

Combining Passion with Professionalism in Movie Making: A Dialogue with Tunde Kelani

Sola Fosudo & Paulina Adekoya-Oduntan

Abstract

The Nigeria film industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the country today. From reports, it churns out over one thousand movies yearly. It has not only become a crucial source of employment for teeming Nigerian youths, it has also been contributing to the Nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the last ten years. Although, there are many practitioners in the industry who use the nomenclature "Film maker" and who function either as Producer, Director or Cinematographer, only a very few stand out in their approach towards quality film making, especially in the pursuit of excellence and professionalism. One of these few is Tunde Kelani. This paper is an exploration into the professional life and artistic motivation of this great Nigerian cinematographer and film producer. Using the interview method, the paper examines how he combines passion with professional quality in his movies. The paper submits that Kelani is a legendary film maker whose works have not only been a source of inspiration to younger film makers, but ought also to be a subject of greater academic research and documentation.

Introduction

According to Barry Callaghan,

Movie production entails the co-ordination of all the elements, resources and items required to fund, record, edit and exhibit or screen the finished work of art before an audience on television or in a cinema theatre. This task is a huge one. Although it is generally classified

into two main broad areas – the organization of **ideas** and the organization of **facilities** (Barry Callaghan, 1975:9).

Callaghan explains that the organisation of ideas constitutes the scripting of the film while the organisation of facilities ensures the smooth translation of the script into a completed film. Once a story idea is developed and a film script is written, the second stage, which is more critical, requires the organisation of equipment, location, studio, personnel and finance.

Film making, like every theatrical production, is a collaborative art, where tasks are divided among the different production personnel involved in the process of its making. However, the foregoing notwithstanding, the overall coordinator on whose shoulder lies the success or otherwise of the entire venture is the **Producer**.

The Film producer, by all standards, is expected to possess some degree of professional knowledge and competence in order to function effectively on the job. But we find that in the Nigerian context, anybody and everybody could be a film producer. For instance, Kenneth Nnebue, one of the progenitors of the popular Nollywood industry was purely an “investor” who saw the possibility of making money in movie production and went into full-time film producing as a business undertaking. Though he is now an evangelist, some of his popular works include *Living in Bondage* (1992), *Glamour Girls* (1994), *True Confession* (1995) and *Rituals* (1997) to mention a few. Confirming the foregoing view, Shaibu Husseini (2010:30) in his book, *Moviedom: the Nollywood Narratives*, submits that

... indeed, Nnebue proved with *Living in Bondage* and a few others after it, like *Glamour Girls* and *True Confession*, that video making could be as lucrative as any other viable business. Not only was the movie industry reinvigorated, it metamorphosed into a national art.

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In addition, we have situations where video and CD marketers, actors, writers, and other production personnel have all produced films as long as they have access to a script and some funds. And in most cases, many of them are untutored in the art of theatrical or film production. Tunde Kelani, the focus of this essay, is a cinematographer. Apart from the fact that he was formally trained in a film school in the United Kingdom, he has had the opportunity of working with the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) as cameraman and producer for many years before quitting the NTA to establish his own outfit. He has also worked as cameraman for a great number of the celluloid films of the 1970s and 80s such as Akinwunmi Ishola's *Efunsetan Aniwura* (1986), Moses Olaiya's *Mosebolatan* (1988), Awada Kerikeri's *Eri Okan* (1990), and Afolabi Adesanya's *Vigilante* (1992) etc, thereby making him one of the most experienced, and imaginative film producers in Nigeria who has established for himself a reputation that is quite enviable (Wole Ogundele, 1997:64).

Also, confirming Kelani's credential as one of the most reputable and professional film producers in Nigeria, Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome (1997:26) in their book, *Nigerian Video Films*, describe Kelani's Mainframe Productions

...as an outfit that make sophisticated films and drawing on the script writing talents of prominent Yoruba literary dramatists like Akinwunmi Ishola and Wale Ogunyemi.

They affirm that Tunde Kelani and his Mainframe Productions are multiple award winners. "The cultural aspirations of Kelani's productions are illustrated by the fact that Mainframe advertises a **"library pack"** of its award winning movies in the glossy page of *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts*" (Haynes and Okome, 1997:26).

Tunde Kelani: A Brief Profile

Born on the 26th February 1948, Babatunde Ayinde Kelani is popularly known as TK. He is a Nigerian filmmaker, storyteller, director, photographer, cinematographer, and producer. In a career spanning more than four decades, TK specialises in producing movies that promote Nigeria's cultural heritage and have roots in documentation, archiving, education, entertainment and promotion of Nigerian culture. As a young boy, he lived with his grandparents in Abeokuta. The rich Yoruba culture and tradition he experienced in his early years, coupled with the training he received at the London Film School where he studied the art of filmmaking, prepared him for the leadership role he plays today, in the Nigerian Film Industry.

