

AUTEURING NOLLYWOOD

Critical Perspectives On THE FIGURINE

*Edited by
Adeshina Afolayan*

Foreword by Jonathan Haynes



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Adeshina Afolayan

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The Home Video Industry and Nigeria's Cultural Development

Dele Layiwola

In this chapter I intend to do three things: the first is to trace the evolution of home video theatre from its traditional travelling theatre origins. The second is to reveal the emergent irony of a popular cultural production that adopts a bottom-to-top development and has now become a dominant sub-culture. The final point is to indicate that it is the arrival of television as a mass medium that directly gave rise to the film or what is reborn in the home video; the precursor of other new age social media.

The background

The precursor of the genre that is generally referred to in the latter part of the 20th century as the home video emerged from the activities of the travelling theatre troupes of the 1940s through the 1970s. Most of these troupes were located in the various towns and villages of Western Nigeria and by the early 1980s when Biodun Jeyifo conducted a formal, systematic study and

inventory, there were about one hundred and twenty or six score groups (Jeyifo, 1984: 200-3). It is true as Jeyifo affirmed at the time that the travelling theatre troupes had constituted themselves into a cultural movement. The ubiquitous presence of the travelling theatre troupes in Western Nigeria of the 1950s and 60s could not but catch the attention of young persons growing up in the region at the time. The branded mammy-wagons with high-rising loads of drums, stage flats, backdrops and props moving wholesale through narrow highways and dusty alleys made memorable cinematographic scenes in the mind of every village folk of the period. In my memory as a boy growing up in Ibadan, Osogbo, Ipetumodu, Ikirun and Okuku, the performance scenarios were replications of archetypal festivals. Days before the arrival of the troupes for performance, posters were disseminated liberally in the entire surroundings, especially in elementary and high school compounds as well as around the town halls and marketplaces. Sometimes announcements were made on Rediffusion and radio sets, those being the limited variety of social media available through the 1950s and early 60s.

When the troupe arrived in town, there were acrobatic displays of adept drummers and percussionists playing on the rooftops of mammy-wagons at very dangerous, dust-rousing speed. This was always done to the admiration of town and village folk. There were hardly any consequent mishaps on account of these preludes. They often became a point of convergence and cultural renewal for towns, villages and communities during the period.

There is one important point to be made that whilst the general community experienced some glamour or gaiety with regard to this social and cultural movement, the youths of the period, particularly those in educational institutions, derived the greatest boon from

the movement. Public schools had become the bequeathal of a new elitism derived from colonial governance and the British social and educational system. The public schools would normally have a year-long curriculum demarcated into three fourteen-week terms. At the end of the third term early in December, before Yuletide, the schools would normally have what is termed "the end-of-year concerts". Usually, a performance, curiously referred to as "opera", is staged to the admiration of pupils, teachers, parents and the interested community of "stakeholders". It is at these end-of-year concerts that a travelling theatre play features. The concept, scope and style of these plays were usually those popularized by the travelling theatre companies otherwise referred to as the "concert parties". Why were they called concert parties? My suspicion is that because a differentiation had to be made from the political parties which also had their cultural and dramatic followership at campaign rallies, the strictly professional and cultural troupes were named *concert*, as opposed to *political* parties. Biodun Jeyifo has captured the spirit of these end-of-year concerts in his own account:

My earliest contact with the theatrical tradition popularised by the *Yoruba Travelling Theatre* troupes took place in my primary school days during the end-of-year concerts that rounded off the work and experience of every school year. These concerts were typically a mixed bag of songs, recitations in English and Yoruba, "cultural" displays of traditional dances and modes of dressing, and the dramatic items comprising plays and "operas". These "operas" were the most formalistically distinctive in our mixed bag of concerts; they were dramatic productions in which the dialogue was almost entirely sung, the physical action being little more than a choreographed rhythmic swaying leftward and rightward in an unvarying

smooth motion to the accompaniment of part rhumba, part “low” highlife (“**Kokoma**”) rhythms. In 1956 or 1957, with my classmates Leke Atewologun and Moses Alebiowu, I acted in one such opera titled “**Ore Meta**” (“Three Friends”) which I later discovered to be an original creation of the Kola Ogunmola troupe. To this day some of the tunes and words of the “libretto” of that production are still fresh in my memory.

