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Political Engagement and Mass Re-orientation in Nigerian Indigenous language Films: A Study of Yomi Ogunmola's "Alaga Kansu"

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Abstract:

The Indigenous language film industry in Nigeria has increasingly come under attack by critics who argue that the filmmakers are so obsessed with shooting mainly stories with superficial themes that appeal to their audience who are ignorant about accepted standards in movie production. Comments about some filmmakers who produce films in Yoruba language have not been salutary. They have been derided for being so fixated on sex, misfortunes and humour to such an extent where the film medium has not succeeded in raising the consciousness of the audience nor has it been effectively deployed to lift the audience into an idealist plane of understanding.

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the sociopolitical import of Nigerian indigenous home video films and argues that in the midst of these films with superficial themes are works that have served as a platform for engagement and mass re-orientation. By examining Yomi Ogunmola's Alaga Kansu- a film with strong political motif as its model- the paper extends the argument that some indigenous filmmakers have responded to the transformation of Nigeria's socio-political structure, even though some of the films may not have been done in the explicitly anti-imperial mode as can be seen in most better known films produced in English. In arriving at this conclusion, the film is textually analyzed to reinforce the capacity of film as a vehicle for mass re-orientation and the role of politically themed indigenous films in deepening people's participation in the process of democratization and development.

2. Preamble

The Nigerian video film industry popularly known as Nollywood has become a force to be reckoned with in the global movie industry. Several scholars have commented on its pride of place as a major site for the understanding of the political, social, and cultural discourse about Africa generally and Nigeria, specifically. While a lot has been written about Nollywood (Fosudo, 2012, Ukadike, 1999, Balogun, 1987) to mention only a few, only a few scholars have devoted attention to the study of indigenous Nigerian cinema using indigenous languages such as Hausa, Igbo, Efik and Yoruba among others. Unlike the movies that use English as the language of expression, these movies use traditional elements peculiar to their cultural space to entertain and educate. One of these movie traditions is the Yoruba language movies of south western Nigeria.

It is interesting also, that unlike the English language movies whose practitioners have been labeled as being driven purely by commerce, most of the practitioners in the Yoruba language movies are off -springs of a robust Alarinjo, the Yoruba traveling theatre that had the likes of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Moses Adejumo and a host of others as major proponents. As Adesokan, 2004 noted, this 'Offsprings of the traveling performers still constitute a major force in the video film practice and their works still retain fragments of the troupe character'.

It is important to note that while many critics of this film tradition specifically and Nollywood movies generally have argued that the movies lack substance and quality, (Harrow, 2013), it can be argued that due to the fact that the Yoruba language movies' practitioners grew out of a rich tradition steeped in politics as evident in the works such pioneers like Hubert Ogunde, it is impossible for some of them not to go back to use their films to comment on socio-political events of their society.

A lot has been written on the rich legacy of the Yoruba traveling theatre otherwise referred to as Alarinjo Theatre, (Egun Clark, 1979, Biodun Jeyifo, 1985, Yemi Ogunbiyi, 1981) to mention only a few. While each of these scholars celebrated this rich tradition as pioneer of contemporary theatre and film culture, we note that it was Hubert Ogunde that eventually pioneered the use of theatre as a political tool. This role was later to be taken up by other theatre practitioners after Ogunde such as Oyin Adejobi. Karin Barber, (2004)

for instance quotes Oyin Adejobi commenting on the role of the theatre practitioner as one of a journalist engaged in educating the public on social and political matters;

Theatre is so important to the people of our country-especially Yorubaland- because I regard the practitioners as practical journalists. If you are a journalist you make your report in the paper. Not many people read the paper, and if they read it, they read it for reading's sake. But just imagine putting on the stage the story of an Oba who misused his position-you see- so there are messages that our people collect from our plays.

The above shows two things, namely, the role of the theatre in the society and its political engagement. akin Adesokan (2004) in his understanding of contemporary Nigerian argues that, 'Apart from tending to a conservative thematisation of Nigerian realities, these films were notorious for importing the structure of the traveling-theatre into cinema largely unmediated.' Little wonder, then, that some offsprings of the traveling tradition such as Yekeen Ajileye revert to using their films as social commentary and propaganda tool as evident in the film under study.

