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## THE CHARACTER OF POPULAR INDIGENOUS CINEMA IN NIGERIA<sup>1</sup>

Onookome Okome

The structural pattern of popular indigenous film of Nigeria must be seen and discussed within the framework of the society where its practice is situated, as well as its unique relationship to its audience. The social framework includes the social and ritual roots of the theatre practice that produced the cinema, the influence of non-Yoruba elements of entertainment such as the liturgical plays of the church, highlife music, and the concert heritage of Victorian Lagos. In his argument for a re-evaluation of the source of popular Yoruba travelling theatre, Oyekan Owomoyela makes the point about the enormity of this theatre's indebtedness to non-Western forms.<sup>2</sup> In the same way, noncinematic influences continuously shape the structural pattern of indigenous films. These influences are varied, open, and artistically elastic.

Indigenous filmmaking is a very pragmatic enterprise. Themes may be universal in appeal, but the social and economic landscape is usually situated in recognizable cultural history — the history of traditional society or contemporary Nigerian society. Devoid of any intellectual trappings of art cinema, formulated from an authentic frame of an indigenous theatre practice, and forged by a crude zeal to satisfy the audience's clamour for its own face and cultural avatars, filmmakers of this cinema explore the culture of its audience. This audience is mostly the audience inaugurated and nurtured into a mass block by the popular Yoruba travelling theatre tradition. The point has been made that popular indigenous cinema is itinerant; it has taken this from its theatre base. Biodun Jeyifo (1984) rightly points out that popular Yoruba travelling theatre is very mobile, "pursuing" its audience to the remotest parts of its potential audience base. The source of this character is found as far back as the practice of the Alarinjo minstrelsy, and maintained its usefulness during the economic and social exigencies of the 1970s and 1980s. Popular indigenous cinema is therefore itinerant, following the well-beaten paths Yoruba travelling theatre troupes opened up in the middle parts of the century. With the projector and film reels, practitioners move from village to village, hamlet to hamlet, entertaining

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was first presented at the University of Tel Aviv Conference, *Breaking Boundaries: Beyond The Land Of Cush. Critical Encounter With Language and Literatures of Sub-Saharan Africa*, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>Oyekan Owomoyela's analysis of these influences on popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre is in "Yoruba Folk Opera A Cross Cultural Flowering," in *From Commonwealth to Post Colonial* (Australia: Dangaroo Press, 1992), pp. 160-180.

the local audience. Crammed in a *mammiwagon*, the producer-director and his entire family, move from one place to another. The only noticeable difference from the theatre practice is that members of the troupes no longer perform live. They help in exhibition arrangements, mount the gates, and scare away potential thugs who may wish to disrupt the orderly arrangement of screenings.

Before actual screenings, at every point of exhibition, it is usual for there to be advance publicity. Sometimes logistics may not allow this because of remoteness or the breakdown of vehicles. If this happens, the leader of the troupe often makes sure that the screening crew and/or the troupe gets to the venue considerably before screening time. This will enable an on-the-spot announcement to be made to the potential audience in the town or village. All these arrangements are highly improvisational. Sometimes this may not be necessary as in places where a particular troupe is firmly popular. There, the mere presence of the troupe's vans send shock waves among the people, and because these societies, especially in small towns of the South-Western part of Nigeria, are still largely oral in their day-to-day existence, word of mouth passes quickly from one person to the other. This way the troupe is assured of regular (sometimes overwhelming) patronage. The Baba Sala troupe is fairly well known throughout the Southwest. In my experience with this troupe during some of its tours of Oyo Town, it became clear that the troupe's mere presence was electrifying. Although posters of the exhibition schedule were sent well in advance, the enthusiasm displayed by the people when the troupe came to town showed that the physical presence of the troupe was a more appropriate means of publicity. Of course one cannot remove the influence of the troupe's leader, Moses Olaiya, whose physical presence is seen as something extraordinary. He has been described as having the face and gait of a comedian. In big towns and cities, the leaders of the troupes know better than to rely on phatic communion to enhance publicity. Publicity is often done through posters and paid announcements on radio and television days before the performance takes place.

