BETWEEN CULTURE AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA: POWER, IDENTITY AND DEMOCRATIC REFLECTIONS IN TUNDE KELANI’S FILMS

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Abstract

Tunde Kelani is, unarguably, one of the most dominant and resonant voices in the Nigerian film industry. His films pungently reflect an in-depth understanding of the complexities and dynamics of the diverse experiences of culture, arts and politics, religion and development issues that define Nigeria as a nation. Significantly, he is a passionate and committed artist whose works engage critical issues that espouse the African experience at the arena of politics as the continent contends with all the vestiges of slavery and colonization. Employing the contextual and critical methods of scholarly enquiry, this paper interrogates the issues of politics, power-play and ideo-social identity in contemporary Nigeria through a close viewing/reading of Tunde Kelani’s Saworo Ide, Agogo Eewo and Arugba. These films are investigated as direct and explicit portraiture of the Nigerian experience in the 20th Century and beyond. Using Yoruba sub-group as a template, the films undertake a deconstruction of Nigerian political landscape through a critical re-reading of its history and suggest a cultural solution to the lingering political dilemmas in the nation.

Key words: Culture, Politics, Identity, Democracy, National development

Introduction

Africa remains a victim of two historical phenomena; slavery and colonization. The intersection of culture, arts, politics and science in the region has remained subjective to the dominating effects of these phenomena as the continent contends with their vestiges. In Nigeria, for instance, the post-colonial experience is defined by the varying attempts to restructure the system in response to the demands of modernity, democracy and the changing face of globalization. Although the interaction between Africa and the West took off on the simple pedestals of mutuality, reciprocity, autonomy and respect through inter-racial trade, the introduction of human trade by Europe brought new denominators of distrust, evil and greed. This sour relationship was later deepened by imperialism, as Africa became an economic vassal state that was later controlled by Europe. The seminal works of writers such as Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Dubois, George Padmore and Walter Rodney “demonstrate how European colonialism had destroyed African civilizations and social and economic formations” (Southall, 2003:6). Similarly,
in the view of Toyin Falola, The colonial experience transformed African cultures to an extent that some became strangers to the traditions of old, suffering alienation in the process. To many others, it called for profound adjustments to new realities as they benefit or suffer from the consequences of the imposition and spread of alien ideas. (Falola, 2003:4)

Consequently, the estrangement suffered by Africans permeated every aspect of their cultural life and created social, political and economic dislocations. More importantly, social institutions had to be re-aligned with the newly acquired ‘modernity’. The resulting socio-political mutations and transgressions have disconnected Africa from its source without carefully robing it with the borrowed garment of European civilization. Colonialism and slavery have, therefore, created cultural trauma, “not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people”. (Eyerman. 2004: 1).

Presently, African democracy deviates and negates what is practiced elsewhere in the world. It is a hybridized form that is neither here nor there. Obviously, the balkanization of Africa into shreds of political configuration called “nations” was certainly not intended to civilize the continent, as some western scholars claim, but to create a viable market for the growing industries in Europe. Hence, when independence was won in most parts of the continent, African nationalist leaders were unprepared for the challenges of leadership and nationhood. The continent was therefore plunged into a plethora of post-independence dilemmas that leave Africa underdeveloped till today.

In this paper, I wish to explore how the booming home video tradition has captured the post-colonial trials, foibles and disillusionments in Nigeria, specifically, and Africa in general, highlighting the problematics of creating a viable political space that will engender socio-cultural development. Notably, Jonathan Haynes in 2003 (Haynes,2003:77-78) and 2006 had observed the silence of most Nigerian filmmakers on the political and cultural nationalistic utilities of film and the need for them to explore the radical potentiality of film in addressing pungent social and political issues in the country. He compares the video form to two other media/popular forms. First, the print media which gained popularity during the military era as “chronicler of this terrible period of the nation’s history – which constantly tested the limits of the military regime’s tolerance, at the price of many arrests, detentions without trial, beatings, seizures of equipment, and closures of media houses”. The second is Nigerian popular music which, as Haynes observes, “has also carried many oppositional voices, sometimes strident, of which the late Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti’s was only the most famous” (Haynes,2003:511-513). The Nigerian cinema is, therefore, decried as lacking this political tonality; treating banal and mundane issues. This explains why its practitioners were majorly criticized as being commercially-driven, with little or no intents of performing any social role.

