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Colonial Legacy in Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide*: Language, Power, and Resistance

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between colonial legacies, language, power, and resistance in Tunde Kelani's Saworoide, a film deeply embedded in Nigerian post-colonial discourse. Positioned within Nollywood's broader examination of the effects of colonialism, Saworoide uses Yoruba cultural symbols and language to critique lingering power structures that originated during colonial rule. The film highlights the importance of traditional authority, cultural heritage, and resistance to foreign-imposed systems, reflecting Nigeria's ongoing struggle for cultural reclamation. Through the use of language, particularly the Yoruba incantations and proverbs, Saworoide reveals how language functions as both a tool of power and resistance. The talking drum, Saworoide, symbolizes community accountability and a return to authentic governance grounded in cultural values. By examining the film's portrayal of leadership, cultural identity, and collective resistance, this study underscores the resilience of indigenous systems against the enduring effects of colonialism in shaping contemporary Nigerian society. The analysis provides insight into Nollywood's role as a platform for cultural activism, challenging historical narratives, and fostering a reassertion of Nigerian identity through cinema.

Keywords: Colonialism, resistance, power dynamics, language, cultural identity



Introduction

Nigerian cinema, commonly referred to as Nollywood, has experienced a transformative journey over the past few decades, emerging as a powerful cultural force with global resonance (Okome, 2007). As the industry matures, it transcends its initial role as a source of entertainment, evolving into a significant medium for the critical examination and reflection on the enduring effects of colonialism in Nigerian society (Ukadike, 2014). This paper critically explores Nigerian films, investigating the intricate interplay of language, power dynamics, and resistance to shed light on how the colonial legacy continues to shape narratives and representations within this dynamic cinematic landscape.

Nollywood's rise as a cultural force is characterised by its ability to captivate audiences well beyond Nigeria's borders. With its prolific output and diverse storytelling, Nollywood has become a noteworthy player in the global film industry (Haynes, 2016). However, beneath its commercial success lies a nuanced exploration of historical and cultural themes, with a distinct focus on the enduring impact of colonialism. This study seeks to uncover the layers of complexity within Nigerian cinema, positioning it as a lens through which scholars and audiences can engage with the historical legacies influencing contemporary Nigerian society.

Central to this exploration is an examination of the role of language in Nollywood films. The imposition of colonial languages, particularly English, has significantly influenced Nig

eria's cultural and linguistic fabric. Filmmakers navigate this linguistic legacy, utilising language as a tool to convey the intricacies of identity, cultural heritage, and resistance (Achebe, 1986). Insights from prominent Nigerian authors and cultural critics, such as Chinua Achebe, contribute to understanding the profound relationship between language and power in post-colonial contexts. Power dynamics, a key focus of this exploration, are revealed through Nollywood narratives and character portrayals. The colonial era entrenched hierarchical structures that persist in various forms today. Nollywood films engage with and challenge these power imbalances through cinematic storytelling, offering alternative perspectives that disrupt historical misrepresentations and provide a platform for the reclamation of agency (Haynes, 2016).

The theme of resistance emerges prominently in the narratives of Nigerian films as a response to historical oppression and as a means of shaping a collective identity. Filmmakers draw on Nigeria's diverse cultures, utilising the medium to resist the erasure of indigenous narratives and foster a sense of resilience and cultural pride (Ukadike, 2014). This study engages with the works of influential filmmakers and scholars who contribute to the



discourse on the agency inherent in Nollywood's resistance against the colonial legacy. This paper positions Nollywood as more than a cinematic phenomenon; it is a critical lens through which the enduring impacts of colonialism on Nigerian society are scrutinised. By unraveling the complex interplay of language, power dynamics, and resistance within Nigerian films, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how cinema becomes a powerful tool for cultural reflection, identity assertion, and the continuous negotiation of historical narratives in the post-colonial context.