The exhibition pattern is also very interesting and it can be hectic. However, as in popular Yoruba travelling theatre, exhibition in popular cinema is very fluid, very flexible. Exhibitions can happen in the most unlikely places. The town hall may serve well for this purpose. The village square is also good enough and so are conference rooms of hotels. The playground of any near-by school can also serve this purpose. Indeed, wherever there is enough space to take projectors and the audience, provided there is also a way to guarantee gate-taking, the exhibition goes on. The audience responds directly to the content of the film, as if it stands before an oral performer. It sings with the actors, dies with them just as it happens in the oral folktales, eats with them, and sometimes criticizes them loudly whenever they think there has been



a deviation in the narrative. Only the distancing effect of the medium presents this audience from a critical-physical interaction in the narrative proceedings of the film. True to Lee Harring's observation about African oral performance tales, the film experience of the audience of popular indigenous films takes place in the now, "solving the aesthetic needs of the culture as well as the social and psychological problems for people" (1979: 177).

Exhibition, for this audience, is like a veritable carnival, the kind which Oyin Ogunba (1978) describes as total, except that in this case more is put into the exchange between audience and the viewing experience. In small towns such as Oshogbo and Ilesha, the carnival status of these exhibitions is very evident. In big towns such as Ibadan, Lagos or Kano, to mention a few, the carnival atmosphere is also recorded. With the expansion of communication outlets like television, radio, and photoplay magazines, film screening schedules are adequately publicized. The producer/director/exhibitor of indigenous films is aware of this carnival status. To catch on, he schedules screenings for public holidays and weekends. The result is often overwhelming.

As the theatrical tradition has changed media and adapted to its audience, its linguistic options have also expanded. At the inception, Yoruba was the primary linguistic medium. Although Yoruba remains the dominant language, it is no longer classical Yoruba. It is now an urban variety of Yoruba. This is often interlaced with English phrases and the Nigerian English spoken in the cities. For this reason, the non-Yoruba can follow the story easily. The use of pidgin is particularly significant. This makes these films easily acceptable by large, non-Yoruba audiences. This is very important in the big cities such as Ibadan, Kano and Port Harcourt. The continued use of Yoruba has its advantages for this cinema practice, as Biodun Jeyifo properly asserts:

Demographically, the existence of about 12 million speakers of the language and their being concentrated in one of the most urbanized areas of Africa is a massively important factor for the commercial viability of the Travelling Theatre Movement (1984: 13).

The filmmakers seek to use this advantage. Hubert Ogunde's films are restricted to pure Yoruba. However, directors of these films have also realized the need for an interface of the languages coexisting in Nigerian towns and cities if commercial success is to be guaranteed. Baba Sala's films show this remarkable adaptive slant. English phrases are used in *Mosebolatan* and *Agba Man* to evoke the brilliant comic atmosphere for which this director is well known. When Baba Sala speaks English, or the Nigerian street version of English, pidgin, one cannot help but find a

correspondence between his mode of dress and his borrowed language. Ladi Ladebo is another filmmaker who has successfully moved beyond the monolingual character of popular indigenous films. In his *Eewo*, the voice-over is in impeccable, well-modulated English but the dialogue is in Yoruba. The story itself is woven around Ifa, the Yoruba god of divination.

Popular Yoruba films, like the plays that preceded them, appeal to their audience through the glamour of spectacle: dance, festival, elaborate costumes and songs. Critics have sometimes decried this aspect because song and dance are grafted elements, unrelated to the plot, and because the uses of songs in indigenous films are like those found in Indian films.<sup>3</sup> Since Indian films are popular with the local audience, makers of popular indigenous films have reason to believe that the use of local songs in their films, the way they are featured in Indian films, will necessarily assure box-office success. Filmmakers need to recoup their investment, so they must play to the tune of what they deem fit to captivate the audience. However one chooses to look at this influence and its place in the structural equation of local film, the song and dance numbers have become a hallmark of Nigerian popular indigenous films. It is worth pointing out that since *Ajani Ogun*, the film reputed to have started this Indian song influence, notable changes have taken place in the definition of the place of song in the general structural pattern. In later films such as *Fopomoyo*, *Rogbodiyan* and *Asiri Baba Ibeji*, music is not an isolated bit, but an integral part of the entire process of making meaning. Music is part of the plot and plays a significant role in defining characters and situations. One original aspect of the use of music in these films is its association with the metaphysical world. The influence of the Indian films is relatively minimal in this respect.