My first direct experience of the performances of the Travelling Theatre troupes came later in 1965, by which time I had become quite aware of the existence and fame of many troupes and their founder-leaders and had savoured their plays and songs on radio and record albums and in television broadcasts. But it was in 1965 that I first had a direct experience of the live stage performances of the troupes. The particular circumstance of this first contact is, I believe, fairly representative of the social and cultural situation of the millions of patrons that the **Travelling Theatre** troupes have over the years fostered and sustained (1984: 7).

The idea of a popular artistic or dramatic tradition in Western Nigeria was also replicated in another postcolonial West African nation, Ghana. Whilst the social function would appear to be same, the origins and sources of inspiration would appear to be surprisingly antithetical. Catherine Cole, in her account of Ghana's concert party theatre, noted succinctly that the Ghanaian concert party is in the tradition of the travelling popular theatre of twentieth century West Africa. However, she noted that there were dominant influences from American movies, Latin gramophone records, African American spirituals and minstrel shows. Even more distinctive was the fact that the medium of expression was initially in English before they reverted to Ghanaian languages (2001:1).

On the contrary, the popular travelling theatres of Nigeria were originally in indigenous languages, largely Yoruba – in the major dialects of the language. It is plausible to attribute this to the fact that the Yoruba popular travelling theatre, the *Alarinjo*, has had a long history of indigenous performance tradition and patronage. Joel Adedeji, in his authoritative study and article on the origins of Yoruba travelling theatre (1969, 1978), traced the professional origin of the craft to the reign of King Abipa, a 14th century Yoruba monarch, who made actors out of ghost mummors (see Samuel Johnson 1974, 1976: 164-7).

In Eburn Clark's account of Hubert Ogunde's pioneering concert party theatre, it is clear that much of the dialogue and songs are always in the indigenous language. In her account and analyses of Ogunde's play "Onimoto" (The Owner Driver) (1979, 1984: 132-40), she documents that one of the characters, Risi, spoke in her Ijebu dialect of the Yoruba language. This not only establishes the setting and characterization, it also helps to sell the dialogue to the indigenous audience and theatre goer. As the play moves around the country, the same character, mindful of the linguistic variant of each community, switches codes to establish communication with her respective audiences.

Clark's analysis rightly identifies a genealogy for the theatre tradition because the structure of the performance is taken from the traditional performances of *Egungun* oral chants and the *Alarinjo* troupes:

The structure of the programme has followed an unchanging pattern. It has always opened with "The opening glee and the dance, followed by the opera or play, and concluding with the closing glee". It appears that Ogunde's programme structure

has its roots firmly embedded in traditional entertainment (1979: 97).

The adaptation of this traditional format is discernible even in the school concert that Jeyifo describes above. Though Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Oyin Adejobi and Moses Olaiya have established and pushed the frontiers of the travelling theatre tradition, the historical and generational shift moved this practice to the concert party and subsequently to the video and film as a social and cultural medium. The traditional troupes had performed from the 14th through the early 20th centuries. The concert party theatres as described by Cole took over from the early 1920s through to the early 1970s. The film or celluloid, in this tradition, then took over to the present day. This is a rough approximation of the periodization where the method and the medium transited from one stage to the other.

The traditional theatre films and videos

The traditional theatre troupes moved from one town to the other given the itinerary already prepared by the troupe manager who consulted with the impresario or the *Alagbaa* of those towns on a set itinerary. Business consultations were rudimentary and customary. The agreement, predicated on a certain fee or gifts for the host guild, was agreed. But even more important was the non-pecuniary aspect of the business deal. The visiting troupe would not violate copyright agreements; would desist from unduly critical and inflammatory utterances or productions. In addition, both the visitor and the host would keep the confidentiality of dramatis personae in scenes or revues that were not “public”, sacred or protected. Hospitality was usually arranged by the *Alagbaa* (the

impresario) on agreed terms. Decorum and continence were also observed in the interaction between the host and the visitor. Any breach of any of these terminated agreed terms and could see the visitors being censored, censured, chased out of town or banned. Where there were disputes especially in the interpretation or rendition of historical scenes and details, debates and consultations always resolved the matter. Generally, misrepresentations were, as much as possible, avoided.

