

Interview with Tunde Kelani

Tunde Onikoyi

Abstract: In this interview with the Nigerian filmmaker, Tunde Kelani, film scholar Tunde Onikoyi explores the universe of Kelani's cinematic vision, particularly as it relates to *Thunderbolt* (2002) and *Dazzling Mirage* (2014). Although produced twelve years apart, what binds them is a common humanitarian narrative temperament. Onikoyi and Kelani discuss his films in broader terms, exploring literary references, Kelani's interest in health, and how cinema convey his creative tendencies. The interlocutors investigate the effects of "magun," male chauvinism, and patriarchal idiosyncrasies in contemporary Nigeria. Kelani shares his filmmaking vision, and reflects on the future of Nigerian cinema in framing African story-telling.

Résumé: Dans cet entretien avec le cinéaste nigérian Tunde Kelani, Tunde Onikoyi explore l'univers de la vision cinématographique de Kelani, notamment en ce qui concerne *Thunderbolt* (2002) et *Dazzling Mirage* (2014). Bien que produit à douze ans d'intervalle, ce qui lie ces œuvres est un tempérament narratif humanitaire commun. Onikoyi et Kelani discutent de ses films en termes plus larges, explorant les références littéraires, l'intérêt de Kelani pour la santé et la façon dont le cinéma transmet ses tendances créatives. Les interlocuteurs étudient les effets du « magun », du chauvinisme masculin et des particularités patriarcales dans le Nigeria contemporain. Kelani partage sa vision cinématographique et spéculé sur l'avenir du cinéma nigérian dans l'encadrement des récits africains.

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Resumo: Nesta entrevista ao realizador nigeriano Tunde Kelani, Tunde Onikoyi, estudioso acadêmico de cinema, explora o universo cinematográfico de Kelani, em especial no que diz respeito a *Thunderbolt* (2002) e *Dazzling Mirage* (2014). Ainda que tenham sido produzidos com doze anos de intervalo, estes dois filmes têm em comum uma atmosfera narrativa de caráter humanitário. Onikoyi e Kelani conversam sobre os seus filmes em termos abrangentes, explorando referências literárias, o interesse de Kelani por questões de saúde, e o modo como o cinema lhe permite transmitir as suas tendências criativas. Entrevistador e entrevistado analisam as consequências da prática antiadulterio do “magun”, do machismo e das idiossincrasias patriarcais da Nigéria contemporânea. Além disso, Kelani dá a conhecer a sua visão sobre a realização cinematográfica e reflete sobre o futuro papel do cinema nigeriano na estruturação dos modos narrativos em África.

Keywords: Nollywood; Tunde Kelani; African culture; modernity; story-telling; auteur; adaptation

Introduction

Tunde Kelani is the preeminent Nigerian filmmaker, one of the most distinguished directors on the African continent. His cinematographic endeavors come under the aegis of Mainframe Television and Film Production, which is situated in the heart of Lagos, Nigeria. His films are considered to be important works of substance, referenced as having contributed to transforming the culture of the film industry in Nigeria. His sojourns to various film festivals and workshops, as well as his collaboration with other film enthusiasts both locally and internationally, have earned him a reputation that distinguishes him clearly from other filmmakers, as one who is serious minded and whose works represent the much desired “highhandedness” (Jeyifo 2010:598) that is absent from the works of many of his peers. This highhandedness and sophistication that permeate his cinematic oeuvre have differentiated him from other Nollywood filmmakers, a designation he has vehemently resisted because of the style, quality, and the conditions that have distinguished his various productions (Adesokan 2009; Haynes 2016). Unable to avoid the term “Nollywood,” he has described himself conversely as the “other Nollywood” (Harrow 2017:18).

Tunde Kelani is fondly referred to as “TK.” He was born on February 26, 1948, in the city of Lagos. His parents were both from the Ijaye Kukude clan in Abeokuta. His father was an advocate of the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, “the then premier of the Western Region” (Haynes 2016:115) who introduced free education in Nigeria and also established the first television station. Tunde Kelani benefitted from Awolowo’s free education system when he was sent off to Abeokuta to live with his grandfather. His early exposure to and participation in all the cultural activities that took place in the city steeped him in Yoruba culture, which became the predominant

backdrop upon which his films are built. Jonathan Haynes states, “His [Kelani’s] grandfather was the *Balogun*, a high chief of his community. The family was predominantly Muslim, but Christians were living in their compound too, and the indigenous Yoruba religious and cultural practices were still strong. Egungun ancestral masquerades and other performers would come to pay their respects and perform in their courtyard, and Tunde got to know them” (2016:115).

As a child, Tunde Kelani was already well versed in the Yoruba language and constantly read aloud to his grandfather (who was not literate) the novels of D.O Fagunwa and other Yoruba writers, by the light of a hurricane lantern. These works of literature (among others) have remained valuable sources for his film adaptations to date; this sets him apart from his peers, as the use of literary sources is not particularly prevalent among the majority of Nollywood filmmakers. Images of Kelani’s late night readings to his grandfather were alluded to in his film adaptation of Professor Femi Osofisan’s biographical novella, *Maami* (1994; of the same title), in 2011.

In elementary school Tunde Kelani discovered photography and purchased his first camera (Soetan 2018:4). Upon entering high school, he purchased a Kodak 127 and started taking more serious photographs. By the time he finished high school, he was already armed with a more sophisticated camera, Halina 35 b X, his first 35mm camera, which helped him begin his career in photography; he became a photographer while working for the veteran Nigerian photographer Dotun Okunbanjo (Haynes 2007b:7).