However, many reasons were responsible for the passive poise and utter insensitivity of the filmmakers to political issues. First, it was risky to adopt political activism at a period noted for wanton despotism of the military juntas of
Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha. It was like attempting a handshake with death or incarceration. Second, it could be a financial wreck for the filmmaker who attempted this unfamiliar adventure, considering the dwindling economic state of the country then; if the film is banned by the censor’s board (though Haynes claimed this was most unlikely), that may signal the end of business, since they mostly operated within shoe-string budget. And most significantly, filmmaking, especially the video form that was prominent at the time, was still evolving and its practitioners lack both the ideological and artistic resolves to pursue such ‘weird’ adventure.

Arguing in favour of Haynes’ position above, Olivier Barlet submits that “Nollywood does not offer a politically conscious or empowering agenda of some sort”. (Barlet., 2008:121) Jordache Ellapen and Jyoti Mistry are also of the view that Nollywood does not “consider revisionist colonial histories, and that video film narratives are often informed by immediate social and cultural concerns facing the local community and the inspirations for stories have localized appeal”. (Ellapen and Jyoti., 2013:48) While it may be true that a corpus of Nigerian films centre around the domestic, social and cultural issues, there are a number of other films that are politically motivated. More so, most of the socio-cultural concerns are inspired by and foregrounded on political sensibilities, since they are part of “postcolonial conditions”. (Onikoyi 2016:240). For instance, most of the films that are thematized on domestic violence, poverty, social insecurity and the like are tethered to issues of political concerns like corruption, mis-appropriation of government funds and general misrule by the political class.

Thinking in consonance with the above view, Babatunde Onikoyi condemns those who hastily vilify Nollywood for lack of politically conscious films as grossly uninformed on the volume of political films made in Nigeria and thus, probably, base their reading on a few films that reach the Diaspora. As a matter of fact, a negligibly few of the enormous films made in Nigeria manage to make it to the international scene due to lack of a viable distribution network and poor funding. Onikoyi further cites a number of political films produced after 1999 when civil rule returned to Nigeria. (Onikoyi 2016:240). To my mind, the list is inexhaustive, especially, considering the fact that the films he cited are English-language films and, a lot of such films are also produced by the indigenous language filmmakers. Tunde Kelani’s films belong to this category.

Recently, a number of new breed filmmakers have emerged in Nigeria, often branded by scholars like Jonathan Haynes(2014) and Ryan Cornell (2015) as the “New Nollywood”, primarily because they have carved a new niche of artistic creativity for Nigerian cinema in terms of production quality and narrative contents that interrogate happenings in contemporary Nigeria. For instance, Niji Akanni’s film, Aramotu (2011) (in Yoruba language) carefully negotiates the virgin terrain of women in politics, drumming home the pulsating demand for conspicuous involvement of women in key political leadership in Nigeria while Jeta Amata’s Black November (2012), among others treating the same subject, explores the recurring issue of Niger-Delta militancy and the social neglect suffered by the inhabitants of oil-rich Niger-Delta of Nigeria in the hands of the ruling political
class. In the same way, Kunle Afolayan’s *October 1*(2014) explores the issue of serial killing against the background of Nigeria’s pre-independence era. However, while these films, and others not mentioned here, interrogate the Nigerian political system only from either regional or ideological perspective and can thus be regarded as agitation films, Tunde Kelani’s films studied here are unique for their holistic examination of the Nigeria’s political landscape. The films interrogate how the country, through its leaders, has fared in appropriating different political regimes (military or democratic) in advancing the nation. It is indeed against the above background that I consider Tunde Kelani’s films as worthy of strong critical examination as portraiture of Nigeria’s socio-political experiences and the post-independence disillusionment. Most of Kelani’s films are significant for their strong political texture and cultural orientation.