The movement towards a new film art in the practice of indigenous filmmaking is obvious in many respects. The glamorization of rural landscapes in *Amadi*, *Bullfrog in the Sun*, and *Bisi: Daughter of the River* has given way to more critical treatments of this element in *Aiye*, *Money Power* and *Ayanmo*, and the anthropological bias of the early films has changed to a dialectical encounter between artists and cultural facts. Cultural attitudes and mannerisms are increasingly moving out of the influence of the middle class to the working and

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<sup>3</sup>Hyginus Ekwuazi's position is unequivocal. He sees this aspect of indigenous film as a direct borrowing from Indian film culture. See Ekwuazi, *Film In Nigeria* second edition (Jos: Nigerina Film Corporation, 1991), pp. 77-78. Before the publication of Ekwuazi's book, similar criticisms of Nigerian films were made by Alfred Opubor et al, "The Status, Role and Future of the Film Industry in Nigeria," in *The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria*, ed. Alfred Opubor et al. (Lagos and New York: National Council for Arts and Culture, 1979), pp. 7-8.



peasant classes. This is a radical departure from the world with which *Dinner with the Devil* presents us. In short, the cultural landscape is becoming more realistic, moving into the depiction of social change. Some of these changes are linked to the increasing appropriation of the film medium by the popular travelling theatre practitioners. The observation that indigenous film is "heavily indebted to the stage for its personnel and techniques"<sup>4</sup> is apt, but the point that needs emphasis is that this indebtedness has gone beyond the mere copying suggested by that phrase. The recourse to stage personnel and techniques has enriched indigenous film practice in some ways, and the medium has refined borrowed elements to create new forms of aesthetic outlook in these films.

Acting is perhaps one of the most apparent characteristics borrowed from popular cinema's theatrical origins. One of the frequent criticisms levelled against the acting style in these films is that it lacks the realistic and crisp style found in Western films. Acting is often bold, monotonous, declamatory and heavy. This filmmaking also displays an uncritical use of the monologue technique. Often used as a means of penetrating the psychology of central characters, they are delivered flat, without appropriate action, and are often declamatory and sometimes redundant. This is made worse by unambitious camera movement. There are several possible reasons for this loose and uninteresting mode of acting. Ekwuazi (1991: 21) explains that acting in these films is no different from the theatre. The declamatory style of the theatre is transferred to film, a medium that calls for a more realistic mode of representation. And because actors are drawn from the travelling troupes, it is difficult to check the exuberance of overblown gestures and exaggerated mannerisms as well as undirected improvisation on the part of individual star-actors. Overemphasis on improvisation, a seminal artistic device of oral narrative art, argues Francoise Balogun (1987: 61-63), reduces the ability to control acting style in these films, resulting in bogus displays of individual talent. In this respect, indigenous film in English stands on firmer ground. By standard measures, acting in *Kongi's Harvest* or *Bisi: Daughter of the River* is better, closer to the realism Hollywood favours and more interesting in pacing and rhythm. Still many of the *uncinematic*, theatrical elements in the popular style are what endears the actors to their audience. Dialogue in these films is often tedious and lengthy. The audience tolerates this because they are familiar with this speech pattern from its everyday use. Because most of the themes of these films revolve around the magical, with ultimate resolution of conflicts coming from the supernatural representative, the Babalawo, or the Chief Priestess (as in *Fopomoyo*), it is also common

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<sup>4</sup>See Ekwuazi (1991), p. 21.

to hear long, wordy interplays of verbal jugglery and incantations between opposing forces.

In these films, the word assumes a greater force. The *word* approximates, or is equal to, what Walter Ong sees as the magical essence of all communication in preliterate societies. For the reason that the *word* assumes greater and varied dimensions, it becomes, in some cases, the battleground for the metaphysical encounter between opposing forces. Ogunde's *Ayanmo* displays this character very well. The magic wand, the sole means through which the benevolent force reaches out to solicit the support of similar forces in the other world, can only be energized into action by means of incantation.