While we may agree that most of the movies that emanated from the Alarajo theatre tradition is suffused with ritual, witchcraft, obscenity and other themes, there are several films that engage with social, political and economic themes. Tunde Kelani, for instance has done extensive work in this regard. In Saworoide, Agogo Eewo, and Arugba, for example, Kelani takes the audience into the messy world of contemporary Nigerian politics and its attendant corruption-infested leadership both civilian and military. While Kelani engages with contemporary socio-political issues, he does so using traditional tropes. Commenting on the role of film in political discourse and one of Tunde Kelani's movies specifically, Adeoti (2012) argues ,

... if not more than historical records and political treatises, the film medium offers illuminating perspectives, and rich interpretations of socio-political events in a nation. Arugba takes a backward glance at politics and governance in the post-military era and offers serious comments on why absolutism as a political culture still persists in Nigeria's democracy.

As noted earlier, Kelani's political movies are rooted in Yoruba metaphoric tropes as evident not only in their plot structure and characterization but also in his choice of titles. This is where Ajileye's film under discussion here differs sharply from Tunde Kelani's. Unlike Kelani, Ajileye presents us with contemporary realities using contemporary idioms of communication. The title, Alaga Kansu (Council Chairman) does not make any attempt at metaphorisation but rather confronts the audience with the reality of his/her lived experience as a grassroots participant in and observer of corruption-ridden political leadership.

3. Nigerian Political Class and the Virus of Corruption

Anyone familiar with the Nigerian nation need not wonder why most filmmakers and other commentators are obsessed with the theme of corruption. As the most populous nation on the African continent and one of the most endowed with human and material resources, Nigerians remain one of the poorest in the world. The reality becomes even more painful and sad when one takes a look at the lifestyle of most Nigerian leaders past and present who live very opulent and ostentatious lives while the masses wallow in abject poverty deprived of basic necessities of life such as water, housing, health, education, electricity and many more. While this sorry state has led to an astronomical rise in criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, terrorism, prostitution, child trafficking and a lot more, it has also led to a shift in attention by moviemakers and other cultural activist to focus their searchlight on the blight called corruption. At all levels of governance without any exception, corruption seems to have eaten so deep that even the ordinary man now prays to get to the top to take his/her share of the national cake. From the national to the state and local government levels, the masses are shortchanged by their leaders whom they queue in the sun to elect into office. Paul-Sewa and Yusuf capture it succinctly when they argue that,

...an observable phenomenon of unspeakable corruption sometimes fashioned in a way of "political reward" and tagged as "ubiquitous Nigerian infirmity has been enmeshed (sic) in the activities of the leadership of grassroots governments in Nigeria. This unfortunate situation has had pathetic effect on the growth and development of the various Local Government Areas in Nigeria. Therefore, instead of achieving grassroots development, they have become channels through which public funds are appropriated by local politicians as part of their own share of the 'national cake' appropriated from the federation's account for grassroots development becomes 'local cake' to be shared by local politicians.

The view expressed above is reflective of all the levels of government from independence to date. One is therefore, inundated daily with news of billions of Naira stolen with impunity by the ruling Nigerian ruling class who pretend daily to be serving the masses. The Local Government, the third tier of government and the closest to the people, therefore deserves critical attention as a microcosm of the Nigerian political class. This is because, Local Governments Areas are created to bring the government closer to the people. For this reason, Local Government Chairpersons and their councilors are expected to know and feel the pulse of the people and attend to their immediate and basic needs. However, instead of serving the people, politicians at the local level more often than not ape their counterpart at the state and national levels to loot the treasury while the people die in penury. One major catalyst for this high level and brazen corruption is the way and manner that these leaders emerge.

