



Politics of Succession in Nollywood Films, *Saworoide* and *Ikoka*

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Abstract

Employing the media representation theory, this article uses the historical-analytic, key informant interview (KII) and observation methods to interrogate the issue of politics of succession in Nigeria as portrayed in *Saworoide* (1999, dir. Tunde Kelani) and *Ikoka* (2004, dir. Peddie Okao). Apart from highlighting the kind of challenges which politics evokes in the country and the possible ways of remediating them in a contemporary context, the study argues that Nollywood filmmakers have good reasons for shying away from politics, as interesting as it may be; it creates discomfort for governments as well as for the filmmakers. The former on account of their allergy to the truth and the latter on the likelihood of their works being confiscated, banned or even risk to life. The conclusion reached is that filmmakers who engage politics in their creative works deserve encouragement because growing societies such as Nigeria, are in dire need of spokesmen and women, who as change agents, can engender positive and developmental agendas in their ecosystems.

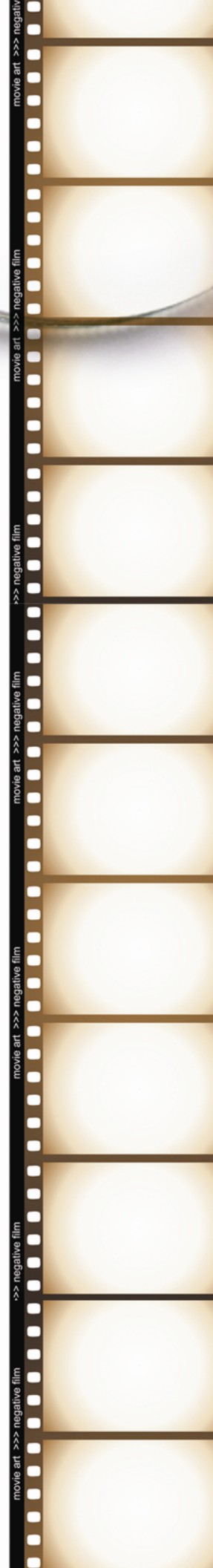
Keywords: Nollywood filmmakers, African culture, Politics of succession, change agents, Developing countries, Filmic narrations



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Politics of Succession in Nollywood Films¹, *Saworoide* and *Ikoka* Osakue S. Omoera, Chukwuma Anyanwu

Introduction

In Africa and Nigeria in particular, politics and the theatre/film can best be regarded as strange bedfellows. Indeed, politics and theatre or theatre and politics have engendered myriad of workshops, conferences, and books. It is, therefore, inconceivable to try to separate the two concepts. From inception, the Nigerian theatre was enmeshed in political intrigues as witnessed in the evolution of the Alarinjo Travelling Theatre from the politics of relocating the capital of a city (seat of government) from one location to another (Adedeji cited in Ogunba and Irele 27); and the need to fight colonialism (Kerr 18-19; Clark 35-36). The colonial period of the African/Nigerian theatre history was a veritable source of conflict between the colonial masters and their colonized hosts. Indeed, the emergence of African film was predicated on the need to right the wrongs of misrepresentation and denigration of African way of life by the colonial masters (Ukadike 95; Tapsoba 5; Ekwuazi, 31; Kerr 7). It was to such reactions and the publications in the media of that period that must have moved Lateef Jakande, a veteran journalist and one-time civilian governor of Lagos State in Nigeria to enthuse that: The war of independence was fought on the pages of the Nigerian press. Not one shot was fired. But many thundering editorials were written. No blood was shed (Anyanwu, “The Humanities and the Media in African...” 94).

The period of colonialism witnessed a vibrant and robust display of nationalist energy, creatively channeled to redress the injustice and degradation of the Black man or woman by the colonial masters in virtually every field. Hubert Ogunde was particularly vocal in this regard, using his plays as the voice of the oppressed in what later became Nigeria. He even resigned from her majesty's police to focus on his theatre aptly called African Research Party (Clark 38). Soyinka was equally not left out and after colonialism; the focus was now turned on the various military regimes that seemed to play out the agenda of the former era. His plays and films, notably, *Blues for a Prodigal* and those of Eddie Ugbomah, *Death of a Black President* were directly or indirectly meant to interrogate the political stance prevalent at that time.

Things changed, however, as the succeeding military juntas got worse in their brutal muzzling of dissenting voices: forcing artists, filmmakers, journalists and other critics to do a self-assessment of their works and call themselves to order since an incarcerated or dead critic was no use to himself/herself or society. We have the examples of the writer, poet, activist and environmentalist, Ken Saro Wiwa, who was shamelessly, murdered against the protests of the United Nations and the imprisonment without trial of the duo of Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor, *The Guardian* (Nigerian newspaper) journalists who were each jailed twelve months without trial by the military as strong deterrents to any form of criticism.

