, signaling to Yanju and his family the severity of her condition. Help for Ayomide does not come soon enough. She and Yanju discuss how she might regain his family’s approval, but the argument escalates and she breaks a vase over Yanju’s head, sending him into a coma. Ayomide evades arrest by going into hiding. Where? We do not know.

On the other side of town in one of Lagos’s notoriously insalubrious slums, we are introduced to *awon omo getto* (the Ghetto Girls), a female gang of pranksters and petty criminals known in the ‘hood for their bravado and audacious attire. The gang members are strong comedic figures in the film with monikers like “Busty” and “Soldier” to match their personas. The ghetto also has its own popular personalities such as Mama-Onimama (Someone Else’s Mother), a dancer at the local music hall, and her philandering husband, Baba-Onibaba (Someone Else’s Father), who sings elaborate praise songs for bottles of Guinness and lusts after neighborhood prostitutes. The representation of the ghetto’s spaces is also worth noting. With a remarkable series of crane shots and a sophisticated manipulation of the camera’s movements, the film brings us into the streets of the ‘hood and makes us familiar with its open-air beer parlors, alleyways, latrines, “face-me-I-face-you” tenements, and other public spaces. This is unusual for Nollywood, which is known for its often stagey interior settings. Furthermore, by taking viewers directly to the slums, the film draws attention to disparities between the most affluent and most impoverished neighborhoods in Lagos. As Jonathan Haynes has observed, Nollywood filmmakers have been restricted in the past to filming within Lagos’s isolated wealthy enclaves because of audience expectations for spectacular displays of wealth, budget limitations, and the difficulty of controlling a scene shot in the streets.

Considering its stark contrast with life behind the walls of Victoria Garden City, no one would expect to find Ayomide in the ghetto, making it the perfect hideout. As “Lefty” she gains a reputation for her wit and verbal

abuse, often targeting neighborhood toughs like “Sola Star.” When a clique of attractive young college students spoils the ghetto girls’ night out at the hip-hop club, the gang gets even by later accosting the women in the street. After insulting the students’ expensive clothes and airs of superiority, the Ghetto girls dump a latrine bucket over their heads. Their antics soon get out of hand and they are apprehended by the police. At the police station, Lefty is identified as Ayomide and is asked to answer for assaulting Yanju. But when Ayomide’s mother, Adebisi, arrives at the station, Lefty refuses to acknowledge her, insisting that everyone in the ’hood knows she is the child of Baba-Onibaba and Mama-Onimama. In a complicated plot twist, it is revealed that Ayomide and Lefty are identical twins separated at birth, and that only the atonement of the local *babalawo* priest can ameliorate their fits of rage.

Omo Getto is unique for its sympathetic and humorous depiction of the ghetto and its residents as a thriving community, lifting the ghetto above representations of indigence, violence, and social corruption, which are often the selling points of other ’hood films. As the teaser on the cover states, “The people you refer to as dregs of the society sometimes rise from grass to grace, fumbling and gambling between good and bad, justifying their existence with criminal activities. However, Ghetto life could be a rough life but there are lots of good things from the Ghetto.” *Omo Getto* is also notable as a film written and directed by female filmmakers. The number of films produced by women has been on the rise in recent years, though it is still unclear whether these productions will significantly redefine existing conventions and representations, especially representations of women.

Tunde Kelani has been producing video films for more than two decades and is perhaps the most respected and accomplished Yoruba filmmaker in Nigeria today. His films are distinct from mainstream Nollywood in many ways, including their use of complex Yoruba language play (*Yoruba ijinle*) and their concern for traditional Yoruba culture. Moreover, his attention to the social and political problems facing Nigerians (government corruption, movie piracy, land grabbing, and AIDS/HIV) has earned him the nickname “the camera with a conscience.” Kelani’s latest film, *Ma’ami*, is based on Femi Osofisan’s novel of the same title and was recently featured in the 19th New York African Film Festival. In this film, Kashimawo (Wole Ojo) is a famed footballer playing for the big bucks with Arsenal in the English Premier League. As the 2010 World Cup approaches, Kashi is called up by the Nigerian national team, the Super Eagles, but as he returns home he is haunted by memories of the poverty of his childhood, his mother’s death, and the mysterious absence of his father, memories he cannot easily put to rest.

