Piety in Production: Video Filmmaking as Religious Encounter in Bénin

by

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David Morgan

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the production of video films by Nàgó–Yorùbá creators along Bénin’s southeastern border with Nigeria. There they find themselves at the margins of three better-funded arts industries with contrasting attitudes toward Nàgó–Yorùbá culture and aesthetics. In Nigeria, much of the Nollywood video film industry supports belonging to global religious movements, such as Pentecostal Christianity and Reformist Islam, all the while portraying indigenous religion as diabolical. The art-film scene of Bénin often dismisses West African video films as amateurish. Finally, Bénin’s state arts programs promote the Vodun religion of the coast as a tourist attraction, yet deny Nàgó–Yorùbá people compensation for the state’s appropriation of their religious arts into the category of “Vodun.” Against this backdrop, video filmmakers use movies to celebrate indigenous religion and culture, to promote religious ecumenism, and to seek new sources of material support. Nevertheless, Nigerian media saturates the marketplace in Bénin so that very few local video films can earn a profit. My study thus explores how Nàgó–Yorùbá media practitioners persist in the face of such precarious conditions. I ask how the production of media becomes a forum to debate and establish norms of community and religious practice, how national identity, religious affiliation, and professional prestige affect negotiations over religious attitudes and conceptions of community, and how the open
style of production in Bénin allows a diverse group of people—media professionals and others—to participate in the debates and discussions that shape media projects.

My work is based on twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork at the Bénin–Nigeria border. During this time, I learned moviemaking from video filmmakers directly, acting in their productions, learning camerawork and editing, and eventually producing my own video film. I argue that Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers make video movies because doing both sustains local community and provides an avenue to influence regional and global debates. These efforts grant video filmmakers a prominent status in their communities as recognizable and relatable faces, and as the conveners of social activities on sets and in studios where they mingle and discuss global issues with colleagues and audience members. This intimacy turns video filmmaking into what I call a production public, a group whose activities not only create media, but also negotiate the audiovisual aesthetics by which religion and culture are shown on screen. In the face of disappearing profits and intense competition, their activities are precarious, but as long as this public continues to make media, video filmmakers assume the role of moral authorities in the community while working with audiences and patrons to shape attitudes toward religious ecumenism, morality, and ethical engagement with regional and global forces. The public crafts an image of idealized community behavior that supports indigenous Nàgò–Yorùbá religion, rejects religious strife, and looks for ways to export its moral outlook throughout the region and beyond.
Dedication

In memory of

His Majesty Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Onísolo of Ìpòbẹ̀ (r. 1996–2016)

and Abiodoun Romain Oyede


Ipa abẹ̀rẹ̀ lokùn ñ tọ́.

In the path of the needle follows the thread.
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Unless otherwise indicated, all images are by the author. Images by other creators are used with permission and with many thanks.

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The inevitable errors and omissions in this manuscript are my own.
A Note on Orthography

Figure 1: Chart of French, Fon (Gun), and Yorùbá translations of common terms for reference by radio deejays and hosts in the sound booth of Plateau FM, Pobè.

Writing about Yorùbá-speaking people in Bénin presents a host of difficulties. In English-language scholarship, the standard orthography for words and names from the...
Yorùbá language follows conventions developed by African Christian missionaries to Nigeria beginning in the nineteenth century and later adapted by Nigerian scholars (Adéṣolá 2016: 194–95; Adéníyì 2016: 200). In this system, the three tones of Yorùbá speech are marked by diacritics, with a grave accent indicating a low tone (as in the name Òndò, the tutelary divinity of the kingdom of Ìpòbẹ̀), the acute accent indicating a high tone (e.g., Lálá, a nickname for Ọládélé), and no accent indicating a middle tone (e.g., Ọba, the title for a monarch) unless the sound is nasalized, such as ọ. Other diacritics indicate sounds that do not exist in English or that are represented by two or more letters in English. In French colonial Dahomey, the foreign administrators used the French alphabet to write Nàgó–Yorùbá words, and these spellings persist today, especially for the names of people, villages, towns, and cities. Complicating things even further, Bénin standardized the orthography used for its native languages in 1975, using letters from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for sounds unique to its languages (see table 1 and fig. 1). While this decision standardized the writing of Bénin’s Yorùbá dialects with that of Gbe-family languages (Ewe, Fon, Aja, and Phla–Phéra), it ignored the work already done in Nigeria for the Yorùbá language. These differences remain, despite ongoing attempts to standardize the systems across Nigeria, Bénin, and Togo (Adéníyì 2016: 200). Table 0–1 summarizes the differences among these writing systems.
Table 1: Various Orthographies for the Yorùbá Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nigerian Orthography</th>
<th>Béninois Orthography</th>
<th>French Orthography</th>
<th>International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
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<td>uː</td>
<td>moon</td>
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</table>

I want this dissertation to be accessible to as many Yorùbá-speaking people as possible, a group most likely to be accustomed to the Yorùbá writing conventions used in Nigeria. Accordingly, I use Nigerian Yorùbá orthography for general Yorùbá words (e.g., ọba and ọṣà), the names of Yorùbá subgroups (e.g., Kètu, Ànàgò), and the names of divinities (e.g., Ôgün, Ṣàngó).

For the names of administrative territories within the contemporary nation–states of Bénin and Nigeria, I use the preferred orthographic conventions of each country. For Bénin, this practice generally calls for French spellings for the names of villages, districts, arrondissements, communes, and departments (e.g., Ìfàgni rather than Ìfònyin). For Nigeria, this instead calls for the standard English alphabet with no tone.
marks or special characters, even for words with an equivalent in Yorùbá (e.g., İbadan rather than İbàdàn).

For the names of historical Nàgó and Yorùbá kingdoms, towns, and cities, I use Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, even for names that have an equivalent in the administrative territories of Bénin or Nigeria (e.g., Ôyọ̀ is a historical empire and city, but Oyo is the name of a state and a city in contemporary Nigeria). In these cases, my use of Nigerian Yorùbá orthography indicates that I am discussing the indigenous Yorùbá political entity and not its contemporary administrative counterpart. For example, İpòbè refers to the historical Ànàgò–Yorùbá kingdom, while Pobè refers to the commune and arrondissement named for it in the Republic of Bénin.

How to write the names of people and the titles of video films is a more complicated question. In these cases, I have followed the spellings and orthographic conventions preferred by each person or by each video film’s main producer whenever known. This policy includes the names of the academics I cite, even though this leads to inconsistency when one scholar publishes under a name with tone marks while another leaves them off. For video film titles, I also include transliterations into Nigerian Yorùbá orthography in footnotes.

In English, the name of the country where I conducted most of my fieldwork is the Republic of Benin; its demonym is Beninese. Nevertheless, references to Benin in English-language scholarship often refer to the historical Benin kingdom, its people, or
the contemporary Nigerian state named for the kingdom—especially in discussions of African expressive cultures. For this reason, I follow the precedent of other scholars of the nation formerly known as Dahomey in rendering the name by its French form as *Bénin* (with an acute accent over the e) and by using the French-language demonym *Béninois* (see Flynn 1997b; Semley 2011b; Rush 2013; Landry 2016).²

² This is not a universal convention, however. See Rosenthal (1998), Omoniyi (2004), Lindberg (2006), Bay (2008), Seely (2009), Forte (2010a; 2010b), and Falen (2011) for counter examples.
1. Introduction: Precarious Publics in West African Video Film Production

Figure 2: Ecumenistic prayer and singing the CAPADI anthem on the set of *Magumi* in Iganna, Pobè Commune.

Issiaka Adelabou wasn’t happy. He’d driven an hour north from Porto-Novo—with an anthropologist he’d just met on the back of his motorcycle, no less—and things hadn’t gone smoothly since we’d reached Iganna, a village in the Pobè commune.¹ The shoot had started out well enough: As a good dozen residents of the village looked on, the cast and crew gathered in a courtyard decorated to look like a Nàgó–Yorùbá palace, prayed a Muslim prayer, sang the anthem, and chanted the chant of their filmmaking

¹Bénin is divided into twelve departments (*départements*), which subdivide into communes, then arrondissements, and finally villages and city quarters (*quartiers*).
association: CAPADI, the Collective of Innovative Dramatic Arts Professional Associations of Bénin (fig. 2). The next time a prayer was called for, I learned, it’d be led by a Christian, maybe a Roman Catholic or a member of the Celestial Church of Christ. But the director, Gérard Koukpohounsi, told me that his video film, *Magumi*, was “pure tradition.” Adelabou was playing a village elder in the video film, the tale of a woman cursed so that any man she has sex with dies. Gérard had scheduled all of Adelabou’s scenes for that day; giving him a prominent role was only fitting—he was the president of CAPADI—but wrapping his scenes before nightfall would save Gérard money on an already tight budget; no need to reimburse the president for two days of travel.

*   *   *

But things hadn’t gone well. Two young men got into a shouting match—something about who was the production manager and who the location manager—that soon spiraled into shoving. Their fight delayed things as Gérard, Adelabou, and another older man had to pull them apart. Worse still, the camera battery died. With no power in the village, Gérard and his camera operator had to take a motorcycle into town to charge it, another hour’s delay. Not even the set seemed willing to cooperate; during a scene where Adelabou and other elders discuss weighty matters outside a mud-brick home, a

---

2 The official acronym is CAPADI–B, which stands for the French name, *Collectif des Associations de Professionnels de l’Art Dramatique Innové du Bénin*. The members usually leave the B off in casual conversation.

3 The Celestial Church of Christ (*l’Église du christianisme céleste*) is an independent, African-initiated church of the type often referred to as “white-garment churches” due to the clothing worn by congregants at worship services (Adogame 2009).
wooden post buckled under the weight of a bowl someone had on the roof. The technical crew scrambled to catch the collapsing awning before it fell on the actors below, but the bowl tumbled to the dirt, scattering hot peppers across the ground like orange marbles. Gérard fell to the ground, lying on his back, mouth agape. “Ọlọ́run!” he yelled. *My God!*  

By late afternoon, thunderclouds loomed in the distance. “Let’s go,” Adelabou told me, speed-walking to his bike. He started the engine, but Gérard came over and prostrated himself, face down in the dirt, a sign of deference in the area. “President! Don’t be angry! We only have a few more scenes for you…” Adelabou waved his hand dismissively. Gérard asked if he could come back the next day, but the senior actor said he had another shoot scheduled. It would have to be the day after. “But, President!” Gérard pled. Adelabou was already speeding through the tall grasses on the dirt path back to town.  

Over the engine roar, the CAPADI president yelled, “You see how much trouble we have in Bénin? We want to make films, but we don’t have the means. I’m in my second term as president, but it’s hard to see how our filmmaking can be successful, how our filmmakers can turn a profit.” As we sped into town, Adelabou complained of the economics of making Yorùbá-language video films at the border with Nigeria, the

---

*We visited the set of *Magumi* on 2 July 2013.*
country with the largest Yorùbá-speaking population in the world. What profit could the Béninois artists make, he asked, if pirated Nigerian video films come in and sell for so cheap? And how can Béninois video filmmakers make any sales when the road network is so bad and transport is so expensive? How can anyone get outside the Ouémé and Plateau departments on the Nigerian border? With a sigh, he said that only video films in French, Fon, and Gun had succeeded in the country thus far.5

“Can’t you translate your video films into Gun or Fon?”

“It’s too expensive,” he replied. “And if we make the films in Gun or Fon, that just helps kill off Yorùbá language and culture in Bénin.”

“So…” — I debated whether to ask the question—“…why even try?”

Adelabou paused before answering it. “If we don’t make our own films, our language and culture will die. In Nigeria, they speak ‘pure Yorùbá.’ Some of their Yorùbá people work together, but they also have churches that make films, films that make our culture look bad. They say it’s sorcery or evil. But here, we speak Yorùbá of Porto-Novó and Ànàgó Yorùbá.6 And we love our traditions. If we don’t make our own films, they’ll overwhelm us. Our language and culture will die. So we keep trying. And we pray that God will help us.”

*                     *                    *

5Fon and Gun are closely related languages of the Gbe language family. Egun is an alternative name for Gun.
6 FOOTNOTE ABOUT DIALECTS HERE
A year later, things hadn’t gotten better for the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers of Bénin. Money was still tight and wide distribution daunting. Even worse, the rivalry behind that shoving match on Gérard’s set had since erupted into a full-scale schism as video filmmakers left CAPADI to form a rival organization. Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmaking was in a funk with no sign of better days ahead. Nevertheless, people remained upbeat. God will provide, they told me. We just have to stay united.

This is the story of their struggle.

More generally, this dissertation is about how minority expressive cultures get erased from global view despite the fact that more people than ever have access to media-making technologies. I focus on Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers of Bénin to understand how and why they make video films in spite of shrinking profits and intense competition from rival media industries. For these media practitioners, filmmaking is about more than profits: It is about working with local communities to construct an audiovisual frame that shows local religion and culture as essential models of moral behavior, resources to empower local people and draw foreign wealth, and links to patrons and counterparts in Africa and the Diaspora. As African producers, video crews, actors, and audiences work together on sets and in studios, they attempt to shape the

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7 The name Nàgó–Yorùbá refers to those people in Bénin who speak dialects of the Yorùbá language, who profess an ethnic identity as Nàgó or Yorùbá, or both. I discuss the applicability of the ethnonym Yorùbá in Bénin further below.
contours of their community and its notions of religious plurality, morality, and ethical relations within an indifferent market that favors the superpowers surrounding them.

Figure 3: Map of Yorùbáland (in green) in West Africa, after Akintoye (2010) p. 86.

I focus here on Nàgó–Yorùbá people of Southeastern Bénin. Western wisps of the people now called Yorùbá, their small kingdoms and towns have long been on the front lines of Yorùbá encounters with others, making them what historian ‘Biodun Adédiran (1994) calls the “frontier states of Western Yorùbáland” (see fig. 3). The people here have faced historic enemies, such as the Fon of the Danxomé Empire, who captured Yorùbá-
speaking people and sold them into slavery in precolonial times. But the frontier they inhabit faces more directions than west. It also runs east, to Nigerian Yorùbá-speaking kingdoms and cities that also raided the area in centuries past, but groups to whom Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá trace their origins and claim continued kinship. It faces south, via European slave traders and historic slave ports, and across the Atlantic Ocean, where Yorùbá-speaking people became influential cultural influences on Black religions in the New World. And the frontier faces north toward former colonial powers that once plundered African states and now manipulate them for cultural influence and political gain. This location places these people within a whirlpool of cultural and economic forces that have remade West Africa since the late 1980s: the shrinking of the postcolonial state; the arrival of Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity and Reformist Islam with their new ways of seeing and hearing the sacred (Larkin and Meyer 2006; Piot 2010); the renewal of links to foreign powers and peoples, such as the one-time French colonial rulers and the descendants of enslaved people now refashioned as tourist kin (Tall 1995; Araujo 2010; Sutherland 2002); and new media and media-making technologies that have poured in from all sides (Haynes and Okome 2000). In these postcolonial swirlings, Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá belong to all sides and no sides at once: too “French” to be Yorùbá for Nigerian kin, too “Nigerian” to be Béninois for their own

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8 The name of the empire is spelled Danxome in some sources.
state. They get left outside the frames that these larger forces create through their own media and expressive cultures, leaving it up to themselves to fill people’s eyes, ears, and minds with images and sounds that they care about (Butler [2009] 2010).

My argument is that Nàgó–Yorùbá media-making in Bénin offers a way for producers and audiences to keep themselves legible to themselves, as well as to the forces surrounding them. Their media-making constructs a frame (Butler [2009] 2010), a projection of Nàgó–Yorùbá people and values that keeps them visible in the face of other media industries with their own take on Nàgó–Yorùbá “tradition.” Specifically, I trace the efforts of one group that has combined the relatively inexpensive technologies of digital video filmmaking and home film-editing software with a willingness to collaborate on one another’s projects to celebrate what they call àṣà iberì. The term translates to “indigenous culture” and refers to all things “Yorùbá”: language, customs, social roles, sovereignty, history, and, most of all, religion. But the phrase stands for much more than that, an entire way of life, system of morality, and ontological understanding of the world—what Nàgó–Yorùbá people in Bénin often gloss as “tradition.”

Many of these filmmakers have joined forces as CAPADI, adopting a motto of “progress” as they aim to build a robust local filmmaking infrastructure in the image

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9 My use of tradition here and throughout acknowledges the term’s importance to the video filmmakers with whom I worked. Nevertheless, I keep the warnings and caveats in mind about tradition as a sociocultural construct, always subject to reinterpretation and rearticulation (Hobsbawm [1983] 1992; Ranger [1983] 1992; Palmié 2002). For the role of British colonial authorities in enforcing this traditional social structure in Nigeria, see Matory (2005b: 30–33).
of Nigeria’s Nollywood film industry. CAPADI wagers that cooperation now will enable its members to achieve independence and profit in the future, but their challenge is to preserve their unity and piety for àṣà ń ibiṣẹ̀ in a state of intense precarity—when locally made video films rarely make a profit, and rival media-making practices offer better financial prospects—especially in work allied with Pentecostal churches eager to show local religion as evil. Others take foreign funding from groups that view Nàgò–Yorùbá video aesthetics as amateurish and unprofessional. Yet this frame is not the product of the media-makers alone; instead, these small-scale activities create a production public, a body of producers and audiences who together decide how to speak back from the margins to the better-funded media-making practices surrounding them—European-inspired African art cinema, the Béninois state’s public arts programs, and Nigeria’s Nollywood—but only so long as the people who give it life are willing to sacrifice time and money to keep their activities going. These rival media cultures have their own ways to show Africa and its peoples, ones that reinforce colonial hierarchies and perpetuate religious conflict and distrust. As Bénin’s production public debates the aesthetics and narratives of the video films it makes, filmmaking becomes an act of religious piety that rejects Christian–Muslim animosities while offering an alternative mode of African diasporic ethics located in Nàgò–Yorùbá religion and culture.
My choice of terms here—production public—acknowledges the fact that for the Béninois video filmmakers with whom I worked, theory and practice are intertwined. My argument is based on my own experiences in West Africa, where I studied video filmmaking from movie producers themselves. I acted in their productions, learned camerawork, editing, and film-poster design in their studios, and eventually produced my own video film, Ìkòkò Atura (The jar of sacred bliss, fig. 4). This hands-on approach allows my project to speak to important debates in anthropology, media studies, and related fields about how media shape the ontological limits of perception and social norms (Butler [2009] 2010). At the Bénin-Nigeria border, these Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers actively take on the mantle of frame-makers as they debate the audiovisual aesthetics of how their religion and culture are shown on screen, crafting an idealized
image for both themselves and others for how their community should look and sound (Dornfeld 1998). Yet the smallness and openness of sets and studios fosters “collaborative creativity” as potential audience members offer their opinions, too (Condry 2013). The resulting production public is a community whose very vitality depends on its debates over its self-representation (Kelty 2008).

But theirs is a precarious public. In the pages that follow, I show how artists in Africa fight long odds to be seen and heard locally and abroad. The aesthetics and narratives of the video films they make present an auroscopic regime, unwritten rules that guide seeing and hearing. This frame guides notions of how people should interact with the sacred, as props stand as metaphors for powerful ọrìṣà spirits with powerful secrets. Their filmmaking techniques, from camera shots and film-editing styles to prop designs and sound effects, model relationships among community members and to the world of spirits lying beyond the normal limits of human perception. These practices thus establish these video filmmakers as comedians and moral authorities, people with the license to mimic, mock, and blaspheme religious practices that they deem out of place in Nàgò-Yorùbá communities. And by turning a panegyric gaze toward spirits and important members of the àṣà ibíleọ̀ establishment, they set themselves up as stewards for aspects of àṣà ibíleọ̀ that have been forgotten in Nigeria or appropriated by the state. Their efforts are precarious but essential. Their video film sets draw together Nàgò–Yorùbá who are Christians and Muslim and followers of the ọrìṣà (ọlọrìṣà), Nigerian and
Béninois, male and female, as media-making itself produces new concepts of ethnic identity that address the traumas of slavery and colonialism. These open sites of production draw people together to negotiate how they can best present themselves while promoting religious ecumenism as essential to Nàgó–Yorùbá ethics at home and abroad. Through these alliances, they reject the toxic legacies of the slave-trade and colonial separation. Their debates transcend religious divides and enter transnational conversations, offering a valuable lesson far beyond the networks in which their productions circulate.

**1.1 Producing film theory**

The embassy’s conference room was packed, so Nikki and I sat behind the press bullpen and craned our necks to see past the cameras and tripods. Public Affairs Officer Paco Perez pointed us out to the careful rows of dignitaries, diplomats, and filmmakers: Brian and Nikki Smithson are here; Brian’s doing research on filmmaking in Bénin; so glad to have him and his wife here with us. But soon, he was back on script, talking about American Film Showcase (AFS), the special program the U.S. Embassy was sponsoring that week at ISMA, Bénin’s premier film school. AFS would offer a crash-course in filmmaking for five-person teams of Béninois filmmakers. Each would be paired with American mentors who’d teach them how to make a short documentary

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10 ISMA stands for l’Institut des Métiers de l’Audiovisuel (Institute of Audiovisual Studies).
film with little time or budget. Then Perez called up the headliner, Béninois–American actor Djimon Hounsou, who commanded the room in his African-style suit made from shiny, lace fabric that matched his white goatee. Hounsou’s remarks were brief, but the actor most famous for playing African characters in Hollywood movies crowed that Bénin had so much to offer the world, so programs like AFS were essential to building its capacity to tell its own stories. Indeed, Bénin’s cultural riches had drawn Hounsou back to the country of his birth to make his own documentary, he explained, a film about Bénin’s indigenous Vodun religion, maligned in much of the world but a source of comfort and strength to millions in West Africa and the Americas. Perez thanked Hounsou with a soccer ball signed by Senegalese–American hip-hop star Akon and had him sign a new ball for the embassy’s next big guest—whomever it would be—in a game of celebrity gift exchange. Two short videos about AFS later, we broke for a reception in the next room.

Sipping soft drinks and nibbling finger food, Nikki and I looked for Ọládélé “Lálá” Pedro amid the tables and centerpieces. He was one of the participants in the three-day workshop and an apprentice filmmaker from Pobè, the town where we were living as I did my field research. Lálá emerged from the conference room beaming. “I

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11 America Film Showcase is a joint initiative of the U.S. Department of State and the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. See Baker, Alan, Mark J. Harris, and Michael Renov. “American Film Showcase.” USC School of Cinematic Arts, 2018. http://americanfilmshowcase.com.
12 Hounsou’s film has since been completed: In Search of Voodoo: Roots to Heaven (2018, dir. Djimon Hounsou).
13 Opening ceremony of the Atelier American Film Showcase, Cotonou, 11 January 2016.
got Djimon’s autograph,” he said, flipping open a notebook to show us. Just two days before, Lálá had called me, distraught; he wouldn’t be able to make it to Cotonou in time for the AFS orientation the following morning, he said, since the ọba, or monarch, of Ìpóbé had declared a sundown-to-sunup curfew for that night and the next; priests of the kingdom for which Pobè was named needed to call on the ọrìṣà spirits to purify the land and stave off potential violence in the upcoming national election for president. With the curfew, no shared taxis would leave for Cotonou until sunrise, but Lálá would have to head out even earlier than that to make the orientation on time. The officer he reached at the embassy hadn’t understood the situation, though. Luckily, I got a hold of Paco, and he said Lálá could come late. But now here Lálá was, having nearly missed the workshop due to a religious ritual, meeting the most famous Béninois man in the world, who was there to make a movie about religious ritual. Lálá’s home in Pobè was only a two-hour ride away from Cotonou, but here in the brand-new U.S. Embassy building, it couldn’t have been farther away.

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14 Yorùbá-language orthographies are complex and conflicting in Bénin. For more information on my orthographic choices, see Appendix A.

15 Worldwide, singer Angélique Kidjo is perhaps the most famous Béninois of any gender.

16 Phone call with Lálá Pedro, Pobè, 9 January 2016. Other potential barriers to Lálá’s participation included the fact that the application for AFS was available only online and required typing short answers to essay questions in French.
Four days later, Nikki and I climbed to the top of ISMA to watch the
documentaries the teams had made. Lálá’s group didn’t win. But back in Pobè, it was
clear he was proud to have been a part of AFS. The workshop’s organizers had made
him his team’s film editor, while other trainees acted as director, production manager,
sound engineer, and director of photography. With a loaner camera and no money,
they’d been given three days to find a subject for a short documentary, get their footage,
and edit it into a five-minute digital short. Neither ISMA nor the embassy provided
food, lodging, or per diem, so Lálá had crashed with a friend who lived twenty minutes
away from ISMA’s expensive neighborhood. Still, he said the workshop was worth it.
He’d learned about high-definition file formats—in Pobè, most filmmakers were still
working in standard definition—and he’d gotten a certificate of participation, important
proof in a country where résumés and CVs are rare.

Two weeks later, Lálá was back at work, this time on a film by a fellow Pobéen
named Jacob Abiodoun about the tragedy that befalls a pair of young lovers when their
parents ignore the advice of the ọ̀rìṣà as revealed through divination. Waiting for the
actors to arrive, Jacob asked Lálá how the AFS workshop had gone. Lálá complained

17 Closing ceremony, American Film Showcase, Cotonou, 15 January 2016. Lálá’s team made a film called My
18 Conversation with Lálá Pedro, Cotonou, 15 January 2016.
20 Pobéen is the French-language demonym for an inhabitant of the town or commune of Pobè. Jacob’s film is
Kemi: La Fatalité entre Responsabilité et Destin (Kémi: The fate between responsibility and destiny; 2017, dir.
Jacob Abiodoun).
about the expenses, but he said it had been useful. When he had talked about his training in Nigeria and on Béninois Nàngó–Yorùbá video films, though, the other participants—most of them students at ISMA—had said that Nigerians really only do practical training; they don’t understand *theory*. Jacob laughed. “ISMA may be strong in theory, but their students don’t get much *practice*. They never go into the field!” He set his camera on its tripod—a new Canon 7D, bringing Pobè into the era of high-definition. He added, “It sounds like the ISMA students learned a lot more than you did.”

In their discussion of “theory” and “practice,” Lálá and Jacob were noting the distinction between the philosophical side of how films are made versus the real-world knowhow to make filmmaking happen. In this binary, theory tells a filmmaker how to take discrete moments of image and sound and stitch them into a coherent audiovisual experience for the spectator. In contrast, practice covers how to capture those moments with a camera, edit them together with software, and get them before an audience. Making a film in Bénin requires both. The set designer, prop maker, and makeup artist need to create or find the visual elements that will fill each scene. The actors have to adopt the right intonations and gestures to convey their characters’ places in the narrative. The director, camera operator, and director of photography (*cadreur*) need to

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21 Conversation with Oládélé “Lálá” Pedro and Jacob Abiodoun, Pobè, 29 January 2016.
22 Béninois filmmakers use the French terms for these concepts, *théorie* and *pratique*, respectively.
capture the right shots from the right angles to communicate the story they want to tell in the way they want to tell it.\textsuperscript{23} And the editors need to splice that footage together in the right order and with the right sound to convincingly convey the narrative thrust and feel of each scene. On the other hand, the film crew needs people with the expertise to paint a backdrop, sew a costume, and apply makeup. Someone needs to know how to work the camera—one likely imported from Nigeria with all its instructions in English. They need to know how close to move the lights to make sure the actors can be seen, and how far away to put the generator powering those lights so its growl will be as faint as possible in the microphone. And they have to know the ramifications of choosing one image format over another—high definition versus standard definition (and then NTSC versus PAL versus SECAM)—and one medium over its rival—VCD versus DVD.\textsuperscript{24}

Theory, in other words, only goes so far; as Lálá once explained, someone might think up an inventive way to film a guy brushing his teeth, but what good is it if the footage is

\textsuperscript{23} In standard French, \textit{cadreur} means “cameraman” or “camera operator.” However, for Béninois Nágó–Yorùbá filmmakers, the term is used to describe a position that better matches that of director of photography or cinematographer.

\textsuperscript{24} These broadcasting standards are for standard-definition television signals. NTSC (National Television Systems Committee) was developed in the United States and spread to Canada and Mexico, much of East Asia, parts of South America, and the Caribbean. PAL (Phase Alternating Lines) was developed in Germany and grew to be the standard in most of Europe, parts of Asia, most of Africa, and Australia. SECAM (\textit{Sequential Couleur avec Mémoire}, or Sequential Color with Memory) is a French standard adopted in Russia and the Middle East, as well (Parekh 2006: 301–303). VCD (video compact disc) format grew popular in Hong Kong in the mid-1990s, spreading throughout Asia and then to Nigeria around 2000. VCD was long the preferred format for Nollywood-style video films due to its inexpensive cost and portability (Jedlowski 2013: 42n5). Since I began researching West African video cultures in 2009, the higher-capacity DVD format (digital video disc) has grown popular as players have become more affordable.
too dark, out of focus, or inaudible? Even worse, what if they don’t have the hard-drive space to put that footage on their editing rig, since they captured it in high definition? For Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers, theory is about understanding the language of filmmaking (Mowitt 2005), while practice is about using equipment and software to make a film in the first place.

Yet Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers speak of “theory” with a mixture of envy and disdain. Theory is a luxury for academically trained filmmakers to worry about; it may help you make a movie look “professional” — a vague term for adherence to filmmaking conventions established in Europe or the United States—but Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers can learn it just as well by reverse engineering the movies they watch and by getting second-hand training from folks who have trained at places like ISMA. Practice, on the contrary, is something you get on the job, by showing up at video film sets and asking to be put to work. It teaches you how to make a movie on a budget. The trick for these Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers is to create films informed by theory for as little money as possible. Budgets are incredibly tight, but no one wants to be embarrassed by the work done in the country. As Lálá told me, “I don’t want someone to see my work and think, ‘Ah, the Béninois are here.’”


Conversation with Oládélé “Lálá” Pedro, Jacob Abiodoun, and Carlos Ogoudina, Pobè, 29 January 2016. I discuss the idea of “professional standards” in Chapter 7.

In this view, the American Film Showcase was responding to what I see as a widespread shift in the way filmmaking works in not only Africa, but around the world: the institutionalization of precarity. The word refers to a condition of economic insecurity, uncertainty, and risk for workers within a logic where the “free market” is all that matters (Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Gill and Pratt 2008: 3; Allison 2013: 5). The term’s roots lie in struggles by European workers to oppose the dissolution of the Fordist model of capitalism, with its guarantee of a stable job with benefits and a pension down the line. Arguably, this model of employment has been the exception rather than the rule in most times and places (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Allison 2013: 7), but the global shift toward neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s (a thread I return to below) ushered in a new era of precarity worldwide. For many theorists of the idea, creative workers have exemplified precarious labor in Europe and North America: They make intellectual property that makes someone else lots of money—value from “nothing”—yet these computer programmers, designers, and media practitioners are increasingly forced to work as freelance contractors with no notion of where their next job will come from or how they’ll pay their health insurance (Gill and Pratt 2008: 2–3, 15; Ross 2008: 32–34). This reimagining of workers as agile, flexible, and

28 The idea of precarity emerged in online debates among labor activists who tried to understand the neoliberal worker as a new form of subjectivity, one characterized by insecurity and flexibility. From there, activists expanded the concept to apply to an existential state of political subjection and exploitation exemplified by migrant workers. Academics were slow to adopt the term; once they began using it, the concept already had lost currency among labor activists (Neilson and Rossiter 2008: 52–53; Ross 2008: 37).
mobile has rapidly spread to other industries, as well, leading some to question whether precarity has any theoretical heft if it can describe everybody everywhere. To answer this charge, I follow philosopher Judith Butler ([2009] 2010: 2) in distinguishing between precariousness and precarity. The former is a common condition of life, the natural vulnerability that comes from living in a world where much remains beyond one’s control. In contrast, precarity is acute precariousness brought on by political forces and policies that allow some people to live in a state of greater precariousness than others. Thus, the low-budget methods of the AFS acknowledged the fact that African filmmakers of all types must adjust now to political–economic conditions that have decimated funding for African film. In doing so, they urged these art filmmakers to embrace the practical savvy that Lálá and his Nàgò–Yorùbá colleagues have long depended on as outsiders to this scene.

Nevertheless, this assumption that some African filmmakers privilege “theory” and others “practice” manifests in the scholarship on African filmmaking, as well. As independent video filmmaking came on the scene in Nigeria, Ghana, and elsewhere in the 1980s—the “practice” that Lálá and Jacob were schooled in—the scholars who noticed mostly came from anthropology, cultural studies, and media studies (Okome 1995; Haynes 1995; Meyer 1995; Hackett 1998; Edmondson 2009). For this group, the fact that video film is intended for a large, popular audience made it interesting (Waterman 1990; Barber and Waterman 1995; Drewal 1996; Fabian 1996; Jewsiewicki 1996; Barber
1997a; Barber, Collins, and Ricard 1997). Meanwhile, academics in the humanities, especially film studies, continued to focus primarily on African “art” film using more text-based methods of reading a film through a theory of choice (Austen and Šaul 2010: 2; Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Bordwell 1996; Carroll 1996), whether it be auteur theory (treating films as the genius of a single creator, usually the director), French structuralism (attention to subject formation by way of the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, the Marxism of Louis Althusser, and the semiotics of Christian Metz), or postmodernism and post-structuralism (looking at films for what they say about world capitalism and struggles between the powerful and the marginalized) (Bordwell 1996; Mowitt 2005: 5; Šaul 2010: 133).²⁹

Yet a fundamental assertion of this project is that practice doesn’t just reveal theory; practice is theory. I’m particularly interested in how media-making allows the creators to produce not only images but the frames that shape them, an idea I borrow from Butler ([2009] 2010). As a metaphor, frames place ontological limits on perception that influence social norms by actively including some subject matter and excluding

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²⁹This split between theorists of “popular film” and theorists of “art film” even manifests in what the object of analysis is called. Beginning with Jonathan Haynes’s (2000) edited volume, Nigerian Video Films, most scholars have appended video to the word film to distinguish these productions from their celluloid counterparts (e.g. Ogunleye 2004; Meyer 2015). Other scholars call them video movies (Garritano 2013) or simply movies (Miller 2016: 77–78). Anthropologist Brian Larkin (2004; 2008) has illustrated the importance of medium in discussing these cultural productions. In keeping with the predominant literature, I refer to these productions as video films, as well. However, note that the preferred French- and English-language term used by Nàgó–Yorùbá creators in Bénin is simply film. In Yorùbá, the term used is kásẹ́fí (cassette), a loanword from English that recalls the original video cassettes on which these films were distributed.
much more. Butler puts the concept to work to theorize war and how it is perceived in the U.S., specifically, why people from certain populations are not grieved when they die. In this way, framing is about not only deciding what images to present, but also how to present them in a way that will shape how people see and think about them (ibid.: 67, 71).

Butler’s ([2009] 2010: 14–15) hope is that by recognizing each other’s precarity, people might acknowledge a shared social responsibility for one another. But frames are invisible, shaping individuals’ interpretations of what they see, how they see it, and how it affects them based on principles that they largely do not notice or register (ibid.: 67–8). Butler’s (ibid.: 73) frame concept encompasses more than the audiovisual; for her, even media producers create within the confines of a frame that precedes their practices of creating. But in the pages that follow, I focus specifically on media production to show frame-making as an active, conscious process, one that media practitioners undertake to show themselves to both members of their own communities and to outsiders. Understood in this way, frames are not outside the realm of human control, and rival frames compete for attention as their makers struggle to keep their own preferred frame relevant and alive. Frames do more than perpetuate precarity by excluding certain kinds of people from view or skewing how those people are perceived.

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30 I do not deny the potential Butler ([2009] 2010: xiv, ix) sees in affect to allow people to escape their frames and notice a shared reliance on one another (cf. Azoulay 2008). Nevertheless, my argument focuses on frame-making as an active attempt to permit such affective engagements.
Instead, frames themselves are precarious, requiring active effort to enforce and maintain. For filmmakers, this effort comes from production.

My focus here on the production leg of the production–circulation–reception triangle (Lee and LiPuma 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002) situates this project within a growing body of work known as production studies (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell 2009). In the social sciences, this area of inquiry goes back to Leo Rostein’s (1941) and Hortense Powdermaker’s (1950) separate investigations into Hollywood movie production in the years surrounding World War II. Indeed, questions that drove Powdermaker (ibid.: 3) six decades ago remain at the heart of production studies today: How is a work of art or media “conditioned by its particular history and system of production”? Why do certain people have more influence over how the finished product looks and sounds than others? The area languished in anthropology as scholars privileged studies of peoples for whom mass media were seen as foreign impositions rather than “timeless” artistic practices, and as semiotic and structuralist theories came in vogue for the interpretation of art objects (Boas [1955] 2006; Fagg [1965] 2006; Lévi-Strauss [1975] 1982). Even as anthropologists and ethnographically inclined art historians kept their focus on the “why” of art—what role it plays in human social worlds (Firth 1992; Gell 1992; Fernandez 1966; Thompson [1973] 2006), and an approach

31 While not a book about media and art per se, Charles Piot’s (1999) Remotely Global makes a case for African “traditions” as part of global modernity far before the colonial encounter.
that still provides useful insights today (Coote 1992: Descola 2010)—their emphasis on objects that might be seen in a museum rather than on a television screen skewed analyses toward expressive cultures that were cast as “pure” or “primitive” (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002: 3).32

Thus, when Sol Worth and John Adair ([1975] 1997) taught filmmaking techniques to Navajo people in the U.S., their project was framed as a grand experiment to see what would happen if a “foreign” media-making technology were introduced to a people with no tradition of using it. Such research took on an activist tinge when Eric Michaels (1994) helped train Warlpiri people to use film and television broadcasts to provide local alternatives to Australian state media. Michaels’ Warlpiri interlocutors showed him how media production allows creators to recognize themselves not as cultural isolates but as people situated within global networks of power, even if they try to hang onto something of the “tradition” and “identity” that makes them unique (Ginsburg [1995] 2002: 230).33 This “indigenous media” school has shown how minority and indigenous groups use media to oppose oppressive forces, make a stand against social and political systems that marginalize them, preserve local culture, fashion local identities, pursue financial possibilities, and heal from historical traumas (ibid.: 210–11;

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32 Howard S. Becker’s (1982) analysis of the fine arts scene is a notable exception to this trend, albeit one coming from sociology; Becker set out to understand the conditions that allow art to be created rather than the art itself.
33 Terence Turner’s (1992) work in Brazil is another example of this type of scholarship in anthropology.
Ginsburg 2011: 245). Meanwhile, fields such as sociology and communications studies have innovated production-based approaches to understanding the relationship between media and larger social forces. This work argues that media embed both audiences and producers into shared “interpretive worlds” that they shape, and which in turn, shape them (Dornfield 1988), while media-making turns its creators into self-contained communities with distinct rituals, habits, jargon, and worldviews (Caldwell 2008: 2; Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell 2009: 2). Such scholarship has led to a burst of production studies in anthropology, taking these insights to media cultures around the world, from India (Ganti 2012; Pandian 2015) and Japan (Condry 2013), to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Pype 2012), and right on back to Hollywood in the United States (Ortner 2013).

But what about the media products themselves? I don’t want to focus on production processes  
tout court; instead, I show how a production-focused approach can reveal essential information about not just how media get made, but also how the aesthetic codes they use to communicate from creator to spectator are themselves the results of negotiations and consensus-building practices of media-makers and their audiences. In a sense, I use production studies to circle back to those semiotic and structuralist theories—among others—that production studies once reacted against. That is, I return to the idea that understanding aesthetic standards in art and media can offer insight into the frame those aesthetics support, including definitions of beauty (Coote

In the Nàgò–Yorùbá context, aesthetic codes communicate artists’ expectations of ethical behavior on the part of the viewer (Doris 2011). My own understanding of aesthetics follows that of anthropologists Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips (2008: 21): “our total sensorial experience of the world and […] our sensuous knowledge of it.”

Here, the emphasis on “sensuous knowledge” is key, as it gestures toward the importance of culturally and socially situated processes through which human perception is shaped and directed—what role they play in reinforcing frames. Visually and aurally oriented scholars attempt to understand these shared social and cultural codes to better comprehend how they inform the ways human beings engage with their environments and one another through their senses (ibid.: 27).

Scholars in visual studies have used various terms to theorize how aesthetics influence our experience of the world. In the realm of religious visual culture, Meyer and Verrips (2008: 27) have suggested the concept of “sensational forms” to describe the rules that shape sensation and how theology, dogma, and symbolic regimes give them their authority. Religion scholar David Morgan (1998) makes a similar argument with

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regard to what he calls “visual piety”; that is, as viewers confront a sacred image or thing that adheres to a certain religious aesthetic or style, the experience of seeing compels a certain type of pious contemplation and kinesthetic interaction. Thus, visual culture and its material manifestations expand the religious social sphere beyond adherents and clergy to also encompass the divine (Morgan 2012). A similar concept comes from historian Martin Jay (1988) by way of film scholar Christian Metz ([1977] 1982): the “scopic regime,” an interpretive lens situated within a particular cultural, social, economic, and historical context that shapes how people apprehend the world through vision, and how they comprehend what they see. To tie these concepts back into the frame metaphor discussed above, aesthetics are codes that follow the logic of a scopic regime, the aspect of the frame that specifically deals with vision. But these theories of seeing present a problem when turned toward a medium such as film: What about the sound? My solution is to borrow the insights of sound studies, the interdisciplinary investigation of the roles sounds plays in human social worlds and the cultural codes by which people interpret their sonic environment (Sterne 2012: 1–2).

To truly understand the aesthetics of film—how movies get to look and sound the way they do, and why their creators make them that way—I propose that we must consider what I call auroscopic regimes, the unwritten rules for how people both see and

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35 In Metz’s ([1977] 1982) original use of the term, *scopic regime* referred to both the visual and sonic aspects of film. However, the term has since been used almost exclusively to discuss vision, perhaps due to the ocularcentrism of the name itself.
hear their world, look at and listen to what it presents to them, and understand what
their eyes and ears have told them—the audiovisual part of their frame. As with
sensational forms and scopic regimes, auroscopic regimes are not biologically or
physically predetermined; instead, they reflect historical processes of social and cultural
conflict, change, and consensus. In film production, creators often follow an auroscopic
regime intuitively, often within the constraints of the medium itself, which, in the case of
video film, can influence, limit, and stymie the aesthetic choices of the creators through
collaborative work that happens on video film sets and in studios, the parameters of the
auroscopic regime can change as people debate matters of aesthetics, semiotics, and
taste. Thus, as aesthetic standards are in flux, so, too, are the moral and ethical principles
they encourage (Okoye 1996). And if the nature of the medium limits aesthetic options—
as with digital video in West Africa these days—there is still room for filmmakers and
audiences to bring in aesthetic and ethical commitments from elsewhere. Attention to
the practical side of filmmaking can help reveal how these debates and negotiations play
out.

This point leads me to another source of theory that Nàgój–Yorùbá video
filmmakers reference. When they call their style of filmmaking an art form, these

36 These same aesthetic qualities and limitations have also compelled scholars to privilege the image rather
than the sound of video films (Merz 2015: 106).
filmmakers acknowledge aesthetic commitments they have adopted from other Nàgó–Yorùbá aesthetic practices. In making this claim, they share the attitude of art historian Rowland Abiodun (2014) and literature scholar Adélékè Adéêkó (2017), who argue that African artists, including filmmakers, follow their own theories of aesthetics—not ones developed to describe European or white North American art-making practices—even if these creators don’t articulate these theories explicitly (ibid.: 10). Scholar of these practices must seek out emic terms and concepts to understand the ontological perspectives of their creators. This thinking animates Abiodun’s (2014) study of so-called “traditional” Yorùbá arts: sculpture, shrine painting, ritual implements, architecture, clothing, dance, and music. But when dealing with a medium that is still relatively new in West Africa, the challenge is to tease out the indigenous theory from that brought in by the medium itself. In other words, Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers of Southeastern Bénin have to reconcile at least two forms of aesthetic theory. One of these Abiodun (2014: 4) calls a Yorùbá “religio-aesthetic,” wherein art is an expression of the nature of worlds both physical and spiritual. The others reflect the conventions of French art cinema as taught in film schools and celebrated at African film festivals. Yet I follow Adéêkó (2017: xiv–xv) in his argument that practitioners of newer arts, such as

37 Literature scholar Glenn Odom (2015: 4–10) presents a similar argument from the standpoint of knowledge. He argues that the Yorùbá concept of Ìfọgbọ́ntìánjẹ́ recognizes that all knowledge is unified despite differences in the contexts in which it is employed. In this view, Yorùbá expressive cultures are always already political and moral discourse.
filmmaking, find ways to translate the aesthetic logics of the practices that came before them, turning new media into what he calls “being-Yorùbá practices” that let them communicate their “cultural being” to one another and to outsiders. In this view, Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmaking is an art form with its own aesthetic conventions, no matter how Béninois government bureaucrats may dismiss them as “unprofessional.” The aesthetics of Nàgó–Yorùbá video films may be a mélange of conventions from both older Nàgó–Yorùbá artmaking practices and rival filmmaking traditions, but Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers use this combination to present a unified auroscopic regime that anchors a single frame. They do so in conversation with other filmmakers, potential audiences, and sanctioned bodies of knowledge known as tradition.

This last point brings up how even something as weighty as “tradition” responds to debates over its interpretation, how people should respond to it in their daily lives, and how best to represent it in media form (Hirschkind 2006). These factors are especially pronounced among Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers of Bénin. Their video filmmaking is a minority vocation by a minority ethnic group, making these producers into a close-knit community with its own culturally nuanced approaches to working within constraints (Caldwell 2008: 2; Banks, Conor, and Mayer 2016: x). This activity also makes Nàgó–Yorùbá media practitioners intensely public in their interactions with the

38 Interviews with Sébastien Okpeîtcha, Porto-Nov, 13 August 2013; and Akambi Akala, Porto-Nov, 16 August 2013.
communities in which they work. To understand the importance of the smallness and openness of this style of filmmaking, I use the concept of the production public, which I define as a group whose collaborative practices of production both give the group identity, and rely on constant discourse about the production process itself, especially with regard to its aesthetic and narrative content. Video filmmaking thus becomes a social event for these producers, one that engages not only media practitioners, but also potential audiences, giving them hope that the frame they create together will survive (Allison 2013: 18). And the target of these cameras is Nàgò–Yorùbá indigenous religion, the àṣà ìbílé that sustains it, and by corollary, the religious ecumenism that permits both.
1.2 Producing piety in Nàgó–Yorùbá places

Bàbá Àgbà just appeared one morning, the first anyone had seen of the spirit in three years (fig. 5). Video filmmaker Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou called me at 7 AM to let me know. “Come downstairs,” he said. “And bring your camera.”39

39 Bàbá Àgbà came out on 21 August 2015. The masquerade is unique to Ìpòbè and as of yet, has gone unnoticed in the literature. The masked divinity travels through the various quarters of Pobè visiting prominent people to bless them and to receive financial donations. Meanwhile, people follow the spirit carrying branches of the Newbouldia laevis tree (ẹ̀wẹ̀ àkoko), which symbolically take on their illnesses and
We got off his motorcycle when the crowd got too thick, joining hundreds of other revelers on foot. There was Issiaka’s apprentice, Salomani, hawking yellow T-shirts and blue-collared polos with Bàbá Àgbà screen-printed onto them below the caption “The Vigorous Grandfather of Pobè.”40 And there was Issiaka’s other apprentice, Lálá, a few dozen meters away waiting outside a big compound with a camera. A furious drumbeat erupted from the other side of the wall, and out came Bàbá Àgbà, a tall, raggedy, helmet mask with palm-frond hair, bug eyes, and a mouthful of peg-like teeth. The divinity ran, and the crowd ran after. For the next six hours, Issiaka and Lálá followed along, pressing right into the crowd, hoisting their camera overhead, dodging revelers sloppy on moonshine, and making sure I kept up. We ended the day on the roof of Ìpòbè’s royal palace next to a crew from Bénin’s state-owned news station, ORTB,41 the ọba wanted to make sure we all got good footage as the crowd piled branches out front so that Bàbá Àgbà could take them into Ìpòbè’s sacred forest. As the drumming

misfortunes. When Bàbá Àgbà reaches the royal palace, people pile these branches up, the ọba prays over them, and the spirit and designated helpers carry them into Ìpòbè’s sacred forest, where they are neutralized (interview, King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 16 March 2016). In Brazilian Candomblé, certain Nagô Egun (ancestral masquerades linked to Western Yorubáland) are referred to as Baba Egun Agba and Egun Agba (elder Egun) (Omari 1984: 44–46). While Bàbá Àgbà is an egungun in the sense that this word refers to all Yorubá masquerades (Drewal 1978: 18), the Bàbá Àgbà masquerade of Ìpòbè is considered distinct from the Eegun (Egungun) masquerade, a specific type of religious performance associated with Òyó-Yorubá and peoples closely related to them.

40 In French, LE GRAND PÈRE VIGOROUS DE POBÈ. Issiaka later told me that his friend had made the shirts as a gamble, knowing that Bàbá Àgbà generally comes out in August (Interview, Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 21 August 2015).

41 In French, ORTB stands for l’Office de radiodiffusion et de télévision du Bénin (the Office of Radio and Television of Bénin).
reached a crescendo, the masked spirit fled into the bush, gone for one more year at least.

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A few days later, Lálá and Issiaka had edited their footage into a documentary film. Issiaka burned a copy for me on VCD and said he’d been selling the discs to anyone who missed the festival, anyone who wanted to send a copy to relatives out of town, or anyone who just wanted a souvenir. Lálá pulled the film up on the computer and scrubbed forward a few minutes: The scene conjures the feeling of communal spirit from that day, an unbroken shot of men and women, children and adults, Muslims and Christians, Béninois and Nigerians, cheering the deity on as he dances their ills away.

Filming Bàbá Àgbà, Issiaka explained, had only been permitted since 1999; before, the ọba, ministers, ọrịṣà priests, and other leaders of the àṣà ụbile establishment had wanted to keep Bàbá Àgbà a secret to Ìpòbẹ́. Yet Issiaka had argued to open the festival up. “I told them, no, things like this, since there’s no secret—women come out, men come out, children come out—well, we need an archive of it. The world’s changing now, so we need to have this, to know everything we’ve done in the past. People may talk about Bàbá Àgbà, but some children nowadays don’t even know about it.” The elders accepted, and Issiaka has filmed the spirit’s outings since 1999. “Bàbá Àgbà is
important to the people here,” he explained. “When you follow him, you forget that you’re a Muslim or a Christian. You’re just a child of Pobè.”

Issiaka’s drive to film Bàbá Àgbà and sell his documentary goes beyond a simple profit motive; for Issiaka and the video filmmakers of his organization, CAPADI, producing video films produces piety for àṣà ibílé. These video filmmakers may claim any number of religious affiliation, with Muslims and members of the Celestial Church of Christ most common. But their piety for indigenous Nàgó–Yorùbá religion is evident in every film genre they recognize. Traditionnel video films tell of life in the primordial village, a place inhabited by ọ̀rìṣà divinities, ancestral spirits (àwọn bábá ńlá), and powerful witches (âjẹ); where the ọba rules supreme, advised by ijoyè and oloyè (chiefs and nobles); and where people get their comeuppance for crossing the will of the deities as revealed by babaláwo diviners and the Ifá oracle, in visions and dreams, or via ancestral interventions. Moderne video films, in contrast, highlight the wonders and dangers of city life—even if the “city” is just a relatively small town like Pobè—where opulent houses, private automobiles, and frequent business deals show urban living as a source of riches; yet where corruption, theft, infidelity, and religious strife between Christians and Muslims point to a strained morality and demand a return to traditional principles, often represented by a diviner or other village-based figure. Tradi–moderne

*Interview, Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, 2 September 2015.*
video films tie the two together; these movies foreground the contrast between village morality and city wealth to show àṣà ibíle as a resource to draw investment from the city and beyond to enrich the life of people in the village. And in films documentaires and other forms of reportage, such as Issiaka and Lálá’s video film of Bàbá Àgbà, CAPADI video filmmakers turn a panegyric gaze onto traditional subject matter, whether it be in the village or the city (Gore 1998; cf. Adéeko’2017). In one sense, these video films express a conservative and even “stereotyped” view of the world (Barber 2000: 269); their setting is one where men and elders hold political power, women may have a deep capacity for spiritual àṣẹ—the power to get things done—but are otherwise relegated to the domestic sphere (Peel 2000: 62, 73; Barber 2000: 264), and where urban immorality must be kept at arm’s length. But these are also video films that engage their audiences directly, encouraging viewers to extract the moral core of the video film and apply its lessons to daily life.

CAPADI inherits this didactic commitment from Yorùbá traveling theater plays, where audience members are expected to debate the moral of each play in terms not dictated by the producers but those that were most applicable to themselves (Barber 2000: 216–8, 221). CAPADI’s structure, too, derives from traveling theater; its members divide into individual troupes, almost all of which operate in the Ouémé and Plateau

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43 These genre conventions put into filmic form the principles of traditional government and morality that are common among other Yorùbá people in West Africa (Mator 2005b: 71–75).
departments along Bénin’s southeastern border with Nigeria. Each troupe may have from a handful of members to several dozen; as a unit, they support CAPADI through monthly dues in return for access to a large network of fellow actors and media practitioners, which they can tap to call up performers, makeup artists, hairstylists, and other collaborators to work on a film for little or no monetary compensation. Almost all of CAPADI’s members consider themselves ethnically Nàgó, Yorùbá, or both, with most coming from the Kétu and Ànàgó subgroups. Their location at the border places them at the crossroads of several overlapping mediascapes (Appadurai 1990), with Nigerian

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44 The organization has some members in Cotonou (Littoral Department), as well.
45 Historian A. I. Astwaju (1976: 11) identifies seven Yorùbá subgroups that make up “Western Yorùbálánd”: the Ànàgó, Awori, Ègbádo, Èfọnyín, Kétu, Ohorí, and Sàbè. Of these, all but the Awori straddle the border between the Republic of Bénin and Nigeria. Fellow historian ‘Biódún Adédìran (1994: 11–13) argues that the Èfọnyín and Ohorí (whom he calls the Ohorí-lèjè) are actually part of the larger Nàgó subgroup. He adds the Ànà, Èdáisà, Èsà, and Mànigri to his list of Western Yorùbá; with the exception of the Èdáisà, these subgroups straddle the Bénin–Togo border. Note that Drewal (1992: 230n17) writes the subgroup’s name as Ohorí, while Adédìran (1994) renders the tones slightly differently as Ohorí; as Adédìran is a native speaker, I follow his lead. For many Yorùbá people who live in Southeastern Bénin, Nàgó and Ànàgó are sometimes used interchangeably; the former seems to be the Fon-language term for the peoples widely known as Yorùbá in academic literature and has become an administrative term used by the Béninois state, sometimes rendered Nagot (Parrinder 1947: 122; Adédìran 1994: 11). Law (1997: 214–15) surmises that Nàgó probably derives from the self-designation of the Ànàgó subgroup; it became a standard term for Yorùbá speakers in Brazil and was taken up by the Fon and others through continued transatlantic contacts. Variants of Nàgó have remained current among the practitioners of African-inspired religions in the New World, including Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé (Law 1997: 208; Matory 2005a: 40–41). In earlier periods, the term seems to have been used in the British West Indies and Louisiana, as well. Ànàgò is used in Cuba to refer to a subgroup of the Lucumi, an Ocha nation linked to areas of West Africa now known as Yorùbálánd (Law 1997: 207–208). As of 2016, CAPADI had not yet attempted to recruit members from areas further north or west, where the Sàbè, Èdáisà, Mànigri, and Ànà Yorùbá subgroups are primarily found.
46 Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s (1990) concept of a “mediascape” captures how people and institutions make and distribute information as well as the actual information that they spread and the ways by which it shapes people’s notions of the world. Understanding mediascapes means paying attention to the mode, technology, audience, and controlling interests of media images. The concept also helps us understand how images of other “scapes,” such as ethnoscapes, are formed in the minds of viewers who might otherwise have no notion of people or places outside their immediate experience. Indeed, the images provided by
popular media coming from the east, Béninois music, film, and television coming (along with licensed Latin American *telenovelas*) from Cotonou to the west, Islamic media, much of it Hausa, coming from the north, and American, Indian, Chinese, and other movies and television programs entering via pirated discs from Nigeria. These contemporary mediascapes each tap into Southeastern Bénin’s complex history in a different way. For CAPADI, then, the goal is to use video films to present a morally and culturally sound Nàgó–Yorùbá identity that acknowledges the influences of these outside media while standing as a counter to them.

I focus on how these producers get the social sanction to become moral authorities through sustained and intimate contact with potential audiences, shifting the dynamics of the discourse about media to include discourse about media-making. Video film sets become intensely social spaces where film crews and actors reconnect, chat, and joke. Yet for local people with no other connection to video filmmaking than as fellow community members and potential viewers, these sites become de facto spectacles that allow even non-producers to make comments and suggestions that can influence the look and sound of the finished product. These dynamics manifest within the doors of video film studios as well, albeit to a lesser degree. The result is a blurred line between mediascapes act as fodder with which audiences can construct “imagined lives” for themselves and strangers.
producers and audiences from the earliest stages of production, creating a production public.

I define this term as a group that comes together to produce something, such as media, and whose collaborative production practices include negotiation over both the processes of production itself, and the information or symbolic content of what is produced. The existence of a production public is thus reliant on what anthropologist Ian Condry (2013) calls “collaborative creativity,” as well as on discourse about how that collaboration occurs and how it links the producers and their audiences to groups around them. Likewise, the idea gets at a more network-oriented understanding of production, wherein certain participants may be understood as “creators,” but where production itself relies on workers whose labor allows the production to happen (Mayer 2011: 2–4). While anthropologist Karin Barber (2000) describes the typical Yorùbá traveling theater audience as a public in the sense that sociologist and philosopher Jürgan Habermas (1974) first used the term—as a group able to debate issues of concern free from the intervention of state or religious institutions—a production public does more than debate; it also produces the very thing that it is debating. This makes it more akin to the “recursive public” described by anthropologist Christopher M. Kelty (2008) in his research into the free-software movement of the Internet, where programmers create and negotiate the infrastructure that allows their collectivity to exist. Yet a production public does this and more, as its members must come to consensus not only
about the best practices of camera technique, editing, and so on, but also about the aesthetic and narrative standards of the media these practices produce.

A constant concern for the members of this production public is how best to establish Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá as an essential component of the larger ethnic group known as Yorùbá, a public that overlaps with the “imagined community” it operates within (Anderson 2006; Barber 2000). I follow theorist Michael Warner (2002: 75, emphasis mine) in distinguishing between these two social groupings: “…other ways of organizing strangers—nations, religions, races, guilds—have manifest positive content. They select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership. […] A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory.” Publics and imagined communities are different, but publics can be a major mechanism by which imagined communities are established, debated, altered, and dissolved (Hirschkind 2006). Thus, for CAPADI and its audiences, producing video films allows Bénin’s Nàgó-Yorùbá to assert not just belonging to the larger Yorùbá ethnicity, but also their right to comment on what defines Yorùbá being (Adéẹ̀kọ̀ 2017). As I show in the chapters to follow, the criteria they most often present include respect for àṣà ́ibíle, veneration of the ọ̀rìṣà, and tolerance for other religious practices people may follow, particularly the different denominations of Christianity and Islam.
1.3 Media in the creation of Nàgò–Yorùbá piety

The influence of media from Nigeria is one reason Yorùbá belonging has become so important in Southeastern Bénin. Two-hundred years ago, the idea of a single Yorùbá ethnic group didn’t yet exist; instead, what is now Southern Bénin was a collection of independent kingdoms ruled by ọba. They shared much in common: mutually comprehensible dialects of the same language, shared customs, oral histories tracing their origins to the city-state of Ile-Ife in the east, similar styles of government and religious practice, and economies united through regional trade networks (Asiwaju 1976: 9). They also faced constant predation by neighbors taking advantage of the region’s geography—no forest separates the savanna from the coast in this area—to raid the towns for captives to be sold at the coast for the burgeoning transatlantic slave trade (ibid.: 10, 30). Too small to wage war on their own, and too disjointed to present a united military front, these kingdoms especially suffered after the fall of the city of Qyọ’ to the east in 1837, an event that created a power vacuum that was filled by the kingdom of Danxomé to the west and new militarized states, such as Îbadàn and Abéokúta, to the east, eventually leading to the fall of Kétu to Danxomé in 1883 (ibid.: 27–29). The turmoil played into the hands of European merchants and missionaries, who courted the

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47 Kétu and Sâbè both trace their origins directly to Ilé-Ife. Meanwhile, most Egbadọ and Ohońri towns trace their origins to Qyọ. Ifọnyin and some eastern parts of Ohońri territory claim origins from Qyọ or Ilé-Ife via Kétu. Finally, the Ànàgò kingdoms of Ïpókiá and Itáké (Sakété) claim descent from the kingdom of Benin (Asiwaju 1976: 13).