Other parts of Africa were not left out. In Kenya, the writers had to go underground to counter the atrocious behavior of the colonial masters. Indeed, they formed a movement –the Underground African Movement, popularly called the *MAUMAU*, to counter their oppressors. The case of South Africa was peculiar as the writers and activists had to fight mainly from outside the country. The film, *Sarafina*, for example was shot and screened outside the country and many others like it.

With this kind of scenario, it was not surprising to see filmmakers divert to less contentious subjects to avoid being victimized. However, there have been a return to democratic governance in most, if not, all African countries. This creates room for freedom of speech and other freedoms associated with it. It is, perhaps, in light of this democratic rebirth that some filmmakers have begun a gradual return to the subject of politics, either directly or indirectly. Politics is an interesting and contentious subject by all standards, especially the brand played in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular; therefore, whoever dabbles into it as worthy of filmic interrogation has to be extremely creative and careful. Notwithstanding that in a democracy, everyone is entitled to freedom of expression and that Nigeria, as a country, has passed the freedom of information into law (Omoera, “The Quest for more Effective Media...” 85). It is within this context that we consider issues of political import in the Nollywood films, *Saworoide* and *Ikoka*, by two of

Nigeria's best storytellers in the motion picture genre. The study highlights the possibility of a political reconstruction of the way Nigeria and Nigerians have been (re)presented and are being (re)presented in regard of certain events that occurred in the past as well as in the contemporary times, particularly in the Benin and Yoruba geo-cultural areas which have cultural and political implications for the wellbeing of the country generally.

Theoretical and methodological Insights

Theories are projections which are used to direct a given work or study. It is in this connection that this article is anchored on the media representation theory (MRT). Media representation is concerned with how the mass media (that is, radio, television, film, newspaper, etc.) represent reality in all its ramifications. It interrogates how humanity in its entirety is represented in different courses and causes of life; to the extent that this representation is a reflection of humans in their real and natural habitats is what the theory focuses on. David Chandler, writing on the theory claims that:

Representation refers to the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of aspects of reality such as people, places, objects, events and cultural identities. The term refers to the process as well as to its products. For instance, into the key markers of identity (class, age, gender and ethnicity) representation involves

not only how identities are represented within the text but also how they are constructed in the process of production and reception. (par. 25)

Viewed from whichever perspective, media products are representations of the actual world to the viewers. What we see or view is not the real world itself but its representation. Therefore, the media representation theory examines the manner in which individuals, groups, institutions, or events are presented to the viewers. Chandler further explains the concept of audience identification. In his words:

In a film, the director wants the audience to be on the side of the protagonist and hope that the antagonist will fail. This means that the audience has to identify with the protagonist – they have to have a reason to be ‘on his/her side’. But directors only have a couple of hours to make you identify with the protagonist – so, they have to use a kind of ‘shorthand’. This is known as typing – instead of each character being a complex individual, who would take many hours to understand, we are presented with a ‘typical’ character who we recognize. (par. 26)

The connection and dialectical bearing of the MRT to this study is not far-fetched. The whole essence of the study is towards the political reconstruction of the way Nigeria and Nigerians have been presented and are being presented in regard of certain events that occurred in the distant

past as well as the contemporary times in Nigeria, particularly in the Benin and Yoruba geo-cultural areas whose imports are still reverberating in films and other creative works such as *Saworoide* and *Ikoka*. Because of their cultural imperatives, many filmmakers turn to folklore in their stylistic approaches and in a bid to steer clear of political intrigues some make use of tropes, anecdotes and allegories deploying animal characters for human beings. As Shaka and Ibe have noted while citing Adesokan, Kelani's films generally revolve around:

A complex address to Nigerian political society from the standpoint of Yoruba expressive culture; a predilection for allegorical and popular forms; subtle or (often) overt didacticism; the use of actors from both the English Language and Yoruba subgenres, the skillful use of light and exteriors in cinematography, and an astute sense of a transnational context. (250)

The recourse to allegory enables the Nigerian filmmaker to be on his or her guide while choosing his or her story and characters in order not to fall on the other side of the law or incur the wrath of the powers that be. Thus, when narrating historical events, he or she is at once ready to stick to facts or prepared to do his or her creative best to reconstruct such facts in such a manner that will enable him or her to avoid murky waters or political perils. The easiest and simplest way to achieve this is via allegory, satire or transmogrification, by endowing inanimate objects and

animals the qualities which should have enriched his or her characterization of the historical or identifiable living characters.