In 1970, Tunde Kelani joined the (at that time) Western Nigerian Television as apprentice cameraman, working with professionals in the station’s film unit. Following his extensive experience as an amateur filmmaker, he entered the London Film School in 1976 to study cinematography for two years; he later returned to Nigeria and worked for the Nigerian Television Authority for another two years. Finally, he decided to practice as an independent filmmaker. Following the demise of celluloid, he decided to make films by using alternative technology, video technology. In 1992, Tunde Kelani established his production company, “Main Frame Film and Television Productions Opomulero”; since then he has produced a significant number of films, such as *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile (Part 1, 2 & 3)* (1993–1995), which highlight issues of land fraud, and *Ayo Ni Mofe* (1994) which addresses issues of love and mental health. Other films include *Campus Queen* (2004), *Saworoide* (1999), *Agogo Ewo* (2002), *Arugba* (2008), and *Kosegbe* (1995). All of these films explore political and postcolonial problems of leadership and neo-colonial tendencies; they are highly rated films through which, according to Akin Adesokan, “Kelani deploys Yoruba traditions in addressing issues of legitimacy and institutional checks of corruption” (2009:609). Firmly rooted within the Yoruba worldview, these films contain elements that suggests a universal appeal, as they meanwhile maintain a foothold in the political terrain of Nigeria and Africa, which allows his works to occupy a unique global space.

Kelani's approximation of the auteur (Haynes 2016; Onikoyi 2016d; Afolayan 2014) is not in doubt. His themes are unique with recognizable structure, familiar stars, and technical consistency; he prefers to produce films in the Yoruba language, which distinguishes his personal vision from that of other filmmakers. Other films which add to Tunde Kelani's oeuvre are *Magun: Thunderbolt* (2001), *Dazzling Mirage* (2014) (both considered subsequently as case studies in this article), *Narrow Path* (2007), *Abeni* (2006), *Pyrolysis and Paralysis* (2016), and *Sidi Ilunjinle* (2017) (an adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Lion and The Jewel*).

Tunde Kelani's collaboration with very interesting cultural actors endeared him to the works of the late scholar, playwright, and cultural activist Professor Akinwunmi Ishola, as demonstrated in Kelani's adaptation of works such as *O Le ku 1, 2 & 3*, *Campus Queen*, and *Saworo Ide*. A detailed account of Kelani and Akinwunmi's artistic relationship has been examined in depth in his documentary titled *Akinwunmi and the Rest of Us* (2017).

Kelani's career is such an interesting one. For instance, his relationship with some of the first generation Nigerian artistes and filmmakers such as Ishola Ogunsola, Ola Balogun, Bankole Bello, Bayo Aderounmu, Ayo Rasak, Olowomoroje Oguagbe, Akin Oguagbe, and the late Hubert Ogunde (Ukadike 1994:158–59) are testimonies to his solid sense of meticulous and careful filming. Before he began making films using video technology, he had worked with the aforementioned professionals, either as a collaborator or hired director, making great films on celluloid. Some of those titles are: *Efunsetan Aniwura* (1981), *Orun Mooru/ Heaven is Hot* (1982), and *Mr Johnson* (1990). Tunde Kelani was everywhere, and his ability to identify with the various technologies serves to demonstrate how significant he has become in the annals of the Nigerian film industry. Kelani was there during the celluloid era, working and collaborating with different people to produce some of the best cinematic productions at that time. He was also present during the emergence of video technology, which ushered in the Nollywood industry, following the significant production of Chris Oriapku's *Living in Bondage, Part 1 & 2* (1990 and 1992) (Haynes & Okome 2007:64). He is also active today, witnessing and utilizing a wealth of flourishing wisdom and applying his keen mind to the consistent advancement of the digital era. What this means is that Kelani not only bridges the gap between the celluloid era and the video era, but also, through his vibrant collaboration with keen filmmakers eager to work with him (and engage with his vast experience) links all the eras together, demonstrating his relevance in truly creative ways.

The celluloid years had a brief span, and their demise came with the downturn of the Nigerian economy in the mid-80s. A lot of filmmakers felt the "crunch of the difficult economic problems at that time" (Okome 2007:2). In order to survive the setback and continue to create entertainment for their audiences, most filmmakers, including Tunde Kelani, turned to video culture. The video culture was phenomenal. It was very cheap and made film easier to produce as "handheld cameras, and computer editing software" (Orlando 2017:60) were readily available. Video films were more than

enough to satisfy the markets, as different filmmakers produced up to a hundred or more in a week. Audiences in Lagos and elsewhere had the opportunity to stay in the comfort of their homes and treat themselves to films on their video players. The prevailing political and socioeconomic quagmires at that time required that films be watched in private homes and other secure sites because of the “horrendous crime rates and general breakdown of public order in the 1990s” (Haynes 2007a:136). Though of substandard quality, video technology continued to create entertainment, as it became extremely difficult and dangerous for film lovers to go out to movie theatres and halls at night. Social unrest was rampant, and urban infrastructures were deficient. With the low budgets and technical failures that permeated these videos it was clear that a majority of the filmmakers and directors were not professionals.

Kelani came into the industry at a critical moment in history, and “was saddened by the decline of celluloid filmmaking” (Esonwanne 2008:27). In spite of the evolving video technology, and as the industry experienced a steady rise in the number of amateurs, Kelani maintained a high level of professionalism and reputation by producing highly rated films, employing a combination of “celluloid filmmaking strategies with video production knowledge to create artistically appealing audio-visual narratives that endear the Nigerian film industry to the ...world” (Soetan 2018:4).

For more than three and a half decades, Kelani has distinguished himself in an industry that is constantly in transition. In addition to creating films and television productions, Tunde Kelani has also started a radio programme on *Ogun State Broadcasting Cooperation* (OGBC2 FM), which addresses issues related to the advancement of indigenous culture. Tunde Kelani also trains the younger generation, having established the Main-frame Film Production Academy in Abeokuta, Ogun State, which is already over a year in existence.