48 For this reason, the region is known as the Dahomey Gap or the Bénin Gap.
victimized kingdoms for entry in exchange for their military protection. British–French rivalries spurred this process along until the Anglo–French Agreement of 1889 formally acknowledged France’s and Great Britain’s dual interests in the region (Asiwaju 1975: 435; 1976: 40–45). Yet Danxomé put up a fierce resistance to the French, who were calling for the African empire to end its raiding, slave trading, and religious rites involving human sacrifices (Asiwaju 1976: 47). Meanwhile, the Yorùbá-speaking kingdoms of the area offered the French supplies, intelligence, guides, soldiers, and advance agents to help defeat Danxomé (ibid.: 50); the conquest was completed in 1894, and Dahomey became a French colony in 1904 (Asiwaju 1975: 435; 1976: 5).49

The kingdoms on both sides of the border maintained political and kinship ties (Omoniyi 2010: 130), but separation led to cultural differences as colonial policies changed how the two sides lived and their institutions functioned (Adejunmobi 1976: 276). On the British side of the border—where the ethnonym Yorùbá had come into fashion for these groups—colonial policy shifted from military suppression to autonomy for local rulers to carry out colonial policies, a system known as indirect rule.50 Meanwhile, in French colonial Dahomey—where the administration adopted the Fon term Nàgò to refer to these peoples—the French transitioned from a policy of leaving Nàgò territories alone to one of regularizing the administration of the area once the Fon

49 The division of Yorùbá subgroups between French Dahomey and German Togo occurred in 1884. See Bertho (1949) and Newbury (1961).
50 See Lugard (1922) for an explanation of the system.
had been defeated. These new administrative divisions paid little heed to historical and ethnic relationships, lumping former enemies together, and reducing the role of ọba and other traditional rulers in politics (Asiwaju 1976: 58–59, 64–65, 81–82, 95). As the French focused their economic energies on Fon-majority areas in an attempt to pacify them (all the while demanding laborers be sent from Nàgó areas), resentment against the colonizers erupted into uprisings (ibid.: 61–62). Nevertheless, these actions only prompted the French to marginalize ọba further, ruling through colonial bureaucrats instead, and emphasizing cultural assimilation of the African inhabitants of Dahomey through a policy of direct rule (Adejunmobi 1976: 276–79; Asiwaju 1976: 84, 136–38, 260–61).

A sense of ethnic unity grew along the Nigeria–Dahomey border in spite of colonial policy as people traveled from one colonial territory to the other to find work, visit family, trade, and evade colonial demands for taxes, labor, and military service (Asiwaju 1976: 134–35; Flynn 1997b; Martineau 2006). But with separation and different preferred ethnonyms came the notion that Dahomey’s Nàgó and Nigeria’s Yorùbá had diverged; today, people on both sides are quick to blame colonial histories for why Nigeria’s Yorùbá are seen as more economically successful and more assertive, and why their brand of Yorùbá culture is considered more legitimate. This quip from a professor at a Nigerian university is unfair, but it sums up the attitude: “If you tell a Yorùbá man in Bénin to sit down, you can come back in two weeks, and he will still be sitting.
there!" Both sides leveraged ethnic solidarity within their respective nation-states after Dahomey and Nigeria won their independence in 1960; in Dahomey, politicians from the relatively small Nágó population struck political alliances with Gun counterparts with whom they shared the nation’s Southeast (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 53–55), while in Nigeria, Yorùbá politicians used ethnic identity to promote regional interests versus factions primarily made up of Hausa and Igbo (Falola 1999: 14; Matory 2005a: 76; Falola 2006: 37). Long exposure to Islam and Christianity and the need for ethnic solidarity have made religious tolerance and recognition of the dignity of indigenous religion defining features of Yorùbá politics on both sides (Clarke 2004: 13; Matory 2005a: 64).

Media have played an essential role in both promoting the Yorùbá ethnonym in Dahomey (later renamed Bénin), and in spreading Nigerian notions of Yorùbá expressive culture as markers of Yorùbá identity there. This process began in French colonial Dahomey, when people liberated from slavery in Brazil settled in coastal cities and became part of a group known as Aguda, the majority of whom spoke the language now known as Yorùbá and practiced Catholicism picked up in the New World (Yai [2001] 2013: 72–73). Inspired by an explosion of Yorùbá literary activity in Nigeria, the Aguda ignored French colonial policies deprecating African languages and published a

51 Conversation in Ilé-Ife, Nigeria, July 2010.
52 Law (2004: 182) notes that at least some of the Yorùbá-speaking Aguda returnees were Muslim, however. In Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, the word is written Agùda.
bilingual paper in the 1930s called *Iwe Ajase* (Porto-Novu Gazette), bringing the ethnonym “Yorùbá” into fashion, especially in Porto-Novu and Cotonou (Adejunmobi 1976: 278–79; Yai 1976: 74; Adeniran 2009: 136; Yai [2001] 2013: 80). Beyond this coastal elite, however, illiteracy in European scripts left other Nàgò out of these conversations (Frère 1996: 94). After World War II, urbanization and new technologies in Nigeria gave rise to new forms of Yorùbá popular culture that relied on spectacle and performance rather than the written word, such as traveling theater and jùjú music (Waterman 1990; Barber and Waterman 1995; Barber 2000). As performers and traders brought records, cassettes, and video tapes west, these performance practices introduced a standardized Yorùbá language and pride in Yorùbá indigenous knowledge to a wider audience (Barber, Collins, and Ricard 1997: 47; Barber 2007: 161). For the first time, Dahomeyan Nàgò and Yorùbá people could take part in discussions once reserved to Nigeria: about

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53 In Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, the name of the paper would be Ọ̀wé Àjàṣé. This process was merely an intensification of media flows dating back more than a century before, when former slaves in the New World secured passage back to Africa. From the 1830s, British anti-slavery forces sent returnees to Sierra Leone, where many converted to Protestant Christianity and learned English. Some of these converts traveled to Nigeria, where they were known as Sàró, short for “Sierra Leone”; they leveraged English literacy to enter colonial administration and worked to standardize the various related dialects of the region into a “standard Yorùbá” to allow the publication of materials for proselytization (Yai [2001] 2013: 72–73; Falola and Genova 2006: 1). Yai ([2001] 2013: 72–73) notes that a key difference between Sàró and Aguda people was that the former were African captives seized by British anti-slaving efforts and then brought to Sierra Leone, while most Aguda returnees had been enslaved in the New World for a time before buying their own freedom and paying for passage back to Africa, or else being expelled from Brazil for disruptive activity. In other words, Sàró never knew the full extent of slavery, while Aguda did. Law (2004: 182–83) notes that some Sàró settled in Damxómé, as well, although most seem to have emigrated to Lagos after the British established a presence there in the 1850s. The missionaries called their standardized language Yorùbá, after the term Ọ̀rùrùba used by the Hausa Muslims in reference to the people of the Ọ̀yọ’ kingdom (Matory 2005a: 51, 54).
Yorùbá artistic, musical, and royal achievements, about the beauty of Yorùbá language and culture, and about the intense ethnic pride that came from understanding oneself as part of a sophisticated civilization on par with any in Europe (Matory 2005a: 53–58; Falola and Genova 2006: 1–3). Equally important to this spreading understanding of how Yorùbá belonging was defined and understood were religious notions, as well: ideas that, while not all Yorùbá practice indigenous religion (ẹ̀sìn ibile) or consult babaláwo for Ifá divination, these practices were essential markers of Yorùbá identity (Falola 1999: 6–7; Matory 2005a: 61). Similarly, the idea spread that religious plurality defines the Yorùbá, with tolerant respect for Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religion considered a key provision (Clarke 2004: 13; Matory 2005a: 64). Today, many mission Christians and Muslims maintain an awe of the priests and priestesses of the ọrìṣà, and in dire situations, when Western medicine, or Christian or Muslim prayers prove ineffectual, people consult local priests or babaláwo diviners to try to set their lives aright (Apter 1992: 170).

1.4 Precarious media, precarious frames

By focusing on Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmaking in Bénin, I want to extend recent insights from production studies to understanding African expressive cultures in a time of global precarity. But I also aim to show that Africa is a trendsetter in this movement—for better and for worse—with Hollywood only now catching up (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 5–7). Scholars of Hollywood and its sister industries, such as video game
development, have shown how the once-stable employment offered by these sectors has grown rare. Digital technologies and Internet connectivity have enabled media conglomerates to move production offshore, outsource behind-the-scenes work, and create a new class of mobile, flexible, but insecure workers overseas (Curtin and Sanson 2016: 1–2, 10; Vanderhoef and Curtin 2016: 201–202; Chung 2018: 1–2). These changes in production labor came about due to the spread of neoliberalism, a term for deference to market forces and the retreat of government from the regulation of private industry and providing of public services. In media production, the neoliberal paradigm privileges media-for-profit, or media that must compete with for-profit analogs (Curtin and Sanson 2016: 6; Ganti 2012: 6–12). Nevertheless, this focus on transnational, industrial media production misses smaller production cultures, such as the one I consider here. My argument is that CAPADI’s production public persists—in spite of market forces—by tapping into a deep sense of piety for a religious and cultural identity they call àṣà ìbílẹ́.

In many African countries, neoliberal reforms followed an earlier era of strong central governments and autocratic rulers (Piot 2010). Scholars of African filmmaking usually understand this shift as bringing African art filmmaking into competition with a new, popular, video filmmaking, a low-cost form of making movies that started in Nigeria and Ghana in the 1980s and then spread across the continent (Barlet [2005] 2010; Austin and Şaul 2010; Green-Simms 2010; Okome 2010; Adesokan 2011; Haynes 2011; McCain 2011). However, both forms of cinema have relatively shallow roots in Bénin,
where instability after independence and decades of state control of the media prevented the establishment of a robust filmmaking infrastructure. Colonial policy tried to check anticolonial sentiment by requiring permission from the governor to film in Dahomey (Diawara 1992: 22; Šaul 2010: 135)—forcing would-be filmmakers to go to Western Europe, East Berlin, or the Soviet Union for training and work in film (Ukadike 1994: 68; Genova 2006: 57)—and by tightly regulating exhibition (Šaul 2010: 135; Obiaya 2011: 137). Colonial radio and print media were almost exclusively in the hands of foreigners, especially Christian mission groups (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 251).

After independence in 1960, the French funded a few projects in Dahomey to counter the influence of Hollywood; the Ministry of Cooperation’s Bureau of Cinema thus offered training and support for Dahomeyan filmmakers through processing, editing, and sound-dubbing services in Paris (Andrade-Watkins 1990: 90–91; Ukadike 1994: 70; Šaul 2010: 134–37, 139; Barlet 2012: 208–209, 211). But economic doldrums and political

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54 This policy was instituted by the Laval Decree of 1934. The only film known to have been produced in colonial Dahomey is Lumière des hommes (Light of men, 1954, dir. unknown) (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 165).

55 For instance, Afrique-sur-Seine (Africa on the Seine; 1955, dir. Paulin Soumanou Vieyra) is a short fiction film about West Africans living in Paris; the director was Senegalese but Dahomeyans worked on the project (Genova 2006: 57).

56 As France’s film production recovered from World War II, two companies held a virtual monopoly on cinema screens in Cotonou, showing American, Indian, and Egyptian films that had to pass a censor board and be dubbed into French (Šaul 2010: 135; Obiaya 2011: 137). These companies were COMACICO and SECMA, acronyms that stand for la Compagnie Africaine Cinématographique et Commercial (the African Commercial Cinema Company) and la Société d’Exploitation Cinématographique Africaine (the African Film Exploitation Company). About twenty-percent of cinemas were run by Syrian and Lebanese firms that relied on COMACICO and SECMA to provide them films, as well (Obiaya 2011: 137).

57 In French, le Bureau du Cinéma and le Ministère de la Coopération. The bureau was headed by filmmakers Jean-René Debrix and Lucien Patry. Claire Andrade-Watkins (1990: 90–91) provides a list of early French–
instability after independence—with six coups d’état from 1963 to 1972—prevented
Dahomey from developing an appreciable national cinema in its early years of

Conditions hardly improved after Lieutenant–Colonel Mathieu Kérékou seized
control of the government in 1972, changing the country’s name to the People’s Republic
of Bénin and adopting a Marxist–Leninist economic model two years later. Kérékou
nationalized the media and focused on expanding radio and television coverage to rural
remained an urban phenomenon with Béninois production virtually unknown, as
accepting French film aid went against the government’s aims to sever ties with the
former colonial power. Using media to express religious sentiment or promote religion
was against government policy: The revolutionary program discouraged religion in
general, only tolerating Catholicism due to its long roots in the country, but

African co-productions, but she does not indicate the specific African countries involved in each. Two
entries on her list seem to actually be one single film, one likely co-produced with a Dahomeyan director:
Danses en Fa ou les Ballet Dahoméens (Dances in Ifá, or Dahomeyan ballets; 1962, dir. Étienne Laroche). Pascal
Abikanlou made Ganvié, mon village (My village, Ganvié) in 1966 (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 165).
58 The Bureau of Cinema was most active from 1969 to 1977, nourishing a generation of West African
filmmakers while establishing France as a place for creators to live and study. A fire in the editing lab ended
the program in 1979, but it later reopened as a nonprofit called Atria that operated on government funds
(Saul 2010: 139; Barlet 2012: 209, 211).
59 The state-run TV station was ORTD, which stands for l’Office de radiodiffusion et de télévision du Dahomey
(the Office of Radio and Television of Dahomey). Bénin replaced Dahomey in the name when Kérékou
changed the name of the country. The government tolerated La Croix du Bénin (the Cross of Bénin), a
newspaper run by the Catholic Church in Bénin since 1949 so long as it avoided politics. Meanwhile, illegal
newspapers, such as La Flamme (The Flame) of the anti-Kérékou Communist Party operated in secret (Frère
nationalizing Catholic schools and limiting public Christian activities. Indigenous religions were targeted through “anti-witchcraft” legislation, although Kérékou did call for recognizing “nationalities” within the country to restore cultural integrity lost under colonial rule (Tall 1995: 197; de Surgy 2001a: 26–27; de Surgy 2001b: 9, 25; Tall 2009: 161–62, 166).60

The little emphasis Kérékou’s government put on cinema took its inspiration from a coalition of African filmmakers known by the French acronym FEPACI,61 which formed in 1969 to set the terms for non-commercial francophone African cinema along the lines of the Third Cinema movement in Latin America. FEPACI promoted African cultural expression while opposing the imperialism of the Western-dominated system of film production, distribution, exhibition, and aesthetics that had grown prevalent in the early postcolonial period (Larkin 2008: 177; Şaul 2010: 142; Adesokan 2011: 51–52; Haynes 2011: 70). Kérékou nationalized Dahomey’s dozen cinemas and placed them under the control of a government office, ONACIDA, which also took over the distribution of films (N’Gosso and Ruelle 1983: 15).62 Nevertheless, Béninois filmmaking

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60 In French, the country’s new name was la République populaire du Bénin. While the official ideology was Marxist, historian Chris Allen (1992: 69) argues that the government and economy ran more along a West African single-party dictatorship model than a Marxist one. Instead, the Marxist label was a branding attempt to placate radical student Leftists and to attract investment from the Soviet Union and its allies.

61 The full name of the organization is la Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (Pan African Federation of Filmmakers). The group was formed in 1969 but became active in 1970.

62 The reporter Delphine Bousquet notes that Bénin had twelve cinema halls at its height, with five in Cotonou. (See Bousquet, Delphine. “Bénin: redonner le goût du cinéma aux jeunes (volet 2).” [Bénin: restoring a taste for cinema to the youth (section 2)]. Radio France International, February 28, 2017.) However, Gaston Samé N’Gosso and Catherine Ruelle (1983: 34) counted only four in 1983—perhaps
remained stagnant. As other West and Central African countries relaxed controls over the public sphere, Kérékou tightened them: Bénin founded the Ministry of Literacy and Popular Culture to regulate cultural expression in the country in 1980 (Alao and Salhi 2000: 32).

Nevertheless, a Béninois popular culture formed under Kérékou’s nose in the country’s Southeast, where trade with Nigeria and close ties with Nigerian performers provided an escape from Kérékou’s tight grip on media in the country. As early as 1976, Béninois comedians were joining Yorùbá traveling theater troupes in Nigeria or were founding their own troupes along the same model, sometimes filming stage performances or recording comedy routines for sale on cassette tape and, later, film and video (Barber, Collins, and Ricard 1997: 6; Barrot [2005] 2008: 43–44; Adejunmobi 2007: 4; Ehysse 2007: 11–12; Ugochukwo 2009: 4; Okome 2010: 30; Merz 2014: 168, 171). The

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63 The lack of filmmaking was partly the fault of mismanagement of OBECI. Only three films were made by Béninois directors in the 1970s; one of these was the country’s first feature-length motion picture, Sous le signe du vaudou (Under the sign of Vodun), directed by Pascal Abikanlou, a Nâgó–Yorùbá man from Pobè in Bénin’s Plateau Division (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 165).

64 In French, le Ministère de l’Alphabétisation et de la Culture Populaire. The other two 1970s films were both directed by Richard de Medeiros: Le roi est mort en exil (The king has died in exile) in 1970 and Nouveau venu (Newcomer) in 1976 (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 165). The 1985 film was Ironu, directed by François Sourou Okioh. Note that Sévérin Akando produced two documentary films in 1984: Histoire d’une vie (Story of a life) and Abomey (FESPACO 2000: 26); however, it is unclear if these were produced in Bénin or abroad. No more films were produced in Bénin until 1985, leading into another period of inactivity, this one lasting fourteen years (Armes 2006: 46).

nascent popular culture gained popularity in the Ouémé and Plateau departments, offering an early glimpse at a radical transformation that would soon sweep African media.

Faced with economic turmoil in the 1980s, Kérékou took tentative steps toward policy reform, including loosening his grip on religious practices and media expression (Allen 1992: 64–68; Tall 1995: 198), and even converting to Islam to court potential North African and Middle Eastern benefactors (Heilbrunn [1999] 2018). Nevertheless, momentum shifted against him as public-service employees, students, the military, and the Catholic Church advocated democratic reform; Kérékou was ousted from power in 1990 by a National Congress that rewrote the constitution, protected religious practice, and appointed a former World Bank official named Nicéphore Soglo as president of the newly christened Republic of Bénin (Allen 1992: 71; Frère 1996: 91; Houngikpo and Decalo 2013: xxxiii). Soglo embraced neoliberal reforms via structural adjustment programs (SAPs); as the size of government was reduced, the state’s relationship to media and the arts changed. Newspapers flooded the cities, but few survived due to high levels of illiteracy and poor distribution infrastructure (Allen 1992: 72–73; Frère 1996: 88–89, 91–92). Radio blanketed the countryside, but it remained a government mouthpiece (Frère 1996: 94–95, 109–110). The biggest shift in Bénin’s patronage of the

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66 Only twenty-five percent of Béninois could read French in the 1990s according to Frère (1996: 109–110). Thirty-four percent of Pobéens are literate according to the 2013 census (NSAE 2016b).
The plan originated during the final years of Kekekou’s administration. UNESCO stands for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The appropriation of local expressive cultures has become de rigueur in postcolonial African states. For examples from Guinea, Nigeria, and Cameroon, respectively, see McGovern (2013), Apter (2005), and Nelson (2007).
movies (Barber 2000). Yorùbá and Hausa traders brought these video films into Bénin, where they were sold or shown in video parlors in the 1980s and 1990s (Merz 2014: 74). By the early 2000s, Nàgó–Yorùbá performers had begun to make original video films of their own (Mayrargue 2005: 249; Merz 2014: 166–67).

But just as neoliberalism had brought the video technologies that allowed this new movement to flourish, it also brought rival religio-aesthetics that caused the new media sector to splinter. Nàgó–Yorùbá video movies in Bénin quickly diverged into two separate but related video film cultures, each with its own audiovisual take on Africa’s neoliberal predicament. The first continued to promote the concerns of the Yorùbá traveling theater, using Nollywood-inspired aesthetics and production techniques to tell stories about àṣà ìbílé. Many of the video filmmakers in this group later founded CAPADI, with its emphasis on expressing piety for Nàgó–Yorùbá religion. The other genre embraced the Pentecostal–charismatic Christian revolution that had risen during economic crises in Nigeria and Ghana before spreading to Bénin. The video films of this camp are in many ways directly opposed to their tradition-affirming counterparts;

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68 Which of these genres reached Bénin first (and thus, the designation of first Béninois video film) is a matter of debate. Anthropologist Cédric Mayrargue (2005: 248–50) notes that Christine Madeleine Botokou’s Tu as besoin de lui (You need him) was released in Cotonou in 2001. However, Nàgó–Yorùbá comedian and film producer Oyede Abiodoun Romain claimed that he and others were already making Nàgó–Yorùbá video films by that time in the Ouémé and Plateau divisions (interview, Pobè, 2 June 2015).

their stories and visual revelations emphasize Pentecostal–charismatic teachings about
divine prosperity, everyday miracles, and spiritual powers to defeat evil forces that
bring ruin to health, finances, and spiritual wellbeing (Meyer 2003a; Meyer 2003b;
Hackett 2003; Meyer 2005; Meyer 2006; Uría 2013: 28, 39; Meyer 2015). In this battle,
video films about àṣà ibile' look to precolonial models of sovereignty that promote
indigenous power structures framed as primordial. But these videos must find their
footing against media that argue for a rejection of the old and an embrace of a new
neoliberal subjectivity based on belonging within global Christianity that offers relief
from traditional forces reframed as demonic (Piot 2010: 103–105, 128). The old remains,
but in a process of translation, it becomes an other to the new religious sensibilities
(Meyer 1999).

For a time, it seemed the Pentecostal frame would win out, at least in Bénin’s South. Everything from TV screens to storefronts promoted what anthropologist Birgit
Meyer (2004) calls a “pentecostalite style,” extolling Pentecostal values or messages
intended to sound like them. The state, too, seemed headed for a pentecostalite takeover;
in 1996, Kérékou was re-elected after converting to yet another new religion—this time,
born-again Christianity—and becoming affiliated with the Foursquare Church
(Mayrargue 2002; Strandsbjerg 2005a: 80). During his two terms in office, the former

70In French, l’Église Evangélique Internationale Foursquare. The Foursquare Church has its roots in North
America (Uría 2013: 40).
Marxist–Leninist tried to break with the past, a common Pentecostal idiom that downplays African “tradition” in favor of new global connections (Meyer 1998; Piot 2010: 9). Kérékou repackaged Bénin’s Vodun arts-and-heritage initiative to focus on repentance for Bénin’s role in the slave trade and on reconciliation with the descendants of these past sins now living in the Americas—mostly African American Protestants rather than the practitioners of African-inspired religions Bénin had previously wooed (Hatch 2008). The next president, Thomas Yayi Boni, also a member of an “evangelical” Protestant church (Mayrargue 2006: 165), restored the emphasis on religious plurality and indigenous religion-as-tourist-attraction, but his election was seen as another example of Pentecostals gaining access to the reins of government.71

Ironically, Bénin’s art-film scene only really emerged in the years following the National Conference. Ouidah native Jean Odoutan has spearheaded this sector, beginning with his first feature film, Barbecue-Pejo, which he filmed in Bénin in 1999 (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 165). Italian filmmaker Valério Truffia, who married a Béninois woman and worked on several of Odoutan’s films, founded the first film school in Bénin in 2004, Atelier Fiwe, which he located in Odoutan’s home town of Ouidah (Sinda 2004: 115). This school was followed in 2006 by Odoutan’s own film

71 Independent Protestant churches in Bénin are usually called églises évangéliques (evangelical churches). The category includes charismatic and Pentecostal churches, as well as more recent Protestant arrivals, such as the Nigerian Baptist Church (Grätz 2011: 163–64n6).
school, the Cinematographic Institute of Ouidah (ICO). In 2006, Marcellin Zannou founded a private film school in Cotonou, the Institute of Audiovisual Studies (ISMA) (Balta et al. 2007: 111). Atelier Fiwe and ICO are funded in part by government subsidies and donations from foreign backers, but ISMA students pay private-school tuition.

These institutions have emphasized an auroscopic regime that privileges art-film aesthetics along the lines of European cinema, aiming these films at festival, art-house, and academic exhibition channels and eschewing the neoliberal emphasis on profits (cf. Ortner 2013). Often these funding sources expect a certain performance of exoticness, as well (Barlet 2010: 63–64). Yet Bénin’s art-film scene has fallen prey to the precarity that has struck media-production worldwide, as suggested above when the American Film Showcase taught art filmmakers how to make digital films on minimalist budgets. In short, art film and video film are both children of neoliberalism in Bénin, and both face precarity in getting their messages out.

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72 In French, l’Institut cinématographique de Ouidah.
Figure 6: Muslim music, Qu’ranic chants, and video sermons for sale in Pobè.

Béninois media practitioners took advantage of the neoliberalized public sphere. Christian video filmmakers created their own movies, and traders brought them in from Nigeria and Ghana. Pastors began paying for radio airtime, and deejays made gospel a standard genre on radio stations (Strandsbjerg 2005b: 225; Uría 2013: 27–28). This zeal for producing media (and pirating it) has spread to other religious groups in Bénin and Nigeria, who produce Islamic video sermons and music, Qu’ranic readings, or Catholic video movies; these religious media (fig. 6), like the religious practitioners more generally, borrow from one another (Larkin 2016: 633–37), while presenting rival auroscopic regimes that privilege new ways of linking viewers to the world around them. The victim in much of this new religious media is indigenous religion and “tradition” more broadly, as these new brands of Pentecostalism and Islam often cast
such practices as backward at best, demonic at worst. Instead, they advocate for a turn toward membership in global bodies of believers (Larkin and Meyer 2006: 286).

Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers have done the same, borrowing video filmmaking techniques from Pentecostal films, but they do so to offer movies devoted to àṣà ́ibìlè, which remains popular in the Southeast (Krings and Okome 2013: 10). There, Nigerian influences remain high, influencing the video film sector in disparate ways. The mid-2000s saw a period of cross-border collaboration with Nigerian video filmmakers, while other Nigerian producers and pirate outfits experimented with subtitling and dubbing video films into French for sale in Bénin (Barrot 2011: 112; Ugochukwu 2009: 5–6). This flowering of media-making large and small has saturated Bénin’s mediascape. The result is that better-funded industries, such as Nollywood and its pirate shadow, outproduce Bénin’s own media and compete with local productions for money and attention. Indeed, between 2005 and 2011, an average of 966 video films were released yearly in Nigeria (González 2013), while Béninois producers put out only

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73 I acknowledge anthropologist J. D. Y. Peel’s (2016) reservations about comparing Pentecostalism and Reformist Islam, as he argues that such movements must be understood through the prism of local politics. Nevertheless, I agree with Larkin (2016) that similarities have developed in the two movements through their constant conversation with one another and their common experiences with global capitalism.

74 For instance, the celebrated Yorùbá filmmaker Tunde Kelani of Nigeria partnered with a Béninois businessperson to film Àhènì 1 and 2 through Laha Productions (Adejunmobi 2007: 5; Barrot 2011: 118n127).

75 Overproduction of video films has been a problem in Nigeria, as well. There, producers have voluntarily cut back on production to avoid oversaturation. Nevertheless, piracy continues to prevent them from avoiding the problem entirely (Jedlowski 2013: 25–26).
about 300 per year. Nollywood’s film workers face precarity in that profits there go almost exclusively to marketers (Miller 2016a: 156). Yet artists across Africa struggle to find some purchase in such saturated visual spaces (Roberts and Roberts 2003). For Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers, the production public itself has entered a period of precarity. How these video filmmakers weather that period is the focus of this project.

1.5 Joining the production public

The role was hardly a stretch. I’d play an American traveling in Bénin who gives a bit of (bad) advice to a large man in a military uniform known as le Général (the General). The circumstances, though, were pure happenstance. I’d been in Pobè all summer doing fieldwork on Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmaking, but I was still getting to know the members of CAPADI. When I dropped by Production Odada studio one day unannounced, the owner, Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, asked if I wanted to head to the outskirts of Pobè, where Abiodoun Romain Oyede was filming a movie. We found him a short motorcycle ride later, along with other actors, a camera crew, and a crowd of curious onlookers. I greeted him in Yorùbá. Surprised, he said, “Ah! You have to be in my film.”

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76 This estimate for Bénin comes from Bousquet, Delphine. “Bénin: redonner le goût du cinéma aux jeunes (volet 2).” [Bénin: restoring a taste for cinema to the youth (section 2)]. Radio France International, February 28, 2017. My impression is that the actual number is much lower.

77 We shot the scene in Pobè on 3 August 2013.
The scene wasn’t in the script, so we improvised. Oyede said that in this comedy, le Général is looking for Death—an actual character, with whom he has struck a devil’s bargain. Le Général, driving his car, chances upon me, an American walking down a bush road, and asks me if I know where he can find Death. But America is a country that loves war, Oyede explained, so my character thinks the man wants to go to a war zone, and I tell him to go to Iraq. He thanks me and drives away (fig. 7). We shot the scene three times, in wide shot, Oyede’s close-up, then my own. In the finished video film, Un Pacte (A pact; 2013, dir. Oyede Romain), it’s nothing but a throwaway gag. But in my fieldwork, the scene marked my entry into the local Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmaking scene of the Ouémé and Plateau divisions as not just a participant–observer, but also as a producer.

Figure 7: Filming a scene with Abiodoun Romain Oyede for Un Pacte in Pobè (photograph by Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou).
To understand those forces, I sought to become part of the production public myself. I did this through the practice of apprenticeship ethnography. By acting in video films, learning camera and film-editing techniques in studios, and attending CAPADI’s official meetings, I set out to learn about media production through direct involvement. These methods, I surmised, would address the major research goals of this project: to determine how the production of religious media becomes a forum to debate and establish norms of community and religious practice; how national identity, religious affiliation, and professional prestige affect negotiations over religious attitudes and conceptions of community; and how the open style of production in Bénin allows a diverse group of people—media professionals and others—to participate in the debates and discussions that shape their projects. I conducted preliminary research over two months in summer 2013, with long-term fieldwork beginning in 2014 and lasting for twenty months.

My home base was Pobè, a commune in the Plateau Department with a land area of 400 square kilometers (154.44 square miles) and a population of 123,677 people in 2013 (Bani 2006: 39; INSAE 2016b). The location offered easy access to CAPADI branches in other towns, from Cotonou, Porto-Nov, Ifagn, Adja-Ouéré, and Sakêtè to the south, to Kétu in the north. With its location on the border, Pobè also brought Nigeria within reach. Ethnically, Pobè is ideal for studying Nàgó–Yorùbá media-making; in 2013, 68.7 percent of the Plateau Department was Nàgó–Yorùbá, compared to 10.1 percent in the
Ouémé Department to the south, and 12.0 percent of Bénin’s overall population of 10,008,749 (INSAE 2016a).

The area also offered a religiously plural milieu: In the 2013 census, the Plateau Department was 59.8 percent Christian; 18.6 percent Muslim; 10.7 percent followers of traditional religions; 4.0 percent members of other religions; and 5.7 percent people who professed no religion (INSAE 2016a).

Anthropologist Sitna Quiroz Uría (2013: 20) found similar numbers for the town of Pobè in the early 2010s, with Catholics the plurality, followed by Muslims (overwhelmingly Shi’a), Methodists, members of the Celestial Church of Christ, and then smaller Christian denominations.

The Pobè commune is primarily rural, but even in town, eighty-five percent of the population worked farms at least part time in 2002, growing primarily maize, cassava (manioc), and yams (Bani 2006: 10); similarly, livestock raising was common, primarily of chickens, pigs, sheep, and goats (ibid.: 12).

As of March 2018, INSAE has not yet released arrondissement-level results of the 2013 census. In the previous census of 2002, the Pobè commune had a population of 89,910, with 33,249 living in the town with the rest in the villages. Of this population, 84.3 percent was Nàgò–Yorùbá (primarily Anàgò and Òhòrí, which were considered separate subgroups) (Bani 2006: 5–7).

These numbers break down further. Among Christians, 24.6 percent are Catholic, 5.6 percent are Methodist, 3.8 percent are members of other Protestant denominations, 10.0 percent belong to the Celestial Church of Christ, and 15.8 percent are Christians of unspecified denomination. Among those who profess traditional religion as their primary affiliation, 7.4 percent practice Vodun, and 3.3 percent practice other traditions (INSAE 2016a).
Pobè also offered an intriguing site for this project due to the fact that it has evaded the wave of Pentecostalism that has swept much of the rest of West Africa (Mayrargue 2001; Kalu 2008; Marshall 2009; Piot 2010), while keeping Reformist Islam at bay, as well. Pobéens have largely met Pentecostal churches with indifference. One reason for this has been a generally negative view of Nigerians, who are often stereotyped as greedy; accordingly, Nigerian missions have had little success in Pobè (fig. 8), and the prosperity gospel so prevalent across the border has been much less popular (Uría 2013: 39–40, 43). Nigerian pastors in Pobè blame the commune’s

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80 Regarding Islam, the same is true among Yorùbá people in Nigeria, where Reformist Islam has a much shorter history than in other parts of West Africa (Peel 2016: 623).
antagonism toward these new churches on the proselytization strategy they have followed in Bénin: By starting in rural areas of Nàgô–Yorùbá Bénin, churches have failed to find a solid financial base from which to spread.81 Likewise, Muslims in Pobè look askance at Salafism from Northern Nigeria, understanding it as antagonistic to indigenous religion and associated with violence (cf. Larkin and Mayer 2006: 286; Schulz 2012: ix–x). Instead, the Pentecostalism so evident in Nigerian video films is strongest in the cities, or in various independent churches whose congregations are primarily made up of outsiders in Pobè, immigrants from elsewhere (Uría 2013: 45–46). Pobè natives instead remain committed ideologically to indigenous religion as a linchpin of ecumenism, even if they don’t actively venerate the ọ̀rìṣà.

My original goal was to apprentice myself to a senior video filmmaker in Pobè, an approach that has proved fruitful in other studies of African art- and media-making practices (Coy 1989; Drewal 2005; Marchand 2009). Yet my status as a white, American man in his thirties quickly knocked my plans off course. I found early on that my identity granted me the unearned privilege of being assumed to be an expert no matter what the task at hand. Video filmmakers at first thought that I had come to study their practices to tell them what they were doing wrong, or to help them find wealthy American benefactors. I emphasized that I was there to learn from Béninois video

81 Interview with Pastor Ọbáọ̀rù Saturday Àjàyí, Pobè, 10 August 2013.
filmmakers—the true experts—and that I had no specific film training. Yet a full apprenticeship did not make sense within these cultural confines. Another problem was that by the time I began long-term fieldwork in 2014, a schism in CAPADI had sapped the organization of much of its vigor. During the twenty months of my primary fieldwork, very few video films were released, and most of the movies in production were stuck at the writing stage or were progressing through the production process only slowly. Nevertheless, access to production sites was never an issue like it has been for other scholars of production studies (Ortner 2010, 2012; Chung 2018). I made myself a fixture at local film studios, where I watched the behind-the-scenes processes unfold, and on film sets, where producers often took advantage of the novelty of a white man who speaks Yorùbá to give me some small role. Over time, I convinced filmmakers to give me informal instruction in their techniques.

Fieldwork changed after my first year. First, I was married and joined in Bénin by my spouse, Nikki Smithson. Her presence helped CAPADI video filmmakers see me not only as a nomadic white man—I was still that—but as a husband. Nikki’s experiences also made me more cognizant of gender dynamics between male and female video filmmakers, a theme I return to in later chapters. Around this same time, I also realized that my closest interlocutors were not just fellow actors; they were also writer–producers. If I wanted to get the start-to-finish look at film production I’d envisioned in my research design, I needed to do as they did and produce my own video film. The
officers of CAPADI–Pobè encouraged the idea, but I stressed that I would need them to
guide me through the process. We formed a production committee and made the project
an official, region-wide, not-for-profit collaboration. Things moved quickly; we
formulated a budget, formed a team to write the scenario, cast the movie, commissioned
set and prop designs, and handled other logistics, such as catering, makeup, and legal
permissions. Over the course of production, my identity in Pobè changed: People
became much less likely to hail me as “Óyín bó” (white person) and instead began
calling me by the Yorùbá name I used with my interlocutors, Ayòkúnlé. The video film
was filmed in November 2015, and then edited and subtitled into French in early 2016.
In March 2016, the video film was released, Òkòkò Atura (The jar of sacred bliss; dir.
Gérard Koukpohounsi). Much of the analysis that follows is based on my first-hand
involvement in its production, along with my participation in the production of other
video films, interviews with dozens of media producers, consumers, religious leaders,
and government officials, and regular attendance alongside Christians, Muslims, and
followers of indigenous religion (olórísà) at religious services, ceremonies, and festivals.

What I found was that CAPADI and its members have a deep attachment to àṣà
ibílẹ, which they see as fundamental guidelines to maintaining a moral and just society,
and to establishing ethical relations between local communities and other social groups,

82 Brian, I found, is difficult for many French-speakers to pronounce. In West Africa, people often mistake
the name for Ibrahim.
such as neighbors in Nigeria, fellow Béninois ethnic groups, the state, and transnational religious movements like those in Christianity and Islam. By making video films, CAPADI and its allies seek to make a living, surely. But they also hope to preserve traditions and establish themselves as essential members of the larger Yorùbá ethnicity in West Africa and the New World.

1.5 Dissertation overview

The goal of this project is to understand production as culture—how Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers form a community with one another, and how they position themselves and their audiences vis-à-vis larger social groups, such as the Béninois state, the larger Yorùbá ethnic group, and transnational diasporic networks. This production public persists—barely—in a time of precarity. Funds for video filmmaking are scarce and competition for viewers intense. In focusing on video filmmaking, I seek to understand how production reveals these creators’ strategies to keep up their efforts with little hope of financial return. Their production processes also reveal common behaviors, proclivities, and routines that respond to larger forces—political, social, economic, historical, cultural—and shape those processes in turn. Yet I also consider the video films themselves as windows into the auroscopic regimes of their creators: how their aesthetic choices draw from cultural stores of theory and practice, and how these get reinterpreted in new media to reflect the creators’ desires and expectations both moral and ethical for the people who watch their video films. By centering production in
this analysis, I emphasize the negotiations that underlie those aesthetic commitments, negotiations that involve not only fellow video filmmakers but potential audiences, as well.

The chapters that follow tease out specific elements of what it means for Bénin’s Nágó–Yorùbá filmmakers to work with their audiences in the creation of a production public. From the actions of camera operators and cadreurs on sets, to the editing choices made in post-production, film producers make important aesthetic decisions that play an important role in helping them shape the conversation around indigenous religion and other elements of àṣà ibíle'. And through their public appearances and activities, these same media practitioners interface with potential audience members and patrons alike to establish themselves as voices of morality in the community. Yet the specter of money haunts all of these activities, threatening to draw producers away from CAPADI toward potentially more lucrative media enterprises, while offering audience members alternative media to consume rather than homegrown products that celebrate all things local. These economic forces make the production public precarious, meaning that its lifeblood relies on people committed to sustaining it.

In Chapter 2, I explore the precarity of video filmmaking at Bénin’s Nigerian border by showing just how difficult it is for filmmakers to finance productions. Unlike the Nigerian Nollywood system that inspired them, Bénin’s filmmakers must fund their productions out of pocket due to a lack of investors and marketers; the writer–producer
can continue only as funds become available, making production times stretch out to several years in some cases. Profits from sales are also scarce; the market for Yorùbá-language media is small in Bénin, and even French-language movies face logistical hurdles to distribution in a market saturated with videos made or pirated in Nigeria. Nevertheless, Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers persist. To explain why, I return to a foundational debate in film theory about how the processes of “suture” and “interpellation” draw audiences into the logic of a film’s narrative and thereby reinforce ideologies and social norms (Oudart [1969] 1977; Dayan 1974; Heath 1977). I situate these processes within the cultural context of Yorùbá-speaking Bénin by analyzing two common shot structures in Nàgó–Yorùbá video films. In both, enunciation—the “language” of how the film is edited together (Mowitt 2005)—bolsters the social capital of the producer as a modern-day praise singer. That is, these creators construct a panegyric gaze, celebrating the eminence of their subjects in one genre of film (Adéékó 2017), while they use a reciprocal gaze (Morgan 2012) in fiction films to represent something as simple as everyday greetings that nonetheless makes the actors in them familiar faces. This is a form of social capital, making these media practitioners more likely to be called upon to film panegyric films, as well, and continuing filmmaking as a form of piety production.

In Chapter 3, I show how Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers of Pobè put their panegyric gaze to work for the benefit of the àṣà ́ibíle’ establishment: the ọba, his ministers, and the
ořiṣà priesthood. During an annual pilgrimage to Òyó, Nigeria, Pobè’s media practitioners pull double duty: On the one hand, they point their cameras and microphones toward the Aláàfin, or emperor of Òyó, playing the part of “Yorùbá in Diaspora” granted them by Òyó as they honor the heir to the Yorùbá empire that once stretched across the region, and the homeland to which they trace their ancestry. At the same time, their video films and news reports reinforce the diaspora–homeland relationship for people back in Bénin, helping to keep people invested in the àṣà ibílé’ establishment whose legitimacy depends on that history. In doing so, these media practitioners argue for diaspora–homeland links that make ethical demands on both sides. Key to their strategy is restoring Ìpòbè’s understanding of Orányàn, founder of Òyó and Ìpòbè, to the Nigerian discourse around the ořiṣà. That is, while Ìpòbè’s àṣà ibílé’ leaders see the divinity as tolerant and ecumenical, Òyó views him as bellicose and ethnocentric. These Nàgó–Yorùbá media practitioners present their version to make themselves essential to efforts by Ìpòbè’s traditional leaders to obtain material support from the Aláàfin for things like the renovation of the Ìpòbè royal palace—all the while ensuring that their services will continue to be requested by Ìpòbè’s àṣà ibílé’ leadership as a source of financial stability. In doing so, they promote religious tolerance and plurality as qualities of Nàgó–Yorùbá identity that have been preserved in Bénin but which are fading in Nigeria.
In a similar vein, the video filmmakers of CAPADI see tendencies toward schism and religious strife within their own membership and the communities they live in as threats to the health of their organization and community. In Chapter 4, I show how they use comedy to downplay this religious precarity and acknowledge their shared piety for indigenous religion. Specifically, I focus on the spirit of blasphemy that animates CAPADI’s official events, filmmaking activities, and social gatherings, and how this impiety infuses the films they crate. Like CAPADI’s members themselves, I trace this spirit of blasphemy to the Gẹ̀léjé masquerade, an àṣà ibíle spectacle that Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers see as a direct antecedent to their own activities. Through the Gẹ̀léjé’s performances of ẹ̀fẹ̀ (curse songs), these secret societies use humor to call out immoral behavior—including religious immorality—among community members. In the same vein, CAPADI members claim comic license to call out immorality through their video films and among their members by mimicking, mocking, and blaspheming Christian and Muslim practices. Impiety becomes piety by marginalizing exclusivist forms of Christianity and Islam, thereby reinforcing the centrality of indigenous religion in the wider community and stabilizing the organization.

Chapter 5 elaborates on the idea of filmmaking as a form of audiovisual piety (cf. Morgan 1998) by showing how Nàgó–Yorùbá video films act as a bulwark against rival media forms that aim to denigrate and demonize indigenous spirits and their followers. I follow the production of the video film Ìkòkò Atura to show how the filmmakers enact
an auroscopic regime, a standard for what roles hearing and seeing should play in people’s interpretations of the world (cf. Metz [1977] 1982; cf. Martin 1988). Essential to this auroscopic regime is a distinction between spectacle and secrecy, two components of indigenous Nàgó–Yorùbá rituals, ceremonies, and festivals that work in tandem to tap the œ̀rìṣà’s àṣẹ, or power to accomplish, and spreads it to spectators. In this regime, different levels of initiation grant deeper knowledge of the awo, or secrets, by which the œ̀rìṣà are hailed. By hearing the telltale signs of secret goings on and by seeing the elements of a ritual that are permitted to them, spectators are able to partake in the àṣẹ produced on both sides of the barrier. Yet translating this auroscopic regime to film presents a problem: With its reliance on images, how do you present the divine on screen without revealing its secrets and sapping its strength? The answer for CAPADI filmmakers is to appropriate a rival auroscopic regime, that of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, and apply its strictures to made-up divinities that stand for the other œ̀rìṣà. This way of hearing and seeing the divine relies on exposing secrets: Seeing and hearing into the realm of dark spirits and then revealing that knowledge to others through testimony (Marshall 2009). Yet by using that strategy for their own video films, CAPADI members take aesthetic conventions designed to harm indigenous religion and use them to celebrate it instead.

In Chapter 6, I follow CAPADI’s efforts to create and sell tradition to another potential patron: the Béninois state, with its arts programs aimed at promoting Bénin’s
indigenous religions to tourists from the African Diaspora in the Americas. The chapter follows several CAPADI members to the former slave port of Ouidah. Every year, the city becomes a site for diasporic tourists to memorialize ancestors who were captured and shipped overseas in heinous conditions, and for religious tourists to visit the homeland of Vodun, the religious practices that those captives carried with them.

Meanwhile, at the Quintessence film festival, Béninois art filmmakers and their foreign patrons attempt to capture some of the festive excitement of the Vodun Festival to celebrate film as art (Dovey 2015). At both festivals, then, the Nàgó-Yorùbá video filmmakers in Ouidah argue that they are the legitimate stewards of the thing the festivals celebrate, what I call festival objects: indigenous Nàgó-Yorùbá religion for the Vodun Festival, African filmmaking for Quintessence. By doing so, they make a case to the state that their production public is worth supporting even with limited funds, rebutting the state’s assumption that Nàgó-Yorùbá religious practices are already part of the practices of Vodun, and rejecting Quintessence’s disdain for their style of filmmaking.

I end with a short conclusion, Chapter 7, that suggests important implications of this research and areas for future investigation. I also reexamine my central premise: that neoliberal forces have allowed a revolution in African media-making practices, making it easier and cheaper than ever for minority groups, such as Nàgó–Yorùbá in Bénin, to make stories, sounds, and images that celebrate local customs and religious
ideals. However, a new phase of this media-making frontier has begun, one characterized by a deepening precarity as the wide-open media markets of the 1990s and 2000s that have allowed certain auroscopic regimes and the publics that support them to become dominant, while smaller ones struggle to survive. With little monetary reward, minority production publics persist for other reasons, having to do with local pride, piety for indigenous spirits, and the simple joy of community. In the next chapter, I show just how precarious that public is, but how video films sustain it and help unify it.
2. Greeting between the Lines: Structuring Praise and Praising Structures in Nàgó–Yorùbá Video Films

Gérard Koukpohounsi and Jayéolá “Jay Jay” Ọlábíntán hunched over a desktop computer in the corner of the salon–turned–studio. Nigerian Yorùbá gospel music played from tiny speakers as Jay Jay fanned himself with a cardstock video film jacket in the heat of mid-afternoon. Small, interlocking images flashed from the flatscreen monitor, each showing some segment of Magumi, Gérard’s soon-to-be-released video film, now two years in the making thanks to the financial uncertainty the producer had gone through in that time. The “timeline” across the bottom of the screen showed short slices of film, each representing a different camera shot. Most of the editing, or montage in French, had been done, but there was still important work to be done. 83

Jay Jay opened the file for Magumi’s poster design in Photoshop. 84 He selected the red title and dropped it onto a black background in his film-editing program, Adobe Premiere, to make a temporary title card. Then, one by one, Gérard called out the names of the actors—leaving out anyone who’d quit CAPADI to join FENAPAD in the filmmaking organization’s recent split—to send Jay Jay scrubbing through the timeline looking for a suitable portrait for each. Most of the images came from dialogue scenes: close-ups of the character looking past the camera at some unseen conversation partner.

83 I joined the editing team on Maguni in Pobè from 2–5 May 2015. In Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, the video film’s title would be Mágùnmì.  
84 The poster was designed by Jacob Abiodoun in CorelDraw.
Jacob gave each actor a title card, the portrait in an oval frame and the person’s name beneath, leaving Gérard to guess at which screen name each preferred and how they spelled it (in Nigerian or French orthography?). Gérard repeated the process for key crewmembers, who got title cards but no portraits; Gérard had to spell a lot of the technical positions out for Jay Jay, who spoke little French. Gérard himself got three credits: actor, director, and scenario writer, each under a different name. “I want to make sure people know who I am,” he explained. After adding stock special effects and sounds, Jay Jay pronounced the title sequence complete. He played it through: A yellow spark flashes above each actor’s portrait like a lit fuse until finally bursting into a fireball with a whoosh that reveals the red title Magumi. “It’s good,” Gérard said in Yorùbá. The preview continued into the video film’s first action sequence, villagers in bright tie-dye talking to one another as their faces fill the frame in turn.

One of film’s greatest powers, its theorists have argued, lies in taking small pieces of action—shots—and stitching them together into a coherent narrative. The way a film is edited—its montage—is a language in its own right, one that viewers have to learn to decipher, but which then fades from conscious thought as it pulls the spectator into a world of the creator’s making (Gerrig and Bezdek 2013). Viewers from Los Angeles to Mogadishu share a fluency in interpreting how shots in sequence relate to one another, thanks in part to the dominance of editing conventions established by early
filmmakers and spread worldwide by Hollywood studios. But film languages are by no means universal; as film theorist John Mowitt (2005) notes, a director’s cultural background and political sensibilities seep into the very structure of the films she makes, turning them into political statements not only through their stories, but in the very telling of those stories through editing.

In this chapter, I zoom out from the editing room to show how other factors influence the structure of a movie—whether on celluloid film, video film, digital video, or some other audiovisual medium—far beyond the director and his cultural background or political agenda. By focusing on how movies are produced, I show that the economics of movie production must be considered in tandem with any political or cultural motive to provide a fuller picture of how and why a movie came to tell its story in exactly the way it does. These concerns are especially germane in a small, poorly funded video filmmaking scene like that of Yorùbá-speaking Bénin. The fact that Gérard had waited nearly a full year between shooting Magumi and editing it points to constant financial shortfalls in Bénin that force creators to make video films piecemeal as funds become available. Meanwhile, other economic forces sap the revenue from most Béninois Nágó–Yorùbá video films, especially competition from wider-spread, bigger-budget (and better-pirated) Yorùbá movies from Nigeria. Most Béninois video filmmakers know they stand little chance of breaking even on a movie’s production costs, let alone turning a profit from it. So why make video films at all? A hint lies in
Gérard and Jay Jay’s editing of Magumi: They made sure the video film clearly showed each actor and used each one’s preferred name. As Gérard said, “I want to make sure people know who I am.”

Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video films, in short, make actors familiar. But they do so through a complex film language that pulls viewers into relationships with the people on screen and that thrust the people on screen into the world as social beings. In doing so, these movies give their creators something far more than the promise, however small, of financial gain: They give them the ability to promote and structure idealized social relations between people. Video filmmakers rely on their audiovisual expertise to do this, structuring each movie as a “hail” to the viewer, to adopt an idea from film theorist Daniel Dayan (1974), himself pulling from the work of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser ([1971] 2006). Yet understood in the context of production (and not only reception by the spectator), this hail is not a one-way call from film to viewer; it’s a tripartite greeting to the viewer, the actors on screen, and the video filmmaker alike, each of whom is addressed as a particular subject position—“interpellated” in Althusser’s phrasing—and thereby slotted into a web of social relations that sets the parameters of how each should relate to others as moral beings (Barber 2007).

I focus on two genres of video movie and their characteristic editing styles to illustrate this idea: the video panegyric and the fictional video film. In the former, the creator takes on the role of praise singer (Barber 2007; Adééko’ 2017), providing long,
steady shots of eminent patrons, and hailing the viewer as a member of the live audience at the event depicted. Meanwhile, in fictional video films, the use of intercut shots and reverse shots encourages the viewer to identify with on-screen characters and not with some unseen, gazing audience (Oudart [1969] 1977; Dayan 1974). In the process, the on-screen actors are interpellated not as their off-screen selves, but as their constructed screen personae. These fictional video films treat these characters like masquerade performers, popular and familiar not for their own eminence, but for their comic license to comment on the moral failings of the community.

2.1 Video film economics

“Good morning, Pobè!” Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou’s radio voice echoed through the microphone, a bit deeper and more flamboyant than his normal tone. The deejay thanked God in Yorùbá, Arabic, and French, and announced, “We’re here today with Gérard Koukpohounsi, director of the new Yorùbá film *Magunni*. Gérard, say hello to the listeners out there.”

Two seats over in the crowded sound booth, Gérard used his own deejay voice. “Good morning! Gérard Koukpohounsi here, producer and director of *Magunni*, a traditional film about a woman who’s been cursed so that anyone who has sex with her will die.”

85 “A dupe fún Olónírun! Allahu Akbar! Merci, Jésus-Christ!” The radio show was recorded and broadcasted on 25 July 2015.
For much of the rest of the hour, Issiaka acted as if he were hosing his standard shift at Plateau FM, “Radio Olókíki” (popular radio), Pobè’s community radio station, playing music, greeting eminent Pobéens and guests in the community, announcing local events, and taking calls from listeners. But Gérard, also a deejay, was paying for this airtime—perhaps at an employee discount from the standard 20,000 francs per hour (US $33)—to promote his video film being released that day. *Magumi* had been a huge investment; Gérard had paid its production costs bit by bit based on what he could save from his tailoring business and radio gig; all told it had taken him two years since principal photography to finally release the movie. A week before release, Gérard even resorted to handing out “invitations” to some of Pobè’s wealthiest residents—invitations to a release party that Gérard couldn’t afford to throw, but which came with an empty envelope for stuffing congratulatory bills into. Gérard thus hoped the radio show would build hype for *Magumi* and boost its sales.

That purpose only became clear every fifteen minutes or so, when Issiaka motioned through the glass for the technician to play one of two radio spots he’d created for the new video film. At other points, he interviewed the other men in the booth: He asked Ṓládélé “Lálá” Pedro to talk about his job as sound technician for *Magunmi*; he

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86 Conversation with Issiaka Adèwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 13 December 2014. All prices in this chapter reflect the exchange rate at the time of *Magumi*’s release in July 2015.
87 Conversation with Gérard Koukpohounsi, Pobè, 23 September 2015.
88 Conversation with Gérard Koukpohounsi, Pobè, 18 July 2015.
had Yacoubou Eïtcha (also a deejay) praise Iganna, the village where the video film had been shot; and he prompted me to talk about what I’d seen when I’d visited the set and how I’d be bringing a copy of the video film home with me to America. (I didn’t mention the collapsing roof—see Chapter 1). As the hour wound down, Issiaka made the final press. “Lálá, where can people find Magunmi? In shops? With a marketer?” Lálá told the listeners to look for the video film with people in green Magunmi T-shirts in Pobè and nearby towns that day, or to find it at Radio Olókikí—there was someone outside already with copies available—or at APADI–Pobè’s headquarters near the ọba’s palace. Issiaka gave Gérard the final word; the movie producer thanked God, Radio Olókikí, CAPADI, and his mother. The hour-long infomercial finished, and he left to go sell (fig. 9).
Three weeks later, Gérard complained that of the one-thousand VCD copies of Magumi he’d had made in Nigeria, hundreds were left unsold. Normally a video film
should sell through a run of that size within a week or two, he said, but people just weren’t buying—not in Pobè, and not in nearby towns where he’d left a few hundred copies for sale with friends and shopkeepers. At this rate, he wouldn’t even recoup the costs to have the video film duplicated in Nigeria. Selling the two-disc movie at 1,000 francs CFA per copy (US $1.67) would only net him a decent profit over the 100 naira (US $0.50) he’d paid per disc if he could actually sell through the full run.89

Gérard seemed resigned to the fact that he wouldn’t break even on the video film, especially when the substantial costs of production were factored in. Magumí’s budget was modest by Béninois standards, somewhere around two-million francs CFA (US $3,340), and a fraction of the five-million CFA ($8,350) a larger production might cost.90 But two-million francs is a lot for almost anyone in Bénin, especially for someone whose primary income comes from tailoring.91 Such video film costs cover a wide array of expenditures: hiring a camera crew (often a studio with a single owner and his apprentices); paying a director; renting props and costumes or commissioning new ones; hiring a set designer or paying people for the use of homes and businesses as movie sets; paying fees to both local and state officials for permission to film in public locations; hiring caterers to keep the cast and crew fed; compensating people for travel expenses; and providing everyone with a place to stay.

89 Conversation with Gérard Koukpohounsi and an anonymous friend, Pobè, 14 August 2015.
90 Interview, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
91 Conversation with Gérard Koukpohounsi, Pobè, 23 September 2015.
Post-production expenses add up, as well, with editing, special effects, music (such as a title theme), subtitles, and poster and disc-jacket designs all calling for professionals to be hired.\textsuperscript{92} Having the posters and jackets printed and the discs duplicated usually entails an expensive trip to Lagos, Nigeria, where infrastructure allows for better production quality at a faster turnaround time.\textsuperscript{93} Then, registering the video film with Bénin’s copyright office, BUBEDRA, requires a nominal fee of 500 francs CFA (US $0.84), but much more if the producer wants to put foil stickers on the jackets.

\textsuperscript{92} Interviews with Abib Sid Toro, Pobè, 22 August 2014, Jacob Abiodoun, Porto-Novo, 22 May 2015, and Florentine Omolacho, Pobè, 30 May 2015; preliminary story meeting for Ìkòkò Atura, Pobè, 21 October 2015.

\textsuperscript{93} Interview, Jacob Abiodoun, Porto-Novo, 22 May 2015.
to advertise the movie’s authenticity. Some producers sell the video film from a car equipped with a loudspeaker, but this means renting the vehicle and equipment, paying gas, and taking unpaid time off work (fig. 10). Finally, shopkeepers and itinerant sellers get a cut, 100 francs (US $0.17) for each copy they sell.

What profits remain go to the video film’s producer, usually the same person who wrote the scenario and starred as its lead actor—Gérard, in the case of Magumi. For a typical video film, the producer expects to sell two- to three-thousand copies, enough to net a small profit at a sale price of 1,000 francs CFA (US $1.67) per copy. True blockbusters are generally exclusive to producers who have name recognition beyond the local level, and who are able to get the movie distributed beyond their home community. Among the members of CAPADI, the department president, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, was the only actor with the clout to do this; he reported that his video film Un Pacte (2013) sold more than forty-thousand copies, but he’d had to travel tirelessly across the country by motorcycle dressed as his character, le Général, to reach that level of sales.

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94 The acronym stands for le Bureau Béninois du Droit d’Auteur et des Droits Voisins (the Béninois Office of Copyright and Related Rights); Abiodoun Romain Oyede, preliminary story meeting for Ìkòkò Atura, Pobè, 21 October 2015.
95 Interview, Tadjou Deen Babalola, Pobè, 24 October 2014.
96 In rare cases, a theater troupe may pool its resources to co-produce a video film, as Abib Sid Toro told me during an interview in Pobè, 22 August 2014.
97 Interview, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
By 2015, things had grown worse thanks to competition from Nigerian video films, many of them pirated. Béninois Nágó–Yorùbá video filmmakers looked back fondly to a time when they charged as much as 5,000 francs CFA (US $8.35) for a VCD, but as movies streamed across the Nigerian border, local productions found themselves competing with not only Nigerian fare, but also pirated films from Hollywood, India, and China. Such movies sell for a mere 500 francs CFA (US $0.84) each, sometimes even less, putting pressure on Béninois producers to match those prices. And as cheap DVD players have become more widely available, the greater storage capacity per disc has let pirates cram even more onto a single disc. Why pay 1,000 francs for a two-disc Béninois movie on VCD when you can get eight movies on a single DVD for half the price (Haynes 2014: 54)? These pressures are more acutely felt in Pobè than in other parts of Bénin, as its location on the border with Nigeria makes it an important transit point for pirated media, glutting the local market with such wares. Gérard faced a new economic reality that meant he stood little chance to turn a profit on Magumi. So why make the movie at all?

98 Interview, Jacob Abiodoun, Porto-Novo, 22 May 2015.
100 Interview, Pétit Maître, Pobè, 23 July 2015. Technically, selling pirated video films from Nigeria is illegal in Bénin, but shopkeepers reported that even if caught, bribing the officer to waive the sentence or fine costs less than just paying it, somewhere between 10,000 and 25,000 francs CFA (US $19.00 to $47.50).
Asked that question directly, Béninois video filmmakers often answer with a variant of “I have to,” or “I can’t not make films.” In the words of Oyede, “It’s only out of love for theater and film that anyone does this kind of thing. If not, the industry would have already ended in Bénin. It’s love, and the blood of the theater, the theater in our blood, the blood of film in our blood, that pushes us to do these films each time. If it weren’t, there would be no other benefit.”