Thus, while not misrepresenting his or her characters since they are either unidentifiable as human beings, his or her story then scales through as mere figments of the imagination, a product of his or her creative ingenuity. Such is the case with many Nollywood filmmakers. Only very few, if any, have dared to be near obvious in their relationship to history or topical issues of political concern. It is on the basis of this lodestar that this article uses the historical-analytic, key informant interview (KII) and observation methods to interrogate the issue of politics of succession in Nigeria as depicted in *Saworoide* (1999, dir. Tunde Kelani) and *Ikoka* (2004, dir. Peddie Okao).

Brief Biographies of Tunde Kelani (TK) and Peddie Okao (PO)

Popularly known by his initials TK, Tunde Kelani is currently the Chairman of Board of Directors of the Nigerian Film and Video Censorship Board (NFVCB), a position which he tried to rescind as a consequence of bureaucratic red taping, but was prevailed upon to stay because of the perceived positive impact and legacy he was bound to leave behind. Coming from a background of journalism as a photojournalist with BBC-TV and Reuters in the 1970s, TK is an experienced hand with the camera, whether still or motion picture. He was born in Lagos State, Nigeria, on Thursday, 26th February, 1948. He kicked off his entertainment career over four decades ago as a

cinematographer. He proceeded to the London International Film School where he obtained a Diploma in the Art and Technique of Filmmaking, after which he came into limelight as an international filmmaker of repute (Shaka and Ibe 223).



TK: Photo Credit Tonye Bakare (2018)

Kelani has over fifteen (15) full length films to his credit. He has been severally honored with nominations and awards in recognition for his works. His nominations include African Movie Academy Award (AMAA) for Best Nigerian film, 2011, 2009, for his movies, *Maami* and *Arugba*. Also by the same Academy for Best Director, 2009, 2007, for *Arugba* and *Abeni*. (Shaka and Ibe 223).

Kelani is one of three Nigerians who made the 2019 list of America's Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences of 842 members. The *Daily Trust* informs that:

The Academy, popularly known as Oscars, made visibly improved racial and gender considerations in the 2019 list that tops 2018 list. Kelani is one of Nigeria's acclaimed directors known for classics like 'Thunderbolt: Magun', 'Saworoide', 'Agogo Eewo', and 'Dazzling Mirage'. He is currently working on the film adaptation of Wole Soyinka's award-winning novel (sic) 'The Lion and the Jewel'. (<https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/oscars-three-nigerians-make>).

The said *Lion and the Jewel* being adapted into a film by Tunde Kelani currently is a play and not a novel as the source would want us to believe. It suffices to say that Tunde Kelani has carved a niche for himself as an electronic (motion picture) storyteller of note through his films and directorial prowess. He is among the few that has come through the various stages of Nigerian

film history, from the colonial/motion picture era to the present video/Nollywood phase. And he has excelled in his chosen professional field with a legacy that would endure as a point of reference to future generations through his production outfit: Mainframe Film and Television Productions.

By all standards, the Nigerian film culture/industry (Nollywood) is a story of technological innovation and the triumph of creativity through the unrelenting doggedness of some creative minds. In the Benin video-film culture and indeed Nollywood, some personalities/names have been recurring because of this commitment to talent development and artistic excellence - developing talents, critical structures of distributing, marketing and generally raising the ante in the growing industry which has been touted as a strong small and medium enterprise (SME) gizmo (Omoera “Benin Video Film Rising...” 16). One of such personalities is Peddie Okao (PO), a scion of the famed empire of Okao, from Avbiogbe Community in Oredo local government area (LGA) of Edo State. Peddie, the chief executive officer (CEO) of Prolens Movies Nigeria Limited, is reputed to have taken the Benin video-film to a whole new level with the production of *Ikoka 1, 2 and 3* (2003) which was subtitled in English and took the larger Nollywood by storm, featuring the likes of Olu Jacobs, Justus Esiri, among others. He has since made many other great movies such as *Udazi* (2006), *Omodion* (2008), among others.



PO: Photo Credit Osakue S. Omoera (2017)

Peddie Okao, the writer, director and producer of the movie, is a banker turned movie maker, has helped to bring Benin movies into international focus. He was the first to introduce professionalism into the industry and began formal scripting of the stories. Prior to his incursion into the industry, the practice was guided and driven by interest and amateurism especially as most if not all those before him did not enjoy the benefits of higher education (Anyanwu, “Historical and Thematic Study of Nigerian...” 176).