Ever technically alert, Tunde Kelani gives instructions to young and ambitious filmmakers who engage his expertise. He still manages to attend film festivals, gets invited to talk shows, participates at workshops, mingles with academics, engages in cultural production, plays advisory roles in different quarters, and engages in consultancy work. In his constant quest to pursue integrity at the highest level, he recently resigned his appointment as chairman of the Nigerian Video and Film Censor’s Board for personal reasons; this was an appointment he was offered by the President of Nigeria, Mohammed Buhari two years ago.

Conclusion

I had earlier conducted some research on Kelani, which included his adaptation of literature (Onikoyi 2006, 2016b; Okome & Okahku 2016a), his use of rhetoric, and his political films (Onikoyi 2014, 2016c). My focus was on the issues of young Nigerians and their desires, challenges, tragic experiences,

errors, and confusions that unfolded in his films. I wanted to learn how that stalwart is able to direct the path of young people who struggle with different questions in a modern world. I chose to discuss these issues as they related to two of his films, *Thunderbolt Magun* (2001) and *Dazzling Mirage* (2014). In brief *Thunderbolt Magun* is a metanarrative about a western-trained medical doctor's interest in researching the efficacy of traditional medicine to treat the imprecation and affliction known as magun. Involving a couple engaged in a cross-cultural marriage, this film critiques ethnic stereotypes as we see individuals defy them.

An Igbo Youth Corp worker, Ngozi, is married to a Yoruba man, Yinka, who, unknown to Ngozi, curses her. The curse will kill her if she does not sleep with another man. But the truth is exposed when Ifa reveals, through the help of three traditional herbalists, that her husband Yinka is the culprit, the author of all her predicament, because he is jealous of Ngozi's wealth bequeathed to her by her late mother. He feels insecure and decides on a ruthless course of action to rid himself of his wife. However, a combination of herbal medicine and western medical attention cures Ngozi, and she ends up finding love with yet another Yoruba man, Doctor Demeji, who takes the risk of sleeping with her, but is resuscitated by the treatment he receives from the herbalists.

Dazzling Mirage (see [Figure 1](#)) involves the story of Funmi, a professional woman driven to excel in her career in a Lagos marketing firm while managing her sickle cell anemia. Struggling with her health and a love relationship, Funmi finds inspiration in a Sickle Cell Foundation support group and becomes a key player in educating the public about what it means to live with the disorder, in spite of some strenuous rejection from a particular section of society. This sickle cell group represents a contemporary support structure and the voice of wisdom. Funmi's parents are also very wise, supportive, honest, and forgiving of their determined daughter. She finally rejects her indecisive and uncooperative fiancé and eventually falls in love with and marries her boss, Toyibi, with whom she also has a child.

While it is true that the production gap between the two films is very wide, in both films one finds common factors, especially the binaries of "modernity" versus "tradition," and part of this Tunde Kelani was able to discuss with me. For instance, youths encounter challenges in finding the right lover and partner who will love them unconditionally without doubt or feeling insecure. Kelani was firm on this, stressing that one does not usually end up with one intended life partner as such. There is always a twist in the events of one's journey in life, in order to learn a moral lesson, that will help one to mature and become wise. Such events also tend to make one a better and stronger person. In his quest for choosing an appropriate story, Kelani is of the opinion that his films are basically there to provide possible answers to some of the questions that society raises. This is a major reason why he relies heavily on the mores and worldview of his people and his immediate Yoruba constituency.

Figure 1. A poster of the film *Dazzling Mirage*. Courtesy of Mainframe Productions



In both *Thunderbolt Magun* and *Dazzling Mirage* (as well as other earlier films) Tunde Kelani feels a sense of duty to seek social amelioration, and indeed to show how individuals in society should behave. From his cinematic oeuvre he enlightens his audience about how he makes moral distinctions. He told me that his approaches to cinematic strategy are derived from the philosophical and cosmological phenomena that feature prominently in Yoruba culture. For instance, in Yoruba culture, individuals are encouraged and cautioned to promote integrity and dignity and to shun disgrace and dishonor. The desire for this Yoruba ideal is what literary scholar Akin Adesokan describes as the “aesthetics of exhortation.” Adesokan argues that “dramatic or narrative text is thought to be fundamentally about notions of good and bad conduct and, in exhortatory and didactic registers, subsumes every aspect of human relations—social, political, economic, so on—to this basic theme” (2011:82). Whether his narratives are set in specific metropolitan or village environments, the notions presented across his cinematic

Figure 2. Tunde Kelani with Tunde Onikoyi, the interviewer. Picture taken by one of the staff members of Mainframe Productions



oeuvre are constant. This conversation covers an extremely wide range of Kelani's cinema experiences, his collaboration with highly rated writers and academics such as the late Adebayo Faleti and Yinka Egbokare, and his relationship with his actors, including Kunle Afolyan. Afolyan is also a talented and vigorous filmmaker who ushered in the New Nollywood style, the paradigmatic shift of cinematic endeavour that has, with its striking and yet distinct formulae, taken over the cinematic environment of Nigeria. The conversation also addresses his influences, such as his cultural constituencies, the traveling theatre tradition, orature, his preference for literary sources, choice of actors, and the usefulness and importance of research as key to film production. Above all, he expressed enthusiasm and deep concern for Nigerian cinema, younger filmmakers, New Nollywood, and the business part of the future of African cinema, a system he believes still has many hurdles to overcome.

On October 3, 2017, I traveled to Abeokuta, the Ogun State capital in Nigeria, to engage Tunde Kelani in a conversation (see [Figure 2](#)). The interview took place in his apartment, which also housed a small but attractive studio. It was enlightening to see Kelani at work, bristling with energy and excitement as he gave instructions to young assistants who were inspired by his rare expertise.

Tunde Onikoyi: You saw a film in England, that is, *Family Affair* directed by Jane Turbon, which inspired the production of *Dazzling Mirage*. What is the connection between both films?