As many scholars have observed, the electoral process has a lot to do with the level of corruption in Nigeria. The Nigerian electoral process is a very flawed one that does everything to destroy democratic participation. It is now common in Nigeria for money bags to appear as political godfathers and godmothers to impose their candidates on the people. It follows, therefore, that when candidates of these moneybags eventually emerge as winners in an equally flawed (se) election process, they serve their pockets and those of their financiers. In most cases, as Nwaeziegw (1997) noted, these financiers are retired military men who have tasted the delicacy called power and who want to remain in the corridors of power to continue feasting on the "national cake." In a contrastive study of the military in Nigerian and American political lives, Nwaeziegw argues that while retired American Generals contributed positively to

America's democratic ideals, Nigeria's retired Generals did otherwise. Citing Generals Yakubu Gowon, Olusegun Obasanjo and Sheu Yar'Adua as case studies, he observes that apart of these generals having the title of "general" conferred on them through their participation in coups as against American Generals who were actually promoted based on merit, these Nigerian "Generals" are anti-democracy;

Again, another distinguishing feature of these men was that they never portrayed any inclination towards democracy and were aware of their potent unpopularity among the people. One of the potent reasons for overthrowing Gowon was his refusal to initiate the democratic process he earlier pledged to do by 1976. Obasanjo's successful handing over was seen as an act of cowardice rather than desire to build up democracy. The fact that both him and Yar'Adua retired into big fortunes of accumulated public funds scattered in foreign banks... showed that they were only concerned with leaving the scene to enable them enjoy their ill-built up wealth. But none of the American Generals, not even past presidents was known to have made fortunes from his public assignments.

In addition to the above, it is interesting to note that Obasanjo later became a civilian president while the late Yar'Adua's son, took over from him! We may also note that the role of godfather or godmother has now included civilian money bags and locals with control over thugs who unleash terror against their opponents.

4. Corruption through the Lens of Nigerian Moviemakers

The high level of corruption among the political ruling class, therefore, has received the attention of the lenses of not a few movie makers. Tade Ogidan, Tunde Hundeyin, Tunde Kelani and Ajileye whose film is studied here are examples of these practitioners who see the film as a potent tool for political engagement and re-orientation. Of these practitioners, Ajileye stands out as one who metamorphosed from an itinerant theatre practitioner to a movie producer and director. In fact, his metamorphosis cuts across the stage, radio, television and finally film. Since the itinerant Alarinjo theatre was both a means of entertainment and political engagement, it becomes understandable that Ajileye, not content with the political situation of Nigeria especially with regards to graft and corruption of the ruling elite, decided to use his film "Alaga Kansu" (Local Government Chairman) to critique government neglect of the populace after winning elections.

To understand the relevance of Alaga Kansu as a film on political re-orientation of the masses, a brief discussion of the Nigerian nation is essential. Nigeria, the most populous black nation on earth is endowed with natural and human resources. Despite this, however, her citizens are amongst the poorest in the world. This poverty in the midst of abundance is attributable to the graft, greed and corruption of the political elite who plunder the nation's treasury using the mandate of the people. Several studies have revealed that a lot of Nigerians live below a dollar a day! This sad situation contrast with the absurdity that the Nigerian political office holders are the highest paid in the world. It is, therefore, not surprising that every political office seeker from the local government to the legislature and the executive sees the national treasury as a piece of cake from which he/she must cut a large chunk not only for himself but for members of his family and his political cronies. This explains the sad state of infrastructures and institutions –roads, hospitals, power, education, water and other basic amenities. It is also not surprising that political office holders who were once members of the oppressed class often become super rich with months of getting into office and thereby cutting themselves from those who voted them in, in the first place. Once elected by the people, they become, like the masquerade that only appears occasionally when the people's votes are needed to re-elect them after years of self-representation and neglect of the sufferings of the people. It is this situation that Ahaji Yekeen Ajileye dramatizes in his movie, "Alaga Kansu".

5. "Alaga Kansu" as a political metaphor on Corruption

In Nigeria, as in most democracies, governance begins at the grassroots. The Local Government or Councils (Kansu) is expected to be the closest arm of government to the people. It is expected to take care of such basic things as health, basic education, rural development and so on. Therefore, the Council Chairman or "Alaga Kansu", is expected to know the pulse, pains, expectations and needs of the masses as he/she is a member of the community. This explains Ajileye's title of the film. From the title, it is obvious that he intends to take a very close look at governance at the grassroots level. This is so because, if the masses must enjoy good governance and better political representation at the state and federal levels, they must participate actively in politics at the local government level. As Nudewhenu aptly observes,

The expediency for the creation of Local Government anywhere in the socio-political environs in the world stems from the need to facilitate development at the grassroots. The significance of Local Government is function of its ability to generate sense of belongingness, safety and satisfaction among its populace.... Local Government has been perceived as panacea for the diverse problems of the people with diverse culture.