The *word* is the primary field of symbolism; in it social and cultural meaning is entrenched. The encounter between Fadeyi Oloro and Orisabunmi in *Fopomoyo* is particularly interesting in this regard. The final duel is an incredible but fascinating display of the masterful use of incantation. After the physically exhausting fight in the idyllic landscape at the outskirts of town, Orisabunmi wins. But this is only temporary. Fadeyi promises to move the fight to another day. He swears that he must take revenge for this disgrace. Fadeyi is the evil force. He is Esu, the trickster god incarnate. In Orisabunmi's quest to thwart the evil machinations of Fadeyi Oloro, she solicits the support of all the benevolent forces of the Yoruba pantheon. Olokun, the water goddess, is called upon to help restore sanity to the war-torn town where Orisabunmi reigns as the Chief Priestess. When the ultimate duel begins, it is not only the powers of the benevolent gods and goddesses that fire Orisabunmi, but also her masterful articulation of the right *odu* help thwart the powers of the malevolent forces.

One reason for the propensity to improvisation in indigenous filmmaking, in dialogue and action, is its scripting tradition or lack thereof. Even in front of the camera, the tendency to carry over the popular mode of audience-actor cordial closeness is easily noticeable. The loose nature of the script guarantees the latitude of the actors. Hubert Ogunde was noted for this practice. All his films began as stage-plays, and as stage-plays they lacked a well orchestrated scripting pattern. Action in these plays became the actors' affair. Ogunde's performances were typical examples of an actor's theatre, with himself playing the grand patriarchal roles. Sketchy plot synopses mapped out cues for actors, and the parts were written with a view to the physical and verbal abilities of each actor. When it was time to do an *ewi* chant or a *bata* dance movement, it was always thought wise to give the role to the *ewi* exponent or the dexterous *bata* dancer of the troupe. Actors stick to character types, or to particular roles. Orisabunmi plays the benevolent priestess of Osun in most of the films in which she is the star. Fadeyi Oloro is the reputed rascal of Yoruba cinema. He is loved and hated, despised and wanted, but never ignored.



The looseness of the script, and the slow development of the entire scripting tradition, are attributable partly to the episodic and improvisational disposition of the Alarinjo performance style, and partly to the improvisational disposition of the many other types of cultural expressions from which popular indigenous cinema borrows. Karin Barber's concept of popular art is very apt applied to the dynamism of this filmmaking tradition. Because it is a new kind of art created by an emergent class, the fluid heterogeneous mass located at the perceiver's source of social change (1987), popular indigenous films are like many forms of popular art, energized and accepted because of their inclusiveness. These films include a lot of borrowing from residues of other "traditional-unofficial" modes of discourse as well as from "modern-unofficial" sources.

The influence of the popular Yoruba travelling theatre is obvious in the structure of popular indigenous film. The extent of fidelity to the travelling theatre may vary from one film to another. By and large, the structural pattern follows a simple oral narrative pattern which emphasizes a moral end that justifies social harmony. The justification of this moral end is largely a phenomenon accomplished in the metaphysical world. The primary distinction of popular indigenous film from Western filmmaking is found in the former's recourse to the metaphysical. Actions and narrative reversals are mostly predicated on the whims and caprices of inscrutable forces. The audience for these films apparently desires to see a great deal of the metaworld of its culture, especially the metaphysics of witchcraft, the ancestors, gods and goddesses, ghosts, spirits, the mid-world of the unborn, all forms of magic and the supernatural. Since this world is ingrained in the audience's psychological construction, it accepts it as a true manifestation of its universe. It is therefore common to see a mere domestic *palaver* moved into the realm of this other world. Moral lessons and didactic teachings conclude, in most cases, the search for spiritual equilibrium, acknowledging "that which is greater than man" as the final point of reconciliation.

Two modes of filmmaking within this indigenous tradition are easily discernable: the metaphysical film, which hegemonizes the ethereal world, and the loose comic film dealing with social reality. Although the dividing line may not be altogether a neat one, certain characteristics mark the boundary that separates the two. Thematically, the metaphysical film deals mostly with the supernatural and fantastic, myth, history, legend and ritual. Within the plot, humans are merely pawns on the chessboard mapped out by the gods. Magic and the supernatural are vividly and elaborately portrayed. Ogunde's films are good examples of this mode of indigenous filmmaking. The themes of *Aiye* and *Ayanmo* are essentially a fight between the physical and metaphysical worlds, with the latter winning. *Fopomoyo*, a later version