Tunde Kelani: Well, it (*Family Affair*) is a short film, about thirty-five minutes, and it was commissioned by the National Health Service in London to draw society to the awareness of sickle cell anemia. It was particularly targeted at the minority population in the United Kingdom. What attracted me was the fact that the filmmaker used a cast of Nigerian actors and actresses that I am familiar with. When I saw the film, I was impressed by the production. So, before then I had nursed the ambition to do something like it, and if I came across a material or a story about sickle cell anemia, I might do it. Sure enough, I really did not know how it happened. I met Yinka Egbhokare, and then she offered me her novel, *Dazzling Mirage*. I read it and instantly I knew I had found my story. So the first thing I did was to try and contact the writer of the screenplay of *Family Affair*. I saw the end credit then, I noticed it was Adeola Solanke, and for a long time, I had been trying to contact her. I went to the African Film Festival in London, where I screened *Maami*. During the question and answer session, someone got up and asked a question, and introduced herself as Adeola Solanke. And then, I said “Adesola Solanke, you wrote the screenplay of *Family Affair*—I have been looking for you. I have a job for you.” When we met to dialogue, I told her that I thought I had found a better story than *Family Affair*, and I needed her to do the screenplay. So, that was how we started.

TO: So a working relationship began. Adesola Solanke is not related to the veteran actor Jim Solanke, is she?

TK: No. She is not.

TO: Do you think you could have actually conjured up something as good as the novel for your sickle cell story if you had not seen Yinka Egbokare’s book?

TK: Well, I had about four projects on my hands; it will depend on the factors to determine which was more important for me to do at a particular time. And then another factor would determine which the next project to do was. And again, you know, most of my works are adaptations from literary materials I found Egbokare’s *Dazzling Mirage* rewarding in the sense that it became a natural process for me when I move first from text to screen. First of all, the process of my operation is from orature, folklore, and then to text, and then from text, I go to screen. I now have the new version of the book, and the cover is designed from the scene in the film. So, this time it is like going from orature to text and then, to film and back to text. This I have found really interesting. So what I suggest to people is that they should find

the book to read first, watch the film, and read the book again. That is the best way I think someone can enjoy it.

TO: And the fact that the story deals with a health issue?

TK: No, not really, that is not the point. The first thing is, I look for an entertaining story, and that is important. This is not a documentary in a sense that it deals with sickle cell. It is a love story that deals with people living with sickle cell anemia, a genetic condition. I would like to see it that way. So primarily it is a love story that treats the theme of sickle cell anemia, rather than a film about sickle cell anemia.

TO: Yes, I understand that, but my thoughts gesture towards a point. Apart from seeing it as an entertaining love story, it would also by the side, draw people's, and even other filmmakers', attention to the health issues it treated.

TK: You can say that, but I am just telling a story. The entertainment value would take care of the rest and, the meaning comes later. The relevance of the story is later recognized or identified, whether it is social, political, economic, religious, and so on. I have always wanted to do meaningful films. For me, it is a natural process. I do not go out of my way to say that I am going to make a film about anything or agitate for some kind of change. Basically, the whole process might just lead to change, and that is a wonderful thing, but it is not my role to say I want to pursue this or that agenda.

TO: Speaking of change then, one notices that Sanya's mother in the film does not approve of the relationship between her son and Funmi. And this attitude is most common among mothers who find their children in such situations. A change of impression on how to relate with a potential daughter-in-law as preached by her son does not make any difference to her.

TK: In a normal situation it is expected. For instance, in a Yoruba family and among people of that culture, it is necessary for a family to find out about the family in which the son or daughter would be engaging with as in-laws. You know, they get to find out about so many things, and among those things is the issue of genetic incompatibility. They may also want to find out if there was a case of one family member or the other who had a case of mental illness. So, if they find anything of such, it is quite natural they might not encourage the wedding to take place. But in modern times, young people do find themselves, and fall in love, and even if they found out that there is something wrong with either, they may want to encourage themselves to go on. That is what I have come to realize happens. So, it is possible to have characters like Sanya's mother all over the place and in our society.

- TO: The film in itself was enough to help our ignorance about those who have the disease, and how to relate to them.
- TK: Well if the genetic condition is managed, it can't be treated in any case. The film does make that point. People should go for the test, they must find out what their individual genotypes are before they venture into the wedding proper, and before it gets out of hand. Usually, when they must have made adequate preparation for the wedding, and then they eventually find out that they are actually incompatible, they will not be able to do anything about it.
- TO: But in spite of the fact that we seem to be modern, even if Sanya's mother was aware of some of the challenges faced by Funmi as a sickle cell patient, and was fully educated about how to treat people like her, do you think she would have allowed her son to marry her?
- TK: What the film illustrates is this: whatever decision you take if you knew or you had access to information about the sickle cell disease, you will be doing it from an informed position, and not out of ignorance. We are in a knowledgeable era and information on such things should not be difficult to find. That is what the film advocates. You just have to be informed. And it is suggested that every single person should know his or her genotype, and know the consequences of incompatibility, if the case is different from what one desires. But if one decides to go on, at least the proper medication can be made available to help the victim manage such hazards. Voluntary platforms and organizations, too, will perform their roles to cater to their psychological needs. For instance, the Sickle Cell Foundation, as illustrated in the film, is a typical example.
- TO: I will suspend our discussion on *Dazzling Mirage* for a while and move over to some other things because I would like to talk about *Thunderbolt* as well. About twelve to thirteen years stand between both films, but I find a kind of connection in the love stories in both films. Although *Thunderbolt* depicts something that is essentially traditional or something that evolved from the culture of the Yoruba people and has existed all through, into the modern age. This is "magun,"—and your story is situated within the modern Nigerian era. I will begin by asking, does magun really exist?
- TK: It depends. You know, you cannot say it does not exist. People may go on and say, it does not exist. I mean, one must be living in a cloud cuckoo land to think that magun does not exist, even in the twenty-first century. You know people still believe in magun, but we have got to a point in our existence where I think that before we believe anything, we have to bring a proof of evidence. We do not have excuses anymore. During the making of the film,

I went as far as approaching people, and I interviewed them. It was almost like an appeal. If they found any case of magun they should get across to me. Today, in our present times, if anyone came across anyone under magun attack, they can bring out their smartphones and take photographs to show us. That is what I am saying. We have advanced beyond the point where we try to argue about whether it is myth or reality or mere hearsay because there is a proof.