In the era of the concert theatre, performing companies covered longer distances because auto and mechanical vehicles had come into use. The era of commodity economy which set in began to change the faces of logistical arrangements and business deals. Customary tokens and hospitality were then replaced by negotiations and currency deals. Strict division of labour necessitated that food would be bought and accommodation paid for. Brokers and mediators began to charge "professional" fees and each stage of the production had to be commodity-driven. What used to be negotiations became consultations. The pace of history and tradition had moved on. Traditional societies were becoming part of the post-industrial, capitalist age where social and economic relationships are constantly mediated. It is just as well, at this point, to speculate on the future of a mass audience in modern and modernizing societies.

The representation of the mass society, especially in the representation of art, is succinctly represented by Denis McQuail as including 'a hope or nostalgia for a more communitarian alternative to the present individualistic age as well as a critical attitude towards the supposed emptiness, loneliness, stress and consumerism of life in a contemporary free market society' (2010: 95). In the context of our present discourse, that was bound to

be so because theatre, by sheer pressure and compulsion, had to be made available to a greater population across larger distances within a short span of time. In the same way I have represented the growth and development of theatre and entertainment in southwestern Nigeria here (vide Jeyifo, 1984 and Clark, 1979), the same phenomenon appeared in the middle belt of Nigeria in the Kwagh-hir puppetry theatre (cf. Enem, 1976, 1981 and the studies of Iyorwuese Hagher). What art has done in these emergent communities is that it champions the social reconstruction of reality and makes for a broader social communication.

A major historical development in the media and the arts always precipitates two consequences.

- (i) The sharp division of society into those who reproduce the new media and the array of those who respond to that new media by its avid consumption; the audience.
- (ii) The emergence of a new technology and the attendant establishment of new social relations and classes in the production and the patronage of it.

It is clear that the purveyors of popular theatre are the artisanal groups in society who creatively respond to the taste of the upper class and elite groups. In satisfying these desires and tastes, they earn a living and contribute to opinion legislation in society. Composers and musicians of popular music fall into this group as well.

The mass society and the mass media

It is often noticed that art and craft advance a lot in centralized societies where guilds and organized groups and associations

develop in response to social hierarchies and the emphasis on organized labour. It is also true, in a dialectical sense, that those organized guilds are processes for challenge and resistance to the tyranny of social hierarchies. Naturally, there is the need for checks and balances such that the taste of the elite is often matched or countered by the production scale of the artisans and craftsmen. The mass society holds sway in the area of production and popular expression. Even the production patterns and the itinerary of the travelling theatre troupes reflect this phenomenon. The mass society is thus atomized and centralized in its operational processes.

The new electronic media, especially the medium of celluloid, wax and video discs, are new ways by which the mass society reaches out in self-expression and breaks the cycle of individual and collective atomization that dominant social conditions impose. My thinking here is consistent with McQuail's media-society theory on the mass society that 'the media offer a view of the world, a substitute or pseudo-environment, which is a potent means of manipulation of people but also an aid to their psychic survival under difficult conditions' (2010: 94). It is also consistent, as he points out, in the assertion of Wright Mills, that 'Between consciousness and existence stand communications, which influence such consciousness as men have of their existence' (1951: 332-3).