Literature Review

Language and Cultural Hegemony

The imposition of colonial languages in Nigeria, notably English, has exerted a profound influence on cultural expression within the cinematic landscape (Ukadike, 2014). This linguistic imposition becomes a central point of exploration for Nigerian filmmakers as they navigate the intricate aftermath of colonialism, grappling with the multifaceted implications of language choices on identity and cultural representation.

As Chinua Achebe astutely remarked, "Language is the most important vehicle through which that curtain of power is created and maintained" (Achebe, 1986). Achebe's profound insight serves as a guiding principle for Nigerian filmmakers, compelling them to recognise language not merely as a medium of communication but as a nuanced tool intricately woven into the fabric of

cultural hegemony. Filmmakers draw on Achebe's observations to delve into the layers of power dynamics embedded in linguistic choices, understanding that language is a potent force in shaping narratives and influencing perceptions of identity within the post-colonial context.

Nigerian filmmakers engage in a delicate dance with language, using it to unravel the complexities of cultural hegemony left in the wake of colonial rule. Through their cinematic endeavours, they navigate the challenges of linguistic legacy, seeking to convey the nuances of identity and cultural heritage while simultaneously addressing the historical power imbalances perpetuated by colonial languages (Ukadike, 2004).

In this nuanced exploration, language becomes more than a narrative tool; it becomes a site of resistance against the erasure of indigenous cultural identities. Filmmakers strategically utilise linguistic choices to challenge and subvert the hegemonic structures inherited from colonialism. By doing so, they contribute to an ongoing discourse on cultural reclamation and the assertion of identity in the face of linguistic legacies imposed by colonial powers (Ukadike, 2004). The examination of language in Nigerian cinema serves as a poignant entry point for understanding the broader implications of cultural hegemony and its enduring presence in post-colonial narratives. Drawing inspiration from Achebe's reflections on the power dynamics inherent in



language, Nigerian filmmakers employ language as a nuanced tool to confront, critique, and ultimately transcend the colonial legacy, contributing to a richer and more authentic portrayal of Nigerian cultural identity on the global cinematic stage.

Power Dynamics and Cinematic Representation

The legacy of colonialism has left an indelible mark on Nigeria, with power dynamics established during that era persisting and shaping societal structures in post-colonial times (Ukadike, 2004). Within the realm of Nigerian cinema, filmmakers take on the role of cultural interpreters, using their craft to dissect and challenge these ingrained power imbalances. This involves offering alternative narratives that provide a nuanced understanding of historical events, disrupting prevailing misrepresentations.

As Jonathan Haynes astutely notes, "Nigerian cinema serves as a battleground for contesting historical misrepresentations and interrogating the power dynamics inherited from colonial rule" (Haynes, 2007). This observation underscores the pivotal role that Nigerian filmmakers play in reshaping narratives and dismantling the historical distortions perpetuated by colonial powers. The cinematic medium becomes a space where power dynamics are not only depicted but actively contested, reflecting the ongoing struggle for a more authentic representation of

Nigerian history and societal structures.

Filmmakers employ various cinematic techniques to unravel and challenge power imbalances, using storytelling as a means to provide alternative perspectives on historical events. By presenting narratives that delve into the complexities of power dynamics, Nigerian cinema becomes a tool for fostering a nuanced understanding of the societal structures that have endured since the colonial era (Haynes, 2007). Furthermore, cinematic representation serves as a means of reclaiming agency for marginalised voices and communities. By challenging the prevailing power structures through film, Nigerian directors contribute to a broader discourse on social justice, equality, and the need to reassess historical narratives through a post-colonial lens (Ukadike, 2004).

In essence, the exploration of power dynamics in Nigerian cinema extends beyond mere storytelling; it becomes a form of cultural activism. Filmmakers engage with the complexities of historical power imbalances, not only shedding light on the injustices of the past but also actively participating in the reshaping of societal narratives. Through their craft, they endeavour to create a cinematic landscape that challenges the status quo, fostering a more inclusive and authentic understanding of the power dynamics that continue to shape post-colonial Nigeria.