- TO: So during your research did you find any proof?
- TK: I did not find any proof. But I did find a medical doctor who told me that in his neighborhood, a fellow was under magun attack. When he went to the scene, he was shocked to find that the victim was his patient. He debunked the truth about the magun attack, and said his patient had high blood pressure and so on. But no one took him seriously. They did not even listen to him. Somehow, and you know in modern times, with health care facilities all around us, if magun exists.... I think it is on the decline, because nobody has reported any case in the last few years.
- TO: That is surprising. While studying as an undergraduate in Ibadan, I think it was in 2003, at some point I took a trip to Lagos to see my mother, and on a certain Sunday morning, I went to church. You know how it is in church, when you become aware of a miracle. There was this woman reported to have been under the attack. I saw the woman and she was present at that service. According to reports, she was actually laced with magun and was advised to stay in the church for twenty-one days to go through the ritual of some prayer and fasting exercises.
- TK: Did you see the woman?
- TO: Yes, I did. And the old clergyman claimed he saw the Magun leaving the woman. The woman is still alive anyway. Still saw her in the neighbourhood when I visited recently.
- TK: I have heard of various kinds of magun. You know, there is magun of "do not drink water," "do not cross a gutter." But I have never heard of someone seeing magun leaving a woman's body until you narrated your story. That must be a new one; a miracle of some sort.
- TO: A miracle, yes. That was what the clergyman said happened. It was a miracle.
- TK: Do you believe it?
- TO: Are you asking me a question?
- TK: Yes.

TO: Well, does it matter here what I believe or what I do not believe here? But I think I do. Some of us believe in miracles, too.

TK: That is interesting.

TO: What do you say *Thunderbolt* is about? I know that there is a literature available that led to the film adaptation, but this story appears more about a woman's challenges with magun than the love story, although the love tale did have a way of prevailing in the plot as well.

TK: You know, several things have happened. What intrigued me about the making of the film was the material itself, coming from a renowned Yoruba scholar, the late Adebayo Faleti. He wrote this material in English, but people wondered if he was ever going to write a novel in English. Apparently, he wrote predominantly in the Yoruba language. And he did prove them wrong. At that time, I had developed a reputation for working in the Yoruba language and culture, and critics had started to write me off, thinking perhaps I could never do anything in English. It was this work by Adebayo Faleti that gave me the opportunity to do that. I succeeded in doing a film in English, and quite legitimately so; it was the adaptation of a book written in English that I found interesting and sufficiently fulfilling. Apart from that, there is a uniqueness we both share, that is Faleti and me, the quality in the unique approach of creating cultural production. The story is very simple. It is about two very young people who were on their primary assignment (NYSC). They found each other. The man is Yoruba and the girl is Igbo. That relationship led to a union, and in such a home the language of communication will no doubt be English. And it is even possible that the children from such a union will adopt the English language as the trope for communication. But the parents, if any of them had to visit the couple, the mother of Yinka, the husband, would speak Yoruba to Yinka, while the father of Ngozi would speak in Igbo to his daughter. I found this very interesting, and it gave me the opportunity to delve into the significance of both languages. Again, the film is about two great cultures in Nigeria, in spite of the diversity. This is what our country offers. The film illustrates a burden on so many levels, and then we throw in the myth or reality of magun.

TO: What we learnt about the myth of magun was that when Yoruba men go to war, they laced their wives with magun, in order to put them in check, to ensure their fidelity, and in order to find out if their women have or not have been promiscuous or adulterous while they were at war.

TK: Yes. That is true.

- TO: And if such women were found wanting, they would not survive the effect of magun, which had been placed upon them. Also, the male who gets involved with these women would have also died from the effects of magun.
- TK: You are very correct. You see, if you consider the end part of the film, the notion of the entire story is that there are two tribes: the good or bad tribes. Spouses can feel insecure or jealous if, for instance, in the case of a man, who notices that his wife has a lot of inheritance, is well-educated, has a lot of admirers and so on, I mean all that would naturally make the man feel insecure and jealous. That was the motivating factor. Yet again, and just as the end scene illustrates, that among our tribes there is a lot of suspicion in Nigeria today. But again, Ngozi makes a very good point that there are no bad or good tribes, it is only the good and bad person that exists. And that is why she still ends up marrying a Yoruba man, the medical doctor.
- TO: With regard to the issue of ethnic rivalry, Ngozi's father initially didn't approve of his daughter's wedding to Yinka, and this development played out concretely because Yinka eventually behaved badly, as an individual Yoruba person. Again, it brings one to a realization of what the other Igbo boy had told Ngozi at the camp parade. He told her she would regret her actions of getting involved with a Yoruba guy.
- TK: But she eventually ended up with another Yoruba man. You see, these things are normal in our societies. Some marriages never go well anyway, but the couples persist. I do not know what you think about it, but for me, it is a really exciting story.
- TO: Between both films, *Thunderbolt* and *Dazzling Mirage*, I see a lot of connections. Let us consider the relationship phenomena. The relationship between Ngozi and Yinka in *Thunderbolt* turns out sour because of Yinka's inconceivable character and sense of wickedness. In *Dazzling Mirage*, Funmi and Sanya's relationship also turns sour, not only because of Sanya's lack of confidence to be firm about the lady he chooses to marry but also because his mother was a stumbling block. However, she may not have succeeded if Sanya had been decisive enough to pursue his intentions with Funmi. His mother also eventually instigates a relationship between Sanya and his research assistant. Now, if we take a look at these two films, we will notice that the men Ngozi and Funmi ended up with were the most unlikely men. For you, and for the vision that you had for both *Thunderbolt* and *Dazzling Mirage*, were they natural cause and effect phenomena, and did you orchestrate them?
- TK: No, they were just natural. Look around and talk to people; many of us never end up marrying the people that we desire every one of us. Perhaps a small percentage do, but a majority does not.