Although born in Lagos, at the age of five, he was sent to live with his grandparents at Abeokuta. He attended Oke-Ona Primary School in Ikija, Abeokuta, and Abeokuta Grammar School. During this time, his grandfather was the Balogun of Ijaiye Kukudi and he was privileged to have witnessed different aspects of Yoruba culture, literature, and philosophy at close quarters. He was also greatly influenced by the theatre of the Yoruba who have a very strong travelling theatre tradition at that time. While he was in secondary school, he had the privilege of seeing most of the great Yoruba classics, including the *Palmwine Drinkard*, *Oba Koso*, *Kurunmi*, by Kola Ogunmola Theatre, and the plays of Hubert Ogunde Theatre such as *Yoruba Ronu*, *Bread and Bullet*, *Garden of Eden*, to mention a few.

He developed interest in photography from primary school and throughout his secondary days, he invested some money and time to learn photography. So, invariably, after his secondary school education, he took up a job as an apprentice photographer at the then Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) before proceeding to study at the London International Film School.

Tunde Kelani holds a Diploma in the Art and Technique of Filmmaking from the London International Film School, England.

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After many years in the Nigerian Film Industry as a cinematographer, he now manages Mainframe Film and Television Productions, an outfit formed to document Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. In the 1970s, Kelani worked as a BBC-TV and Reuters correspondent as well as in the Nigerian Television. For Reuters he travelled to Ethiopia to cover the drought, and to Zimbabwe, three times to cover the country's independence celebration. After completing his studies at the London Film School, he returned to Nigeria and co-produced his first film with Adebayo Faleti, called *The Dilemma of Rev. Father Michael*. (*Idaamu Paadi Mukaila*). Kelani participated in most of the feature films produced in the country in the early years on 16mm as a cinematographer, some of which include: *Anikura*; *Ogun Ajaye*; *Iya Ni Wura*; *Taxi Driver*; *Iwa* and *Fopomoyo*, but he is an advocate of 'Alternative Technology' in motion picture production in Africa. He has successfully produced and directed some digital features which include *Saworoide*, *Thunderbolt*, *Agogo-eewo*, *Arugba*, *Maami* and, most recently, *Dazzling Mirage*.

In addition, he has shot some Mnet short feature films, such as, *Twins of the Rainforest*, *A Place Called Home* and *Barber's Wisdom* (35mm). He also photographed, produced and directed a short feature in 16mm titled *The White Handkerchief* in the same series, including *The Campus Queen*, *Abeni* and *The Narrow Path*, the first set of works to probe further the possibilities of advanced filmmaking. In the area of video productions, he has to his credit award-winning feature videos such as *Ti Oluwa Nile*; *Ayo Ni Mo Fe*; *Koseegbe* and *Oleku*.

Tunde Kelani started his own production company – Mainframe Films and Television Productions (Opomulero) – in 1999, so that he could produce his own films and not just lend technical support to other people's projects. Having emerged from the world of theatre and literature, adaptations of books and plays

for cinema are the core of Kelani's filmmaking practice and through them he celebrates writers and their works.

His latest work, *Dazzling Mirage*, an adaptation from a novel by Olayinka Egbokhare, is a love story of how a sickle-cell sufferer overcomes social stigma, prejudice and her own low self-esteem, to achieve success, marriage and motherhood. Through the movies, he hopes to bring the much needed awareness and attention to the sickle-cell condition and help people make better informed decisions.

Chronology of Films Produced by Tunde Kelani

S/N	Title of Film	Year
1.	<i>Ti Oluwa Nile 1</i>	1993
2.	<i>Ti Oluwa Nile 2</i>	1993
3.	<i>Ti Oluwa Nile 3</i>	1993
4.	<i>Ayo Ni Mofe</i>	1994
5.	<i>Ayo Ni Mofe 2</i>	1994
6.	<i>Koseegbe</i>	1995
7.	<i>O Le Ku</i>	1997
8.	<i>Saworoide</i>	1999
9.	<i>White Handkerchief</i>	2000
10.	<i>Thunderbolt: Magun</i>	2001
11.	<i>Agogo Eewo</i>	2002
12.	<i>The Campus Queen</i>	2004
13.	<i>Abeni</i>	2006
14.	<i>The Narrow Path</i>	2006
15.	<i>Life in Slow Motion</i>	2008
16.	<i>Arugba</i>	2010
17.	<i>Maami</i>	2011
18.	<i>Dazzling Mirage</i>	2015

Most of the films listed in the foregoing chronology have won multiple awards. Some of the awards include:

- *Kosegbe* - Best Picture – The Movie Awards (THEMA), 1995;

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- *Ayo Ni Mofe* - Best Picture – The Movie Awards (THEMA), 1996;
- *Campus Queen* - Africa's Best Cinematographer - Moremi Awards, 2004;
- *The Narrow Path* - Best Director – Tinapa, (Calabar), 2007;
- *Life in Slow Motion* - Best Cinematographer - City People Awards, 2009;
- *Maami* - Best Nigerian Film, Nigerian Film Corporation, 2012;
- *Maami* - Best Indigenous Movie, Nollywood Movies Award, 2013;

(Source: Mainframe Productions Office, 16, Seinde Callisto Street, Oshodi, Lagos.)