The invention of the film and video over what used to be a live dramatic art creates a dream world which not only broadens aspiration but makes the individual and his/her world bigger, isolated, plastic and remote. Although this does not represent a political mass action on the part of the mass society, it is a direct cultural action and affirmation and a cultural medium of identity projection. I particularly remember that the late Oyin Adejobi and

his protégé, Kareem Adepoju, said they were keen on producing a film titled *Ipadabo Oduduwa* (The return of the progenitor Oduduwa) which they believed would be a launch pad over which to rebuild the dwindling fortunes of their theatre troupe. The key, to them, was a rejuvenation of a medium which establishes the sovereignty of their craft and métier as culture propagators and practitioners. This was about 1981, both in their homes at Osogbo and at the cultural centre, Ibadan. About five years earlier, the doyen of the Concert Party phase of Yoruba popular theatre, Hubert Ogunde, had been able to aggregate resources to launch into film. He produced a mythopoeic title, *Aiye* (*The world*), to be followed a couple of years later by *Jaiyesinmi* (*The world redeemed*) (1979). He, I believe, was launched into the market by the breakthrough of Ola Balogun whose epochal box office success, *Ajani Ogun*, appeared with a bang in 1975. This became the leading example for Ogunde and other indigenous performance practitioners in the transition to video and filmmaking.

The Nigerian film versus the Nigerian home video

It has been documented that cinema came to the continent of Africa soon after its invention at the close of the 19th century (Rouch, 1962; Vaughan, 1966; Mgbejume, 1989). It was said that a vaudeville magician stole a “theatregraph” projector in 1896 from the Alhambra Palace Theatre in London from where he escaped to South Africa. There he set up the first cinema business where he showed moving images. Thereafter, two pioneering documentaries, *Negro Cruise* and *Trader Horn* were made at about 1920. They were amateur ethnographic films portraying different scenes generally prejudicial to the true circumstance and interest of the indigenous population. These were later followed by the adaptation of romance

and adventure novels written by non-African Africanists. But this is not of much concern in the present essay; rather, I prefer to focus on Nigeria and the evolution of the film tradition in Nigeria.

The first motion picture showed on Monday August 12, 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos (*Lagos Standard*, Vol. 9, No. 48). Considering that the cinema had just been invented only seven years before, this was a feat. The *Lagos Standard* did not dilute its excitement as it announced: 'The cinematograph exhibition which is being made at the Glover Memorial Hall from Monday night and is to continue for ten nights is the talk of the town.' The film was brought to Nigeria by Messrs Balboa of Barcelona, Spain through the auspices of Mr Herbert Macaulay, the grandson of Bishop Ajayi Crowther. A gate fee of three shillings (same as the British shillings) was charged per head. The *Lagos Standard* not only promoted the advertisement, it equally sponsored the advocacy that the price of three shillings be lowered so that the film experience would be affordable for many. It also advocated that many Nigerians from the hinterland could come and experience the cinema first-hand. The description and promotion of *Lagos Standard* whetted the appetite of the would-be cinema-goer, describing it as a wonder of the age. The cinema replicated scenes from daily life: a steamer moving across the water, conjugal dispute, a steeple chase, acrobats on display and, above all, the coronation scene of King Edward VII at Westminster.

The film brought live entertainment and broke the boredom and monotony of night life in Lagos. By mid-September 1903, Messrs Balboa closed their shows in Lagos and proceeded on a West African tour. Seizing on the success of the Balboa shows, a British entrepreneur by the name of Stanley Jones brought films to show at the same Glover Memorial Hall in November 1903.

He tried to moderate the gate fees by charging the same three shillings for reserved seats and two shillings for the popular seats. Stanley Jones flavoured his films with footages that were “native” so that he became more sought after by his audiences. It was to his credit that he not only brought the first roller-skating ring into Lagos in 1911 he also interspersed cinematographic scenes with live comedies. This innovation and his mastery of the art of spotlighting made him immensely popular (Leonard, 1967: 154-55). It was only a question of time before the missions seized on the popularity of cinematographic events to propagate religious lessons.

