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# A Political Economy of Lifestyle and Aesthetics: Yorùbá Artists Produce and Transform Popular Culture

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## ABSTRACT

This article celebrates and pays tribute to the work of Karin Barber by joining analyses of the history of political and economic conditions with analyses of the relationship between people's lifestyles and aesthetic forms of production. This paper analyzes a Yorùbá alárinjó (traditional singing, dancing, drumming, and masquerade) performance and a recent Yorùbá film by Túndé Kelani to illustrate the interconnections between "lifestyle" and aesthetics (Bourdieu, *Distinction*). This article concludes that a local performing troupe produced an aesthetics of liminality that emerged from its immersion in local and global markets of the 1990s, while the Kelani film produces an aesthetics of ambivalence, exploring relationships between traditional and modern cultural politics in the early 2000s. Grounded in long-term fieldwork in southwestern Nigeria, this piece illustrates Barber's insight that cultural preservation requires innovation and argues further that popular culture is an important part of this process (*Anthropology of Texts*).

Grounded in her expansive knowledge and experience of the aesthetics of Yorùbá culture in southwestern Nigeria, Karin Barber's texts bring Yorùbá popular culture to life by effortlessly emulating the tenor and cadence of the "artful performances" captured in Yorùbá dialogue and consciousness (*The Generation of Plays* 266). Barber's monumental historical and ethnographic analyses of Yorùbá praise singing (1991) and Yorùbá popular theater (2000) not only answer her own shout-out for scholarly attention to African popular culture (1987) but provide models for how to theorize and critique popular cultural forms while celebrating their specificity and creativity. In its attention to cultural interpretation

and social theory, Barber's canon illustrates how popular culture aesthetics have emerged from the material conditions of their production. This paper builds on Barber's analyses of Yorùbá popular culture by examining the aesthetics and production of an alárinjó—traditional singing, dancing, and masquerade—performance in the late nineties and a recent film by a popular Yorùbá filmmaker, Túndé Kelani.<sup>1</sup>

I suggest a *political economy of lifestyle and aesthetics* approach that joins analyses of the history of political and economic conditions that have shaped and been shaped by cultural forms of expression and analyses of the relationship between people's lifestyles and aesthetic forms of production. Following Bourdieu, I use the concept of "lifestyle" to refer to specific preferences emerging from the relationship between habitus and class positioning, played out through the material and symbolic terrain of the body, language, possessions, artistic production, etc. (*Distinction*).<sup>2</sup> This approach, in order to resonate and matter, must be informed by the analyst's best attempts to understand the culture from within. Barber's work emphasizes and models the need for long-term, ethnographic language and field study. There are no short cuts.<sup>3</sup>

Armed with copies of my ethnography, to distribute among the artists who had collaborated in the making of our twelve-year project on Yorùbá Bàtá, I returned to Èrín-Ósun during the summer of 2010. Eager to begin a new project and show off our book, the symbolic representation of our collective labors over the years, I looked forward to an eventful re-immersion. It was a challenging visit. I found myself jolted, yet again, into a critique of why ethnographic work is at once so fraught yet so necessary. To my surprise, several of the artists questioned my representations of them in the book, which led to a series of strained discussions with the king and the artists, and my good friend and collaborator consistently expressed his disappointment—in social settings—that our work together has failed to generate any substantive funds. I was also called upon by friends to make peace (an impossible charge) between one of my closest friends and his estranged junior wife, also my good friend; two weeks into my stay, my friends revealed to me that I had been bewitched and would have to take measures to break the spell if I wanted my bad luck to end; and then when I returned back to the U.S. I discovered that my email account had been hijacked, complete with a nearly believable narrative about my kidnapping followed by an urgent plea for money. Otherwise, it was wonderful to be back in Nigeria: my language skills had improved, my good friends were healthy and as hospitable as ever, a colleague helped set up my new research affiliation, and I was forced to remember that although every day of fieldwork feels like a month, that kind of experiential knowledge is invaluable. In order to analyze and theorize the historically, socially, and culturally produced realm of practices and aesthetics that comprise "popular culture," anthropologists must engage in dialogue with people as they debate the events of their everyday lives and hopes for their futures.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LIFESTYLE AND AESTHETICS IN KARIN BARBER'S WORK

*The Generation of Plays*, Barber's latest ethnography, brilliantly realizes and exemplifies her own suggestions for how to approach a study of African popular culture. Thus, I take this significant work as a point of inspiration. *The Generation of Plays* emerged out of Barber's fieldwork with the Oyin Adéjóbí Theater Company from 1981 to 1984. Situating the proliferation of Yorùbá language popular culture genres in Òsogbo's history of literacy and education in the 1950s,<sup>4</sup> Barber categorizes the theater company members as "clerkly artisans," members of an intermediate class with some primary and/or secondary school education along with training as apprentices in particular trades.<sup>5</sup> While most had limited literacy in the English language, many spoke some English while others were nearly fluent. Although their audience members ranged in class, most had at least enough disposable income to pay for the ticket. Popular theater, argues Barber, followed by television and video, significantly spoke to and helped create a new kind of audience: an anonymous public whom the artists did not know personally. Rather than rely on their expert knowledge of particular individuals' personal, family, and town histories (as in praise poetry), the theater's task was to craft plays that would speak to a broad Yorùbá-speaking public.

If the theater company members were clerkly artisans, then drummers and masquerade dancers from Èrín-Òsun are strictly artisans, members of a lower, working class. In addition to their lineage-based apprenticeships with professional family members, most báta and alárínjó artists also pursue apprenticeships in other trades, such as taxi driving, furniture making, and bartering. Unlike the Òsogbo-based collective, the four generations with whom I have worked have had little or no primary and/or secondary school training and thus have limited literacy in the Yorùbá language and very limited facility in English. Although with each generation, the amount of time children remain in school has increased. While these class distinctions are useful, I will suggest that the categories of class and status in Yorùbá culture are also fluid and flexible as are the categories of traditional and popular arts. Èrín-Òsun artists' lives as locally rooted and globally prolific traveling performers exemplify some of this complexity and fluidity. For example, I have argued in *Yorùbá Bátá Goes Global* that these artists produce a genre called pop tradition. Though they are not literate, Èrín-Òsun artists are more worldly and well-traveled than most members of the Yorùbá intermediate class. These artists' lifestyles—defined by travel between traditional and popular genres and lower and middle classes—are reflected in their artistic production.