Interview with Tunde Kelani

Researcher

Good afternoon, my name is Dr Sola Fosudo and my co-interviewer is Mrs. Paulina Adekoya-Oduntan. There is an on-going project designed to archive the works, activities and achievements of accomplished Nigerian artistes in the theatre, film, culture and media related professions. Your name rings a bell in the Nigerian film industry. How would you describe yourself?

Respondent

Let me start by thanking you for the opportunity extended to me for this interview. I would describe myself as a Film Maker. More specifically, I am a Cinematographer, Film Director, and Producer.

Researcher

What is the major factor that influenced your choice of career in film making?

Respondent

There are several factors that influenced my being in the film making career. In the first place, I learnt the art of photography after my secondary school education. Besides, I used to read a lot of books especially those that will broaden my horizon on the general and basic aspects of life. I must say those books I read, helped me greatly and eventually influenced my choice of career, because they changed my mentality in a way and made me broad-minded about life.

Another factor that influenced me was my growing up environment. I am very sure we all know that each person is a product of his or her environment. I am fascinated and curious about everything and anything concerning the culture, tales, folklore, taboos and traditions of my people. I actually spent my childhood years learning about those things. They had a great impact on my orientation and development. In addition, I also go to the cinemas to watch films and this has left a great impression on me as well. After my apprenticeship in photography, I worked as a technician and as trainee camera man. Propelled by the desire to optimise my potentials in photography and the motion picture especially because of the fascination I have for the big screen, I travelled to London to learn more about the art of film-making.

Researcher

Which school was that?

Respondent

London International Film School in Britain.

Researcher

How do you determine what to do after seeing a film script?

Respondent

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I have worked on other people's projects in much capacity as I have initiated personal ones. If it is somebody's script, I buy the rights from the original writer and later commission a screen writer to come up with the shooting script. From there, I begin to assemble my team both artistic and technical, a team that will ensure the success of the project. Whether it is somebody's project or mine, when the shooting script is delivered, I begin to look for the cinematic potentials in it. I look at the structure of the story, that is, how the events are plotted. A story that is too linear is not the best for film. It doesn't have to be a complex plot, but the structural arrangements of events in the story must leave room for suspense, twists and turns; you know, those elements that make a dramatic story interesting and gripping. I also begin to look for situations where, with the aid of camera, lighting, and other visual applications, atmosphere can be created for theatrical mood in the film. In a sense, it is the script that determines what to shoot, (in terms of actions) where, (in terms of location), when, (in terms of time of day) and how to shoot (in terms of shots, frames and angles).

Researcher

Which of your movies do you consider to be the most successful?

Respondent

All of our movies have been successful. There has been a progression in our productions over the years. Naturally, the newer films are done with current technologies in terms of tools and equipment. Experience is also a factor in terms of a growing capacity to do things differently and better than they were done before.

Researcher

Which would you prefer to do in a situation where you have to choose between directing, acting, writing and producing?

Respondent

Firstly, I produce and direct projects that I initiate but there are instances when I am also approached only to direct other projects. In such cases, there may be a Producer or an Executive Producer. Since we are working in a low budget situation, most artists involved in our productions carry out multiple tasks. Secondly, the training I had cuts across most of the complex processes involved in film production. Thirdly, I don't really involve myself in acting. Though, I contribute to the process of story development, I usually commission people to write my shooting scripts. That way, there is division of labour which translates to expertise and professionalism. My main area of practice is in Directing and Producing.

Researcher

How have you managed to combine passion, professionalism and excellence within the current harsh economy in the country?

Respondent

We endeavour to do what is professional at all times. In other words, we are driven by excellence in all our productions in spite of the harsh economy. The truth is, if funding is not available for a film project, it is better not to venture into it at all, because what is worth doing at all, is worth doing well. Generally, I am very concerned about details in my production. I insist on the application of appropriate locations, props, costumes and make up etc., and these are the elements that give a well-shot movie an edge over rushed works. I cannot compromise professionalism for mediocrity. For me, best practice and quality are not negotiable. I don't work with the minimum but with maximum standards. Our partners and audience know all these already, and we are always encouraged by their confidence in our work and continuous

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patronage. Secondly, we have a crop of technical crew that is well trained and well-motivated. In any creative enterprise, when you put the necessary things together as best as you can, you get the best in spite of some external factors, be it economy or politics. So, my passion for excellence transcends any external factor; it's a philosophy, a guiding purpose.