He has over twenty movies to his credit in Nollywood and many of them explore the rich cultural heritage of the Benin people, using figurations, myths and traditions to make critical statements that speak to social realities in Benin localities as well as the universal human community. Before the year 2000, it had become apparent to the few practitioners in Nollywood, particularly those in the Benin language segment, at the time that to build a foundation for growth, there must be some level of control. This control was centered on two guild platforms such Actors' Guild of Nigeria (AGN) and Directors' Guild of Nigeria (DGN) in which attempts were made to develop control policies for an emerging industry. As a trained and certified accountant, PO brought his statistical and accounting prowess to bear on his creativity in the making of world acclaimed films such as *Ikoka*, *Agbonaye*, and *Omodion*. Ever since, PO has been in the forefront of setting policy controls for the Benin film industry as he has been involved with several projects such as Igodo Motion Pictures Ltd, which seek to empower a wide range of talents and cineastes in the Benin film and Nollywood ecosystems.

The Benin language video-film enjoys wide patronage in Benin-speaking localities in Nigeria and wherever Benin people or those that understand or are interested in the language live in the Diaspora (Omoera, "Audience Reception..." 12-13). One of the films which have helped it to achieve this feat is Peddie Okao's three part historic-political movie, *Ikoka* (2004). The film has both Benin and English language versions and has sold in hundreds of thousands since its release.

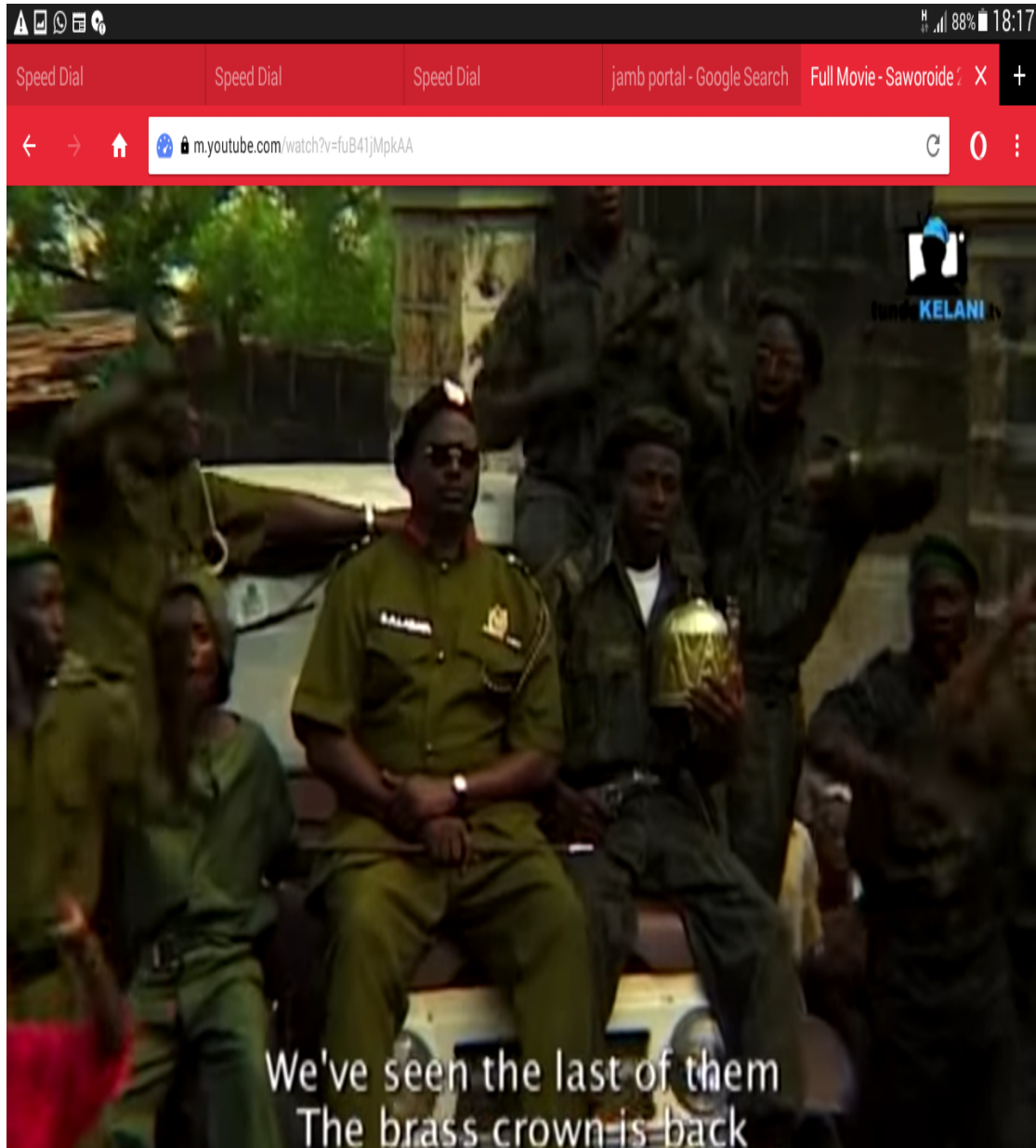
It has also “been translated into Italian, Spanish, Dutch and French languages; a feat no (mainstream) Nollywood movie has been able to accomplish,” (Anyanwu “Historical and Thematic Study of Nigerian...” 177).