The film’s narrative advances through a series of flashbacks to Kashi’s childhood in Abeokuta under the loving care of his mother (Funke Akin-

dele), who scrapes by as a petty trader, barely able to afford her son's school fees. On his tenth birthday, young Kashi (Ayomide Abatti) pleads for a bit of meat in his stew, and his mother resolves to go to whatever lengths necessary to provide her son with this small pleasure. She washes corpses at the mortuary before the break of dawn, but, failing to raise enough money, begins concocting stories to cozen money from sympathetic bus passengers and pedestrians, finally resorting to begging from strangers. Kashi and his mother, in their search for meat, are repeatedly led back to Lafenwa Market, where Kashi learns from his mother that in life "some want to eat, some will be eaten, [and] others stand by watching and clapping." Shot in a manner that captures the vibrant colors, movement, and subtle dangers of any Nigerian marketplace, Lafenwa becomes a symbol of the ups and downs of mundane life in Abeokuta, the catastrophic losses but also the fortuitous windfalls and that might befall anyone at any time. When two wealthy men, for instance, discover Kashi's mother at the butcher's shop scraping meat from cast-off bones, they offer to buy Kashi's birthday meat while other traders who have learned of her plight stack bags of produce at her feet. Mother and son pass on their good fortune, pressing naira notes into the hands of beggars on their way home. Kashi's mother instructs him that "kindness is like a baton in a relay race: once you receive it, you must pass it on." However, on the last stretch of their commute home, Kashi's mother dies tragically when their bus collides with an oncoming truck. The gravity of her words is never lost on Kashi, who later in life repeats the same phrase as he makes a celebrity appearance at a Lagos orphanage where he makes a sizable donation. The mother's wisdom and the orphanage scene represent instances of "edutainment," or scenes of educational information embedded within the film's narrative. These scenes are not only characteristic of Kelani's filmmaking, but are also popular with audiences who take pleasure in stories that simultaneously entertain and instruct. The director of the orphanage, for example, comments explicitly on the changing attitudes toward adoption in Nigeria and the need to reverse associated stigmas.

The mysterious absence of Kashi's father, Otunba, is felt throughout as a subtext to his childhood flashbacks. Believing Kashi old enough to learn the true identity of his father, Kashi's mother leads him to a mansion in Abeokuta's Government Reservation Area where, upon sneaking into the compound, they discover an occult shrine and Kashi's older twin brother, Akorede, under Otunba's spell. As an adult, Kashi returns to this compound to find his ailing father near death, unable to speak. He introduces himself to Otunba as "the child you didn't get to sacrifice" and snatches from him the evil charm that is the source of his occult power. Otunba dies before Kashi's eyes. The confrontation with his father allows Kashi to lay to rest his personal turmoil and dedicate himself wholeheartedly to representing his nation in the World Cup. In an impassioned gesture of loyalty to mother and to country, Kashi visits his mother's grave to dedicate all his achieve-

ments in life to her. Then with a hand over his heart and the words, “I love Nigeria,” he sets out for the Super Eagles training camp.

The films under review all present Nigeria as multiply entangled with the international community and global cultural economy. Divergent as they may be in other regards, the films are remarkably similar for their preoccupation with Nigeria’s place in the world. In *Bosun Omo Yankee*, the anxiety that Nigeria’s national image is tarnished by acts of fraud abroad leads to Lanre’s incarceration and lends moral justification to Bosun’s eventual demise. In *Ma’ami*, the World Cup serves as the venue in which Nigeria might prove its status in the world and Kashi’s personal dilemma is only amplified by the expectations placed on him as the nation’s star footballer. Finally, as Jonathan Haynes has noted, Nollywood film production relies heavily upon generic conventions, in part as a mode of marketability. *Bosun Omo Yankee* and *Omo Getto* suggest a generic trend oriented around hip-hop and youth culture. Whereas hip-hop culture is represented as a local phenomenon and principally as a symbol of Nigerian youth in *Omo Getto*, it is a sign of Bosun Omo Yankee’s alienation from his community. When Bosun seeks to distinguish himself from local artists, he recites the names of his American associates, rappers like Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. Still, each film derives its appeal from the playfulness and outrage marking their depictions of global and local cultural aesthetics.

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