Resistance and Identity Assertion

Nigerian cinema serves as a compelling arena of resistance against the enduring effects of colonialism, providing a platform for filmmakers and characters to assert agency in the face of historical oppression (Ukadike, 2014). Through a combination of storytelling, visual aesthetics, and thematic exploration, Nigerian filmmakers craft narratives that not only confront the legacies of colonialism but actively contribute to the construction of an authentic Nigerian identity.

As filmmaker Tunde Kelani eloquently articulates, "Nigerian cinema is a powerful tool for cultural reclamation and the assertion of identity, challenging the legacies of colonialism and shaping a narrative that is authentically Nigerian" (Kelani, 2015). Kelani's words underscore the transformative potential of Nigerian cinema as a medium for resisting the erasure of indigenous narratives and fostering a sense of cultural pride and resilience. In the realm of storytelling, Nigerian filmmakers strategically weave narratives that emphasise the resilience and strength of Nigerian communities. These narratives often showcase characters who navigate and overcome the challenges imposed by colonial legacies, offering audiences a lens through which to view the ongoing struggle for identity reclamation (Ukadike, 2004). The stories told in Nigerian cinema become a form of resistance by challenging historical narratives that have marginalised and silenced certain voices.

Visual aesthetics play a crucial role in this resistance, as filmmakers employ cinematic techniques to portray cultural richness and diversity authentically. Through the visual language of film, Nigerian directors challenge stereotypical representations imposed by colonial influences, providing audiences with an alternative and empowered vision of Nigerian identity (Ukadike, 2004). Thematic exploration further reinforces the resistance inherent in Nigerian cinema. Filmmakers delve into themes that emphasise the importance of cultural heritage, the strength of communal bonds, and the ongoing struggle for self-determination. By addressing these themes, Nigerian cinema actively engages in a form of resistance that seeks to reshape the narrative landscape and challenge the lingering effects of colonialism (Kelani, 2015).

The resistance and identity assertion found in Nigerian cinema represent a dynamic response to the enduring effects of colonialism. Filmmakers, inspired by a commitment to cultural reclamation, utilise storytelling, visual aesthetics, and thematic exploration to actively challenge historical oppression. Through their work, they contribute to the ongoing process of shaping a narrative that is authentically Nigerian, providing audiences with a powerful and transformative representation of resilience in the face of colonial legacies.



Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design to delve deeply into the nuanced aspects of the colonial legacy in Nigerian cinema. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select Tunde Kelani's film *Saworoide*. The rationale behind the consideration of the film was that it explicitly engages with themes related to the colonial legacy, language, power dynamics, and resistance. A balance between older classics and contemporary works was maintained to capture the evolution of cinematic responses to colonialism. Content analysis was utilised to systematically examine the selected film, involving the identification and analysis of recurring themes, language choices, and power dynamics depicted in the narrative.

Analysis

Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide* is a rich cinematic work that delves into the themes of language, power, and resistance, set against the backdrop of post-colonial Nigeria. The film employs Yoruba cultural elements and storytelling techniques to explore the enduring legacies of colonialism, particularly how language and power dynamics continue to shape societal structures and resistance movements.

Language as a Tool of Power

In *Saworoide*, language is effectively used as a tool of power, particularly in how it conveys authority, tradition, and control within the fictional town of Jogbo. One key scene that illustrates this is when the elders and kingmakers emphasize the importance of the royal oath, a sacred and binding agreement between the ruler and the people. The ritual involves a drumming sequence known as *Saworoide* (brass drum), which cannot be played without the king taking the sacred oath. This oath is delivered through traditional incantations and proverbs. For example,

