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FILM REVIEW

Kunle Afolayan, dir. *Aníkúlápó*. 2022/2024. 144 minutes and 6-part series. Yoruba with English subtitles. Nigeria. KAP Motion Picture & Golden Effects. No price reported.

Anthropological studies on African worldview confirm that several cultures across the continent perceive the world as a hierarchy of interconnected forces, with God at the apex and plants at the bottom. Humans also exhibit an interconnectedness outside of this hierarchy, remaining entwined with their dead and unborn. In Africa, the living and the dead constitute the social world. In various African cultures, this interconnectedness resonates. The Igbo people of Nigeria believe that human actions have consequences in the present and afterlife (I. Onwutuegwu, O. Okpokwasili and E. Christian [2023], "The Circularity Principle in Igbo-African Philosophy", *Nnadiebube Journal of Social Science* 3[1]:80–89). Among the Yoruba, death is not the end of life, but a dematerialization of breath, a transformation from the human to the spirit (B. Lawal [1977], "The Living Dead: Art and Immortality among the Yoruba of Nigeria," *Africa* 47 [1]:50–61).

Aníkúlápó (he who carries death in pouch), explores the concept of living and dying. Woven into a story of love, betrayal, and jealousy, *Aníkúlápó* engages with the philosophy of perishability of the body, but not the soul. It presents the flesh as a temporal habitation, manipulable by the spirit—hence, a soul can inhabit a body belonging previously to another. Known as *Akudaaya* (transmigrated soul or living wraith), it means someone returning to life after they have been dead and buried. Similar to the *abiku*/*ogbanje*, who dies only to be reborn, *Akudaaya* returns to life to continue its existence. Unlike the *abiku*, which returns to the same mother and home, *Akudaaya* often relocates from the locale of its previous life.

Presented in two parts (a feature length in 2022 and a limited series in 2024) and set in precolonial Oyo, *Aníkúlápó* explores some Yoruba cosmological mysteries of existence—life, death, resurrection, *Akudaaya*, and Akala the mystical bird. In Part One, the illicit relationship between Arolake, the king's youngest and childless wife and her lover, Saro, a weaver and a foreigner, is discovered. Saro is beaten to death, but resurrected by Akala, who decided his fate, saying, "Go back to your death". But Arolake fights off the bird, acquiring its gourd of resurrection with which Saro becomes prominent and powerful. Upon attaining wealth, he sidelines Arolake, who out of spite, empties the gourd, rendering it powerless.

Aníkúlápó is replete with the supernatural, exploring themes of death and afterlife, alternating settings between the land of the living and journey to afterlife, revealing some Yoruba traditional beliefs. The audience is exposed to amulets and charms such as the *Magun* (thunderbolt charm) cast on Princess Omowunmi, taboos like the king not beholding a corpse, myths like ghosts' inability to cross waters, and mysteries such as the *Akudaaya*, among others. With captivating imagery and folkloric appeal, *Aníkúlápó* 1 set a runway record on Netflix, reasserting Afolayan's artistic integrity as well as commitment to promoting Yoruba language and culture through films. The sequel, however, falls short of Afolayan's "greater than *Game of Thrones*" prognostication (W. Oloworekende, "Kunle Afolayan on *Aníkúlápó*" *The Guardian*, [October 28, 2022]). To avoid eternal damnation, Saro, who died in Part One, must return the souls he had resurrected with Akala's gourd. The six-episode series shifts from Saro's mission and Arolake's search for self-fulfillment, to new conflicts and characters, but ends with neither the completion of Saro's mission nor Arolake's transformation.

For a filmmaker who has created strong female characters as seen in *CEO* (2016) and *Citation* (2020), Afolayan's females in *Aníkúlápó* are uninspiring. Perhaps the director seeks to portray precolonial Oyo women as largely unambitious. In early Oyo history, the king's older wives are known to train the younger ones (B. A. Agiri [1975], "Early Oyo History Reconsidered", *History in Africa* [2]:1–16). In *Aníkúlápó*, the king's wives bicker at each other, modeling banal jealousy. The king's oldest wife exerts authority only over the servants and not the harem. Princess Omowunmi is indecisive. When she calls Arolake a "husband snatcher" in *Aníkúlápó* 1, there is sympathy for Saro's broken-hearted secret admirer. But in *Aníkúlápó* 2, we not only realize she is betrothed to Bashorun's son, she happily marries Prince Kuranga of Ede. Latorera typifies the inability of young girls to exist without male authority—first her father, and then Saro as husband. Even in death, Saro must rally support for Latorera. She is completely lost following Saro's disappearance and her son's birth. Only Awarun's motherly and commanding presence, and material support comfort her. Inconsistency defines Arolake, except for her unsettling naivety, unabating for a young girl forced into early marriage and made to live amid undisguised hatred, navigating her survival and loneliness on daily basis. Her wish to return to this palace to face punishment for adultery and the unforgiving taunt of co-wives appears implausible. Safe for the mutual love shared with the ageing king, one wonders why Arolake would give up a young lover, wealth, servants, and

fulfillment in helping others to return to a palace of torture. For the untransformed hero, "once bitten, twice shy" does not apply.

Aníkúlápó is a tale of many contradictions, raising multiple questions—for example, the silence over such an important personality as Bashorun or the betrothal of his son to Princess Omowunmi in Part One; what becomes of Saro following an incomplete mission of returning the resurrected souls? Arolake's inability to grow with her experiences; the old woman's refusal to return to the dead despite being blind and dependent on others; Akala's powerlessness over Saro or Arolake, among others. While these gaps raise anticipation for another sequel, an incomplete hero's arc often leaves the audience unfulfilled. Nonetheless, the engagement with African folklore and Yoruba belief in the interconnectedness of life, death and the unborn is a worthy venture.

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