of the metaphysical film form, is also based on a fight between evil and good forces who find representation in both worlds. This fight comes about because of some spiritual disorder within the physical society. Return to order is achieved by re-establishing contact with the world of the unborn, as this ensures the perpetuation of humanity. All three worlds, the living, the unborn and the dead, must be constantly connected. *Fopomoyo* opens with festivities associated with the coronation of a new king. Everyone is happy and there is music and dance. The new king is installed. Then Fadeyi Oloro, the bringer of evil, comes along and disrupts the proceedings in a bid to install his own heir to the throne. Fadeyi's power comes from the potency of witches (*aje*). We see Fadeyi actually consult with the witches in their coven: a grotesque, bizarre atmosphere. Chaos assumes its destructive role. The Chief Priest is called in by the town's Council of Elders. Ira is consulted. Orisabunmi, the Chief Priestess of Osun, prepares herself for the great encounter. Fadeyi is eventually defeated and taken captive. The village is brought back to order and music and dance follow. Social order is restored — an order which is only made possible by the divine intervention of benevolent ancestors, gods and spirits.

The comic film, on the other hand, functions primarily to bring about laughter — critical laughter — as it satirizes social classes and etiquettes, poking fun at social, political and cultural vices as a way of redirecting attitudes. The themes of this kind of film are usually mundane. They may or may not have any clear affiliation to the other world. However, the idea of predestination is not ruled out. And the pantheon of the gods may play a significant role in determining the places of the characters in question. This role ascribed to the other world is only remotely suggested, not flagrantly displayed as it is in *Ayanmo* or *Fopomoyo*. The basic device employed here is the creation of ludicrous situations. The plot is then built around these situations, and the satirical target foregrounded through laughter.

The comic film is by far more fluid in structure than the metaphysical one. Its structure is conjunctive and its style of presentation always very fluid. This form of popular indigenous film can be rightly dubbed "crazy comedy", a phrase used by Stephen Neale to describe an artistic situation which "articulates order and disorder across the very mechanisms of discourse, producing incongruities, contradiction and illogicalities at the level of language and code."<sup>5</sup>

Baba Sala is master of comic film, and *Orun Mooru* is a useful example. The structure follows a loosely strung episodic arrangement of events, with the final resolution of conflict remotely related to the notion

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<sup>5</sup>Neale discusses the concept of "crazy comedy" in *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 24.

of predestination. Moses Olaiya, in his usual role as Baba Sala, was once a rich man. The story begins after the loss of his worldly possessions, signifying, on a personal level, a narrative disjuncture. When the plot begins, Baba Sala's quest, ludicrously articulated as it may seem, is for rehabilitation to the social class from which he has fallen. The need to regain this position forms the propelling force of the plot. Always capricious, Baba Sala tries to put things right, but always from a ridiculous angle. At every point, his ill-laid plans fail him, until he finally attempts suicide. This suicide bid is stopped by Death (a move into the magical), who says it isn't time for him to cross to the other world.

In the metaphysical genre, the social transgression which brings the main character into focus can be communal, as it is in *Ayanmo*, *Fopomoyo*, and *Eewo*. Baba Sala's films are examples of the popular film structured as individual journey. In both cases, however, transgression is experienced at two levels of existence: the physical and the metaphysical. The plot normally begins in the physical and then moves into the meta-world in search of lasting fulfillment (solution). *Fopomoyo* opens with a calm, serene, orderly society, until Fadeyi Oloro, the physical representative of all the malevolent forces, stumbles in. He asks for a drink of water because of thirst and from that moment wreaks havoc on the community. He disrupts the social order by using his connection with malevolent spirits, gods and goddesses to oppose the newly elected king of Dagon. In *Ayanmo* and *Aiye* the structural order is the same. *Eewo* begins with episodes of the Ira priest and his acolytes chanting *Odu Ifa*. When the main character, a drug addict trained in the US, comes into focus, the stage is very well set for the transgression of one of Ifa's *Odu*.

A priest is normally elected to pursue the course of order. The priest becomes the source of order and the bridge to make order achievable within the physical realm. Sometimes the intermediary role of the priest could be replaced by an ordinary person. When this happens, that individual is most likely to be someone with an undoubted *iwapele*,<sup>6</sup> since he/she will be accepted as an intermediary in the *other world* only if she/he has no moral blemish.