Researcher

What film are you currently working on?

Respondent

Our latest film is *Dazzling Mirage*. But beyond film making, our current major project is the *Tundekelani TV*. It's an on-line TV, envisioned as the home of premium indigenous entertaining content and cultural themes from Africa and the diaspora, optimised for web and mobile devices.

Researcher

What are the programmes currently running on the web TV?

Respondent

Currently we have serialised episodes of *Yeepa* running. We also have programmes such as *E fura*, *Luku-Luku*, *TK ati Segun Adefile*, *TK ati Olumide* (Badoo), *Saaworoide*, *Ayoka Nkorin*, *Ooni of Ife at Olojo festival* and so on.

Researcher

What is your view about the issue of piracy in Nigeria?

Respondent

Actually, piracy is a global phenomenon, but the main problem in this part of the world is that the institutions that are supposed to

monitor and curb it are not quite effective. So those who indulge in it kind of have a field day.

Another thing is that government cannot do it alone, even the people have a role to play by ensuring that they do not patronise pirated films. Thirdly, the laws are there, but they are not really being enforced, but we have to continue to create awareness against the scourge. For instance, on Monday 20th April 2015, there was an anti-piracy protest march in Lagos attended by many of the industry players such as my humble self, Oga Bello, Jide Kosoko, Zeb Ejoro, Kunle Afolayan, Yemi Shodimu and several others.

Researcher

What was the outcome of the Protest March?

Respondent

Well, the march was to send a signal to those perpetrating the evil that it is not going to be business as usual for them anymore, and that the awareness to fight against piracy is gaining more momentum. Secondly, we ended the peaceful protest march that day at Alausa, the Lagos State Governor's office, and he (Babatunde Fashola, the immediate past governor) came out to address us by himself. Being a lawyer, he understood our agitation and the cause we were fighting and he promised to direct the appropriate arm of government to address our grievances and enforce existing laws against apprehended persons.

Researcher

What advice do you have for up-coming artistes?

Respondent

Every young artiste of today will grow to become an old one tomorrow, so my advice for the upcoming artiste is to use their youthful age usefully. They need to associate with the right team where they will learn the required skills for the trade. They need to continue to improve themselves. They need to be focused and

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hard-working. They need to be motivated for the right reasons, not really for fame or money, but for professional accomplishments and fulfilment.

Researcher

Thank you very much for your time and congratulations on your online tv.

Respondent

You are welcome. Thank you.

Lessons from the Interview

It is clear, from the data gathered from Kelani's profile and the interview, that film making is a "specialized art" which requires not just a flair from the artiste to engage in its practice, but a deep-rooted interest and passion, coupled with functional educational training and a conscious determination to be outstanding and accomplished in the profession. It is also important to note that, though film production depends on so many factors such as actors and appropriate locations, the shooting script is greatly pivotal to the eventual outcome of the project. This is because it is the film script that determines what to shoot, where, when and how, in terms of shots, frames and angles. Therefore, considering the nature of the film with the use of camera in the interpretation of the narrative, a story that is well structured and plotted and which possesses good cinematic potentials come out usually to be more fascinating and successful.

In addition, we believe that as a career cinematographer and film maker, Kelani's professional life is exemplary, one which is not driven by selfish and inordinate motive, but by the principle of diligence and best practices. According to him, artistes should

not be motivated for the wrong reasons, such as fame, materialistic desires, but they should always be interested in enduring professional achievements.

Finally, although, it is common knowledge that piracy is one of the impediments militating against profitability in the film industry, the interview with Kelani leads us to understand that continuous creation of awareness against the scourge is one of the ways to check the activities of perpetrators. It may be true that the government has a role to play by enforcing existing laws against offenders through its relevant agencies, the people, both practitioners and the consumers, all have roles to play as well. For instance, refusal to patronise pirated films will go a long way in curbing the menace and consequently, protecting the investments of financiers and stabilising the industry by making it investment-friendly.

Conclusion

In the last thirty-five years of Kelani's sojourn in the world of photography, cinematography and film producing, he has distinguished himself as a worthy film-maker of note. His award winning works speak for themselves as they epitomise great artistic vision and professionalism. In terms of quality and excellence, they also meet with the standards that can be found in international circles. In summary, Tunde Kelani can be described as a legendary film maker and it is not in doubt that his legacies will endure for a long time to serve not only as a source of inspiration to younger professionals in the art of film-making, but also, a subject of academic exploration and discourse.

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Note

Sola Fosudo and Paulina Adekoya-Oduntan (2015) Interview conducted with Tunde Kelani at No 21 Seinde Callisto Street, Oshodi, Lagos on Friday 21st August.

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