Issiaka Adelabou even tied video filmmaking into cultural survival, as discussed in Chapter 1. These officers’ words notwithstanding, video films do afford their creators another form of capital: the ability to simulate social relations among viewers, people on screen, and video filmmakers alike, and then to instantiate those relations in the real world. This power lies in the language of Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video films.

### 2.2 Suture and film languages

“We’ll start with the *gros plan,*” said Lálá, pointing to the French word for close-up on the makeshift chalkboard. “Who knows what that is?” Matthew Alao and Salomani Fagboutè, both new apprentices at Production Odada studio, answered with silence. I stayed quiet, too. “Well, I’ll tell you,” Lálá continued. “The *gros plan* is how you let the viewer [*téléspectateur*] get up close to the subject. It shows the emotions of the character [*personage*].” Lálá worked from notes he’d taken from Ismaël Abiala Rotimi, a Pobè

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101 Interview, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
native who had trained at the Higher Institute of Audiovisual Professions (ISMA) in Cotonou.\textsuperscript{102} Lálá himself was still technically an apprentice at Production Odada,\textsuperscript{103} but on this second day of training, he’d settled into his role as our de facto master—albeit one in T-shirt, athletic pants, and flip-flops—as he passed that ISMA knowledge on to us. “Not everyone can afford to go to ISMA,” he’d explained (fig. 11).\textsuperscript{104}

By 2015, Lálá had become the unofficial head film editor at Odada Studio, his time there giving him space to explore and experiment with shots and camera angles and turning him into one of CAPADI’s more creative camera-and-montage specialists. Unique for a Béninois media practitioner, Lálá had become an expert as both a “cameraman” and “cadreur”—terms that both mean “camera operator” in standard English and French. But among the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers of the Bénin–Nigeria border, the positions covered two very different aspects of camerawork: “theory” and “practice.” The cadreur translates written scenes into shots and tells the actors where to stand—a job more akin to the director of photography or cinematographer of an American film. Meanwhile, the cameraman’s role is more hands

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{102} In French, \textit{l’Institut supérieur des Métiers de l’Audiovisuel}.
\textsuperscript{103} By 2015, Lálá’s father had lived in Gabon for several years, so without his explicit approval, Lálá had had to begin his apprenticeship at Production Odada unofficially. Until his father signed a contract with the studio owner, Issiaka Ganiou, Lálá would not receive the legal certification that he had completed apprenticeship, which would permit him to start his own studio (conversation with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 28 November 2015).
\textsuperscript{104} The training sessions took place in Pobè on 28 April, 31 May, 1 June, 3 June, 11 June, and 12 June 2015.
\end{footnotesize}
on, taking light readings, focusing the lens, and yelling at onlookers to move out of camera-shot. Now Lálá wanted us to learn both sides of camerawork.

Figure 11: Lálá teaches the new apprentices at Production Odada, Pobè.

The lesson continued into an overview of progressively larger shots, each designed, he said, to showcase characters [mettre en valeur les personnages] in different ways: The très gros plan, or extreme close-up, zooms in on the actor’s face to better convey emotion; the plan rapproché poitrine (head-and-shoulders shot) makes the actor’s identity clear; the plan rapproché taille (waist-up shot) allows the actor to make hand gestures; while the plan américain (stopping at mid-thigh), plan italien (stopping at mid-calf), and plan moyen (full-body shot) show progressively more of the actor’s costume
and situate him or her within the scene. From the other direction, we learned of large-scale shots that establish a location and set the stage, starting with the plan généré (a wide, scenic shot), then the plan d’ensemble (slightly closer in, with characters visible), and finally the plan large (tighter still, with recognizable actors).

Figure 12: Extreme examples of angle plongée (high-angle shot) and angle contre-plongée (low-angle shot) starring Salomani Fagbouté (photographs by Oladélé Pedro).

105 The plan américain and plan italien codify common aesthetic framing practices from the film industries of the U.S. and Italy, respectively (Vallet 2016).
Lálá continued on to camera angles; while the shot makes the character and his surroundings recognizable, the camera angle helps convey the cadreur’s judgement about the emotional tone of the shot, from the angle normal (a straight-on shot, value neutral) to the angle plongée (a high-angle shot, making the subject look small and weak) and the angle contre-plongée (a low-angle shot, making the subject seem powerful). “And of course,” Lálá concluded for the day, “The champ–contrechamp [shot–reverse shot] is important to show two characters interacting. But we’ll cover that later” (figs. 12, 13).

Figure 13: Augustine Bessan and Gérard Koukpohounsi in a shot–reverse shot structure from Ḭkòkò Atura (CC BY 3.0 US).
On our fifth day of training, it was time to put theory into practice. Lálá took us
to a quiet clearing near the center of town, a few yards from the sacred forest and shrine
to Pobè’s patron ọrìṣà, Ôndò. “As a cadreur, you have to be creative with shots. Think of
how best to convey the emotion of the scene and the characters in it.” He crouched
down low and shot Salomani from almost directly underneath. “We can have extra-
high-angle or extra-low-angle shots.” Lálá stood back up and dusted the sand from his
shorts. “But be careful. If the angle is too severe, you can’t tell who you’re looking at.
The point is that the audience knows who the character is.”

The sight of the camera, tripod, and white man turned the lesson into a spectacle
of its own as people stopped to watch us work: a group of boys taking a break from a
soccer match, a drunkard accosting us for ọgógóró money, and an elderly man on his way
back from prayers at the Central Mosque nearby. 106 “What you are doing here,” the old
man gestured toward the camera, “is the future. You can ask for money and survive for
a day or two. But if you learn a skill, you can earn money every day. This is how Pobè
will develop.” He gestured to the sacred forest and the Ôndò temple nearby. “It’s good
you’re doing this here. This is the mouth of Pobè [ẹnu tí ọ̀pòbè]! This is the place where
the whole town comes together.”

106 Ọgógóró (known as sodabi in Gbe languages) is a potent alcoholic beverage distilled from palm wine,
itself a lightly fermented palm sap (Bryceson 2002: 29).
The man never clarified what he meant by “the mouth of Pobè.” The word ẹnu means “mouth” or “opening,” but it’s also part of the compound ẹnubodè (town gate), and Lálá’s lesson did take place only a few meters from the road that Pobè’s oral history marks as the oldest leading into town (Drewal 1975: 15–17). But Lálá took the old man’s comments in the context of what he was training us to do: Using video films to bring people together. Here I want to take that concept a step further to look at how even the editing of shots gathers people up. This aspect of film has been a longstanding concern of theorists eager to understand how a viewer becomes immersed within the world of a movie (Freedman 1991: 56). Narrative, music, special effects, acting, and other aspects of the film all play a role in capturing the viewers’ attention, encouraging their suspension of disbelief, and helping them ignore or forget about the medium to instead focus on the message (Gerrig and Bezdek 2013). Most filmmakers strive to render invisible their movies’ structure; audiences usually aren’t supposed to think consciously about how individual shots create a sense of continuity when juxtaposed with one another. For film scholars, however, these semiotic codes create meaning through editing—the film’s “language”—to absorb the viewer into the logic of the film, while also imparting the ideological baggage that comes with it.

Since the 1960s, film theorists have turned to two strains of critical theory to understand the relationship between shot sequence and viewer identification:
psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theory of subject formation, and philosopher Louis
Althusser’s theory of interpellation that derives from it (Strathausen 1994). From Lacan,
these theorists borrow the idea that subject formation occurs when symbols, especially
language, structure an individual’s perception of self (Dayan 1974: 23–24). The
experience of viewing a film approximates the “mirror stage” of human development,
the point when an infant recognizes itself in a mirror and develops a unified sense of
identity tied to that image and arbitrarily bounded by the symbolic order, represented in
have borrowed the idea of “suture” from Jacques-Alain Miller ([1966] 1977), his answer
to a problem posed by Lacan that, as an individual learns to distinguish itself from that
which is not the subject (the Other), a “wound” or “lack” results from the foreclosure.
Miller suggests to “suture” that wound closed requires accepting the logic of the
symbolic order and the limited subject position it affords (Heath 1977: 48–50; Silverman

For cinema theorist Jean-Pierre Oudart ([1969] 1977), suture is necessary to pull a
film spectator into identification with the on-screen characters. The viewer’s initial joy at
seeing a cinematic image fades upon realizing that the image is neither boundless nor

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107 Cinema scholar Daniel Dayan’s (1974: 24) recounting of Lacan’s theory of the mirror-phase only refers to
an infant forming an imaginary conception of its own unified body by analogy to its visual perception of its
caregiver’s body.

108 Although Miller’s concept of suture is heavily indebted to the thought of Jacques Lacan, the concept itself
originates with Miller (Hewitson 2013).
under his control—so whose viewpoint is it? The viewer feels powerless and frustrated to refuse the gaze thrust upon him, a gaze subconsciously associated with the “Absent One,” the proverbial Father of psychoanalysis. Yet the shot changes to an image of a character looking, allowing the disoriented viewer to assign the unattributed first shot to the figure now on screen. The tension resolves as the viewer is sutured into the symbolic logic of the film and now identifies with the subject positions of the movie characters (Silverman [1983] 2000: 78–79; Lapsley & Westlake 2006: 86–87).

For cinema scholar Daniel Dayan (1974: 28), suture does more, making film an address to the spectator that not only encourages identification with on-screen characters, but also perpetuates its ideology. Dayan’s argument combines Miller’s ([1966] 1977) psychoanalytic insights with the theory of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser ([1971] 2006), himself heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Althusser (ibid.: 100–106), ideology is similar to Lacan’s symbolic order, a set of codes that provides people with an imaginary understanding of their relationship to their actual material conditions of existence. Yet to perpetuate itself, an ideology needs subjects beholden to it. It achieves this dominance by setting the terms by which individuals view and address one another, a process Althusser calls interpellation. The “hail” is the most basic form of interpellation; two individuals greet one another on the street as specific subjects with specific identities, interpellating one another through their mutual recognition. In so doing, they also embed one another within the logics of the
ideology that has set the terms for their interaction. Likewise, institutions such as the state, interpellate individuals as subjects within their ideology by hailing them, as in Althusser’s famous example of a police officer calling “Hey, you there!” and the person so addressed turning to look. These ideologies then affect the material world by shaping the behaviors of those beholden to them. Thus, for Dayan (1974: 28–31), a film hails its viewer through the semiotic codes it uses to convey its narrative. The process of suture allows the film to hide its structure from the viewer’s conscious perception, while constituting the viewer as a subject who identifies with the on-screen characters and the ideology governing their actions. In other words, by presenting a disembodied gaze (a shot) as belonging to an on-screen character, the film masks its own enunciation just as ideology masks real material conditions with imaginary ones. What Oudart’s and Dayan’s theories have in common is their insistence that shot structure is the primary mechanism filmmakers use to suture viewers into the narrative world of the film. As back-to-back shots associate a field of view with a looking character, the spectator identifies with that person on screen and forgets about the film itself. The process repeats over the length of the film as the spectator experiences the gazes of multiple characters and identifies with each in turn (Silverman 1983 [2000]: 77; Freedman 1991: 56–57).109

109 In a response to suture theory, William Rothman (1975) argues that shot–reverse shot is actually much less common in classic Hollywood films than a three-shot structure that begins with the character looking, cuts to what that character is looking at in the second shot, and cuts back to the character reacting in the
However, theorists of African art cinema have argued that a film’s structure can do much more than merely draw viewers into an ideology; it can interpellate them as politically active subjects to destabilizes oppressive structures, as well. Sure, film and other screen media entered Africa under colonial rule for colonial ends (Larkin 2008), and today African audiences are subjected to Hollywood films and the capitalist ideologies they support (Mowitt 2005: 7–8; Prabhu 2014: 5–6). Yet, film theorists such as John Mowitt (2005: 13, 36) and Anjali Prabhu (2014: 3–4, 217) argue that African filmmakers have adapted the semiotics of film structure to reflect local conditions and cultural concerns rather than the European or North American contexts in which they were first developed. In the process, they have developed what Mowitt (2005: 37–38) calls “foreign film languages”—meaning not that the dialogue of a movie is in Swahili or Yorùbá, but that the very structure of the film reflects the culture in which it was produced and furthers the filmmaker’s ideological goals. Mowitt (2005) and Prabhu (2014) focus exclusively on African art cinema, yet their insights suggest that the products of Africa’s commercial movie cultures have their own ideological effects, whether Nigeria’s Nollywood juggernaut or its much smaller Béninois analogue. While

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third shot. Such a structure leaves no doubt as to which character any disembodied shot belongs to, which Rothman suggests allows audiences to understand that the movie is fabricated and that its editing is artificial (Lapsley & Westlake 2006: 88–89).

110 In this way, Prabhu argues, African filmmakers are explicitly addressing the unease felt by Fanon’s ([1952] 2008) experience of being constituted as a colonial subject in that theorist’s version of being called into being as a subject.
not “films” per se—scholars gloss them as “video films”—these productions still rely on film languages that call upon unique cultural contexts and target specific audiences. Even more these film languages reflecting the economic conditions of their production.

2.3 Gazes and greetings

Another strain of film theory builds on the concept of suture to understand the implications of using camera shots to act as surrogate gazes for the spectator. As discussed above, the viewer identifies with the on-screen personages, eventually accepting the shots of the camera as the characters’ gazes and, by extension, the viewer’s windows into the world shown on screen. This concept has led film theorists to argue that by encouraging the viewer to identify with on-screen characters, films objectify what those characters look at. In other words, gazes represent power, with certain people able to look, and others subjected to being looked at. For instance, Laura Mulvey (1975) has famously argued that the shots of classic Hollywood cinema encourage identification with on-screen male characters, turning female characters into passive objects of the male gaze.

Writing about the role of devotional images in religious practice, David Morgan (2012) argues that the gazer–gazed dyad doesn’t necessarily place the person looking into a position of power over what is seen. Any number of gazes can operate in a particular cultural context, each enacting a different social relation between looker and looked-at. For Morgan (ibid.: 55), these gazes are “ways of seeing” shaped by historical,
social, and cultural factors. They aren’t images; images are merely the results of particular gazes. Rather, a gaze is a specific act of looking and how that looking links the viewer to the viewed within a particular constellation of cultural and historical (and, I would add, economic) concerns that shape the interaction (ibid.: 69). In short, gazes are a way to link not only one human body to another, but also one human body to objects and images in its environment and, through the way those bodies have been conditioned by culture and history, to larger social forces (ibid.: xvii).

From childhood, Nàgó–Yorùbá people in Bénin learn that gazes are an essential part of social relations due to their role in greetings (ìkìni). Unless mediated through a telephone or other device, every greeting begins with a gaze; that is, someone has to be able to see the person he wishes to greet and then wait for that person to come within earshot to be hailed. As Romain Akogou, president of APADI–Pobè told me, “People shouldn’t have a conversation if they can’t see each other.” But Yorùbá greetings like those in Pobè are rarely simple hellos—what linguists call “phatic” greetings (Akindele 1990: 2); they are instead protracted affairs that involve specific gestures, inquiries, and more gazes. Greetings require both greeter and greeted to judge their relative social status, a factor generally dependent on their relative birth age; the younger averts her or his eyes to kneel down if female or prostrate if male (Igboin 2012: 130)—a position

111 Interview, Romain Akogou, Pobè, 17 September 2014.
Morgan (2012: 72–73) calls the “aversive gaze”—regardless of who initiated the greeting. Once bidden to stand back up, the greeting continues as the higher-status person asks after the other’s health, family, work, etc. (Akindele 1990: 11–12). Ànàgó and Ọ̀hórí, like most dialects of Yorùbá, have greetings for nearly every conceivable situation: time of day, specific relationships, specific occasions (such as weddings or festivals), and specific circumstances (rain falling, someone traveling) (Akindele 1990: 8).

Yorùbá scholars from Nigeria note that in the urban hustle of their country, drawn-out greetings such as the ones discussed here are growing rare (Akindele 1990: 10; Igboin 2012: 138–39). But in Bénin, proper greetings are an essential part of Nàgó–Yorùbá morality, especially for a group as concerned with àṣà ibílé (tradition) as the video filmmakers of CAPADI. The actors and producers of Pobè relished knowing the appropriate greeting for obscure events and quizzed each other on such lore, even if practicality led to shorter greetings and half prostrations when people were busy. Yet these video filmmakers agree with those same Nigerian scholars who note that greetings are moral signifiers, setting the stage for proper social relations, thereby helping maintain moral standards within the community (Akindele 1990: 1). It is a sign of bad

112 If age is relatively equal, other factors determine who should initiate a greeting, such as seniority in a group or association, or gender (men senior to women). The exception is when a lower-status person doesn’t see a higher-status one, or when a higher-status person is greeting a lower-status person for some accomplishment or life event (Akindele 1990: 2).
upbringing to not greet others or reply to greetings properly; such rudeness can lead to hurt feelings and even accusations of witchcraft (ibid.: 3; Igboin 2012: 124).

For Gérard, the fact that no one was buying copies of *Magumi* was a symptom of just such immorality: In Bénin, people don’t support one another. At the level of film sales, local audiences don’t care about paying for the video films they watch, he griped; instead, they borrow video films from friends or watch them for free in video shops.113

And at the level of production, creators argue that Bénin’s wealthy hoard their money and refuse to invest it in the success of others, whether this manifests through tight-stringed government arts-funding programs, or lack of private investments by Bénin’s small wealthy class.114 What many CAPADI members long for, then, is a system like the one used in Nollywood, where a single person known as a marketer pays the costs to produce and distribute a video film either as the sole funder, or by inviting partners to invest. The writers, directors, and other creative professionals take a cut but surrender copyright to the finished movie. This financing system often leads to conflict over artistic differences and budgets (Miller 2016b: 38), and it has not prevented precarity in both Nollywood labor practices or video film sales (Miller 2016a). But from across the border, Béninois video filmmakers see marketers as a way to liberate themselves from the economic woes of video film production.

113 Conversation with Gérard Koukpohounsi and an anonymous friend, Pobè, 14 August 2015.
114 Interview, Florentine Omolacho, Pobè, 30 May 2015.
The problem, as they see it, is that when someone gets rich in Bénin, the would-be investor suddenly severs social ties from people who may ask for support. As Oyede put it, “If you ask someone rich to help you, they’ll start to avoid you. You greet them, and they ignore it.”\textsuperscript{115} To Bénin’s video filmmakers, investment isn’t a coldblooded calculation to gain a monetary return; it’s a way to redistribute wealth and help others succeed. By refusing to even engage with video filmmakers who may need financial support, these would-be investors not only show themselves to be antisocial, they also reveal their immorality and open the door to accusations of occultism.\textsuperscript{116} Òrìṣà alone are permitted to not return greetings—a version of a viewing relation that Morgan (2012: 73–74) calls the devotional gaze—as suggested by the proverb, “Àkínijé níí gbé òrìṣà niyì”: It is his silence and unchallenged greetings that bestow honor and sacredness on the Òrìṣà (Olúpònà 2011: 161). Mere mortals are not supposed to ignore someone’s hail.\textsuperscript{117}

But this last point suggests that all greetings involve at least one more gaze: the unseen gaze of the Òrìṣà and the ancestors, forces whom Nàgò–Yorùbá indigenous religion charges with maintaining peace, health, and harmony in the community. Ancestors in particular ensure that social order is maintained and bless those who help

\textsuperscript{115} Interview, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
\textsuperscript{116} Conversation with Gérard Koukpohounsi and an anonymous friend, Pobè, 14 August 2015.
\textsuperscript{117} Olọ́rìṣà are expected to greet their divinities at the start of daily ritual practices (Olúpònà 2011: 99; Igboin 2012: 124).
As religion scholar Benson O. Igboin (ibid.: 131) puts it, Yorùbá greetings become “ontological” as they link people together into a social web that “preserves the common ancestry, shared values, purposes, and experiences of the people. This ancestry must be maintained by the community because therein the individual realises him/herself.” The parallels to Althusser’s ([1971] 2006) theory of interpellation are clear: This ancestor-enforced morality is an ideology into which friends and acquaintances mutually interpellate one another, with the framework personified as ancestors and divinities who hail both.

Greetings in this view require at least sight and hearing: I see you, and I greet you—which you hear. In this light, interpellation itself has important audiovisual aspects. Understood as forms of hailing in their own right, then, how might the camera shots of movies act as surrogate gazes, as Mulvey (1975) and others have argued? What do Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video films reveal about their creators’ notions of idealized social relations among the viewer, creator, and on-screen figures? Below, I consider two genres of video film produced by Nàgó–Yorùbá media practitioners in Bénin: The praise film, with its panegyric gaze, and the fictional film, with its familiarizing gaze.

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118 As Laitin (1986: 68) notes, the Yorùbá code of greetings only applies to social realms governed by indigenous religious values; in mosques, for instance, parties greeting one another crouch down to the same level so that neither is superior to the other, and greetings are in Arabic. In the Evangelical churches of Pobè, most greetings are by handshake with no one kneeling or prostrating to another.
2.4 Video and the panegyric gaze

Issiaka sighed. In the tiny preview window of his film-editing software, a mass of men and women bobbed and swayed to the music of an àpàlà musician. He had almost finished editing together the footage he’d taken at a large gathering the week before, a celebration honoring the babaláwo (diviners) of the Plateau region. This kind of videography was his bread and butter at Production Odada, a steady source of income with so many Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá holding celebrations each weekend, from weddings and anniversaries to special events such as this one. The event itself had been large and ambitious, drawing babaláwo from across the Ouémé and Plateau, and even Nigeria. The program was impressive, too, with performances by traditional singers and dancers, as well as fújì and àpàlà musicians. Editing the video had been relatively simple; the video used one main camera view from a relatively fixed position that showed the stage and the makeshift dancefloor in front of it. From time to time, Issiaka added explanatory subtitles to identify important people, but the video film’s primary footage treated the home viewer as just another member of the audience, seeing everything in widescreen. Only now, Issiaka noticed, something had gone wrong: A large man in a colorful bùbá moved to fill the frame with his back—but then the footage jumped, the
man disappeared, and the dancing continued. “There’s a jump in the footage,” Issiaka spat.  

Issiaka’s frustration over a technical difficulty in his video film speaks to how videography is supposed to work in places like Pobè. Even if they won’t fund fictional video films, the well-heeled of the Ouémé and Plateau departments do hire media practitioners to come to their events, record them, and create keepsake VCDs or DVDs for guests. Several CAPADI actors and video film producers moonlight as deejays, emcees, or videographers for special events. Of these roles, videographer is the most lucrative; having such audiovisual attention at an event is costly, but it lends the event prestige, with longer videos more effectively conveying the largesse of the host (Gore 1998). But Issiaka’s dismay over the jump in his footage suggests how this type of video is meant to interpellate the viewer into the world of the movie: In this case, the viewer becomes another member of the audience, gazing upon the honored guests. In other words, these video films create a panegyric gaze—one that melds elements of Morgan’s (2012: 73–78) devotional and communal gazes by showing a large group of people all united in celebrating their host.

Writing about glossy praise magazines in Southwestern Nigeria, literature scholar Adélékè Adéêkọ (2017: 122) argues that Yorùbá media focused on the rich and

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119 Conversation with Issiaka Adéválé Ganiou, Pobè, 24 March 2015.
powerful—the “eminent” in his terms, or “big men” in anthropologist Karin Barber’s (2007: 126)—are animated by a “panegyric tendency,” a logic derived from the older medium of praise poetry (*oríkì bọ́rọ́kinni*). His argument echoes that of ethnomusicologist Christopher Alan Waterman (1990: 186–87), who shows how older genres of Yorùbá praise singing infuse newer ones, such as *jùjú*, as musicians sing the praises of potential patrons. As Adéèkọ̀ (2017: 122–25) shows, the same impetus animates Nigerian magazines that showcase eminent subjects in glossy, full-color photographs.120

Yet in arguing for a panegyric tendency in photography, Adéèkọ̀ (2017: 148–50) shows how even traditional praise-singing, ostensibly limited to sung or chanted oral poetry, is inherently audiovisual in nature. The job of an effective praise-singer, at least in part, is to recognize signs of moral virtue in the target and to celebrate those. By praising them, then, the singers “swell the eminent’s head” in recognizing his position (ibid.: 127). Such recognition may permit a bit of exaggeration, but the singer should stay true to what he sees (or can see in mind’s eye from what others tell him). As Adéèkọ̀ (ibid.: 151–52) argues, Yorùbá conceptions of morality often privilege the visual over the spoken in their emphasis on truthfulness, as indicated in the proverb, “Ohun tójú bá rí ló yẹ kẹ́nu ó sọ”: That which the eye sees is what the mouth should say. The same is true

120 Art historian Rowland Abiodun (2014) makes a similar argument in claiming that the logic of oríkì praise poetry guides all Yorùbá expressive cultures. For Abiodun, a researcher must have a firm grounding in “deep” Yorùbá language and culture to understand the complexities of oríkì poetry and, by extension, any Yorùbá artwork. His point is well taken, but Adéèkọ̀’s (2017) approach suggests a productive alternative that I follow here.
for drawing, sculpting, dancing, and video filmmaking. The eye guides moral expressive culture.

Simply possessing eminence is not enough; it must be recognized. To that end, someone can buy fancy clothes, build a large home, or employ a fleet of servants to signify his successes in life. But by attracting praise-singers, the eminent person benefits from having a specialist amplify the visibility of those signs of status and success. Praise poems and newer media alike hail the target as an eminent being—or at the very least as one with potential to become so—and recognize those aspects of his life that distinguish him from everyone else. This requirement gives praise-singers a great deal of power, as they are the ones with both the social sanction and technical knowhow to recognize and broadcast eminence in others. In this view, eminence is not merely a measure of an individual’s accomplishments; it is the reason that individual is hailed in the first place (Barber 2007: 108–109, 126–27; Adéekò’ 2017: 127–28, citing Babalọlá [1975] 1981: 5).

Oriki praise poems start from what the singer has observed or knows from other sources and translate that information into expressive form. Praise poems are rife with verbal descriptions of the subject’s physical attributes, references to his retinue, or mentions of personal property. For visual media such as photography and video, these verbal descriptions are translated into audiovisual forms: A photograph may focus on expensive clothing and possessions, for instance (Adéekò’ 2017: 132–34), while a video may linger on the size of the crowd or the number of people dancing until the camera
zooms in on the sweat-streaked brow of a musician or emcee as rich party guests place one crisp bill after another on his forehead. There is some room for exaggeration in this practice—perhaps in editing, the footage is slowed down, footage repeated—but the core of the oral image must be based on the praise singer’s own knowledge, or at the very least belief based on credible sources (Adééko 2017: 148–50). Often, the main subject of the video, the host, may not appear on screen for long stretches, or a photograph may focus on clothing and possession at the expense of showing the likeness of the subject more prominently. Such is part of the appeal; these images are about recognizing a particular subject position—that of eminence—rather than an individual per se (ibid.: 132).

As audiovisual experts, then, video filmmakers such as Gérard, Lálá, and Issiaka supplement their income from mundane employment and make up for lost revenues from their fictional films by offering their services as videographic praise-singers. Every election season, for instance, candidates turn to these media practitioners to create their campaign materials: radio ads, TV spots, messages played from loudspeakers mounted on cars, even live songs and sketches at rallies.121 And for every lavish party thrown in Pobè or nearby, there’s a need for someone to come and recognize the eminence of the person hosting. These videos suture the viewer into the scene as another member of the

121 Interview, Romain Akogou, Pobè, 16 February 2015.
audience, hailed by the video’s praises to join the others in their panegyric gaze. The challenge for these video filmmakers, then, is to make themselves known as skilled video praise-singers in the first place.

2.5 Audiovisual masking and suture in fictional video films

The poster for *Magumi* was already up at the APADI–Pobè office, the faces of its lead actors prominently featured: Gérard as the protagonist, Oyede as a stately family head, Issiaka as the monarch, and Janette Odjo as the cursed female lead. Flanking the one-sheet on the yellow-painted walls were about a dozen posters for other video films, turning the headquarters into a de facto shrine to the productions of its members since the 1990s. In quieter times, APADI–Pobè members liked to walk the length of the hall to see if anything new had gone up, and when the doors were open, people wandered in from the neighborhood, pointing out posters for video films they’d seen and listing the screen names of the actors they recognized. But today, the building was abuzz with the release of Gérard’s video film, with actors, singers, and media technicians coming to grab T-shirts and bundles of VCDs to sell around town and in nearby communes on foot, by motorcycle, or from rented cars. Gérard made sure that each hawker took a few posters, too. “Give those out. Ask people to put them up!”

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122 Conversation with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 6 December 2014.
Gérard knew the posters wouldn’t last long; he’d already put up dozens last month to create buzz, but most had already fallen to wind, rain, or children needing paper to cover schoolbooks. But a rare few had survived, faded perhaps, but clinging to the walls of open-air food stalls, concrete fences, and sheltered interiors, keeping Gérard’s face in the public eye. The new posters would be a refresh, making sure people knew that a new video film was coming out, and it was from Gérard “Oladekpo” Koukpohounsi.

Making media lets people like Gérard keep themselves known to the public as media makers. There is economic incentive in this, since being known for making or appearing in video films or on the radio increases the chances someone will get called up to work for an eminent client for a job as a deejay, emcee, or videographer. However, for Béninois media practitioners, at least in Pobè, this neo-praise-singing is not financially lucrative enough to bestow eminence of its own, unlike the situation in Nigeria (Adéeko 2017: 146–47), nor to sustain a livelihood. Such jobs provide some financial incentive, yet people like Gérard continue to make fictional video films, as well, even though those movies are money losers. With monetary gain so unlikely, then, is it enough to take these producers at their word and say that they make video films

123 Conversations with Gérard Koukpohounsi, Pobè, 1 June 2015, and Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 9 March 2016.
because they enjoy it? Pleasure undoubtedly does play a part; movie sets and studios are highly social spaces, where friends joke between takes, meet new people, and escape from their everyday lives (see Chapter 4). But the producer could just as easily spend that same money to throw a large party and achieve a similar effect.

Reciprocity is another benefit for video filmmakers, it isn’t enough to explain their attachment to the medium either. Producers rarely pay the actors who appear in their video films, only reimbursing them for travel expenses and providing food and lodging during production. Bringing in actors from other communities greatly increases potential sales; even if the actors play only minor roles (often necessary, since paying for lodging and food is expensive), having them in the video film means their faces can go on the poster and jacket, increasing their appeal to people from the actor’s home community.\footnote{Interview, Romain Akogou, Pobè, 27 August 2014.} For instance, the front and back of the disc jacket for Magumi features the faces of twenty-three different performers from across the Ouémé and Plateau divisions. This reciprocity is one of the benefits of CAPADI membership: Video filmmakers are happy to take roles in one another’s productions so long as they can call upon a similar pool of unpaid labor when they make their own video films in the future.\footnote{Interview with Issiaka Adelabou, Porto-Novo, 12 August 2012; Interview with Tadjou Deen Babalola, Pobè, 24 October 2014.}

But that secondary draw of using familiar faces to boost sales points to what I see as the most compelling reason Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá make video films despite the
financial burden: Making video films lets them fashion a public image that lends cultural sanction to their work, and then to spread that image to the community. Fame, however geographically limited, is an end of its own. Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá actors and video film producers often go by screen names rather than birth names both on and off camera. The filmmakers themselves call one another by these nicknames, but more importantly, strangers greet them by the names of their on-screen characters, their studio names, their most popular video films, and their noms de plume. For instance, people call the producer Tadjou Deen Babalola “Tadjou Omi Ola” after his 2012 movie. Likewise, during a 2015 event when the masquerade Bàbá Àgbá came out in Pobè (see Chapter 1), a group of praise singers surrounded Issiaka Ganiou on his motorcycle and addressed him for his work at the radio station:

Kábíyësí Olúwa O,
Gbé ũrè wà fún Olókíkí
Nibíkibi ko fì didé.

Almighty God,
Bless Olókíkí
No matter where [he is] so that he will stand up [advance].

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126 Barber (2000: 143) notes the same phenomenon among the Yorùbá stage and TV actors of 1980s Nigeria. 127 Conversation in Oké-Ola Quartier, Pobè, 20 November 2014. This practice is similar to how mothers may be referred to by the name of their firstborn child (e.g., Ìyá Adéníyì for the mother of a child named Adéníyì). Literature scholar Adélékè Adéẹ̀kọ̀ (2017) makes a similar point about created material in his argument that Yorùbá book-release parties in Nigeria borrow the logic of traditional baby-outing and naming celebrations. 128 Recorded in Pobè on 21 August 2015.
The most recognizable Pobè-based video filmmaker was Abiodoun Romain Oyede, whom people addressed as “Général” (or by children, “Dééné”) after his most famous character. When encountering him on the street, people rarely knelt or prostrated as would be the standard greeting for a man of his age and renown; instead, they talked to him as a close friend. In one encounter, Oyede and I stopped on his motorcycle to get gasoline from a roadside stand; the woman didn’t even greet us but like someone bumping into a celebrity unexpectedly asked, “Hey, don’t you make films?”

“By the power of Jesus Christ,” Oyede replied.129

But, as I outlined above, proper greetings are essential to establishing and renewing social relationships and, with them, the moral order of the community. Why, then, would actors and video film producers encourage and tolerate such ostensible social slights when they claim the mantle of protectors of the very morality such protocol is supposed to uphold? Abbreviated greetings and use of nicknames may indicate rudeness, but they just as easily suggest intimacy. These greetings rely on the same audiovisual principles laid out above: One individual sees another and hails that person to initiate a social interaction. But when that hail is something like “Odada!” or “Hey, don’t you make films?” the greeting suggests either that the two people are

129 The exchange happened in French in Onigbolo, 31 January 2015: « Ah, tu fais les cassettes, non? » « Avec le pouvoir de Jésus-Christ. »
intimately familiar with one another, or that the person hailed is a well-known public figure. Linguist Reuben O. Ikötun (2010: 180, 182) notes that this is the case with Nigerian politicians, with the familiarity indicating not disdain but a desire to see the addressee’s continued success. The same phenomenon plays out among Nàgó–Yorùbá actors and video filmmakers.

Even more, these intimate greetings show the power that lies in these media practitioners’ mastery of the audiovisual. Video films are a way to construct a public persona as comedians, like masked performers, people with the ability to claim moral authority to comment on moral authority (see Chapter 4). This process occurs in three steps: The creation of a persona on screen, the interpellation of audiences into a sense of familiarity with these personae, and the affirmation of this process through real-world interactions.

Actors effect on-screen personae as artists creating an image (àwòrán). In Yorùbá, the word refers to all sorts of aesthetic creations: paintings, drawings, masks, and so on (Lawal 1996: 98–99). On-screen characters fall under this term, as well, even if the media are different: rather than wood, pigments, and chisels, artists use costumes, makeup, mannerisms, acting, and voice to create on-screen personae. In doing so, they rely on a Yorùbá concept of the body as a container for an inner essence with which it combines to constitute the self (Matory 2005b: 169–71). From a metaphysical perspective, the ẹ̀mí (spiritual self) chooses the ọrí inú (also understood as destiny) before the physical body
is born; in mortality, the individual cannot remember what that destiny was but must strive to discover it, as through divination (Hallen 2000: 52–54). The physical body, separate from its interiority (ori ínú; literally, inner head) can be altered or dressed differently as the individual’s subject position changes. For instance, olóribà may be possessed by an ọ́rìṣà divinity, leading to periods of amnesia as the body becomes the vessel of an outside force and others dress the possessed to indicate the identity of the spirit now in control (ibid.: 184). Nàgô–Yorùbá video filmmakers understand these processes and know how to fake them in their costuming and acting. The characters can and do change, even if the skill with which they portray the characters stays the same, as do individual tics of speech and acting (Barber 2000: 143). As the parrot of CAPADI’s motto suggests, ayékóótí, “the world rejects truth.”

The word àwòrán implies that images use the senses to stoke memory: à wò rántí, “what we look at and remember.” These images have both visual and aural dimensions (Lawal 2001: 512), and for art historian Babatunde Lawal (1996: 98–99), the image is both “prospective” and “retrospective”; it stokes the viewer’s memory with a sense of how the image was created in the first place. The word thus references a “past” shared between the image’s creator, the image itself, and the viewer. For art historian David Doris (2011: 163–64), this shared context is akin to Althusser’s concept of ideology, the

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130 Hallen (2000: 44) calls this interiority ínú (inside) without reference to the ori (head).
substrate that allows for communication in the first place, the shared codes that give the image meaning, and the context that lets both viewer and viewed understand themselves as part of something larger. The power of Nàgó–Yorùbá images is thus that they stand for a greater authority and make that authority visible, hailing the viewer to acknowledge it (ibid.: 164–65).

Nevertheless, Nàgó–Yorùbá video film editors understand an even more effective way to make an onscreen persona–image into a social reality for the viewer and actor portraying that character: the way the video film itself is edited. A contrast to early Nollywood video films illustrates this point. In video films from the late 1980s and early 1990s, scenes of conversation often take place in lengthy medium shots that show multiple characters simultaneously. As film scholar Jonathan Haynes (2007a: 139) notes, this choice reflects both material conditions of exhibition and economic restrictions from the time. Early Nigerian movies were meant to be viewed on small television sets with poor picture quality; emphasizing dialogue and plot thus was a more effective strategy of suturing the viewer into the story than sophisticated film editing. And financially, showing conversations in two-shots was more economical in a moviemaking system that relied on limited production time and improvised dialogue. Yet another shot structure grew prevalent in Nigeria as economic pressures lessened with Nollywood’s growth: the shot–reverse shot (fig. 14). From there, it spread to Bénin, bolstered by the
influence of French cinema, as well. It’s an expensive technique that requires more
time or more cameras as nearly every scene must be shot at least four ways: in wide shot
(plan large), in group or double shot (plan de deux personnes), and in close-ups on each
actor delivering his or her lines (plans courts). So why use it? To understand its
prevalence, we return to the theory of suture.

Figure 14: Practicing the shot–reverse shot structure with Matthew Alao
(photographs by Oladélé Pedro).

131 Interview, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
Early film theorists were especially interested in the shot–reverse shot pairing due to its widespread use in everything from Hollywood blockbusters to European art films. The structure is simple: A first shot shows something to the viewer, then the film cuts to a second shot of a person looking at that thing. This sequence suggests that the character in the second shot is the one whose perspective was shown in the first. The shot–reverse shot thus hides the artifice of how those shots were created—in film theory parlance, the “enunciation”—as no camera is visible and the shots approximate a natural human field of vision (Silverman [1983] 2000: 77). One of the most common uses of shot–reverse shot in cinema worldwide is to show a conversation between two characters. That is, the first shot shows Character A’s face as she delivers a line of dialogue; the film then cuts to Character B’s face as he reacts or gives his reply. The shots continue to alternate as the characters trade lines, creating the illusion of a face-to-face conversation often enhanced by showing part of the listening character’s back during the partner’s turn in the exchange. Likewise, the actors’ eye lines, or gazes, link shots to reverse shots; by looking off to the side of the camera and not directly into the lens, the alternating shots establish that the characters are addressing one another and not the viewer directly. The shot–reverse shot sequence helps maintain a sense of narrative cohesion, hiding the fact that the images were captured individually and only later

133 For most movies, the camera actually moves between taking the first shot and its reverse, meaning that the fields of view are technically not from the same position looking in different directions (Silverman 1983 [2000]: 78).
edited together. For some film theorists, the structure is an arbitrary way to represent the human universal experience of a back-and-forth conversation (Bordwell: 67–69). For others, the process is one with potentially deeper effects on the viewer’s thoughts and behaviors (Silverman [1983] 2000: 77–78).

This shot sequence has become a taken-for-granted part of Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video films’ film language. As financial conditions worsened for video filmmakers in 2014 and beyond, for instance, movie professionals focused on technological means to speed up the process of capturing multiple camera angles, such as more cameras and a video mixer—but never on abandoning the shot structure as too expensive.¹³⁴ But mixers are expensive; in Bénin, only the national TV station and ISMA had them. APADI–Pobè continued to do things the time-consuming way, taking several different shots in sequence and later editing them together to create the illusion of conversation.¹³⁵ Clearly, showing each party in a conversation via interlocking close-ups carries aesthetic importance.

The reason lies in its ability to suture the viewer into both the world of the video film and into a social relationship to the constructed personae in it. As those familiar hails indicate—calling Oyede “Général,” or Gérard “Oladekpo,” for instance—the shot–reverse shot technique hails the viewer into identification with onscreen characters but,

¹³⁴ Interview, Romain Akogou, Pobè, 21 November 2014.
crucially, also creates a sense of sociality with those on-screen characters. This back-and-forth shot structure interpellates the viewer into a moral order that requires greetings, the camera angles surrogates for what Morgan (2012: 73) calls the “reciprocal gaze,” a mutual looking-while-looked-at that puts the two parties into an intimate relation. Only this virtual version of the reciprocal gaze has real-world effects in a small-scale film scene like that in Southeastern Bénin; by simultaneously hailing actors as on-screen personae, the video films make their personae social actors when people meet the actor in the flesh, hailing them as such in the market, in the street, or at a roadside gasoline stand.

2.6 Conclusion

Saliou Akadiri, mayor of Pobè, surveyed the people lined up before the town hall. “I see we have the artists of CAPADI with us this morning.” It was a virtual who’s who of Pobè’s acting community: Aline Abike, Saka “Babá Sakêtè” Adam, Romain Akogou, Issiaka “Odada” Adéválé Ganiou, Gérard “Oladekpo” Koukphounsi, Yacoubou “Eitcha” Koussonda, Ìyá Ogege, Célestine Ogoudina, and Oládélé “Lalá” Vincent de Paul Pedro. The mayor peered at the performers through gold-rimmed glasses and cried, “CAPADI!”

In unison, the actors replied, “Progress!”

136 Flag-raising ceremony, Pobè, 3 November 2014.
“Now, I assume CAPADI has something to talk about. Who would like to address the assembly?”

Romain Akogou, president of APADI–Pobè moved over beside one of the rifle-wielding officers who’d just raised the flag for November’s first-Monday-of-the-month flag ceremony. “Excuse me, Mr. Mayor,” Akogou said with all the flair of a Pentecostal preacher. “We are here to ask that you honor a promise. It is a promise that you made to us two years ago to support the artists of Pobè. You said that you would pay the rent on our headquarters building. We would like to ask you to please keep your promise.”

Akadiri didn’t flinch. “Pobè,” he said, “is a poor commune. As the mayor, I have very little money to run the affairs of this town and its surrounding villages. But the source of that poverty is that no one pays taxes.” His tone was now didactic. “Did you know that everyone who runs a boutique or rents a stall in the marketplace is obligated to play taxes to the town treasury? Sadly, very few do so. Because of this, the town treasury is very low. There is simply no money to pay CAPADI’s rent. I can try to find something—but I am not hopeful.”

The mayor took a few steps, sizing up the actors confronting him. “So many of you are on the radio. People know you from your films. You are personalities people know and trust in the community! Why don’t you get the word out that people should pay their taxes? Or do an investigation into the matter to come up with ideas to increase our revenues?”
Akogou slumped. Ìyá Ogègé sucked her teeth and marched off toward the market behind Town Hall. “CAPADI!” the mayor called again.

The video filmmakers replied, “Progress.” This time, it wasn’t an exclamation.

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Three weeks later, the mayor had found the money, and APADI–Pobè’s rent was paid. At a smaller flag-raising ceremony on 24 November, the mayor called, “Akogou Romain! What do you have to say this time?”

The president of APADI–Pobè moved to the mayor’s side and said, “Three weeks ago, we stood before you and asked that you help us pay the rent on our offices. Today, we’re here to thank you for providing that money. As you requested, we also have some ideas on how to improve the economy of Pobè.”

“Would you like to share them in public or private?”

“In private, Sir.”

“Good,” said Akadiri. “Last time we spoke, you made a public request for money, saying that I had failed to provide you what I’d promised. But now you say you want to talk about financial matters in private. That is good. It means you have learned your lesson.”

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137 Conversation with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 19 November 2014.
138 Flag-raising ceremony, Pobè, 24 November 2014.
The mayor may have tried to save face, but APADI–Pobè’s strategy did work; their rent was paid. Clearly, the mayor recognized some element of the public persona they had built up was worth funding: As audiovisual experts, they have the ability to recognize and amplify the eminence in important men, such as he. And as public celebrities, even if local ones, these actors and video filmmakers encourage even strangers in the community to recognize them as personages with comic license to comment on matters of morality both on screen and in the real world.

While their movies may not be profitable financially—APADI–Pobè was begging for financial support from the mayor, after all—these media practitioners trade on their expertise in both singing the praises of others and film editing to call into being the world they want to inhabit and the kinds of people they want to live there. Their video films both structure praise and, through the magic of film languages, praise with their structure. In videography aimed at the eminent, the camera fixes on signs of the client’s achievements and wealth. And when video filmmakers turn the camera’s gaze on themselves in fictional films, they suture the viewer into a sense of social identification with on-screen characters that transcend the medium.

As public personae, a type of image or mask, video filmmakers want to be hailed informally. Greeting them by the name of a character or screen name signifies that you are part of that person’s audience, a public that would otherwise be “dispersed” and “anonymous” (Barber 2000: 55). The reciprocal gaze of the video film leaves the world of
the virtual and enters the world of the actual (Morgan 2012: 76; Boellstorff 2012), putting the two on intimate terms, even if only simulated ones. In doing so, people on the street recognize the performers as real people and fictional personae. And when a person encounters a masked performer, such as an Egúngún or Gèlèdè, protocol says that they should hail the mask as a mask, not any person they suspect to be inside (Barber 2007: 132–33). For video filmmakers, celebrity goes hand in hand with establishing themselves as video panegyrists. Reportage at major events brings revenue at a time of financial uncertainty. This revenue can go toward producing fictional video films that sustain production publics. In the next chapter, I show how Nàngó–Yorùbá video filmmakers use their audiovisual savvy to praise another eminence, the Aláàfin, or Emperor, of Òyò, Nigeria, attempting to win his patronage and to shape his policies vis-à-vis Bénin’s Nàngó–Yorùbá.

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139 Barber (2007: 132) relates the story of a woman in Nigeria who saw an Egúngún masker half-undressed drinking palm wine. She addressed him as a man and not as an ancestor and was driven from town for several years for her faux pas.
There’s a moment in the documentary *Irin Ajo Si Oyo* [Journey to Oyo] (2012, dir. Issiaka Adewale) when we see the Oníṣọlọ of Ìpòbẹ́ meet the Aláàfin of Òyò for the first time. The crowds of Òyò, Nigeria, part as the Aláàfin glides down the streets toward the Oníṣọlọ, approaching from the opposite direction. The two elderly Yorùbá monarchs meet and embrace. The greeting is warm if a bit awkward, lasting a second or two at most. But as a fújì song about Yorùbá ọba (monarchs) plays on the soundtrack, the footage of the hug repeats again and again.

The rest of the documentary puts the 2012 meeting into context. On the one side is King Adiro Agbadjè Wolou, the Oníṣọlọ of Ìpòbẹ́, a small Nàgò–Yorùbá kingdom in Southern Bénin but with some territory stretching into Southwestern Nigeria. On the other is Ọba Làmídi Ọlúyíwọlá Adéyémi III, the Aláàfin of Òyò, a kingdom and city in Western Nigeria that is heir to a two-hundred-year-old tradition of Yorùbá empire and conquest, and the place to which Ìpòbẹ́ traces its origins. This is no simple meeting of Yorùbá monarchs; this is a rekindling of ties between related kingdoms. Setting their reunion in motion is footage of Princess [Arèwà Ọmọ Ọba] Fọlásadé Adéyémi’s tour through Yorùbá-speaking Bénin months earlier. We see her admiring Ọgbọn dancers in

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140 In Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, the title would be written Ìrìnàjò Sí Òyò.
141 Here I use Ìpòbẹ́ to refer to the historical Yorùbá kingdom and Pobè to refer to the town and administrative territory in contemporary Bénin (See Appendix A).
Pobè, an Egúngún masquerade in Takon, the Nàgó–Yorùbá monarchs of Kétou (Kétu) and Porto-Novo (Àjáṣe). Then we see Adéyémi inform the Onísòlo at the royal palace of Ìpòbè that later that year, her father will hold a major festival in honor of Òrányàn, mythical founder of Òyò, and he would like all Yorùbá of the “diaspora” to be there. It is at once an advertisement, invitation, and royal summons from an ambassador of the Aláàfin to come back to an ancestral home. Yet it is also an invitation to establish a new kind of relationship, one that makes Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá, including the people of Ìpòbè, members of—in the words of the festival organizers—a “Yorùbá Diaspora” linked to Òyò as their homeland. As a car inches through a modest crowd, we see that the Onísòlo of Ìpòbè is heeding the emperor’s call.

The rest of Issiaka’s video film supports this narrative of Ìpòbè’s ancestral ties to Òyò. Over shots of a white couple visiting the temple of Òndò, Ìpòbè’s guardian ọ̀rìṣà, and the Onísòlo at his palace, a voiceover describes the kingdom’s founding by migrants from Òyò and the connection between the divinities Òrányàn and Òndò. We see Ìpòbè’s delegation, Ẹgbè Gbọbaníyì—Group in Service to the Ọba—touring the royal palace of Òyò, followed by interviews with Ìpòbè and Òyò elders explaining religious and family ties between the two kingdoms. Finally, the movie shows the Òrányàn Festival itself, with performances by masquerade troupes—including Geledé from Ìpòbè—speeches, and the arrival of the Aláàfin at the palace. But in the final third of the video film, the Onísòlo of Ìpòbè is the star; we see him led through the streets of Òyò by the princess,
arriving at the festival grounds, flicking àṣẹ from his flywhisk to the crowd, watching performances, being announced over loudspeakers, and being greeted back at the Ìpòbẹ’ royal palace by a crowd of prostrating subjects. Then the footage cuts to that scene again, the king of Pobè meeting the king of Òyọ́. Once more they embrace.

*   *   *

On its surface, *Irin Ajo Si Oyo* is the story of how a forgotten corner of Yorùbáland and a once-mighty empire rediscovered one another. At another level, it’s a story of how media producers in a small Nàgó–Yorùbá kingdom have helped set the terms of that relationship by promoting local oral history via print, radio, and video film. In doing so, these producers have allied with those institutions that represent “traditional culture”—Ìpòbẹ́’s monarch, his royal ministers, and the ọ́rìṣà priests, or what I call the àṣà ibílè establishment—and proved themselves crucial in fostering an alliance between Ìpòbẹ́ in Bénin and Òyọ́ in Nigeria based on the notion of a diaspora rediscovering its homeland. This alliance brings financial opportunities when these elders cross into state politics and need publicity, but it also allows media practitioners to express devotion for àṣà ibílè.

Yet, as I will show, this idea of a “Yorùbá Diaspora” expands the concept of diaspora beyond its normal limits. In theories of the African Diaspora in the Americas, for instance, diaspora was created in a moment of trauma, as the transatlantic slave trade separated Africans from their homeland and dispersed them throughout a strange
land in deplorable conditions. These circumstances have led in turn to a sense of shared identity and cultural affinity based on African “traditions” linking diasporic peoples to one another and to their homeland (Gilroy 1993; Matory 2005). Yet if West Africa’s non-Nigerian Yorùbá population is itself a diaspora, its founding trauma was the fall of the Òyọ́ Empire and the subsequent carving up of Yorùbá territory into European colonies and, later, independent nation–states. The resulting situation is one where the “diaspora” is literally next door to its “homeland,” with both sides keeping in close contact even during the colonial period. In this chapter, I focus on how this intimate separation has made “tradition” a source of diaspora–homeland unity, but also a point of negotiation and contention over which version of tradition should set the parameters of the rekindled relationship. Under debate are what I call diasporic ethics, the rights and responsibilities the diaspora and homeland demand toward one another.142

I consider these questions by focusing on Ìpòbẹ́’s efforts to frame Òyọ́ in Nigeria as homeland, with special attention to the role media producers have played in the process. I argue that for Òyọ́, the idea of a Yorùbá Diaspora in West Africa privileges a tradition that makes the Aláàfin supreme among Yorùbá monarchs. This tradition rests on the idea that the Aláàfin is the earthly representative of the warrior–king–turned–ọ́rìṣà Ọ̀rùnṣà, mythical founder of the Òyọ́ Empire, which once stretched across

142 The trauma–separation model of diaspora formation is perhaps the most commonly used in academic literature, but it is not the only way to conceptualize diaspora. See Piot (1999: 40–43, 156–71) and Piot (2001) for others.
territory now divided into Nigeria and Bénin during the founding trauma of Òyó’s fall and the colonial divisions that followed. Rekindling ties between diaspora and homeland, then, requires a renewal of precolonial fealties to the Aláàfin as Òrányà́n’s living representative.

Yet if Òyó seeks to create a diaspora, its diasporic subjects must go along with that tradition to create a homeland (Matory 2005; Feld 2012). In the case of Ìpòbẹ́, radio deejays, journalists, and video filmmakers frame Òyó as a traditional homeland and set the terms of Ìpòbẹ́’s client–patron relationship with it. Part of this task is accomplished through the performance of spectacle, as media practitioners from Ìpòbẹ́ turn their cameras, microphones, and recorders toward the Aláàfin to create a spectacle of his power within the Yorùbá Diaspora. At the same time, the media practitioners send radio, video, and digital photographs back to Bénin, framing Òyó as a traditional homeland for the people there. In this task, the role of media practitioners as storytellers allows them to emphasize traditional stories and practices shared with Òyó, while leaving Nigeria’s violence, corruption, and religious strife outside the frame (see Feld 2012: 205–206). But in accepting the shared tradition of an imperial past under Òrányà́n, Ìpòbẹ́’s media practitioners argue for their own version of this tradition as “purer” than that of the homeland (Clarke 2004; Matory 2005; Palmié 2013), especially where the character and fate of Òrányà́n are concerned. In advancing tales of Òrányà́n’s Béninois version, Òndó, Ìpòbẹ́’s media professionals and their patrons promote an equivalency
between Ìpòbẹ́’s Onísọlọ and Ọyọ’s Aláàfin, both earthly representatives of Ọránỳàn. At the same time, Ìpòbẹ́’s origin myth makes an ethical claim on the Aláàfin and the Yorùbá people he presides over by depicting Òndò as not a divinity of war, as the Ọránỳàn Festival promotes, but one of tolerance and cosmopolitanism.

3.1 Radio reunion

The creator behind Irin Ajo Si Oyo is actor, director, and producer Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou. Issiaka started acting in the Yorùbá traveling theater in 1983, over time becoming more prominent in the media and performance circuits of Pobè and the Ouémé–Plateau region of Bénin. After two short trainings in Nigeria (1998) and Gabon (2001), Issiaka apprenticed to Romain Akogou, the Nigeria-trained head of Ife Dola Film Productions. Meanwhile, Issiaka became well known in Pobè as an Ànàgó–Yorùbá announcer and deejay for the community radio station, Plateau FM, “Radio Olókikí” [Popular Radio] which he joined in 2003. After completing his apprenticeship in 2010, Issiaka invested in cameras, computers, and software to found Production Odada. He gained a reputation in the community for his work as a videographer at special events, and as a designer for radio and video spots, allowing him to work full-time as a media producer. He continued to support Nàgó–Yorùbá theatre and video

143 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Póbè, 6 August 2012.
144 In Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, the name would be Ifé Dójá.
145 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Póbè, 18 July 2013. The station has announcers for shows in Ànàgó– and Òhörí–Yorùbá dialects, Fon, and French.
146 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Póbè, 6 August 2012.
filmmaking, fronting the theater troupe named for him, Adéwálé Theater Group, and serving as the secretary for the Pobè branch of the Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmaking association CAPADI.

The history and traditions of Pobè are important to Issiaka. He has been steeped in Pobè’s indigenous religion since childhood, thanks to a family home in the Mamangué neighborhood, just a short walk from the royal palace and a few hundred yards from the sacred forest of Pobè’s patron divinity, Òndò. Issiaka’s personal projects often focus on Pobè’s indigenous religion, as in both fictional video films he has written, directed, and produced: *Eru Yìgi* [Marriage of fear] in 2009, and *Igi Ojude* [The meeting tree] in 2011. As his skill in video filmmaking grew, Issiaka turned his camera toward Pobè’s àṣà ibíle ceremony, starting with the Òndò yam festival and a local masquerade called Bábá Àgbà in 1999.

It was only natural for Issiaka to take this fascination to his radio work, as well. In 2011 or so, he invited a radio personality named Akukọ from Ibadan, Nigeria, to speak on Plateau FM about the history of Òyọ: its founding by the warrior–king Òrányàn, its rise as a powerful Yorùbá empire, its sway over large swaths of what is

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147 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 18 July 2013.
148 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 6 August 2012.
149 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 6 August 2012. In Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, the titles would be *Eru Yìgi* and *Igi Ojude*.
150 Interview with Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 29 March 2015, 2 September 2015.
151 Interview, President of Gbọbaníyi delegation, Pobè, 14 September 2015.
now Nigeria and Bénin in the eighteenth century, and its collapse in 1837, which gave way to the empire of Dahomey next door (see Law 1977 and Matory [1994] 2005). But then Ganiou told another Ọ̀rányàn story, one about the founder of Ọyo traveling southwest to found another kingdom, Ìpòbẹ; his final resting place, and a place where he is revered as Òndò. Other Yorùbá-speaking parts of Bénin—Kétou, Savè, Ifagni—trace their origins to Ilé-Ifẹ or the Benin kingdom and to relatives of Ọrányàn. But Ìpòbẹ links itself directly to the ancient Yorùbá capital and considers its people kin to those in Ọyo.152

Plateau FM’s antenna reached well into Nigeria at the time, so, as Pobè’s ăṣà iblyẹ establishment tells it, the Aláàfin of Ọyo himself was listening to this program about the historical and cultural links between Ọyo and Ìpòbẹ. This radio broadcast then spurred a major reawakening of Ọyo–Ìpòbẹ ties. The aftermath is recorded in Ganiou’s Irin Ajo Si Oyo: Princess Fọláṣadé Adéyemí visiting Ìpòbẹ in 2012, meeting the king, and giving her speech inviting him to Ọyo. Her visit, the Ìpòbẹ partisans say, was an official investigation into the truth of Ìpòbẹ’s ăṣà iblyẹ elites to form a delegation, the Ẹgbẹ Gbọbaniyì, to travel to Ọyo in 2012 for the first edition of a festival held in honor of Ọrányàn. Issiaka naturally offered his camera to document the trip; Irin Ajo Si Oyo is the result. Issiaka has taken footage each year since

152 Interview, Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 18 September 2014.
for potential follow-up documentaries, and for the 2014 festival, he even brought along copies of the travelogue to sell in Òyọ, his homeland.153

3.2 Ṣrányàn and the ethics of Yorùbá leadership

On the other side of the border, the Aláàfin and his ministers have used festivals to draw a transnational Yorùbá audience, engage Yorùbá youth, and renew interest in Yorùbá heritage and history since the end of the ’00s. Earlier attempts included the Ṣọyọtòrò Festival and the Jàkúta Festival in honor of the orìṣà Šàngó, events that drew Nigerian festival-goers, but failed to lure many from outside the country. For that, the festival needed to find a different focus to celebrate.154

Their choice of Ọ̀ranyàn took the figure from obscurity and restored him to prime of place among the Òyọ–Yorùbá. Since the first festival in 2012, the organizers have touted Ọ̀ranyàn as the greatest Yorùbá warrior to ever live,155 but also as the founder of a code of ethics that has set the model for Yorùbá traditional leaders ever since.156 Public-relations material notes that Ọ̀ranyàn epitomized “dignity, decorum, courage, administrative efficiency and excellence in governance”157 as he worked to

153 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 11 September 2014.
establish an “effective political system [of] statecraft, empire building and mass political participation” like a “modern day human [rights activist], who defended the [rights] of his people.” Orányààn, as the festival presents him, was a man of the people. By following his example, the Yorùbá can claim a more prominent position in Nigeria and demand a more equitable distribution of resources from the Federal government. At the festival’s second edition, the Aláàfin stated,

Oranyan was an astute political leader, who in spite of all odds, created a most enduring political system in sub-Saharan Africa. The archetypal monarchy embroidered with central authority was a product of the wizardry of Oranyan, who left the cradle of Yoruba consciousness to create a system of government whose effectiveness, creativity, relevance, suitability and appropriateness is not in doubt even in contemporary Nigeria.

The time is just right for a new Yoruba genius to emerge and provide leadership for the Yoruba nation. Let our aspiring politicians approach the foundation of knowledge, and every pretentions, arrogance and selfishness to embrace the ideals of Oranyan in politics. The implication is clear: What better person to be that Yorùbá leader than the Aláàfin of Òyò, a man who claims direct descent from Orányààn?