While the Adéjóbí company was still flourishing as a live theater troupe during the eighties (before it turned to video in the early nineties), many other popular theater groups, as well as lineage-trained artists, were also performing widely and building new networks. In the eighties, Èrín-Òsun artists were peaking in their careers as professional representatives of traditional Yorùbá performance in local, national, and overseas venues. From the vantage of the nineties—shaped by two oppressive military dictatorships and the dramatic devaluation of the náírà—the eighties quickly became a storied reference point for more flush and hopeful times that were still within reach. Having conducted the bulk of my research in the nineties, I produced an ethnography that analyzes daily life tensions—between

culture brokers and artists, brothers, husbands, and wives, fake and real artists, etc. It is little wonder that this book was met with some initial angst: rather than showcase báta and alárínjó in their aesthetic glory out of context, I argued that the artists “managed” the realities of their everyday lives by working their strategic collaborations with culture brokers.<sup>6</sup> Following Barber’s approach, I analyzed the working and living conditions that shaped the artists’ relationships to their art and communities; it was impossible to separate the aesthetics of artistic production from everyday life.

Barber argues that the projects and aesthetics of popular culture in southwestern Nigeria have emerged from the material conditions of their production, a process she calls “generative materialism” (*The Generation of Plays*). Specifically, popular theater performances were “activations” of the actors’ “potential”; the actors “filled out” each play during each performance. Rather than representing a fully scripted story, image, or idea through their plays, the artists constantly drew on and then acted out their potential on stage. Each actor’s potential consisted of life experiences, understandings of the Yorùbá language, interpretations of the plots, and responses to audiences, etc. As clerkly artisans, the actors drew on their training as artisans who have mastered a craft as well as the entrepreneurial skills required to start and maintain a business. School-oriented, they also respected the literary and educational value of their plays. The intermediate class experiences of these actors produced the aesthetics of popular theater: traveling from town-to-town on a shoestring, scripted plays but with room for improvisation and changes (in dialogue, scene emphasis, scene inclusion, etc.), a company structure based on kinship and professional models, always responding to audiences, two-dimensional staging, and presenting a moral that served to educate an engaged audience who sought such a lesson.

The popular theater, as well as other “modern” popular culture forms (songs, novels, ewí, etc.), addressed the Yorùbá language public as one moral community. This community included parents, spouses, clients, patrons, friends, etc., and was invoked at different times as “African, Nigerian, Yorùbá, Òyó, Muslim, Christian, traditional” (*The Generation of Plays* 418). One of Barber’s key arguments is that Yorùbá people saw themselves as examples of “humanity in its moral dimension rather than as an exclusive group claiming the only humanity. Yorùbá values . . . exemplify Nigerian, African, or human values in general” (*ibid.*). While Barber maintained that the company was not overtly political, in that it did not openly critique politics, the company did significantly help to create a Yorùbá public that transcended ethnic, race, class, and religious boundaries. One could call this mode of its production the company’s political project, stemming from specific historical and social conditions.

## DENATURALIZING TASTE

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu builds on his theory of habitus to illustrate how, what he calls, “taste” emerges from a particular “social orientation” shaped by socioeconomic class. Just as our “schemes of habitus” express social differences (between classes, genders, age groups, etc.) as if to appear natural, our taste for aesthetics also appears natural, yet is clearly linked to our educational level and social origin (466). According to Bourdieu, “Tastes

are predisposed to function as markers of class. . . . Taste classifies" (2, 6). Taking pains to denaturalize taste, specifying how taste worked in France during the sixties, Bourdieu bases his historical and philosophical critique on his analyses of the results of a twenty-six question sociological survey administered in Paris, Lille, and a small provincial town among 1,217 people (13). The survey consists of questions about preferences for specific books, films, music genres, songs, furniture, clothing, activities, interior design, and museums. He delineates three zones of taste corresponding to education and class: legitimate, middle-brow, and popular taste.

Over the course of his analysis, Bourdieu argues that taste generates what he usefully defines as "life-style," a set of distinctive preferences that become so due to the "specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language, or body hexis" (173). He goes on to offer this example:

An old cabinetmaker's world view, the way he manages his budget, his time, or his body, his use of language and choice of clothing are fully present in his ethic of scrupulous, impeccable craftsmanship and in the aesthetic of work for work's sake which leads him to measure the beauty of his products by the care and patience that have gone into them. (174)

By showing how threads of cultural logic and aesthetic taste help to define the lifestyles of particular groups of people, Bourdieu offers some useful tools for analyzing the aesthetics of everyday life, and perhaps linking aesthetic taste to people's *production* (not just consumption) habitus.

Embedded in his analysis is a critique of bourgeois dominance. Building on this work, I suggest that because particular lifestyles emerge out of and produce particular aesthetics, it becomes a political project to advocate for the heterogeneity and sustainability of lifestyles that challenge modernizing projects that squelch or deny lifestyles perceived by dominant institutions as not modern or inappropriate. Bâta and alárinjó artists of Èrin-Òsun, for example, critique the Nigerian state for claiming to support their aesthetic traditions while devaluing and dismissing their lineage-based lifestyle, which produces their aesthetics. Bourdieu's insights into the connectedness of lifestyle and aesthetics help us to better understand and even advocate for those who consciously choose against-the-grain lifestyles.

In order to further denaturalize the relationship between class and lifestyle, Bourdieu explains that each group of people in a class, specified by occupation, is "characterized by a certain configuration of the . . . distribution of economic and cultural capital among its members . . . to which there corresponds a certain lifestyle" (*Distinction* 260). For example, "artistic producers and higher education teachers" are low in economic capital but high in cultural capital, whereas "commercial employers" are high in economic capital but low in cultural capital (*ibid.* 262). This insight helps us analyze artists' struggle: artists produce culture for elite and popular consumption, yet their class status usually remains low.

While Bourdieu's classification schema is useful in any analysis of class and aesthetics, he is critical of the fact that the very acts of classification and being classified are problematic as they work to reproduce the very categories themselves. Almost as an aside, however, he reminds us that using this kind of work (the project of denaturalizing these categories) to "[transform] the categories of perception

and appreciation of the social world and, through this, the social world itself, [is] indeed a forgotten dimension of the class struggle" (*Distinction* 483). The political economy of lifestyle and aesthetics approach that I am suggesting borrows from Bourdieu's analyses of how our production and consumption of aesthetic forms is shaped by our class position (social origin, educational level, and life trajectory). And should we choose to challenge or transform the ways in which various aesthetics are perceived and valued, we open the possibilities for a redistribution of economic capital and a widening field of what counts as cultural capital.