Synopsis of *Saworoide* (1999)

From the jacket cover of the movie, we get this brief English language subtitle by way of synopsis: “SAWOROIDE: This is the parable of the drum as the voice of the people. It is the story of an ancient community and the kings that ruled over it...” Anyanwu gives a more elaborate synopsis as follows:

The story which is set in Jogbo, a community in Yoruba land, starring Kola Oyewo, as Lapite, is about a pact between the community and its kings. In the pact, when a new king ascends the throne, certain rituals are observed which include making incisions on the king’s body and muttering incantations. This brings unity between the king, the people and the symbols of his authority, which include a brass crown and a carefully made talking drum (*Saworoide*), and the man who plays the drum, in a fusion of spiritual and physical oneness. It also confers spiritual powers on the king and serves as a check and balance on his economy. In other words, the king will be comfortable but not wealthy because that spiritual fusion of the relevant forces helps to control him and his excess(s). (126)

The refusal of any king to partake of this ritual would mean an incomplete ceremony in the kingship installation. Indeed, it renders the entire exercise null and void because the people would not consider themselves as having a king. This is because there is a spiritual pact embedded in the incisions made on the king's body, the brass bells (saworoide) on the drum, the people and the saworoide player. If the King refuses to complete the rituals and wears the crown of his office and the drum is beaten, the king would either run mad or commit suicide. This is because there is refusal to complete the ceremony of installation is a sign that the king has the tendency to misrule which is the case in this movie. This is the situation which Kelani exploits when using this allegorical story of the King, the drum and the rituals of kingship installation he narrates the story of Nigeria's political foray and transition from military to democratic governance covering the Sanni Abacha and Ibrahim Babangida military juntas as well as the brief civilian interim reign of Shonekan which saw Nigeria into the present democratic era.



A Screen Grab of a Scene where the Military Dictator thought he now holds the Reins of Power in

Saworoide

The symbolism of Saworo Ide is also very important in the exfoliation of the veneer of politics in modern Nigeria. The phrase ‘Saworo Ide’ in Yoruba means ‘Brass Bell’. It is a collection

of tiny bells woven around a talking drum which gives the drum a peculiar sound when beaten. The Saworo Ide does not operate alone. There is also the Yoruba 'Ade Ide' (Brass Crown) which shares some mystical affinity with the saworo ide. The saworo ide serves its utmost best when the ade ide is won and by the owner of the ade ide, preferably a monarch or whoever is rightfully bestowed with such a privilege to wear it. Thus, "there is a connection between the Saworo Ide (Brass Bell) and the Ade Ide (Brass Crown) such that whenever the Saworo Ide is being played, the Ade Ide must be on the rightful owner or the wearer dies of headache. There is a ritual to be carried out that binds the throne, the King and the Ade Ide together" (Shaka and Ibe 236). This is the background of what gave rise to the film, *Saworoide* (1999). Kelani draws from his Yoruba folkloric oeuvre to create and narrate a story of the Nigerian political scene, lacing it with anecdotal inferences from history, mythology and real life.

The political dimension of the movie may have been lost on the general public due mainly to any or all the following reasons. (1). The title of the film is quite innocuous. It does not elicit curiosity. (2). The story is allegorical and makes no direct reference to real life beyond the use of costumes and makeup. (3). It is set in a remote, if fictional Yoruba village. (4). The relevant authorities were unable to see beyond the story.

Synopsis of Ikoka (2004)

The three-part movie, *Ikoka* (2004), celebrates and documents the history and political intrigues which occur during the reign of Oba Ewuakpe, 1700-1711, AD. Before she died, the King's mother, Queen Ewebonaza, a woman from Ikoka, perhaps, perceiving that her son may not be a good King, cautioned him to be kind to his subjects. She also directed that he should treat her people (Ikoka) well because in her next life, she would still return there. The king rather chooses to chastise his people, being highhanded and wicked. This attitude makes it easier for one of the chiefs, Iyase, who feels aggrieved that the Oba used his authority to take his (Iyase's) betrothed, Iden, to plan a rebellion against the King. Thus, when the Queen mother dies, the people of Ikoka send delegates to the Oba at Benin, to commiserate with him and plan the burial of their daughter.