Admittedly, other scholars have investigated both the cultural and political potentialities of Kelani’s films. For instance, Babatunde Onikoyi examines Kelani’s works, *Saworoide, Agogo Eewo and Arugba*, from an auteurist perspective. He argues convincingly that auteur theory is apt in discussing the cinematic oeuvre of Tunde Kelani’s films. (Onikoyi 2016:240) In the same vein, Hameed Olutoba Lawal studies the acting styles in Yoruba video films. His essay dwells significantly on the role of Lapite, played by the ace Nigerian actor, Kola Oyewo in *Saworoide*. (Lawal, 14-29) Olagoke Alamu also interrogates Kelani’s *Saworoide and Agogo Eewo* as reflections of Nigeria’s socio-political situations of the historical period captured by the films. (Alamu. 332-372) The emphasis of his essay is the discourse of the films as insights into prophesies of cultural, social and political behaviours in the Nigerian society. This present work, apart from exploring the political preoccupation of the film from the thematic angle, concentrates significantly on the deployment of characters in the films as direct representamen of real life personages in Nigeria’s political history.

**Tunde Kelani’s Films and the Dialectics of Culture and Politics**

The Argentinian film makers and theorists, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, in their manifesto, "Toward a Third Cinema” argue that film is the most valuable tool of communication of our time because of its power to convey and elicit strong emotions and to present dynamic images of social reality. This underscores the functionality of film for social revitalization and re-engineering. In Nigeria, film has become the most dominant popular culture genre by which the people’s social, political and cultural lives are gleaned and re-enacted back to them; it is a potent medium of revealing Nigeria back to Nigeria.

Obviously, Tunde Kelani is, unarguably, the most prominent of all Nigerian filmmakers of the video-film era. His films carefully reflect a rich blend of the complexities and dynamics of the diverse experiences of cultures, art and politics, religion and development issues that define Nigeria as a nation. He is no doubt a contemporary example of a passionate and committed cinearte who adopts the motion picture genre as a tool for engaging critical issues that espouse the African
experience at the arena of politics. In his recent book *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*, Jonathan Haynes submits that:

Kelani enjoys his role as cultural ambassador to the world. It is part of what keeps him afloat as a filmmaker, though it is more important psychologically than financially, and this foreign money has never played a significant role in his revenue streams. First and foremost, his purposes are oriented around being an artiste of and for his own culture, an exhorter and custodian. (Haynes. 137)

Artistically, Kelani’s films mark a radical departure from the regular practice by most Nigerian filmmakers in quality and artistic vitality. The semiosis of his works demonstrates a rich mix of ardent understanding of the film language with indigenous African narrative aesthetics. Having traversed the different epochs in the history of the Nigerian cinema, it is difficult to pitch him with either the old or new Nollywood. In fact, in my own view, he could be regarded as the progenitor of the new Nollywood, since his works provide a strong artistic base for the take-off of what is today regarded as “New Nollywood”. This is why Uzoma Esonwanne describes him as that exemplary cinearte that “bridges the gap between cinema era and [the] video/digital era”. (Akoh and Inegbe 306)

To Connor Ryan, Kelani is “perhaps the most respected and accomplished Yoruba filmmaker in Nigeria today. His films are distinct from mainstream Nollywood in many ways, including their use of complex Yoruba language play (Yoruba Ijinle) and their concern for traditional/Yoruba culture”. (Ryan. 2012:183) But it is, of course, the social relevance of his films that makes Kelani the most committed Nigerian filmmaker.

Kelani’s debut in 1992, *Ti Oluwa ni Ile/The Earth is the Lord’s* (in three parts) explores the gruesome effects of preference for personal greed above societal wellbeing. It dramatizes the agonizing story of Balogun, Sanda and JP, who suffered untold miseries after selling Ile Oosa (spiritually forbidden land) to Mr Johnson, who visits their town with the intention of buying a landed property for business purpose. The film draws from the belief in the supernatural in Yoruba culture to drum, with strong tonality, the abhorrence of greed, selfishness and materialism in Yoruba society. His other films, principally *Koseegbe* and *Thunderbolt*, adopt the same attempt at deploying film as a tool for social (re)engineering.