This focus on Orányààn’s connection to the Aláàfin has rankled the Aláàfin’s longstanding rival in a dispute for cultural sovereignty over the Yorùbá people, Okùnadé Síjúadé II, the Qòni of Ìfẹ́. The Qòni has questioned Orányààn’s legacy as part of the larger dispute between the two monarchs. While the inaugural festival was

underway in 2012, for instance, the Ooni claimed authority over the veneration of Ọránýàn, arguing that the Aláàfin needed permission from Ifé to hold a festival in his honor. In the festival’s second and third years, the Ooni questioned its historical basis—that Ọránýàn founded the Ọyọ Empire, or even that the Ọyọ Empire existed at all—by questioning historical sources, such as Samuel Johnson’s 1921 book, *The History of the Yorubas*. At the center of the controversy lie oral histories disputed between the Ọyọ–Yorùbá and Ifé–Yorùbá about Ọránýàn’s life. Most Yorùbá traditions agree that he was the son or grandson of Òdùduwà, the mythical patriarch of the Yorùbá people and the first Ooni of Ifé. Ọránýàn was a mighty warrior who gathered followers, led military campaigns, and defeated rivals. On one expedition, Ọránýàn led his forces north to a savanna region south of the Niger River. There he founded the city of Ọyọ-Ilé, which would eventually become the capital of the Ọyọ Empire (Akintoye 2010: 81–82, 94).

Yet the histories differ in key details. In Ọyọ–Yorùbá accounts, Ọránýàn lived in Ifé—possibly reigning as Ooni—before quarrels with his brothers prompted him to gather an army and set out to found his own kingdom to the north. Ilé-Ifẹ, then as

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162 Both Edo and Ọyọ–Yorùbá oral history claim Ọránýàn as the founder of the Benin Kingdom, as well (Akintoye 2010: 117), but Ifé tradition disputes the details of this founding (Law 1977: 31; Asiwaju 2001: 175).
163 In recent years, the Alààfin of Ọyọ has argued that Ọránýàn may not have reigned as Ooni in an effort to delegitimize claims by the Ooni of Ifé for the right to be the central hub of Ọránýàn worship in Yorùbáland. See Durowaiye, Debo. “In Oyo, Oranyan Festival Sets New High.” *Western Post*, 14 September 2014.
now, was the seat of state veneration of most Yorùbá Ọ̀rìṣà and, by extension, the sacred Yorùbá monarchy, so leaving the city meant Ọrànṣàn needed to find someone to perform royal religious duties in his stead. He chose a woman enslaved by his father for this task, sparing her from sacrifice to the divinity Ọbàtálá when she revealed she was pregnant. As Ọrànṣàn moved north and founded Ọyọ-Ilé and a new royal dynasty as the first Aláàfin, Adímú, son of the formerly enslaved woman in Ifẹ́, inherited his mother’s duties and took the title of Ọ̀níní (Smith 1969: 29–30; Law 1977: 123–24; Apter 1992: 15–16).

Ifẹ́ tradition disputes the Ọyọ́ story’s suggestion that the Ọ̀níní of Ifẹ́ descends from a slave, as someone from such a lineage would have been forbidden from being crowned ọba (Apter 1992: 15–16).164 Instead, the Ifẹ́ tale alleges that Ọrànṣàn never ruled Ọyọ-Ilé at all; he traveled there to help the local ruler wrest control of the city from his enemies, only to seize the throne for one of his sons (Law 1977: 30–31), or reconquer the place after its rightful ruler had fled into exile (Adediran 1994: 69–70). Just as the Ọyọ́-Yorùbá stories discredit the legitimacy of the Ọ̀níní’s monarchical claims, the Ifẹ́-Yorùbá versions paint Ọrànṣàn as the usurper of the throne of a senior relative (Asiwaju 2001: 175). These differences bolster claims of sovereignty for either the Aláàfin or the Ọ̀níní at

164 Apter (1992: 16) notes a folk etymology for Ọ̀níní: “ọmọ ọlúwọ ni,” or “he is the son of a sacrifice.” The etymology acknowledges another aspect of the tale that claims the mother of the first Ọ̀níní was sacrificed to Ọbàtálá.
the expense of the other, asking the question, did Ořányàn found a dynasty independent of the Qọni of Ife, or one subservient to him (Law 1977: 32–33)?

Both Oyo and Ife traditions agree that Ořányàn eventually left Oyo under the rule of his sons, returning to Ilé-Ife to live out the rest of his life (Law 1977: 30–31; Akintoye 2010: 117). This story of Ořányàn’s return to Ife lets both sides claim him as a key figure, buttressing a relatively modern idea that makes the Aláàfin the political leader of Yorùbáland and the Qọni its religious head, and therefore sidestepping the issue of which ruler is superior to the other (ibid.: 123).

Ořányàn achieved the status of orisà in several areas, including Ile-Ife, Oyo, and Ìbàdàn. Historical evidence suggests that in the early nineteenth century, he was the tutelary orisà of Ilé-Ife, a popular divinity of war whose popularity rivaled that of Ògún in other parts of Yorùbáland. Missionary accounts note that human sacrifices were offered to Ořányàn before Ife would send soldiers into war. Likewise, military rulers in other Yorùbá cities, such as Ìbàdàn, regularly conducted sacrifices to the warrior divinity

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165 Law (1977: 31–32) doubts the historicity of the story of Ořányàn founding Oyo-Ile, citing traditions that link Oyo to the Nupe and Bariba people located north of the site of Oyo-Ile. Law argues that stories where Ořányàn marries the daughter of a Nupe king, or where he is led to the site of Oyo by a magical serpent given him by the Bariba, attempt to assert Yorùbá legitimacy over territory previously inhabited by Nupe and Bariba. See also Smith (1969: 30) and Akintoye (2010: 117, 232).

166 Ife tradition says that Ořányàn returned to Ilé-Ife to help the reigning king, Obalúṣòn Ejigimogun, fend off enemy forces. Ořányàn defeated them, but he then forced the king into exile and took his throne. He reigned for several decades before relinquishing the throne to Obalúṣòn for a second, more prosperous reign (Akintoye 2010: 81–82).
in Ilé-Ife to ensure military victory (Peel 2000: 69–70; Olúponà 2011: 66). Over time, Òrányàn’s popularity faded as Ógún’s rose, and stories began to make Òrányàn the father, son, or brother of Ógún (Barnes and Ben-Amos 1989: 58). Meanwhile, Òrányàn was eclipsed in popularity by his son, Ìàngó as the favorite royal òrìṣà of Òyọ̀ (Matory 2005b: xviii–xix).

Though reduced, Òrányàn’s worship has continued in both Ife and Òyọ̀, where his head priests are known as the Eredùmí and Agbakin, respectively (Bascom [1969] 1984: 83; Akintoye 2010: 250). At Ife, òrìṣà give sacrifices at the spot where Òrányàn is said to have “gone into the ground” to become a divinity, and newly crowned Aláàfin in Òyọ̀ must visit both his shrine and Ógún’s before taking the throne (Barnes and Ben-Amos 1989: 58, 84). Otherwise, until the 2012 Òrányàn Festival brought the figure back

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167 Missionary accounts record that as Ìbádàn was preparing for war with Adó-Èkiti, the people of Ilé-Ife demanded a human sacrifice to Òrányàn, for whom their city was the headquarters of worship, to ensure Ìbádàn’s victory. The prospect offended the Muslim general of the Ìbádàn forces, who suggested they sacrifice cows and horses instead. But the people of Ife refused, so the general allowed the sacrifice of a Hausa man (Gàmbàrì) to the god of war instead (Olúponà 2011: 66). Accounts note such sacrifices in 1854, 1860, 1872, and 1873 (Peel 2000: 69–70). Anthropologist J. D. Y. Peel (ibid.: 335n115) notes that the source for the 1873 sacrifice says that the sacrifices were to Ógún, not Òrányàn; this may indicate that Ógún had finally taken over as the preferred divinity of war by this point, but Peel argues that the missionary account was likely mistaken. Peel (ibid.: 69–70) notes that the practice of human sacrifice ended for a time, but restarted after the death of Latosisa, when military defeats convinced the army to rekindle the practice.

168 In one tale from Ile-Ife, Ógún is Òrányàn’s father, as is Odùduwà, thanks to both men vying for the affections of a single woman named Lakange, brought back as a captive during a war Ógún fought on behalf of Odùduwà. By the time Odùduwà found that Ógún had been hiding her from him, the warrior divinity confessed that they had had sexual relations together already, but Odùduwà took her as a wife nonetheless. Her son, Òrányàn, was born with traits from both fathers: half of his skin light like Odùduwà’s, half dark like Ógún’s (Bascom [1969] 1984: 83).
into the public eye, Ọránýàn had fallen into obscurity in Yorùbáland. But focusing on the figure, a human being who became an ọrìṣà, the festival organizers center Yorùbá tradition as a source of ethics in the face of attacks from Christian and Muslim groups in Nigeria.

### 3.3 Becoming diasporic

Even better, Ọránýàn’s association with the Qyọ́ Empire makes him a prime figure for festival organizers to appeal to Yorùbá from outside Nigeria, thereby bolstering the status of the current Aláàfin even more. The organizers cite requests from Yorùbá outside Nigeria and from practitioners of Yorùbá-inspired religions abroad as their impetus to reach out to groups from outside Nigeria for the Qyọ́’s festivities. The de facto spokesperson for the festival committee, retired Methodist Archbishop Ayọ́mediately explained to reporters in 2012:

>We have had people from Oyotunji in South Carolina, Sabe people, Ketu people, Ewe both in Nigeria and Ghana saying to [the] Alaafin, “[W]hen are you going to bring us home?” We thought if we invited them to Oyotoro Festival, sure, they will like to come but that won’t have any depth of meaning to them. And so the Alaafin now decided, let us celebrate the 1st Alaafin, a man who represented valour, courage, the ingenuity of planning wars, and war strategies, a man who

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169 The major exception has been the Ọpá Ọrànmiyàn (Staff of Ọrànmiyàn), a granite monolith studded with iron nails that stands more than eighteen feet high near the center of Ilé-Ifẹ. The monument is said to be the staff or sword of Ọránýàn, resting on a slab that was his shield; the items either show that Ọránýàn was a giant, or they grew to their present size when he dropped them. The staff once may have been venerated before wars for victory over enemies (Uguru 2015); today it attracts tourists and pilgrims interested in the story of the great warrior who was born in Ilé-Ifẹ, founded mighty Qyọ́, and died in his hometown (Bascom [1969] 1984: 4; Akintoye 2010: 79; Olúpọ̀nà 2011: 61; Uguru 2015). At least one Pobè journalist claims that the spot still has great àṣẹ, even if Ọránýàn’s true resting place is in Ìpòbẹ̀ (interview with Gérard Koukpohounsi, 8 June 2015).

mobilised people to follow him in their thousands, even in those far, far gone
days; a man who established an administration in this land that when the British
came they just said: [Y]ou people are far ahead…

Choosing Ọ̀ranyàn as the festival’s focus did more than honor an obscure figure
from Ọ̀yọ’s past; it focused the festival on a stand-in for the reigning Aláàfin, Lámídí
Ọláyiwọlá Adéyễmí III, furthering his claims to supremacy over other Yorübá
monarchs. But the organizers also recognized what they call a “Yorübá diaspora” lying
west of Nigeria’s borders.

But what does it mean for a diaspora to be next door to its homeland? Broadly,
the concept of diaspora assumes the separation and dispersal of people who nonetheless
maintain a connection to their original homeland. In many cases, that separation and
dispersal are the result of a foundational trauma that creates conditions of common
suffering for the people it scattered. For the African Diaspora of the Black Atlantic, the
foundational trauma was the enslavement of millions of Africans, which scattered them
throughout the Americas. While recent theories of diaspora, beginning with Paul
Gilroy’s (1993) influential The Black Atlantic, privilege common suffering as the primary
shaper of common identity for people living in diaspora, black writers, religious

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172 This equivalency was not subtle. During the run-up to the first festival, the President of the Guild of
Tourism Journalists, Wale Ojo Lanre, noted that Ọba Lamidi Adéyễmí III was the first Aláàfin since
Ọranyàn himself to father triplets, making him “history personified.” Quoted in Jacobson, Austin. “Oranyan
Festival: To Be Used in Celebrating Our Heroes — Alaafin of Oyo.” National Daily Newspaper, 10 September
2012.
173 J. Lorand Matory (2005: 277) traces the origins of the diaspora concept to Jewish thought, showing that
African Americans in New York City adopted the idea through their interactions with Jews living there.
practitioners, and others living in diaspora often emphasize the temporal and spatial aspects of their condition instead. In this formulation, tradition is the imagined link among people of African descent in the Americas and to connections between them and their mutual African homeland (Gilroy 1993: 190–91; Clarke 2004: xvi–xvii). In this view, Africa is a metaphorical root, with the cultures of the Americas the metaphorical branches (Gilroy ibid.: 112; Matory 2005: 279).174

If tradition is a mediating force between diaspora and homeland, for the Ōrányàn Festival, the operative tradition is one that unites the diaspora to the homeland under the person of the Aláàfin as Ōrányàn’s representative on earth.175 In one sense, this appeal to diaspora is more of the same, as festival organizers appeal to the descendants of enslaved Yorùbá and the practitioners of Yorùbá-inspired religions in the Americas (“[Ọyọ́túnjí] Village in South Carolina”)176 by borrowing a tactic from other parts of West Africa: the marketing of tradition to people of African descent living in the Americas, recasting them as “diasporic tourists” returning to an ancient homeland to overcome the founding trauma that separated them in the first place (Sutherland 2002). But the Ōrányàn Festival organizers go further by adding Nàgó–Yorùbá peoples living in Bénin

(“Ṣàbẹ̀ people, [Kétu] people”) and those with oral histories linking them to Ōyo (“Ewe both in Nigeria and Ghana”) into the category of the displaced. That is, the Aláàfin and his ministers located diasporic tourists not only across the Atlantic, but across the border—in Bénin, Togo, and Ghana—and offer them an ancient homeland in present-day Nigeria. From its very first edition in 2012, the festival devoted an entire day to “Ọ̀yọ́ in Diaspora” to celebrate this newly (re)created relationship. The tradition the festival galvanizes asserts a restoration of precolonial sovereignty over peoples in Bénin and beyond; as Ládìgbòlù claimed in 2017, “Nigerian [sic] empires had governed almost all parts of Benin [sic] before the colonial separation,” making the diasporic identity itself a “continued trauma.” The festival should bring them back home, and home is Nigeria.

### 3.4 The storied homeland

Ipòbẹ̀ has sent its official Ègbè Gbọbaníyì delegation to the Òránỳàn Festival every year since it began. The group includes the Onísọlọ, key ministers, and journalists, radio announcers, and video filmmakers. One of the delegation leaders, Adeyemi Clément Kouchadé, explained their raison d’être during the 2016 festival: “This is not the first time we are coming here. We are descendants of the Aláàfin and that is why we

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have to bring our own masquerades here to entertain the king and let them know that we have not forgotten our ancestral home.”

During these trips, representatives from Ìpòbè and Òyò come into contact and have the chance to discuss the traditions that unite them, illustrating a point from Paul Gilroy (1993) and elaborated upon by anthropologist J. Lorand Matory (2005) that diaspora allows for ongoing dialogue. For Gilroy (ibid.: 199), this dialogue is primarily within the diaspora itself, among groups for whom the common experiences of slavery and its aftermath have inspired cultural innovations that people borrow and adapt. But anthropologists studying Black Atlantic religions have shown that dialogues happen across the diaspora–homeland divide, as well. The idea of a trans-Atlantic dialogue disrupts the temporal assumption that the homeland precedes the diaspora, showing how the two come into being through mutual engagement, not through “retentions” or “collective memories” of practices from the past (Matory 2005: 279–82).

In this way, diasporic communities can and do unite around African “tradition.” This mutual veneration offers them, at one level, solidarity in the face of dispersal. On another level, it leads to debates over what tradition is the first place, both within and

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179 Quoted in Abiodun, Taiwo. “Oyo Agog with the Oranyan Festival.” The Nation, 20 November 2016. The article misspells Kouchadé’s surname as Louchade. The other leaders of the delegation are Liamidi Odouchinan and Odjowoye Ogoudare.

180 Matory (2005: 280) offers the metaphor of rhizomes, derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari ([1980] 1987), as a useful alternative to the “roots” paradigm, as the rhizome model does not assume a single source for supposed Africanisms in the Americas.
among diasporic communities, as well as between them and their counterparts in Africa. For Ìpòbẹ’s Ègbẹ Gbọbaníyì, the debate over Ôrányàn’s legacy has created the perfect opening to promote a tradition they see as lost in Ôyo: Ôrányàn’s true fate. Ègbẹ Gbọbaníyì’s story picks up where the story propagated by the official Ôrányàn Festival committee leaves off: with claims Ôrányàn leaving Ôyo’ under the rule of his son and walking toward the setting sun.¹⁸¹ For Gbọbaníyì, walking toward the setting sun indicates that Ôrányàn marched west, toward the current site of Ìpòbẹ. That is, instead of traveling south to Ifè, as Ôyo and Ifè hold, Ìpòbẹ claims he headed west to found a new settlement. The warrior–monarch and his forces stopped at promising spots along the way, but none seemed right. During this long sojourn, Ôrányàn died,¹⁸² but his personal strength and power, or àṣẹ, were so great that he lived on as an ọrìṣà, able to appear to his followers as a leopard [panthère], a tree, and other forms. Under his guidance, his people tried various settlements, but Ôrányàn told them to backtrack [recouvrir leur traces]. They came upon a forested area, which became the nucleus for the settlement of Ìpòbẹ.¹⁸³ There they installed Ôrányàn properly within a sacred forest, forever linking Ìpòbẹ to Ôyo.¹⁸⁴ In this version of the tale, Ìpòbẹ means “Here is the final

¹⁸² Interview, President of Gbọbaníyì delegation, Pobè, 14 September 2015.
¹⁸³ The notion that Ìpòbẹ was founded in the midst of a forest is to assert that there were no previous inhabitants of the area and that the Pobéens are the autochthons (Drewal 1975: 15–16).
¹⁸⁴ Interview, President of Gbọbaníyì delegation, Pobè, 14 September 2015.
resting place” [Ici la dernière demeure]. Both folk etymologies reference movement, from Ọyọ to Ìpòbẹ, from Ọrarányàn to Òndò. But Òndò and Ọrarányàn are one, making both the Aláàfin of Ọyọ and the Onísọlọ of Ìpòbẹ both representatives of Ọrarányàn on earth. As the president of Ègbè Gbọbaniyi puts it, for Nàgó–Yorùbá, to know where your father is buried is to never forget him. Now everyone knows that Ọrarányàn’s final resting place is Ìpòbẹ.

Further diplomatic visits from the Aláàfin’s court—his chief minister, the Baṣọ̀run, and another of his children in 2014—amount to official acknowledgement from the emperor of the historical ties between Ọyọ and Ìpòbẹ, recognition that Ọrarányàn himself traveled to Ìpòbẹ. And as some of Ìpòbẹ elites tell, it the Aláàfin has expressed thankfulness to know that part of Ọyọ history had been recovered. In advancing their rival tradition over Ọyọ’s, the Ègbè Gbọbaniyi follows the lead of differing groups of followers of African-inspired religions in the Americas; on both sides of the Atlantic, the members of the diaspora argue that indigenous religion in the homeland has been corrupted by the spread of Christianity and Islam, and that the hardships of diaspora have ensured the

185 Margaret Drewal (Drewal 1975: 15–16) records a similar version of this story, noting that Òndò and his wife, Arè, traveled from Ọyọ to found Ìpòbẹ and the royal lineage there. According to this version, Òndò did not die, but instead “went into the ground alive,” a Yorùbá euphemism for deification. She notes that her interlocutors told her that Òndò and Ọrάńyàn were the same person (ibid.: 22n10).
186 Interview, King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 13 February 2015.
187 Ìpòbẹ’s story distinguishes it from other Yorùbá-speaking kingdoms in Bénin, including Kétu, Šabè, and Ìfọ̀nyìn, which trace their origins to Ilé–Ifẹ (Interview, Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 18 September 2014).
188 Interview, President of Gbọbaniyi delegation, Pobè, 14 September 2015; Interview Gérard Koukpohounsi, Pobè, 8 June 2015.
“purity” of those traditions now bastardized at home (Clarke 2004; Matory 2005; Palmié 2013). In this view, making Ọ̀yọ́ the homeland requires a concerted effort to frame Ọ̀yọ́ as traditional. Media producers are crucial in this work.

3.5 Performing the homeland

Figure 15: Flaming Egúngún at the Ọrányàn Festival, Oyo, Nigeria (photograph by Oládélé Pedro).
Passengers spilled out of three white vans as they pulled up in front of the Ààfín, royal palace of Òyó: journalists, artists, and video filmmakers from the first vehicle, àṣà ibíle' priests and dignitaries from the second, businesspeople and sightseers from the third. Phones and digital cameras snapped photos of one another in front of the palace gates, pulled shut for the night. Above them, a large banner read, “Ọ̀rányàn Festival: The Unique and Authentic Festival of the Yorùbá Race,” while below, a teenage boy sold T-shirts with the face of the emperor on them, Ọ̀rányàn’s living representative.

The first full day of the festival celebrated the Yorùbá in Diaspora, giving Ègbè Gbọbaniyi a chance to show the Aláàfin what Èpòbè had to offer. While most of the group sat under a yellow canopy, press badges allowed Issiaka, his apprentice, Lálá, and his colleague, Kass, to move about the palace grounds, get right up to the stage, and record the dancers, musicians, and other performers. When Èpòbè’s own Egúngún took the field, Nigerian police and armed guards kept the crowd at bay with assault rifles and crackling stun batons. Yet Lálá pressed in on the masqueraders with his camera, capturing close-ups, tracking shots, and views from his belly on the ground. The crowd cheered as the Egúngún held their skirts out and twirled them, and Kafayath Soumanou, a singer in the Èpòbè delegation, started the delegation on a hymn to Èpòbè from her seat at the sidelines. A Béninois fúji singer met with a more muted response. But then the Onísọlọ of Èpòbè passed before the delegation. The members of Ègbè Gbọbaniyi prostrated and chanted, “Kábiyèsil!”
Diaspora was on display during the second day of the festival, as well, but the focus shifted to the power and majesty of the Alâàfin within transnational Yorùbá circuits. The day began with members of the Yorùbá diaspora arriving in full formal attire; the Onísọlọ of Ìpòbẹ̀ wore a bùbá and agbáda made from iridescent pink-and-yellow cloth, sporting a cane with an elephant carved into the handle. A drum troupe played him from his car to his seat near the Alâàfin’s throne, while the Ìpòbẹ̀ delegation followed Kafayath and another woman in singing praise songs. The king showered the drummers with naira, while the Ìpòbẹ̀ delegates prostrated, Lálá and Issiaka recording with their cameras. Then, after an afternoon of bands and dance troupes, the Alâàfin arrived to a hail of gunfire, accompanied by shaker-throwers, praise-singers, and dancers. After he took his seat, a female voice said over the loudspeakers, “You are going to see wonders … Tell others what you’ve seen.”

But seeing the Alâàfin wasn’t so easy. After opening prayers, the festival organizers ushered one delegation after another across the palace grounds to prostrate before the emperor, with most groups wearing clothes made from a common fabric (aṣọ ẹbí). Efficiency was key: Even a delegation all the way from the U.S. state of Maryland 189

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189 The Ìpòbẹ̀ delegation didn’t wear aṣọ ẹbí, but several members bought strips of woven cloth (aṣọ oke), asking the weaver to embroider them with “AGBOBANÍ” on one side and “POBE” on the other. The weaver misspelled “POBE” as “POPE,” yet people wore them proudly, expecting to have the error corrected after the festival.
was rushed back to their seats. Ìpòbẹ́ did things as expected, removing shoes and hats, and flopping down on our bellies until the organizers urged us back behind the stage. A few delegations and guests were given the chance to address the Aláàfin, including Ìpòbẹ́; when the journalist Adeoye Alabi Assaba spoke in French, the rest of the delegates shouted, “Speak Nàgó!” [Sọ ède Nàgọ]. The rest of the events were a spectacle of the traditions the emperor championed: A team of acrobats performed to music by the royal drummers and horn players, an Egúngún troupe set one of its members on fire to gasps from the crowd (fig. 15), and a group of the Aláàfin’s wives danced and sang. For each act, the Aláàfin stood up from his throne, shaded by an umbrella carried by a servant, and accompanied by salvos of gunfire. He showered the performers with naira bills.

After an intermission, the festivities culminated in the Aláàfin taking the stage to deliver the keynote address. His demeanor was that of a man of the people; the emperor wore no beaded crown, as is common custom among Yorùbá ọba at official events. Such crowns hide the ọba’s face from view, presenting him as an office rather than an individual (Thompson 1970: 16). But he didn’t need one: The spectacle made him

190 The Marylanders were there to represent Community Dentistry on Wheels, an organization that donated a $300,000 mobile dentistry platform to Oyo after the Aláàfin approached two Nigerians living in Maryland for aid. See Durowaiye, Bode. “Alaafin Praises Ajimobi.” The Nation, 14 September 2015, and Ogunsola, Oladele. “Alaafin Facilitates $300,000 Mobile Hospital for Oyo.” Independent, 11 September 2015.
191 The Aláàfin did wear the Adé Sesefun, a 120-year-old crown, for the first time during the 2017 Òrányàn Festival. See Busari, Tunde. “Oranyan Festival: Honouring Oyo’s Progenitor.” Nigerian Tribune, 26 September 2017.
impossible to hear or see. Every line the emperor delivered from the stage was accompanied by gunshots, drumming, and applause, drowning out his words. And the emperor was blocked from view by the wall of photographers so as to need no beads. The announcer asked them to “please be more discrete in your duties,” and to “learn how to use your zoom lens.” But blocking the Alààfin from view only made him seem more important. Even people with no press badges brought out cameras, phones, and voice recorders to document the event.

* * * *

Just as their radio shows and documentary video films have worked to promote a tradition that links Ìpòbẹ́ to Ọ̀yọ́, the media arm of Ègbẹ́ Gbọbaníyì has helped Ìpòbẹ́ keep up its side of the diaspora–homeland relationship as the Alààfin and his ministers envision it. In making this argument, I join other scholars who show that expressive cultures and the people who create them play a crucial role in fostering such dialogues and in setting the terms of the relationships they allow. For instance, Paul Gilroy (1993: 200–201) argues for an “ethics of antiphony” in such exchanges; the term refers to the call and response so common to storytelling in Africa and its Diaspora, a form of sociality in performance that makes the storytelling itself more important than the plot, lyrics, or choreography of the performance. For Gilroy, liveness is key to how African

192 Artists and media professionals are not alone in this role, of course. Matory (2005: 289–90) and Palmié (2013: 29) place missionaries, travelers, and scholars—including anthropologists, and, I would add, art historians—on this list.
performances unite performer to audience; mediation disrupts that intimacy. Yet, I follow anthropologists J. Lorand Matory (2005), Steven Feld (2012) and others in acknowledging media as not disruptors of intimacy but as ways to extend it. Writing, recorded music, and other mediations create intimacy by crossing oceans and national borders, where they are adopted and adapted by people who then imagine the paths they traveled to get to them (Feld 2012: 205–206). In other words, just as the antiphonal call and response of live African and Diasporic performances refuse neat separations between performer and audience (Gilroy 1993: 200), media encourage intervocality and foster intimacy even among peoples who may live far away from one another (Feld 2012: 205–206).

Creating this intimacy through mediation is a major task of Ẹgbẹ Gbọbaniyi’s media arm. Their activities present the people of Ìpòbẹ to Ọ̀yọ and the traditions of Ọ̀yọ to the people of Ìpòbẹ. Ẹgbẹ Gbọbaniyi played its part in paying attention to the Aláàfin, showing his majesty and power in foreign lands. Yet they also worked to mediate the homeland for people back home in Bénin. In this task, they had to act as editors, presenting the “traditional” aspects of Ọ̀yọ through their photographs, videos, and radio stories, while ignoring anything that showed Ọ̀yọ in a negative light.

193 Feld borrows his concept of “diasporic intimacy” from literary scholar Svetlana Boym (1998).
Part of that editorial work required them to downplay how getting to Oyo was like an action movie. Here's how the scene might have gone: Three white vans bounce along a dirt road from Pobe, Nigerian Yoruba gospel music blaring from the stereo.

Inside the lead van, *Irin Ajo Si Oyo*’s director, Issiaka Ganiou, joins other journalists, video filmmakers, and artists as they crack jokes and marvel at the sights across the border: an enormous cement factory, sprawling cities, military and police checkpoints.¹⁹⁴

Through the windshield of the lead van, a man in green soldier fatigues walks into the road, his semiautomatic machine gun pointed to the ground. He waves for the van to stop, but the driver barrels on. The soldier leaps out of harm’s way, levels his rifle at the van, and fires—*Bang! Bang!* The upbeat Yoruba music stops.¹⁹⁵

In the rear of the van, video film actor Akim Soumanou ducks to the floorboard and clasps the back of the driver’s seat. Another video filmmaker, Gérard Koukphounsi, stares wide-eyed and lets out an exasperated cry. Camera operator Oladélé “Lálá” Pedro cries out, “Olórun!” *My God!* From my seat on the middle bench, I reach into my satchel to get my field notebook. The sculptor Assaba Alabi sitting next to me says, “Yes! You have to write about this in your book!”

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¹⁹⁴ These events occurred on 10 September 2015.
¹⁹⁵ I remember seeing the soldier fire at our tires, but a passenger in the van behind us said that he saw the soldier fire into the air.
A few hundred meters further down the road, a heavyset soldier is visible through the windshield by the side of the road, cell phone to his ear. “The other soldier warned him about us!” frets Lálá.

Video film producer Bàbá Metor starts to chant “Kábiyèṣí o!”—the term of respect for addressing a monarch, here acting as a prayer that we’ll make it through the roadblock alive. The other passengers join in, and the soldier waves us past.

Kass turns to the driver. “The next time the police ask you to stop… *Stop!*”

* * *

This Nigeria couldn’t be more different from the Ọ̀yọ̀ depicted in *Irin Ajo Si Oyo*. Armed police, gunshots, and crumbling roads are a far cry from the Ọ̀yọ̀ of Ìpòbẹ́ legend. Nor does the documentary feature any of the other aspects of contemporary Nigeria that the Ẹgbẹ́ Gbọbaníyì delegates remarked upon during the trip: pollution, urban sprawl, and a Pentecostal Christian church on every street. Instead, throughout the trip, the Ìpòbẹ́ pilgrims used cameras, smartphones, and voice recorders to curate an image of Ọ̀yọ̀ as a place of Yorùbá tradition, ethnic pride, and ancient origins. Their images focus not on the modern-day nation-state of Nigeria, but on Ọ̀yọ̀ as traditional homeland.

This image curation was even stricter for the journalists and video filmmakers on the trip. As the events wore on, Lálá conducted on-camera interviews with members of the delegation, while Kass did live radio interviews for *Radio Olókíkí* by calling into the
radio station. The president of the delegation boasted on air of the places we’d been, and the important people we’d seen. A woman nicknamed “Madame Députée” spoke about the delegation “advancing the truth” about Yorùbá tradition. When Kass got to me, I started to talk about how Oyo City is bigger and noisier than Pobè, but Kass stopped me; he wanted me to talk instead about the Yorùbá traditions I’d seen: food I’d eaten, traditional jewelry people had bought. Meanwhile, Lálá recorded interviews with a video camera resting on a tripod in the courtyard. I did better for him; he asked me to talk about the history of Òyọ̀, so I talked about its former imperial reach beyond present-day Nigeria into Bénin.

The exception was images of people and movement: At the end of the festival, Issiaka asked me to go into the field with him, where I got snaps with him, the hotel owner, and (on his insistence), a woman from Latin America. The night after the festival ended, Lálá recorded part of the performance by a Pobè fújì artist hired by the hotel to perform for us. And while en route to Òyọ̀, Lálá got video of the vans on the road, a high-angle shot of people stirring in the morning and getting breakfast, images of Nigeria passing by outside the van windows. Here the emphasis was on movement— from Pobè to Òyọ̀ and back again. The violence, sprawl, and Pentecostalization of Nigeria were backdrop at best, a terrain to move through in search of the real traditions of the Ìpòbẹ̀ homeland.
3.6 Diasporic ethics

This careful cultivation of Ọ̀yọ’s image as a traditional homeland, coupled with this voluntary performance of diasporic identity by Ẹgbẹ̀ Gbọbaniyì and its media allies helps give visual proof of how the Aláàfin’s cultural sovereignty extends even today into territories once affiliated with or conquered by the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire founded by the warrior–king Ọ̀rányàn. At the same time, the groups participating in the creation of this diasporic relationship open the door for themselves to make demands on the Aláàfin and his palace staff. Key to this relationship is a Yorùbá notion of ethical leadership. As described by anthropologist Karin Barber (1981), Yorùbá “Big Men” at the turn of the twentieth century had to cultivate patron–client relationships with followers and hangers-on. The Big Man is deemed a helpful patron for his followers when he helps them out and gives them things. Yet, the hangers-on have ethical responsibilities, as well, since, en masse, their support reveals the Big Man’s wealth in people. If the Big Man is doing well, he will be better able to support his underlings, so it is in their best interests to help keep him on top. But if the Big Man fails to provide for his followers, they are liable to leave for another patron. Barber (ibid.) notes that this code of patron–client ethics governs the relationship between ọ̀rìṣà and their followers, as well. As Ọ̀rányàn’s earthly vessel, then, the Aláàfin is doubly bound to his followers.

During the 2015 Ọ̀rányàn Festival, Ẹgbẹ̀ Gbọbaniyì requested an audience with the Bàṣọ́rùn for this very purpose. In the meeting, they made several requests: an
audience with the Alààfin himself in the near future, for the Alààfin to visit Ìpòbè to recrown the Onísọlọ, money to reconstruct Ìpòbè’s crumbling royal palace, and land in Ọ̀yọ to construct a “village of the diaspora.” Through these requests, they looked for ways to stem the precarity faced by indigenous monarchs in Bénin by seeking largesse from a wealthy Nigerian ọba. The festival organizers, in turn, play such demands up for the Alààfin’s advantage as signs that the former subjects of Ọ̀yọ desire even greater closeness to the Alààfin and their Ọ̀yọ–Yorùbá kin. As of late 2015, the Ààfin had agreed to provide the land at least. Yet Ìpòbè asks for something more that somewhat upturns their status as mere clients: They ask that the Onísọlọ of Ìpòbè be recognized as another representative of Ọrányààn on earth.

196 Meanwhile, Pobè video filmmakers on the trip attempted to sell their movies to the festivalgoers. Nevertheless, they had little success; indeed, Gérard Koukphounsì lost around one-hundred copies of his movie Magumu when another member of the group misplaced the sack they were in (conversation with Gérard Koukphounsì, Ọ̀yọ, 11 September 2015).

197 Interview, President of Gbọbaníyi delegation, Pobè, 14 September 2015. A rival tradition in Nigeria claims Ọrányààn’s final resting place as a spot in Ilé-Ifẹ where his staff now stands. The president acknowledged this story but claimed that only the staff or Ọrányààn was there, not the man’s body. Durojaiye, Bode. “Oranyan Festival: Preserving Yoruba’s Cultural Heritage.” Freedom Online, 13 September 2017. The article lists the following groups as part of this negotiation: Ọhọrí-Yorùbá, “Pobe people,” “the Ewes,” and the “Alapinnis, Onikoyis, Idasas, Fiditis, Sabigannas, Isemis, Ijayes and Agboluajes” (all Yorùbá subgroups).
I first met the Onísọlọ in 2012. A slight man a bit over five feet tall, he was wearing an undershirt and wax-print trousers as he smoked a cigarette and watched the town go by. I mustered all the propriety I’d learned in Yorùbá class and got down in the dirt to greet him with a hearty “Kábíyèsí!”

“Get up,” he said in English, extending his hand to shake. When I did, he added, “You are getting my hand dirty. You didn’t wipe it off first.”

“Ẹ má binú, Sa!” I said in apology: Don’t be angry, Sir!

Figure 16: Òba Latidji Gabriel Ogunede in his Ìpòbẹ palace (photograph by Karen Wodke).
“If I was angry,” he quipped in English, “I’d hit you.”

In a word, King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Onísoło of Ìpòbè is impish. He cuts a much different figure from the Aláàfin of Òyó with all his propriety and pomp. Yet the fearsome leopards painted on the gates of the Ìpòbè palace remind his subjects that the Onísoło is the earthly representative of Òndò, patron divinity of their kingdom—never mind the fuzzy brown puppy curled up at his feet.

When I found him again a year later just inside the palace, I asked if I could have permission to attend Ìpòbè’s annual Òndò festival (fig. 16). He replied, “Yes. But you are thinking of the festival. They cannot start without me. So forget about that. Now you are here. This is something different. Will you take a drink?” He called for gin and ògógóró and told me about his life. The ọba was born in Oyo State, Nigeria. He dabbled in masonry, architecture, woodcarving, and tailoring, even designing his own royal regalia and carving his own throne after his coronation. A framed photograph hanging over the throne shows him in another career as an ordained Protestant pastor. “I used to be against Islam when I was a pastor,” he says. “But now I am for all religions. It is all the same God.”

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198 This meeting took place on 6 August 2012 in Pobè.
199 The Onísoło (interview 5 August 2013 in Pobè) mentioned later that the delay was because the women of the palace were still cooking the yams for sacrifice to Òndò.
200 Interview with King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 5 August 2013.
Ogunede lived his whole life in Nigeria until the king of Ìpòbẹ, Onísołọ Ochoukpa, died in 1995. It was Ogunede’s family’s turn to rule, and the heads of Ìpòbẹ’s four royal families identified him as one of several potential candidates for the throne.201 When he came across the border to Bénin, it was the first time he’d set eyes on Pobè, but at 7:30 PM, as he recalled it, the Ifá oracle revealed that Ogunede would be the next king of Ìpòbẹ: such was Òndò’s will.202 He was given the throne name of Adiro Agbadjè Wolou, and the title of Onísołọ, “the monarch who defeats other monarchs.”203

The new ruler took a keen interest in understanding his connection to Old Qyọ. He compiled a list of kings in his journal, although he didn’t know much about them (“I wasn’t born yet”). The important part was that they all came from one of the four branches of the royal family, and ultimately all from Qyọ.204 Beyond this ancestral connection, though, he was wary of discussing Yorùbá royal politics. He acknowledged the Aláàfin of Qyọ as his superior, and he recognized the importance of the Ooni of Ife, but he downplayed this hierarchy in religious terms: “I can only say that God is the top

201 Three of the noble families include Asebiolou, Ewusi, and Asoba. The heads of the families who are currently not on the throne serve as ministers to the king (olọye) (Interview with the Asebiolou of Pobè, 25 February 2015).
202 Interview, King Latidji Gabriel Oguned, Pobè, 13 February 2015. The king remembers the year as 1996, but a newspaper article gives the date as 1995 instead. ABP/ID/DKJ. “Sa Majesté Adiro Agbadjè Wolou Roi de Pobè s’est éteint.” [His Majesty, Adiro Agbadjè Wolou, King of Pobè, has died]. 24 Heures au Bénin, 13 September 2016.
203 Interview, King Latidji Gabriel Oguned, Pobè, 13 February 2015.
He even had an excuse for the fact that he didn’t have a beaded crown with a veil, a marker of a higher-ranking Yorùbá king (Asiwaju 2001: 167): “I want to be able to see my people. And I’m a Christian.”

Still, the Onísọlọ claimed a special relationship with the Aláàfin, one of parity if not equality. When I told him I’d seen the video *Irin Ajo Si Oyo*, the king gave me a bear hug in reference to the repeated footage of him embracing the emperor. “The Aláàfin is very important. No one [Not just anyone] can do like this to him.” Ogunede took part in the negotiations with the Aláàfin for some form of material support of the Ìpòbè́ monarchy, lamenting the fact that traditional rulers in Bénin don’t receive government salaries like their counterparts in Nigeria. Instead, he has to wait at the palace, helping subjects with problems, often from his own pocket. “You see, that’s my life. If I stay in the house, I have many problem[s]. But if I just run out, they are calling me…. So I just sit here.”

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205 Interview with King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 21 March 2015.
207 Interview with King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 21 March 2015.
208 Interview with King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 5 August 2013.
209 Interview with King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 21 March 2015.
Yet the differences between the Onísọlọ and the Aláàfin run deeper than the disparity in their wealth and state support. For the Onísọlọ, closeness to the people and a disdain for royal propriety underscores a fundamental difference in how they view their patron órìṣà, Ọrányàn or Òndò. In turn, this relationship to the founder and patron órìṣà of their kingdoms reveals differing attitudes toward the role of indigenous Yorùbá religion in Yorùbá society; for the king of Ìpòbẹ and his ministers, the órìṣà don’t need to be popular to be part of a peaceful coexistence among Christians, Muslims, and olọrìṣà. Yet for the Aláàfin, attention to Ọrányàn is in part an aggressive counterattack to the spread of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria.
As Onísọlọ, Oba Ogunede is the head priest of Ôndò in Ìpòbè. The divinity remains central to the olórisà community in the small kingdom despite his counterpart, Ôrányàn’s, relatively obscurity in Nigeria. Although Ôndò, as deified founder of Ìpòbè, protects the kingdom and its inhabitants, his circle of direct devotees is limited to the oba and three full-time priests: the Èṣà Ìpòbè as the most senior, the Olupọna Ìpòbè, and the Okèrè Ìpòbè (fig. 17). Every four days, the oba and these priests hold ceremonies for Ôndò at the entrance to Ìpòbè’s sacred grove at the site of the oldest road leading into town (Ibitokun 1983: 4), a short distance behind Pobè’s central mosque. According to Oba Ogunede, the name Ôndò explicitly refers to this forest, translating as “where he sat down” or “where he stopped,” a reference to the ọ̀risà’s installation there after the long migration from Ôyọ. The forest is now where Ôndò’s power can be accessed most directly. This sacred forest is the only space where inhabitants of Pobè may venerate him, and sections are forbidden to non-initiates; only Ôndò’s priests may have shrines to him in their homes, unlike other divinities, such as Șàngó, for whom anyone can install a shrine.

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210 Interview with the Èṣà Ìpòbè, 18 February 2015, Pobè; Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosí, Okèrè Ìpòbè, Pobè, 13 March 2015.
211 Interview with the Èṣà Ìpòbè, Pobè, 15 February 2015. In French orthography, these are rendered Issa I pobè, Oloukponon I pobè, and Okèrè I pobè, respectively (Abikanlou et al, n.d.: 6).
212 Drewal (1975: 15–17) mistakenly says the ceremonies occur every five days.
213 Interview, King Latidji Gabriel Ogunede, Pobè, 13 February 2015.
214 Interview with the Èṣà Ìpòbè, 18 February 2015, Pobè.
Òndò’s priesthood holds that he is supreme over all other deities in Pobè. Five other important orishà of Pobè—Óndò’s wife Arè, Omo Olú, Ìyá Ajé, Àràigbo, and Ọ̀yọ alongside Òndò to serve as his helpers and allies.²¹⁵ As part of these every-four-days ceremonies, the priests offer sacrifices to the other two orishà with shrines in a clearing in the forest: Òndò’s wife Arè and his son Êlégbá—known as Èṣù in other parts of Yorùbáland (Drewal 1975: 15–16). During twice-yearly ceremonies, large crowds gather, including most of Ìpòbè’s olorishà community, as the priests dance, sacred drummers perform, and Òndò and Êlégbá mount their priests in possession–trance. The orishà then bless the congregants as priests they are inhabiting offer left-handed shakes and address people’s spiritual problems (Drewal 1975: 21).²¹⁶ Likewise, Òndò is a powerful healer; if people have problems with illness or infertility that the hospital cannot help, they can come to Òndò, where the priests will give them herbal medicines.²¹⁷

To his priests, there is no question that Òndò and Òrànnyàn are the same; the Ìsà Ìpòbè notes that outside Ìpòbè, Òndò is only venerated in one other place: Òrànnyàn in Ilé-Ifẹ as another place where Òrànnyàn is honored.

²¹⁵ Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosí, Okèrè Ìpòbè, Pobè, 13 March 2015.
²¹⁶ For a full account of the Òndò ceremony and the ritual paraphernalia of the divinity, see Drewal (1975) and Ibitokun (1983). At the ceremony Drewal observed, the head Òndò priest gave a sermon-like speech, but this was not part of the four ceremonies I observed between 2012 and 2016.
²¹⁷ Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosí, Okèrè Ìpòbè, Pobè, 13 March 2015.
²¹⁸ Interview with the Ìsà Ìpòbè, 18 February 2015, Pobè. The Ìsà Ìpòbè did not mention the Òpá Òrànmiyàn in Ilé-Ifẹ as another place where Òrànnyàn is honored.
direct link they claim between Ìpòbẹ and Òyọ, a status that distinguishes Ìpòbẹ from neighboring kingdom, especially considering that they consider all the ọrìṣà to have originated in Òyọ rather than Ilé-Ife.\textsuperscript{219} Unsurprisingly, Òndò has many of the same warlike associations associated with Òránýàn in Nigeria. His priests carry machetes to signify the ọrìṣà’s strength and prowess in battle (Drewal 1975: 17, 22n20), and images of leopards appear on his main temple and the royal palace, denoting his “hot” nature. The divinity’s martial side is reflected in his oríkì: “He kills the first, he kills the second, so that the third will have fear” (ibid.: 16, 22n7).\textsuperscript{220}

Yet as early as the 1970s, Ìpòbẹ’s Òndò priesthood had adopted the idea that Òndò’s “cool” side is dominant. The Onísọlọ then claimed that Òndò is at heart a “cool god” (ọrìṣà tútù), only prone to violence as a last resort: “[W]hen you step on him, he does not create a danger so quickly, but when you step on a part which is very sensitive, the serpent will avenge” (quoted in Drewal 1975: 16). Òndò’s priests today make similar claims, stressing that Òndò is slow to anger; if someone in Ìpòbẹ does something evil, Òndò gives the person a warning. Only if the misdeeds continue will the divinity step in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{219} Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosi, Okẹrẹ Ìpòbẹ, Pobè, 13 March 2015.
\textsuperscript{220} Ò pa kan ọ pa kéjí bẹrọko gbé kẹta. At the time of Drewal’s fieldwork in the 1970s, a leopard image also appeared on the door to one of the Òndò priests’ homes, but this was no longer the case forty years later.
\end{flushright}
to punish the perpetrator. In contrast to the warrior-king Òrányàn of Òyò, Òndò opposes war.

Òndò differs from Òrányàn as a representative of Òrìṣà religion, as well. According to his priests, Òndò doesn’t expect widespread devotion from the people of Ìpòbè. So long as his dedicated priesthood prays to him daily “in Òndò’s name,” the kingdom will know peace and prosperity. The Òkere notes that, unless the divinity calls on him, he prays to Òndò twice a day: at the sacred forest in the morning, and at a personal Òndò shrine at home before he goes to bed. The king and other Òndò priests do likewise, their attention keeping the divinity happy and the town prosperous. But if this devotion were to end, Òndò might get angry and abandon Ìpòbè.

For at least two generations, Òndò has been noted instead as a divinity of extreme tolerance. “L’histoire de Pobè” [The history of Pobè], an unpublished, undated manuscript likely was written in the 1990s based on deliberations at a conference of the Pobè Youth Association of Pupils and Students (JEEP) in July 1964 (Abikanlou et al, n.d.: 12), notes that even during the migration from Òyò to Ìpòbè, Òndò accepted a slave to

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221 Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosi, Okere Ìpòbè, Pobè, 13 March 2015. My research assistant, Alsabah Amoussa, suggested that one such punishment might involve being tied at the wrists and ankles like game and then brought into the sacred forest. The Olúpọ̀nà Ìpòbè (interviewed 19 March 2015 in Pobè) echoed many of these sentiments, saying that Òndò answers anyone’s prayer, provided the person isn’t doing evil things.

222 Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosi, Okere Ìpòbè, Pobè, 13 March 2015.

223 Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosi, Okere Ìpòbè, Pobè, 13 March 2015.

224 In French, la Jeunesse Pobéenne, l’association des élèves et des étudiants de Pobè. The document is undated, but it says that the research the document is based upon occurred in July 1964 during a JEEP conference on the history of Pobè (Abikanlou et al 1964: 1). However, a reference later in the document states that Doudouala’s
carry him. Since, he has allowed Ìpòbẹ̀'s Gelede masquerade troupes to adapt and innovate their dances each year, and the Onísoro to move about the kingdom on foot or by bicycle, mingling with the people (ibid.: 34).

In other words, spokespeople have represented Òndò as a divinity of cosmopolitanism for as long as they’ve shown him as a tolerant, cool oríṣà. He insists on peaceful coexistence across lines of religion, ethnicity, and nationality (Abikanlou et al, n.d.: 16), welcoming not only oríṣà to Ìpòbẹ̀, but also Christians, Muslims, and even atheists. He invites not only Nàgó-Yorùbá to live in his kingdom, but also Fon, Hausa (Gàmbàrì), and oyinbo (non-African foreigners). His peace extends to men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and—in previous times—slave and free. Òndò supports “diversity as a source of prosperity” [la diversité comme source de prospérité] (ibid.). The result of this cosmopolitan tolerance is that Ìpòbẹ̀ is a place where anyone can come and succeed, regardless of background (ibid.: 35).225 His is an unreserved protection that covers anyone, regardless of religion or nationality.226

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225 Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosí, Okẹrẹ Ìpòbẹ̀, Pobè, 13 March 2015. According to my research assistant, Alsabah Amoussa, other towns, such as Kétou and Adjá-Ouéré, have reputations as being unwelcoming to foreigners.

226 Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosí, Okẹrẹ Ìpòbẹ̀, Pobè, 13 March 2015; interview with Agbọla Jerome Olugbon, Olúpọ̀nà Ìpòbẹ̀, Pobè, 19 March 2015.
This tolerance isn't necessarily reciprocated. A generation ago, JEEP decried Catholics and Muslims in Pobè who neglected their obligations to the ọ̀rìṣà. These people, JEEP claimed, refused to help maintain the Òndò temple, to donate a portion of their yam harvest to the king and his ministers for the yam festival, or to acknowledge the king’s authority out of disdain for his association with the ọ̀rìṣà spirits (Abikanlou et al, n.d.: 16). But the Òndò priesthood seems to have responded to these affronts with a form of radical syncretism. At one level, they subordinate the other ọ̀rìṣà of Ìpòbẹ̀ to their tutelary spirit, potentially as aspects of the same god.227 The story they tell is that these divinities came to Ìpòbẹ̀ alongside Òndò, so they now follow his lead in advocating tolerance to attract prosperity. Yet Òndò’s religious tolerance is coupled with a sort of religious domination as well: The Okẹrẹ Ìpòbẹ̀ says that he prays each day to Òndò to ask him to accept all the prayers delivered in Ìpòbẹ̀, regardless of whether they are directed toward Jesus by Christians or Allah by Muslims. As Òndò hears the prayers and answers them, these Christians and Muslims receive divine aid and prosper, but it is Òndò who helps them—even if he himself is an agent of a single God—so this stance subordinates foreign religions to the àṣà ibase establishment.228 By reserving Òndò’s devotion to his head priests and avoiding a more combative approach, the Òndò priests are able to preach solidarity among religions. As the Olúpọ̀nà Ìpòbẹ̀ notes, if he

227 Interview with Agbọla Jerome Olugbon, Olúpọ̀nà Ìpòbẹ̀, 19 March 2015, Pobè.
228 Interview with Abógùn Pascal Agbaosi, Okẹrẹ Ìpòbẹ̀, Pobè, 13 March 2015.
performs his morning sacrifices earlier than usual, people may not see him going to the forest. These people—Christians and Muslims—then ask him all day long why he didn’t do the sacrifices.229

The fact that the àṣà ibalẹ establishment sees Òndò and Özanyàn as the same orisa speaks to the closeness of the diasporic relationship Ìpòbẹ is enacting in relation to Qyọ. Yet the ways each side characterizes the divinity speaks to their differing attitudes toward religious encounter. In insisting on an orisà who hears the prayers of not only his olorisà followers but also Christians and Muslims, the Onisọlo of Ìpòbẹ and his ìṣà ibile allies argue for a humble but important role for indigenous religion. Its goal is not to assert itself as dominant over Christianity and Islam; rather its role is to pay attention to the patron orisà Òndò and keep his blessing on Ìpòbẹ. This is a far cry from the Özanyàn Festival and its attempt to restore indigenous Yorùbá religion to a prime position within Yorùbáland, including its Béninois hinterland. Ìpòbẹ’s emphasis on Òndò as a cosmopolitan and tolerant divinity is instead an assertion of how the orisà should be interpreted, and by extension a claim from the diaspora for a more tolerant and pluralistic Yorùbáland—no matter what part it’s in. The ìṣà ibile establishment’s media allies thus present this version of the orisà (and orisà religion more broadly) in their productions.

229 Interview with Agbọla Jerome Olugbon, Olúpọ̀nà Ìpòbẹ, 19 March 2015, Pobè.
3.7 Framing diasporic ethics

Figure 18: Ọba Latidji Gabriel Ogunede agrees to a photoshoot before he leaves Ọyọ for Ọ̀pọ̀bẹ̀ (photograph by Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou).

The day after the Ṣránýàn Festival, the Onísọlọ of Ọ̀pọ̀bẹ̀ walked to his car in the Oyo hotel courtyard in full royal regalia. His assistant placed the elephant-headed staff in the trunk, and the king opened the car door. But Ògbé Gbọbaníyí’s media arm intervened: Kass, Issiaka, and Bàbá Metor stopped the king, asking him to stand still as
they straightened out his agbádá robe and returned the cane to his hands. The chauffeur looked perplexed but joined in, pressing the bright-yellow-and-pink robes pristine. Issiaka handed the king his flywhisk, and someone closed the trunk. The king’s grand exit was too great a photo op to pass up (fig. 18).

Kass, Assaba, Issiaka, and Lálá soon had cameras snapping. More approachable than the Aláàfin, but no mere doll, the king changed pose every few seconds like a live version of pictures spat out by a photo booth, prompting Kass to cry, “Kábiyèsí!” and “Bábá!” with each flourish. Before long, other members of the delegation had cameras and smartphones out, and people took turns kneeling before the Onísọlọ as he lay his flywhisk on their shoulder while someone else got a keepsake shot. Finally, Ẹgbẹ́ Gbọbaniyí squeezed in around their ọba for a group photograph, the paparazzi becoming themselves absorbed into the spectacle.

There were no gunshots on the trip back to Pobè. Once across the border into Bénin, Bàbá Metor began singing traditional Ìpòbẹ́ hymns and was joined by his cousin, Gérard. Issiaka called the radio station for a live report: The king had returned, and the people should come to welcome him at the palace gates. Emboldened by being live on air, Bàbá Metor and Gérard’s hymns grew raucous and attracted a crowd of well-wishers to cheer the king on as the caravan barreled into town. Before long, the whole car had joined in with the singalong, accompanied by talking-drums played by the troupe in the back.
At the palace, the Onísọlọ got out of his car and posed while the crowd cheered (fig. 19). The king danced across the threshold of the palace and toward the throne, while Lálá captured the events on camera and Issiaka interviewed bystanders for the radio. When Oba Adiro Agbadjè Wolou, Onísọlọ of Èpòbẹ̀, finally sat on his throne, Ègbẹ̀ Gbọbaniyi and onlookers alike got down on the ground before him. Lálá joined them, but only after he snapped a photo.

Once the crowd had dispersed, I waited outside the palace to trade photographs with other members of the delegation, but everyone seemed to have gone home. When I wandered back into the palace to make sure I hadn’t missed anyone, the king greeted
me. He was in his sleeveless undershirt, smoking a cigarette, dog curled up under his chair.

3.8 Conclusion

Media have been essential to how a small kingdom in Southeastern Bénin has overcome a history of colonial separation, international borders, and linguistic differences to reforge ties to a precolonial power. The relationship effected requires media at both sides: in constructing Ọ̀yọ́ as the homeland and in constructing ̀pồbè as part of the Yorùbá Diaspora. In *Irin Ajo Si Oyo*, the scenes of Princess Fọlásadé Adéyemi touring Bénin and inviting kings to attend her father’s Ṭránhàn Festival amount to requests for them to acknowledge the continued hold of the imperial past and the ethical responsibilities it places on the Aláàfin’s diasporic subjects. Meanwhile, Pobè’s media producers, with their radio journalism and video films, have worked to frame Ọ̀yọ́ as a traditional homeland, focusing on what’s “traditional” in Ọ̀yọ́, while ignoring the challenges contemporary Nigeria presents, such as police violence and religious intolerance.

In the bargain, both sides ask something of the other. By uniting behind the figure of Ṭránhàn and showing up in mass with cameras fixated on the Aláàfin, the festivalgoers—Nigerian and Béninois alike—bolster the Ṭyọ́ claim that the warrior–king founded Ṭyọ́ and that he can unite the Yorùbá people in the face of threats against tradition posed by Christianity and Islam. Yet the emphasis on Ṭránhàn’s equivalence to
Ìpòbẹ́'s guardian divinity, Òndò, allows Ìpòbẹ́ ǎṣà iblyẹ́ establishment to bolster the status of the Onísọlọ as another of Ọ̀r ányàn’s representatives on earth. By promoting their own version of Ọ̀r ányàn in Òndò, they use diasporic connections to promote an alternative code of ethics, requiring religious tolerance and coexistence, not opposition between indigenous religion and its rivals in Christianity and Islam. They point out the precarity of tradition in Bénin and open the door to material demands to rectify it. In the process, they call for a more tolerant and cosmopolitan version of tradition. From their vantage point across the borders of Nigeria, Niger, and Burkina Faso—all countries plagued by religious violence in recent years—Béninois understand all too well the the perils of religious division. In the following chapter, I consider this notion from within the ranks of Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers.

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Issiaka Ganiou posted an image to Facebook the day after Ègbé Gbòbaníyi returned from Òyó. The photomontage juxtaposes the Onísọlọ with the Aláàfin: On the left is the Onísọlọ, wearing his pink-and-yellow bùbá and agbádá from Òyó; on the right is the Aláàfin wearing the same colors reversed. The men stand in similar poses, both clipped from their original backgrounds and superimposed in front of an image of Pobè’s Òndò temple. The caption reads, “Ìwọ ni mo nwa lati ojo to pe!”—an

230 In standard Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, the phrase would read “Ìwọ ni mo ń wá láti ojó tó pé.” Ọba Ogunede died on 10 September 2016, shortly after I returned to the U.S.
ambiguous phrase that means either You are the one I came from a long time ago! or You are the one I have searched for from a long time ago! Perhaps it means both. In English below this it says, “yes it is me” (fig. 20).

Figure 20: Ọba Latidji Gabriel Ogunede (left) and Aláàfin Làmídì Òlàyíwọlá Adéyẹmi III of Òyọ̀ (right) in front of the entrance to the Ìpòbẹ́ sacred grove (photo montage by Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou).

231  ABP/ID/DKJ. “Sa Majesté Adiro Agbadjè Wolou Roi de Pobè s’est éteint.” [His Majesty, Adiro Agbadjè Wolou, King of Pobè, has died]. 24 Heures au Bénin, 13 September 2016.

Figure 21: Abiodoun Romain Oyede puts on his makeup to become *le Général* in his Pobè shop.

Filming couldn’t start until the cameraman arrived, so Abiodoun Romain Oyede held court. The actor, video film producer, and radio personality kept spirits high,
buying everyone breakfast and snapping off endless wisecracks in a gravelly voice that reduced everyone to laughter. While the cast and crew of *Ma vue* (*My view*) melted into the benches and chairs of Oyede’s “shop,” a round, hut-like structure with rattan walls and a thatched roof near Pobè’s royal palace, Oyede’s large size and larger personality filled the space.