A Screen Grab of a Scene where Oba Ewuakpe (Played by Olu Jacobs) was Spoiling for War in *Ikoka*

Unfortunately, rather than welcome them, either in anger or out of grief, the Oba orders that the delegates be killed; accusing them of defiling his palace by wearing black clothes contrary to tradition. One of the delegates, Oyegue manages to escape but not completely as he lost a leg in the process. It is, therefore, Oyegue who returns with the news of the atrocious behavior of the Oba. So, when the King goes to Uselu for his routine royal visit, Iyase organizes a palace coup and sacks the Oba's household in his absence. When the news of the coup gets to the Oba, he goes from Uselu to his maternal home, Ikoka, to seek refuge and solicit the support of his maternal kinsmen

and women in order to regain his kingdom. The Ikoka people still smarting from the death of the delegates give the Oba conditions that were not only difficult to fulfil but reduce him to nothing. In his anger, the Oba walks away from his maternal people placing a curse of abject poverty on the men while excluding the women because he recalls that the mother said she would reincarnate there.

Meanwhile, Iyase, who has taken over the Kingdom, is unable to win back Iden's love. She resolutely refuses her loyalty and love. Iyase is again accused of the same crime of insensitivity as the Oba and is unable to control the people. Iden consults a priest who directs the Oba on what to do to regain his kingdom. The sacrifice is ultimate and Iden, much to the Oba's discomfort and reluctant disapproval offers herself and the Oba regains his throne. Iyase loses Iden's love mainly because he never really loved her but only wanted her in order to score a romantic point. On the other hand, Iden's love, loyalty and final sacrifice were the qualities that served best the interest of the kingdom as well as the ingredients needed to nudge the Oba awake to the demands and essence of true leadership.

Political Dimensions in *Saworoide* and *Ikoka*

It is quite easy to gloss over the political stance of the two movies. The reason is simple. Both filmmakers deliberately chose to set their stories in the historically distant past while adopting

the allegorical technique as well. The latter applies more to Tunde Kelani than Peddie Okao. For Kelani's *Saworoide*, the allegorical stance is barely hidden because its preoccupations are closer to recent occurrences in history as they affect the political intrigues in the last two decades of Nigerian history. Its posturing, therefore, does not seem to be a threat to the powers that be which means it can pass as any other entertainment in the fiction/feature film mode. For *Ikoka*, the locale and monarchical posturing does not engage the attention of political demagogues because most Nollywood films preoccupy themselves with 'epic' stories of Kings and Queens in imaginary kingdoms. Thus, both movies can pass for any of those types. To the question of situating *Ikoka* as a politically committed film, the producer/director, said:

1. If you put *Ikoka* in perspective, there is this tendency to think of it as a politically committed film because of the trajectory of its conflicts. It seems to propose that its social capital value is informed by citizen power only, and especially so, that this is situated in a monarchical environment. Yes, *Ikoka* presents citizens' engagement in building a strong conflict of service withdrawal by fueling mutiny. Yes, it also assumes a severe conflict as it concerns succession. Then, it proposes a democratic inclination in dealing with, and engaging reciprocity by the people of Ikoka against the King. These as conflict milestones in the movie give one the right to situate *Ikoka* as a film loyal to its political capital. But I must say that *Ikoka* is not a politically committed film because

of the greater proportion of its social-cultural capital value. (Peddie Okao, Personal Communication)

To the same question, Kelani appeared to be evading the answer. “*Saworoide* is primarily an entertaining film leveraging more on the language and culture of the Yoruba, political commitment is secondary,” (Tunde Kelani, Personal Communication). There is no doubt that *Saworoide* more than *Ikoka* is closer to the political situation in the country especially as it relates to the military juntas of Generals Sani Abacha and Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and the transition to the current democratic governance. Of particular relevance is the scene where he transits from being a military head of state to a democratically elected president. This is the exact replica of Babangida’s ‘step-aside’ gimmick. Asked to comment on how the Benin monarch/government reacted on the release of *Ikoka* in 2004, Okao noted that:

2. To the question, upon the release of *Ikoka*, I presented copies of the film to His Majesty, Oba Erediauwa, Oba of Benin (1979 - 2016). The Monarch received it as a fair representation of the historic account of that experience, and in his words, its ennobled royalty. He received the movie well, and that work earned me an award of excellence from his majesty. That is not to overlook the histrionic dispositions of a few other persons in 2007, who felt offended that we played a Yoruba man as Oba Ewuakpe. This

disposition was disregarded because it did not meet best standard. (Peddie Okao, Personal Communication)

3. On the part of government, they were indifferent as they usually are about the works of arts and entertainment. They didn't even notice that a movie in the name of *Ikoka* was released. One individual in government then paid me some compliments after he was entertained with the showing of *Ikoka* by his guest at far away United States of America. He saw *Ikoka* as a movie that made him proud of his heritage. He invited me later to screen the film privately to his selected audience (Peddie Okao, Personal Communication).

