

Warriors and Colonizers: Colonial Allegories and Resistance in Nollywood's *Jagun Jagun*

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Abstract

This study critically examines (post)colonial ideologies within the Nollywood epic *Jagun Jagun* (2023), directed by Adebayo Tijani and Tope Adebayo and produced by Femi Adebayo. Through a colonial reading, the film gives form to a narrative that critiques systems of power, exposes the enduring legacies of colonialism, and accentuates the urgency of African self-determination and youth empowerment. Set against the historical canvas of colonial exploitation and its lingering socio-political impacts, *Jagun Jagun* knits together a narration of war, love, and betrayal; this study positions the film as presenting a colonial narrative rooted in an African Indigenous framework, explored through its key characters. By situating *Jagun Jagun* within the evolving landscape of African cinema, this research highlights Nollywood's role as a medium for confronting historical injustices, promoting cultural resilience, and inspiring African youth to reclaim agency in the face of (post)colonial challenges. It presents the potential of African cinema as a space for artistic expression and as a platform for socio-political critique and the collective reimagining of the continent's future.

Keywords: *Jagun Jagun*, African cinema, Nollywood, colonial and postcolonial ideologies, youth empowerment

DOI: 10.53228/d8ngnt69



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About the author

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Acknowledgements

This article owes its very conception to a conversation with Dr. Valerie Kaussen, who graciously welcomed my suggestion to include *Jagun Jagun* in her 2023 film seminar on the French New Wave. I am grateful for her openness in expanding the course's scope to accommodate a Nigerian film, and for the thoughtful engagement of my colleagues during its classroom screening, whose insights helped shape, encourage, and strengthen this project. I also extend my sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which have been invaluable in strengthening the critical edge of this article, and to the editors for their generous support and kind communication throughout the revision and copyediting process to nurture this work to its fullest potential. *Eṣé gan ni!*

Introduction: African cinema and postcoloniality

The 54 nations in Africa are a mosaic of diversity, resilience, and rich cultural traditions, with African cultural resources and traditions increasingly becoming highly sought after. From tangible assets like architectural heritage, cultural festivals, and safaris, to intangible treasures such as performances and the burgeoning film industry, Africa continues to captivate the world. Nollywood is positioned at the heart of cultural and economic exchanges across West Africa (Afolabi et al. 2022, 47). Through collaborations with other film industries, both established and emerging Nollywood stars have significantly elevated the standards of this dynamic creative sector. The rapidly evolving cultures of Nigeria and Africa have arguably been brought into sharper focus through the lens of the camera (Oklobia and Onwuliri 2020, 80).

Film culture operates as a form of soft power in international politics, enhancing cultural visibility and influence (Cooke 2016, 4). Paul Cooke highlights this dynamic through a case study of the BRICS nations – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – emphasizing China's growing influence in Hollywood. He argues that cinema serves as a crucial medium for projecting soft power and shaping the BRICS' global presence. This should also hold true for Nigeria, where video art is both widespread and socio-culturally and economically significant (Haynes 1995; Ogunleye 2004; Akahome and Wilson 2024). As Joseph S. Nye (1990) notes, soft power has “the ability to attract people to our side without coercion” (166). Many Nollywood films, for instance, aim to promote Nigerian culture, address cultural misunderstandings, document historical events, or critique political realities on the continent. This intersection of cultural diplomacy and soft power in Nollywood opens up new theoretical and ideological dimensions for analysing African cinema.

Unlike the Marxist-influenced oppositional stance of traditional Third Cinema – which emerged in Latin America in the 1960s and advocates for politically committed filmmaking that rejects colonial, capitalist, and elitist structures (Gabriel 1982) – pan-Africanism is primarily defined by its pro-African focus (McCall 2007). Scholars like Francois Pfaff (1984) and Nwachukwu N. Ukiadike (1994) argue that pan-Africanism carries both a political and an aesthetic mission, advocating for an independent Africa while simultaneously resisting (neo)colonial dominance. While pan-Africanist approaches often align with Third Cinema theories in positioning African cinema as a rejection of Western and neo-colonial ideologies, their primary focus is on fostering solidarity and a collective African consciousness (Akande 2021, 58). For instance, Ukiadike (1994) highlights the unifying impact of colonial identity, which homogenizes cultural and ethnic differences along colonial lines. This is evident in his observation that Britain's pragmatic policies in Anglophone Africa minimized direct postcolonial involvement while promoting British-made documentary films in its former colonies, whereas France's more interventionist approach in Francophone Africa encouraged the development of feature films and actively shaped the production, distribution, and exhibition of cinema in its West African colonies (109–110). Ukiadike uses these generalizations to categorize the diverse experiences of African nations based on their colonial affiliations.