*Koseegbe* is the story of Mako, a very brave and intelligent custom officer who, having been appointed as the new controller-general of customs, “decides to wage a relentless war against corruption, fraud and smuggling that have characterized the fold”. (Olayiwola, 2016:213). This eventually brings him at loggerhead with some powerful and highly influential people in the society who see him as a hindrance to their malevolent practices. His undaunted poise however breaks the nerves of the evil cartel; the perpetrators are exposed and made to face the wrath of the law. The film therefore harps on the rule of law and the need for good governance that entrenches zero tolerance for corruption. *Thunderbolt* rides significantly on the
wings of culture and inter-tribal relations in Nigeria to explore the pulsating themes of jealousy, mistrust and marital conflicts resulting from inter-tribal marriage. Yinka and Ngozi are two love-birds who meet and get married during their National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) year. Having been blessed with a bouncing baby boy, their union later suffers decline and eventual break-up due to mistrust. More importantly, the film dwells on the Yoruba belief in the supernatural power, employing the subject of Magun – a disease said to be deadlier than AIDS - often inflicted on a woman suspected to be promiscuous.

Principally, drawing from the above, two artistic values intersect in Kelani’s creative oeuvre: the interplay of cultural elements and the making of strong socio-cultural statements. His films are often inter-laced with cultural aesthetics of the Yoruba and are mostly thematized with political satires. Most significantly, his recent works, from Saworo-Ide to date are imbued with socio-political criticisms of contemporary Nigerian nation. In this paper, therefore, I shall examine the discreet deployment of traditional narrative motifs and direct character referents in exploring the political concerns and dilemmas in post-independence Nigeria.

Reflecting and Refracting the Nation: Power-play and Democratic Dilemmas in Saworo-Ide and Agogo Eewo

Saworo-Ide appears to me as the first major political satirical film by Tunde Kelani. Employing the technique of allegory, the film chronicles the historical life of Nigeria at the twilight of democracy and during the despotic reigns of military dictators (especially Babangida and Abacha). It reveals the tragedy of an African nation fiddling with alien political structures and sensibility. Jonathan Haynes had earlier hinted that traditional political system, especially kingship and chieftaincy loom largely in the imagination of the video films in Nigeria, owing strongly to the fact that traditional rulership still matters a good deal in Nigerian life. He observes further that “commentary on national state power can be and often is safely carried on through allegorical treatment of kingship. (Haynes, 2006:515). Operating from this premise, Saworo-Ide also employs the traditional kingship allegory to make political commentaries on Nigeria’s post-independence socio-political life.

A good blend of Yoruba oral arts and narrative style with conventional film aesthetics, Saworo-Ide is said in the opening title to explore “the parable of the drum a(s the voice of the people. It is the story of the pact between an ancient community and the kings that ruled over it...” An array of shots reveals a dying king of Jogbo amidst his chiefs, children and allies. The king instructs them of a potent magical concoction necessary for the installation of a new king as prescribed through Ifa oracular consultation. Both “Saworo-ide” (a drum with brass bells) and “Ade Ide” (a royal crown partly made of brass bells) are constructed and magically linked through Ifa divination: “half of the seeds taken out of a ritual pot were placed inside the royal crown, the other half inside a drum; successive kings and drummers had a powder rubbed into incisions. A king who was illegitimate or sought excessive wealth would die of a splitting headache if he wore the crown when the drum was played”. (Haynes, 2006:515)
Thematically, the film begins with events which typify the advent of democracy in Nigeria. This is represented principally by the character of Lapite, “who is billed to ascend the throne of Jogboland. He sends one of his accolades to find out why all the kings who had previously ruled over the land never prospered financially. He is later informed that the incision and oath-taking associated with the kingship precluded the kings from financial affluence”. (Olayiwola, 2010:63) He, therefore, refuses to be subjected to any kingship rituals that will not permit him to satisfy his personal greed at the expense of the state. Lapite, no doubt, represents Nigeria’s first republic leaders whose personal greed and sentiments thwarted the course of democracy and launched the nation into the era of military dictatorship that pushed the most populous country in Africa to the threshold of underdevelopment. Lapite’s reign, like its referent, is marred with corruption, misrule, massive killings and social unrest; a graphic portrayal of Nigeria’s political scenario in the 1960s.