There is no gainsaying the fact that cinema became a symbol of cultural liberation and aesthetic release because it later became the medium for the call for cultural nationalism. Nigerians had seen the faces of cosmopolitan actors/atresses on the screen; they would like to see the faces of their own actors and actresses too! The *Daily Times* of October 11, 1920 specifically re-echoed this call. It is pertinent to mention that as a further precursor to the heritage of the Nigeria Home Video, the Colonial Film Unit carried out the rural Nigerian film experiment in 1952. Various films on education, health, community development and modern favouring techniques were shown to various communities in their ethnic languages (Mgbejume, 1989:11). The ethnographic films were based on the report of British researchers and anthropologists to the colonial office. These films then served the dual purpose of entrenching colonial rule as well as propagating indigenous knowledge of the environment.

The Colonial Film Unit recognized the power of visual imagery and took advantage of it. The medium was to help study the temperament and outlook of Nigerians, in particular, and

help establish how best to govern it. The policy statements on the preferences of the colonial office are very well articulated in the Colonial Film Unit's memorandum 96307 A/5/, as enunciated by Mgbejume (1989) and Peter Morton Williams' *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*. Much of the undoing of foreign films and prejudicial screen and visual presentations are now inadvertently being addressed by the development of the ubiquitous home video phenomenon. The confidence with which the project is prosecuted by Nigerian artistes shows that they are able to retell the histories of their own peoples. The film has become the new resource to remake their image in their own true image, tongue and voice. It is also a source of great revenue and wealth marker.

The medium of the film or the home video came at a time when social upheavals and urban violence disrupted the rubric of city life, entertainment and musical shows. For people to have the kind of entertainment that the travelling theatre troupes provided, they needed a medium which could reproduce the same inside a productive habitat like private homes and private spaces outside of the downtown commercial and violence-prone centres.

The medium also guarantees a large-scale box office proceeds at medium cost. The overhead from running around country roads in mammy-wagons and buses and in analogue-type publicity and human-centred contacts were tasking, exerting and costly. They projected their names and reputation on the new medium and their fame soared as well as their new acquisition of transnational expertise. In the long run, they got more from a medium which was portable than from the unwieldy medium of theatre. The new medium is convenient and much cheaper to run. This medium requires new and varying levels of expertise and technical support; for instance, films in indigenous languages which intend to broaden

the debate on the public sphere have to be subtitled. The films travel even larger distances and generate more social commentary. It is needless to emphasize that indigenous languages grow and derive new vigour and vocabulary from the frequency of media patronage.

The new-fangled electronic multi-media which support the film industry boost a new-found confidence mildly comparable to those of the Asian Tigers. Hollywood and Bollywood have now been succeeded by Nollywood and Kannywood! Ideologically, it has helped to invent a new optimism and consciousness of the potential of societies hitherto called postcolonial or neo-colonial. The established hegemony of radio and the print media is now challenged by the growth of the electronic and the new media which have subsequently followed and overtaken them. It is clear that like the new media, merchants of the film and home video have gained a new liberty which helps the mass public to reach the media at various levels. This ensures that films are produced faster than plays and the purveyors – actors, actresses, scriptwriters and producers – are not only challenged to be more productive, they also collaborate more creatively and more profusely. The public(s) are no longer just entertained, their reactions are hardly processed before they confront new materials which are churned out and lunged at them.

At its very worst, this new industrial confidence leads to massification and inferiorization of the commodity and the media process. This proliferation of avenues helps the same process to abuse and manipulate the commodity, a fallout of which is piracy and skewed marketing. These ruthless centres of multiple monopolies ensure that the public is atomized. Though we mentioned earlier on that, at the last count, the travelling theatres

round the country approached a hundred and fifty, sheer number was not enough to atomize the group. In the latter case, it was not just a game of numbers; it was the pro-rated randomization of the game of chanced collaborations that ensured an all-year-round productivity. We are no longer talking of at least a hundred productions in a play season; we are talking of at least a double of that number of films in one season between the Southern-based Nollywood and the Northern-based Kannywood.