The Nigerian cameraman, Jay Jay Ọlábintán, called to say he’d made it to Sakètè, in Bénin and not far away, so Oyede said everyone should get started. For Oyede, that meant getting into costume; *Ma vue* would be the fourth comedy to star his signature character, *le Général* (*the General*), so he needed to get into character. Pulling a bottle of black nail polish from a cloth bag, he removed the cap and painted his two front teeth. He blackened two fingers with pulverized coal from a compact and rubbed it onto it his face like a soldier in camouflage. From another bottle, the comedian outlined his mustache and eyebrows in white correction fluid, and brushed highlights into his facial hair, eyebrows, and temples. The makeup made him look comically old, rustic even, with the missing teeth, but somehow wise and knowing. Since the character debuted in Yorùbá traveling theater, Oyede had envisioned the character as “the general of comedy”—someone who’d reached the highest rank of humor, making people laugh

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232 A blackened face is a common feature of Béninois comic characters. By linking the makeup to soldiers, Oyede was the only Béninois actor to give me an explanation of where the practice comes from. The similarities to the corked-up faces of blackface performers are obvious, however, and the practice may derive from minstrelsy. See Lott (1993) and Cockrell (1997), among many others.
and think of love and friendship, not war, troubles, or animosity.\textsuperscript{233} And as le Général’s fame had grown, Oyede became associated with the character, often driving from one town to another selling his video discs in full costume (fig. 21).\textsuperscript{234}

To complete the transformation, Oyede slipped behind an oversized Mylar banner for \textit{On ne change pas le chauffeur} (You don’t change the driver; dir. Abiodoun Romain, 2009), le Général’s first video film, and reemerged minutes later in a drab-green military uniform. His assistant director, Gérard Koukphounsi, helped him with a black necktie, while a neighbor woman attached his costume epaulettes—laminated, cardboard rectangles with stars painted on. Singer–actor Kafayath Soumanou found le Général’s white New Balance sneakers behind the banner; like the blackened teeth, they added a whimsical touch that demilitarized the look. The comedian then flopped on the final touch, a gray, army-style peaked cap. A group of neighborhood children, watching through the window, called out, “Déné! It’s Déné!”—toddler-speak for the character’s name. Oyede had become le Général. His massive frame sank into his desk chair, and Gérard, Kafayath, and lighting tech Oladélé Pedro bowed down in mock deference. Laughter filled the shop.\textsuperscript{235}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[	extsuperscript{233}] Interview with Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
\item[	extsuperscript{234}] Conversation, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 13 May 2015.
\item[	extsuperscript{235}] I witnessed this transformation in Pobè on 15 April 2015. Oyede explained the process and his materials in an interview in Pobè on 2 June 2015.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The joking kept up for another hour or so. But it was getting hot, and le Général was getting testy. He called Jay Jay, yelled at him for being so late. As the day grew long, everyone realized there’d be no filming today. Le Général took off his hat and tie in a huff, unfastened the top buttons of his uniform, and slumped in his seat—Oyede once again. But the comic atmosphere wasn’t completely deflated. As I went to grab a small sachet of water from the back of the shop, Oyede stopped me: “You should take one from that other sack. Those are for the Muslims.” I noticed the brand name on the sachet in my hand: Alahou Latif Pure Water. I put it back and took one from the next sack over, Olouwole Pure Water. “Yes,” le Général quipped. “That water’s for the Christians. It’s clearer.”

*                     *                     *

What are we to make of this jibe, that “Muslim” water is somehow inferior to “Christian” water? Or the idea that people should only patronize businesses owned by or consume products made by followers of the same religion—that Christians should avoid water sold by Muslims, or vice-versa? And what is it that made this religious joke land with Christians and Muslims alike, rather than offend? Wasn’t Oyede’s barb about Christianity being “clearer” than Islam offensive—blasphemous even?

This question matters as religious clashes have grown increasingly common in West Africa over the past few decades. As African Muslims, Christians, and followers of indigenous religions come into daily contact, religious violence has become a reality,
especially in large cities (Sampson 2012). In these spaces of religious mixture, partisans weaponize forms of expression—from sermons to calls to prayer to entertainment media—in attempts to colonize the public sphere through the sheer volume and ubiquity of visual and aural religiosity (Meyer 2004; Larkin 2014). To keep the peace, people develop coping strategies, not least of which is simply ignoring religious expression from rival groups, no matter how loud or pervasive it grows (Larkin 2014). Yet harder to ignore is outright blasphemy, a term I define as impious expression targeting a religion to offend its adherents’ sensibilities. These sensibilities are defined by the group so offended, so blasphemy exists only in context, with accusations of it reinforcing social boundaries: blasphemers come from a rival group, or at best a rival faction that does things “wrong” (Lawton 1993). And as visual culture grows increasingly prevalent, media and art are often the sources of this offense (Lawton 2014: 82–83).

But what if blasphemy itself were a form of piety? Not in the sense of a Christian proving her holiness by insulting Islam or vice-versa; no, what if offensiveness in general proved one’s faithfulness—no matter the target? In this chapter, I argue that for Oyede and his fellow comedians, causing offense through blasphemy does exactly that: showing their piety toward indigenous Nàgó–Yorùbá spirits while calling out religious overzealousness as antithetical to traditional Nàgó–Yorùbá ethics of religious ecumenism. When CAPADI’s Christians mock Islam and its Muslims mock Christianity,
the actors and video film producers stress what they have in common: devotion to indigenous Nàgó–Yorùbá religion. Key to this arrangement is a spirit of comedy that infuses the movies made by Oyede and his fellow video filmmakers—all part of an organization called CAPADI—along with their sites of movie production. These performers trace their roots to Yorùbá traveling theater, and filmic masks like Oyede’s hearken to Gelede performance before it, a masquerade that honors powerful female elders and polices the community through the satire of pointed social commentary (Ola 2013: 20–21, 25).

In this way, comic blasphemy supplements CAPADI’s constructed emblems of unity—logo, anthem, and chant—and its institutionalized religious pluralism to mitigate deep-seated tendencies toward regionalism and schism. The organization thus ensures that no religious group dominates the organization, its agenda, or its filmic output, thereby preventing pricey schisms that could make the precarity of Béninois video filmmaking even more acute. In putting on his makeup, Oyede not only becomes *le Général de la comédie*; he taps into a long tradition of Nàgó–Yorùbá satire and masking that pairs masked performance with social commentary, uniting the public in the process. Oyede and his fellow video filmmakers assume the role of commentators on antisocial behavior, using humor to point out the misdeeds of the rich and poor alike (ibid.: 43), and giving the messages of their video films social sanction through the
laughter they elicit (ibid.: 31). This spirit of comedy then embeds itself in the video films themselves and spreads that spirit to the public that watches them.

4.1 Comedy on the move

Abiodoun Romain Oyede got into theatrical comedy in the 1980s when he formed a theater troupe with two friends, Casimir Capouli and Elias Dégence Toglosi. Even decades later, Oyede spoke of the troupe with pride; it was the first of its kind in the whole of the Plateau Department, let alone Pobè, he claimed; the idea arose when the founders saw Yorùbá theater performances in documentaries and Nigerian TV. In an era before the widespread availability of television sets, the group realized that the Plateau was an untapped market for live, comic entertainment. They called themselves Ifelegbe, “Love of the Group,” and traveled throughout Southern Bénin performing for sold-out crowds.236

Still, Oyede admitted that Ifelegbe wasn’t the first Yorùbá traveling theater troupe in Bénin; that honor goes to Towakanou, a company founded in Porto-Nov in 1976 by Mamoudou S. Ehysse and Dèhoumon Nougboyîkô Adjagnon.237 As Ehysse tells the story, the men decided to found a theater troupe after a day of witty banter at a

236 Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015. In Nigerian orthography, this name is Ìfẹ́legbe.
friend’s car-repair shop in Porto-Novo (Ehysse 2007: 11–12). The men knew of Yorùbá traveling theater from Nigerian troupes that toured Nigeria and Dahomey beginning in the 1960s, so why not start their own? Ehysse and Adjagnon became a Béninois Mutt and Jeff, a lanky Nàgó–Yorùbá Muslim and a portly Gun Vodun adept. The garage owner, siblings, cousins, and acquaintances joined the troupe, which grew to more than a dozen men and women and pulled in Muslims, Christians, and followers of indigenous Béninois religions (ibid.: 11–14). Comedy and religious plurality went hand in hand even in the earliest days of traveling theater in Bénin (fig. 22).

Figure 22: Live theater performances are rare these days, such as this joint Yorùbá–Gun troupe in Porto-Novo.

As in Nigeria, these itinerant theater professionals came from the “intermediate class,” a group characterized by their urban orientation, mobility, and ability to spot
new opportunities to make a living in the colonial and early-independence economies (Barber 2000: 2); Ehysse was a former footballer from Dahomey’s national team, retiring before the country changed its name to Bénin, while the legendary meeting where the troupe formed took place at a friend’s garage (Ehysse 2007: 11–12). In both Nigeria and Bénin, members of the intermediate class had enough formal schooling to read and write, even if they never became entirely comfortable with a European language, and they tended to leave school early to enter skilled trades. They were more defined by what they were not: neither rural farmers nor highly paid office workers and government functionaries. These were the beneficiaries of an expanding urban economy, one that opened up jobs for masons, merchants, taxi drivers, and theater performers (Barber 2000: 2). Yorùbá traveling theater thus emerged from a body of people who had learned to read, who had been exposed to Western forms of theater, but who understood the commercial trade networks that artisans had traveled between city and hinterland since before the colonial encounter (Barber 2000: 4; Barber, Collins, and Ricard 1997: 3).

In Nigeria, Yorùbá theater was well established and widespread by the early 1970s, fueled by the thirst for entertainment of an ever-increasing urban population and a booming economy spurred by oil money. By the middle of that decade, more than a hundred Yorùbá traveling theater companies were active in Nigeria, each employing twelve or more performers (Barber 2000: 1–13). However, when Yorùbá traveling theater took root in Bénin in the 1970s, it found a different cultural milieu. In Nigeria, the
pioneers of the art form were first exposed to stage drama via the European-style plays that British colonial schools introduced, and the Bible musicals that indigenous Christian churches staged beginning in the early twentieth century. After World War II, a few writers and composers, already in demand at churches to stage Bible musicals, branched into commercial theater with plays about politics, folklore, and comedy (ibid.: 40–46). But theater traditions were different in Bénin. The aftereffects of French colonialism meant that most Dahomeyans’ (and later Béninois’) first exposure to stage drama was through formal performances of French-language plays, mostly in the southern cities of Cotonou and Porto-Novo (Ehysse 2007: 14). Such theater would have appealed primarily to audiences comfortable with French, most of them likely highly educated Catholics.

In contrast, the theater Ehysse and Adjagnon envisioned would be modeled on the Yorùbá traveling theater of Nigeria, even as it opened the form up by bringing in a Nàgò–Yorùbá Muslim and a Gun practitioner of Vodun, albeit one with a Ọṣẹ-Yorùbá mother. Further, these were performers whose training came not through Christian morality dramas but from a wider array of sources: Ehysse had learned French-style drama in Qu’ranic school, while Adjagnon had trained as a traditional Gun storyteller (Ehysse 3–5, 10–11). Their new troupe, the men decided, would appeal to the masses, with plays performed in Yorùbá and Gun rather than French (ibid.: 3–5, 14). Even their company name signaled their difference from the stuffy classical theater of Bénin’s cities:
Towakonou is Gun, not French, and means “people, come cheer up” (ibid.: 7). By the end of the decade, Towakonou had been joined by a handful of other troupes touring the small country, concentrating their efforts in Porto–Novo and Cotonou (ibid.: 9).

Within a decade, the art form had spread to more rural parts of the country. In the Plateau Department, an intermediate class of skilled tradespeople had been established in the smaller towns, its members taking advantage of a semi-urban population with no easy access to film or television. Among them was Abiodoun Romain Oyede, a man who had attended primary and secondary school before training as a sign painter and eventually forming Ifelegbe.238 The troupe traveled across the country for several years until members moved away, got married, and lost interest, forcing the group to disband. But Nigeria’s influence remained strong. Troupes from both countries crossed into one another’s territories, collaborated, joined forces, and competed. Ehysse and Adjagnon toured Nigeria in 1979 and 1980 as members of the troupe of Baba Sala, a well-known comedian and jùjú musician (Ehysse 2007: 15–6). Only a few years later in 1986 or 1987, Pobè’s Oyede and Capouli traveled to Nigeria to join a troupe run by Oloya Ajere. For nine years, they worked in Nigeria and learned theater and filmmaking techniques. Oyede eventually joined up with Baba Sala, traveling with him throughout Nigeria, Bénin, Togo, and as far as Côte d’Ivoire.239

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238 Interviews with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015 and 16 October 2015.
239 Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
For Oyede, this work was less about adopting a new form of Nigerian theater, and more about carrying on a long tradition of Yorùbá comic performance. Indeed, for Oyede and many other Yorùbá traveling theater professionals, popular Yorùbá theater was a fusion of indigenous styles of singing and storytelling with European dramaturgical models, positioning them as heirs to indigenous performance practices that predate colonialism (see Barber 2000: 3; Ola 2013: 19). While anthropologist Karin Barber (2000: 12–14) argues that the traveling theater is at best hybridized—not fully European, not fully African—for Oyede and other Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá performers, it continued older forms of Nàgó–Yorùbá performance—especially comic ones—many of them involving masked performers. In Oyede’s case, he saw his comic bona fides coming from the Gelede’ masquerade, since his family was linked to one of the Pobè troupes.  

4.2 Gelede’, blasphemy, and the spirit of comedy

Oyede’s father was both a trained storyteller and a member of a Gelede’ troupe in Pobè. The Gelede’ are a Yorùbá masquerade renowned for their colorful and inventive masks, public performances, and veneration for “our mothers” (àwọn iyá wa) or “grand

240 Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015. Other performers traced Yorùbá theater and video filmmaking to the Egúngún masquerade and to storytelling, as well (conversation with Gérard Koukpohounsi, Pobè, 14 March 2015; interview with Saka Adam, Pobè, 9 June 2015). While some Egúngún performances comment on social events, Gelede’ troupes do so more regularly (Ola 2013: 30).

241 Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
mothers” (ìyá àgbà), elderly women thought to hold great power over life and death due to their age and wisdom (see Drewal and Drewal 1983; Lawal 1996; Witte 2001). While Gelede performances may touch on any aspect of social life, they are one of a handful of Yorùbá performance traditions that use comedy for social commentary, particularly through comical songs called ẹ̀fẹ̀. The word literally translates to “joke” or “jest” (Crowther et al [1937] 2001: 2: 74), but such songs also praise virtuous behavior as they poke fun at selfishness and immorality (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 38, 52). These are pointed barbs, not subtle insinuations, with ẹ̀fẹ̀ singers (known as Ọ̀rọ̀ Efẹ̀ or simply Efẹ̀) targeting anyone thought to be acting up, regardless of their wealth, age, or social status (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 54; Lawal 1996: 113). The protection of the mothers grants the Ọ̀rọ̀ Efẹ̀ carte blanche to levy these comical attacks, and the butts of the joke have little choice but to accept such criticism (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 39; Ola 2013: 24). Religious behavior is no exception: Efẹ̀ singers can target immoral or unethical religious behavior or entire religious groups (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 56). As with any antisocial behavior it pinpoints, humor takes some of the sting out of the Gelede’s criticism, provided the target can take a joke (Lawal 1996: 113; Ola 2013: 25). In short, the comic license granted

\[242\] Note that, while the literature on West African masquerades generally considers Gelede to be of Yorùbá origin, the practice has spread to other parts of Southern Bénin. Thus, while the Nàgó-Yorùbá of Bénin consider Gelede to be culturally Yorùbá, the Béninois state considers it part of “national culture,” the cultural heritage of the whole country (interview, Richard Sogan, Porto-Nov, 8 October 2014). For more on cultural heritage versus national heritage, see Chapter 6.

\[243\] Others include jesters and poets (Ola 2013: 4).

\[244\] Related words for comedy include ọ́rọ̀ (wit), ọ̀rọ̀ yẹ̀ (ridicule), àwàdà (jokes), and àpárá (jest) (Lawal 1996: 130; Ola 2013: 7).
to Nàgó–Yorùbá comedians allows them to use impiety—what in another context might be called blasphemy—to regulate religious behavior and honor the great mothers.

So are these ẹ̀fẹ́—and the video films that derive from them—blasphemous? The answer is that it depends. In simplest, terms, blasphemy is a form of impious expression. The concept bleeds into other forms of impiety: curses, defamation, disparagement, heresy, idolatry, obscenity, offensiveness, sacrilege, swearing (Grenda, Beneke, and Nash 2014: 1; Cabantous [1998] 2002: 7; Lawton 1993: 4–5; Plate 2006: 10, 34; Grenda, Beneke, and Nash 2014: 4). But a few characteristics makes blasphemy unique. First, blasphemy doesn’t necessarily indicate any belief or conviction on the part of the blasphemer (Lawton 1993: 85); someone might blaspheme out of sheer ignorance as easily as out of malice. Second, blasphemy is targeted at either some belief or practice, at the people who adhere to a belief or practice, at their religious leaders, or at the divinities they revere (Cabantous [1998] 2002: 9, 152–53, 182, 188–89). Third, blasphemy is at its core a transgression, a violation of the boundary between sacred and profane (Cabantous [1998] 2002: 2–4; Plate 2006: 47). Fourth, blasphemy depends on context to identify, since understandings of piety and impiety, sacred and profane vary from place to place and group to group. Finally, blasphemy causes offense. An expression—whether a speech act, an artwork, a movie, or something else—is blasphemous only in so far as the person who made it intended it to cause offense, or the target took offense
to it (Plate 2006: 10, 28). In this light, do the ẹ̀ẹ̀ songs count as blasphemy? Yes: They transgress sacred–profane boundaries. They offend.

No matter the target, blasphemy is an act of transgression, what art historian Brent Plate (2006: 47) calls “an improper mixing of what some people consider sacred and profane,” the sacred here understood as that which is set apart for divinity, and the profane as the banal and everyday (Cabantous [1998] 2002: 108, 191; Plate 2006: 36–37). Generally, blasphemy is about crossing such boundaries in the wrong way (Plate 2006: 40, 43), challenging in the process both the status of the sacred and the power of those who protect it from profane contamination (Cabantous [1998] 2002: 108, 191; Plate 2006: 36–37). Blasphemy when identified reveals cultural attitudes toward the sacred, and the social standing of the religious groups that enforce such conceptions (Cabantous [1998] 2002: 6–7; Plate 2006: 60). That is, blasphemy—and its constituent parts impiety, offense, and transgression—reflects local conceptions of proper versus improper religious expression, which in turn rely on cultural consensus to become normalized and institutional power to become enforced (Plate 2006: 28). The exercise of power over culture shows why blasphemy has been so reviled in so many settings: blasphemy amounts to a rejection of authority, a protest against religion and the powers that support it (Lawton 1993: 4; Cabantous [1998] 2002: 85, 190). Yet Nàgò–Yorùbá conceptions of humor demand that comedians transgress sacred–profane boundaries precisely to make people feel uncomfortable. In a sense, comedians are not only
permitted to mimic and mock sacred targets, including monarchs; they are duty-bound to do so (Ola 2013). This duty reverses their role as neo-praise singers (see Chapter 2); causing offense, not flattering, is the goal; taking offense makes the target feel pressured to change his or her behavior, no matter how high or low his or her status.

Disputes over blasphemy often reveal disagreements over how community is defined and membership determined. For those offended by it, blasphemy may arise through the violation of community norms of piety and propriety, its violators outing themselves as people who don’t belong (Lawton 1993: 4–5, 21). On the other hand, blasphemers may use such expression to cause offense in a challenge to those same definitions of community, perhaps to call for a more inclusive membership or tolerance for “offensive” behaviors (Lawton 2014: 82). Alternatively, blasphemy itself can be a marker of group belonging among those who oppose its target, feel marginalized by it, or reject its authority over them. In this form, blasphemy becomes the purview of the rebel, the miscreant, and the outcast, allowing them to find one another in their mutual opposition to someone else’s idea of piety (Cabantous [1998] 2002: 95, 115–17). Òrô Èfè songs are about the shape of community, too, but not for the same reasons. These songs do more than send up bad behavior through comical lyrics and dance moves; they also gain power through community endorsement (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 38, 52). Instead, as the Ôrô Èfè sings, the power of the critique is enhanced as audience members join in, signaling their agreement with the moral message of the song. Likewise, in prayers and
invocations requesting protection over the performers from the ọ̀rìṣà spirits, the spectators add their assent by chanting “àṣẹ,” a word that means power or capacity to make happen, but which indicates their social approval over the songs to come (ibid.: 40, 44–45). The spectators thus give the chants community sanction and authority, empowering the songs and shielding the singers from retribution (Lawal 1996: 117).

This form of blasphemy differs from that often found in so-called secular states in that it is self-consciously “traditional” rather than being tied to some concept of “secular modernity” in the European tradition. Artificial distinctions between tradition and modernity aside, the insults of an èfè song are different from, say, a blasphemous cartoon made by a European artist to poke fun at Islam and somehow prove it as antithetical to free discourse. While the end result may be the same, the blasphemy in each case serves a different end. That is, both types assume that not taking offense to blasphemous expression is a mark of religious tolerance and respect for religious difference (Grenda 2014: 28–29). Both promote the idea that everyone should be free to follow his or her own conscience in religious practice. Yet èfè differ from their European counterparts, for which the goal is to preserve the divide between church and state (Plate 2006: 170; Asad 2013: 15, 21; Grenda 2014: 28–29). For èfè singers and the video film producers who have followed them, the goal is instead to preserve ecumenism as part of religious practice. Nàgò–Yorùbá performers may just as easily target Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, or Wahhabist and Salafist Islam as European cartoonists.
might (Plate 2006: 238)—but they do so not to oppose tradition and support “modernity,” but to oppose an assault on their own tradition, àṣà ịbile.

For Oyede’s father, his Gelede troupe’s ẹfẹ songs were too powerful. In their strongest form, the èpè, Gelede songs are actual curses, targeting named individuals and foretelling their downfall—backed up with the àṣẹ power to bring such pronouncements to pass (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 50–51). Oyede remembers his father’s troupe being especially adept at such curses; if they directed an èpè at a tree, he said, it would wither and die. Because he was also a practicing Catholic, the elder Oyede told his children that if they wanted to be singers, they should sing for God or for “the culture”—not for the Gelede.

But there’s another side to this. If an offensive song is in fact a curse, its offensiveness grants it social power. Even the direct target of such a barb learns of his or her misdeeds too late to change them, the ẹfẹ calls out the behavior in question as antisocial, warning Gelede spectators to avoid such behavior in their own lives. If the targeted behavior is excessive religiosity or unethical religious practices, blasphemy becomes a tool to label such zeal as unwelcome in the local community. Put another way, when ẹfẹ target behaviors specific to Christianity, Islam, or even indigenous Nàgò–Yorùbá religion, their sacred power and social sanction label such behaviors as unethical and immoral. The ẹfẹ singers almost dare their targets to take offense, thereby pressuring them to take the jabs in stride—impious as they may be from the perspective
of the religion targeted. If taking offense reveals difference (Lawton 2014: 106), not taking offense reveals similarity and community belonging.

For Oyede, then, this spirit of comedy has been passed down from Gẹléde to dance, dance to theater, and theater to video film. All four of these art forms are aspects of àṣà ̀bílè, and that social obligation to point out immoral and unethical behavior via comedy has continued. Even after Oyede converted from Catholicism to the Celestial Church of Christ, an African-initiated church, he noted that his theater and video filmmaking—as with that of other Nàgô–Yorùbá Béninois performers—honored the fétiches (ọrìṣà spirits) in this way.\textsuperscript{245} These newer performance styles, carry on the spirit of the eṣẹ, giving actors social permission to promote moral behavior and castigate bad. This inheritance became important when Oyede joined in a movement of Béninois Nàgô–Yorùbá theater professionals in the 1980s and 1990s to move from theater to video film.

\textbf{4.3 Guilt by association}

Nigeria’s oil economy crashed in 1985, hitting Yorùbá traveling theater companies hard (Barber, Collins, and Ricard 1997: 6). With so much overlap in both touring circuits and personnel, Bénin’s troupes also felt the impact, and things grew

\textsuperscript{245} Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
worse when Bénin entered a period of economic decline and civil unrest as President Matthieu Kérékou abandoned a failing Marxist-Leninist economy in favor of structural adjustments proposed by the International Monetary Fund. Troupes on both sides of the border had experimented with celluloid filmmaking, with some traveling theatrical circuits with rented projection equipment to show locally produced films. But even as economic policies ate up disposable incomes, they also brought cheap electronics, including televisions and VCRs.246 Faced with new competition from home entertainment, many troupes recorded their plays on video and sold them to viewers to watch at home (Barber, Collins, and Ricard 1997: 6). Béninois performers reached out to Nigerian counterparts for help setting up their own video film industry, and by the late 1980s, troupes were making video films on VHS.247 Oyede followed suit when he returned to Bénin around 1996, and by the early 2000s, he, like most Nigerian and Béninois performers, had largely abandoned live theater for video films distributed on video-disc.248

While Nigerian expertise helped individual Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá performers make the leap to video, some of the better-known actors decided that to build a profitable and self-sustaining video film industry in Bénin they’d need to band together. These efforts largely ignored religious differences thanks to the early pioneers of Yorùbá

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246 Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
248 Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
drama, such as Ehysse and Adjagnon, who had downplayed religion in the earliest Béninois troupes. Instead, the biggest barrier to cooperation among the performers–turned–video filmmakers was regionalism. This conception of difference hinges on each video filmmaker’s professed affiliation with a specific Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá city (ìlú): one of Porto-Novo, Ifagni, Sakétè, Adja-Ouéré, Pobè, Kétou, or Cotonou. With the exception of Cotonou, each of these ìlú is also a Nàgó–Yorùbá kingdom with its own monarch and oral history linking it to an ancestral city–kingdom in Nigeria, such as Òyọ or Ìlé-Ifè; these ancestral ties also create regional rivalries between Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá ìlú based on shared origins (see Laitin 1986: 109–10). These rivalries crop up in the stories actor–video filmmakers from different parts of Bénin recount of their early efforts to associate; as I did research with them, media professionals in the Plateau Department were suspicious of what their colleagues in the Ouémé Department were telling me and vice-versa.²⁴⁹

Thus, for Oyede and other Nàgó–Yorùbá video film producers in the Ouémé and Plateau departments, hometown rivalries kept them from associating with their colleagues in Cotonou, Bénin’s commercial capital. There, the first Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá theatre association was formed, the Association of Yorùbá Professionals of the Dramatic Arts, known by the French acronym ASPYAD.²⁵⁰ The organization was

²⁴⁹ Interview with anonymous filmmaker, Porto-Novo, 13 August 2012; interview with Akambi Akala, Porto-Novo, 16 August 2013.
²⁵⁰ In French, l’Association des Professionnels Yorubas des Arts Dramatiques.
devoted to building the infrastructure of Bénin’s video film industry from the ground up. Akambi Akala, Bénin’s Director of Cinema at the time,\textsuperscript{251} claims he helped promote the organization and echoed the members of ASPYAD who envisioned it as a national organization that would incorporate performers in the Ouémé and Plateau departments, as well. But regionalism reared its head,\textsuperscript{252} and several of the actors and video filmmakers of Porto-Novo and nearby towns thought they’d be better served forming their own association. In 2003, the result was the Association of Yorùbá Filmmaking Artists of the Plateau and Ouémé, known by the acronym AACYPO.\textsuperscript{253} The group would be headquartered in Porto-Novo, but with branches in the Plateau as well. One of the main forces behind the group, Issiaka Adelabou, reached out to independent video filmmakers and actors in other Yorùbá-speaking Béninois towns to convince them to join and form local branches of AACYPO. The organization later changed its name to the Cooperative of Yorùbá Dramatic Arts Professional Associations, or CAPADY,\textsuperscript{254} with Adelabou serving as the provisional president until the first elections could be organized. In 2010, the voting members retained him as president for a three-year term, with Abidodoun Romain Oyede of the Pobè chapter serving as vice-president. In an effort to expand ever further and incorporate troupes who worked in French, Gun, and

\textsuperscript{251} In French, \textit{le Directeur du Cinéma}.
\textsuperscript{252} Interview with Akambi Akala, Porto-Novo, 16 August 2013.
\textsuperscript{253} In French, \textit{l’Association des Artistes Cinéastes Yorubas du Plateau et du Ouémé}.
\textsuperscript{254} In French, \textit{le Collectif des Associations Professionnels de l’Art Dramatique Yorubá}. The organization sometimes appends a final \textit{–B} to the acronym to stand for Bénin.
other Béninois languages, the cooperative was renamed CAPADI in 2010—the I of Innové (“innovative”) replacing the Y of Yorùbá. Since the cooperative was formed by the associations, the individual chapters became known as APADI–Commune de Pobè (APADI–CP), APADI–Commune de Kétou (APADI–CK), and so on.

CAPADI now exists as a non-profit video filmmaking organization devoted to improving the conditions of video filmmaking in Bénin and to encouraging cooperation among troupes and producers to promote video film among the people and government of the country, while also alleviating the high costs of filmmaking by encouraging members to work on one another’s productions with no monetary compensation. The ethos of the “starving artists” does keep these video filmmakers working at great sacrifice, an ideological justification for precarity common in creative work around the world (Ross 2008). But CAPADI’s rationale is to sacrifice now so that video filmmaking will be profitable in Bénin in the future. The threat of Nigerian competition helps to make the cooperative cohere—recall President Adelabou’s fears about cultural erasure in Chapter 1. Likewise, the different branches trumpet production and leadership in their own hometown over that of other areas, where people “lack vision” or “need more experience.” Yet the organization has introduced other symbols of unity that keep the organization unified in the face of regional rivalries and economic insecurity.

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256 Interview with Oyede Abiodoun Romain, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
4.4 Unity and schism

The 2015 APADI–Plateau General Assembly meeting followed the same structures of all CAPADI gatherings, from film shoots to story-writing sessions and budget meetings. Presiding from the front of a borrowed secondary-school classroom, Oyede, in his role as departmental president, called on Saka Adam to open the gathering with prayer. The elderly man prayed in Yorùbá in a Muslim style, while the rest of the assembled video filmmakers and actors, Muslims and Christians alike, stood from their school desks and followed his gestures—hands held at chest level, palms in, then moving in front of their faces and back down again. They answered each line of the prayer with a chorus of amins.257

After the prayer, everyone sang CAPADI’s anthem:

Ẹ jẹ́ ká fímọşọkan O,
Ẹ jẹ́ ká fímọşọkan.

Ẹ jẹ́ ká fímọşọkan O,
Ẹ jẹ́ ká fímọşọkan.

Wàra o sí lóní; ó ń bọ́ bọ́ dọ́la.
Ẹ jẹ́ ká fímọşọkan.

Ọun tí ọ gbọ́dọ́ parun làsà wa.

Àwọn àgba ló ń sọ wí pé, Bọ́mọ́dẹ́ ọ kú àgba.

257 The meeting was held in Pobè on 24 January 2015.
Ni odá a ifọwọsọwọ pọ loye’ ka ni, ka lèe gbàsà wa laruge’, Láse ni ká fimọṣọkan.

Bénin O, alóyé!
Bénin O, alóyé!

Ìlú Bénin, ilú ọgbọn,
A rè pẹ̀ sàjé ilú awá kọba má bà ilú àwa je.

Igi ṣe tiwa ló je àṣà ibéle’ t’i CAPADI–B ni O!
Oba ọlọla tó dà wá síle’ yìí O,
Má bálú áwá je.

Translated, this means:

Let us unite O,
Let us unite.

Let us unite O,
Let us unite.

[There is] No milk today; [but] it will come tomorrow.
Let us unite.

[To avoid] That which must destroy our culture.

Our elders said that
If a child does not die, he will grow up.
It is good; solidarity is what we need to promote our culture.
There is power if we unite.

Bénin O, wise one!
Bénin O, wise one!

Republic of Bénin, land of wisdom,
Our land’s fortune comes from the palm tree, so may God not destroy our land [not allow our land to be destroyed].

Our palm tree [of wisdom] is the traditional culture of CAPADI–B O!
Almighty God who alone put us on this earth O,
Will not ruin our country [Will not allow our country to be ruined].

Finally, a man stood up to deliver the CAPADI chant, with the rest of the group responding:

Leader: CAPADI!
Response: CAPADI–Bénin!
Leader: CAPADI–Bénin, ayékòótọ!
Response: Progrès, progrès, progrès [Progress, progress, progress]!

These three beginning elements—prayer, anthem, and chant—have been carefully choreographed by CAPADI’s leadership since the organization’s founding to promote unity and sidestep difference among members. I will return to the prayer below. As for the anthem, it was written by a video filmmaker, videographer, and radio personality from Pobè, Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, as part of a CAPADI-wide contest. The theme is unity; the lyrics say nothing of specific Yorùbá towns or ancestral homelands; indeed, no mention is made of the Yorùbá at all. The song praises unity of purpose and the nation–state. When the anthem is performed by all present singing together, it only underscores CAPADI’s emphasis on national unity for Bénin’s video filmmakers and provides the communal àṣẹ to do so.

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258 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou and Saka Adam, Pobè, 29 October 2014.
Figure 23: CAPADI’s logo features a parrot holding a ṣẹkẹrẹ (rattle gourd) in its claws.

Likewise, the call-and-response CAPADI chant stresses national unity, joining the membership in two primary goals: improving the lot of video filmmakers in Bénin (Progès, progrès, progrès!), and making movies that are both aesthetically pleasing and morally sound. The key to this last element in the chant is the reference to ayékọ́yọ́, a Yorùbá pun that means both “parrot” and “the world rejects truth” (Barber 1982: 446). The parrot here acts as a metaphor for the role CAPADI sets for itself in Bénin. In one sense, the parrot is a reference to the audiovisual, CAPADI’s own métier (fig. 23).

Visually, the bird suggests beauty, as when its bright feathers liven up the ritual dress of monarchs and priests (Thompson [1983] 1984: 18–19; Drewal 1992: 66; Abiodun 1994: 78; Renne 1994: 107–09; Owomoyela 2005: 443n6).259 As artists themselves, the video

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259 Red feathers also feature in regalia of those honoring the female river ọrịṣa Ọṣun and Yemoja (Apter 1992: 113; Abiodun 2014: 89).
filmmakers of CAPADI aim to create video films that, like the parrot’s feathers, are pleasing to the eye. But the logo and motto are even more relevant in that the parrot can talk, and that what it says isn’t always pleasant. Yorùbá folktales tell of parrots getting their owners into trouble with their truthfulness, as they witness immoral deeds and then tell the community about them (Ladionline n.d.). In such tales, the parrot becomes a symbol of truthfulness and morality, no matter how unpopular its message (Lawal 1996: 242–43). CAPADI’s logo makes this association more explicit, featuring a red parrot with a ẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀ rattle in its claws. In short, the CAPADI chant and logo support Oyede’s assertion that video filmmaking is a direct descendant of the Gèlèdè masquerade; parrots are one of many birds associated with such masks and the powerful women they celebrate (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 215; Lawal 1996: 241–44), and video films here are made analogous to ẹ̀fẹ̀ songs that point out wrongdoing in the community and celebrate righteous behavior. CAPADI’s members echo this sentiment, seeing their video films as a way to spread moral and ethical messages.

These appeals to unity were especially important at the 2015 CAPADI–Plateau general assembly meeting; CAPADI–Bénin was reeling from a major schism only two years before and a second schism threatening to strike any day now. Oyede opened the meeting with a series of blessings, drawing amins from the others. Then he addressed the issue threatening to tear the organization apart: registration with the Béninois government. Obtaining government recognition as an arts organization had been
CAPADI’s primary goal for more than a year; video film production had fallen, especially since the only models to fund productions were for the producer to self-fund or to petition local government, such as the mayor, for support. Registration with the national government, Oyede and the other leaders reasoned, would allow the cooperative to access state moneys earmarked for the arts. The process was onerous and expensive: Each video filmmaker, whether actor, camera operator, editor, producer, or singer, had to obtain a government artist’s license (Carte d’Artiste Béninoise) by paying a fee and sending in copies of previous work. But after enough of its members were thus recognized, branches of CAPADI could apply for recognition by sending a list of video films they’d produced, the profits they made, the names of people involved—and a hefty registration fee of 300,000 francs CFA (US $513). This recognition opened the door to possible funding from Bénin’s Cultural Aid Fund (le Fonds d’Aide à la Culture), an annual grant competition aimed at artists of all kinds and administered by the Ouémé and Plateau branches of the Departmental Office of Culture, Crafts, and Tourism (known by the French acronym DDCAT).

In his opening remarks, Oyede stressed that registration needed to be a communal effort; it wouldn’t work if any one commune failed to follow through. Yet the meeting grew heated when the president opened the floor to comments. Ibrahim

260 Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 10 October 2014.
261 Interview with Akambi Akala, Porto-Novo, 16 August 2013.
262 In French, la Direction Départementale de la Culture, de l’Artisanat et du Tourisme.
Bintinlaye, president of APADI–Ifagni, stood up and wagged his finger at another prominent video film producer from the same town, Ganiou Ademola Oguini, alleging that the “Alfa” (learned Muslim) had found a loophole in CAPADI’s registration plans: He’d registered his personal troupe with DDCAT independently as APTI, the Association of Theater Professionals in Ifagni. Now, Bintinlaye complained, Oguini refused to chip in on the registration fees to register APADI–Ifagni, since he had already payed the 300,000 francs CFA on his own. Bintinlaye charged that if each troupe registered with DDCAT as its own association, what was the need for CAPADI? What use were CAPADI’s communal, departmental, and national branches? Oyede agreed; the best approach would be to go to the government as five united communes: Ifagni, Sakêtè, Adja-Ouéré, Pobè, and Kétou. He called for peace, proposing that the presidents of the chapters and Oguini meet the following Wednesday to sort out the problem.

263 In French, l’Association des Professionnels du Théâtre à Ifagni.
264 Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 27 January 2015.
265 APADI–Plateau General Assembly meeting, Pobè, 24 January 2015, with explications provided by Romain Akogou on 27 January 2015.
Figure 24: Everyone dies after trying to curse CAPADI in this send up of the split with FENAPAD.

Angry voices on both sides continued to trade gibes, so Oyede said it was time for a sketch prepared by the Ifagni chapter. The actors moved school desks to clear a makeshift stage, and the rest of the assembly stopped arguing to turn their seats toward the performers. The sketch was funny. A group of video filmmakers visits a babaláwo to ask him for success in their video filmmaking ventures—and for him to put a curse on their hated rivals, the members of CAPADI. The audience laughed as the babaláwo foretold doom for well-known video filmmakers and CAPADI leaders. In the end, the

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266 The meeting was originally scheduled for Ifagni, but it was relocated to Pobè when the Ifagni venue fell through.
curse backfires, killing the would-be cursers and the babaláwo to boot. Only a single man is left alive; in maudlin exasperation, he asks why he ever tried to cross CAPADI (fig. 24).

In the face of the Bintinlaye–Oguini dispute, the skit was timely. The misguided protagonists were members of a rival video filmmaking association, the National Federation of Dramatic Art Professionals, or FENAPAD, which had split off from CAPADI only two years before. The causes of the schism were manifold, stemming from objections to a mandatory 10,000-franc (US $20) fee to support the April 2013 elections, accusations of embezzling money from the organization, the results of the elections, and allegations that they were “stealing women” from other CAPADI members. Two years later, CAPADI members still characterized FENAPAD’s founders as troublemakers, prone to starting fights at meetings, especially over money and women. Whatever their offense, CAPADI’s leadership banned the accused from making video films for a full year in punishment. The affected video filmmakers chose to quit CAPADI instead and founded their own association, eventually winning converts from CAPADI chapters outside Pobè.

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267 In French, la Fédération Nationale des Professionels de l’Art Dramatique.
268 Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 26 September 2014.
269 Interview with Tadjou Deen Babalola, Pobè, 24 October 2014.
270 Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 27 January 2015.
271 Interview with Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
272 Interview with Gérard Koukphounsì, Pobè, 31 October 2014.
Division is normal to some degree in the theatrical troupes that make up CAPADI. If a troupe grows too large, its founder may urge senior members to found their own groups, while other troupes disband as their members get married, have children, or find jobs elsewhere. In these instances, those who still want to continue making video films found new troupes or join existing ones. In these cases, the members maintain their affiliation with CAPADI despite the fate of their own personal company. But the CAPADI–FENAPAD split was something deeper. When I began long-term fieldwork in the fall of 2014, CAPADI was still reeling from the breakup. Pobè may have rid itself of bad mangos, but in dropping from sixteen active troupes to eight, video film production also fell precipitously from a high of twenty-eight films over the three years before FENAPAD left. The rivalry between CAPADI and FENAPAD was severe, so much so that I was forbidden from interviewing FENAPAD members and never had a chance to get their side of the story. Likewise, CAPADI members were not allowed to participate in FENAPAD productions or to use FENAPAD members in their own work. CAPADI stalwarts took glee in the misfortunes of FENAPAD; a rumor circulated that the head of DDCAT had upbraided the organization when its leaders approached him for aid but failed to show him proper respect. Under no circumstances

273 Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 26 September 2014.
274 Interview with Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
275 Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 16 February 2015. These eight groups were Arabanbi, Ifedola, Ifedayo, GTA, Ariya Théâtre Group, Iwalewa, Olayide, and Olade Théâtre Group.
276 Interview with Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
could they come back to the fold, the president of APADI–Pobè said: “Welcoming them back would be like putting something dangerous in your pocket. They’re poisonous, and you can never really tell if they’re planning to do you or your group harm.”²⁷⁷ The sketch at the general assembly meeting, then, made it clear that FENAPAD not only had broken with CAPADI, but also that they would suffer for it. The skit pulled directly from rumors circulating within CAPADI that claimed they’d actually seen several members of FENAPAD visiting a babaláwo, reminding the members of CAPADI–Plateau that they shared a common enemy—and that enemies are dangerous when they’re willing to use spiritual powers to harm you.²⁷⁸

Even though the skit was a hit, the Bintinlaye–Oguini argument reared back up as soon as Oyede called the meeting back to order. Yet the impulse toward unity was strong; an actor named Ajoke claimed the floor by calling out “CAPADI!” and triggering everyone to answer her with “Progès!” All eyes on her, she started singing an alternative version of Ganiou’s anthem. Everyone joined in, and for a moment at least, CAPADI–Plateau was united. Oyede made one last call for comments from the floor, and Adam Saka pleaded, “Let’s stand united.”

It was time to end. Oyede called on Romain Akogou, president of APADI–Pobè, to pray, joking that “It will need to be in the name of Jesus this time.” Akogou did as he

²⁷⁷ Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 26 September 2014.
²⁷⁸ Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 27 January 2015.
was asked, delivering a spirited prayer in the African Evangelical mold, ending with a loud “In Jesus’ name!” Oyede echoed this in his gravelly voice. Halfway out the door, another video film producer, Yacoubou Eïtcha, yelled back, “Allahu akbar!” and several other Muslims answered, “Alhamdulillah!” When the laughs died down, Oyede called for the CAPADI anthem. Everyone sang it together.

* * *

Four days later, Oyede was presiding over the special assembly in Ikpinle that he had called to resolve the Bintinlaye–Oguini dispute. After the prayer, anthem, and chant, the feuding video filmmakers rehashed their positions, but most everyone else repeated a simple refrain: Let’s stay united. They backed their push for unification with references to FENAPAD, prayers, proverbs, and prostrating to the quarreling parties, begging them to patch things up.279

When he finally had a chance to speak, Oguini announced, “I’m not in CAPADI anymore!” One of his detractors leveled an insult, and another tried to make light, saying everyone was acking like Boko Haram. Then the elderly storyteller Saka Adam got down on his belly and begged the Alfa to admit his mistake and stay with CAPADI. Three younger men dropped to their own bellies in shock, trying to get lower than

279 Special meeting of CAPADI–Plateau officers, Ikpinle, 28 January 2015.
APADI–Plateau’s eldest member and begging him to get back up. But Oguini stayed strong. “I didn’t make a mistake.”

In a last-ditch effort to keep the peace, Oyede called up Bintinlaye, Oguini, and a man named Paul, one of the Alfa’s main opponents. The president of APADI–Plateau bit the corner off a sachet of water, poured a bit on the ground with a chuckle—“That’s for the ancestors”—and poured the rest into a bowl. He said, “Each of you take a drink. We must have peace.”

Bintinlaye and Paul took sips, but Oguini hesitated before reciprocating. “It doesn’t matter,” he added. “I’m not in CAPADI anymore.” He stomped over to his motorcycle and took off without comment.

4.5 Religious unity in blasphemy

The Oguini affair centered on a professional dispute: one video filmmaker’s decision to go it solo and break with the group. During the mock-trial, Oguini defended himself with Yorùbá proverbs and chanted verses from the Qu’ran, keeping with his title of Alfa, but otherwise, his religious practices had little bearing on the affair. No one doubted his commitment to àṣà ìbílẹ̀; they just suspected he might be a bit selfish in his support for it. On 16 February 2015, Oguini changed his Facebook profile picture: In place of the bearded man in the white Muslim cap was a red parrot—perhaps some

280 “Báá! Bàá! Agbálágbá kò ṣe báyìí!”
indication that he was back in CAPADI, or else a claim that he was the one keeping the spirit of ọjọ́ and ayékòótọ̀ alive, offending people with truths no one wanted to hear.

CAPADI’s members convey this message in their video films, too, that religious zealotry is antisocial behavior and that religious figures of all stripes are just as susceptible to immorality as anyone else. The theme is subtle but present in Ma Vue (My vision; 2015, dir. A. Oyede), Oyede’s fourth video film featuring le Général, which he filmed around the time of the Oguini dispute. The story begins with the General of Comedy cleaning house. He’s divorced his wife for a suspected affair and remarried a younger woman (Adjath Bissiriou). He soon rids himself of his longtime chauffeur, too (Gérard Koukopounsi), when he catches the man stealing. But when the chauffeur covers for le Général’s wife when he nearly catches her with a lover (Aremou Machoukouri), she convinces her husband to keep him on the payroll. Rankled by the near-sacking, the chauffeur hires a crooked babaláwo (un charlatan, played by Yacoubou Eitcha) to curse the overbearing employer with blindness. The curse leads to one slapstick scenario after another as the chauffeur steals right from under le Général’s nose, and the elicit lovers sneak in and out of the bedroom literally before his eyes. The comic scenario turns when le Général asks a white-garment priest (Jean-Marie Ogou) to heal him of his affliction. His sight is restored in a miracle, and le Général gives the

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281 The video film never reveals the priest’s religious affiliation. Oyede himself was a member of the Celestial Church of Christ, an independent, African-initiated church whose members wear white garments during worship services.
priest some money by way of thanks (fig. 25). But he continues to pretend to be bind so that he can catch his wife and employee in their treachery. When his wife finally attempts to poison him, he reveals the ruse and calls the police to arrest the conspirators. The two evildoers get their comeuppance, and the movie fulfills what Oyede called the purpose of all Nàgó–Yorùbá video films: to convey a moral lesson to the audience.²⁸²

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 25:** Le Général is healed of his blindness with the help of a white-garment priest and his wife.

*Ma Vue* speaks out against sexual immorality, theft, and spitefulness. But in its depiction of religious figures, the video film calls out religious misbehavior, as well.

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²⁸² Oyede, in a conversation in Pobè (20 April 2015), stated that all good video films must convey a moral lesson to their audience. For more on lessons in Yorùbá drama, see Barber (2000: 216–19).
From a corrupt babaláwo placing a curse to a white-garment priest taking money for his services, these small touches let the movie call out a misuse of spiritual power by the babaláwo, presenting the priest’s prayers and miracle-working as moral. And when the priest refuses money from le Général only to accept it later, the video film evens out some of the moral superiority often claimed for Christianity over indigenous religion, where payment for services rendered is much more common. The video film’s message on religion is therefore not one of Christianity triumphing over indigenous evils as it might be in a Pentecostal–charismatic movie of the type so common in Nigeria (Oha 2000, Ukah 2003), but one more akin to a Gẹ̀lèdè ẹ̀rẹ́, calling out both the babaláwo’s immorality and championing religious power without zealotry.

Yet that moment, the pastor’s taking the money emerged only through the improvisational spirit of blasphemy on set during filming. As Ogou pray-acted a Christian miracle, the Muslim actor Bàbá Metor erupted into an exaggerated impression of a Catholic priest chanting, only to be joined by the Muslim makeup artist, a woman named Kafayath Soumanou, and his Catholic cousin, Gérard Koukpohounsi. In the original scenario, the pastor was supposed to refuse le Général’s payment, but when this version was filmed, Yacoubou Eîtcha, the Muslim man who was playing the babaláwo, exclaimed, “That’s not true!” in both French and Yorùbá (C’est faux! Ìrọ!). With a smirk, Oyede acquiesced. He told Ogou to have the priest accept the money after all, and everyone burst into laughter. This comic offensiveness continued into the actors’
closeups; as they cheered the miracle, Yacoubou shouted, “Allahu akbar!” and the cameraman, Jay Jay asked, “What about Sàngó?”

Within five months, Oguini had returned to the CAPADI fold; he attended APADI–Plateau’s special “Day of Reflection” (Journée de la Réflexion) in Sakètè on 29 July. With all communes on pace to be registered with the government, the organization had moved past the peril of renewed schism to instead focus on getting over the malaise that had affected them since FENAPAD had broken off. After several hours of small-group deliberations, the assembled video filmmakers came to a consensus that CAPADI just might not recover, so it was time to approach FENAPAD and offer to collaborate. Unity was the new watchword: “The war is over,” one member said; “We’re all Yorùbá, and we love each other,” said another.

Yet the Oguini dispute had illuminated another issue contributing to the ennui of CAPADI’s members: namely, the question of leadership. Three years prior, CAPADI’s membership made the decision to add two new offices within the organization: the Presidents of APADI–Ouémé and APADI-Plateau. By inserting a department-level office between the local and national levels, the organization hoped to encourage more activity within each department. Yet the division of power and responsibilities among local,

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283 The scene was shot in Pobè on 17 April 2015.
284 Day of Reflection, Sakètè, 29 July 2015.
departmental, and national presidents had never been clearly mapped. When Oguini went rogue, then, no one had been able to decide which level should punish him for it.\textsuperscript{285} The Day of Reflection brought up other unintended consequences of the departmental office, such as less collaboration between the two departments and increased burdens on video filmmakers from having more dues to pay and meetings to attend. The assembly recommended a return to the previous structure, eliminating the departmental offices and placing commune-level officers directly below the national bureau.\textsuperscript{286}

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A few months earlier in March, the leaders of APADI–Pobè tried another tactic to rejuvenate the organization: asking the ọ̀rìṣà for guidance. With attendance at meetings anemic and very few video films being produced, the leaders decided to consult a diviner, one trained as both a babaláwo and a Muslim marabout.\textsuperscript{287} Nevertheless, one officer dissented: APADI–Pobè’s president, Romain Akogou, the man Oyede had called on to end the departmental meeting with a fiery Christian prayer. He argued that seeing a diviner would do more harm than good; such consultations only ever make people nervous (ennervés). Besides, diviners charged hefty fees for their services, and the costs of the sacrifices the divination would call for would make things even more pricey. Why not, Akogou suggested, consult a Christian prophet instead? As a member of an

\textsuperscript{285} Special meeting of APADI–Plateau, Ikpinle, 28 January 2015.
\textsuperscript{286} Day of Reflection, Sakêtè, 29 July 2015.
\textsuperscript{287} Interview with Issiaka Adéwářé Ganiou, Pobè, 12 March 2015.
Evangelical church himself, Akogou knew that such a person could offer guidance at no charge. The other officers agreed that seeing a prophet wouldn’t hurt—but they still wanted to see the diviner. Akogou dropped his complaint, but as the officers moved forward with their plans, the commune president became scarce. With the organization limping, lukewarm members sometimes found other organizations more attractive, including churches that preached a different message about how religions should interact.

For Akogou, the problems started when he was chosen president of APADI–Pobè in the last set of elections. The position recognized Akogou’s contributions to video filmmaking in his native Pobè; he was a respected video filmmaker specializing in comic roles, leading theater troupes, and writing and producing movies. During his term as president, Akogou’s main source of income was doing odd jobs as a plumber. But he supplemented this living with videography, video editing, and video filmmaking, and he was an early force in encouraging the organization to register with the Béninois government for access to state funds. He advanced a clear agenda to build up Bénin’s video filmmaking infrastructure and allow the members of CAPADI to make movies full time.

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288 Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 12 March 2015.
289 Interview, Romain Akogou, Pobè, 27 August 2014.
But when Akogou was elected president of APADI–Pobè, another native to the town, Abiodoun Oyede, was elected to the new position of president of APADI–Plateau. With a bigger profile and a larger personality, Oyede remained the most dominant force in steering APADI–Pobè’s activities. Yet, when the FENAPAD split happened, Akogou got the blame. As CAPADI scrambled to control the damage, Oyede claimed that Akogou had alienated much of APADI–Pobè’s leadership, leading not only to schism but to apathy among the members. From mid-2014 to early 2016, Akogou’s involvement dwindled until he became largely absent, leaving daily operations to Oyede.290

Figure 26: Entrance to Mountain of Power and Success (Up-Jesus), Sakète.

290 Interview, Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 2 June 2015.
But just as Akogou was drifting away from active participation in CAPADI, he was becoming more active in church. He became born-again in 1995 after growing disillusioned with the Egúngún society to which his family belonged; he felt the Egúngún offered him little support or comfort, so after his conversion, he severed ties with them and with the Orò secret society he belonged to. For many years he remained active as a comedian and video filmmaker. He maintained the idea that all of Bénin’s religions offered a pathway to God, and he ignored church prohibitions on polygamous marriage, as he already had married three wives. Yet the church offered another outlet for Akogou, one insulated from the politics of video filmmaking with CAPADI. In 2014, he was becoming more active in the Mountain of Power and Success (Up-Jesus), a church affiliated with the Holy Ghost Congress (fig. 26). The church had adopted Pentecostal and charismatic practices common in Nigeria and other West African countries, such as belief in the present-day power of the Holy Spirit, the laying on of hands, slaying people in the spirit, and delivering people from possession by evil spirits. During his free time, Akogou spent time with fellow Evangelicals and debated Bible verses, or scouted out locations for new congregations in the department. On

291 Interview, Romain Akogou, Pobè, 26 September 2014.
292 Interview, Romain Akogou, Sakétè, 7 December 2014.
293 In Yorùbá, Ori Oke Aghara Aṣeyori (Up-Jesus), and in French, l’Église Up-Jesus Pouvoir du Succes. The church was founded in Bénin, but the pastor trained in Nigeria (interview, Prophet Aladé Bienvenu, Sakétè, 7 December 2014).
294 Church service, Church Up-Jesus of Power and Success, Sakétè, 7 December 2014. Literature on such Pentecostal–charismatic practices in Africa is vast. For instance, see Kalu (2008) and Marshall (2009).
Sundays, he regularly guest preached at his home church in Ikpinle and at other congregations. Akogou said that he’d not yet gotten “the call”—God’s demand that he become a full-time pastor. If he did, however, things would have to change. He’d have to abandon CAPADI. Maybe he could make Christian video films instead.  

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Figure 27: Ifá divination to help CAPADI recover from the downturn in production.

With his opposition to the divination, it was little surprise when Akogou stayed home, saying he was sick. Oyede and the other officers met at APADI–Pobè

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headquarters on 12 May 2015 for the initial consultation. The babaláwo, a man named Ifáloyè, cast palm nuts; how they landed told him whether to draw one line or two, eventually building up a configuration of dashed lines that called up an odù to guide the divination, a code that referenced stories the ọrìṣà deemed relevant to overcoming CAPADI’s problems (Clarke 2004: 233; Adéékọ́ 2017: 5). The odù revealed was called Ògúndá bèdé, an indication, Ifáloyè said, that something good was in store if APADI–Pobè only continued to work “hand in hand.”296 (“No, that doesn’t mean that it’s Ògún who has dábèdè’d,” Oyede later joked when I asked if the odù referenced Ògún, divinity of iron.297) As for FENAPAD, the babaláwo said the odù suggested that CAPADI should leave their rivals be and focus instead on winning back their own lukewarm members.298 Further casts revealed the specifics of the sacrifices the ọrìṣà needed to bring about these changes and the actions APADI–Pobè’s officers should take to improve their situation (fig. 27). Before the video filmmakers left to purchase the items required for sacrifice, however, Ifáloyè revealed that the reading showed that the wife of one of APADI–Pobè’s officers was having fertility struggles and should attend with her husband. Issiaka thought that the reading must be indicating Romain Akogou, his former master

296 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganou, Pobè, 13 May 2015.
297 Conversation with Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 15 May 2015. « Non, ça ne dit pas que c’est Ògún qui a dábèdè. » The meaning behind the names of odù are often obscure. Ògúndá bèdé is also called Ògúndá borogbè and Ògúndá atoriṣẹ, names that respectively translate to “Ògúndá conquered Ogbè” and “Ògúndá, the repairer of heads (destiny)” (Chief Àìkúlọlá Fáwéhinni Nathan Lugo, Olùwín–Ọọṣà, personal communication, 11 March 2018).
298 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 21 March 2015.
who taught him audiovisual media.\textsuperscript{299} Nevertheless, the president of APADI–Pobè stayed home again the next day. Oyede stood in for him instead.

\textbf{4.6 Conclusion}

In November 2015, APADI–Pobè shot the video film \textit{Ìkòkò Atura} (The jar of sacred bliss, dir. Gérard Koukphounsi, 2016). While the major roles went to members of APADI–Pobè, the movie incorporated actors from across the Ouémé and Plateau.

Abiodoun Romain Oyede served as location manager; his job was to make sure actors got where they needed to be on time, that the caterers kept everyone fed, and that local people were persuaded to let the video filmmakers shoot in their neighborhoods. For Oyede, \textit{Ìkòkò Atura} was a love letter to CAPADI; he said that everyone participating in it was there for love of video filmmaking and of CAPADI.\textsuperscript{300} Notably absent during the making of the film, though, was APADI–Pobè’s president, Romain Akogou.

If the video filmmaker–turned–pastor was missing during the shoot, another pastor was very much present: Oyede’s character for the movie, Pastor David.\textsuperscript{301} Compared to the video film’s plucky high-school protagonists, Pastor David is a stodgy old man; in a stern speech to his daughter, Ṣọmọlọlá (Augustine Bessan), he rails against her interests in Nàgò–Yorùbá culture (iṣẹ), labeling it occult mumbo-jumbo that Christ

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{299} Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganou, Pobè, 13 May 2015.
\item \textsuperscript{300} Conversation with Abiodoun Romain Oyede, Pobè, 26 November 2015.
\item \textsuperscript{301} Oyede died of medical complications in August 2016.
\end{itemize}
has commanded us to abandon. Making a similar argument to his son Akim, Ọmọlọlá’s boyfriend (Gérard Koukphounsi), is a zealous Muslim cleric (Aremou Machoukouri) who forbids his boy from researching àṣà, too. The students defy their parents and travel to the small Nàgó–Yorùbá kingdom of Ayédáradé, where they eventually convince the king (Adéwálé Issiaka Ganiou) to petition his guardian spirit, Ọ̀rìṣà Atura, to abandon an ancient custom that requires him to take a new wife upon being crowned. In this message, indigenous Ọ̀rìṣà religion is shown as most modern and accepting, while Oyede’s and Machoukouri’s blustering clerics are made out to be buffoons.

Yet the scene singled out by cast, crew, and early viewers of ìkòkò Atura pits Oyede’s pastor and Machoukouri’s imam against one another. With his daughter missing for several days, Pastor David and his wife (Aline Abike) confront the imam at his home and accuse him of keeping their daughter there against their wishes. The imam denies the charge, but this just sets the pastor off: He declares that the Muslim can perish in the Red Sea like the Egyptians of the Old Testament for all he cares. The imam replies that the pastor is an “orphan” because he lacks a true education about God. The pastor and his wife storm off, but when the imam calls him “Satan,” the scene devolves into another round of insults. The scene is tense, the anger almost palpable. But every time people in Bénin watched it, it never failed to elicit hearty laughter. Even on set, everyone laughed. Nearly one-hundred-percent improvised by the two comedians, it grew more outrageous with each take, Oyede and Machoukouri feeding on the laughter of the cast,
crew, and curious onlookers. In a way, this scene became Oyede’s most direct emulation of a blasphemous ẹ̀fẹ̀ song, a scene of two religious blowhards insulting one another into complete fecklessness. Pastor David, while perhaps not a direct parody of Akogou, lampoons the Evangelical and Pentecostal pastor and rebuts the idea that Christianity requires abandonment of reverence for all things indigenous.