The reign of Lapite is brought to an abrupt end by Lagata (head of his military squad), who usurps the throne, having been invited by Lapite to calm the storm of social unrest created by the youths of the land. The youths had earlier seized Ade-Ide, the brass crown, being the symbol of authority and which according to custom must not leave the palace for more than twenty one days. Lagata’s intervention brings back the Ade-Ide but eventually terminates Lapite’s rule in the same manner in which military coups are executed; having killed Lapite, Lagata ascends the throne with the full gamut of military dictatorship. Lagata’s reign explores all that the military juntas represent in the history of Nigeria and most African countries: dictatorship, embezzlement, wanton disregard for the rule of law, unlawful arrest, incessant killings, etc. In the view of Bonnie Ayodele, citing Nwankwo, Nigeria experienced three decades of uninterrupted military rule marked by violence, arbitrariness, command and obey, intemperate language, abuse of rights, total absence of rule of law and due process among other incarcerating governmental measures. (Ayodele, 2008: 24) Supporting this view, Toyin Falola also submits that the military regimes of Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha “presided over the further entrenchment of official and everyday corruption in Nigeria, and sought to maintain power through oppression, coercion, and the manipulation of the democratic transition process”. (Falola & M.M. Heaton, 2008:209) He concludes that Government officials and their patrons continued to impoverish the nation through corrupt and fraudulent activities that make a few exceedingly wealthy through their corrupt practices, while most remained mired in extreme poverty. A number of pressure groups and individuals, however, opposed this repressive tendency, though not without repercussions.

This certainly explains why, in Saworo-Ide, Lagata finds himself at loggerheads with the youths of the land who see his (mis)rule as overtly anti-development and, therefore, inimical to their future and societal wellbeing. With strong assistance of the chief priest, the youths are able to deploy the spiritual power resident in saworo-ide, combined with their militant efforts, to bring Lagata’s reign to a halt; they locate the new abode of Ayangulu and invite him to beat saworo-ide during Lagata’s official coronation, knowing that he will wear the Ade-Ide without
performing the accompanying rituals. This effort is initially thwarted by a saboteur in the name of Kangudu, who informs the king’s allies and, Ayangalu is arrested and imprisoned to prevent him from beating the unwanted evil drum. Kangudu is no doubt a representamen of political jobbers and booth-leakers who serve as government agents but masquerading as revolutionaries. Later, One of Ayangalu’s sons who has been initiated to beat saworo-ide is found, the mysterious drum is beaten and Lagata dies of incurable migraine. As Jonathan Haynes rightly observes, Saworo-Ide “provides a complex allegory, then, which reveals rather than obscures the elements of contemporary Nigerian politics and, even as it works with the symbols of kingship, insists on the democratic aspects of the traditional constitution”. (Haynes 2006:517).

While Saworo-Ide is no doubt a socio-political ‘documentary of Nigeria’s pre-military and military eras, Agogo Eewo, I must admit, was necessitated by the sudden and unexpected emergence of General Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigerian president in 1999. The Yoruba, therefore, saw it as a tribal opportunity which must be well laundered through all possible means. In my own opinion, the film is a political propaganda by Kelani to drum up socio-political support for Obasanjo, who is cleverly portrayed as a messiah expected by the people of Nigeria to transform the nation and ensure concrete development. Unlike Lapite and Lagata who refuse to perform the ritual associated with kingship because of greed and selfishness, Bosipo undergoes the ritual and further emphasizes his desire to use the position for societal transformation and reformation. This strongly delineates him as a forthright leader, who will take the town through the required reforms. Jonathan Haynes also observes the physical semblance in the character of Bosipo and Obasanjo, noting that “…someone who looks very much like Olusegun Obasanjo is installed on the throne, bringing the film even closer to contemporary political allegory” (Haynes 2006:516).

The film opens with a close up shot of Bosipo’s hands as he tries to plant some cocoa seeds in his farm. The succeeding pan shot to his smiling face demonstrates his contentment with and love for farming. This is no doubt an opulent imitation of the personality of Obasanjo who is an avowed farmer; his Ota farm grew significantly even while in office as Nigeria’s president. Three chiefs of Jogboland visit Bosipo to implore him to accept to rule Jogbo. Bosipo refuses but the chiefs insist. They obviously want him installed for personal reasons. This scenario also confirms current opinions about Obasanjo’s ascendancy; he was an appointee of the Northern cabal who wanted to continue with “business as usual” while at the same time saw the need to placate the Yoruba tribe for the annulment of the presidential election held on June 12, 1993 and the eventual death of Chief Moshood Abiola, who was adjudged to have won the election. But rather than allow himself to be used by the corrupt chiefs, Bosipo fearlessly asserts himself and becomes unwavering in his determination to fight corruption and initiate developmental programmes. This expresses people’s expectation of Obasanjo; he should free himself from the northern oligarchy and use the political privilege to transform Nigeria through laudable initiatives. The rest of the film narrates Obasanjo’s encounters as he confronted the two monsters of greed and corruption
among the people that contemporary political system imposed on him as political allies.