Figure 3. A poster of the film Thunderbolt. Courtesy of Mainframe Productions



Look, you will find it in *Arugba*, *Ole Ku*, *Narrow Path*, and *Abeni*. It is just a natural process. Emotions are played out even at that young age. Things happen, and sometimes, you find out that a lot of young lovers are confused, so they end up with the wrong person. But later they eventually find the right person. This is how I have seen life as far as I am concerned.

TO:

Ngozi was very lucky, and so was Funmi. For someone like Funmi, if she had a chance to commit suicide, she would have done that easily as she was a sickle cell carrier, and painful enough was the fact that she later found out that her foster parents were not her biological parents. These factors were enough reasons for her to commit suicide, which she actually attempted, as seen in the film. The same thing can also be said about Ngozi. Ngozi was also lucky because she found a guy who could die for her. These experiences are unique with these two characters. But more than any of

your other works, I think these two works have amazing characters in both Ngozi and Funmi that bring out those factors that make both works resonate deeply.

TK: I think you are correct there. From my experience of growing up and all that, somehow this resolve hopefully end up happily for some people, but for others, it is not the same. But generally, there are solutions to all the complexities associated with these issues. And I dare say, if in a work like *The Narrow Path*, Awero's story should proceed further, she would have found someone also. But with the kind of outcome that occurred, the question would have been, will the family or her husband ever be willing to take her back?

TO: But that was a sad one for her. A young lady loses her virginity to some scallywag by some unfortunate circumstances and then she is condemned for that. I mean the patriarchal issue here is very glaring.

TK: But if you look closely, in Yoruba societies there are women who on the night of their wedding were found out not to be virgins, and they decide to insult her, cast all sort of aspersion, call her all sorts of names, but when the children begin to come, everyone becomes happy, and they forget about the indiscretions of impurity or uncleanliness before marriage. They now pay attention to the children more. I think society has a way of solving these problems.

TO: And to think that the male character was almost pursuing her in such an unethical and immoral manner. I speak here of the medical doctor in *Thunderbolt*, which elicited Ngozi's antagonism and constant anger whenever he occasionally came wooing her at her place of work.

TK: She was a married woman, you know, the typical Igbo woman understands the integrity behind fidelity. The case of infidelity is a taboo to that society, and no matter what anyone says, promiscuity is not an option for them. Ngozi was a proudly married Igbo woman, and it was something her so-called suitor did not understand.

TO: Well, he wanted to have a fling, but then, you could not tell, he was also serious in a way because he also loved her.

TK: He grew to love her more. He started to respect her when she was constantly proving difficult; because he was just wondering what else she wanted. He was a trained medical doctor who was residing in a village, well respected by all the village folks, and he also had a car. This was absolutely rare. Ladies would die for him, but this lady would not. So he began to respect her from the moment he discovered that she was less interested in his peculiar advances.

- TO: Those are the circumstances surrounding her life and, of course, her dignity and integrity as a woman, and, if you like, as an Igbo woman. But for Funmi and her boss, Mr. Toyibi, the antagonism between them was essentially based on issues of work commitment, before they eventually fell in love with each other. In fact, the love phenomenon between the two of them was instigated by Mr. Toyibi, who grew to love her. He loved her for her determination to survive, to make an impact in life, and to forge ahead with what she was good at. Her posture at work was that of defiance because she believed she was instrumental in the company's successes, and for winning the contract. Now, her defiance was not because her boss wanted to lay her off based on her health issues, which also meant that she was unavailable at work for most days of the week, but because of the fact that she played a key role in the company's eventual success in winning a high profile contract, and Mr. Dotun Toyibi never recognized that. She thought it was so illogical.
- TK: That is what happens in the corporate world, and in this part of our world where people really discriminate, or they are biased. It goes further to say for the handicapped in our societies, no one gives them a chance. In the corporate world, people are motivated by profit, efficiency, and all of that. If you look around, these discriminations are not farfetched, and perhaps, Dotun himself was acting from the point of view of an ignorant person. But again, he applied himself to study the young lady's tenacity. He understood that, in spite of her condition she could still work, get results and live a normal life as manager of a company like any other person and even perform better. Nigerians are guilty of this sort of thing. We hardly provide opportunities for the handicapped. Nobody cares or bothers about them.
- TO: If this occurred in reality, I think it would be a one-in-a-million cases. Normally, she would have been laid off.
- TK: Yes, that could have happened. But in her case, she was determined to remain, and that is why in spite of all the agonies she goes through, she says to her parents, "Leave me alone, I can take care of myself." Yes, she fell sick from time to time, but she fights. She is always in a constant fight. This brings me to make a point, that all women are constantly fighting in our societies for one thing or the other. For me, whether consciously or unconsciously, I have come to think that the African woman has not been appreciated enough. You know, we have not given African women their due respect and their place both in the traditional and modern societies. Even up 'til now, it has not happened. This is very interesting, because I had wanted to do Femi Osofisan's book *Wuraola Forever*. And then, I read the novel, and then I told myself; "Here we go again, this is another woman." These are the

categories of stories that I get to film as I go around in search of a fascinating story let alone a good literature.