## ANALYSIS OF POPULAR CULTURE IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

### *Yorùbá Lifestyle and Aesthetics in an Alárinjó Performance in Èrìn-Ósun*

From the late nineties into the present, I have lived and conducted ethnographic research with an extended family of *bàtá* drummers in the medium-sized, semi-rural town of Èrìn-Ósun.<sup>7</sup> Founded by Yorùbá refugees who fled from today's Kwara state during the Fulani invasions in the mid-1800s, Èrìn-Ósun in the 2010s continues to pride itself on its preservation, innovation, and celebration of *àsà ibilè*, traditional culture. Nigeria in the nineties was shaped by the military dictatorships of Babangida and Abacha and the dramatic devaluation of Nigeria's currency, the náírà (see Guyer, Denzer, and Agbaje). Having come to power by force in 1993, President Abacha (1993–98) became infamous for killing off his political rivals, sanctioning the hanging of the "Ogoni nine," making deals with international corporations that only benefited the elite, and mismanaging funds meant for state and local governments. By necessity, Nigerians have imbued their entrepreneurial culture with heavy doses of innovation and magic in order to provide for themselves and their families. No steady wages or quality control at public institutions, no models for honest leadership in politics, no retirement system—no nation/state-level support.

When I settled down in Èrìn-Ósun in 1996, the artists with whom I worked had already built an extended overseas network of culture brokers, fans, and supporters. Their foreign network, mostly in Germany and the U.S., were patrons and clients—their guaranteed, albeit sporadic and contingent, source of income and livelihood. My presence served as a reminder that there was an overseas market for their commodity, traditional Yorùbá performance. Over the years, I have experienced the artists' endless schemes and cycles of determination and disappointment to keep their overseas networks alive. The artists' keen focus on manifesting overseas opportunities was evidence that their entrepreneurial prowess became a primary mode of survival.

While Èrìn-Ósun artists regularly performed for audiences overseas during the nineties, they also continued to perform for local secular venues, primarily naming parties, funerals, weddings, and political events.<sup>8</sup> The most common type of alárinjó performance ensemble consisted of two to four drummers playing accompanying rhythms for one or two solo singers/dancers/acrobats and several backup singers/dancers/acrobats. While audiences always appreciated talented drummers, they often focused on the words sung by the lead vocalist in the genre called *ewì*, "neo-traditional topical and moral poetry" (Barber, *The Generation of Plays* 72). Túndé Ójéyemí was one of the most prolific and talented performers in

his town over the course of my research, during which I documented over fifty local performances and participated in many more. The *ewì* discussed in this section was representative of the events I had been documenting: Túndé sang for ninety minutes straight, directly addressing different members of the celebrating party and their guests. Late scholar of Yorùbá culture Báyò Ògúndíjo transcribed and translated the entire segment. In my analysis, I connect the aesthetics of this slice of local performance with its everyday life and political economic context.

It was May 10, 1997, during the height of the masquerade season in Èrìn-Òsun. *Egíngún*, masquerades representing ancestors returning to the realm of the living (*ilé aye*) to bless and bring messages to family members and townspeople, "came out" (*jáde*) during most weekends, and many weekdays, during the season. Since Túndé and his ensembles played for most of the *egúngún* ceremonies, they squeezed this gig into their schedule. Such local performances are less about making money and more about supporting community members who, in this case, were honoring a deceased family member.

Túndé approached all venues professionally and always wore fashionable cloth—"mirror," satin, patterned wax, or thick lace styles—sewn into a traditional men's long-sleeved, roomy shirt over matching pants (see figure 1). The supporting ensemble members, however, felt most comfortable wearing baggy jeans and name brand T-shirts. Visually, this generation went for what they called a "guy" aesthetic, "a graceful masculinity and showy sexuality" that let their audiences know that they were successful professionals who had traveled the world, one foot in their hometown and one foot overseas (Klein 88). This self-positioning through their visual aesthetic was strategically meant to correct the disparaging images of lineage-trained artists as poor, uneducated beggars. These artists took pride in their mastery of their genres and ability to afford beautiful and stylish clothes.

Typical of such venues, this celebration took place outdoors, just outside the compound of the celebrants. Groups of five to ten people sat on rented metal chairs or wooden benches surrounding rented round tables. The women of the celebrating family served food, sodas, and beer, while the celebrating men and a few women were treated as guests. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun was strong. The heavy air was filled with scents of palm oil, cow meat stewing in spicy tomato sauce, and the distant burning of trash and brush. The soundscape was full of different styles of percussion and chanting, all competing for the attention of the celebrants. Each ensemble worked the crowd by roaming from group to group. In between sets, the hosts offered food and drink to the artists. These conditions were challenging, though the artists accepted them as part of the nature of their work. The artists who had performed abroad often talked and sang about their luxurious overseas venues: they were paid in advance, performed for a circumscribed amount of time on a stage, and were always treated with respect. Playing these local venues, however, gave the artists a chance to reflect on their overseas experiences, often in the musical interludes between the more structured *ewì*.

Túndé sang twenty different *ewì*, broken up by thirty-five choral refrains. Each *ewì* segment consisted of all or some of the following: invocations of the ancestors and/or the òrisà, Yorùbá gods and goddesses; Túndé's personal praise names and/or accomplishments; and the song body. The song body consisted of a combination of personal *oríkì*, prayers, incantations, proverbs, and anecdotes.<sup>9</sup> Thirty of the choruses were variations of the same theme about these artists'