When instructions from the other world are ignored or misinterpreted, narrative digressions occur. In *Fopomoyo*, the source of social order, the diviner, is in the king's court. He is consulted about the prevailing social problem. He consults Ifa, and is told that something is wrong in that society. The priest goes on to say that unless something is done fast, the whole community will suffer untold calamity. Meanwhile

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<sup>6</sup>This is a principle in the Yoruba traditional world-order which Wande Abimbola explains as "good-character."



children are dying in large numbers, crops have refused to grow, famine is imminent, and women are no longer fertile. Communal life is about to come to an end. Something must be done. The diviner consults Ifa for remedial signs. What comes out at this point is a misreading of Ifa's position. The right sacrifices are not prescribed. The consulting king's court goes away. But nothing changes in society. The general condition goes from bad to worse. There is the need to see another diviner. In some cases, as is very evident in *Eewo*, the genuine advice of the Ifa priest consulted is ignored. The consequence is a further deepening of crises as mother is dubiously led into sexual intercourse with son. Not heeding the voice of Ifa leads to complications. In *Ose Sango*, the magic wand is given to the hero in the metaphysical realm. In a series of dream sequences, this hero is transported into the world of the supernatural where instructions are dished out to him as to how best to use the wand. The hero is also told of certain things he is not to do with the supernatural power the wand offers him. It is Sango's wand, and so must be judiciously used, otherwise the wrath of the Thunder God falls upon the user's head. The hero now has power to order the affairs of men. But does he do this? The action the hero takes determines the plot movement. In *Ose Sango* the hero misuses this privilege. Sango gets angry and passes the wand on to someone else.

At this point of social redress, generic man attempts to reach the realm of "that which is greater than man." Once the necessary *ebo* is sent to the other world, the plot progresses a step and the audience is let into the other realm. The primary ground of conflict resolution is the world of the departed itself. Despite the modern means and subjects employed in popular indigenous film, traditional psychological patterns of thought remain deeply ingrained. Plots are predicated on the reordering of a society broken by certain taboos committed by the society or individuals within.

The picture of the supernatural world and its relationship to man is intricate. Wande Abimbola tells us that Ifa is very central to the relationship that exists between the living, the unborn and the dead. It is Ifa who knows "the history of heaven and earth and mastered the moral and physical laws with which Olodumare (the Almighty Creator) governs the universe" (1975: 389). Two forces, according to Abimbola, govern our life on earth — the benevolent forces, *ibo* (the divinities), and the malevolent forces, *ajagun*, although there is a third force, *aje* (witches) which may ally with the malevolent forces. Esu, the trickster god, is the "principle of order and harmony." Man is not left at the mercies of the malevolent forces because he occupies a position less than that of these forces. Man's existence somewhere in this intricate pattern of relationships is based on certain principles. Established since Oduduwa's reign, these principles were worked out to save a place for man. One of these principles is *iwapele* Abimbola argues that "the



principle of *iwapele* to some extent redeems man from the authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the universe" (1975: 389). *Iwapele*, the principle of "good character", is an important construct within the structure of the indigenous Yoruba film. The priest/diviner who intercedes on behalf of the community should have some measure of this "good character" to succeed. The hero who fights on behalf of society should have this too. Popular indigenous film finds this a suitable device to advance the plot. It is purity (and innocence) of heart that makes the *ebo* (sacrifice)<sup>7</sup> valuable in the presence of the god, goddess, or ancestor. It is the *ebo* which guarantees free communion between the priest and the other world. For example, it is the *iwapele* of Osetura in *Ayanmo* which makes him successful in his bid to rid the society of *aje* (witches), enemies of progress. Baba Sala may be ludicrous, cantankerous and gullible, but his *iwapele* sees him through hard and difficult times. He is clean at heart.

The intricate patterns ordering life within the physical world on the one hand and the relationship which exists between the physical and the supernatural on the other hand are well known to Ifa. These are represented in *Odu Ifa*. For every transgression that needs atonement, an appropriate *Odu* is invoked. The appropriate *Odu* defines the god (goddess, ancestor or spirit) transgressed upon and the kind of *ebo* to be performed as panacea. Once there is a recognition of a transgression, appeal for forgiveness is asked for and this is sent through the diviner/priest to the deity in question. Esu, the ferocious trickster god, assumes a very significant role in this relationship, never tired of devising ways to frustrate and punish erring man.