- TO: I think they are based on the circumstances of a particular woman, too. The particular female person you actually choose to explore, and somehow, you now find a resolution that favors them at the end of the day. But in the case of *Wuraola Forever*, she could not have been helped in any case, so I am wondering, how would you solve her problem?
- TK: Well, I do not know. But I will do it. It is difficult to say how one encounters these stories, but I will do it, once I get the funding. Although I will not deny that I have been distracted by other projects anyway. Perhaps if I got funding, I probably will not do that; I would just pursue something else and then come back later to do it.
- TO: I notice the character of Ngozi's father was given a lot of credibility in the story, but Yinka's mother was not developed as much Ngozi's father.
- TK: Well I do not know. Yinka's mother never liked Ngozi. So in the first place, there was no cordial relationship. For instance, the baby's name was Akin, and both parents, Ngozi and Yinka, called him Hero, which actually means Akin when translated to Yoruba. So, each time the mother called the name of the boy out as Akin, she would expect that Yinka would also call him Akin instead of Hero. It devastated the old woman. It did not make any sense to her. And then she says, "What is that? What is Hero?" Similarly, you will find it in the gastronomy. When the wife is not at home, and Yinka goes to prepare the meal and bring it over to his mother, and then the mother says; "What on earth is this?" Now for Yoruba people, the white processed cassava is usually transformed into white garri, while the Igbo garri is yellow after being processed. Obviously, Yinka would eat his wife's food, but the mother finds this ridiculous, especially as she is being served such. And then the mother, having realized that this is what she will be eating says, "No, I cannot have stomach aches." You see, that kind of protest will constantly come, in so many ways. It could have gone on.
- TO: Yes, her character was key to such unpleasant postures anyway. I thought it was not adequately blown up in relation to the entire film. In such situations, one would have expected that the cold feeling that mothers have towards unwanted and unloved wives would permeate the sequences.
- TK: That could have been done. Yet again, it is a story that is directed to a certain point. You need to avert distracting your audience with unnecessary details that do not help the plot.

- TO: Funmi's quarrel with her foster parents started from the realization that they were aware that she would have constant health problems. However, they did what any biological parents would have done: kept the baby, that is, giving the baby a supposed chance to survive, a fifty-fifty chance. For Funmi not to understand that makes one realize that she was a little unfair to her foster parents.
- TK: What was really frustrating for Funmi was that they ought to know the very implications of bringing her to the world because they themselves were medical experts. That was her point. As a medical doctor and a nursing sister respectively, they knew the consequences. But she did not realize that they kept her for many reasons, not just because they wanted her to survive, but for the fact that they themselves were unable to have children. They were not just going to risk it, but they loved each other so much, and the best they could do was to adopt and keep Funmi. Both of them decided to stay together in spite of their fate, until she, Funmi, came into their world.
- TO: Not knowing that the child they adopted was a sickle cell carrier.
- TK: Yes, they got what they craved for but only to realize later that she had sickle cell. Again, Funmi had to understand the whole thing later; when she discovers that they were not her true parents.
- TO: You have a way of choosing your talents. Kemi Lala, in an interview, said she actually walked into your office and then, you thought she fitted the portrait of the person you needed. But then, your relationship with Kunle Afolayan dates back to the *Saworide* days. Adebayo Faleti of blessed memory was also in a couple of your films like *Thunderbolt*, *Agogo Ewo* and so on. How do you make your choices?
- TK: I like using talents sometimes, when I am getting ready and seriously considering a story I am deeply passionate about, I begin to see those opportunities. Sometimes it is just my feelings, about a role or someone who could fit into one role or the other. I suddenly see it, and when I come across someone by sheer luck, I tell myself, "Wait a minute, this is the person I imagined for this role or that role." For some of the projects I am yet to do, I have mentally done the casting.
- TO: Do you run auditions at all?
- TK: Sometimes I do, but there are certain principal parts that I retain for some people I must have come across in my life. Sometimes, I would have references to support the actor. If we must have done the casting, and we are at rehearsals, and then I find out the role is not going well with someone, I might swap it. For instance, one of the characters that amused me is Lere Paimo's role in *The*

Campus Queen when he played a role of a man close to the establishment, the political elites. He was a representation of the elite. This was on his first scene with Sarah Mbaka, who was a student of geography at that time in the University of Lagos. Sarah Mbaka was also convincing as a campus queen. Hers was by a stroke of luck, and we took a chance with her carriage, her debonair, and her entire style of performance. I threw her in for the first time with veterans like Lere Paimo, and she gave a good account of herself. And when Lere Paimo was not coming forth with the role, I had to tell him to play the role the way we understood the behavior of one of Nigeria's political stalwarts, now late Alhaji Arisekola Alao. And that was all he needed, just that little hint. And all of a sudden, he is bubbling in this role, despite the fact that it was in English and not in Yoruba. The truth is that Africa, and Nigeria in particular, is filled with talents. At times, as a director, you need to do some extra work, and search a mile further and work at these things. And then when you find what you want in an actor, you now work on that actor to obtain what you really desire, which is what I do. So, I really do not coach actors as such. I just give them a little piece of advice that will help them through. I allow them consider points of references and they explore and enjoy those references.