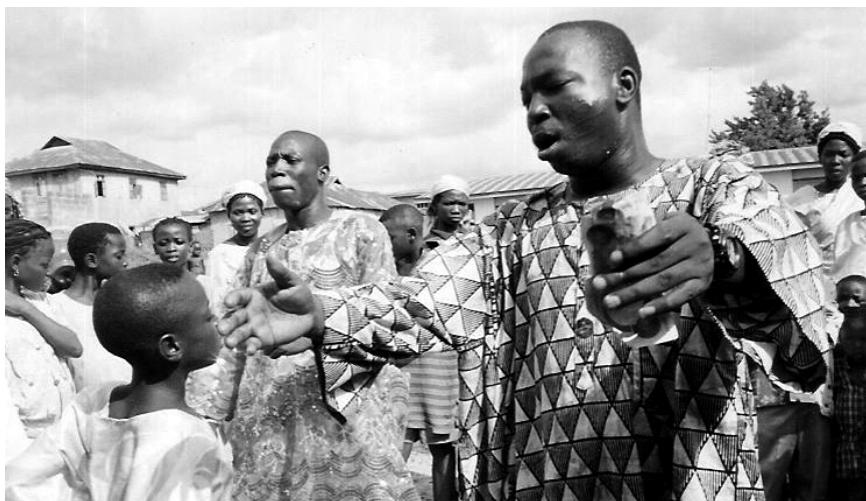


Figure 1. Túndé Òjéyemí and his brother sing ewì in Èrin-Òsun. Photo: Debra Klein, 1997.

invention of a fusion genre they called “Bàtá Fúji” (see Klein). That day’s poetic themes, always directly addressing a specific audience member or group, included wars that led to the founding of towns, wealth and poverty, women’s infidelity, secrecy, good versus evil, magic, persistence, pregnancy, money, prayers for success, town histories, loyalty to the king, praises for òràsà, praises for bàtá, and people’s sources of power. Taken together, Túndé’s poems offered his audiences a series of artfully articulated reflections about local histories, morality, and spirituality.

After paying homage to his father and addressing individual audience members, Túndé sang the following poem about the Ìkoyí war because some of the celebrants were from the Ìkoyí area.

The Ìkoyí war is sweet. War is not sweet.  
 The warrior killed sixteen, child of Òtúnba in the house of Olúgbón.  
 He who cannot be seen in the rain.  
 He had boasted of war earlier in Ìkoyí long ago.  
 He who has effective medicine.  
 He who should not be thinking of women.  
 It was a woman who killed the first Olúkòyí.  
 Èsù said he should never taste palm oil.  
 They gave him oil to eat, the one who should not eat palm oil.  
 They gave him palm oil to lick, the one whose house should not be rubbed with  
 horse’s feces.  
 They used horse’s feces to rub his house.  
 So they cut off the Olúkòyí’s head.  
 His head rolled as far as Ibàdàn, Ògbómòsó, Ilé-Ogbo, Kúta.  
 On the sixteenth day, the head of Mololá rolled back.  
 Mololá said Sàngó and Sònporrà will kill the father of the thief who cut off his  
 head. (10 May 1997)

The content of this story reflects a Yorùbá sensibility and cosmology. Warriors are revered as powerful, gifted, and spiritually protected guardians of their town and its people. In many *ewì*, and other genres, women are storied as untrustworthy, conniving, and dangerous to men. In this poem, a woman tricked the warrior by cooking for him, one of the most common ways women are said to manipulate men. Even though the god of the crossroads, Èsù, had forewarned him not to taste palm oil, the warrior succumbed to this woman's power, shirking his responsibility to protect his king during wartime. Vulnerable and unprotected, the king was killed by his enemies. Even though the king's head rolled far and wide, it magically rolled home on the sixteenth day. A sacred number in Yorùbá cosmology, sixteen was invoked twice. The dead king's message, delivered by his head, was one of prophetic revenge: two of the most powerful òrìṣà, the gods of thunder and smallpox, would jointly kill his killer's father. The head (*orí*), symbolic in Yorùbá cosmology and philosophy, signifies an individual's destiny, adding symbolic meaning to the gruesome yet somewhat comical imagery of the king's rolling head. The message delivered by the king's head was that destiny would be taken as spiritually sanctioned.

One of the many oríkì for the town of Ìkoyí, this poem, and the way Túndé sang it to the two middle-aged male celebrants, impressed and moved the audience. When Túndé began to tell this story of Ìkoyí, his two addressees immediately expressed their elation by smiling, sipping their beers, and tuning in more intently to hear *their* story unfold. As the story continued, they dug into their pockets and pulled out their money to "spray" (place on the forehead) Túndé for his skillful work. Other audience members enjoyed the song but were less attentive to the details of the poem. Túndé's father, however, was extremely attentive to his son's song because he wanted to be sure he was getting it right, since he was praising his father's age mates and because he was proud of his son's skills. The audience was impressed and excited by the fact that Túndé was singing *ewì* in a style they recognized as "traditional." They were impressed that a performer from an area far from Ìkoyí was able to pull their town's song out of his memorized repertoire, on the spot. It doesn't get much better than this: to be called out in praise poetry is a memorable, joyful, and proud moment.

As soon as Túndé finished his poem, his father beckoned and asked him to greet some arriving guests. After welcoming three new middle-aged male guests by name and personal oríkì, Túndé cued his ensemble to perform their signature fast-paced, galloping, *fújì*-inspired chorus about the merging of *bàtá* with the popular music genre of *fújì*.<sup>10</sup> The ensemble repeated this chorus twenty-nine more times. Always catchy enough to inspire audience members to dance, this chorus became the vehicle through which Túndé reminded his audience of his group's innovation, uniqueness, worldliness, and rootedness in traditional culture.

Neither Túndé's ensemble nor the audience members dwelled on the details of the lyrics for too long, with the exception of gossip, yet they shared in the overall content and vibe of the performance. Excited by the skillful drumming backing up Túndé's on-point improvisation, proud of their cultural heritage, relaxed as they engaged with their local entertainers—these were good times for the celebrants. In the Ìkoyí poem, as in the others, Túndé often invoked or told stories about the òrìṣà, *Olórun* (God), as well as the powers of nature. Although the majority of people in Èrìn-Ósun believed that their commitments to their Muslim and Christian paths

did not permit the public acknowledgement of the òrìsà, they whole-heartedly enjoyed the poems in Túndé's repertoire. When I asked audience members for their thoughts about the poems' spiritual content, they said ewi was beautiful to them; the poems represented their cultural heritage, which includes the òrìsà, and made them proud; and the rest of the world also finds beauty in their tradition, made evident by the fact that their local artists perform all over the world. Performers and audiences alike easily separated their culture from their religion and/or had flexible spiritual orientations; they did not experience conflict when it came to enjoying or listening to these poems.