Elder's Incantation in Yoruba: *"Oba kii je k'ori pe, a kii se jogun oba l'aso. Gbogbo eniti o ba se Oba Jogbo, o gbodo fo maalu, o gbodo sun ekun. Bi o ba je kii se b'ise wa, ase wa yio fo. Iku a pa Oba t'o ba fese kan asa ilu Jogbo."*

Translation: *"A king does not reign without the completion of rites; royalty is not inherited like clothing. Whoever becomes the King of Jogbo must sacrifice a cow, must sleep near a leopard. If he refuses to follow our customs, our oath will break. Death shall befall any king who disregards the traditions of Jogbo."*

This serves as a linguistic mechanism that binds the king to the moral and cultural expectations of his people. The power of language here is in two folds:

1. **Cultural Authority:** The elders, using incantations, invoke the authority of the ancestors and deities. Their language ties the ruler to the spiritual realm and cultural laws that must be respected.
2. **Political Control:** By taking the oath, the king is bound by his word. If he breaks his promises, the language used during the oath-taking ceremony comes back to haunt him, symbolizing how words and language serve as checks on political power.

In principle, *Saworoide* shows that language in the form of rituals, oaths, and traditional expressions acts as a powerful tool to control and guide leadership, maintaining a balance between the ruler's authority and the people's rights.

2. Power Dynamics

In *Saworoide* by Tunde Kelani, the narrative powerfully delves into the power dynamics of a fictional Yoruba town, Jogbo, within a post-colonial context particularly through the depiction of traditional kingship and political authority. The story revolves around the symbolic significance of the talking drum (*Saworoide*) and the rituals associated with kingship, which serve as checks and balances against the abuse of power. The drum's sound is a metaphor for accountability and truth, and its silence indicates the lack of legitimacy in leadership. This cultural symbol becomes a focal point of resistance,

highlighting the contrast between genuine leadership rooted in tradition and the corrupt practices inherited from colonial rule.

An important extract illustrating this theme is the traditional rite that kings must undergo before ascending the throne. The failure to comply with this rite highlights the consequences of unchecked power:

"Oro ti Ilu Oyo ko ni lo kanka lati ri Oba ti ko gbo Saworoide ni pe bi Oba ko ba gbo Saworoide, Ilu ko ni sin Oba, Oba ko si ni sin Ilu."

This translates to the belief that *if the king does not undergo the ritual of the talking drum (Saworoide), the town will not serve the king, and the king will not be accountable to the people.*

The film thus portrays a complex relationship between leadership, the ruled, and the institutions meant to regulate authority, reflecting post-colonial struggles with governance, accountability, and traditional values. Kelani uses these rituals and symbols to critique modern Nigerian leadership and to emphasize the importance of moral and cultural accountability in positions of power.

3. Resistance and Cultural Reclamation

In *Saworoide*, the collective actions of the community play a pivotal role in reclaiming their cultural heritage and restoring integrity to their governance systems. The narrative emphasizes the power of community



solidarity in the face of corrupt leadership, particularly through the ritual of the *Saworoide* (talking drum) and the collective effort to preserve traditional values. One of the key scenes that captures this theme is when the town of Jogbo comes together to challenge the corrupt leadership of Lapite, the king who bypasses the sacred rites of the *Saworoide*:

"Ilu Jogbo ti dide. Gbogbo eniyan ti gbomo lowo. Gbogbo aiye ti gba oro pe bi a ko ba se to eto Oba, Ilu ko ni bale, ko si alaafia mo. Opo eniyan ni o dide lati da eto pada."

Translation: *"The town of Jogbo has risen. Everyone has taken a stance. The whole world has come to understand that without the proper rites for the king, the town will not have peace, nor will there be harmony. Many have risen to restore the rightful order."*

This moment represents the community's collective resistance against corruption and their determination to reclaim their cultural and political identity. The *Saworoide* drum itself becomes a symbol of the people's voice, resonating with their desire for a return to accountability, justice, and cultural pride. Through their unified actions, the community successfully restores the balance between leadership and tradition, reinforcing the message that governance must be anchored in integrity and the values of the people.