The local government council (Kansu), therefore, is a metaphoric representation of the state and federal governments as what happens at that level is a direct reflection of what happens at the other levels of government and Alaga Kansu frontally engages with this because as Adeyanju, 2004 quotes Stuart that,

The power of video to generate discourse and strengthen collective identity is great..., they raise spirits, inspire confidence and solidarity and communicate effectively the importance of collective action

The film Alaga Kansu is a star studded film parading some of the most popular artists of the Yoruba video film industry. It is interesting to note that most of the actors and actresses paraded in the movie grew from the old Alarinjo theatre mentioned earlier. It may be posited that the casting of these actors for a film that critiques governance and which educates the masses on what to do to change the status quo is deliberate as Ajileye, it may be argued put this cast together to remind them of their political origin during

their Alarinjo or itinerant theatre days where the stage was used as a space of political engagement as seen in the works of Ogunde and others.

The film opens with Koledowo, a poor miserable man of fifty attempting suicide due. He is rescued and as common with a largely communal Yoruba community, he is asked to explain the reason for his sordid action. He explains that the reason for his decision to end his life was as a result of poverty. According to him, if a man has achieved nothing at the age of fifty, then, such a man was not fit to live. The community took pity of him and advised him to take things easy. Koledowo's suicide attempt coincides with an election year and to give him a lease of life, he is introduced to a party for consideration as their candidate during the forthcoming local government election.

This gesture by some members of the community is a metaphor meant to reveal the economic and moral status of most Nigerian leaders. Koledowo represent very clearly, that most political office holders who have suddenly become rich were actually from very humble background. As members of the less privileged, the masses have faith in them as people who would fight their cause. The presentation of Kokedowo to the political caucus, however, reveals, very clearly, the fabric of Nigerian politics and politicians. His introduction to other party members by a party leader and his subsequent appeal that Koledowo be considered as the party's Chairmanship candidate is vehemently objected to by the majority based on the argument that he never identified with them. The situation became chaotic as the only criterion to sell Koledowo to the people as their candidate is hinged on his attempted suicide. This shows that in Nigeria, merit is sacrificed on the altar of emotion and sentiments. Despite Koledowo not having a vision for the people, he is eventually imposed on the party by the leadership cabal of the party. This, again, is a reflection of what happens in the real world of Nigerian politics where godfathers subvert the principles of democracy and merit for personal gains.

The narrative moves to a critique of political parties and their ideologies as we see, in a montage, party campaigns. Again, the names of the parties reflect their lack of ideological clarity and direction. Instead of names that touch on values and visions of the parties, Ajileye creates parties with names such as Egbe Oloronbo, (Lime Party) Egbe Ologede (Banana Party). This is a powerful metaphor that reveals the lack of direction and clarity of most Nigerian political parties. Since the parties are creation of visionless leaders who are only concerned with power to get to office and loot the treasury, little consideration is given to ideology and nomenclature. The campaigns, also, capture what happens in the field of politics in Nigeria as we see the parties engage in fictitious promises and singing of songs to ridicule and discredit their opponents. Koledowo, for instance promises to procure a drug that cures every woman of her barrenness. This bait to the electorate reflects Koledowo's knowledge of his community, a children-loving one. Among the Yoruba, it must be noted; barrenness is seen as a curse. A barren is something of an outcast and failure in life. Therefore, the promise of an injection to cure barrenness sways the electorate to his side!

If Koledowo is portrayed as the quintessence of a political brigandage, so are others politicians in the local government. We see Baba Wande (Kareem Adepoju) visit an Imam for spiritual assistance to win the forthcoming election just as we see another politician, Jide Kosoko's wife visit a babalawo (diviner) to perform some rituals so that her husband would win. In Jide Kosoko's case the diviner warns him not to renege on his promise to the people. But both of them are promised victory in the election. These narratives reveals very clearly the dimensions that politics takes in Nigeria as stories abound of politicians who visit shrines, mosques and churches to seek spiritual assistance to win elections. In most cases, these politicians become more committed to their spiritual and political godfathers rather than to the electorate.