Whenever women appeared in the poems, they got themselves and/or men into trouble due to their dishonest and manipulative nature. Most of my friends and informants agree that Yorùbá culture is patriarchal, in that men ultimately set the terms for what is appropriate, yet women are in charge of powerful public realms, such as the market and trading. This power asymmetry creates problems and provides the stuff that good stories are made of. Poems composed and sung from a male perspective tend to reproduce narratives warning men of women's duplicitous nature. And because men occupy more public social spaces, they use these opportunities to joke and commiserate with other men about their trouble resisting women and tendencies to fall prey to their agendas. When women sing ewí and are in the audience, however, they turn some of the same stories around to convey their frustrations with men's failed promises and tendencies to depend on them for everything. These poems provide opportunities for community members to negotiate their gendered relationships, often through gossip about specific individuals who happen to be present. As the occasional subject of such gossip, I can attest to the effectiveness of this play to stir things up and get people talking.

Listening to the content of the poems, we can appreciate how stories of the past and present are infused with commentary on morality and spirituality. From illustrating the challenges of being morally appropriate women and men to acknowledging the omnipresent roles of gods, nature, and destiny in choreographing the paths of our lives, the stories are entertaining. This form of entertainment still works because it is grounded in the lifestyles of the artists and the audience. In a community setting, such events inspire animated discussion and debate about the politics of everyday life in relation to the past, present, and future.

Alárinjó performance is arguably a dying art: elder artists are dying, children spend more time in school, and traditional knowledge professions have been devalued. Túndé and his supporting ensemble spent much of their childhood studying, performing, and thus mastering their arts alongside their family members. The aesthetics of alárinjó performance have emerged out of particular ways of training the next generation and living their art in their communities. This analysis reveals how the artists' aesthetics are inextricable from their lifestyles. Building on Bourdieu and the critique of báta master Lámídì Àyánkúnlé, we are left with the task of advocating for the support of lineages and towns committed to passing along their art. Since they cannot depend on the support of their local and state governments, one of the elder artists, Rábíù Àyándòkun, has started a school for the traditional arts on the outskirts of Èrin-Ósun. Supplementing the role of lineages, but still close to his town where these arts matter, this school will employ professional masters to train future generations in the traditional arts.

As the national economy has steadily declined, so have people's incomes and the availability of disposable income for entertainment. In the nineties, the income earned from local performances, once divided among the ensemble members, was merely enough to provide one day's meals for a small family. If the venue involved travel, the earnings were often spent on transportation. My elder collaborators often tell stories about how well they were paid for the same work during the seventies. The most well-traveled elders, in fact, will not play for local events today because they are insulted by the lack of compensation. These artists have also critiqued national institutions for inviting them to represent the Yorùbá arts in festivals but then failing to fulfill their contracts to provide daily stipends, food, and accommodations. In the nineties, the artists did their best to secure tours and visiting positions overseas so that they could continue earning livings as professionals. Unfortunately, the global market for world music and performance was drying up: venues in Germany and the U.S. were not able to support them for second, third, or fourth visits. Locally, however, the artists were still able to build on the cultural capital they had rightfully earned by traveling the globe in decades past.

#### *Yorùbá Lifestyle and Aesthetics in a Túndé Kelani Movie*

From July 7 to 10, 2010, I attended a conference about the Nigerian video industry at KWASU, Kwara State University, on the outskirts of Ilorin. Entitled "Nollywood: A National Cinema? An International Workshop," this conference was packed full of presentations, film screenings, and social events. In addition to bringing together scholars and film practitioners from Nigeria, other parts of Africa, Europe, and the Americas, this conference also intended to bring attention to KWASU's ambitious new "Film Village" housed in its School of Performing Arts. Convened by Nigerian scholars who teach and live in North America and funded by Kwara state public educational and arts institutions and private banks, this conference provided a lively venue for discussing and analyzing the third largest cinema industry in the world (behind Hollywood and Bollywood).

The main event for Saturday night was a screening of Túndé Kelani's latest film, *Arugbá* (see figure 2). The venue was the charming outdoor courtyard of the Kwara Hotel. A featured artist, guest, and participant, Kelani was present at all of the events I attended. A graduate of the London International Film School, Kelani has been producing and directing feature films in Nigeria about Nigerian society since 1993. In 1992, he founded, and continues to manage, Mainframe Film and Television Productions, a company dedicated to promoting Nigeria's "rich cultural heritage and moral values both within the country and the outside world at large," "improving the standards of film production in Nigeria," and "giving technical support to other production houses both within and outside Nigeria" (*Mainframe*). I met Kelani during the conference and exchanged some emails with him while writing this paper. A generous artist and colleague, he is dedicated to his work and the professionalization of Nigeria's film industry.

*Arugbá* was still new in 2010 and had not circulated widely among the general public. I bought and gifted copies to my friends in Èrin-Ósun, but they would probably not have seen the film just yet. Due to time constraints, I have yet to conduct audience response interviews about this film. Like all of Kelani's work, *Arugbá* is a complex film full of sub-plots, surprising scenes, rich cultural imagery,



Figure 2. *Arugbá* promotional media. Photo: Mainframe website, 2011.

music, dance, poetry, proverbs, humor, drama, magic, and compelling characters. An *Arugbá* is a virgin, chosen by the king and *Ifá* (òrìsà of divination/oracle), who carries the ritual calabash down to the Òsun river during the annual festival honoring Òrisà Òsun (goddess of fertility). For his 1995 documentary about the Òsun festival in Òsogbo, Kelani interviewed and became inspired by a real *Arugbá*.

Produced in 2008, *Arugbá* tracks the journey of its main character, Adetutu, as she struggles to balance her life and commitments as a university student, leader of an all-women's performance troupe, chosen *Arugbá* for her hometown, object of a fellow student's affections, and young woman with special powers to ward off evil and do good for herself and others. The king of Adetutu's hometown embodies all that is corrupt and reprehensible about Nigerian leaders and politics. Power-hungry and selfish, he constantly fights with his chiefs, schemes to steal generous WHO funds granted to manage the HIV epidemic, accuses Adetutu of losing her virginity while at university, doesn't care about his town's poverty, and hoards his stolen money in foreign bank accounts.