Ultimately, irreverent comedy and mutual blasphemy keep CAPADI unified. At the same time, as Akogou’s situation reveals, the comic disparagement of religion can alienate members and push them away, especially in precarious times when video filmmakers are reckoning with a market for local media that seems to be drying up. As unity frays, or as power struggles emerge, members may seek solace in other groups, including churches or other religious organizations, abandoning their commitment to video filmmaking. If the spirit of the Gelede ẹ̀fẹ̀ song animates the comic insults that maintain CAPADI’s religious unity, it becomes easy for members to abandon that comic spirit if they feel marginalized or if they’re already warming to a new faith that downplays that indigenous religion. Blasphemy at its core is a means of establishing community—insiders versus outsiders based on religious beliefs and practices—so perhaps that is exactly the point. CAPADI has no room for members who either refuse to revere indigenous spirits and the culture surrounding them, or for members who show excessive zeal for religions that do so.
Officially, APADI–Pobè maintains its fixation on mutual blasphemy as a path to religious unity, and its video films promote the same. These performers pull from longstanding Nágó–Yorùbá practices—often masked—of using humor to chastise bad behavior and reinforce moral expectations, their status as comedians keeping their barbs from causing offense, or at least dissuades people from acting offended. In the bargain, CAPADI and its members promote mutual piety to the ọ̀rìṣà spirits while labeling religious zealotry as a violation of traditional ethics. Oyede’s roles illustrate this point. As heirs to the Gèlèdè tradition, he claims the ability to mimic, mock, and blaspheme not only world religions, but also Yorùbá monarchs, using praise to deliver political commentary (Ola 2013: 21). This spirit of comedy becomes another manifestation of the audiovisual aesthetics video filmmakers work within. The audiovisual parameters they set help spread their pious blasphemy to the publics who watch these artists working and who watch the video films they produce, a theme I consider in the next chapter.
5. See No Evil: Producing Auroscopic Regimes at the Yorùbá Borderlands

Figure 28: Writers meet to complete the scenario for Ìkòkò Atura (photograph by Ọládélé Pedro).

It took a few hours, but the writers had a basic plot for the video film by lunchtime: The newly crowned monarch, or ọba, of a small Nàgó–Yorùbá village needs to restore his realm to prosperity after it has fallen on hard times. He has just completed a set of ancient rituals that legitimize his reign, but the new leader has one more to go through: choosing a new bride. Only after he does so will the ọrìṣà, or indigenous divinities, restore prosperity to the town and grant him a long, successful reign. There’s just one problem: The king decides to marry a student who’s just visiting the village to do research—and she’s not interested. Chaos breaks out as the woman’s friends rescue her from the palace and disrupt the ritual marriage. In the end, the king relents, asking the ọrìṣà to do away with this custom of wife-taking once and for all—and they agree!
Royal subjects and student researchers rejoice, and an American university agrees to fund an exchange program with the village.\textsuperscript{302}

In that stuffy room in Pobè, the six APADI–Pobè writers knew they had a winner on their hands. Here was a story with plenty of meaty roles: all those kings and queens and priests in the village, all those students and pastors and imams in the city (fig. 28). And even better, the movie’s core message would reflect the convictions of the video filmmaking association the writers belonged to, CAPADI: The idea that Nàgó–Yorùbá indigenous religion is a cultural resource that keeps the Nàgó–Yorùbá people united and links them to foreign wealth and diasporic communities around the world. In this way, this video film would be a direct rebuttal to another type of movie these video filmmakers were all too familiar with, video films that mostly come from Nigeria, where they were made by Pentecostal Christian producers who paint indigenous religion as a form of witchcraft, an evil force to be exposed and vanquished (Oha 2000: 193–194). Instead, this group’s movie would show an ọ̀rìṣà in all its glory, performing miracles and saving a village.

But the problem was how? This question became important when the writers came back from lunch and had to decide which ọ̀rìṣà to cast in the video film. Gérard Koupohounsi, fresh off the release of his movie Magumi, suggested they could use Orò,

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\textsuperscript{302} The story sessions for Ìkòkò Atura took place at APADI–Pobè headquarters in Pobè from 26 October to 28 October 2015.
the ọ̀rìṣà of ancestral fertility (Marcuzzi 2010). His wife, Aline Abiké, suggested it would be better to use Ọ̀rìṣà Oko, the god of the farm (Pemberton 1977). An apprentice camera operator named Ọládélé “Lálá” Pedro brought up Ọ̀ndò, the patron spirit of Pobè, where the group was meeting and where part of the video film would take place (see Chapter 3). But an older man and master storyteller named Saka Adam pointed out that all of these ọ̀rìṣà had the same problem: They couldn’t be shown on screen as active spirits without either misrepresenting them or exposing secrets about them that shouldn’t be caught on camera. Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou came up with the solution: Why not just make the spirit up? The group decided that it could work, so they set to figuring out what this fictional spirit would be. Finally, video film producer and deejay Yacoubou Eïtcha grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote the spirit’s name on the chalkboard: Ọ̀rìṣà Atura—the god of happiness and the patron divinity of the fictional kingdom of Ayédarádé. After three more days meeting up to brainstorm and jot down scenes in notebooks, the scenario was complete. The video film would have other ọ̀rìṣà in it—the Gèlèdè masquerade and Orò—but they’d be minor parts, limited to those divinities’ public faces. Ọ̀rìṣà Atura would be the wonder-working star, a made-up ọ̀rìṣà with no real secrets. Along the way, each of these spirits would reveal something about Ṓmọlọlọ́lá, the movie’s female lead. Production took off, and Ìkòkò Atura, or The jar of sacred bliss, came out in 2016.
In this chapter, I follow the production of *Ìkòkò Atura* to focus on this tension Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers in Bénin have to face. On the one hand, they want to promote indigenous Nàgó–Yorùbá religion as a unifying force, with mutual veneration for the *ọ̀rìṣà* uniting all Nàgó–Yorùbá people and their descendants, meaning both Christians and Muslims, Béninois and Nigerians, West Africans and followers of African-inspired religions in the Americas. But Bàbá Saka’s objections suggest the dilemma involved with putting these spirits on screen: How do you show them as powerful entities that influence the mundane world without misrepresenting them, or worse, revealing the secrets that give the spirits their power? Video films are an audiovisual medium, so for a group such as CAPADI, with its piety toward indigenous Nàgó–Yorùbá *àṣà ibiẹ̀*, two obvious options would be to not put indigenous religion on screen at all, or to restrict its depictions to the level of public spectacle. But neither conveys the true power of the *ọ̀rìṣà*. With its special effects and editing techniques, video film is a medium primed to show supernatural forces at work.

Instead, video filmmakers use audiovisual adaptation to depict *ọ̀rìṣà* without damaging them, a process that could only have arisen in a zone of religious encounter like this one along Bénin–Nigeria border. Specifically, I argue that these Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers use their medium to respect culturally and religiously determined restrictions on what people can hear and see—what I’m calling an “auroscopic regime” after work by film theorist Christian Metz ([1977] 1982) and
historian Martin Jay (1988)—informed by Nàgò–Yorùbá distinctions between spectacle and secrecy (Apter 1992; Drewal 1992). Yet they do this by adapting an auroscopic regime that arose among Nigerian Pentecostal Christians eager to expose the evils of the occult and to show the hidden forces at work in everyday life (Larkin 2008; Green-Simms 2012; Meyer 2015). By focusing on the three divinities used in Ìkòkò Atura, I show how female power is specifically referenced and promoted through these practices. Meanwhile, I show how at face value these two auroscopic regimes seem contradictory: One conceals, the other reveals. But Béninois video film producers square them by drawing from a long tradition of metaphor in Yorùbá verbal and visual arts, allowing them to conceal hidden knowledge right out in the open (Matory 2005b) through a foreign aesthetic, the film language of Nigeria’s Nollywood video film industry.

5.1 Auroscopic regimes

Once the scenario for Ìkòkò Atura was finished, the next step was to cast the video film. Each of the six writers got his or her pick of a role to play: In the village, Issiaka would be the king and Yacoubou a royal minister. From the town, Gérard and Lálá wanted to play students, Bàbá Saka a schoolteacher, and Ìyá Abiké a pastor’s wife. I was told I’d play an American professor, so that made my part easy. Then the writers went through the other open roles and assigned them to actors from other towns in Bénin. The group called Abiodoun Romain Oyede, off selling copies of his movie Ma Vue, for
his feedback, and he suggested an actor to play the student who catches the eye of the king in Ayédáradé against her will: Augustine Bessan, a young woman who had played le Général’s daughter in the last two video films in that series. The role would be her biggest yet, and the predicament of her capture and would-be forced marriage would give her a lot of dramatic potential to work with. It’s a role that would also hurl her character into a world of sacred secrets she didn’t understand and that locked her to into marriage against her will.

As noted above, producing Ìkòkò Atura presented a quandary: How do you use an intrinsically audiovisual medium to show religious forces that are usually kept secret? For this problem, the producers of Ìkòkò Atura borrowed Nigerian Christian aesthetic conventions and turned them on their heads to bolster the stature of the Nàgó–Yorùbá indigenous ọ̀rìṣà spirits. But to understand how this process works, it’s helpful to examine the two auroscopic regimes these Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers are caught between in scenes showing indigenous religious practices. I’ve coined this term by adapting the idea of a “scopic regime” as used by scholars of cinema and visual culture. As with the idea of filmic gazes discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of a scopic regime has roots in Lacanian psychoanalysis (Beller 2006: 165–73). Cinema scholar Christian Metz ([1977] 1982: 61–63) first used the term in his discussion of the “scopic regime of cinema.” For Metz, cinema is a form of voyeurism focused on an absent object. Unlike a theater performance, where the spectator occupies the same physical space as
what he views, the cinema, as a way of viewing, is defined by lack and its corollary, desire. That is, cinema presents images and sounds, but at the same time restricts the spectator’s perceptions to what the film provides, while separating the spectator from the object viewed. This object is never more than an image of something that is not physically present, a signifier or representation that relies on symbolic language for the spectator to perceive it, but an object that the spectator can never obtain and that cannot consent to be gazed at. Even taking into account the fact that a film has a creator, Metz (ibid.: 94–95) argues that in its efforts to hide its structure from the viewer—shot structure and so on—the scopic regime of cinema is one of nonconsensual voyeurism. His theory thus combines Lacan’s notion of the role of the visual in subject formation (Beller 2006: 165–66; also see Chapter 2) with the notion of a regime, that is, the regulation and management of vision.

Historian Martin Jay (1988) develops the idea further in his essay “Scopic Regimes of Modernity.” For Jay, different media reveal scopic regimes characteristic of their times and places. He focuses on European “modernity,” identifying three overlapping models of seeing and understanding what is seen, as they are represented in three styles of European panting. The Cartesian perspectivalism of the Italian Renaissance explains, with its emphasis on a scientific understanding of optics and a single perceiving subject (ibid.: 4–12). The Baconian empiricism of the Dutch Renaissance describes, with its focus on surfaces, clutter, and an uncontained field of
view (ibid.: 12–16). Finally, the baroque occludes, with its embrace of medium, ornate subject matter, and acknowledgement of a human creator (ibid.: 16–18). Despite his reliance on the term, Jay never defines what he means by the term “scopic regime,” yet his various synonyms for it shed some light on his use of the term: A scopic regime is an “ideal typical visual culture” (ibid.: 18), an “ocular field,” a “visual model” (ibid.: 4), a “visual impulse” (ibid.: 19), or a “differentiated ocular experience” (ibid. 20). In his preface to the same volume, Jay’s editor, Hal Foster (1988: ix), sketches the term a bit more clearly: it is “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.” Scopic regimes involve “rhetoric and representations” that seek to “make of its many social visualities one essential vision, or to order them in a natural hierarchy of sight.” Perhaps religion scholar David Morgan (2012: 50–51) puts things most succinctly by suggesting that a scopic regime is a “metaphysical ideology” of seeing.

A scopic regime, then, is a set of social, cultural, economic, and historical factors that shape both how people see and how they learn to interpret what they see. In this way, vision is more than just the physical act of light entering the eye, the signal traveling up the optic nerve, and the brain interpreting the result. The idea of the scopic regime is that interpreting what we see is learned, and therefore it reflects the peculiarities of a person’s upbringing and environment. Only there’s a problem when using this idea to understand cinema and other narrative audiovisual media:
audiovisuality itself. That is, since Metz ([1977] 1982) coined the term *scopic regime* to explain both sonic and visual aspects of film, scholars of visual studies have largely evacuated sound from its use. Accordingly, cinema studies especially is often prone to ocularcentrism, leaving out a full half of what makes sequential narrative media so compelling. My solution is to adopt the term *auroscopic regime* to emphasize that video films rely just as much on sound as they do visual images.

In restoring sound to cinema studies, I bring in the insights of sound studies, an interdisciplinary field that, as the name suggests, takes sound as its object of study. Scholars of sound studies consider both how sound enters human social worlds, and how sound is understood and interpreted when it does so (Sterne 2012: 1–2). Among the many insights of sound studies scholars is the notion that hearing is not simply a physical–biological process; it is shaped by cultural, social, and economic forces (Schafer 1977; Meintjes 2003). Likewise, listening is not simply natural, but is an active process that takes skill and training to do properly so that the listener can distinguish signal from noise (Mody 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Krebs 2012; Gray 2013). And like visual studies scholars, researchers of sound understand that sound knowledges—sonic regimes?—compete and shift in the world, leading to rival approaches to understanding sound and its relationship to human social worlds (Sterne 2012: 8). By merging the *audio*–back into the *audiovisual, then, I take sound scholar Jonathan Sterne (ibid.: 9–10) seriously when he warns of “the audiovisual litany,” a set of preconceived notions about how sound and
vision operate differently, taking the physical properties of sound and light as its main bases for comparison, but ignoring cultural variations. The dichotomies on the list thus represent the Cartesian perspectivalism described by Jay (1988), with such contrasts as “hearing is spherical, vision is directional; hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective; [...] hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect...” The concept of an auroscopic regime shows that such contrasts are not universal. They reflect only one auroscopic regime, one culturally determined understanding of how the sonic and the visual become part of human social worlds. In this chapter, I explore two others that operate differently.

In sum, my focus here is on auroscopic regimes as the ways people see, hear, look, and listen within a particular sociocultural and economic context that shapes both vision and hearing and the interpretation of what is seen or heard. Yet I want to stress that an auroscopic regime also shapes how people understand the relationship between what they see and what they hear. These senses operate in tandem; how people triangulate visual with aural stimuli relies just as much on cultural factors as does the interpretation of either sense on its own. In Southeastern Bénin, two auroscopic regimes compete, each instilling a different view of secrecy and of women’s roles in the religious sphere.
5.2 Seeing and hearing the sacred

It was a race to make Pobè before dark. We’d just filmed two important scenes: the townie students coming to and leaving from Ayédarádé, bookends for the portion of Ìkòkò Atura where they make trouble in the village. As director, Gérard wanted to make Ayédarádé seem remote, but the nearest river that fit his vision was the Aguidi, over an hour south at the Medejonou border with Nigeria. Shooting there had taken longer than anticipated, so we had to speed back north to Pobè for one last scene before sundown (fig. 4). Then principal photography would be a wrap.³⁰³

From his shop, Oyede said the Gelede dancers were waiting in their temple nearby. The sun dipped dangerously close to the horizon as Gérard barked for me to change my shirt: “The professor can’t wear the same shirt twice!” My character, American anthropologist Jack Jones, had just been in the scene of the boat leaving Ayédarádé, so I swapped shirts with Faozane Sourakatou, our continuity director for this sequence.

The scene shows Lálá’s character, Ìṣọlá, bringing Jones to his village to show him the Gelede masquerade, a spectacle of Nàgó–Yorùbá indigenous religion widespread among the Nàgó–Yorùbá people of Bénin. Jones is a minor character in the video film, a symbol of American wealth and the power of àṣà ìbílẹ̀ to attract it. At this point in the

³⁰³ These scenes were filmed on 27 November 2015.
narrative, Jones has just arrived in the country to learn about “traditional culture,” and the schoolmaster with whom he’s been corresponding has suggested that he hire some local student guides. Yet in this scene, we see that Ìṣọ́lá has opted against joining forces with his friends so that all of them can share whatever benefit may accrue from Jones’s interest; instead Ìṣọ́lá leads the foreigner to his home village as his sole guide. The scene thus establishes Ìṣọ́lá as a greedy and unscrupulous character, a personality that has greater ramifications later in the movie.

But the scene also showcases one of Pobè’s Gelede troupes (fig. 29). Oyede had hired them, pulling on his family’s ties to the masquerade to bring them on board (see Chapter 4). Cameraman Jacob Abiodoun called “Action!”, the Gelede drummers played, and the masked dancers streamed out of their temple. But Gérard cried, “Weather! Weather!” — the English word that Béninois video filmmakers use for natural light. He and Faozane switched on built-in flashlights in their cell phones and shined them on the dancers as Jacob zigged and zagged between them to capture a long, unbroken shot of dancers jumping, slinking, and tumbling through the frame. Finally, Gérard and Faozane turned their cellphone flashlights on Lálá and me as Jacob filmed us in two-shot, close-up, and reverse close-up. In the conversation, Ìṣọ́lá asks the professor if he likes what he sees. Sure, says Professor Jones, but I’d like to learn more about the

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304 Conversation with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, 11 February 2016.
305 The troupe performed for 10,000 francs CFA (US $16.20).
Gẹ́lẹ̀dẹ̀. Ìṣolá says, fine, he can share some hidden knowledge about the masquerade—if the price is right.

*                     *                     *                     *

Figure 29: A Gẹ́lẹ̀dẹ̀ dancer in a still from Ìkòkọ Atura (CC BY 3.0 US).

Almost two months later, Lálá imported the footage of the Gẹ́lẹ̀dẹ̀ dancing into Adobe Premier and played it through in the preview window a few times, sucking his teeth in disappointment. “The drums aren’t right.” He imported footage of another Pobè Gẹ́lẹ̀dẹ̀ performance into the film-editing program and spliced it in, but the resolution and lighting were too different. None of Lálá’s tricks could make the clip fit what we’d shot, not even tinting the older footage an orangey gray to match the colors of our own video, lit by cell phones and sunset. Instead, he stripped the soundtrack from the older clip, laid it below our footage, and removed the drums from the newer sequence. He
previewed the new scene with old drums, new dancers. “That’s better,” he said. “The drummers we hired didn’t do a good job. These drums are better.” I asked whether the drummers might be upset to have their performance used in this way. “No, they’ll appreciate it,” Lálá replied. “We can’t use a bad performance for an international project like this. It won’t show Pobè in a good light.”

A few days later, Lálá’s boss, Issiaka, tinted the scene yellow; then, while adding French subtitles to the video film, Jacob Abiodoun made the tint even more pronounced. He said the scene should be the “color of tradition.”

The comments of Lálá, Issiaka, and Jacob from postproduction reveal that this scene is supposed to do several things. First, it showcases the Gelede as one of Pobè’s more spectacular performance traditions and, with that yellow tint, an emblematic part of its ìṣà àbílé. Second, it establishes Lálá’s character, Ìṣọ́lá, as a man of no scruples, willing to abandon his friends and sell out his home community for personal gain. Third, we learn that the American professor is fairly clueless about indigenous Nàgó–Yorùbá culture and willing to pay to learn more. But perhaps most importantly, the

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306 Lálá did the first edit of the scene at Production Odada in Pobè on 5 February 2016.
307 Issiaka edited the scene in his Pobè studio on 11 February 2016; Jacob Abiodoun made small changes in the same studio on 27 February 2016.
308 Conversation with Jacob Abiodoun, Pobè, 13 December 2015.
scene elicits outrage from the viewer as ìṣọ́lá behaves badly. At the heart of his immorality is his willingness to betray secrets.

Secrecy is an essential part of the auroscopic regimes at play in the borderlands of Yorùbá Bénin and Nigeria. It’s a point reinforced in another part of the video film, when another student, Bàbá Metor’s character, Àjàní, tells the professor that the people of Ayédáradé would never give him the “real, real truth” unless he hired the students as his research assistants. Secrets (awo) are a source of power both metaphysical and political; Romain Akogou, president of APADI–Pobè, told me, “Secrets are important. A person’s secrets are his power.” In Yorùbá indigenous religion, understanding secrets requires the mastery of deep knowledge (imo jinlẹ) available only through initiation and experience. Much of secrets’ power lies not in what they say, but in initiates’ ability to interpret and use their depth of knowledge to petition the ọ̀rìṣà and affect the material world (Apter 1992: 7–9, 107). Such secret knowledge comes in layers, with levels of initiation granting access to more imọ jinlẹ’ (Drewal 1992: 198). This gradual revelation of knowledge protects non-initiates from danger, since secrets can cause real harm to someone who doesn’t understand the deep meaning behind them.

309 While usually translated into English as “secret,” awo in Yorùbá has metaphysical connotations, as well, making awo “sacred mysteries” that bestow “spiritual power,” as anthropologist Karin Barber (1981: 739–40) has noted.

310 Interview, Pobè, 14 August 2014. Akogou’s statement echoes anthropologist J. Lorand Matory (2005b: 187) when he notes that keeping one’s secrets is a constituent element of that personhood, health, and the “containment of physical and metaphysical substances, including knowledge, will and ‘truth.’”
(ibid.: 24). It also protects the ritual body, since revealing secrets willy-nilly saps the group and its ọrìṣà of àṣẹ, the power to effect change in the world by calling upon the ọrìṣà, as I discuss below (Barber 1981: 738; Apter 1992: 210). But for those who do know how to harness such power, access to secret rituals, incantations (ọfọ), and medicines or other material components (ọgùn) grants access to immense stores of àṣẹ (Apter 1992: 55–56; Matory 2005b: 122–23). This “real, real truth” is something that only insiders get to witness. In this way, being an insider reverses the eye–mouth duality discussed in Chapter 2: the operative proverb in this case is “Bí ojú bá rí, ènu a dákẹ”: When the eyes see, the mouth remains quiet (Owomoyela 2005: 61). Biting one’s tongue protects the integrity of the secrets that empower the group and the rituals it conducts. Indeed, anthropologist Andrew Apter (1992: 107) explains that “a senior cult member is described as someone who has eyes but no mouth, who sees truth but cannot talk.”

Yet in the case of Yorùbá indigenous religion, especially as Ìkòkò Atura presents it, secrecy is paired with spectacle (iran). As with àwòrán (image) discussed in the Chapter 2, literature scholar Ọlábíyí Yai (cited in Drewal 1992: 13–15) notes that the root of iran is rán, “to send,” but a word also used to form rántí, to remember. These words assume a human agent, someone interpreting an original referent for an audience. The same root gives auwòran (spectator)—literally, “one who watches a spectacle.”

311 “Ohun tójú bá rí ló yẹ kẹnu ó so”: That which the eye sees is what the mouth should say (Adéọ̀ẹkọ́ 2017: 151–52).
Performance scholar Margaret Drewal (ibid.: 15) cautions that Yorùbá spectacle is not simple entertainment presented for a passive audience, though; the spectators join in—perhaps singing along with ritual songs, dancing to the rhythms of sacred drums, or running for cover from masked dancers charging the crowd. In this schema, ritual performers are tasked with bringing esoteric knowledge out into the open in a form that non-initiates can safely hear, see, and participate in (ibid.: 13). In the case of the Gelede masquerade, the masks themselves hide physical substances placed there by senior members and activated through secret incantations, but even the publicly visible forms of the masks and choreography of the dances reveal secret knowledge to those who know what to look for (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 76; see also Doris 2011: 154).

For many viewers of Ìkòkò Atura, the Gelede masks simply stand for Pobè’s unique contributions to àṣà Ọ̀bì, a spectacle no more spiritually charged than the kaleta masks that come out every Christmas and New Year (Blier 1991: 33–34). Yet for those with a deeper understanding of the masquerade, the scene may signify one more important concept: The need to placate a class of powerful women known as àjé so that they will use their immense àṣẹ to help rather than harm the community. The term àjé often is translated into English as “witch” and into French as “sorcière,” but popular

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312 Aremou Machoukouri equates the Gelede with “idols” during an improvised rant by his character, a Muslim imam, to his son, Akim. Láá cut the line in editing to shorten the scene, claiming that people would already understand that Gelede are included in the broader category of “idols.” Conversations at Production Odada in Pobè, 28 January 2016.
euphemisms, such as “our mothers” (àwọn iyá wa) or “the wise mothers” (iyá àgbà), link such women to motherhood (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 7–9; M. Drewal 1992: 177–78; Apter 1992: 112–13). Here motherhood is the empowered alternate to wifeliness; a form of womanhood with more freedom from male domination (Matory 2005b: 213). In Yorùbá popular culture and discourse, àjé are usually evil versions of older women (Barber 2000: 362). Yet the Gèlèdè masquerade recognizes that these women’s age and wisdom allows them to bring fertility to women of childbearing age, or just as easily to remove it. The Gèlèdè masquerade acknowledge that when the mothers get angry, they are most dangerous, moving about in spirit form—often as birds—to meet with other witches, and to eat their victims (Apter 1992: 113; Barber 2000: 369). In this way, àjé are like brides in reverse: Within them is contained great life-bearing power, yet they just as easily use it to take life away (Matory 2005b: 212–13).

In sum, by adding a Gèlèdè scene to Ìkòkò Atura, the writers reference secrets within secrets. On the one hand, the student Ìṣọlá is ready and able to sell secrets of the Gèlèdè masquerade to an American for some ill-defined gain. In doing so, he would not only betray the Gèlèdè but disempower them and keep them from their duties to placate the àjé who are otherwise untouchable due to their own mastery of secret knowledge and ability to operate undetected. The scene exemplifies the auroscopic regime of indigenous religion, since secrets allow powerful and miraculous things to happen, and spectacle is where the effects can be shared with the larger community.
5.3 Spectacles in sound

To the right of the shot, four high-school students fan out on a wooden bench. Their chic T-shirts, jeans, and button-downs wouldn’t look out of place in Paris, let alone Cotonou, so in comparison, the floral bùbá of the man to their left—one of their uncles—looks so 1980s. But the real contrast comes from the people opposite them in the frame: the woman who owns the bar sitting behind a little table, and a group of villagers spread across their own pair of benches dressed in kampala, “village” clothes made from traditional Yorùbá tie-dyed cloth. The overall mise-en-scène makes it look like everyone’s picked sides: modern-looking students in trendy clothes to the right, villagers in traditional outfits to the left—all under a tree against the backdrop of night (fig. 30).

Figure 30: Students from the city visit a palm-wine bar in Ayédáradé village (CC BY 3.0 US).
It’s a funny scene that showcases Djamiou’s gift for improvisation comedy. His bumpkin uncle character is introducing the city-slickers to the joys of rural life—mostly just his favorite palm-wine bar—in the village of Ayédáradé. Meanwhile the students, newly arrived from the town of Pobè, marvel at the “culture” around them, snapping photos of their drinks, the villagers, everything. After a bit of improvised banter between Djamiou and the palm-wine seller (Célestine Ogoudina) everyone stops, reacting to something they hear in the distance. The villagers trip over themselves as they flee. The bartender runs into the darkness behind the tree.

The uncle stands up and cries, “It’s our lord, the spirit Orò!”

“Let’s take a picture of it!” beams Ọmọlọlá, the only woman among the students.

The uncle does a take. “Picture? What picture! Women can’t even look! Don’t do anything!” He covers her eyes and ushers her forward and out of the shot. The other students follow, confused.

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The scene got laughs even on the set, and it proved a hit each time people saw it during various stages of Ìkòkò Atura’s production, from our review of the raw footage to the editing at Odada Films Production. But when he worked on the video film’s sound

313 The fictional village and kingdom’s name translates to “the good life has come.”
editing, Issiaka said he wanted the scene to really stand out; we needed to add in “the real sound.” “You’ve gotten Orò on your recorder, right?” he asked me one day, gesturing to my voice recorder, quietly taking in the sounds of sound editing. I said yes. “Find us Orò’s voice. We’re going to use a big one.”

The sound Issiaka asked for was a distinctive buzz-buzz-buzz that I’d heard as early as my first research visit to Bénin in 2012. People told me that the sound was the voice of the ọrìṣà Orò, part of his annual festival period when the spirit of ancestral fertility comes out across Southeastern Bénin. People wouldn’t tell me how the sound

Figure 31: Detail from the wall mural of the sacred grove (igbórò) of Ofia, Kétou Commune.

314 Conversation with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 11 February 2016.
manifested, although I had guesses; instead they stressed that I should stay inside when I heard it. Only initiated men could venture out; otherwise, foreigners and women might see things they shouldn’t, which could get them fined—or even killed (fig. 31).

As I became more involved in Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmaking in Pobè, I realized that virtually all the men I was working with were members of one Orò secret society or another—despite any professed adherence to Islam or Christianity—and the women were active as singers and dancers at public ceremonies devoted to the spirit. Unlike the Gélede masquerade, Orò societies work not to placate the powerful mothers known as àjé but to repress them. Gélede festivals center on an exuberant festival open to all, while for most of Orò’s festival period, women must shut themselves up at home and refrain from peeking, except during brief public components to the festival where women sing and dance in honor of Orò at the entrances to his sacred groves (fig. 32). To an outsider, Orò seems to be a divinity of male dominance; anthropologist J. D. Y. Peel (2002: 144) argues that Orò societies work to preserve “a patriarchal–gerontocratic order,” while anthropologist Donna K. Flynn (1997a: 113–14) notes that Orò enforces “husbandly authority” and “wifely subservience.” In this way, Orò promotes the role of women as wives while suppressing women as elders, two roles that anthropologist J.

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315 The secret of how Orò finds his voice is well documented in academic sources (see Ojo 1973; Peek 1994; Lawal 1996; Brand 2001; Beffay-Dégila 2009).

316 Information gathered through conversations with numerous people, including Pierre Houssou (4 August 2012), the owner of Hôtel Nulle Part Ailleurs in Pobè (7 August 2012), Alsabah Amoussah (8 August 2012), Colette Gounou (10 August 2012), and the manager of the Confidence Hôtel in Kétou (21 August 2012).
Lorand Matory (2005b: 212–13) has shown to be structurally opposed in Yorùbá religion. The wife or bride heeds her husband’s wishes and reproduces the family, and, by extension, the social body. In contrast, the female elder, especially in her guise as witch, is independent of male authority, mobile, and able to invade people’s homes in spirit form and consume them. Yet Flynn (1997a: 130–32) notes that this is not merely about husbands versus wives or wives versus àjé; constraining women’s mobility prevents gossip which can lead to jealousy and, in turn, to witchcraft. But there’s something much more potent at work, I argue: Orò’s voice as a sonic spectacle.

Margaret Drewal (1992: 205–206n1) distinguishes between rituals that incorporate spectacle and those that do not. In contrast to a public Gelede’ performance, say, a private divination has no public visual component. In this view, “spectacle” (iran) is a term reserved to events that attract large groups of onlookers, measuring their success in the size and diversity of the crowd. However, if we acknowledge that Yorùbá spectacle incorporates sound in addition to sight, the public impact of even the most secret of rituals becomes apparent. For instance, even at a private divination, the diviner beats his divination tray with a wooden tapper (irokè); the tapping spreads beyond the walls of the location of the divination proper; as it does so, it signals to all within earshot that a divination is happening. Likewise, the buzz—buzz—buzz of Orò’s voice is able to blanket the town and spread its fertility to women holed up at home precisely because it is sound. Even if they can’t see what’s happening outside, their attention to the sound
reinforces the knowledge that there is a secret they aren’t privy to and thereby
empowers that sound to do its job.

Figure 32: Entrance to an Orò grove (igbórò), Adja–Ouíré Commune.

And far from being passive victims of husbandly authority during Orò festivals,
wives empower the divinity by helping to keep his secrets. On the one hand, popular
notions claim that younger women are incapable of keeping their lips sealed (Akintan
2013: 58); their tendency to gossip threatens the community by sowing jealousy and
leading to accusations of witchcraft (Flynn 1997a: 130–32). Nevertheless, a counter view
holds that women are the ultimate secret-keepers, and it is men who are unable to stay
quiet; having an Orò festival thus ensures that men keep their secrets by giving them the run of the town for a set period (Drewal 1977: 457). Nevertheless, many women know or have guesses about how Orò finds his voice. Keeping that knowledge to themselves keeps Orò strong and permits him to continue to spread his ancestral fertility throughout the community. Speaking of the Egúngún, another ancestral spirit, Karin Barber (1981: 739) writes that initiates in these situations are not “deceiving their fellow-townsmen, so much as they are presenting [the òrìṣà’s] glory to its best advantage.” Regarding the idea that living men are behind the masks, “[T]he important thing is not women’s actual ignorance, but the maintenance of a respectful silence about their knowledge. It is a matter of keeping up appearances for the sake of the ancestors’ dignity. The woman collaborates to keep the egúngún’s ‘secret’—which is no secret—so that its splendid beneficent power will remain intact for her to profit from.”

At the same time, the spectacular side of a ceremony attracts onlookers, while the sound captures the attentions of even those shutting themselves off from it. Both visual and sonic spectacle make secret activities all the more potent by showing how important they are to the community. As Matory (2005b: 187–88, emphasis in original) has noted, “[T]he spirit of secrecy competes with the principle of showing others that there is a secret

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317 Ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1913:1:17) found something similar in the early twentieth century, when he saw Yorùbá women handling sacred Orò implements.
and making clear *who is privileged* to know it.” The spectacle feeds the secret, and the secret empowers the spectacle.

In this sense, including the Orò scene in Ìkòkò Atura was another chance for CAPADI to showcase an element of àṣà ibase. With Orò’s voice in the video film, Issiaka and the others took a scene that, at first blush, seemed like pure comic relief, and gave it a tinge of spiritual menace. With the sound added, these few short minutes of screen time show us that these students are outsiders in this village. There are divinities that they don’t know about, and, for the one woman among them, at least, spirits they can’t know about. They are vulnerable in this place, not just of making cultural gaffes but of running afoul of spiritual forces they don’t understand—forces that can hurt them, but also forces the kingdom relies on. In short, this comic interlude establishes that these high school kids aren’t in the big city anymore—and what they don’t know can hurt them. But if they play along, refuse to look, and run away, they’ll be fine. And then that voice starts.

5.4 *Adapting the Spirit of Discernment*

Toward the end of Ìkòkò Atura, Ọmọlọlá learns that she will have to marry the ọba of Ayédáradé in three days’ time. Locked up in the palace, she finds a hidden camera and uses it to send a message to her friends: Come rescue me! As they make a plan to do so over the next couple of days, Ọmọlọlá feels a compulsion to explore—an urge reinforced audiovisually by herky-jerky, first-person camera angles, whooshing
sound effects, and a musical hum on the soundtrack. She stumbles into a palace shrine, where Ọrishà Atura appears to her, glowing with a yellow light. Using a smuggled cell phone, she calls her boyfriend, Akim, to remind him that the wedding is now only one day away.

The other students hide until the king and ritual elders leave the palace grounds to prepare for the ceremony. The outsiders sneak past a sleeping guard and storm the royal palace, finding Ọmọlọlá in the shrine to Ọrishà Atura. The friends take advantage of being in this secret place to photograph it—reckoning that Professor Jones will be interested in what they’ve found—but then Îṣolá’s bad character gets the better of him again: We cut to his daydream of visiting the professor at his home and handing over the Ìkòkò Atura itself to be shipped off to America—with Îṣolá along for the ride. Back in the shrine, Îṣolá’s takes the sacred pot. Only as soon as he exits the palace, he is stricken by an unseen force, shakes violently, and falls to the ground (fig. 33). The sound of thunder plays beneath the scene, a sonic representation of the power of Ọrishà Atura, and when the king and his priests return to the palace grounds, the Ìkòkò Atura disappears in a plume of black smoke. The scene borrows heavily from a second auroscopic regime, one used in Pentecostal–charismatic video films from Nigeria, where the camera serves as a proxy for powers granted by the Holy Spirit to allow Christians to see, hear, and expose secret spiritual activity.
If anyone in Pobè understands the auroscopic regime of Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity, it is Prophet Zacc Isaac Akereja. Born in Ekiti State, Nigeria, he converted from Islam to Christianity at age fourteen. He joined the Christ Apostolic Church, a church that began as part of the Aládúrà movement of African-initiated churches but which, at this time in the 1980s, was rapidly adopting Pentecostal–charismatic teachings brought by a new wave of Pentecostalism sweeping Nigeria (Crumbley 2008: 40–41). Although his mother was a Christian, Zacc Isaac’s father disowned him for eight years for abandoning Islam. With a gift for performing, he eked out a living with a Yorùbá traveling theater troupe, touring Nigeria as a singer, dancer, and actor (see Chapter 4). Zacc Isaac devoured American Pentecostal literature and cassette tapes, with the preacher Kenneth Hagin a favorite of his; like many other Nigerian Pentecostals, the
young Yorùbá man found comfort in a doctrine that combined belief in an active Holy Spirit with the notion that God grants health and wealth to those who live a pious life (Ukah 2005). In 1987, Zacc Isaac felt that the Lord was calling him to become a pastor. He considered founding a church in Nigeria, where he knew it would grow large, but God led him to Bénin instead, where he founded the Kingdom Wonders Tabernacle in Pobè (fig. 34). By 2014, the church had branches in Ikpinle and Kétou in Bénin, and Ilaro in Ogun State, Nigeria. He visits Nigeria frequently to run crusades—large worship services that last for several days—and to guest preach, using the money raised from the tithes and offerings at these events to fund his churches in Bénin.319

Figure 34: Sunday service at Kingdom Wonders Tabernacle, Pobè.

318 Nigeria is now home to some of the largest Pentecostal–charismatic churches in Africa. See Vaughan (2016: 145).
319 Interviews with Zacc Isaac Akereja, Pobè, 27 October and 9 November 2014.
Yet Zacc Isaac didn’t abandon his love for performing. Like many other Pentecostal pastors (Hackett 1998), he found that media were powerful tools for proselytization. Even “bad boys” loved his singing, he says, so he used it to draw people to church. “Music has the power to control minds,” he proclaims. “All performing arts have this power.” Zacc Isaac’s activities are quite similar to those of the video filmmakers in CAPADI: He has produced audio cassettes and CDs in Pobè, and he records a paid program each week at Plateau FM, Pobè’s community radio station. But Zacc Isaac has chosen not to associate with Pobè’s other media practitioners, claiming that the level of acting and creativity in Bénin is “too low” for his tastes. “People in Bénin have stiff minds,” he says. “They aren’t open to new ideas. In Bénin, an old idea is a final idea.” This criticism applies to Béninois Christians, as well; they don’t see growth and learning as continuous processes. “They get a certificate or finish Bible college and consider themselves done, so their spiritual growth stagnates.”

Where Bénin excels, says the pastor, is in “spiritism.” “Bénin people have much stronger jújú. They call it Vodun here, and it’s very strong. It’s a serious hindrance to spiritual growth.” As he sees it, “one-hundred percent” of Bénin’s Catholics practice Vodun, and the Catholic church encourages this. But even the Protestant churches fail to forbid “idols” to their congregations. “Even Christian pastors, if you check their pockets,

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320 Interview with Zacc Isaac Akereja, Pobè, 9 November 2014.
321 Interview with Zacc Isaac Akereja, Pobè, 27 October 2014.

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will have jújù inside.” The prophet says that this spiritism is strongest in Abomey, Bohicon, and Ouidah—once key cities in the Danxomé Empire—but it’s also strong in the Plateau Division. Whether called Vodun, ìrìṣà devotion, witchcraft, or Mami Wata spirits, this spiritism is the path to power in Bénin, Zacc Isaac says, whether spiritual, political, or economic. “Nigeria has more violence, but Bénin has more spiritism.”

Thus, for Béninois, true conversion is rare, Zacc Isaac says, leaving people stuck in old ideas. In Nigeria, people believe in miracles, deliverance, and supernatural healing, but most Béninois pastors think the age of miracles is over, dismissing modern-day wonders as demonic in origin. In this claim, Zacc Isaac aims his criticism at leaders of mission churches, including the Catholic and Methodist churches, which are among Pobè’s largest (see Uriá 2013: 20). This inertia leaves people open to demonic possession, especially by water spirits, so to fight evil forces, Bénin needs is to go through “deliverance.” But deliverance can only happen after old covenants are broken—which Zacc Isaac calls “breaking the shrine”—ending any pacts the person may have with ancestral spirits, ìrìṣà, or masquerades—all demons in this view. He gives the

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322 Zacc Isaac’s term jújù is commonly used in Nigeria and other anglophone African countries to refer to small power objects individuals use to grant themselves spiritual protection or other boons. In francophone Africa, the term gris-gris is more common (Parrinder 1961: 9). Nevertheless, both terms are in common use in Yorùbá-speaking Bénin.


324 Interview with Zacc Isaac Akereja, Pobè, 9 November 2014.
example of a woman who was having trouble getting pregnant after fifteen years of marriage. Zacc Isaac discovered that she had a Mami Wata for a “husband,” who was preventing her from conceiving. The pastor helped her break the shrine to the spirit spouse, and the woman quickly became pregnant with twins.

When he links infertility to spiritual attack, Zacc Isaac follows a trend among Pentecostal churches in both stressing the nuclear family over the extended family, and in encouraging husbands to treat wives as equal partners in domestic, economic, and spiritual affairs, even if wife must still adhere to husbandly authority (Marshall 2009: 113–14). His Pobè church, while small compared to the town’s Catholic and mission Protestant denominations, draws primarily women and young people. Yet Zacc Isaac’s rhetoric shows that, while he may not blame women for fertility problems they may be suffering, he reassigns the blame to other models of femininity that he then codes as evil: the witch, the Mami Wata spirit, and the non-Christian woman. For instance, he warned me against marrying a Béninois woman, since marriage, as a covenant of love, opens the husband to spiritual attacks from the wife and any evil spirits with which she has made her own covenants. “If you swear a covenant of love with a Bénin woman, the words will go straight down to the Satanic kingdom,” the prophet warns. “They are very desperate to destroy life.”

325 Interviews with Zacc Isaac Akereja, Pobè, 27 October and 9 November 2014.
For Zacc Isaac and other Pentecostal Christians, deliverance can only happen after revelation, which is an essential component of the Pentecostal–charismatic auroscopic regime Zacc Isaac espouses. A spiritual world lies hidden from standard human perception, but Zaac Isaac says visions and voices from the Holy Spirit allow him and other believers to penetrate the hidden realm of such evil forces to expose them (Meyer 2006a: 439–441; Mitchell 2004: 107). This ability is called the discernment of spirits, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in I Corinthians 12:4–11. If a Christian feels that she is coming under spiritual attack, she can pray for God to reveal the hidden assailants or visit a pastor for help. The Holy Spirit might send a vision or dream that shows what is actually happening, allowing her to better target those evil forces and overcome them with God’s aid. The final step in this audiovisual process is that once the spiritual threat is defeated, the person should tell others about the experience in what is called a testimony (Marshall 2009: 152–54). The Pentecostal–charismatic auroscopic regime thus relies on a three-part structure: divine revelation of hidden forces, seeing and hearing that revelation, and testimony to others about the

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326 “To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.” (I Cor. 12:8–11 NIV.)
experience—all three often lumped together as “witnessing” (ibid.). In this auroscopic regime, secrets harm the community rather than help it. They must be exposed.

This three-part structure of revelation, witness, and testimony shapes the auroscopic regime of Christian video films, too, as these video films reveal dastardly secrets to the viewer. This understanding of looking and listening has been highly influential in Nigeria’s Nollywood video films, especially during the industry’s early years in the 1980s and 1990s, when Pentecostal–charismatic churches in Nigeria harnessed media to proselytize and popularize their messages in the wider popular cultures. The regime persists among some Yorùbá video film producers even today.

Consider Take Heed: Sora (c. 2011, directed by Femi Ajewole), a slapstick Yorùbá comedy from Nigeria and the first video film I ever saw in Pobè. The story begins with a down-on-his-luck young man visiting a babaláwo diviner for help getting back on track. The diviner leads the man in a ritual and gives him a bank note to place at a crossroads, where it will draw away the evil spirit plaguing him. The young man does as he is told, and the spirit appears in a flash of fire. Soon the bill claims its first victim, a student who freezes in place upon touching it. A classmate fetches one religious leader after another to free his friend—including a Šàngó priest, an Oṣun priestess, an Aládúrà pastor, and an Eastern-style mystic—but each gets frozen in turn. Finally, a Pentecostal pastor delivers everyone from bondage with the power of the Holy Spirit. The evil entity claims
one last victim when it strangles the babaláwo who summoned it. The short video film demonstrates how Pentecostal–charismatic notions of seeing and hearing into spiritual domains have influenced Nigerian video films, where props, set design, and special effects reveal real-world practices and spiritual realms normally hidden from human sensation.

The result has popularized a decidedly Pentecostal–charismatic auroscopic regime—or, as anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2004) puts it, a “pentecostalite style.” While Take Heed is a comedy, other video films of this type work as horror: They depict evil, occult acts that their perpetrators would prefer to keep secret, and they highlight the shocked reactions of moral folks when the truth of such deeds is exposed. Unlike the auroscopic regime of indigenous Yorùbá religion, this aesthetic relies on exposing secrets. As Take Heed demonstrates, these video films portray the occult and indigenous religions as the same—lumped together as tradition—and use scenes to expose the truth of how ritual secrecy hides immoral behavior (Oha 2000: 193–194). This attitude is present in the set design and props for Take Heed, with the babaláwo’s temple portrayed as a devilish place with skulls and crossbones painted on the red-and-black walls. Likewise, special effects bring to life the diviner’s Satanic minion, a figure with wide eyes, wild hair, and a face half white and half black. The reference is to Èṣù, Yorùbá divinity of the crossroads and opener of paths (Matory 2005b: 213–14; Matory 2016), yet when this Èṣù appears in a blast of flames, the reference is equally to the Christian Devil, whom early Christian
missionaries in Nigeria conflated with Èṣù (Peel 2000: 263–64).327 Movies such as this let Christians partake in a kind of filmic voyeurism, seeing practices forbidden to or hidden from them.

In these lurid scenes, the camera stands in for the believer. The result is an aesthetic deeply informed by Pentecostal–charismatic teachings about the discerning of spirits—the same gift Zacc Isaac uses to glimpse the evils that lie behind the outward appearance of reality (Meyer 2006a: 439–441; Mitchell 2004: 107). As these schemes are exposed, they are stripped of their power. Such video films thus make an audiovisual judgment—if you have something to hide, you must be up to no good (Meyer 2006a: 439)—and set the stage for the second half of the this film language, which anthropologist Brian Larkin (2008: 186) calls “the aesthetics of outrage”: closeups on the shocked faces of moral people stumbling across misdeeds that come to light (ibid.: 192–94). Film scholar Lindsey Green-Simms (2012: 25–26) argues that such shocking imagery evokes a visceral response, stoking viewers’ Pentecostal–charismatic sense of morality. The pentecostalite aesthetic of these video films thus aims to expose occult secrets and rile up viewers, whose outrage reassures them that they are good and moral people.

327 The video film’s choice of a crossroads is another reference to the ořiṣa Èṣù. As Matory (2005b: 213) notes, crossroads are like markets, places where people encounter strangers in “anonymous and ill-defined” conditions.
5.5 Localizing auroscopic regimes

Figure 35: Le Général visits a “traditional doctor” and diviner in a scene from Un Pacte. Note the stereotyped décor, which borrows heavily from Nollywood aesthetics.

The aesthetic conventions of Nollywood—its props, sets, costumes, and film language—greatly inform the look and sound of Béninois Nàgô–Yorùbá video films, as well. Nigerian movies are ubiquitous in Bénin, so they shape the expectations of Béninois audiences, which in turn influence the aesthetic decisions of local video filmmakers. For Béninois creators, the pentecostalite style outlined above serves as a convenient shorthand to convey the idea that something is “traditional” or to show ritual activities. For instance, Oyede’s video film, Un Pacte (A pact), released in 2014, has le Général visit a “traditional doctor” in a scene that could have easily been part of Take Heed, complete with faux statues, red-and-black color scheme, and skeleton-themed
décor (fig. 35). But Béninois video films differ from their Nigerian counterparts in that they take an aesthetic reflective of Pentecostal–charismatic notions of sensation largely foreign to Bénin and localize it to suit their own purposes. In other words, these scenes may reveal evil goings on, but they do so within a framework that assumes that àṣà ́ibílè and indigenous religious ritual can just as easily be used for positive, moral ends. And unlike the pentecostalite video films from Nigeria (and their Béninois imitators), CAPADI movie creators flip Nollywood conventions to feature ọ́rìṣà in active, positive roles. The problem becomes how to do this without revealing the secrets that Nollywood video films claim to expose. For this, video filmmakers rely on audiovisual metaphor.

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328 Anthropologist John McCall (2002) has noted a similar phenomenon in Nigeria, where an Igbo traditional doctor referenced a Pentecostal video film about “blood money cults” to illustrate that phenomenon.
The divinity created for Ìkòkò Atura is a good example of how CAPADI video filmmakers reveal truths without spoiling secrets. At the end of the first day of writing, the team debated what divinity to show on screen. When Issiaka Ganiou suggested they just make a spirit up, it set off a rush of activity in the writer’s room. What would the Òrìṣà look like? How would they bring it to life on screen? Representing the spirit as some sort of ersatz “fetish,” as Nollywood often does in ritual scenes, wouldn’t work; the team wanted something that would suggest real-world Òrìṣà without actually being one. Eventually, Issiaka suggested they should make it a jar. He pulled up a photograph on his phone, one he’d taken in the artisans’ market of the royal palace of Òyọ́, Nigeria, the kingdom that Pobè traces its origins to (see Chapter 3), and he went up to the board

Figure 36: Vase for sale in the market of the Ààfin of Òyọ́ (photograph by Issiaka Ganiou).
to draw it (fig. 36). But the other writers didn’t think the pot was “traditional” enough, so they took turns going to the board to sketch their own ideas. Yacoubou drew a squat, pot-shaped vessel with a wide mouth. Gérard added cowrie shells around the perimeter of the pot. As symbols of wealth, thanks to their onetime use as currency in Yorùbáland (Smith [1969] 1988: 5; Matory 2005b: 166), the cowries sealed the deal; this pot adhered best to the concept of àṣà ịbíle; it was the most “traditional” (fig. 37).

Figure 37: Gérard Koukpohounsi (middle) adds cowries to the Ìkòkò Atura sketched by Yacoubou Eìtcha (right).

The choice of a pot for the movie ọ̀rìṣà was a natural one, considering the role the divinity plays in the story. J. Lorand Matory (2005b: 169–72) has written extensively about how containers, such as pots, jars, and calabashes, serve as metaphors in Yorùbá possession religions. They can contain potent substances, so Yorùbá shrines often
feature pots and jars that hide secret substances within them, lending power to the rituals performed there (ibid.: 187–88). Thus, as Matory (ibid.) has argued, vessels signal the idea that bodies, too, can be filled with potent substances, from the womb of a mother-to-be to the ori inú, or inner head, of a human being: an enclosed container that guards a person’s intellect, capabilities, and personality (ibid.: 103). Likewise, the human body can become a container for a spirit that possesses it during a religious ritual (ibid.: 187–88). Perhaps most importantly, these vessels allow Yorùbá possession religions to acknowledge the potential women hold, with vessels linked to wombs and, by extension, motherhood (ibid.: 99, 130, 174–75). In such a scheme, wifeliness and motherhood are more important to a woman’s status than gender based on her birth sex (ibid.: 145); wifeliness implies male dominance while motherhood suggests the opposite (ibid.: 172, 174–75). In this way, the Ìkòkò Atura, as a pot, references vessels that reference sexual fertility (ibid.: 136, 139–40). The video film borrows from one auroscopic regime—the Pentecostal–charismatic way of seeing and hearing as shown in Nollywood video films—and flips its notion of secrecy to promote an indigenous notion of sacred fertility.

329 As Matory (2005b: 172, 174–75) argues, childbearing is necessary to reproduce the community—with the child joining the father’s lineage—but motherhood separates the woman from her own father’s lineage and grants her authority over the rearing of her children.
For the story team in Pobè, the question became how to actually make the jar prop. The crew wanted their ìkòkò to be terra cotta, to better represent what they called a “traditional” Yorùbá style, but they were worried that it would break during filming. Yacoubou said he knew an artisan who could forge the thing in metal, so at the metalworker’s shop, he drew the pot in the sand with a stick, asking the artist how he might add cowries around the sides like Gérard had suggested. The metalworker said he could sculpt the cowries directly into the metal; that way, they wouldn’t come off during filming. But he warned he’d have to use a mold for the basic body of the pot; it
would be shorter and squatter than the story team had envisioned (fig. 38). They agreed, and a week later, he was done. Issiaka brought the metal pot to a machinist, who bored holes into the base for the feet to screw in. Finally, it was off to a sign painter, who coated the prop in brown paint and made the faux-cowries white. Òrìṣà Atura had material form.

On set, actors and crewmembers seemed to immediately recognize the symbolism of the prop (fig. 39). On the first day of filming, female cast and crew took turns posing with the metal pot on their heads, a reference to how such pots are used by wives to carry water for the household (Matory 1994: 511n19), but also to rituals devoted to female Òrìṣà, such as Yemoja and Oṣun in Nigeria, for whom the water inside stands for the fertility of female ancestors and the àṣẹ of the divinity (Matory 2005b: 165–66, 173). Yet it is in the use of special effects that Ìkòkò Atura owes the greatest debt to the Pentecostal–charismatic auroscopic regime of Nigeria, but also where it most markedly deviates from it. Òrìṣà Atura appears in the video film four times. First, during the prologue, the sacred pot appears above a tree to prevent a childless woman from hanging herself. It next appears to the high-school student Òmọlọlá to reassure her during her captivity, as discussed above. The third appearance, also detailed above, is when Òṣolá decides to steal the Ìkòkò Atura while rescuing Òmọlọlá, only to be struck down by it. Finally, it appears to the village when its priest asks it to abolish the practice of forced marriage at the behest of the king.
Figure 39: Make-up artist Céline Oloukosi poses with the finished Ìkòkò Atura prop on the set of the film.

For these appearances, the filmmakers used a mixture of practical and special effects. For instance, in the suicide-attempt scene, Lálá made the pot fly and cut a rope via film-editing software. He then juxtaposed these special effects with a close-up of the distraught woman being sprinkled by water from Òrìṣà Atura. On set, cameraman Jacob Abiodoun realized this practical effect by pouring water from a Pure Water bag into the metal prop and poured the water out (fig. 40). In the final scene, Gérard as director had
the actors freeze while the prop jar was set in place on set; Lálá then cut the intervening frames in postproduction to make the jar’s appearance instantaneous. These are low-cost special effects that these video filmmakers learned how to do in apprenticeships to Nigerian movie creators, or by reverse-engineering Nigerian and Ghanaian occult video films. The way these techniques are employed in the movie presents an image of indigenous religion that is precisely opposite to the one typically found in video films about the occult: Each time Ọ̀rìṣà Atura appears, it performs a miracle: saving a woman from committing suicide, calming a young captive, punishing a thief, abolishing an outmoded practice. The one instance where the ọ̀rìṣà does something violent, it prevents its own theft. In this way, the video film shows Îṣọ́lá to be a morally corrupt character, willing to give up hidden secrets and damage a community for his own gain. But the scene also makes Ọ̀rìṣà Atura an active, miracle-working presence. In this way, Ịkọkọ Atura becomes more than just a facsimile of actual ritual objects, which metaphorically point to àṣẹ; instead, the pot is a metaphor in its own right. The Ịkọkọ Atura’s shape, iconography, and visual provenance allow it to stand in for all Yorùbá divinities as spreaders of ancestral wealth and fertility. It becomes a metaphor for the other ọ̀rìṣà, one with no real secrets of its own to reveal, and thus one that can be part of the audiovisual exposé so common in video film.
Figure 40: Jacob Abiodoun pours water onto an actress in the prologue of Ìkòkò Atura.

5.6 Women’s roles

The Gèljèdè, Orò, and Òrìṣà Atura: These three aspects of àṣà ibiṣe infuse Ìkòkò Atura with piety for indigenous Yorùbá religion and for àṣà ibiṣe more generally. At the same time, each celebrates a different facet of womanhood, from the frighteningly powerful mothers of the Gèljèdè, to the dutiful wives of the Orò festival, to the wives–becoming–mothers metaphorically referred to by Òrìṣà Atura. The auroscopic regime reflected in this Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video film may reject the tendency of pentecostalite Nollywood to expose secrets and disempower indigenous religion, but it
also reveals that the indigenous Yorùbá auroscopic regime of Bénin is not a settled monolith. A look at women’s roles behind the scenes shows how this may be the case.

Although Ìkòkò Atura had a writing team, most Nàgó–Yorùbá video film scenarios in Bénin are written by a single person, usually a man. There are exceptions: Tẹjú Alice Sàánú wrote, produced, and starred in Ômọ Pẹ Ọfon (the late-child thief) in 2014 as a joint Nigerian–Béninois venture that reflected her own upbringing in both countries.³³⁰ Likewise, the venerable Rebeca Oloukossi, better known by her screen name Ìyá Iṣẹṣẹ, was revered in Pobè’s video filmmaking circles for her long association with theater and video film, writing and producing her own material with money from a gàrí-processing business she ran from home.³³¹ A video film’s writer is almost always the producer who must bankroll the project,³³² though, so men dominate the space. This reality reflects the fact that wives and husbands keep their finances separate after marriage; the wife must pay for regular expenses, such as common household foods and items, while the husband covers larger expenses, such as upgrades to the house and business investments (Falen 2011: 103–104, 106–107). Funding a video film falls into the latter category, so women who decide to produce video films may be chastised for using

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³³⁰ The video film’s title refers to the idea that a child that proves difficult to give birth to (pẹ means to be late or to wait), may become a thief. Interview with Tẹjú Alice Sàánú, Pobè, 17 November 2014; interview with Olaładé “Lálá” Pedro, Pobè, 9 December 2014.

³³¹ Gàrí is meal made from cassava (manioc). Falen (2011: 98) notes that such mercantile success is not uncommon among Béninois women, but it is still the exception.


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their money unwisely. A woman’s capital is limited to what she can raise selling goods and services in her neighborhood or perhaps in the market, but this income is generally small compared to what men have access to, since domestic duties and childrearing fall on the wife, leaving the man with more vocational freedom (ibid.: 95). These same barriers allow men to invest in computers, cameras, lights, microphones, and other video film-production infrastructure, meaning that such technical video filmmaking duties almost always fall to men.

Such was the case with Ìkòkò Atura, which had men in the positions of director, cadreur, cameraman, editor, lighting, and sound. Women were instead in charge of doing makeup, handling costumes, and serving food to cast and crew, all duties associated with a woman’s role as a wife in the home.333 Of course, women also participated as actors and singers; such roles are typically divided evenly in Béninois video films. But one thing few people acknowledged was that the digital camera we rented, a fancy, new Canon 7D, belonged to both our cadreur, Jacob Abiodoun, and his wife, Benedicta Ozemoya, the couple having just purchased it the same month filming took place.334 For Benedicta, the fact that Jacob was the cadreur and the camera was considered his alone was a symptom of bigger issues with women in CAPADI. From her own experience, women who want to make video films face the problem of lack of

333 Interview with Kafayath Soumanou and Alimanth Soumanou, Pobè, 18 October 2014.
334 Conversation with Benedicta Ozemoya, Pobè, 23 November 2015.
capital. They have to turn to a husband or boyfriend for money, or they approach others with a story idea but get laughed at because men assume they won’t have the money to produce.335

Indeed, Benedicta finds CAPADI to be downright stifling for a creative woman such as herself. She produced her own video film, Igbeyin (The end of love) in 2014, filming most of it in Ogun State, Nigeria, with some scenes in Porto-Novo.336 But she complains that when she and Jacob moved to Pobè after a stint in Ghana, they had a hard time getting their business off the ground. Both trained in Lagos in the 1990s and started her own firm there in the early 2000s. She married Jacob, a Pobè native, while he was studying graphic design in Lagos. After a brief stint in Ghana, the pair moved to Pobè to start a joint business to make posters and jackets for the video filmmakers and musicians of the Ouémé and Plateau divisions.337 But Benedicta found that Pobéens treated her coldly, preferring to deal with Jacob instead. On video film sets, she says, people deferred to her husband, even though Benedicta has a deep knowledge of video-filmmaking techniques. Even graphic design clients would specifically request that Jacob work on their projects and not his wife, despite the fact that Benedicta has more experience. People also argued that she was responsible for the company’s no-credit

335 Interview with Benedicta Ozemoya, Porto-Novo, 22 May 2015.
336 Interview with Benedicta Ozemoya, Porto-Novo, 22 May 2015.
337 Interview with Jacob Abiodoun and Benedicta Ozemoya, Porto-Novo, 22 May 2015.
policy, meaning they wouldn’t do work or have work printed in Lagos without cash up front.338

At least part of the icy reception Benedicta received in Pobè may have had to do with the fact that she is Nigerian and Edo—neither Béninois nor Nàgó–Yorùbá. But her comments on being a woman in CAPADI also show that she and Jacob view marriage from a different lens than most CAPADI video filmmakers. Both she and her husband attend the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Porto-Nov, a Pentecostal–charismatic church headquartered in Nigeria. For both wife and husband, then, their marriage was the formation of a new family and full partnership, so it was only natural for them to merge their businesses when they wed. The couple moved to Porto-Nov in part for better access to a more clients, and they now design materials for artists from the all the way to Lomé, Togo.339 But they also left Pobè to escape spiritual attacks by members of their extended families jealous of their success.340

Most other female members of CAPADI are married to CAPADI men, as well, but these women rarely produce video films. For instance, Céline Oloukosi, who did makeup on Ìkòkò Atura, apprenticed as a hairstylist in Pobè and became involved with CAPADI in 2006, playing roles such princesses and dancers, and doing makeup and hair behind the scenes. She met Issiaka Ganiou through the organization, and the two were

338 Interview with Benedicta Ozemoya, Porto-Nov, 22 May 2015.
339 Interview with Jacob Abiodoun and Benedicta Ozemoya, Porto-Nov, 22 May 2015.
married. She plans to produce her own film if she can ever save enough to do so, but
this money must come from her alone—she makes and sells beignets now—as her
husband has his own stories to tell. This model of CAPADI women marrying CAPADI
men is widespread, and to someone like Benedicta, it speaks of sexism in the
organization that also existed in Nigeria when she first became involved with
Nollywood films there. Speaking of Nigeria, she said, “You know what? They use
women. […] Before you can face the camera, they always give us a ‘tax.’ A tax in the
sense that, if you’re a pretty lady, they will tell you, ‘Can I go out with you?’ Then if you
are free, you will accept. If you are not free, you say no, because you say no, they will
tell you, ‘OK, go; we can’t use you.’ So that thing was too rampant! So, because of that, I
[had] to stop it [quit Nollywood movies].” In Pobè, this problem persists such that
women are supported if they want to be actors, singers, or dancers, but never camera
operators, let alone producers. Of CAPADI’s men, Benedicta says, “They have ‘olden-
days thinking.’” Structurally, the fact that men are almost universally the ones behind
the camera and in the editing studio supports Benedicta’s complaint that women and
men in CAPADI are not equal. Indeed, these same facts suggest that the auroscopic
regime represented in these Nàgò–Yorùbá video films is one that privileges a “male

[341] Interview with Céline Oloukosi, Pobè, 12 December 2014.
“gaze” at least somewhat (Mulvey 1975). But Benedicta admits that things have improved; more women are getting behind the camera.