The chiefs of Jogboland become so corrupt that Bosipo needs to seek solace in the spiritual potency of kingship rituals. Through oracular consultation, an alternative ritual is created to bind the chiefs to “Agogo Ide”, a special taboo gong created to preclude them from corruption and apprehend those found culpable. Like every reigning king, the chiefs are made to swear by the oracle and drink a concoction from the gong. At the end of the film, a cleansing festival is organized by which the chiefs are made to confess openly their wrongful acts and be granted amnesty. Those who refuse to confess are made to face public ridicule when Agogo Ide is beaten and they are stricken with incurable pains.

Obviously, the employment of deu ex machina in both films suggests a spiritual solution to the lingering political dilemmas in Nigeria. One may opine that, like countless other Nigerians, Tunde Kelani wants our political leaders to swear by our traditional deities, rather than the Bible or Quran as commonly used. Those who uphold this opinion see the Christian and Islamic God as too forgiving, always delaying judgment while African traditional deities are judgmental and swift in visiting evil on evil doers. In a sense, when political leaders are conscious that they will bear the brunt of whatever evil they perpetrate while in office, they will desist from corruptive tendencies and the nation will make progress.

Narrating the Nation: Arugba as Socio-political Commentary

Two issues informed the thematic pre-occupation of Arugba. First, it was a time dominated by the fear and concern about the ravaging HIV/AIDS. Second, it was a period of political turmoil for Nigeria, as a result of the overbearing influence of President Obasanjo and the people’s Democratic Party as the ruling national party. The search for a cure for the dreaded disease was mounting. The United Nations Organization embarked on myriads of enlightenment projects to educate the world and prevent the disease from spreading while we craved for a cure. Kelani therefore made the film as a means of educating and informing the Nigerian society on the dreaded HIV/AIDS. At the arena of politics, Obasanjo’s dream of elongating himself in office through his unpopular “third term agenda” and the political activism of the most viable opposition party, Action Congress/Action Congress of Nigeria (AC/ACN) necessitated a review of the political terrain and further questioned Obasanjo’s role as a leader. The film also found recourse in a popular annual traditional festival in Yorubaland – the Osun of Osogbo festival. Kelani had earlier produced a documentary film on the festival and thus saw it as a viable rallying point for underscoring the two aforementioned issues.

The film narrates the twin-story of the young and beautiful lady, Adetutu, and the old, witty and clever king of an unnamed cosmopolitan city. Adetutu is summoned by the king to inquire if she is still fit to perform the role of Arugba in the present year (Every Arugba is expected to remain a virgin throughout the period of her reign. She is to perform the role of spiritual cleansing and propitiation for the land during the annual festival of the river goddess). Responding in the affirmative,
the king however makes an unusual demand of her; requesting for her hand in marriage once the festival is concluded. Arugba rejects this offer and, thus, the story takes a dramatic turn. The king becomes uninterested in the entire festival arrangement. Concurrently, Adetutu is the head of a viable all-female cultural troupe in the university. Her artistic dexterity in one of the troupe’s performances brings her into friendship with Makinwa, who also heads a parallel cultural group on campus. The relationship deepens, creating tension between Makinwa and his girlfriend on the one hand and Adetutu and her group members on the other.

Another leg of the story dramatizes the highhandedness of the king, having become so powerful to the extent of denigrating the advice and counsels of his political accolades. This introduces a fresh dose of tension into the polity, resulting in the resignation and eventual death of Aare Alasa, as well as stiff confrontation with Aare Onikoyi, amongst others. There is marked division of the polity between the reigning king and Aare Onikoyi, who presides over one of his vassals, so much that when the king refuses to welcome Arugba and her entourage into his palace as it is custom, Aare Onikoyi ceases the occasion to launder his political image by hosting the Arugba amidst pomp and pageantry in his domain. The story is also conflated with arrests and trials of close allies of the king who are found culpable of corruptive activities like embezzlement, mismanagement of community fund and collaboration with foreign agencies to defraud the community.