The film's brilliance lies in its ability to invoke its metanarratives in the rich mini-stories of each scene. One of the film's metanarratives is about the tensions between how Nigerians grapple with their nation's corruption, greed, and lack of development on the one hand, and how they continue to find strength and unity in their unique cultural resources on the other. Another metanarrative is about the tensions between tradition and modernity. Traditional culture is as beautiful and inspiring as it is plagued by big man corruption and sexism. Modern culture is wise in its vision to help women and children out of ignorance, poverty, and disease, but it is also ambivalent about and often disapproving of tradition. While there is some resolution in the hope of the young couple's new relationship and

Adetutu's decision to start an NGO to serve her community, most themes and issues remain completely unresolved by the film's end.

Building on my earlier analysis of Yorùbá popular culture aesthetics, I will look at the portrayal of traditional culture and values in the film. The performing arts play a central and even framing role in the film: the young couple, Adetutu and Makinwa, are both students of theater arts and lead their own performance groups; the Òsun Òsogbo festival provides the film's backdrop; and scenes featuring traditional songs and dances for the *òrìsà* provide the spiritual structure that grounds the film's main characters.

Both main characters' troupes perform complete pieces, taking up significant space toward the beginning and end of the film. While each act borrows from *ewì* and Yorùbá dance traditions, each is notably dominated by a global hip-hop aesthetic. After some of the Èrin-Òsun artists watched the film, they commented most about these particular performances on the university stage. In sum, they said that the performances were trying too hard to be "*òyìnbo*" (foreign) and were not aesthetically pleasing to them, but were funny.

Adetutu's performance troupe joins aesthetic genres: lead female vocalist with back-up singer/dancers choreographed in unison mixed with traditionally inspired dance moves, occasional drumming, and song content. The group performs on stage to a seated audience in an indoor university theater. While the audience is very engaged and sometimes claps during exciting dance segments, they remain in their seats the whole time. The Yorùbá lyrics follow the *ewì* tradition, directly engaging the audience in a song about honesty winning out over vanity. The overall vibe of the piece is reminiscent of female pop singers from the U.S. and Europe, such as live performances by Beyoncé and Lady Gaga. Throughout the film, Makinwa pursues training in *bàtá* drumming and dancing, collaborating with a *bàtá* drummer with whom he shares a powerful scene portraying a historic dance between King Sàngó and his *bàtá* drummer during the fifteenth century. Makinwa's final stage performance, a climactic scene in the film, contains an opening *ewì* poem but no drumming. His main act is the male rap/hip-hop equivalent of Adetutu's group: a solo rap performance with back-up singers/dancers who join in for the chorus.

Both group performances borrow from the *ewì* tradition of telling pointed stories relevant to the moment and people's lives. For example, Makinwa's second verse (of four) gets us thinking about Nigeria's corruption in relation to what counts as "education."

They equate education to academics.  
 English is a must for judicious expression.  
 Listen to what I have to say in our own tongue.  
 A childhood tale of a certain autocrat.  
 Bent on self-perpetuation.  
 Absolute power corrupts absolutely.  
 Excessive love for power courts disgrace.  
 Respect begets respect. (*Arugbá*)

The film, and Makinwa's character, questions the relationship between tradition and modernity: isn't it also important to be educated in the Yorùbá language and culture and to perhaps use some of that knowledge to salvage the nation? Is

Nigeria continuing to go astray, becoming more corrupt, as it gets further away from the wisdom inherent in its cultures? At the very least, can't we do something to stop the corruption that is making us starve? Like the performance of Túndé, this ewì-rap asks its audience to engage in the ideas presented. Unlike the alárinjó setting, however, the audience does not have a chance to talk back on the spot, yet they may talk with each other later. By showcasing this particular ewì-rap, the film, in the ewì spirit, asks its audience to dialogue about these timely issues.

Curious about the film's portrayal of bátá culture, I was struck by the only scene during which the bátá master spoke. This brief scene makes a loud statement about the political economy of lifestyle and aesthetic tensions between tradition and modernity. Makinwa sits under a tree reading a book when the two drummers walk by wearing "native" *ngbáda* (a traditional male long robe) and *fila* (traditional male cap) and carrying their drums. Makinwa wears his hair in dreadlocks, a modern and controversial hairstyle for men, Western-style trousers, and a button-down shirt. Aesthetically, the scene allows us to see how the drummers look out of their element on campus. After the drummers tell Makinwa that his group has "mastered bátá drumming" (an impossibility to those who know better), one of them picks up and starts looking through Makinwa's book. The drummer asks, "How can you read a book with no pictures?" to which Makinwa replies, "Pictures are good. But the knowledge it holds is more important."

As Barber historicizes, Yorùbá popular theater and video films emerged out of traditional performance aesthetics, such as the alárinjó event I analyzed earlier in this paper. Popular theater writers/directors/actors intended for their plays to provide moral lessons for their audiences who, in turn, would attend plays in order to actively learn. Some of the scenes in *Arugbá* follow a related performance tradition of expressly educating the audience about a specific topic. The scene described above could be interpreted as one such scene, serving to educate an illiterate viewing public about the value of literacy. However, it might also be interpreted as reproducing the disparaging stereotype of drummers as uneducated. Given Kelani's commitment to preserving and celebrating all forms of Yorùbá culture, I doubt he would have intended this latter interpretation.

In fact, a few scenes before this one, the opposite lesson is offered, albeit by the corrupt king. One of the king's grandchildren visits and greets him without kneeling and says in English, "Good morning, grandpa." The king is shocked by such disrespect and asks, "Can't you speak Yorùbá?" The child replies, "My teacher forbids speaking that uncivilized language." The king then turns to the child's mother, "Yejide, so you brainwash your kids with foreign culture. They are even clueless about how to greet in Yorùbá." The scene goes on to show that indeed the kids are not fluent in Yorùbá. Taken together, these two brief but hard-hitting scenes illustrate the tensions surrounding the angst and confusion inherent in the process of modernizing, hanging on to what is important while customizing a culturally specific brand of modernity.

The film portrays aesthetic ambivalence when it comes to the dance between tradition and modernity. The illiterate drummers don't really have a place in universities, made evident by the book scene and the sepia-toned, historical flashback to Sàngó and his drummer. The bátá drummer is allowed to shine in the past but is not comfortably invited to be part of the present. The drummers do not appear in Makinwa's climactic performance, though a traditionally dressed

male performer sings a brief *ewì* poem to introduce the featured rap song. While we might be alarmed by the fact that children are being punished in school for speaking Yorùbá, the character who expresses concern is the most evil and unlikeable character in the film. While the king may care about the persistence and value of the Yorùbá language, he also inhabits the worst side of big man culture: self-centered corruption at the expense of other people's health and happiness. While traditional aesthetics are portrayed through a sepia-toned lens of nostalgia, they are also ever-present in the moral-driven, audience-engaging vocal content of university student productions. While people who inhabit traditional values, knowledge, and skills are portrayed as illiterate and power-hungry, they make us think about which aesthetics and institutions to transform and which to phase out.