And even Ìkòkò Atura suggests that video filmmakers are open to the idea that gender roles are changing, and that women can no longer be expected to remain in the domestic sphere if they choose not to be. After all, the female lead, Òmọlọlá, is a headstrong woman who defies her pompous preacher–father to research her own indigenous culture, only to fall victim to that culture when the king demands that she marry him. But in the end, the miracles of Òrìṣà Atura, metaphorical Yorùbá divinity that it is, show him that times have changed, and indigenous religion along with them. The king asks to do away with the “olden-days thinking” undergirding Òmọlọlá’s captivity, and the divinity approves. Òmọlọlá has divine sanction to go her own way.

5.7 Conclusion

After shooting the comic scene of Orò interrupting the palm wine bar, we moved to APADI–Pobè headquarters, which doubled as the interiors of the palace of Ayédáradé. Working long into the night, we shot Òmọlọlá’s captivity, her discovery of the Ìkòkò Atura, and her rescue by her friends. The hour pushing 1:30 AM, Issiaka’s apprentices, Soloman and Rashid, shut down the generator, its dying growl matched by the dying floodlights it had powered.343

342 Interview with Benedicta Ozemoya, Porto-Nov, 22 May 2015.  
343 We shot these scenes in Pobè on 25 November 2015.
Out on the terrace, I asked Gérard if he might take me to my house on his motorcycle. “I’d like to. I’d like to go home myself. But my motorcycle’s having problems.”

I stifled a yawn. “I just haven’t seen my wife in three days.”

“It’s like that, shooting a film!” Gérard laughed. “I haven’t seen my family in three days either!”

Issiaka said he could take me. As we neared his studio, he told the technical crew who would sleep there, “I’ll be back soon. I need to take Ayôkúnlé home.”

Lálá stopped in his tracks. “What? I don’t agree with that at all!”

Céline was shocked, too. “No way!”

I didn’t understand what the issue was, but I didn’t want to cause trouble. “It’s OK. I can walk home. It’s not far. Pobè is safe.”

“I think you want to go home because Nikki is there alone,” Benedicta said, playing the mediator. “But the issue isn’t whether Pobè is safe. In general, I agree with you that it is. The problem is that it’s now the middle of the night, the time when people are at their worst! The dangerous things are not always the ones you can see.”

The video film Ìkòkò Atura shows how thoroughly the Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers of CAPADI have taken a rival auroscopic regime—that of Pentecostal–charismatic Nollywood movies—and adapted those aesthetic conventions to suit their
own purposes. Special effects designed to expose the secrets of indigenous religion instead show the Òrìṣà Atura as a miracle-working force in the lives of the people of Ayédáradé. The prop’s shape, iconography, and visual provenance all work at a metaphorical level to suggest the metaphor of containment, and to let it stand in for other Òrìṣà and to show them as similarly beneficial to human beings who venerate them. Likewise, scenes featuring other Òrìṣà—Gẹ́lẹ̀dẹ́ and Orò—act at the level of spectacle, whether audiovisual or simply sonic, to underscore the importance of seeing and hearing those divinities as ways to enhance their efficacy in the community. The video filmmakers thus respect the reciprocal relationship between secrecy and spectacle, thereby supporting the auroscopic regime that recognizes women as domestic wives and powerful mothers. But the real star is Òrìṣà Atura, a god with no real secrets of its own, but one that stands in for those that do have secrets. The pot can be part of the audiovisual revelation so common in video film, but the net result is that it promotes indigenous religion rather than damaging it. These scenes reveal not evil truths but metaphors and revelations that show the power of indigenous religion to sustain community, promote fertility, and draw foreign wealth. At the same time, Òrìṣà Atura shows an auroscopic regime undergoing change regarding roles women may take, bringing these ideas closer to those of the Pentecostal–charismatic Christians from whom these filmmaking techniques were borrowed. Ìkòkò Atura thus adopts the
auroscopic regime of the occult video film but flips its intent. Ìkòkò Atura is not an exposé, but a testimony to the power of the ọ̀rìṣà.

On that dark night in Pobè, I stayed with the others at the studio, falling asleep on a plastic mat as Jacob, Issiaka, and Lálá watched a video about the secrets of Hollywood special effects. The auroscopic regimes of indigenous Yorùbá religion and Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity agree on one thing: Secrets, like those hiding in the dark of Pobè night, can be dangerous. Spectacle, on the other hand, can be a commodity for sale—especially in Bénin, where indigenous religions have been repackaged as tourist attractions. In the next chapter, I focus on the ethics of this policy in a multiethnic state where disparities in tourist attention stoke precolonial animosities, even in the name of religious tolerance.
6. Selling Yorùbá: Festival Models and Arts Funding in the Land of the Whites

The sun had set by the time we got to the end of the Slave Route, turning Ouidah’s streets into a maze of dark passages. We were following Joël, a Nàgó–Yorùbá linguistics student who had been to Quintessence, the Ouidah International Film Festival, many times for his film-studies research at the University of Abomey–Calavi.\footnote{In French, Quintessence, Festival Internationale du Film de Ouidah. The screening took place on 9 January 2015.} But the rest of us had just gotten to the city that afternoon after a four-hour car trip west from Pobè in the Plateau department. The group had tired itself out walking around Ouidah, exploring, and trying to sell video films. But neither a fatiguing travel day nor the lackluster opening ceremony we’d just attended dimmed spirits; everyone was excited to experience Bénin’s only international film festival, to see how it ran, and to discover what kinds of films showed there. Besides, this trip was a research excursion to learn how to build a festival around films; CAPADI had their own event to plan, the Pobè Film Festival (FEFiP).\footnote{French acronym for le Festival de Film de Pobè.} The event just might bring them to the state’s attention and draw in some arts funding during a challenging time for video filmmakers. If they also could sell some movies in a new market, all the better.

But this night, the real excitement came because the video film we were about to see, \textit{Le secret des iyas} (Secret of the Iyas; 2015, dir. Cyrill Noyalet), was a documentary
about something the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers knew well: the Gelede masquerade famed throughout Yorùbá-speaking Bénin and Nigeria. Even better, at least part of the documentary had been filmed in Kétou, Plateau Department, chez nous. This was proof that a video film about Nàgó–Yorùbá culture could play to an international audience, that people beyond the Ouémé and Plateau departments cared about Nàgó–Yorùbá culture—and might pay to see it. It was also validation; here at a festival centered on film was a film centered on Nàgó–Yorùbá culture, an overlap of two festival objects, the focal points that each festival celebrated to draw in festivalgoers and unify them in a communal feeling. FEFiP would celebrate these two objects, as well.

The cobblestone street spilled into a plaza that stretched out in front of the Ouidah Museum of History, part of the city’s reinvention over the past few decades as Bénin’s major tourism center. Normally, the fort was buzzing with foreign visitors, especially a day before Bénin’s annual Vodun Festival of Arts and Cultures. As a remnant of Bénin’s slave-trading past, the fortress, like the festival, was a monument to Bénin’s place in the African Diaspora and the indigenous religions brought there by enslaved Africans—many of them Nàgó–Yorùbá. Tonight, though, the fortress wall was a movie screen, glowing blue from the beam of the video projector meters away.

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346 The Portuguese fort was first built in 1721 to protect the interests of Brazil-based slave merchants. It was repurposed as a museum in 1967 as a memorial to the slave trade and the African Diaspora it created (Araujo 2010: 134; Seiderer 2013: 296–99). Seiderer (2013) refers to the museum as the ”Whydah Historical Museum.” My usage here reflects the name on the museum’s official website, www.museeouidah.org. The fort protected merchants well into the nineteenth century, with Brazil outlawing the slave trade in 1850 and
As we got closer, a white man with hoop earrings and a crewcut came over and introduced himself as Cyrill Noyalet, director of the film we’d come to see. Joël shook the Frenchman’s hand. “I’m Adissa Joël Latoundji Bambola, President of the National Circle of Student Friends of Quintessence. I’m here with some Yorùbá filmmakers from the Plateau department.” He gestured at the rest of the group: from Kétou, Aimé and Kabirath; from Pobè, Robert and Ìyá Ogègé, Issiaka and his apprentice, Djamil. “We’re here to see your Gëlëdë’ film.”

Aimé butted in. “I’m Kétois.” He used the Béninois French word for a Kétou native. “When did you make this film? I had no idea a white man had come to Kétou to make a film about Gëlëdë’.”

Despite the tinge of accusation, Noyalet remained upbeat. He said he’d filmed the documentary the January before with the help of a Béninois friend. The man was there by the projector, so Noyalet called him over and introduced him as Alidou Mama Seko, a musician and the co-creator of the film. A stout man who looked to be in his late forties, Seko explained that he was a Northerner, but he’d always wanted to learn about the Gëlëdë’ as part of his “national heritage.” Aimé relaxed, perhaps gratified that a

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slavery as an institution in 1888. From 1861, the fort also housed Catholic priests and served as a base for missionization until Dahomey’s independence from France in 1960. Although the fort burnt down in 1961, reconstruction began in 1964. See Verger 1964, Assogba 1994, and Seiderer 2013 for the fort’s full history.

347 In French, le Cercle National des Étudiants Amis de Quintessence (CEAQ).
Béninois man had been part of the production—even if he wasn’t Nàgó–Yorùbá—and Noyalet smiled again. “I hope you enjoy the film.”

The crowd was sparse when the first film started: seven women and six men spread out on benches, with another dozen or so at the plaza’s edge, mostly bored motorcycle-taxi drivers (zemidjan) and child sellers taking a break from their evening rounds. But another thirty spectators or so had joined the crowd by the time Le secret des iyas started. The movie follows Seko on his trip from Cotonou via Kétou to Sagon,348 home village of his mother. There he learns about the Gèlèdè masquerade as a “Vodun cult” and eventually gets initiated into it. Seko is an apt protagonist; a Fon-speaking practitioner of Vodun but outsider in Sagon, he gives the audience an on-screen persona to identify with—especially an audience ignorant about Bénin, Vodun, and the Gèlèdè masquerade. Through Seko, the film takes viewers slowly into the mysteries of the Gèlèdè and the powerful “mothers” (iyà) they celebrate.349 At the same time, Seko’s Béninois nationality makes the case for Gèlèdè as an important “Vodun cult” and a pillar of Béninois cultural heritage.

348 Sagon is part of the Ouinhi Arondissement of the Zou department, southwest of the Kétou Arondissement (Mondjannagni 1977). Noyalet’s crowdfunding page for Le secret des iyas (2012) notes that the village is remote and inaccessible, and that the dominant ethnic group is Nàgó. Simons and Fennig (2017) indicate that Ije–Yorùbá is the primary language spoken in the village, suggesting its inhabitants are primarily from the Òhòrì subgroup of the Anàgó–Yorùbá.

349 Among Fon-speaking peoples, Gèlèdè is considered a Nago Vodun, a term that recognizes its Nàgó–Yorùbá origins while still incorporating it into the practice of Vodun (Rush 2013: 70).
The Plateau video filmmakers agreed that *Le secret des iyas* is a beautiful film. The documentary mixes admiring shots of Béninois vistas and birds in flight with intimate scenes of Seko’s consultations with Vodun priests, all leading to a vivid—but not sensationalistic—depiction of Seko’s initiation and the Gèlèdè dances that follow. As we watched, Issiaka praised *Le secret des iyas* as “artistic” and said it showed that Noyalet had “mastered the camera.” The Plateau filmmakers questioned a few aesthetic decisions, laughing at some establishing shots for what they read as comical mundanity: a herd of cows crossing a street, a swarm of motorcycle taxis, a woman cooking outdoors, another washing clothes in a river. They also bristled at the documentary’s foreign trappings: During the opening title, Issiaka asked Joël and Robert under his breath, “What’s iyás supposed to mean?” He hissed out the final S—an obvious Europeanization of the Yorùbá word iyá, same whether singular or plural.

When the documentary ended at close to ten o’clock, Aimé had dozed off in his seat, and Kabirath was spread out on a bench asleep. Djamil, meanwhile, was nestled in the roots of a large tree, playing games on his cellphone. As the technical crew cued up *Parôles de Gèlèdè* (Gèlèdè words), a 2012 television documentary by Noyalet and Damien Mandouze, the crowd began to thin. Too tired to stay, the Plateau group quietly moved toward the street. Noyalet rushed over to see what we’d thought, and Issiaka and Joël

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350 For bird imagery in Gèlèdè masquerades, see Drewal and Drewal (1983). For a critique of sensationalism in Western depictions of African religion, see Roberts (2000).
said the film was good. The Frenchman said that he’d be up on Kétou later that week to
screen *Le secret des iyas* there, and Issiaka said he would try to make it. But he added that
Noyalet should stop to show it in Pobè, too.\(^{351}\) As we returned to the blackness of the
streets, I realized I’d been the only white person in the plaza save Noyalet himself—
unusual for Quintessence and the Vodun Festival.\(^{352}\)

The next morning, Issiaka and Joël were still talking about the documentary.

Why did the film only talk about Sagon? Issiaka wondered. What about other places in
Bénin that had Geledé, like Pobè, Sakètè, or Ifagni? Better yet, why hadn’t the filmmaker
gone to a festival with Geledé from across the region? Joël agreed. And why did the film
say that Geledé are Béninois culture heritage, rather than *Yorùbá* culture?

“*Le secret des iyas,*” Issiaka griped, hissing out the final S.

* * *

What are we to make of this critique, that a French film about Béninois
indigenous religion might be beautiful, but still miss the cultural and linguistic nuance
so important to understanding its subject matter? And what of the complaints I heard
later, about the low attendance at the film festival, with no more than a few dozen

\(^{351}\) Noyalet paid for this screening tour by soliciting donations on the crowdfunding site KissKissBankBank.

\(^{352}\) Interview with Arcade Assogba, Ouidah, 12 January 2015.
onlookers per screening? Or that Ouidah was overrun by white people, most there for Ouidah’s bigger Vodun Festival taking place at the same time? Even the festival organizers recognized these problems, blaming the specter of the Ebola virus, so prominent in the news that year thanks to an outbreak that had hit Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and—most troubling for Bénin—Nigeria, for scaring away filmmakers looking to enter works into competition, as well as Europeans looking to go on holiday. It’s easy to read such grousing as an indictment of the festivals, the attractions they offered, and the state of tourism in Bénin. Even worse, the critiques might be taken as a slight against the object of the festival: art film itself.

But against the backdrop of Ouidah, the critiques of these Nàgó–Yorùbá visitors take on a starker resonance. Ouidah is a city where people whose descendants are now known as Nàgó and Yorùbá were bought and sold by the thousands at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Since, the city’s dark history has become the focus of local pressure groups, the state, and international organizations, who have repackaged it as its own festival object: a “national heritage” tied to a vision of Vodun as world religion. Indigenous religion, slavery, and Diasporic connections are all commodities in Ouidah, sold to Béninois citizens as national identity, to members of the African Diaspora as religious heritage, and to white tourists as spectacle. But Yorùbáland plays a crucial role

353 Jean Odoutan, Quintessence opening remarks, Ouidah, 9 January 2015.
in this exchange as the source of many of those enslaved people and much of theeligion they brought with them. But not all Yorùbá-speaking people brought to Ouidah
left on slave ships; others were kept there as slaves, married to local men, or came back
from the New World after buying their freedom (Bay 2008; Araujo 2010). For Joël and
the video filmmakers from the Plateau, then, the Nàgó–Yorùbá presence in Ouidah
raises a question: Where do the borders of Yorùbáland lie, and who should profit from
the culture found within them?

In this chapter, I argue that the complaints of the Plateau video filmmakers
should be understood at least in part as critiques about how well those festivals
incorporate Yorùbáness. That is, the critiques were not levied against how the organizers
ran each festival per se, but at how they defined their respective festival objects in such a
way as to exclude or ignore the Nàgó–Yorùbá of Bénin’s Southeast. Critiquing the
festivals at the level of their objects required the Plateau video filmmakers to experience
the events as both organizers and artists: They understood the look and feel of each
festival as a reflection of how engaged the festivalgoers were with its respective object.
Likewise, they saw that the way each festival object was aesthetically defined and
understood shaped that body of festivalgoers, how they engaged with one another and
with the object, and whether the festival experience energized them as intended. The
Plateau video filmmakers critiqued what sociologist Émile Durkheim ([1912] 2001)
might call the totems of Ouidah’s dual festivals: “indigenous religion” for the Vodun
festival, “art film” for Quintessence. By doing so, the video filmmakers challenged the collective effervescence, and thus social inclusion, encouraged by each.

In this way, the Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers rejected two forms of marginalization that kept them from being full participants in either festival, whether as festivalgoers or beneficiaries. At the Vodun Festival of Arts and Cultures, they found a festival centered on “Vodun,” a contested and confusing term that, to the Nàgò–Yorùbá of the Ouémé–Plateau, usually means the indigenous religion of the Gbe-speaking ethnic groups, but to the Béninois state and others, stands in for all of Bénin’s indigenous religions. Then, at Quintessence, they found a festival focused on “cinema,” but one where that festival object was defined via aesthetic and economic criteria to exclude the kinds of movies made by Nàgò–Yorùbá creators of CAPADI. The festival could incorporate them as spectators, like the motorcycle drivers and children who watched Le secret des iyas, or as film students there to hone their art, but not as filmmaker peers with work ready to compete and win prizes. In other words, at the Vodun Festival, the Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers objected to a festival that included them and their religious traditions on someone else’s terms; at Quintessence, they objected to a festival that excluded them and their filmmaking on aesthetic grounds.

For the CAPADI video filmmakers, then, traveling to Ouidah reinforced their understanding of the value of Nàgò–Yorùbá culture as a commodity and made them question who has the right to buy and sell it. Yet, compared to the ailing Quintessence
film festival, the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers recognized that, as artists, they stood
their best chance of winning state funding for their own work if they could frame it as
tradition (and thus national heritage) rather than as cinema. In so doing, they claimed to
be overlooked authentic representatives of Nàgó–Yorùbá ọrìṣà devotion on film. At their
heart, these critiques were about selling Nàgó–Yorùbá culture in a more inclusive and
ethical way, speaking to national belonging, advocating equitable distribution of state
resources, and making diasporic, cosmopolitan connections.

6.1 Selling and celebrating Nàgó–Yorùbá movies

Nearly three months before the trip to Ouidah, Joël made a pronouncement:
“Yorùbá culture is dying out in Bénin, and film is one of the ways we can save it.” He
stood in the middle of the salon surrounded by men on cushioned furniture who were
sipping warm beers to take the edge off the heat. The video filmmakers from Pobè had
only just arrived in Kétou for the wedding, but Joël hadn’t wasted time, passing out
surveys he’d use for his graduate research. He’d already missed the women: Céline and
the others had gone to find the bundles of video CDs they’d hawk at the wedding
reception, earning themselves a cut—since K’Oluwa Ma Fi Seni 1 and 2 (dir. Dorothé
Oyede and Djamou Ogoudare, 2014) starred the groom, they were sure to sell. But the
men were happy to meet the researcher and fill out his forms.355

354 These events occurred on 12 October 2014. Joël prefers the ethnonym Yorùbá to Nàgó.
355 In Nigerian Yorùbá orthography, K’Oluwa mā fi ṣe (May God spare us).
Joël continued. “I’m Yorùbá, from the Plateau, so this is important to me. Film is important, because everyone watches films, even small children. But today, Bénin’s Yorùbá are copying other cultures more and more. And with each thing we copy, our own culture dies out a bit. So we need our language most of all; a culture cannot survive without its language. And Yorùbá film supports the Yorùbá language.”

Gérard tapped the title on the paper with his pen. “What does this mean? ‘Film: The Seventh Art.’” Underneath were spaces for each filmmaker’s name, telephone number, and a list of video films he’d worked on. Joël explained: There were nine Yorùbá arts, with live theater as number six and film as number seven. He couldn’t remember the others offhand, but he’d tell everyone the next time he saw them. Then he made a plea: “There’s a film festival each year in Ouidah. Bénin’s Yorùbá filmmakers should enter the competition this year.”

Joël crossed the room to thumb through a stack of video films near the TV. He lit up to find an old Kétou film he hadn’t seen yet; despite his speechmaking, this trip to Kétou was fieldwork for him. Joël lifted the adhesive flap on the plastic sleeve to pull the shiny video CD from the folds of the cardstock jacket inside. The disc tray on the player hummed open then clicked back closed, and Joël pushed play. The video film’s title

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356 Joël’s survey references the work of Italian film theorist Ricciotto Canudo, whose “The Birth of the Sixth Art” (1911) extols cinema’s potential to sum up and thus transcend all previous forms of art. Canudo’s list builds upon the five arts noted by Georg Hegel in his Ästhetik ([1835] 1886: 160–67): architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry. In later writings, Canudo adds dance to this list, thus endowing cinema with the potential to become the seventh art (Ranvaud 1976: 5, 11n6; Canudo [1911] 1980).
graphic filled the TV screen, and its soundtrack buzzed from tinny speakers. But the video filmmakers and I weren’t finished asking questions—What was Joël’s research about? Why was he interested in Nàgó–Yorùbá filmmakers’ work?—so he paused the video film.

Joël said that the goal of his research was to bring Yorùbá filmmaking to the attention of Bénin’s Ministry of Culture. He wanted to show how to “develop” Yorùbá culture in Bénin via film, making “the audiovisual” sector more robust and thereby improving economic conditions in Yorùbá-speaking areas. For now, he was focusing on the Plateau department, which he called “the heart of Yorùbá culture in Bénin.” I was asking just as many questions as the others, so Joël gestured toward me. “You see? A foreigner thinks more about our culture than the state does!”

“Well. I agree with your position,” Gérard said. “But the problem for filmmakers in Bénin is how to sell films. If you make a film in Yorùbá, it won’t sell well. We have to experiment, mix Yorùbá with Fon…”

Joël’s gasped. “Never! That would be a grave mistake! The Fon already have a big head start on the Yorùbá with filmmaking.”

But Gérard pressed the point. “If we make something in Yorùbá, how do we sell it?”

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357 Scholarly literature often refers to this language as “Fongbe” (Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002), but “Fon” is the more common term for speakers of other languages in Bénin.
Joël answered quickly, “Add subtitles! Make the film in Yorùbá but translate it into French. What’s important is that the spoken language be Yorùbá. Language is the vehicle of culture.”

Céline appeared in silhouette against the open door to tell us the wedding was starting, so we headed out to eat and drink, dance and spray money on the newlyweds—and maybe even buy a couple of video films from her.

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Joël’s ideas were hardly news to the CAPADI video filmmakers. The downturn in local video film production had sent the organization in search of new sources of funding and markets to sell in. The CAPADI producers knew that some Fon-made video films in the French and Fon languages had gotten government arts funding, so they had developed their own scheme to tap into those programs.\textsuperscript{358} A key component of the plan was to hold a film festival, called FEFiP, to promote local movies and gain exposure with the state. The meeting with Joël had convinced Issiaka that a trip to Quintessence would be a way for the Plateau video filmmakers to get some notion of what an international film festival looked like and how it ran. They’d also see the kinds of films that show at a big festival and how they draw an international audience.\textsuperscript{359} Over the next few months, other video filmmakers got interested in going, too, to try to sell video films in Ouidah, a

\textsuperscript{358} Interview with Romain Akogou, Pobè, 9 October 2014.

\textsuperscript{359} Interview with Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 17 January 2015; and budget meeting with Abiodoun Oyede, Romain Akogou, Issiaka Ganiou, and Gérard Koukphounsi, Pobè, 17 September 2014.
market normally beyond their reach. Even better, the place would be swarming with visitors from the annual Vodun Festival of Arts and Cultures, going on at the same time as Quintessence, offering a chance to reach an international audience.360

Going to Quintessence would give the CAPADI video filmmakers a sense of the festival model used there, the way its organizers crafted the sensorial experience of the festivalgoers and steered their engagement with the object of the festival: in this case, cinema. Investigating the Quintessence model would also grant the Plateau video filmmakers insight into how Quintessence intended for festivalgoers to engage in collective revelry. In other words, the Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers wanted to see how Quintessence’s organizers tried to shape what Durkheim ([1912] 2001) calls “collective effervescence,” that feeling generated in the communal celebration of a single object called a totem—and what, in this context, I’m calling a festival object. With cinema as that festival object, Quintessence would offer a model for cultivating a body of festivalgoers united by a love of film, and thereby suggest how to turn collective buzz into video film sales.

But with cinema as the object of a festival, collective effervescence is neither a given nor the sole responsibility of festival organizers, as film-festival scholar Lindiwe Dovey (2015: 17) notes, following Leslie Witz (2003: 10). As with audiences in a

360 Interview with Lálá Pedro, Pobè, 9 December 2014.
production public, a collective feeling arises when festivalgoers get involved, get invested, and make their opinions known about how a festival is running and how the participants should engage with the festival object, a sensation these scholars call “festive excitement.” Dovey (2015: 19) proposes the term (dis)sensus communis to account for such contestation among festivalgoers and how, perhaps counterintuitively, dissent can lead to greater festive excitement and social cohesion. That is, if a film shown at a festival proves controversial among festivalgoers, it may enhance festive excitement rather than harm it, no matter what festival organizers may fear.

Yet I want to return to the Durkheimian roots of this theoretical concept to highlight another aspect of the festival model where the festival may be critiqued and (dis)sensus communis can arise: at the level of the totem itself and how it is defined. Understood in this way, establishing a festival model requires festival organizers, festivalgoers, patrons, and artists to decide on not only what they are mutually celebrating, but on what that thing looks and sounds like, and how it should make them feel. Together, these parties must propose, debate, and come to a consensus on the aesthetic dimensions of both the festival itself and the object it focuses on, deciding what is a good example and what isn’t. Here (dis)sensus communis comes not merely from controversy over a specific representation of the festival object, such as a specific film at a festival, but also from how the festival object itself gets defined, whether it be film, some divinity, locality, commodity, or identity. To critique how a festival object is
defined is to challenge the festival’s totemic core, generating (dis)sensus communis by trying to change the festive excitement the totem allows. The totemic relationship between festivalgoers and festival-object, and the effervescence felt in that relationship, emerge as the result of constant negotiation and are therefore subject to dispute and change. Ethnographically, looking for these attempts to influence how a festival object is defined can reveal attempts to shape the festival body that the totemic object calls into being. What’s more, we can see such interventions at multiple levels of festive engagement: for the festival organizers, for the festivalgoers, or—in the case considered here—for the people who provide the festival object in the first place. These negotiations give artists a stronger position at the negotiating table than a strictly Durkheimian perspective recognizes.

The question for the Pobè video filmmakers was how to define the festival object of FEFiP in a way that would foster more solidarity among Bénin’s Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers while drawing support from state sources of arts funding. Only a year before, they’d staged FEFiP 2013; turnout had been good, with most members of CAPADI attending, national press covering the event, and a large audience attending in Pobè. On paper, they held the event in honor of Pascal Adjibadé Abikanlou, the first Béninois to make a film in the country, a Nàgó–Yorùbá native of Pobè, and a member of
one of Pobè’s royal lineages (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013: 19). But Abikanlou wasn’t FEFiP’s festival object so much as an adopted ancestor for the real totem: video film itself. Inspired by the publicity they’d seen for other Béninois film festivals, Issiaka and the other officers of APADI–Pobè had envisioned their own as a way to encourage Pobè’s video filmmakers to raise the quality of productions. The festival organizers reasoned that the festival might force video filmmakers at all levels of production to stop and think about the quality of their work, with prizes for best director, director of photography, producer, and actor spurring improvements in quality. And this was the same model they planned to use for FEFiP 2014, but on an even larger scale; for FEFiP 2013, only video films made by Pobéens competed, but FEFiP 2014 would be open to the whole of the Plateau department. Over time, it would include the Ouémé department as well, and maybe one day all of Bénin—or even beyond.

Festivals weren’t cheap, though. You needed to rent a podium, chairs, and a sound system. You had to hire a caterer, and commission certificates of participation and trophies. And you had to reimburse invited guests for their travel and put them up overnight. To get Bénin’s national TV station, ORTB, to cover the event would cost even

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361 Technically, Abikanlou directed the first feature-length film in Dahomey (now Bénin): Sous le signe du vaudou (1974, Under the sign of vodun). Several short subjects preceded this production, including Lumière des hommes (Light of men, 1954) by an uncredited director, Abikanlou’s own Ganvie, mon village (Ganvié, my village, 1966), and Le roi est en exil (The king is in exile, 1970) by Richard de Medeiros (Houngnikpo and Decalo 2013:164–65).

362 Interview with Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 17 January 2015.
more. All told, the officers reckoned they’d need more than four million francs CFA (US $7,880) to fund the event. Some of this amount would come from contributions from the theater troupes that made up APADI–Pobè, some could be avoided by relying on APADI–Pobè volunteers and by borrowing equipment from the mayor’s office, and at least a bit would come from sponsorships by local businesses. Like last time, they’d also rent out a local meeting hall where people could come watch the movies in competition for 100 francs CFA each (less than US 20¢). But even with this creative accounting, the festival faced a shortfall of about one million francs CFA (US $1,970). At the APADI–Pobè general assembly in November, the actors, producers, and other video filmmakers met the sum with laughter and gasps of disbelief. But Issiaka and the other officers defended their budget as essential for a larger festival that would include not only Pobè, but the whole Plateau department. The festival idea was popular with the members on its face—many of them still displayed the poster from the 2013 edition, even though the calendar printed at its base was now a year out of date. But the officers agreed to postpone the festival until after the New Year. That would give them time to look for how best to fund the event and raise its public profile with the government.

363 Interview with Issiaka Adéwálé Ganiou, Pobè, 17 January 2015.
364 Interview with Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 17 January 2015, and budget meeting with Abiodoun Oyede, Romain Akogou, Issiaka Ganiou, and Gérard Koukpohounsi, Pobè, 17 September 2014.
365 APADI–Pobè General Assembly, Pobè, 1 November 2014.
366 I witnessed as much when I interviewed Tadjou Deen Babalola in Pobè on 20 November 2014; he had the poster up in his front salon, even though his own film, Omi Ọlà (Water of prosperity; dir. Koyoum Agbadje and Gérard Koukpohounsi, 2012) didn’t win any awards.
367 Interview with Romain Akogou and Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 17 November 2014.
Sending a delegation to Quintessence in Ouidah, the officers realized, would be one way to do this. If nothing else, they’d make an impression on the state, bolstering their larger effort to register APADI–Pobè as an artists’ association with DDCAT, the state office responsible for recognizing artists and making them eligible for grants from the Ministry of Culture. But attending Quintessence would also give them new ideas for FEFiP by showing them how a large film festival operated, what kinds of films got shown, and which films won awards. On 9 January, seven video filmmakers and one anthropologist loaded up on the a four-door sedan, interior gutted to fit us and our bags, and headed west to Ouidah.

6.2 Vodun in the Land of the Whites

We couldn’t find the festival headquarters in Ouidah, so Issiaka asked our driver to stop and ask a zemidjan to lead us there. My whiteness drew motorcycle-taxi drivers to my window, but the other passengers were left alone—I was a tourist looking for the Vodun Festival, right? I needed a guide, àbi? Issiaka ignored these requests and asked a driver to take us to the Quénum Regional Institute of Public Health, a well-known landmark near the Quintessence headquarters. Our driver followed the zemidjan onto a wide, sandy road past bars, restaurants, and hotels. After a half kilometer or so, the

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368 Meeting of the Bureau of APADI–Pobè, Pobè, 2 December 2014. DDCAT (Direction Départementale de la Culture, de l’Artisanat et du Tourisme) is the local government organ responsible for promoting culture, handicrafts, and tourism. After being recognized by DDCAT, artists can apply for grants from le Fonds d’Aide à la Culture (the Cultural Aid Fund) from the Ministry of Culture.

369 In French, l’Institut Regional de Santé Publique Alfred Comlan Quènum.
zemidjan stopped and asked for more money than anyone had anticipated. I wandered off to hopefully give the CAPADI filmmakers more negotiating power in this, the capital of Bénin’s tourist industry.

Figure 41: Quintessence headquarters, Ouidah.

The festival headquarters was a small, concrete building painted wildly with green zebra stripes, empty except for a young man and woman working there. We unloaded our bags and paid the driver for the 144-kilometer trip down from Pobè, and with spirits high, snacked and took photographs in front of the headquarters sign and a matching green-striped van (fig. 41). An advertisement blared on repeat from a pair of loudspeakers emblazoned with the logo for Radio France International: “Quintessence,
the Ouidah International Film Festival—Thirteenth Edition: Culture, without my
culture, acculturates me.”370 Opening ceremony wasn’t until five o’clock, three hours
away, so most of the group decided to try to sell video films. They put on long-sleeved
jerseys and jackets against the slight chill and gathered up bundles of Yorùbá-language
DVDs and VCDs. The festival staff suggested they’d have their best luck in town, so
they headed back up the sandy path on foot.

Issiaka and I stayed back to find something to eat at a nearby restaurant. As we
sipped beer and waited for our food, I said that I suspected the road we were on was
Bénin’s Slave Route,371 a major tourist attraction and one of the reasons Ouidah is
designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. I asked if Issiaka wanted to check it out, but
he said he wanted to see how the others were doing in town first. The check was high; I
realized we’d eaten at a tourist restaurant, but Issiaka refused to let me pay.

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From the moment we arrived in Ouidah, we became part of a festival model
thirty years in the making that celebrates how Bénin’s history of slavery ties it to the
outside world. No matter that we’d come to attend the film festival, or that the other
Plateau video filmmakers were sniffing out a new market in Ouidah for Nàgò–Yorùbá
video films; as soon as Ouidah’s tour guides and taxi drivers saw my white skin, they

370 “La culture, sans ma culture, m’acculture.”
371 In French, La Route des esclaves.
sucked us into a tourist market, one for the foreigners visiting for the Festival of Vodun Arts and Cultures taking place the next day at the beach. As Bénin’s largest spectacle of indigenous religion, the annual festival marks the heart of both the Vodun liturgical calendar and Bénin’s tourist cycle as it attempts to induce collective effervescence by celebrating the festival object of Vodun.372

The story of how 10 January became National Vodun Day in Bénin, complete with its own annual festival in Ouidah, is a complex one that I can only touch on here. But from its inception, that festival object of Vodun has been a source of (dis)sensus communis thanks to debates about how it brings together people in Bénin and abroad, who gets to profit from those arrangements, and even what the term Vodun means. Is it all indigenous religion in Bénin? Does it include only the indigenous religious practices of Gbe-speaking peoples, with Nàgò–Yorùbá and other practices apart? And regardless of how Vodun is defined, who is it a festival object for? Is it national culture for the state, heritage for members of the African Diaspora, international religion for practitioners, spectacle for white tourists—or all four? As artists, the Plateau video filmmakers were interested in the meaning of Vodun and what role Nàgò–Yorùbá history and culture have played in its construction.

372 The literature on Bénin’s Vodun Festival is substantial. For overviews, see Brown (1999), Sutherland (1999), Hatch (2008), and Tall (2009).
Vodun has long been a general term for spirits and divinities in the Gbe language family (Blier 1995: 37). In this sense, it has always been a slippery term, referring not only to gods and spirits of Gbe-speaking peoples, but also the divinities venerated by their linguistic neighbors, such as the Akan to the west and Nàgò–Yorùbá to the east (Landry 2016: 53–54). In one sense, this umbrella use of vodun is somewhat akin to the way the English words spirit and divinity can capture something of the meaning of the term while leaving a lot out (Blier 1995: 37). But calling Nàgò–Yorùbá and Akan divinities vodun reflects an attitude common not only among Gbe-speaking peoples, but through much of coastal West Africa: the idea that religious practices, divine spirits, and sacred aesthetics can be borrowed, adapted, and taken from neighbors. This religious exchange was especially prevalent in precolonial times; Béninois people today often choose to refer to a particular divinity as a vodun, ọ̀rìṣà, espirit, or spirit based more on context, such as the language of the speaker or the person spoken to, than on any notion of that spirit’s provenance. Distinguishing between Fon and Nàgò–Yorùbá religion only really occurred under colonial rule, when the term Vodun came to stand for the idea

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373 Art historian Suzanne Preston Blier (1995: 37) notes that the earliest known use of the term in writing comes from 1658, when the Kingdom of Allada sent the Doctrina Christiana to King Philip IV or Spain; the document uses the Ayizo-language term vodu to refer to the deities of Allada (Arda in the document).

374 European contact and colonialism have also led to the loaded terms fétiche and idol being adopted by francophone and anglophone Africans respectively to refer to indigenous spirits. See Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988).
of a coherent set of religious practices and beliefs among Gbe-speaking peoples (Landry 2016: 53–54).375

Yet well before the colonial period, whites were inadvertently contributing to the religious mixing of the region. With their merchant vessels off the coast in the seventeenth century, these Europeans came to the Bight of Bénin in search of slaves, and the small Gbe-speaking kingdoms competed to supply them. These groups went to wars with one another and their neighbors, such as the Yorùbá-speaking kingdom of Òyò to the east, capturing prisoners of war to be marched south for sale to Dutch, English, French, and Portuguese traders. The Hweda people, with their coastal kingdom of Whydah, capitalized on this constant movement of war captives to the coast, cultivating interest from European traders. They used wealth earned through the slave trade to abandon tributary status to Allada to the north, and to grow to be the busiest slave port along the two-hundred mile stretch of what came to be known as the Slave Coast (Bay 1998: 43–47).

But Whydah’s prosperity made it a tempting target for the states warring inland. Following its conquest of Allada in 1724, the kingdom of Danxomé used tribute to stave

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375 Based on fieldwork in Ouidah and surrounding communities, Landry (2016: 55) argues that scholars have been guilty of artificially sorting African spirits and religious practices into ethnic boxes and origins. This is certainly the case in Verger’s (1968: 1, quoted in Seiderer 2013: 303–304) highly influential work. While Landry’s point is well taken, I retain these distinctions because they were used by my interlocutors, whose location nearer the Nigeria border no doubt colors their perceptions of the differences between Fon and Nàgó–Yorùbá religions. For another source that considers their overlaps, see Forte (2010a).
off its rival, Ṣọyọ, and turned south toward Whydah. With the forces of Danxomé massing across the river from Savi, Whydah’s capital, King Houffon refused them access to the port farther south. The forces of Danxomé’s took the capital by force, bringing the rest of the kingdom with it. King Agaja of Danxomé had expanded his reach from its base in the north all the way to the coast, granting him direct access to the European slave merchants and insulating Danxomé from attacks from its neighbors (Bay 1998: 56–58).

According to a 1734 account by the English merchant and slave trader William Snelgrave (referenced in Bay 1998: 61), vodun spirits played a key role in this conquest. Snelgrave writes that the people of Whydah expected their kingdom’s tutelary python vodun to drive off the invaders, and they offered tamed pythons sacred to their vodun regular sacrifices to persuade the divinity to bar the Fon from crossing the river into Savi. When the Fon came anyway, the people felt that their guardian spirit had failed them, so they fled or surrendered. The invaders, for their part, beheaded the divine snakes, cooked them, and ate them. But after this spectacle of domination, the Fon adopted the python vodun as their own, installing a temple to him in Abomey to the north.

Snelgrave’s account hints at a larger war strategy for the Fon of Danxomé, but also their neighbors: that to overcome enemies, you have to claim the sources of their spiritual power. Taking a foreign divinity brought several advantages: It denied the
enemy exclusive access to the divinity’s power, and it granted that power to the
borrower to turn it back against its foreign source, thereby weakening a rival or keeping
a defeated foe down (Tall 1995: 196; Bay 1998: 61–62). And this spiritual exchange didn’t
require outright conquest; instead, West African kings often encouraged followers of
foreign spirits to settle in their territories and establish temples to foreign spirits there.
Over time, divinities migrated.

Meanwhile, Danxomé state policy was shifting in another fundamental way as
Hwanjile, the mother of King Tegbesu (r. 1740–1774), worked to subordinate the
veneration of foreign spirits established in Abomey, the capital, to the creator divinities
Mawu and Lisa, for whom she was head priest. This policy gave the state official control
over religion in the kingdom, a move that hampered opposition to the king by
individual priesthoods (Bay 1998: 92–93). And by centering religion on the throne,
Hwanjile made supplicating vodun spirits a linchpin of the kingdom’s war strategy,
with many captives destined not for slavery but for sacrifice to the spirits. These
sacrifices spectacularized the king’s wealth in people, terrorized Danxomé’s neighbors,
and petitioned the growing number of spirits in the kingdom to empower its ongoing
conquests (ibid.: 66). In this sense, the term vodun has always meant more than just the
gods of the Fon; or, put another way, the notion that some gods are exclusive to the Fon
and others to the Nàgó–Yorùbá or another group is foreign to such an acquisitive
understanding of how spirits relate to humanity.
The kingdom of Ọ̀yọ́ continued to be Danxomé’s major rival under Tegbesu’s successors, Kpengla (r. 1774–1789), Agonglo (r. 1789–1797), and Adandozan (r. 1797–1818). As Danxomé vacillated between paying Ọ̀yọ́ tribute and fighting its armies, Ọ̀yọ́ itself began to crumble from internal strife and unrest. Ọ̀yọ́’s satellite states, such as Kétu and Ọ̀ṣẹ́, were weakened, too; war captives and refugees flooded into Danxomé from the east, especially after the fall of Ọ̀yọ́ city in 1837. Meanwhile, Danxomé’s wars against eastern neighbors continued as the kingdom turned its armies southeast to the Ẹ̀gbádò and east toward Kétu, Ọ̀ṣẹ́, Ọ̀sẹ́kúta and Ọ̀ṣẹ́kúta (Bay 1998: 185–86). At the start of King Gezo’s reign (1818–1858), most of these Yorùbá-speaking captives were routed south for sale at Whydah, whose population diversified and expanded to include not only the indigenous Hueda and Hula peoples, but also Fon from the interior, European traders, and people brought there through the slave trade (Law 2004: 73–75).

But by the 1840s, most European nations had outlawed the slave trade, and British ships patrolled the coast. Gezo refused European demands to stop trafficking in slaves, but as the legal market for them dried up, Danxomé found itself with a large surplus of captives, many of them Yorùbá-speakers from the east whom the Fon called “Nàgọ́.”

At first, the kingdom simply expanded an older practice of putting enslaved people to work as farm laborers, artisans, or domestic servants, or else marrying them to local men (Bay 1998: 186–89). Merchants from the Afro-Brazilian community (known as the Aguda) were already moving from the export of slaves to that of palm products, and
some captives were put to work on their plantations at Ouidah and along the coast, as well as inland as plantation agriculture expanded over the next few decades. As palm products overtook captives as Danxomé’s main export, the intensified Nàgô presence in the kingdom became the new status quo. Marriages grew common between Nàgô women and local men, whether Fon, Hueda, or Afro-Brazilian, and marriage itself became the preferred idiom to describe the incorporation of Nàgô into royal service as “wives of the king,” regardless of physical sex (Bay 1998: 186–89; Law 2004: 90–91). This integration wasn’t seamless; factions within the kingdom balked at competition from people of slave status, and Nàgô settlers and slaves resented Danxomé’s continued harassment of its neighbors, such as Kétu and Ṣàbẹ̀ (Bay 1998: 191–92; Law 2004: 90–91). Nevertheless, by the 1860s, Yorùbá was one of the three most common languages spoken in Ouidah (Law 2004: 188). The Nàgô–Yorùbá were there to stay.

This influx of Nàgô–Yorùbá refugees and captives brought an intensification of their influence in the religion in Danxomé, too. For instance, Nàgô–Yorùbá ironsmiths brought with them Ògùn, ọ̀rìṣà of iron, who became Gu when adopted into Fon religious practices. Meanwhile, Nàgô–Yorùbá women maintained their devotion to the ọ̀rìṣà of their homeland, spreading these cults to their children, including Gezo’s own son and successor, Glele (r. 1858–1889) (Bay 1998: 190). Ìfá divination (called Fa in Fon) became popular, as Gezo and Glele were advised by bokonon (diviners, Yorùbá babaláwọ) and sent their children to learn divination from elders of their mothers’ lineages (Bay
1998: 190–91). By the end of King Gezo’s reign in Danxomé (1818–1858), the Nàgó–Yorùbá ọrìṣà Èṣù, Èsanyin, and Ọṣàgò, and the Egúngún and Òrò ancestral secret societies had been adopted into Danxomé as Legba, Asen, Heviośso, Kutito, and Oro, respectively (Tall 1995: 196; Bay 1998: 22, 94, 190; Bay 2008: 32–33).

But the Nàgó–Yorùbá origins of these spirits have always been part of their appeal: To speakers of Fon and related languages, most were incorporated into local practices as Nàgó Vodun (Rush 2013: 65–68; 70–71). In fact, Nàgó–Yorùbá religious cachet is so great that it has been applied even to some spirits from non-Nàgó–Yorùbá areas, including the creator gods Mawu and Lisa, associated with the Nàgó–Yorùbá spirits Yemowo and Òòṣàńlá, respectively. Today, Ouidah’s Nàgó–Yorùbá-identified religious practices combine elements that anthropologists and art historians recognize as distinctly Yorùbá or distinctly Fon—Egúngún (a Nàgó–Yorùbá masquerade), say, with sequins sewn on their masks (a Fon innovation). For people in Ouidah, Nàgó–Yorùbá practices are foreign. But this is a localized foreignness, one that gains extra potency from its origins out there while connecting Ouidah’s Nàgó–Yorùbá to their past (Rush 2013: 65–68, 70–71; Ciarcia 2016: 696).376

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376 These are not the only foreign spirits to have been adopted into Vodun by any means. For the anti-witchcraft practices of instance, Thron and Attingali have been adopted from Ghana since colonial times. This has caused controversy in civil society groups consisting of indigenous priests over whether the leaders of these groups should be allowed to head the organization (Tall 1995: 202; Rush 2013: 78).
6.3 *From culture to heritage*

Danxomé’s refusal to stop warring and slave trading gave the French an excuse to invade, and in 1894, King Behanzin (r. 1889–1894) was deposed, at which point the French established the colony of Dahomey. The new colony incorporated dozens of ethnic groups—including portions of Yorùbáland—that had only just emerged from a state of constant war and subordination to the kings of Danxomé. The French thus instituted a policy of direct rule, relegating indigenous authority—and by extension, the veneration of vodun spirits undergirding it—to the past. One aspect of this policy came in 1943, when the colonial regime converted the palace of kings Gezo and Glele into a museum (Tall 2009: 160). Meanwhile, with condemnation of the slave trade now colonial policy, the Afro-Brazilian community began to promote its contributions to colonial identity not as slave traders–turned–palm growers, but as cosmopolitan representatives of Brazil who had enriched Ouidah and the coast with New World architecture, music, dance, cuisine, and more (Araujo 2010: 280–81; 2011: 95–96).

After independence in 1960, official policies kept the precolonial past in the past, albeit with a shift in emphasis to celebrate the glories of the Danxomé Empire, Vodun as indigenous religion, and Afro-Brazilian connections to the New World (Tall 2009: 161–62; Araujo 2011: 95–96). The French researcher and photographer Pierre Verger lent

377 The Historical Museum of the City of Abomey (*le Musée historique de la ville d'Abomey*) still operates today under the auspices of the Republic of Bénin.
credence to this mixture through writings and photographs of continuities he saw between the religious practices of the Nàgó–Yorùbá and Fon of Dahomey with those of African-descended people in the New World, particularly in Bahia, Brazil (see Verger 1954, 1957, 1968, 1982). Verger’s work showed Danxomé influence in the New World, where enslaved war captives had brought Vodun and ọ̀rìṣà devotion, by then conceptually distinct, influencing and inspiring New World religions. Through his work, Ouidah took on a central role in this nascent national imagination due to its prominence as a center of Aguda culture in Dahomey and its historical status as the most active slave port in West Africa for more than two-hundred years (Law 2004: 2; Tall 2009: 160–61; Araujo 2011: 96).378

After coming to power in a coup d’état, Mathieu Kérékou ushered in a Marxist–Leninist economic program in 1974. As a Northerner, Kérékou took no pride in Dahomey’s imperial past, a fact he made clear by renaming the country the People’s Republic of Bénin, after another precolonial state. Under his regime, the official view of heritage shifted from physical reminders of the slave trade and precolonial empires to the recovery of indigenous knowledge lost under colonialism. Kérékou’s plan called for the young nation to recover and harness this lost knowledge to free itself from reliance on foreign capitalist interests. The policy forced Kérékou to walk a fine line between

378 Law (2004: 2) estimates that more than one-million Africans were sold as slaves at Ouidah between 1650 and 1870, placing Ouidah second only to Luanda in present-day Angola for African slave exports in this period.
supporting indigenous practices, such as traditional medicine, and downplaying their ties to indigenous religion, which he cast as an impediment to national progress (Tall 2009: 161–62).

Nevertheless, the ideas of linking Bénin with heritage, slavery, Vodun, and the African Diaspora were sustained by interests both inside and outside the country. In the 1980s, a group of Ouidah elites called the General Union for the Development of Ouidah (known by its French acronym, UGDO) pressured the government to promote Vodun as a world religion (Ciarcia 2008a: 691–93). Meanwhile, Bénin’s Council of Kings, a group made up of indigenous priests and rulers from many ethnic groups, including Yorùbá-speaking Kétou, advocated for a festival to improve the image of indigenous religion and the traditional monarchs in the country by linking them to the African Diaspora and drawing foreign investment (Sutherland 1999: 197–98, 200; 2002: 79). Meanwhile, similar ideas percolated outside Bénin, sustained by the French Mission for Cooperation and Cultural Action (known by its French acronym, MCAC), Pierre Verger, and UNESCO.

By the mid-1980s, Kérékou’s Bénin was struggling, and the leader agreed to explore the development of a tourism economy centered on Ouidah and Porto-Nov, where Afro-Brazilian architecture was most prominent, as part of a structural

379 In French, l’Union générale pour le développement de Ouidah.
380 In French, le Conseil des Rois du Bénin.
381 MCAC stands for la Mission française de cooperation et d’action culturelle.
adjustment program proposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The move also led the administration to warm toward indigenous religion; beginning in 1988, Kérékou’s government encouraged religious leaders on both sides of the Atlantic to travel and reconnect (Tall 2009: 166–67). By this point, the Council of Kings and other indigenous organizations had embraced the agendas of UNESCO and MCAC; most agreed that Ouidah was the logical site for the Slave Route Project, but factions sparred over whether to hold the festival there or elsewhere, such as Abomey, Allada, or a location in Yorùbá-speaking Bénin (Bako-Arifari 2000: 228).382

Kérékou was swept from office in Bénin’s 1990 National Conference, a civil society push that restored multiparty democracy and a market economy. Yet international and foreign groups continued to court the interim government, UNESCO for its Slave Route Project, MCAC for its Bénin–Haiti Reunification initiative (Tall 2009: 168).383 Nicéphore Soglo won the 1991 presidential campaign partly on the promise of cultural reunion between Bénin and Haiti, and on 10 April 1992, he announced Ouidah 92, the First World Festival of Vodun Arts and Cultures: Americas–Africa Reunification (Bako-Arafari 2000),384 bringing the slave memorialization and Diasporic reunification

382 The issue in question was the location of the “cradle of Vodun” and its Diasporic analogs. For Abomey, the claim to that title rested on a legend reported by Pierre Verger in 1952 that the mother of King Ghezo brought the Vodun religion with her to Haiti after being sold into slavery by a previous king, Adandozan. For Allada, the claim derived from oral history accounts that the kingdoms of Abomey and Hogbonou (now Porto-Novo) were founded by princes from Allada. The Nágó–Yorùbá claims related to the strong Nágó–Yorùbá influence present in other Vodun practices, as explored in this chapter (Bako-Arifari 2000: 228).
383 In French, la Route de l’esclavage and les Retrouvailles Bénin–Haïti, respectively.
384 In French, le Premier festival mondial des arts et cultures vodun : Retrouvailles Amériques-Afriques.
schemes under a single banner (Tall 1995: 200; Brown 2001: 390). This was a huge victory for the indigenous priests, and rumors attributed Soglo’s decision to his being saved from a poisoning attempt by the king of Kétu (Tall 1995: 200–01). Soglo’s proposed name for the festival both identified the festival object the event would honor—“Vodun”—and injected the event with a strong focus on Vodun’s role as the state religion of the Danxomé kingdom (Tall 2009: 168). Unforeseen difficulties pushed Ouidah 92 into February of the next year (Sutherland 2007: 81), but Soglo established a festival model that still guides Bénin’s state funding for the arts today: one that takes Vodun as a festival object, reconfigures it as heritage, and uses it to draw festivalgoers from abroad as tourists (Tall 1995: 200; 2009: 155). In so doing, Soglo attempted to invoke all of Bénin’s indigenous religions in the term Vodun, while still tying the festival model to a Fon-centric view of the past.

For the Nàgò–Yorùbá groups backing Soglo, the promotion of Vodun as the festival object required compromising with other ethnic interest groups for a common goal, the celebration of (indigenous) religious freedom after decades of repression under Kérékou. For one, the festival’s emphasis on Danxomé as the cradle of Afro-Diasporic religion challenged Nàgò–Yorùbá claims that the high numbers of Yorùbá-speaking people sent to the Americas as captives made Ilé-Ifé, in modern-day Nigeria, the
spiritual source of Afro-Diasporic religions—not Ouidah (Sutherland 1999: 206–07).385

But by joining the Council of Kings, the oba of Kétu reached across victim–perpetrator animosities to present a united front in support of indigenous religion (Sutherland 1999: 211n6). The gambit held financial promise for Kétu and other Nàgó–Yorùbá groups in the Ouémé–Plateau, as Soglo promised to follow the Ouidah festival with other events around the country, including a Gèlèdè festival in the Ouémé department (Tall 2009: 168). Indeed, as the organization for Ouidah 92 went forward, the organizers chose a Gèlèdè mask for the festival’s logo, an emblem that everyone recognizes as being from Yorùbáland, but one that has been adopted by non-Yorùbá-speaking people in Bénin as a Nàgó Vodun (Tall 2009: 169n38; Rush 2013: 70–71). At Ouidah 92, the mask stood for Vodun in all its polysemy.

With the momentum of Ouidah 92 behind them, the indigenous groups shifted their efforts to a campaign to recognize a national Vodun holiday each 10 January, a date from the liturgical calendar of precolonial Danxomé when families honor their ancestors in domestic ceremonies. Over the next few years, 10 January festivals continued, sometimes with government funding, sometimes without. Soglo finally recognized the holiday officially in 1996, but Kérékou chose not to do so when he was elected for a new term in 1997, claiming he needed a constitutional amendment (Sutherland 1999: 195–96.

385 In the North, critics alleged that the emphasis on Vodun privileged Southerners. The Catholic church saw the campaign as a step away from secularism and respect for human dignity (Tall 1995: 201; 2009: 168).
Now a born-again Christian, Kérékou tried to reconfigure Bénin’s tourist economy to focus on a more Christian conception of the slave trade, emphasizing redemption and reconciliation between Africans and African Americans, while downplaying Vodun and remembrances of ancient Danxomé (Hatch 2008: 234–35). But the alliance among Bénin’s religious leaders and traditional rulers continued, with academics and museum curators joining them in their celebration of Vodun broadly defined as cultural heritage. In 1998, Kérékou reinstated 10 January as a Vodun holiday.

His successor, Thomas Yayi Boni, continued this recognition, providing ten-million francs CFA each year (US $16,600) to support Vodun Festival celebrations not only in Ouidah but across the country (Tall 2016b: section “Vodun et mise en patrimoine”). International funds for heritage projects became more widely available in the mid-1990s, resulting in some tourist-focused restorations and renovations outside the Ouidah region, such as Kétou’s Magic Door and renovated palace (Tall 2009: 172). But none of these has reached the level of success or renown of Ouidah, with its history

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386 I follow Sutherland (1999) and Tall (2014: 245n20) here, but much confusion surrounds the date that Bénin first officially recognized a holiday devoted to Vodun (and later all indigenous religions). For instance, Ciarcia (2013a: 202; 2016: 696) claims that the holiday was recognized first in 1997.
388 These funds were part of an annual budget of 100 million francs CFA (US $189,000 for the support of Bénin’s four recognized religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and “endogenous religions” (Tall 2014: 260).
389 The official name for the “magic door” is Akaba Idéna. The door was part of a series of fortifications Kétu used to resist raids by Danxomé. The fortifications were destroyed in 1886 but rebuilt in 1894 (Joffroy 2012).
of conquest, slavery, Afro-Diasporic connection, and Vodun. Indeed, Yayi Boni placed Ouidah at the center of his own major tourism initiative, a project to construct luxury accommodations and attractions along the Ouidah–Cotonou coastline called the Fishing Road (Principaud 2004: paragraph 40; Degbenon and Toukourou 2016: 135). By making Vodun the festival object of Ouidah 92, Soglo and the indigenous pressure groups behind him promoted Vodun as a catch-all for indigenous religion in Bénin. And at Ouidah, that association is anchored in monuments to the times when Ouidah exported slaves and fertilized the religions of the African Diaspora.

6.4 Monumentalizing Vodun, memorializing slavery

With more time to kill before the Quintessence film festival began, I convinced Issiaka that we should see the monuments at the beach. First unveiled during Ouidah 92 as part of UNESCO’s Slave Route Project, these monuments have become an essential part of the yearly 10 January festivities, when the leaders of Bénin’s Vodun community walk the Slave Route in a March of Repentance. The ceremonies that follow pay tribute

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390 In French, la Route des Pêches. During the presidential campaign of 2016, a promotional video for the Fishing Road ran frequently on ORTB, Bénin’s state-run television network. The slick video features a computer-generated, animated maquette of the Fishing Road as envisioned by its designers. While the video never explicitly mentions Yayi Boni’s hand-chosen successor, presidential candidate Lionel Zinsou, most Béninois viewers recognized the video as an unofficial advertisement for Zinsou’s candidacy. In the end, Zinsou lost in a runoff to businessman Patrice Talon, putting the fate of the Fishing Road in question. Nevertheless, Talon has promised to fund an aggressive expansion of the tourist sector funded by a 600-billion-franc CFA (US $968 million) loan from the World Bank to rise from 240,000 in 2014 to 700,000 tourists by 2021. The current plan is for Ouidah to remain the heart of this new tourist sector, but to put additional emphasis on luxury accommodations to appeal to Africans traveling on business. See Bouillon, Sophie, and Josue Mehouenou. “Tiny Benin Looks to Tourism to Boost Economy.” Yahoo! News, February 28, 2017.