Obviously, Arugba is an allegorical reconstruction of the reign of Olusegun Obasanjo as the president of Nigeria, especially the few years leading to the end of his second term in office. This period was marked by various confrontations with the opposition parties and members of the civil society, especially the Alliance for Democracy (AD) which transformed to Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) led by the Late Chief Bola Ige. Real personalities in Nigerian politics are conspicuously but cleverly represented in the film. For instance, the king is a graphic portrayal of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo who was Nigerian president between 1999 and 2007. Aare Alasa is the artistic symbol of Chief Bola Ige, who became a minister in Obasanjo’s cabinet. After his resignation, he was murdered by unknown gunmen in his Ibadan residence. Although some political commentaries associated his death to his resignation, security operatives are still busy unraveling the mystery surrounding it. Aare Onikoyi is representative of Chief Bola Tinubu who posed as a major political opponent of President Obasanjo after the demise of Bola Ige. Incidentally, Tinubu was the Governor of Lagos State during the two tenures of Obasanjo. The use of the word “Ikoyi” (referring to a popular place in Lagos Island) in the title of his office further accentuates the proximity of the characters in the film to real historical personages.

Wearing the artistic garb of the king, Obasanjo is portrayed, within the universe of the film, as a typical military leader in civilian attire, revealing a nation that is still evolving. Having been traumatized by military dictatorship for many years of its existence as a nation, the process of becoming a fully democratic nation was, of course, a tumultuous experience for Nigeria during Obasanjo’s two-term regime. According to Toyin Falola, Obasanjo’s eight-year term as president has yielded mixed opinions. While, on the one hand, it has been the longest period of
civilians rule in the country’s history, on the other hand many believe that Obasanjo achieved this milestone through manipulation of the political system, and, as a result, that he has not helped to create a stable or sustainable democratic system. (Falola, 2003:235).

Falola’s position above explains why Obasanjo’s tenure was replete with political agitations, legislative turmoil and judicial manipulation. Hence, to some political observers, his reign was simply an extension of the preceding military era with mild democratic flavor. Falola further submits that despite the growth in GDP and government revenues, civil servants, teachers, and university employees continue to go for months on end without pay, which prompted many strikes and school closures during Obasanjo’s term in office. Public services remain in poor shape. Electricity supply is erratic, pipe-borne water is nearly non-existent unless privately supplied, and roads remain poorly maintained. Health services have not recovered from the cuts the sector took in the 1980s and 1990s. The “brain drain” continues to attract Nigerian health personnel to better-paying jobs in Europe or the United States. Conditions have become so poor in Nigerian hospitals that those with resources, including the politicians responsible for improving these services, often travel out of Nigeria to meet their own health needs. (Falola, 2003:235)

It was, however, the issue of tenure elongation that deepened the political tension during Obasanjo’s regime and thus raised critical questions on leadership problem in Africa. This was against the backdrop of other African leaders’ unwillingness to relinquish power in line with popular and acceptable democratic practice, giving way for a return to military rule in some African countries. The third term bid of Obasanjo came to Nigerians as a rumour, popularized by the decision of thirty serving governors to woo the president into contesting for third term, contrary to constitutional requirement. Mobolaji Aluko observed that “a newspaper in Nigeria reported that 30 out of Nigeria’s 36 state governors were already "fixed" - allegedly for a variety of politically selfish reasons - to campaign for support of President Obasanjo’s third term agenda, noting that their “plan is to get each of their state’s members of the National and state assemblies to go along with the required constitutional amendment. The "Odd-Men-Out" six governors reportedly refusing to go along are Bola Tinubu of Lagos State (AD), Orji Kalu of Abia (PDP), Chris Ngige of Anambra (PDP), Boni Haruna of Adamawa (PDP), Ahmed Sani Yerima of Zamfara (ANPP) and Ibrahim Shekarau of Kano State (ANPP)." (Aluko “What President Obasanjo Can Do to Squelch Third Term Rumour” retrieved 05/06/2016 //www.laits.utexas.edu/Africa/ads/1438.htm//.)