The protagonist's journey is also deeply symbolic of the broader resistance against the colonial legacy. Through his experiences and interactions with both the traditional and modern facets of society, he embodies the ongoing struggle for cultural survival and the quest for authentic leadership. The character of Ayangalu, the drummer and custodian of the sacred *Saworoide* drum, serves as a key figure in this resistance, navigating both the ancient traditions and the corrupt modern governance.

This can be seen when Ayangalu, understanding the vital role of the *Saworoide* drum in ensuring the integrity of leadership, confronts the illegitimate king Lapite. He recognises that the neglect of traditional values in favour of power is symptomatic of the broader colonial legacy of exploitation and disregard for indigenous systems:

"O ko ye wa mo, Oba kan ti ko ni gbo Saworoide ki se Oba gidi. E je ki a pada si aye wa ti o je itumo. Ki a to si ile yi, a ni eto, a ni ilana. Nje ki a pada si awon eto wa."

Translation: *"We no longer understand it, a king who does not listen to the Saworoide is not a true king. Let us return to our meaningful way of life. Before we had these lands, we had systems, we had customs. Let us return to our ways."*

Ayangalu's plea to return to tradition is symbolic of the broader call for reclaiming cultural heritage and



resisting the lingering effects of colonialism. His journey encapsulates the struggle for leadership that is rooted in the community's values rather than the corrupt influences of power that have been introduced through colonialism. Through his interactions with both the old and new worlds, Ayangalu embodies the fight to preserve cultural identity and the quest for an authentic, accountable governance system.

The power of cultural symbols and traditional practices in galvanising resistance against corruption and the lingering effects of colonialism is also emphasised in *Saworoide*. The *Saworoide* (talking drum) stands out as a central cultural artifact, symbolising the community's resilience and their determination to preserve their integrity. The drum, initially neglected under corrupt rule, becomes a metaphor for the reclamation of cultural identity and sovereignty.

This could be seen when Ayangalu reclaims the *Saworoide* drum for its rightful use, rallying the community to rise up against the corrupt leadership of Lapite:

"Saworoide o gbo siwaju Oba. Saworoide ni yio so Oba mo agbara re. Oba ti ko gbo Saworoide ko le ba Ilu je, ilu ko si ni sin iru Oba be. Ipo Oba ko se fun aiye aiye. A pada si aye wa ti o je tiwa ni patapata."

Translation: "The *Saworoide* must speak before the king. The *Saworoide* will remind the king of his power. A

king who does not heed the *Saworoide* cannot rule the town, and the town will not serve such a king. The kingship is not for eternity. Let us return to our way of life that truly belongs to us."

This scene represents a critical turning point, where the community, through Ayangalu's leadership, restores the true purpose of the *Saworoide* drum as a check on power. The drum's role as a cultural symbol galvanises the people to resist the corrupt influence of colonial-style leadership, which disregards traditional values. By reclaiming the drum's sacred purpose, the community metaphorically reclaims their cultural identity, autonomy, and right to self-governance, challenging the legacy of colonial exploitation. The drum, once silenced by the corrupt leaders, now becomes the voice of the people, symbolising their resilience and refusal to surrender to the corrupting influences of colonial legacies. Through its powerful rhythm, it signals the restoration of cultural sovereignty and justice.

Conclusion

Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide* is a poignant exploration of the enduring impacts of colonialism on language, power, and resistance in post-colonial Nigeria. Through its rich use of Yoruba language and cultural symbols, the film underscores the importance of cultural reclamation and the resilience of indigenous communities in the face of colonial legacies. It portrays a society



grappling with the remnants of colonial rule while striving to assert its own identity and reclaim its cultural heritage. In doing so, *Saworoide* offers a powerful narrative on the complexities of power and resistance in the post-colonial era.

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