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to and ask forgiveness from the Africans captured in Danxomé’s wars and sold into slavery at Ouidah (Landry 2011: 208–10). In one sense, the monuments extend this experience beyond the festival for visitors who wish to feel how African captives might have felt when marched from auction square to seagoing slave ships (ibid.: 207). But the monuments also make concrete the festival object of Vodun, with its ties to slavery and ancient Danxomé.

Doubled up behind our zemidjan driver, Issiaka and I sped back down the Slave Route, dodging pedestrians and other cyclists. Art works and installations zipped past, blurred monuments to Ouidah’s slave-trade past: Auction Square, where local traders are said to have sold their captives to European merchants; cement statues of Vodun gods and Danxomé royal symbols flanking the road; the Tree of Forgetting—just across the street from Quintessence headquarters—around which male captives were

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392 In French, la Place des enchères. The plaza lies under a large tree and spreads out before the compound of Francisco Félix de Souza, a Brazilian man who earned his wealth selling slaves when he came to Danxomé in the early nineteenth century—the old home restored and a new house built nearby by his descendants in 1995 (Araujo 2010: 160). Once the site of a marketplace, the Slave Route claims that the plaza used to be an auction place for people destined for the slave trade. An alternate name, Place Chacha, refers to de Souza’s title, “chacha,” given to him by King Gezo of Danxomé to acknowledge his place as a “commercial intermediary” for slave trading at Ouidah (Araujo 2010: 158).

393 These cement sculptures, the work of Cyprien Tokoudagba and Dominique Kouass, celebrate the power of ancient Danxomé and its Vodun religion (Ciarcia 2008a: 689; Araujo 2010: 165; Rush 2013: 142). The order of the statues along the route simply reflects how the workers removed them from the bed of their truck when erecting them. These statues offer no explanatory text to inform viewers what they represent, leaving this task to guides (Araujo 2010: 157). Further, the statues are controversial, since they were not part of UNESCO’s plan for the Slave Route and were instead added to help add a tinge of Danxomé patriotism to the heritage discourse. Efforts by non-Fon Southerners to have them removed during the 2011 presidential election failed when Yayi Boni said they were “irremovable” (Ciarcia 2013b: 98–99).
marched three times and female captives seven to force them to forget their past lives and cultural identities; the Zomaï Enclosure, where captives were kept in dark, cramped pens to prepare them for life aboard the slave ships; the Zomachi Memorial, a green space whose walls show scenes of the slave trade; the Zoungbodji Memorial, where captives were branded before their final march to sea; and the Tree of Return, which captives circled three times to ensure their spirits would return to Africa when they died. Many tourists take their time on the route, stopping to contemplate each monument and its significance to the African experiences the Route imagines (Landry 2011)—but many more do as Issiaka and I did, driving the 4.8 kilometer (3-mile) dirt road or hiring a zemidjan to take them to the beach in just a few minutes (Araujo 2010: 156).

394 In French, l’Arbre de l’oubli. A small tree now grows in the spot where the original is supposed to have once stood. Next to the tree is a sculpture of a three-headed, three-armed, three-footed Mami Wata by Dominique Kouass with a plaque explaining the legend about forgetting (Araujo 2010: 176; Rush 2013: 144).

395 The spot now is marked by two Dominique Kouass sculptures of slaves with scarifications representing different ethnic groups, and two Cyprien Tokoudagba sculptures of bound slaves forced into a squatting position (Araujo 2010: 178).

396 The monument’s full name is the Zomachi Memorial of Repentance and Domain of the Return’s Station (Araujo 2010: 178). The spot also memorializes the captives who died in the horrific conditions at Zomaï. The material markers include statues of bound and gagged male and female slaves on their knees by Cyprien Tokoudagba; a tall, black-and-red, portrait-oriented mosaic by Fortuné Bandeira; and two sculptures of captives’ faces made from recycled metal by Théodore and Calixt Dakpogan (Araujo 2010: 179–83).

397 In French, l’Arbre du Retour. The tree is supposed to grow from the same spot as the original, which dated to the reign of King Agaja (r. 1708–1732). Araujo (2010: 183) suggests that the tree may instead refer to the Captains’ Tree, where the Ouidah chiefs (not the slaves they sold) circled three times before dealing with European traders.

398 Robin Law (2008) and others have questioned the historical accuracy of the monuments along the Slave Route, claiming that they are reinventions or misinterpretations of the past. Nevertheless, I agree with Timothy R. Landry (2011) when he argues that recent invention does not make these monuments any less “authentic” to the people who visit them to contemplate the suffering of enslaved Africans.
We padded through the sand to see the largest of the Slave Route monuments: the Door of No Return, a large arch with bas relief scenes of the slave trade carved into its earth-red pediment. The place wasn’t crowded yet; it was just us, a small group of Nigerians, and a few souvenir sellers hawking handicrafts. Issiaka and I dutifully took photographs of one another in front of the huge monument, which honored the spot where the African captives finally reached the slave ships awaiting them (fig. 42). I noticed Issiaka had worn one of his cameraman getups, a screen-printed polo with the

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*In French, la Porte du Non-Retour. The monument was funded by UNESCO and references two other doors, both at dungeons associated with the slave trade: one at Elmina Castle in Ghana, the other at Gorée Island in Senegal. In Bénin’s case, there were no surviving structures to mark the slave trade, so UNESCO funded the construction of a new monument instead (Sutherland 1999: 196). The monument was designed by Fortuné Bandeira in a Soviet style, like most of Bénin’s pre-1990s public monuments (Araujo 2010: 186). The platform below the arch also features bas reliefs, these the work of Yves Appollinaire Kpédè (Rush 2013: 147–48).*
logo on the breast for his production company, Odada Film Production, and a set of worker’s coveralls with plenty of pockets for squirreling away camera batteries and digital tapes. We paused a moment to look at the two cement Egúngún figures on the Door’s beach side, and I told Issiaka what I’d read about them, that they represented the returned spirits of slaves who’d died in the Middle Passage or in the New World (Araujo 2010: 186–89).\footnote{The sculptures, created by Kpédé, also acknowledge the notion that deceased slaves are ancestors of the people of Bénin (Araujo 2010: 186–89). I haven’t found a source that attests to Kpédé’s ethnicity or birthplace, but a story in the 13 January 2016 edition of \textit{La Tribune de la Capitale} indicates that he is well established as an artist in Abomey. Rush (2013: 147–48) suggests that Kpédé (whose name she spells Pede) knows the Egúngún by their Fon name, kutito. My guess, then, is that Kpédé himself is probably Fon. See Rush (2013: 68–71) for more on Fon kutito. Law (2004 : 95) notes that Egúngún likely didn’t enter Ouidah until relatively recently, although they are now practiced by people of Nágó–Yorùbá descent in the city. \textquoteleft Le ‘vodoun’ vu par le plasticien Yves Kpédé [sic] en exposition. \textquoteright \cite{Le ‘vodoun’ vu par le plasticien Yves Kpédé [sic] en exposition} \cite{Vodun seen by the sculptor Yves Kpédé on exhibit. \textit{La Tribune de la Capitale}, 13 January 2016.} If he thought the placement unusual—Egúngún are forbidden to see the ocean during performances (Ciarcia 2008a: 690–91)—he didn’t let on. We could make out two more monuments further up the beach, neither attracting much attention: The Memorial of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and the Gate of Return, the former honoring Catholicism’s long history in Bénin, the latter the rekindled relations between Africa and its Diaspora.\footnote{The Memorial of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (French: \textit{le Mémorial du grand jubilé de l’année 2000}) was funded by the Catholic Church to honor the first Catholic missionaries to reach Danxomé in the mid-nineteenth century, possibly in rebuttal to the celebration of Vodun evident in the rest of Ouidah (Araujo 2010: 190–92). The Gate of Return (French: \textit{la Porte du Retour}) stands about a hundred meters away, the 2004 product of the Organization for the Promotion of Traditional Medicine (PROMETRA) and part of a museum that invites African Diaspora tourists to leave objects in memory of Africans brought to the New World who were not able to return to Africa (ibid.: 192–95).}
Issiaka hadn’t heard much about the history of Ouidah, so I did my best to relate what I knew. I pointed across the waters. “Head straight that way, and you’ll get to Brazil.”

Issiaka looked. “Is Gabon that way, too? I took a ship to Gabon once, for some film training back in the 2000s.” I seemed Issiaka was more concerned with the film festival than memorializing the slave trade. We snapped photos of one another on the beach, two silhouettes against the haze of the Harmattan sky (fig. 43).

As five o’clock neared, we paid another zemidjan to take the two of us back to the Quintessence headquarters. The people who’d gone to sell video films were now
Sitting on a wooden table outside the festival grounds looking tired. They hadn’t sold anything, they grumbled. The local people wanted video films in Fon—not Yorùbá—and the white tourists weren’t interested at all. Ìyá Ogègé gave me her trademark smirk. “Is Ouidah a foreign country [ìlú òyìnbó]? There are so many white people here!”

Ouidah does have a Nàgò–Yorùbá population, no matter what Ìyá Ogègé and the other Plateau video filmmakers found. And their descendants straddle the divide between those who got there as slaves and those who got there as slaves—turned—slavers. On the one hand, many of these families trace their ancestry to Yorùbá-speakers who were brought to the city as captives; many continue to speak Yorùbá at home and maintain devotion to Nàgò Vodun, or ọ̀rìṣà. Even those Nàgò–Yorùbá who have adopted Fon as a first language—even whole villages in some cases—often keep Yorùbá language, dance, and music for religious ritual (Rush 2013: 67–68; Landry 2016: 53). Some even trade on it, staging Egúngún performances near Ouidah’s major tourist landmarks and posing with foreigners for money (Rush 2013: 71). On the other end of the spectrum, many of the Aguda families of Ouidah remember that their ancestors were people from areas now called Nàgò who were sold into slavery, but who then purchased their freedom in Brazil and came to Ouidah to become prosperous merchants.

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403 Ìlú òyìnbó, literally “country of foreigners” is a general term for any place beyond sub-Saharan Africa.
404 During my time in Ouidah, I found video film shops selling pirated Nàgò–Yorùbá video films from Nigeria, suggesting at least a small market for video films in the language.
themselves, often in the slave trade, from the 1830s on (Law 2004: 180–81). For both groups, Nàgò–Yorùbá descent is a mark of pride.

These Nàgò–Yorùbá must live at the focal point of the long history outlined here, the history that makes a spirit into a vodun at one moment, an ọ̀rìṣà the next. In Ouidah, Nàgò–Yorùbá trappings—the Egúngún statues at the Door of No Return, the Gèlèdè́ mask of the Ouidah 92 festival—are, in the words of anthropologist Gaetano Ciarcia (2008a: 687), after Pierre Nora (1989), loci of memory (lieux de mémoire) that paper over the differences in variations of Vodun practice to create a homogenous heritage. Even more, they paper over ethnic differences in bodies of knowledge now acknowledged between Vodun and ọ̀rìṣà devotion as distinct religions practices. To turn Ouidah into a site of national heritage, Bénin’s indigenous religious practitioners have had to sustain a “deliberate syncretism” (Guran 2000: 234, quoted in Ciarcia 2008a: 698) that requires an averaging out of conflicting memories and old rivalries in the name of tourism. Those old rivalries become a form of heritage in their own right, as the victims of slavery are asked to forget or forgive in the name of development (Ciarcia 2008a: 688, 695, 701).

Vodun comes to stand for all of Bénin’s indigenous religions, its agglutinative nature its strength (ibid.: 701–02). Ouidah, with its population descended from slaves and slavers, becomes a touchstone for the idea of shared heritage in a post-conflict zone.

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405 Historian Robin Law (2004: 95–96) notes that Gèlèdè́ are not attested to in Ouidah until 1913.
This is the idea Joël railed against by insisting that Bénin needed Yorùbá films in the Yorùbá languages. For him, Yorùbá and Fon are distinct categories, no matter how much cultural and biological exchange has gone on between them. Other Nâgó–Yorùbá are of a like mind. In 2010, several of Bénin’s Nâgó–Yorùbá ọba left the Council of Kings to form a rival organization, the Federation of Yorùbá Kings of Bénin (FERYB), with the King of Kétou as its honorary president (Tall 2016a: paragraph beginning “Depuis son intronisation”). Then in 2011, King Onikoy, who represents the Nâgó–Yorùbá of Ouidah, asked that the families descended from slaves be distinguished from those descended from slave owners during the annual March of Repentance. At the next year’s march, President Yayi Boni, himself of Nâgó–Yorùbá descent, spoke out against the lack of recognition of victimization in Ouidah’s brand of slave memorialization. He denounced those Ouidah families who take pride in their slave-trading ancestors, saying, “Bénin is not a kingdom of peace, but of the fear of the memories of slavery” (quoted in Ciarcia 2016: 694–95, my translation).

So what is driving this renegotiation of what Vodun means, and whether it includes Nâgó–Yorùbá ọrîṣà devotion? Understanding why this debate has erupted and how the different factions are embracing or abandoning the term Vodun provides a way to see how people are renegotiating their place within the nation of Bénin, the region of

406 In French, la Fédération des Rois Yorùbá du Bénin.
West Africa, and the Diasporic world imagined by the Ouidah Vodun Festival and its affiliated Slave Route Project. For Vodun practitioners and the Béninois state, the festival clings to Vodun as a focus of national identity. For the practitioners of African-inspired religions who travel to Bénin from the Americas, Vodun as a festival object is a form of reclaimed heritage, a recognition of African Diaspora religions as ancestral practices brought to the New World in the hearts and minds of enslaved Africans.

But Ìyá Ogege pointed to another major issue: Not only did she fail to find a market for Yorùbá-language video films in Ouidah, she also found the place overrun with white people: foreign tourists there to see Vodun as spectacle.407 After twenty years, their tourist dollars have turned Ouidah into the land of the whites (ilú òyìnbó) every 10 January, and the Slave Route Project spreads this effect, at least in part, year-round. But this tourist attention hasn’t spread far beyond Ouidah, so, as Ciarcia (2016: 695) notes, the figure of the white foreigner haunts the debate still, both as the instigator of the history of slavery memorialized, and as the figure these rival factions now seek to draw in as a tourist. At stake is a battle over state arts funding in a precarious financial climate: if Vodun draws foreign tourists to Bénin, wouldn’t ọ̀rìṣà religion, as well? Only if the state recognizes it as something distinct, something Nàgó–Yorùbá.

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407 Note that many Béninois use the same terms to refer to foreign tourists, whether white or black. For instance, an African American visitor to Ouidah might be called òyìnbó in Yorùbá, or yovo in Fon (Forte 2010b: 194).
6.5 Film as festival object

Issiaka, Aimé, Robert, and I sat in a circle of chairs, some plastic, some ripped from a cinema somewhere, as the other festivalgoers trickled in from nearby bars and restaurants and made small talk in French. The latecomers were mostly filmmakers with works in competition or financial supporters of the festival; most were Africans or people of African descent, but more than a third were white. Ìyá Ogègé strode into the courtyard, a bag of Plateau VCDs on her hip and three film jackets fanned out in her free hand. A pair of filmmakers with matching dreadlocks—one Béninois, the other white South African—shot her a dirty look, so she went back outside to join Kabirath and Djamil, resting on a wooden table. Ouidah was proving doubly disappointing for her and the others who’d come on the trip to sell: No one was interested in Yorùbá-language video films from the Plateau, not even the film enthusiasts of Quintessence.

Before long, the festival organizer, Jean Odoutan, arrived and opened the festivities with a series of laments: There were very few entrants this year; the French and U.S. embassies hadn’t sent any representatives as they usually did; low attendance meant there were financial problems; Ouidah’s mayor hadn’t come; Bénin’s state TV station, ORTB, had decided not to cover the event. The festival organizers had focused most of their publicity on Europe, but Ebola had scared people away who might

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408 Interview with Arcade Assogba, Ouidah, 12 January 2015.
otherwise have entered films into competition or flown to Bénin to attend. This, Odoutan sighed, would be a “minimalist” festival.

But never you mind, he assured us, the goals of the festival were the same as ever: to honor Ouidah as the place where so many Africans were sold into slavery by creating a “cultural space” for African filmmakers to showcase their work.409 There was a general sense of uneasiness among the perhaps two dozen people there. But before anyone could reply, Odoutan turned the floor over to his assistant, Arcade Assogba, who met his boss’s bleakness with enthusiasm. He introduced everyone present who had a film in competition and announced that the films screened that night would include Le secret des iyas, a documentary about Bénin’s Geledé masquerade. And with that, Assogba pronounced the festival officially open.410

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In many ways, the story of how Ouidah got its own festival devoted to film mirrors the creation of FEFiP more than a decade later. It was 2002, and film festivals were popping up across Africa, while other countries devoted festivals to African film (Lelièvre 2011: 127). At the time, Bénin didn’t have many cinema halls—most had gone

409 Jean Odoutan, Quintessence opening remarks, Ouidah, 9 January 2015.
out of business after the Bénin Film Board dissolved in 1977. As a cultural force, cinema—film as art—was an outlier.411

Into the gap came Jean Odoutan, an actor and filmmaker who had grown up in Bénin but moved to the banlieues of Paris at age fifteen (Tarr 2007: 67). There, he acted in various French movie productions in the 1980s and 1990s, making the transition to producing and directing his own films in 1992.412 But Odoutan never forgot his African roots; he made a career by making films that focus on what it’s like to be an African immigrant in France (Ricci 2011: 7), with the first Barbecue-Pejo, in 2000, filmed in Bénin the year before (Tarr 2007: 67).413 Odoutan wanted to make going to the cinema a normal part of Béninois life, to spread a love for film to Béninois audiences.414 So in 2002, he used his film profits and a bit of money he got from the Francophonie to organize what he hoped would become an annual event: Quintessence, the Ouidah International Film Festival.415

As organized by Odoutan, Quintessence would spread cinema-going in three ways. First, it was an international film competition. Young filmmakers from around the

411 In French, l’Office béninois du cinéma, and le Centre de la cinématographie, respectively.
414 Interview with Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 13 January 2015.
world—but especially the Global South—could enter their films, gain exposure, and exhibit their work. In the bargain, the competition would bring these young artists together, and allow them to network and exchange ideas.\textsuperscript{416} Secondly, Quintessence would be a public festival. All screenings were free and held in public spaces, like the outdoor plazas of Ouidah, to attract larger and more diverse audiences. Finally, Quintessence would be a place where aspiring filmmakers from the Global South could learn how to make films. To this end, Odoutan included a teaching component in the program called the Cinematographic Institute (Pochon 2010; Ricci 2011: 7).\textsuperscript{417}

And the festival was a success. Held annually since 2002, Quintessence has attracted thousands of entrants (1,447 in 2011 alone) and exhibited as many as 140 films in a single year (Odoutan, quoted in Cadasse 2004; Lelievre 2011: 129). Meanwhile, the public screenings eventually expanded from Ouidah and Cotonou to include towns and villages across the country, from Porto-Novo in the south to Parakou in the north, reaching as many as 50,000 spectators (Pochon 2010). The educational aspect has offered student filmmakers training in writing, music, directing, and other aspects of film production, coupled with free or low-cost lodging. Grants from Europe and Bénin make


\textsuperscript{417} In French, \textit{l’Institut Cinématographique de Ouidah}. 
this possible, helping to alleviate some of the precarity felt by African filmmakers. Its success made Quintessence part of a larger network of film festivals—more than fifty in Africa today—that help poorly funded filmmakers gain exposure, find distributors, and, in many cases, earn cash prizes to bankroll future projects. And artistically, it became part of a festival network that gives filmmakers a chance to have their work seen by African audiences, a rarity in countries like Bénin, where state-run TV is too underfunded to air local productions unless paid by the creators (Lelièvre 2011: 126, 129).

But just as the CAPADI video filmmakers learned when they threw the Pobè Film Festival in 2013, running a major event takes a lot of money. With so many entrants from poorer countries, Odoutan recognized the need to fly the participating filmmakers to Bénin, a lesser-visited country where airfare tends to be expensive. He also tried to provide lodging for these filmmakers and for the students and teachers involved with the Cinematographic Institute. Then there’s the cost of publicity, which the festival uses to draw both foreign and domestic audiences to Ouidah via advertisements on radio and television, reporting by Bénin’s state-run ORTB, and posters printed and put up in France. For the second edition of the festival in 2003 and after, most of this money

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418 Interviews with Arcade Assogba and Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 12 and 13 January 2015; Cadasse, David.
419 Interview with Jean Odoutan, 13 January 2015.
came from France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the Francophonie, the French
Institute, and the French television channel TV5 also chipping in. Smaller amounts of
support have come from the government of Bénin, via the Direction of the Cultural Aid
Fund (known by its French acronym, DFAC). The office of the mayor of Ouidah has
helped some, too.421

In short, Odoutan organized a festival that would bring together filmmaking
professionals and students from around the world, put them into conversation with
Béninois spectators interested in seeing their work, and attract international and state
agencies to pay for it. And uniting all these parties is Quintessence’s festival object: film
as art. But just as Ouidah’s Vodun Festival of Arts and Cultures has had to hedge on
what exactly Vodun means to ensure a robust festivalgoing body, Odoutan and his
backers have struggled to keep the definition of cinema and art film free of unwanted
influences. That is, even at the first festival in 2002, defining these terms for the festival’s
object was getting harder; digital movie production was expanding worldwide (Krings
and Okome 2013), and low-budget video filmmaking was spreading from Nigeria and

420 In French, le Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, la Francophonie, l’Institut Français, TV5, and la Direction des
Fonds d’Aide de la Culture, respectively.
421 Interview with Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 13 January 2015. Nevertheless, Odoutan has remained dedicated
to the festival’s independence. He insists that Quintessence is not an organ of the Béninois state and never
will be—despite interest from Bénin’s National Director of Cinematography, Dorothée Elavagnon Dognon,
as the festival’s renown has grown. Like the organizers of FEFiP, Odoutan wants a festival that remains
independent of state control, even if it asks for state money. See Agboton, Eustache. “Jean Odoutan : «
Quintessence n’aura pas le destin du FITHEB ... Il restera une initiative privée ».” [Jean Odoutan:
‘Quintessence will not share the same fate as FITHEB ... It will remain a private initiative’]. Benincultures, 7
January 2014.
Ghana to the rest of Africa—especially among the Nàgò–Yorùbá of Bénin’s Ouémé and Plateau departments, just across the border from Nigeria. For Odoutan and Quintessence, their festival object wasn’t defined by its medium or materiality; digital films were fine and could compete alongside celluloid films with no issue. They needed to find another distinguishing feature.

Likewise, they couldn’t define an art film by how it was funded. In previous decades, African art filmmakers often made movies with funds from state sources and international agencies. But most of those monies have dried up as African and European film programs have been gutted by austerity measures, structural adjustment programs, and other neoliberal economic reforms (Barlet 2012: 205–207; Dovey 2015: 26). The move from celluloid to digital has helped African filmmakers keep costs down, but making a film today usually requires the creator to self-fund a large portion of the budget, and to call on personal and professional networks to find people willing to work on the project for little or no pay. And these shifts aren’t unique to African filmmaking; independent filmmakers worldwide increasingly rely on personal savings and connections. In this regard, video filmmakers such as those in the Plateau have paved the way for their art-film counterparts—industries such as Nollywood have relied on razor-thin budgets and

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422 Odoutan argues that digital media now allows filmmakers to maintain higher standards even as budgets get smaller (interview, Ouidah, 13 January 2015). Odoutan’s openness to digital media contrasts with Africa’s largest film festival, FESPACO, which waited until 2017 to allow digital films to compete against celluloid ones (Konkobo 2017).

423 Interview with Arcade Assogba, Ouidah, 12 January 2015.
curtailed production times since they began—in a case of film theory from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). The distinction between the video filmmakers and their festival counterparts is disappearing; today, the art filmmakers simply have better access to the Internet and equipment, which gives them a few more tools when it comes to finding funding. For instance, Cyrill Noyalet, used the Internet crowdfunding platform KissKissBankBank to raise two rounds of funding for Le secret des iyas: 5,030 euros in one and 4,075 euros in a second (US $6,319 and $5,518 respectively).

For Odoutan and his partners, cinema is defined as a question of exhibition strategy, commercial aims, and aesthetic values. With its open screenings and concern for spectatorship, Quintessence privileges the communal cinema-going experience of a projected film watched by a large audience. Economically, the films screened at Quintessence have no explicit aspirations of commercial success; instead, their creators hope to win prizes and recognition on the festival circuit, but even those prizes are rarely lucrative, with Quintessence giving no cash prizes at all. And, perhaps most importantly, Quintessence and its selection committee expect the competing films to

424 When I pointed out the similarities in this production style to Nollywood, Assogba laughed, “To tell the truth, I’m afraid of Nollywood!” (Interview, Ouidah, 12 January 2015).
426 Interview with Arcade Assogba, 12 January 2015; personal communication from Arcade Assogba, 26 May 2017.
look and sound a certain way. They demand that the image, sound, set design, acting, and editing be on par with those of France and the rest of Europe.\footnote{Interview with Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 13 January 2015.}

The influence of French cinema here is strong. It’s no surprise, then, that films must be in French or subtitled in French to compete.\footnote{Odoutan (quoted in Cadasse 2004) has said that he would have made his first film, \textit{Barbecue-Pejo}, in Fon, but the French National Center of Cinematography (\textit{le Centre nationale de la cinématographie}), which partially funded the film, required that it be made in French.} Likewise, the decision to open Quintessence to entrants from around the world reflects one of Odoutan’s critiques of the state of African support for the arts in 2002: Africa had no real “cinema” of its own, he argues; with the exception of a few directors—Gaston Kaboré, Idrissa Ouédraogo, Ousmane Sembène—he felt that Africans had yet to embrace cinema fully to tell their stories (Odoutan, in Cadasse 2004). Odoutan even includes himself in that critique, citing his French upbringing as preventing him from telling African stories or being a true African filmmaker: “I’m Béninois, but I make French films” (interview with Alain Gomis, quoted in Ricci 2011: 7).

This definition of cinema—as publically screened, non-commercial art films—has an obvious foil: video films of the kind made by Nollywood and by the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers of Bénin’s Ouémé and Plateau departments. For Odoutan, the commercial demands of video filmmaking don’t allow for the time and reflection necessary to make an artful film, since the creators are so concerned with keeping costs
low and getting to market that they have to cut aesthetic corners. Indeed, he told me he’d tried to make a movie on a ten-day shooting schedule once, à la Nollywood, but he couldn’t obtain the look and sound he desired at such a pace. As Odoutan explains it, making “real cinema” takes time.429

Nevertheless, Quintessence and its organizers are aware of the elitism that can surround African cinema and the idea of art film. Their critique is not one about popularity or “popular culture.” To that end, they have long awarded a prize called le Prix du publique (Public Prize) to the audience-favorite film, and in 2010, the Eighth Edition of the festival added le Python à lèvres blanches (White-lipped Python), a prize for a new category called “home vidéo,” which allows ostensibly commercial video films to compete;430 nevertheless, this prize was not associated with video in 2015. With few White-lipped Pythons awarded to date, it’s difficult to determine whether this move signals a true softening of the anti-commercial criterion Odoutan and the other organizers have long placed on their festival object; the first White-lipped Python, at least, went to a Claude Balogoun’s JVS (Je veux savoir) : Mariage forcé (I want to know: Forced marriage), who received funding from Bénin’s Support Fund for Audiovisual Production (known by its French acronym, FAPA; Pochon 2010).431

429 Interview with Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 13 January 2015.
430 In French, these awards are le Python pygmée and le Python aux lèvres blanches, respectively.
431 In French, le Fonds d’Appui à la Production Audiovisuelle.
6.6 The social life of film festivals

These distinctions in its festival object also shape the collective effervescence of Quintessence, the feeling it evokes in festivalgoers. The open, public screenings draw large crowds to experience each film communally, their emotional responses, laughter, outrage, and outbursts infecting the other spectators and showing the filmmakers how their work is received. Similarly, with filmmakers and film watchers in such proximity, film festivals like Quintessence put creators and audiences into direct contact, allowing the audiences to give direct feedback about what they’re watching, and for filmmakers to respond in real time. Public screenings, in short, provide a social space for (dis)sensus communis, the negotiations between festivalgoers of all stripes about what they are seeing together.

Perhaps more importantly, these film festivals create a community of likeminded filmmakers, united in celebration of their art. With so few venues for exhibition, festivals such as this encourage festival filmmakers to get together between screenings, swap leads about other festivals, and strike up collaborations. In this last aspect, film festivals such as Quintessence share a goal with CAPADI’s own FEFiP: cementing relationships between fellow filmmakers.

But, per Odoutan’s jeremiad in the opening ceremony, the thirteenth edition of Quintessence had run into problems. Odoutan had to drastically scale back on his efforts, so there wasn’t room in the budget to support screenings outside Ouidah and
Cotonou. Perhaps most stark of all, Odoutan had cut the Cinematographic Institute, meaning there was no training for student filmmakers.432 These issues affected the feeling of the festival, the collective effervescence that leads from the art film as festival object to the social body of festivalgoers. For one, the lack of funding had resulted in less publicity than normal, which led to a feeling of disappointment for visitors expecting a star-studded gala opening or awards ceremony.433 One festivalgoer complained to me at the closing ceremony that he’d come down from Niger because he thought Quintessence was going to be “a grandiose thing” [un truc grandiose], but instead it seemed poorly run, almost like it was the first edition rather than the thirteenth.434 Likewise, the technical crew was short-staffed; as the festival continued, getting the projectors up and running and queuing up films proved a persistent problem that prolonged screenings into the early hours of the morning.

There were fewer people at the public screenings. Most ran similarly to the one I’d attended with the Plateau filmmakers for Le secret des iyas, with smaller crowds made up mostly of children and motorcycle-taxi drivers. People from within Bénin rarely travel to Ouidah for Quintessence unless they’re in competition or attending a training session, but the lack of foreign spectators was an anomaly at the height of Bénin’s tourist

432 Interview with Arcade Assogba, Ouidah, 12 January 2015.
433 Interview with Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 17 January 2015.
434 Interview, Ouidah, 13 January 2015.
Regardless of the cause of the problem, the buzz at Quintessence 2015 was one of disappointment, and the cause of that disappointment was, at least in part, the breakdown of a festival mode that demands foreign support and foreign festivalgoers to succeed. If Nàgò–Yorùbá culture is a mark of foreign prestige in the Vodun Festival of Art and Culture, running simultaneously at Ouidah, Quintessence needed the prestige of cash and participants from abroad.

Nevertheless, precarity persists in Bénin’s competing models of filmmaking. That night in Ouidah, most of the Quintessence filmmakers stayed in hotels in Cotonou, a twenty-minute drive away. The CAPADI video filmmakers had nowhere to sleep. While I knew fellow anthropologists in the area, Issiaka and the others asked Joël to find them a place to stay (and I stayed with them). The researcher called Odoutan’s assistant, Arcade Assogba, while the rest of us sat on the concrete slab in front of the locked-up festival complex. About a half hour later, Assogba pulled up on the back of a motorcycle taxi. He looked surprised to find so many of us there—and no doubt to see me—but he handed Joël a key and hopped back on the waiting zemidjan.

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435 Interview with Arcade Assogba, 12 January 2015.
436 Interview with anonymous Ouidah resident, 13 January 2015; interview with Arcade Assogba, 12 January 2015.
437 The Vodun Festival attracts another type of foreigner, too, as each year, European and American academics descend on Ouidah for the event. For an investigation of how certain sites attract concentrated research attention, see Neal et al (2016).
438 Interview with Arcade Assogba, Ouidah, 12 January 2015. In an interview later, Assogba was apologetic about this situation; any other year, he said, they would have put us up in student lodging.
People were upbeat as we investigated the reception room. Aimé and Joël sat in plush, theater-style seats and closed their eyes, while Djamil climbed onto the counter. Issiaka and I laid out woven plastic mats we’d borrowed and lay down in the corner. We locked the door and slept with the lights on—there could be no questions of propriety with the two women present—huddling against the coldness of night.

My point here is not that the Plateau video filmmakers are poor, but the Quintessence filmmakers rich; the funding problems faced by both groups are similar, as outlined above, even if filmmakers based in Europe and North America benefit from the higher standard of living in such places compared to most of Africa. This story illustrates how the Quintessence staff wasn’t quite sure what to do with six Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers, and, in turn, how these visitors from the Plateau weren’t entirely comfortable celebrating the festival object of art cinema. For them, the lack of festive excitement at Quintessence had less to do with Ebola and the lack of funding, and more to do with the limits the festival imposed on its festival object, “home video” included or not. Outright selling of movies, as Ìyá Ogègé tried to do, was still a violation of the festival object, film for film’s sake, as Odoutan and the festivalgoers defined it. The opening ceremony was no àriyá (celebration) like the wedding we’d been to in Kétou, where selling video films was part of the festival atmosphere and praising the event sponsors was a central part of the festival model. No, Quintessence had
commercial sponsors—remember that RFI logo on the headquarters speakers—but they were to be kept at arm’s length. For the most part, the organizers still held that the key difference between their festival object and the Nollywood-style video films that didn’t fit that definition was their goals: Nollywood movies focus on commerce, Quintessence films on art.439

But with its festival object defined this way, the arrival of six video filmmakers (and two researchers) from the Plateau Department caused a stir. These Nàgó–Yorùbá visitors weren’t exactly like the Nàgó–Yorùbá who live in Ouidah, just average Béninois who may not yet care for cinemagoing. But there they were, at the opening ceremony and film screenings, selling video films on disc for people to watch in the privacy of their homes. On the other hand, these Nàgó–Yorùbá newcomers were filmmakers; the festival organizers recognized that. So the festival had to integrate them in some other way: As students, perhaps? Or maybe spectators?

6.7 Conclusion

For the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers who traveled to Ouidah from the Plateau, only able to afford one overnight in Ouidah before heading home, Quintessence was truly a “minimalist” festival, as Odoutan had called it, with little festive excitement

439 Interviews with Arcade Assogba and Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 12 and 13 January 2015.
on offer. That left Ouidah over to the other festival running at the same time: the Vodun Festival of Arts and Cultures, with its own festival model focused on a different object, Vodun as Diasporic heritage and tourist draw.

In previous years, the overlap had benefitted both festivals. On the one hand, siting Quintessence in Ouidah was a natural decision for Odoutan, since his father and mother both hailed from the area. But the smaller location also fit with his goal to spread cinema-going culture beyond Cotonou. By the same stroke, he gave the Quintessence filmmakers and attendees more to do, such as attending dances by Vodun practitioners, concerts by Béninois artists, and other events associated with the Vodun festival (Poda 2013: paragraph 31). The two festivals were symbiotic, with practitioners of Vodun agreeing to delay secret, nightly ceremonies until open-air screenings had wrapped (Pochon 2010), and Quintessence encouraging its attendees to explore Ouidah’s Vodun history and culture (Odoutan, quoted in Dedègnonhou 2008).

Even the prizes the filmmakers competed for—the various “Pythons”—referred to Ouidah’s python vodun protector, the one the armies of Danxomé had beheaded and eaten centuries before, but

440 Interview with Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 13 January 2015.
441 In this regard, Quintessence is much like the practitioners of spectacular “Nago Vodun” masquerades, such as Egungün, who perform in Ouidah’s streets for tourists (Rush 2013: 73).
one still regarded as a symbol of wealth in Ouidah (Tall 1995: 198).\textsuperscript{442} As a result, Odoutan says, Bénin has “appropriated” the festival toward its own tourist needs.\textsuperscript{443}

But in 2015, the festival model of Quintessence was breaking. Odoutan wondered whether the Vodun Festival had harmed Quintessence that year by drawing spectators away. Ebola had reduced tourist numbers at the height of the season, turning the festivals into competitors, not allies. And ultimately, the Vodun Festival, as the larger of the two, had more claim over the tourists who were there and their spending. My presence, too, forced the Plateau video filmmakers into the world of the Vodun Festival, as most people in Ouidah assumed I was a tourist rather than a Quintessence attendee. The result was that the Vodun Festival’s model and object were more prevalent in the experience of the Plateau video filmmakers in Ouidah. They were tourists, not filmmakers, there for Vodun, not cinema.

Even though it had been an off year for the festivals, back in Pobè, the trip to Ouidah was changing how the video filmmakers thought about the FEFiP film festival and even their own video films. As fellow festival organizers, they understood Jean Odoutan’s troubles wooing funders to support Quintessence, and they recognized the Vodun Festival’s need for tourists to spend money in Bénin to fund itself. Meanwhile, as

\textsuperscript{442} Personal communication from Arcade Assogba, 26 May 2017. The Python awards also refer to one of Ouidah’s more popular Vodun temples–turned–tourist attractions: the Python Temple. However, Bay (1998: 62) notes that it never gained much popularity among the Fon people inland of Ouidah after Ouidah’s conquest by Danxomé in 1727.

\textsuperscript{443} Interview with Jean Odoutan, Ouidah, 13 January 2015.
Béninois citizens and Nàgó–Yorùbá, the Plateau video filmmakers came up with theories for the lack of festive excitement they’d felt at the two Ouidah festivals and what was to blame for it.

But it was as artists that they gained their most important insight: that the lessons of Ouidah’s twin festivals came less from how their organizers generated festive excitement (or tried to), and more from how they framed the festival objects that held their events together. As artists themselves, then, the Plateau video filmmakers realized how such definitions so often turn on aesthetic criteria. And as artists-turned-curators, they realized that their best chance to win some of the exposure and funding the Ouidah festivals enjoyed would be not as organizers or festivalgoers, but as artists, the suppliers of festival objects: movies for Quintessence, Nàgó–Yorùbá religion for the Vodun Festival. Even better, as artists who made movies about Nàgó–Yorùbá religion, they could provide both at the same time.

In the struggles of Jean Odoutan, Issiaka and the other Plateau video filmmakers found a kindred spirit, an artist struggling to gain exposure for his art in Bénin and abroad, and a fellow filmmaker devoted to his art and seeking desperately to celebrate it in precarious times. State disinterest and lack of foreign investment thus became signs not of mismanagement. Rather, the fact that there was any investment at all showed the Plateau video filmmakers that making video films was a way to solicit state and foreign funding, no matter how little. They understood that Quintessence had simply had an off
year. As Issiaka put it, “It bothered me that my first time to go to a big festival like that, it didn’t have the same big scale it usually has, so that hurt a bit. But despite that, I learned a lot.” In the meantime, Issiaka and his colleagues recognized in Odoutan’s story the need to stay the course, to keep FEFiP local for now, but by doing so, to show the state that there was something worth investing in. State disinterest forced them to conceive of themselves as not merely artists, but as festival organizers, too, taking things into their own hands.

But the trip also turned the video filmmakers into festivalgoers at a second event, one that had much more state support: the Vodun Festival of Arts and cultures. There, a lack of festive excitement sprang less from meager finances and more from the way the Nàgò–Yorùbá from the Plateau were excluded from the festival’s social body or, perhaps worse, interpellated as tourists thanks to the presence of a white American anthropologist among them. Exacerbating this issue was the fact that the Plateau contingent only got to experience the festival peripherally, through encounters with white tourists uninterested in buying Nàgò–Yorùbá video films, and by meeting local guides, taxi drivers, and restaurant owners, who read my whiteness as a cue to charge prices they wouldn’t have otherwise. The result was a festival that, for the people from

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444 Interview with Issiaka Ganiou, Pobè, 17 January 2015.
the Plateau department, offered little collective effervescence, even if it promised a way to draw foreign attention.

But it was as artists and video filmmakers that the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers gained their greatest insights. As creators themselves, they were able to drill down to the essential cores of both Quintessence and the Vodun Festival: the totemic festival objects that held them both together. First, at the Vodun Festival, they found validation for their efforts to celebrate indigenous religion as national heritage and to showcase it to foreign tourists willing to pay to see it. However, they also found a festival that assumes the Vodun religion as a stand-in for all of Bénin’s indigenous religions, including Nàgó–Yorùbá ọ̀rìṣà devotion. Then at Quintessence, they found a model for their own attempts to spread viewership of movies in Bénin, to showcase the works of lesser-known filmmakers, and to attract funding from the Béninois government and abroad.

With this knowledge, the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers could craft a plan to cater FEFiP’s festival object to appeal to the state and broader public, as they’d seen in Ouidah. Chief among these was a better understanding of how Béninois Nàgó–Yorùbá video films might travel beyond the local area—how the local video filmmakers could alter their movies to make them appropriate festival objects at Quintessence and elsewhere. Thus, the screening of Le secret des iyas at Ouidah, with its Aja dialogue,
French subtitles, and redundant S, became proof that there was interest out there for depictions of Nàgó–Yorùbá culture on film. But they could be done better locally.

The video films of Plateau video filmmakers just needed to be subtitled so that people outside the area could understand. This was an economic realization as much as an artistic one. Even if subtitles might help local video films enter the festival circuit and reach new audiences, the goal wasn’t just to win accolades and prizes; it was to sell movies. A festival was just another market, or an entry into another market, as Issiaka noted: “[I]f there’s a festival somewhere, you can take your films there, enter, and sell them. ... With subtitles, you can go to any market, enter any festival.”

Such a strategy, if it were to be adopted, would be risky; it violated the conventional model of distribution, wherein the creator of a video film gets the video film burned to disc and out for distribution as quickly as possible, since going to market quickly helps recoup some of the filmmaking expenses sooner rather than later, an important aspect in a production model that draws so heavily on personal finances. Subtitling a video film into French is doubly taxing: It requires paying a translator and editor to do the work, and it prolongs the time needed to take the film to market. But the Plateau video filmmakers recognized an opening to make their current productions match the festival object at Quintessence without abandoning their own funding model.

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445 Ibid.
Confronting the anti-commercial criterion of Quintessence’s festival model would have to be a bit of (dis)sensus communis for another day.

Perhaps more importantly, the Plateau video filmmakers recognized how the festival objects at Quintessence and the Vodun Festival overlapped and interacted. That is, Quintessence was focused ostensibly on cinema or art film. Yet it drew upon Ouidah’s ties to Vodun and slave heritage in its aesthetic trappings: all those Python prizes, all the outdoor screenings at old Portuguese forts and Vodun temples. And the festival’s timing itself was a deliberate strategy to synergize with the Vodun Festival, giving festivalgoers more to do and experience in Ouidah. Even some of the films screened were about indigenous religion; after all, *Le secret des iyas* was the story of a man discovering the mysteries of the Ògún masquerade.

But the way the Vodun Festival treated indigenous religion as a festival object was ultimately exclusionary. By assuming the term *Vodun* to include within it Nàgó–Yorùbá ọrìṣà devotion, the festival reinscribed the history of Fon domination over their eastern neighbors. And by claiming a Gelede’ masquerade, Egúngún, and other elements of Nàgó–Yorùbá indigenous religion as “national culture,” the Vodun Festival (and the main character of *Le secret des iyas*) denied full credit to the Nàgó–Yorùbá for these innovations. For the Plateau video filmmakers, these were economic considerations as much as artistic ones. Even more, they were ethical ones. In a place where Nàgó–Yorùbá people and culture have been sold for centuries, it’s only right that the families of Nàgó–
Yorùbá descent benefit from state investments in tourism. But what about the Nàgọ–Yorùbá who live farther east, in the Ouémé and Plateau, whose ancestors were the source of that culture and those enslaved people?

In the meantime, African filmmakers of every kind continue to respond to the precarity of their neoliberal mediascape with new strategies to find money, make movies, and publicize the frames these movies support. The question becomes what happens to the production public as funding models shift and target audiences narrow, get richer, or widen beyond the local level? I explore these ideas in the concluding chapter.
7. Conclusion: Shifting Standards in West African Film Production

The Béninois border guard stamped my passport with a warning: “Be careful.” Jacob, Issiaka, Lálá, and I were leaving Pobè for Lagos, Nigeria. Jacob had a USB key with the CorelDraw files for the poster, jacket, and banner ad for Ìkòkò Atura, while Issiaka and Lálá had the DVD with the master copy of the video film. In Lagos, we’d have these digital files realized as material goods: DVDs, film jackets to slip them into, posters and banners to advertise them back in Bénin. Seeing a white man headed to the Nigerian mega-city, though, gave the Béninois border guard pause. Hence the caution: *Soyez vigilant.*

The guard waved the others through—free movement across the border was usually the norm here until I showed up with my passport and visas and vaccination card. A few dozen meters away, I got my passport stamped in Nigeria as Issiaka and Lálá drove past the checkpoint—better to pretend they didn’t know me. About forty-five minutes down the dirt road, we split up in the small town of Oja Odan: Issiaka and Lálá headed for the near side of Lagos, while Jacob and I found a taxi to Ilaro, where we’d get a danfo (shared minibus) to the other end.

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446 This trip from Pobè to Lagos took place on 4 March 2016.
Even with its relatively small population, Ilaro felt different from Bénin. As we waited for the danfo to fill up, men steered people into their cars and away from competitors’ vehicles. More than one tout asked me for money. “Sorry,” I said, “I don’t have the opportunity to do that.”

One man laughed at the deflection. “Your Yorùbá is too polite for Nigeria.” Five boys no older than twelve loaded shovels into the trunk of a car idling beside us as a middle-aged driver looked on; they piled into the laps of other passengers, and the sedan took off. Jacob said they’d come from Bénin to find work. I noticed a sticker in the window of the danfo in front of us: “TRUST NOBODY.”

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As our danfo fought its way toward Lagos, Jacob and I chatted about another difference between Bénin and Nigeria, the sophistication of their respective filmmaking. The director and graphic designer claimed that if the artists of Bénin could only learn what he called “the international story structure,” they could win an international film festival. “It is not negotiable,” he said. “We must follow the international standards of storytelling.”

I bristled at the idea. “Isn’t that just a new form of colonialism?” I asked. “Using standards from France or the United States?”

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448 “Ẹ má binú o; ń kò ni ànfààní láti ńṣẹ bèjú.”
“No,” Jacob replied. “Nigerian directors are doing it. We’ll use the story structure to package our own culture inside.” I asked what he meant. “Take my recent film, Kemi,” Jacob said. “It’s a tragedy. Everybody dies at the end. In it, a babaláwo says that the girl Kémi should be able to marry anyone she wants at age sixteen. But her father doesn’t follow this advice and promises her to one of his friends, a polygamist. Everybody dies as a result.” He paused for a moment as the danfo hit a rough patch of road. “In Kemi, the message is that we shouldn’t use ‘culture’ as an excuse. The father says polygamy is traditional culture, but he really forces his daughter to marry a rich man so he can profit. The same is true for filmmaking in Bénin. We need to follow international storytelling structure and production standards if we want our cinema to truly develop. Right now, we have movies, not cinema.”

I asked him to explain the difference as the danfo reached the Iyana Ipaja neighborhood of Lagos. He continued, “Take the Nigerian film October 1,” (2014, dir. Kunle Afolayan). The movie had come out two years before, a murder mystery set during the transfer of power from Great Britain to independent Nigeria in 1960. “For that film, they had to hire an American colorist and director of photography. Bénin and Nigeria don’t have people who can do those jobs competently. But things are getting better in Nigeria. Directors there are using much larger budgets. To make a festival-quality film, we need to do the same—even as high as one billion CFA [US $1,880,000].”

“What about the Pobè Film Festival?” I asked.
“It will have to be international. If not, there is no point.”

I still couldn’t shake my earlier discomfort with the idea. “If you use this international structure, isn’t that a colonialist mentality?”

Jacob shook his head no. “We need to master the international structure before we can change it.”

Figure 44: Jacob Abiodoun (bottom right) films a scene for Kemi while Lálá Pedro (left) holds up the scenario for the actors.
Jacob’s insistence that Béninois video filmmakers adopt “international story structure” marks yet another attempt by Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers to overcome their precarious financial situation and keep their production public active (fig. 4). Like the CAPADI members who traveled to Ouidah (Chapter 5) and those who made the pilgrimage to Ṭọ̀yọ́, Nigeria (Chapter 2), Jacob reckons that getting his video films to audiences outside Bénin’s Ouémé and Plateau departments might lead to a better revenue stream and access to patrons whose material support can alleviate some of the insecurity of Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmaking.

Less clear is what effect Jacob’s shift toward an international filmmaking style might have on his and other video filmmakers’ ability to frame themselves as moral arbiters in their communities, familiar personae with social sanction to use audiovisual media to honor eminent people and lampoon bad behavior (Chapter 1, Chapter 3). A key argument of this dissertation has been that Nàgó–Yorùbá video films often reveal a community-defined religio-aesthetic (Abiodun 2014: 4), thereby shaping the auroscopic regime of the creators and their audiences. This process transforms video films into love letters to àṣà àibíle and video filmmakers into neo-praise singers for the moral order that supports it (Chapter 4). In other words, I’ve argued that the aesthetic choices of media practitioners have moral and political ramifications. Jacob’s attempt to crack the festival circuit by emulating a different aesthetic—but to “package [his] own culture inside”—may be just another instance of the process described by literature scholar Adélékè
Adééko (2017: xiv–xv): older expressive practices inform new ones, which users adapt to show their “cultural being.” But if Nàgò–Yorùbá video film goes global, what becomes of its production public, that community of creators, audiences, and patrons for whom video filmmaking provides a forum to discuss and negotiate things that matter to them?

Jacob’s reference to *October 1* suggests that he is aligning himself with “New Nollywood,” a Nigerian filmmaking movement by producers trying to make films that look and sound closer to international counterparts. The goal is to create bigger-budget movies that will appeal to Nigerians living abroad, juries at international film festivals, and—most importantly—Nigerians with the disposable income to attend the expensive new cinemas popping up in Lagos and other cities (Jedlowski 2013: 27; Haynes 2014: 53). The hope is that these alternative revenue streams will allow filmmakers to escape the precarity that has haunted West African video film production since 2007, when the Nigerian market was oversaturated with video films, satellite television was stealing viewers with Nollywood fare, and video piracy both physical and digital cut deep into profits (Haynes 2014: 54–55). The director of *October 1*, Kunle Afolayan, helped pioneer the movement (ibid.: 53), advocating that these movies avoid the moralizing so

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449 Some authors instead refer to the movement as “Neo-Nollywood” (Shaka and Ibe 2016; Sesan 2017).
450 Shaka and Ibe (2016: 134) count Yoruba director Tunde Kelani among the directors of New Nollywood, using his example to show that the newer films still call upon cultural roots despite their global aspirations. Nevertheless, Kelani more often describes himself as “the other Nollywood” and has been operating more or less independently of mainstream Nollywood for much longer than the New Nollywood movement described here (Haynes 2014: 57).
common in Old Nollywood. In October 1, for instance, the investigators pin a string of murders and sexual assaults on a Yorùbá prince named Adérópò, but evidence also reveals that the prince was sexually molested by a British priest (Onikoyi 2016: 235). Was the prince simply a bad person, or are his crimes the fault of the colonial regime? The film provides no answers, only ambiguity (Sesan 2017: 419).

Likewise, the film’s relationship to àṣà ìbílè is different from both that of Old Nollywood’s occult video films, and from the Nàgó–Yorùbá video films that CAPADI specializes in. The fact that Adérópò is a Yorùbá prince is just part of his background. The Yorùbá villages that appear in the film are not relics of an evil past (Adejunmobi 2015: 39–40, 42), nor are they moral guideposts. Instead, Yorùbá identity and tradition are part of modernity, but they are little more than background scenery. Movies like this break with Old Nollywood by downplaying the idea that occult forces and religion are tools to grapple with the unfathomable neoliberalism that Jean and John L. Comaroff (2000) call “millennial capitalism.” Instead, October 1 and New Nollywood movies set in contemporary times feature characters who have achieved status and wealth that otherwise go unmarked and unquestioned. The movies then focus on these characters taking their lives into their own hands, doing what is best for them with no moral judgment implied (Adejunmobi 2015: 35–36; Ryan 2015: 57; cf. Ferguson 2006). These are

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451 Other New Nollywood films use villages and traditional culture as symbols of an idyllic past (Ryan 2015: 71).
films about people with a global outlook centered on consumerism without the Pentecostal trappings. The local is only a location in space, not a force opposed to metropolitanism (Ryan 2015: 68–69).

Figure 45: Lálá takes over the camera to shoot a closeup of a gun-wielding Jacob in the final scene of Kemi.

Jacob’s video film Kemi: La fatalité entre responsabilité et destin [Kémi: The inevitability between responsibility and destiny] (2017) is a period piece much like October 1. Yet the movie doesn’t quite make the full leap to Afolayan levels of ambiguity. Instead, embedded in the video film’s tragic story is the idea that culture is not “an excuse.” Forced to marry a man she doesn’t love, the female protagonist (played by

452 Of course, the emphasis on global connections and everyday opulence has been present in Nollywood video films for years, albeit often with a moralistic slant (Haynes 2014: 56).

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Augustine Bessan) dies along with everyone she loves in a violent clash on a back road. The video film blames the turn of events on the elder generation’s refusal to heed the words of Ifá, but the video film implicitly criticizes the decision by Kémi’s parents to marry her off to a polygamist she doesn’t love (played by Abiodoun Romain Oyede in his final role; fig. 45). The message is thus akin to the one in Ìkòkò Atura (2016; dir. Gérard Koukphounsi): that àṣà ́ibíle can change to meet the needs of the here and now. But unlike that video film, Kemi also attempts to break with audiovisual standards that I have argued are a key way in which video films support indigenous religious ideals.

An in December 2017, Jacob’s strategy bore fruit. At the first edition of the Ciné 229 Awards, Kemi was nominated in four categories: Best Actress in a Short Subject, Fiction (Augustine Bessan), Best Actor in a Short Subject, Fiction (Frédéric Ogoudina), Best Editing of a Short Subject, Fiction (Jacob Abiodoun), and Best Short Subject, Fiction.453 Kemi fell short, losing to other films in these four categories. Yet Jacob read the nominations as a sign of things to come. “We couldn’t [get] the first prize of the best of the best, I [guess] due to the quality of our sound,” He told me. Yet, “We have learned a

453 In French, these awards are Interprétation Féminine Court-Métrage Fiction, Interprétation Masculine Court-Métrage Fiction, and Meilleur Montage Court-Métrage Fiction. Jacob Abiodoun reports that Kemi was one of four nominees for Best Short Subject, Fiction; however, this category is not listed on the Ciné 229 Awards website. Nevertheless, the website notes that there were sixteen categories, but only fifteen winners are revealed on the website (Ciné 229. “Nos stars 2017: Les palmarès.” [Our 2017 stars: The winners]. 2017. http://cine229.org. The awards were the brainchild of a graduate of ISMA, the private filmmaking school founded in 2006 in Cotonou, with funding provided by ISMA and French satellite television station Canal+. 358
Jacob’s move toward festival films, like its New Nollywood inspiration, is a gamble. As for-profit ventures, these movies have no access to European grants or NGO support. But international film festivals offer a potential avenue for a video filmmaker like Jacob to garner artistic recognition. And winning one might even bring opportunities to exhibit the video film for new audiences in Bénin or even abroad. Better still, a win could draw the attention of an international company willing to pay for distribution rights. How this international attention will interface with a localized production public is another question.

The health of that production public matters. As I’ve argued in this dissertation, the openness and smallness of Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmaking in Bénin is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. The intimacy this public affords—among producers, between creators and audiences, between media-makers and patrons—offers a case study for how a minority expressive culture can keep itself and its convictions

454 Jacob Abiodoun, personal communication, 19 December 2017.
455 Corporate sponsors, such as telecoms companies MTN and Globacom, have sponsored some New Nollywood films (Haynes 2014: 58), a necessity for a movement whose films in 2015 ranged in budget from 20 to 150 million naira (US $100,000 to $750,000) (Bisschoff 2015; Ryan 2015: 66), but sponsors can back out at the last minute, and cinemas are still rare in Nigeria (Haynes 2014: 59; Adejunmobi 2015: 44). Haynes (2014: 70–71) does express hope that the New Nollywood model may be more sustainable in the long run once Nigeria has more cinemas and faster broadband Internet access.
relevant in a saturated media landscape. The spread of moviemaking technologies may have democratized the ability for minority cultures to represent themselves and to tell stories that they care about, but disparities in access to technology and funding remain. This unevenness leads to precarity not only for video film producers as workers, but for the frames they work to construct within a glutted media market. My argument has focused on Nàgò–Yorùbá video filmmakers of Bénin, whom historical and geographical coincidence has placed at the intersection of media forms antagonistic to their way of seeing and living in the world, which they base on àṣà ibern, or “indigenous culture.” These video filmmakers reckon that reaching beyond the local level offers the potential for better financial returns and bigger budgets, grants them more exposure and, perhaps most importantly of all, can lead to the recognition that Bénin’s Nàgò–Yorùbá have something special and unique to them—thei àṣà ibern—that only they are qualified to package in audiovisual form for sale to people who can benefit from it. Their particular struggle is nuanced and complicated by their proximity to Nigeria and its Nollywood film industry, their relationship to the Béninois state and its emphasis on “Vodun” religion as tourist attraction, and their desire to get their video films into circulation alongside art films at festivals around the world. Their situation is especially precarious as Nigerian media offer rival frames that promote other religious identities, and as the state’s frame appropriates Nàgò–Yorùbá aesthetics but erases Nàgò–Yorùbá identity.
Nevertheless, the struggle of Béninois Nàgó-Yorùbá video filmmakers is not a solitary one. Instead, my contention is that there is hope so long as minority expressive cultures struggle to keep themselves visible and audible within regional and global media conversations. Neoliberal capitalism has made it easier than ever for such groups to represent themselves to themselves and others. But it has also made it harder for them to compete for attention against rival media regimes (Beller 2006; Hoffman 2011). Experimenting with new aesthetic standards and storytelling strategies is one way these production publics struggle to get noticed. And as aesthetics change, they potentially usher in new understandings of how community should be understood, what the criteria are for inclusion, and how morality is tied into it. This is always an iterative process that requires discussions and debates by producers of all types and their audiences. The trick, then, is how to change the frame enough to get more attention without abandoning the elements that sustain the underlying ideas and morality. What Jacob’s turn to “international” standards may point to is a generational shift: away from a more theater-based model of actors–turned–video filmmakers who relish a direct interface with audiences, and toward a more expertise-based system that emphasizes technical prowess over social hailability in public. This move might also signal a shift away from the openness of video filmmaking—the spectacle of spectacle-making as community members look on—and toward a more secretive, closed-off model where technical skill wins accolades from peers but becomes an inscrutable fetish to the general
public (Meintjes 2003). Spectacle and secrecy continue their intricate dance, one empowering the other in different portions at different times.

My focus in this dissertation has been to explore how the Nàgó–Yorùbá video filmmakers of CAPADI sustain their production public despite the factors acting against them: lack of financial and material resources, intense competition from the products of other media cultures, religious and professional schisms, and other media cultures that directly challenge their output. My argument has been that these video filmmakers persist in their activities at great financial sacrifice because of their intense piety for àṣà ìbílé, their indigenous traditions that they see as threatened in this oversaturated media climate. The very act of video filmmaking creates a community of like-minded creators, what I call a production public, and offers social excitement to sustain the production—however barely. I have shown how these video filmmakers try to connect this local production public to potential patrons with more resources, whether the Béninois state, the art-film scene, or Nigerian Yorùbá ethnic associations. I have also paid attention to how the aesthetic and narrative choices of these filmmakers and their publics help to promote an auroscopic regime to validate àṣà ìbílé and indigenous religion, to preserve Christian–Muslim ecumenism and avoid schisms, and to turns filmmakers into familiar faces with the prerogative to act as moral authorities in the community. In sum, my
focus in this dissertation has been to show how the production public constructs itself—
for itself—and presents that image to larger neighbors with greater financial resources.
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Biography

Brian C. Smithson was born on 14 September 1978 in Bossier City, Louisiana. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts from Louisiana State University in Shreveport in 2000. Brian worked as a graphic designer before joining the U.S. Peace Corps in Cameroon and then the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme. In 2011, he earned a Master of Arts in African Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles, writing his thesis on the politics of visual culture in Cameroon (Smithson 2011). Brian then earned a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Duke University in 2018. Brian’s grants for fieldwork and dissertation writing include the Fulbright U.S. Student Grant from the Institute of International Education, the International Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, the Dissertation Fieldwork Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation, the Charlotte W. Newcombe Dissertation Fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and the Weatherhead Resident Scholarship Fellowship from the School for Advanced Research. His preliminary fieldwork was supported by the Summer Research Fellowship and the Dissertation Research Travel Award from the Duke Graduate School. To fund Yorùbá language study, Brian received the Fulbright-Hays Fellowship to attend Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, and the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship to attend the African Flagship Languages Initiative at the University of
Florida. His graduate study was supported by the University Scholars Fellowship and James B. Duke Fellowship at Duke University, and the Graduate Opportunity Fellowship at UCLA. In 2017, the Association for Africanist Anthropology awarded an essay he wrote with the Bennetta Jules-Rosette Graduate Essay Award. Brian’s publications have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *African Studies Quarterly*, and *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*. 