In the world of gods and ancestors, the plot reveals its magical dimension through dance, music, costume, make-up, atmosphere, sound cues, poetry and dialogue. At once the audience is faced with a different order of things, a different life, a different people. The world is bizarre and exotic at once; the atmosphere is eerie and the figures grotesque. The filmmaker is no longer dealing with mortals, but with immortals. The logic of action is bewildering. This world is divided into benevolent forces and malevolent ones. The latter are painted by the filmmaker in a gory light, emphasizing violence, malignancy and outlandishness. This is one aspect of popular indigenous cinema where the audience is likely to see the discarded mask of traditional performers. The mask creates the grotesque and the idea of the unknowable.

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<sup>7</sup>Ebo is also one of the cardinal principles which Olodumare laid down to guide life in the Yoruba world-order. It is defined by Wande Abimbola as the sacrifice that an Ifa priest may recommend for a transgression.

Generally, the masking tradition in Yoruba performance art is presentation, not representational. The Western notion of masking which emphasizes the representation of something other than the mask is not a common phenomenon in Yoruba theatrical arts. For instance, in the Egungun art, a ritual of ancestral worship, it is not the person behind the mask that matters.<sup>8</sup> It is the mask. In popular metaphysical films, the medium deemphasizes the sacrosanct essence of the mask. In many indigenous films, the sacrosanct nature of the ritual mask gives way to the spectacular. It is the spectacular nature of how the *other world* is presented that propels indigenous film artists to recapture the grotesque and unknowable of the *other world*.

*Fopomoyo* presents a duel between the good and evil forces in their abodes. The evil camp is made up of a coven of bizarre characters. The same situation occurs in *Ose Sango* where the trickster god, Esu, is unquestionably capricious. The evil forces carry grotesque masks, uttering improbable, inhuman sounds. An interesting phenomenon in this structural pattern is the formulaic attitude which they all take — that is, a consensus among filmmakers as to the portraiture of the evil forces. Another is the unanimity of thesis. The grotesque, evil and inexplicable world of evil spirits and ancestors must necessarily be overwhelmed by the good forces of the other world. Yet both are essential in the overall interest of physical life — the balance which is essential to this life.

Masking as a theatrical device is not common in comic films of popular indigenous filmmaking. Rather what is ubiquitously visible is an exaggeration of costumes. For instance, Baba Sala has an array of stock costumes which add to the ridiculous personage he creates. This

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<sup>8</sup>This point is well known among scholars of Yoruba masquerade art. Harry Garuba's *Mask and Meaning in Black Drama* (1987) gives a graphic picture of Yoruba masking tradition in these words: "In the egungun mask the spirit of the ancestor is believed to have materialized in physical form and can speak to the lineage descendants or to the community as a whole. Again to emphasize its otherworldliness, the mask does not speak in a human voice but employs a hoarse, husky voice given a weird quality as it resonates from the mask. While saying that, it should also be stressed that the egungun mask does not represent the ancestor, nor is it meant to; the mask *is* the ancestor made physically present. This difference is important because the mask, in traditional belief, is not thought of as an image of the ancestor but as the ancestor himself. The mask, thus conceived, functions as a negation of absence, a ritual device for the affirmation of presence" (86-87).



standard in costume design is amply demonstrated in *Mosebolatan*, *Orun Mooru* and *Aare Agbaye*.

Since the structure of indigenous film, together with its content, fulfills deepseated psychological needs Western or Asian films cannot hope to fulfil in this society, its popularity is assured. Both the metaphysical and comic films meet this psychological need. For instance, whatever happens to Baba Sala in *Orun Mooru* is designed for him by fate. It is this fate that will also rescue him when he stumbles upon evil forces.

The intervention of the external forces is always a point of narrative reversal. It is the high point in the process of finding a solution to the disorder or chaos which leads to the quest to establish the bond with the metaphysical world. The good and evil forces fight in their world and the result of this fight is then replicated in the social world of the human. Order is restored and spiritual life brought back to equilibrium. From the magical world of ethereal beings, the structure reverts to the material world of man and things. The priest/diviner discovers the true state of affairs. Ifa is willing to be plainer in language than before. Prescriptions of what ebo has to offer become clearer and preparations are put underway. Then begins the veritable festival. By making this announcement of festivities the impression given is that, the real solution to the problem is at hand after all. The festivities are elaborate and it is at this point that the most outstanding spectacle of popular film is experienced. It is for this reason that some critics conclude that popular film provides a subgenre, the costume film. But the spectacle is not perceived only in terms of elaborate costume. Costume is no doubt part of it, but only a part of it. The dance is well choreographed and it is not one dance, but many dance movements. The general atmosphere is that of euphoria. There is plenty to laugh about, especially in the comic films. The world has been reordered for the benefit of the human community. The world, at this point, reverts to the festival of completed meaning where the world view of the people, lowly and highly placed, reaches fulfillment. It is a field of many meanings, each form of cultural discourse present calling attention to itself, its own meaning and its place in the social arrangement. In popular indigenous film, this display of the totalized culture is often the moment of denouement; it is the reconciliation between physical and spiritual levels of existence.