The same question put to Kelani elicited the response below:

The government as represented by the National Film and Video Censors Board at that time interpreted *Saworoide* and *Agogo-eewo* I considered in my opinion as the flagship of conscience camera, purely from religious bias. The then director of the agency banned *Saworoide* because they contained unacceptable level of fetish practices. It was rated not suitable for broadcast (NTTB) (Tunde Kelani, Personal Communication).

In spite of the arguments to the contrary in view of government's attitude to the two movies, there are ample evidences in them to show their political leanings or biases. Both directors (TK and PO) were quick to deny any political consciousness on their part but the content of the films clearly betray political sentiments even if couched in allegorical terms or set in the distant past.

The attitude of the directors to political distancing is, of course, understandable given the environment and times in which we live. One easily recalls the fate of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* (1971) which was adapted into a movie by Francis Oladele as *Things Fall Apart*, but the government of the period rejected the title with the excuse that nothing was falling apart in the country. We recall too that the Nigerian Civil War had just ended, and emotions were still very raw and fresh, so the title would seem to be a sad reminder to the people. The filmmaker had to adopt the innocuous title of *Bullfrog in the Sun* (Anyanwu "The Filmic Space..." 24). This incident underscores the fact that Nigerian filmmakers have good reasons to shy away from sensitive subjects.

What's more, filmmaking is a high-end finance and intensive business. In Nigeria, it is an individual effort of the producer/director who would want to recoup his or her capital and make some profit; not being guided by discretion in subject selection and treatment would amount to playing dangerously with one's future. Even though the society has become morally lax and permissive especially in terms of what was condemned before being glossed over now, Nigerian filmmakers prefer to keep their distance from anything that would irritate the powers that be. Ekwuazi makes us to understand that:

The real menace of censorship is the insidious and cunning way it is being used as a device to prevent the expression of any opinions contrary to the various powers and interests which seek to run and control the people, the country, the government and any other thing that is of importance to them at the time. It is these interests that are among the strongest supporters of censorship, for they shrewdly recognize in the movie the strongest public weapon ever created that could be used against them. (154)

He argues that Nigerian filmmakers are aware of the implications of dabbling into ‘prohibited’ subjects such as the Nigerian Civil War. Again, the socio-political implications are too daunting for such risks. Ekwuazi further cites Bryan Forbes when he says: “making film nowadays is a political and economic act before it can dare to have any artistic pretensions” (165). The foregoing substantiate why it is wise to shy away from political subjects notwithstanding the permissiveness of the society in terms of morals. Morality concerns itself with salvation; economic issues relate with survival while political concerns are closer to criticism of the powers that be. Hence, they are touchy and need to be avoided. The answer to the question below is also instructive.

In Ikoka, we see a dialectical engagement of the Nigerian political scene in the last two or three decades, did you at any point consider government's reaction while you were doing it?

4. It is rather unfortunate if we see what is true in Nigerian contemporary political scene in *Ikoka*, the experiences of which took place in the year 1705. It is a normal expectation that we learn from history, but if we are recreating history in this respect, it becomes a food for thought for the political class. However, the thought of government and how they will react to the issues in *Ikoka* did not come to mind at all, because in my reckoning Nigerian governments do not see the need to invest fairly on the socio-cultural capital of her people. And more importantly, nothing was intended to undermine the unanticipated government's reaction in the making of the movie. (PO, Personal Communication)

It is clear from the above that Nigerian filmmakers become some sort of mind readers when packaging their stories especially if there is any iota of political trappings in such films.

Why do you think many Nigerian filmmakers avoid issues of political concerns in their films?

Filmmaking is business and the objective by investors is to recoup the investment and make profit. Smart businessmen simply stay out of risks by making comedy films or love stories guaranteed smooth sailing. (TK, Personal Communication).

The Nigerian filmmaker is a sort of lone long-distance runner because he or she has only himself or herself to rely on from preproduction through exhibition. His or her creative ingenuity serves as his or her surest means of survival because he or she has to source finance and do everything by himself or herself. That is why he or she is an independent. He or she depends on his or her creative ability to source sponsors and uses himself or herself as collateral. He or she hardly gets support from the government (Omoera, “An Inquiry into Institutional Support...”) and must meet the collateral demands of corporate bodies and individuals who take the risk of sponsoring him or her. Based on such enormous risks involved and given the colonial and military antecedents in such matters of censorship and the experience of producers and filmmakers such as Wole Soyinka, *Blues for a Prodigal*, Eddie Ugbomah, *The Great Attempt*, Francis Oladele, *Things Fall Apart (Bullfrog in the Sun)*, among others, the contemporary Nollywood filmmaker knows that it is better to steer clear of stirring the hornet’s nest.