Conclusion: Home video and television as precursors of the new media

We must not forget that as the story of the film unfolds, so do those of the television and home video. The arrival of the first television station in Nigeria in 1959 brought a lot of hope and animation to the media world. A lot of cultural and educational factors became the source of raw materials for television programmes. It was also easy to watch at home what was otherwise available in theatres and cinema halls. This helped to keep the family at home whilst engaging the benefit of outdoor entertainment otherwise available in the now riskier parts of downtown postcolonial cities in their various phases of transition. My point here roughly approximates what Afolabi Adesanya implies when he writes:

What in essence is now being offered in the video genre is a rehash of television programmes packaged as movies. This explains why this set of producers, who are responsible for many of the movies being made today, do not have a scope any wider than the width of a television screen, and possess a dramatic consciousness that does not extend beyond the parlour audience mentality (1997: 19).

Our concluding point leads to the fact that the Nigerian popular theatre tradition has been domesticated in the frame of the home video. The modernist point of departure is that it is mediated by the television set or the LCD screen. It may well echo the conceptual point that the home video is the twin invention of the television screen. The film has the broad framework of a field and outdoor medium but the television is a miniaturized version of this. But is there quite any difference?

In further emphasizing my conclusion that the home video is that aesthetic historical interface between television and the new media, I shall like to review some conclusions earlier drawn by two colleagues – Jonathan Haynes and Afolabi Adesanya. A facile look at the phenomenon of the home video hints at extraordinary artistic expressions captured on video and supported on shoestring budgets on account of poverty as an imitation of real, filmed events. Jonathan Haynes fell into this error of judgement because he did not aggregate the holistic aspiration of these impresarios and artistes from the days of the travelling theatre. On the contrary, it is not a reflection of poverty as it is sometimes insinuated, even if resources are scarce, but a challenge to poverty and limitation (cp. Haynes, 1997: 9). It is a medium of liberation for ideas and skill. As a medium of narration and tertiary orality, the home video rivals the Nigerian press in its vigour and voluptuousness. It is therefore a professional battleground and a potential reservoir of media expertise.

One must also say that Afolabi Adesanya's comparison of the Nigeria Home Video, as a genre, to Onitsha market literature is an uncanny and witty observation, albeit skewed. We must understand that as a postcolonial reflection of society, it often sets out with the belief in its ability to "speak" to an audience and write itself indelibly in the consciousness of its own public. Because

that audience is double-sided (i.e. postcolonial and indigenous), it creates a mirror image that is split and, at the same time, many sided. The beneficiary society is both emergent and suppressed. It must entertain itself as well as analyze itself in a way that is both earthy and endogenous; turning itself inside-out. It is both itself as well as being the "other". It is, therefore, the remaking of a voice in a language that is overwhelmed by the challenges of the modern world. Cinema in Nigeria, be it "written" in Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba, is a medium both for the tongue and for the voice (Laiwola, 2010: 30). It is writing beyond the script onto a screen and a popular understanding within the context of her generic, interiorized values. This is why it is prone to misunderstanding by an unwary or patronizing outsider. This phenomenon is, in itself, profoundly ideologically flavoured in terms of its own activity. I agree with Adesanya that sometimes the effort falls short of its aspirations or fails in its accepted technicality, marred by *gaucherie* – noisy, gaudy or vulgar. This is how Adesanya puts it:

Aesthetically, this is regrettably the *métier* of the home video movies: gaudy costumes, vulgarly furnished mansions and exotic vehicles. The story and acting, more often than not, are overwhelmed by the projection of glamour over substance – a gaudy visual style that robs the production of memorable pathos and artistry. The thematic moral values and lessons are like those that constitute the hallmark of Onitsha market literature (1997: 19).

But in the space of the same resources, and in the corpus of the same producer over a given period of time, there are extreme variations in terms of quality of plot, dialogue and characterization. In the corpus of the famous and established

Mainframe Productions with Tunde Kelani as producer, you have extremely well directed titles – *O le ku* and *Thunderbolt* – and the fairly well directed – *The Campus Queen* and *Abeni*. The point I seek to make here is that in our assessment of the artistry of Home Video Productions, there are always exceptions which prove the rule. The home video is, after all, a travelling theatre phenomenon; a play! Finally, it has become a feature of the post-industrial society maintaining independent channels on the cable network. This ensures that its permanent feature as film is now on television and on its own as a pillar of the new media.

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