## A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LIFESTYLE AND AESTHETICS APPROACH

Analyzing Túndé's *alárinjó* performance in its context, I suggest that this event embodied an aesthetics of liminality: in between genres and classes, in transition, in the process of becoming something else, exciting, communal, participatory, and cathartic. The chorus expressed the ensemble's liminal status: if the spirits and forces of nature would permit it, their new aesthetic fusion of traditional and popular genres would survive. But would it? The young adult generation's fusion genre was liminal because it was in the process of creation. The economic and the political free-for-all of the nineties not only produced this aesthetics of liminality but made it feel like a permanent state, permanently transitioning. While citizens and scholars of Nigeria have attributed this state of perpetual flux to Nigeria in general (the popular slogan painted on buses and taxis, "no condition is permanent," comes to mind), I suggest that this aesthetics of liminality was particular to the moment of its production.

We didn't realize at the time that the global market for the Èrin-Ósun artists' commodity was shifting. The artists' overseas successes became a prominent feature of their narrative and visual aesthetics; the liminality lay in the fact that the artists were suddenly having trouble manifesting the same amount of opportunities for travel as they had throughout the past two decades. "Overseas" was not only a pervasive character and aesthetic fixture during my research, it was the cause of family tension and intense debate.

Túndé's poems were classic texts from his lineage-derived oral corpus. Invoking the powers of the Yorùbá spirits and natural forces in the nineties was also part of this event's liminality. In Èrin-Ósun, funeral celebrants were free to express their religious flexibility and love for their culture in a public social setting. Within the context of an urbanizing and modernizing Nigeria, this participatory aesthetics was liminal: neither rural nor urban, neither Muslim nor Christian, neither traditional nor modern. When I observed Túndé and his ensemble performing at a much larger funeral in 2010, I noted that the aesthetics had indeed changed: the chorus was different as was the overall feel of the group. But I did not do the research that would allow me to specify today's *alárinjó* aesthetics.

In 2010, members of the Àyánkúnlé family and their friends were still crazy about *fújì* music and its aesthetics: fast-paced drumming, talented and skilled star vocalists, big venues attracting thousands of fans, and its status as one of the

most popular music genres in Nigeria. During my stay, my friends watched their favorite music videos in a beer parlor during the evenings. One of their favorites, *Ojó Nlá*, is a two-hour video recording of the huge funeral celebration honoring the deceased mother of fújì star Alhaji Chief Kollington Ayinla. Sponsored by the Fuji Musicians Association of Nigeria (FUMAN), this event features performances by many old and young popular musicians. Not only did my friends love the performances as fans and fellow fújì musicians, but they also loved watching the last twelve minutes of the video during which Kollington offers his caring advice to Saheed Osupa, one of today's most popular young fújì stars.

Most youth gravitate toward particular genres and styles of pop culture that reflect aesthetics that speak to their taste. Not only are aesthetic preferences defined by their class position, education, and life trajectory, but also by generation. The fictional university students in *Arugbá* are inspired by the aesthetics of a globalized hip-hop and rap culture, while the Èrìn-Ósun young adults identify with and are inspired by fújì culture. Both groups of Yorùbá young adults are not only culture consumers, but are also culture producers, in the business of creating and circulating aesthetic styles that are on the cutting edge. The difference in class positioning of the university students versus the artisans is notably reflected in these groups' lifestyle and aesthetic preferences.

When it comes to the business of culture production, the elder generations are up to something different. Since I have been working with the Èrìn-Ósun artists, elders and brothers Lèmídì Àyánkúnlé and Rábíú Àyándòkun have expressed their frustration and sadness that their sons, who I call the Bàtá Fújì generation, prefer to listen to and play fújì music over the bàtá classics. Looking through a political economy of lifestyle and aesthetics lens, I have argued elsewhere that these elders are not only concerned about the loss of an aesthetic tradition they love and identify with but are also concerned about the loss of a lifestyle and culture that produces bàtá and alárìnjó aesthetics. Filmmaker Kelani is also a culture producing elder concerned about the disappearance of a particular set of cultural aesthetics, values, worldviews, and traditions that Àyánkúnlé and others call àṣà ibflè, traditional culture. Driven by a deep passion and sense of urgency, both sets of elders have dedicated much of their careers to the preservation of their culture, which they perceive as endangered.

In *Arugbá*, Kelani portrays traditional Yorùbá aesthetics in a deliberate way. The scenes in which the òrisà are invoked as well as the historic bàtá scene are full of classical singing, dancing, and drumming within natural settings. The òrisà worshippers are beautiful women wearing colorful traditional cloth, their dancing inspired by the spirits of the òrisà and nature. The bàtá scene revolves around an embellished ewí for Sàngó, a moving story about the symbiotic relationship between drumming and dancing.<sup>11</sup> These scenes stick out because they are self-contained and separate from the plot (though they enhance it) and the film's flow. These scenes have a timeless feel, reverential of the past—an aesthetics of nostalgia. This aesthetics of traditional culture is juxtaposed against the rest of the film in which the king, chiefs, youth, parents, market women, etc., must grapple with institutions and cultural values in flux. Overall, I suggest the film's statement is its aesthetic ambivalence. What parts of our culture will we fight to keep alive, what parts can we let go? It's up to us to decide so that we resist the temptation to give up on our country in search of a better life elsewhere.

The elder artists of Èrìn-Ósun have just started a School for the Traditional Yorùbá Arts so that they can actively pass along their knowledge, skills, and passion to future generations. Since their teaching methods hinge on performing with live audiences on a regular basis, they will make sure their students understand how these arts are produced in local contexts. In this way, the lifestyle that produces these aesthetics will become a part of the curriculum. Given the formalization and standardization of education that has transformed their world during the course of their lives, these elders have decided that they need to be in control of the institutionalization of the traditional Yorùbá arts. And their overseas successes have provided them with the recognition and income that led to the creation of their school. They see themselves as the professors with the rights and privileges to teach the new generations. Collaborating with nearby colleges and universities, they hope to attract enough students to cover their costs.