This is also the point where one begins to experience the ideological backwardness of popular indigenous film. Soon after all conflicts are resolved in the ethereal world, order and stability are restored to the physical world. But whose order is this? It is often the order of an existing status quo; Karin Barber discusses this ironic twist of popular art in Nigeria with particular reference to popular Yoruba



theatre, which she says reinforces the status quo when she writes "the people's theatre ends up serving the interest of the ruling class" (1986: 5). Indigenous film is no different.

The simple structure of popular film is constructed to function as a means of psychological realignment. The psychological need is defined in the structure of popular film as well as in its themes. Popular films employ highly digressional plot systems, making it possible to include a wide spectrum of social facts and cultural debates. Although this narrative bias specifies preferred cultural attitudes, it produces in a conservative way the "surplus" Barber talks about in many popular arts in Africa. She explains this "surplus" generated in popular art as "meaning that goes beyond, and may subvert the purported intentions of the work" (1987: 4). Except for Ladi Ladebo's films, popular indigenous films do not subvert official history, whether this is traditional, official or not. In rare cases, the "surplus" generated produces meaning that goes beyond it.

The need to discourage influences from American and Asian film cultures became very pressing lately because popular indigenous film is thought to represent a distinct cultural world with recognizable social institutions. The desire for fidelity to this cultural world and its social systems is one of the reasons why critics of this cinema make the point that it ought to develop its own aesthetics in filmmaking. This call, we presume, is not different from that which "Third Cinema" cineastes have made in Latin America.

It is true that popular indigenous films borrow copiously from foreign film cultures, as Opubor, Nwuneli and Oreh observe in the structure of *Ajani Ogun*:

Balogun's *Ajani Ogun* describes special mention because it shows a basic problem in the development of film in Nigeria... any Indian film watcher knows that a typical leitmotif in Indian fiction films is the unfailing presence of a snake danger to the damsel in the thick jungle forest and the inevitable timely intervention of the good samaritan who is often loved out of gratitude (1979: 7).

It is my opinion that this accommodating spirit is not uncritical. This eclectic spirit is a characteristic of most popular art forms operating in African towns and cities. There has been a critical redirection of these "alien parts" of popular indigenous film since *Ajani Ogun*. In its structural direction, for example, *Fopornoyo* better articulates the traditional narrative structure than *Ajani Ogun*. In other words, the accommodating spirit of popular indigenous film is also a critical spirit, revisiting itself through the close contact it maintains with its audience. A truly popular art, it is the carnival structure of popular indigenous

film, especially the triumphant laughter, that releases the state of change and renewal in time and space. In this way, some of the films, especially the comic ones, display the carnival triumph which Mikhail Bakhtin describes as subversive in intent. It is the comic film of the Baba Sala kind, not the metaphysical, that aspires towards the heteroglossia of the urban town described by Bakhtin. Therefore it is the comic film that encourages the polyvocality of popular indigenous film, thereby expanding the potentials of public debate on cultural and political issues.

Not all indigenous films follow this structural pattern faithfully, but by and large the differences are not significant in terms of the deployment of symbols and the predominant psychical world view this filmmaking explores. Always present, the psychological release, in the metaphysical and comic films, is generated, as always, by the filmmakers' call on the audience to be part of a carnival. Since the psychological triumph represents a wish-end, a wish-world sponsored "through the festive mingling of food, dance, laughter, sex and clowning," it allows "every man to feel himself king for a day" (Horton, 1990: 49). The psychological triumph constitutes the communal triumph over evil, expressed in the streets. This is clearly articulated in the films of Moses Olaiya, especially *Orun Mooru* and *Mosebolatan*.

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