- TO: Lere Paimo was in *O Le Ku* and also in *Arugba*.
- TK: He was also in *Abeni*. You know he is like a creative talent that you could imagine when you consider the Nigerian football team, the Super Eagles. The coach is able to determine who he will have play a particular position, among members of the team. He knows the people he can consider for a role, and you can count on them to deliver well. And that gives you room to concentrate on others.
- TO: And then you also had Larinde Akinleye, also of blessed memory.
- TK: He was such a bomb. Larinde Akinleye can play any role given to him. I mean, he was a deep and peculiar actor.
- TO: He was very humane and convincingly so, as well as comical in his role as the school headmaster in *Thunderbolt*.
- TK: He was such a terrific actor. You know, I combined several styles that constituted the Yoruba Travelling Theatre tradition. I count on their spontaneity, which is very interesting to me. I know how to use them. And then for Kunle Afolayan, people actually think that he was better as an actor in *Dazzling Mirage* than any other film, even his own *The Figurine*. Not too many critics gave him a chance in the film, but he managed to convince a lot of people in his role as Mr. Dotun Toyibi. For someone like Kemi Lala, she was very convincing, and a lot of critics and observers thought she was a sickle cell carrier herself. They did not believe she was not a

- sickle cell carrier, and she was so convincing. She did not overdo it. She did a lot of research into the role.
- TO: Yes, indeed Kemi Lala was exceptional and in the online interview, she confessed that she was actually tutored by a close friend who herself was a carrier. Her role was indeed convincing.
- TK: It was fascinating, and it was fun to see her exert so much energy in that role.
- TO: And then with Kunle Afolayan, when you think of him in his heydays as an actor, he was not as spectacular as he is now. Someone was likely going to see him back in the days as a greenhorn.
- TK: It would be interesting to speak to him about this phenomenon. You know, the first time we met, and this was years back, he came to me and then told me he wanted to become an actor, and then I told him he could not because he had to first get an education. That was just a piece of advice, and he actually took that advice. So when he returned and had successfully completed his education, I had to accept him for a role in *Saworoide*. Before then, he would visit me in my home, and we would watch a lot of films together. That is why up until today, I am yet to find someone among Nigerian filmmakers who is as passionate as Kunle Afolayan about cinema among his peers. Kunle Afolayan will watch everything. He is very intelligent. When he sees a film he would remember the actors' lines, their names, and would mouth all the songs in a film. He is just an encyclopaedia of cinema.
- TO: I think it has paid off for him very much. The kind of influence you have had on him has also helped developed his own idiosyncratic style.
- TK: I am happy about his development so far. And that is why, in spite of that influence, our works are not the same and that is how it should be. I appreciate him a lot.
- TO: Thinking about your own choice for styles that gesture towards your filmmaking, I think these elements and styles have successfully worked for you. You know, like imagining you have surreptitiously developed for yourself that travelling cinema in some way.
- TK: I am drawn from all sides, and you know, these things mark me out differently, adopting some of these traditions, watching several films, and then doing my own interpretations in order to carve out my own peculiar style. So I come up with a unique style that is different from others. You can't place it or predict it. I think it is honest and non-pretentious. It is just expression. Sometimes, it is difficult to teach, because you need to convince

yourself that you know it. Look around you these days; there are influences from outside, and one is careful about what one employs.

- TO: The title *Dazzling Mirage*, I have actually been thinking about how it connects to the story. I noticed that the moment Funmi realized that her foster parents were not her real parents, she goes out of the house in annoyance and then perches on a seat. Almost immediately, she sees a strange light which draws her attention and then as she walks towards it, it begins to move further off, and then she almost drowns herself, before she was rescued by some men.
- TK: I think the writer, Yinka Egbkhere, should be able to answer that question. For me, at a point, I saw its validity when Funmi was at the clinic, the physical condition, the husband comes around; he is hopeless and confused and then finds the poem Funmi had written in a drawer. For me, all those things and, most especially the poem, connect the title to the story.
- TO: To say something like not all that glitters is gold.
- TK: Yes, we could see it that way.
- TO: Unfortunately, the man who she thought would be her husband ends up with someone else. He was just a mirage.
- TK: That is a point because if you think you have found what you are looking for, you better be sure because it has got to be concrete.
- TO: It was shocking to see Funmi and Mr. Toyibi end up together, and I think this is where the suspense climaxes. No one would have thought that they would end up together, much like Ngozi and the medical doctor in *Thunderbolt*. It is shocking.
- TK: Yes. You know people were apprehensive, about whether she would survive, but in the end, she lives.
- TO: The same experience Ngozi goes through. Because, one would hardly think about it, after all the insults the suitor had to endure from her, it would be impossible to believe that she would return to him for help.
- TK: Fate determines a lot. No one could have thought that out too.
- TO: So, do you still intend to put *Dazzling Mirage* on DVD?
- TK: I do not think so. I have not fully recovered from the disaster my works have experienced at the hands of pirates. I am still feeling the financial strain and burden. It is difficult to narrate what one passes through. Each time one thinks about it, one is still thinking of how one can monetize it. It is not just possible any more to

- put my films on DVD. *Dazzling Mirage* is not online, and I have not licensed anyone to put it online. However, it will still go to festivals, but I do not know how I can recoup the money.
- TO: One can imagine what the New Nollywood filmmakers are going through as well. Some of them who screened their works at cinemas are yet to break even.
- TK: They cannot. The system is so bad, and it will not allow them.
- TO: A film like *Isokele*, by Jadesola Osiberu was screened earlier in the year. The filmmaker is still trying to recover the cash she put into it.
- TK: That was a success story. The Bank of Industry sponsored it, and I hear it was a success story. She made a lot of money.
- TO: I doubt it. She narrated her ordeal to an audience during the Real Time Film Festival in 2017. I do not think she was happy about the way things turned out. She is yet to finish up payment. I think it is a common problem right now for a lot of them to break even, and even if they did break even, it would be very slim.
- TK: I do not think anyone can break even. The Bank of Industry had earlier explained the formulae to me. They said that even if a filmmaker claimed he or she made a hundred million Naira, the producer may not take home less than say 33 percent of the earnings. That is just the reality. Now, your chances of making a hundred million is very slim and that is the truth. The cinema houses that screened your film would have to be paid heavily. Except you are able to get sponsorships, the bank would have to police you, monitor your earnings, and make sure they recover their capital. The situation can only be solved if we find the right channel that will be available to fund African films. We have not found that proper model yet. There must be a suitable model for funding. We keep talking about being the second-or third-largest producer of films after Bollywood or Hollywood, when there are no institutional structures and government supports. I am not sure. I feel so different about all this.

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