

FILM REVIEW

Kayode Kasum, dir. *Oga Bolaji*. 2018. 91 minutes. Yoruba, English, and Pidgin with English subtitles. Lagos. KayKas Studios/May Seven Pictures. No price reported.

In 2018, when other Nigerian films featured wealthy individuals residing in opulent areas and being chauffeured in four-wheel drive vehicles (*Lionheart*, *Chief Daddy*, *Up North*, *New Money*, *King of Boys*), Kayode Kasum takes us through some of the grimmest conditions of poverty and state failure in *Oga Bolaji* (Mr. Bolaji). The socio-economic realities of underprivileged Nigerians are examined through the lens of Bolaji's (Gold Ikponmwonso) daily commute in this slow-paced depiction of Lagos life and state bullying. What results is a subtle political critique that Nigerians may prefer to gloss over in favor of the more popular titles above, not least because of the absence of film stars and a reminder of scenarios that are better forgotten.

Shot on a four-million naira (USD11,000) budget in three languages (Yoruba, English, and Nigerian Pidgin), the film evokes personal and collective failure and poverty on several fronts. On the personal level, our protagonist is an amiable forty-year-old bar cleaner and aspiring musician, whose lamentable financial situation tethers him to his mother's house and her frequent taunts. This condition leads to his daily habit of recycling left-over beer from his place of employment to drink with two poor friends who in turn provide favors to him. Each character deals with an employment situation that fails to provide a living wage, and the audience does not see the characters' dissatisfaction with or attempts to alter the status quo. Strangely, the logline of the film in its publicity materials highlights Bolaji's resilience, which is not evident in this particular diegetic screen world. Even his close friend, Omoh (Gregory Ojefua), calls him a lazy bone. Thus, Bolaji's initial failures at securing financial independence and at keeping his appointment with Ajua (Jasmine Fakunle) form the narrative spine of this street-life drama.

A government that fleeces the citizenry through insensitive law-making and task forces creates the space for other kinds of failure as envisioned by Kasum. Set in Lagos Mainland as an articulation of collective failure in the country's most populous city, *Oga Bolaji* is Kasum's love letter—in his own words—to a government whose policies consistently disempower its citizens. Although street hawking by children and adults alike has been banned in

Lagos, and from 2003 attracted jail terms or fines, desperate individuals without alternative means of livelihood resort to it with the intention of evading government agents. As depicted in the film, the M-force officials cash in on the vulnerability of poor traders by invading hawkers' territories to confiscate their wares for selfish gain. Offenders must forfeit their goods even if they are not charged. Perhaps the most disheartening collective failure of a society—itsself a symptom of poverty—is the fatality resulting from child hawking. With road officials in hot pursuit, hawkers flee the streets when government workers make the rounds, causing numerous accidents and in some cases, fatalities. Kasum's most eloquent address to power in the film occurs when Bolaji, sitting beside his friend Omoh, berates himself over the death of a seven-year-old hawker while facing the symbol of authority in Lagos. Both friends face a sculpted bust of Ahmed Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos State (1999–2007) who, unlike Omoh, "fails" to console the grief-stricken protagonist.

Arguably, *Oga Bolaji* is not the type of film that escapist, cinema-going Nigerians want to see. It reminds them of all that is wrong within the social fabric of the commercial nerve center of the country; and is in sharp contrast to the drone shots of Ikoyi bridge, a recurring feature of Nigerian films such as those previously mentioned. It is no wonder that the film premiered elsewhere, including the UK, U.S., France, Spain, and in many parts of Africa, but not in its home country. It made official selections in festivals in Kenya, the UK, and Serbia. The cinematography is calculated, sometimes eager to probe the throbbing streets of Lagos, while at other times probing the lives of each character. With a soundtrack that reflects Bolaji's state of mind—now upbeat, and then slow and mournful—Bolaji's carefree character in the first half of the film turns to a sober, reflective, and aspirational one in the second. Aerial shots of Lagos streets interchange with medium and tight close-ups to make the pulsating energy of Lagos come alive. There are minor continuity and lighting problems in various scenes, which however, do not interfere significantly with the depiction of an important slice of Lagos on screen. Kasum successfully takes a swipe at the people and government of Lagos in a sober reflection that at once elicits popular sympathy and irritation.

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