In *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*, Barber argues that by creating texts, people are intentionally “fixing” culture, engaging in a process of “making culture stick” (4). Through her analyses of African oral texts, she illustrates how “preservation and innovation are inseparable”: because the convention of Yorùbá praise poetry (*oríkì*) was established, the neo-traditional genre of *ewì* emerged (211). Barber argues that the processes of preservation and innovation are *not* opposites but rather, are mutually constitutive.

A political economy of lifestyle and aesthetics mode of analysis has helped to unravel the meanings of two different popular culture events, an *ewì* performance in the nineties and a recent Kelani film. Emerging from their positions as young adult artisans from a successful family who has performed all over the world, the *ewì* ensemble of Èrìn-Ósun produced an aesthetics of liminality in the nineties. Featuring differently situated characters who move back and forth between competing institutions, values, and worldviews, *Arugbá* produces an aesthetics of ambivalence about the current state of Nigeria. Rooted in the genres of Yorùbá oral performance, both events actively recruit their audiences, challenging them to debate about the past, morality, gender, tradition, modernity, and the future of their nation. Though these popular culture genres and aesthetics are grounded in traditional forms, Èrìn-Ósun elders and Kelani are dedicated to the preservation of traditional aesthetics, knowledge, and skills. Creating his films, Kelani is at once preserving and inventing Yorùbá culture. Creating a new institution, outside the parameters of state funding, Èrìn-Ósun elders are passing along their knowledge and skills while inventing a new kind of lineage-based training model. Paying attention to the inextricable connections between lifestyle and aesthetic production, we see that elder and youth generations are actively transforming—innovating and preserving—Yorùbá culture by engaging in the process of creating new texts and institutions.

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## NOTES

1. Alárínjó are entertainment masqueraders—also known as agbégijó and apidán. Alárínjó masqueraders are born into Òjé families and are often called elégùn òjé. Alárínjó performers dance and dance in masks to tell stories about their communities and life in general. They also sing praise songs, ewí, passed down from generation to generation. Barber calls the genre of ewí “neo-traditional” since today’s songs probably only go back to the 1800s. In addition to their roles as entertainers, elégùn òjé also worship and bear the sacred masks for the Egúngún (òrisà of the ancestors). Children born into an Òjé lineage are given names starting with the Òjé prefix and Òjé families work closely with and at times marry into Àyàn drumming families. Òjé performers dance, praise-sing, and perform acrobatic and masquerade displays, while Àyàn drummers provide the accompanying drum rhythms and texts.

2. The body’s reproduction of structures below the level of discourse (Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice; Distinction*).

3. This approach to analyzing popular culture emerges from Marxist and neo-Marxist analyses of class and capitalist modes of production, Foucauldian analyses of institutions and the bodies they produce, the Frankfurt school’s analyses of aesthetics and media, and the genealogies these schools have spawned.

4. After the railway opened in 1905, Òsogbo became a dynamic commercial and manufacturing town where major international trading companies operated branches. Between 1911 and 1952, Òsogbo nearly tripled in size, attracting Yorùbá immigrants as well as smaller populations from other parts of Nigeria. In 1950, a small but growing educated elite became elected members of town and district councils, alongside traditional chiefs. The educated elite, not missionaries, built the first grammar school in 1949 to promote “enlightenment,” development through education. New artisan trades emerged to support the colonial businesses: transportation, tailoring, printing, shoe repair, radio repair, etc. According to Barber, “The combination of commercial vigor, thriving artisanal production, and an active, articulate elite were favorable to new cultural developments” (*The Generation of Plays* 40). Popular theater companies grew out of this lively, growing city in the midst of transformation. Òsogbo soon became one of the three, alongside Lagos and Ìbàdàn, major centers for visual and performing arts (*ibid.*).

5. Using a term that Nigerians use, Barber helpfully defines the Nigerian “intermediate classes” as “mobile, entrepreneurial, urban-oriented, [and] aspiring” (*The Generation of Plays* 2). Often defined by lists of occupations—tailors, bricklayers, traders, taxi drivers, etc.—this class is also “defined by what it is not: not illiterate farmers, on the one hand; not salaried professionals, on the other” (*ibid.*). People in this class typically leave primary and/or secondary school to apprentice in skilled trades and then join the “world of small-scale artisanal production and trade which dominates the economy of Yorùbá cities and towns” (*ibid.*).

6. Yorùbá speakers used the English term “manage” to refer to specific strategies for getting by in daily life. A common response to the greeting, “How are you?” was “Manage naa ni o” / “I’m managing.” People would always inflect this response with an exasperated tone.

7. Passed down from generation to generation, báttá is a five-hundred-year-old drumming, singing, and masquerade tradition from southwestern Nigeria. The fifteenth-century reign of Sàngó marks the earliest documented use of báttá drum ensembles in royal contexts. Báttá drums are double-headed, conically shaped drums played in an ensemble of three drums.

8. Dating back at least five hundred years, báttá and alárínjó artists have entertained celebrants of baby naming parties, weddings, funerals, apprenticeship graduations, etc. Báttá drummers have also played for seasonal and personal ceremonies in honor of

the òrìṣà, Yorùbá gods and goddesses; however, missionization and colonization has contributed to the steady decline of public òrìṣà worship since the 1950s.

9. A historically and culturally specific Yorùbá genre of praise singing (see Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow*).

10. Fújì music grew out of *ajisáàrì* music, it is a specific style of vocalization accompanied by the harmonica and performed for Muslims during the annual Ramadan fast. Growing in popularity since the 1970s, fújì music is characterized by heartfelt vocals and a rich rhythm section of talking drums, claves, bells, sekere, drum set, and Hawaiian-style guitar, produced and patronized mostly by Muslims and performed live at parties and secular celebrations. For the past twenty years, since I have been conducting fieldwork in Nigeria, fújì music has steadily grown in popularity and is one of the most popular musical genres in Yorùbá cities and towns throughout southwestern Nigeria.

11. Via email, I asked Túndé Kelani if he would explain to me the significance of báta and ewì in *Arugbá*. He wrote: "Life to the Yorubas is not complete without the drums. Theatre without drums and dance is unimaginable. I find myself inevitably drawn to the cultural elements when I tell a story in films. I think I am simply responding to my cultural experience. It is a life time commitment."

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