There are many ways of running a filmmaker out of business without necessarily an outright deployment of censorship and the Nollywood filmmaker is more aware of them than anyone else. Having effectively illustrated the many overt and subtle ways by which voices are muted in Nigeria, in his inaugural lecture aptly entitled, *In Search of Muted Voices for the Mirage Named Development*, Ojebode, somewhat rhetorically asks:

Can we now see why some people solidly opposed the idea of community radio in Nigeria for those many years? In each of these community radio stations, we hear stories of radio being used to hold government accountable, to subvert evil, and give voice to those never heard. (Ojebode 40)

In the foregoing, Ojebode answers his own poser, providing reasons why government and policy makers were opposed to the establishment of community radio. These reasons are not far from those responsible for the muting of the voices of Nollywood filmmakers in matters of politics and such touchy issues in which governments and politicians would feel uncomfortable about. The safest way to maintain peace or its semblance in such situations is to remain mute and pretend everything is in order. This happens when the filmmaker knows or is conscious of the likely consequences of his or her story. Again, Ojebode substantiates this view when he claims that:

When voices are muted, the mute respond in several ways. One is silence. Our analysis of the Ugandan media coverage of land-related conflicts in Northern Uganda, for instance, suggested that Ugandan journalists have learnt through difficulties that maximum press freedom is available only if they do not report land and oil conflicts in the Northern region. (Ojebode 22)

As the Igbo (a people and language spoken in Nigeria) proverb holds, “you only tell a blind man that there is no oil in the soup, you do not tell him of the lack of salt.” One does not, therefore, go out of one’s way to court trouble. The filmmakers who are brave enough to dabble into the subject of politics as noted above are anxious to dissociate themselves from such label even when the films speak for themselves. The films treated in this article, *Saworoide* by Tunde Kelani and *Ikoka* by Peddie Okao, display remarkable political content which is of topical and contemporary relevance in the history of Nigeria. The denial of political content by the filmmakers notwithstanding, the aesthetic diegesis of the films are symbolically communicative enough. It is, therefore, to the creative ingenuity and credit of the filmmakers that the powers that be did not see any objectionable issues in them beyond allegorical stories of animals in a remote community in Yorubaland for *Saworoide* and concerns with monarchical succession to the throne in an ancient kingdom in Benin history for *Ikoka*. Whatever be the case, the filmmakers have shown unequivocally that politics in film can be handled without ruffling feathers.

Important, too, the current democratic dispensation to some extent favours filmmakers because they can now venture into such hitherto tabooed subjects though with caution. This perhaps, accounts for the release of such movies as Jeta Amata’s *Black November* (2012), *Okerenkoko* (2015), Curtis Graham’s *Oloibiri* (2016), among others, which deal with the neglect and devastation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Conclusion

Film, like written literature and other creative endeavors, is propelled by the muse and creative promptings of the creators. It is, therefore, almost impossible to control the flow of inspiration from these artists who are engaged in furthering the work of the supreme creator. But, humans by nature like to be in control as much as they also resist all efforts at control. This makes it possible for filmmakers to experimentally engage ‘forbidden’ subjects such as politics especially in developing countries such as Nigeria where leadership and the politicking that brings about it is almost a matter of life and death. In doing so, such filmmakers risk everything to tell their stories. However, most of them prefer not to stoke the fire that might engulf them, so they keep silent. Those who venture do so by engaging in all their creative best to avoid censure or the censor’s noose. They deploy every ounce of their creative nous and craftsmanship to cloak their subjects in tropes or themes that may at best be debated rather than be overtly political in their filmic narrations. This article has claimed that the duo of Tunde Kelani and Peddie Okao and their films, *Saworoide* and *Ikoka* respectively, belong to this last group. Given the enormity of the risks involved in dealing with and treating issues of politics and succession, those who do so deserve some approbation and respect no matter how much they try to distance themselves from

contemporary political imbrolios and catch 22 situations as we have experienced in the Nigerian ecosystem.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Nigerian cinema, its reception and Nollywood have been dealt with from a variety of perspectives in CINEJ previously and other film studies journals (see Ebewo (2007); Olayiwola (2007); Ibbi (2013); Onuzulike (2016); Cannon (2017); Endong (2017); Ibbi (2017)). The theatre aspect in Nollywood cinema is a brand new approach in this article. [Editor's Note].