However, the late human rights activist and legal luminary, Chief Gani Fawehinmi was reported to have advised President Obasanjo against his third term bid in the following words:

“Do not disturb the polity”.
“Do not lay a dangerous precedent”.
“Do not tempt God”.

“Do not ignore the feelings of the people as they are against your bid”. G. Fawehinmi “Gani Fawehinmi Writes an Open Letter to President Over Rumours of Third Term Agenda” retrieved 05/06/2016
Gani Fawehinmi further reminded Obasanjo of how he handed over power to civilian administration in 1979 and his oath of office in 1999 and 2003 to protect the constitution Nigeria which only stipulated two terms in office. Although the film does not opulently discuss the issue of third term bid, the choice of monarchical governmental system is no doubt a pointer to it. Certainly, kingship system in Yorubaland, and invariably among all tribes in Nigeria, is a life-time position and thus suggest perpetuation in office for a political leader. This is in consonance with Abubakar Muhammed’s view that when “sit-tight African leaders lost legitimacy largely due to their corruption, ineffectiveness, self-interest, and so on, or due to limited resources or other forces beyond their control, they sought other ways to bolster their authority…they not only multiplied the symbolic references to an imagined traditional African style of rule, they adopted titles and nicknames ostensibly to demonstrate the uniqueness of such assumed style”. (Muhammed 2010:174).

Notably as well, in the film, the king’s nonchalance towards investigating the death of Aare Alasa and his quick submission that the chief was killed by armed robbers summarily suggest subtle attempts at eliminating his opponent. Juxtaposed with history, the death of Chief Bola Ige was seen as a political act that was meant to suppress the most dominant opposing political voice. As some political analysts believe, his death was a single factor that ascertained the victory of the PDP and Obasanjo in the 2003 elections.

Conclusion

Tunde kelani is no doubt a political commentator who employs the medium of film to review the political history of Nigeria. He deploys film to question the inefficiency of political structure, lampoon dictatorship in a democratic setting and condemn massive corruption by leaders elected to effect developmental changes in Nigeria but who end up strangulating the economy and convert national heritage to personal and family booties.

Kelani’s political films, notably Saworo-Ide, Agogo Eewo and Arugba are critical reviews of the transition in national leadership and governance from the despotic rule of Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha to the current civilian era which kick-started in 1999. The films reveal a gross lack of any viable development induced political ideology by Nigerian leaders either as military dictators or constitutionally elected politicians; the ideology is, obviously, of corruption and misrule in both cases. While the military were totalitarian in the entrenchment of corruption, the civilians employ constitutional instruments in legalizing corruption. For instance, the issue of “immunity clause” has remained debatable in Nigerian polity.

Drawing from the films analyzed above, it could be deduced that the major cogs in the wheels of Nigerian economic development are corruption and visionless leadership. In Saworo-Ide, Lagata is expected to nib the tide of corruption flowered by Lapite but to the contrary, his reign is worse. Flanked by sycophants and political
jobbers in the name of traditional chiefs, Lagata surpassed Lapite in treachery, dehumanization and indiscriminate looting of government funds. While Bosipo appears to be of noble intentions in Agogo Eewo, he is surrounded by the same corrupt leaders with personal ulterior motives. The two scenarios graphically capture Nigeria’s political scenes in which the same crop of politicians are appointed as ministers by every regime, ranging from military to civilian. Sometimes when a politician is of significant age and considered unfit for a task, his son or daughter automatically becomes the most qualified candidate, thus extending the reign of corruption.

We can conclude in the light of the above that, for Nigeria to surmount the present political and economic hurdles, there is need for visionary leadership; the polity must evolve a nationalist leader whose prime agenda in transformation but most importantly such a leader must work with other selfless and visionary leaders. If we consider the emergence of Mohammadu Buhari as Nigeria’s president in 2015, one may see him in the shoes of an envisaged visionary leader, but the fact that he is surrounded by the same old stock of politicians leaves numerous questions begging for answers on whether he is the change agent that the nation clamours for.

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