In Alaga Kansu, however, both Jide Kosoko and Baba Wande do not fulfill their promises neither to their spiritual benefactors nor to the electorates. While Baba Wande, as common with most Nigerian politicians promises the Imam that he would build a new mosque for the Muslim community if he won the election, Jide Kosoko vows that he would always serve the people honestly and diligently. When both of them won, however, they reneged on their promises.

But if the Nigerian political space is saturated with mean and greedy people, Ajileye, in Alaga Kansu demonstrates that there is not a dearth of honest and conscientious people who are willing to serve the people. He, therefore, creates the character of Ajani, the son of modest but pious parents. Again, Ajileye takes us into the life of honest people who are willing to serve and the perception of their family about politics. While Ajani truly wants to serve, his parents are stoutly against him because as far as they are concerned, he would be smeared by the many corrupt men and women around him. Here, Ajileye invokes the metaphor of 'alaso aala' (one who adorns him/self with white robes) and 'elepo pupa' (bearers of palm oil). Ajani's father (Peter Fatomilola) tells him a story of twenty travelers. Of the twenty travelers, one is adorned in white robes, the symbol of purity and good intent while the rest are bearers of palm oil. He narrates that no matter how much the white robed one tries, his/her dress would get soiled. He concludes that since he does not want his family name soiled, he and his wife do not support Ajani's political ambition.

The above captures, very vividly, the mindset of most honest Nigerians who believe that "politics is a dirty game" and that anyone with good conscience and intentions has no business in it. This mindset has robbed and is robbing Nigeria of credible and honest people who have the ability and willingness to transform the country's fortunes. This scene is contrasted with the family meeting of another political jobber whose family advice him to go into the office and loot the treasury as this was the opportunity that God has offered the family to put an end to their poverty!

The drama of deceit, intrigue, bribery, corruption, violence against honesty plays out in the movie. Koledowo, Jide Kosoko, and Baba Wande get elected only for them to loot the treasury and neglect the people. We see a woman die in the hospital due to lack of money for treatment while Koledowo, their councilor who, just a while ago, attempted suicide due to poverty. The scenes move from the hospital where the relatives of the patient await the arrival of the woman that was sent to Koledowo's house for assistance just as we see Koledowo with a carton filled with money hiding away from the woman. The sick woman eventually dies. The death of this

woman is a representation of the multitude that die daily in various Nigerian private and public hospitals due to the greed and corruption of the political class.

However, the if Koledowo and his likes are true representations of most Nigerian politicians, Ajani stand out as a true and honest leader even though he find antagonism from his vice who steal money and collects bribes from contractors. The bribery of Ajani's vice leads eventually to the collapse of a school building where several students die. Ajani is mobbed and injured by angry parents reminiscent of his parents' warning that his white robe will be smeared. He remains undaunted, however as he assuages the people's anger and also pacifies the farmers who are threatening to down tools due to neglect.

Happily, during another election year, the people decide to vote for only those candidates who delivered on their campaign promises while voting out the bad ones who are now poor. With this, we can see as Adeoti, (2012) noted that;

The choice of the film medium as a critical platform for dissecting the public sphere is deliberate. Film projects and inspires us to achieve an understanding of the human condition across the globe. It is a vital agent of political socialization. In recent times, the home video has become in Nigeria, a popular cultural production....

Adeoti's view about the place of the home video is corroborated by the popularity of Alaga Kansu among Yoruba home video audiences. The film has become a household film as many of the people especially in rural-urban areas of Lagos are very familiar with the film and are in support of its message. Form the popularity of the film among the majority of the people and its discussion on some Yoruba video programme such as Miniyojo and Gbajumo Osere amongst others, one can safely say that the films are a potent replacement for the Alarinjo theatre of the 40s and 80s as most Yoruba audiences now watch their favourite artist in the privacy of their home instead of in the public village squares. To this extent, therefore, one can say that the film specifically and other Nollywood films in general have come a long way in entertaining, educating and conscientising Nigerians both at home and in the Diaspora and even by other African nationals as noted by Adejumo (2010),

Nigerian video film narratives are created and watched primarily for purposes of entertainment. They succeed in generating significant local and regional audiences to the extent that they address widespread fears and fantasies in what viewers consider to be a satisfactory manner.

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