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed pivotal global geopolitical shifts. These began with the revolutions across Eastern Europe in 1989 and culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991; they generated fresh anxieties around the notion of national homogeneity. Simultaneously, postmodernism's critique of grand theories and universalizing narratives created space for contesting dominant paradigms. As a diverse and multifaceted postcolonial cinema, Nollywood can

be meaningfully analysed through emerging frameworks of post-national cinemas. Its complexity allows it to be interpreted in various ways: at times postcolonial, Marxist, or pan-Africanist, and at other times pro-Western and capitalist.

The origins of Nollywood are far from straightforward, and its historiography lacks definitive consensus. Kenneth Nnebue, often credited with kickstarting Nollywood by financing *Living in Bondage* (1992), had already made notable investments in Yoruba-language films such as *Aje Ni Iya Mi* (1989), which proved to be commercially successful (Haynes and Okome 1998, 113). Beyond establishing a new model of production and distribution, scholars such as Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome (1998) have emphasized that the groundbreaking status of *Living in Bondage* also stemmed from Nnebue's innovative marketing strategies. By shrink-wrapping the videocassettes and packaging them with informative slipcases bearing images of the film's stars, he gave the project a professional look that distinguished it from earlier, more informally presented productions. Although Nigeria's celluloid film era, which preceded Nollywood, is typically viewed as distinct from it due to differences in format, some scholars challenge the notion that *Living in Bondage* marks the true beginning of Nollywood. They argue that many of Nollywood's video film practices were inherited from the celluloid era, including a significant number of film practitioners who transitioned from celluloid filmmaking into the burgeoning video film industry (Barber 2000, 247; Oláyíwólá 2011, 189). Practitioners from the celluloid and television eras, such as Dayo Akinpelu (Alabi Yellow) and Lere Paimo (Eda Onile Ola), seamlessly transitioned into Nollywood filmmaking. Ade Love, a prominent celluloid filmmaker who directed *Ajani Ogun* (1976) and *Taxi Driver* (1983), was the father of Kunle Afolayan, who has significantly elevated Nollywood's global profile through acclaimed films like *The Figurine*

(2009), *October 1* (2014), *Mokalik* (2019), and *Aníkúlápó* (2022), work that is often celebrated for its distinctive neorealist aesthetic (Akande 2021, 204).

Alessandro Jedlowski (2012) refers to Nollywood as a descendant of celluloid filmmaking due to its technological and technical continuities (432). Meanwhile, scholars like Ukadike (1994) trace the roots of Nigerian cinema back to the Colonial Mobile Cinema, a system designed to bring instructional films to rural areas (106). Ukadike further examines how colonial filmmaking structures influenced Nigeria's postcolonial cinematic practices, from the early years of independence to the golden age of television programming in the 1980s and 1990s. While it would be inaccurate to describe the dominance of Hollywood, Bollywood, and Hong Kong Kung-Fu films in pre-Nollywood Nigeria as constituting fully integrated or formal national cinema regimes within Nigeria, their overwhelming presence on African screens significantly shaped audience preferences and cinematic practices (Ukadike 2000, 245). This historical context challenges the notion that Nollywood's origins can be pinpointed to a single moment in time. Although scholars like Olaniyi Akande (2021) have argued that Nollywood's origins can be traced to the 1992 film *Living in Bondage*, this view is primarily based on the informal distribution model introduced by Kenneth Nnebue. By capitalizing on the portability and accessibility of the video film format, this model became the foundation of Nollywood's practices and was pivotal in shaping it into a distinctive cinematic industry.

Building on this distinctiveness, Nollywood has often been celebrated as a modern African cinema that departs from the postcolonial narratives and aesthetics characteristic of Francophone African art films, such as those from Senegal in the 1970s and 1980s (Akudinobi 2015). Its capital-driven, informal industry is praised for redefining African cinema and embodying a more contemporary

identity (Haynes and Okome 1998). However, Akande (2021) cautions against viewing these distinctions as complete departures from the frameworks used by postcolonial theorists to analyse Francophone art cinemas. He argues that such categorizations exist in “tension with Postcolonial and Third Cinema persuasions” (61).

Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that the term “Nollywood” does not fully capture the diversity of Nigeria’s contemporary cinema. Although often used as a blanket term for all post-1992 Nigerian films (Adesokan 2006), it encompasses distinct ethnic and regional variations, including Igbo and Yoruba films (Haynes and Okome 1998) and Hausa-language productions under the label “Kannywood” (Larkin 2008). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in further differentiating Nigeria’s cinematic landscape to recognize the distinct contributions of minority ethnic groups. My use of the term “Nollywood” here is not intended to reduce Nigeria’s contemporary cinema to a single identity or even to three dominant cultural identities. Instead, it reflects the common usage of the term in Nigeria, while acknowledging its tendency to homogenize the country’s diverse filmmaking practices.

Drawing on Nollywood’s distinctive cinematic identity and what some scholars term the “New Nollywood”, characterized by its emphasis on “professionalization” to enhance its global reach (Ezepue 2020, 1; Haynes 2014, 53), the epic film *Jagun Jagun* delivers a compelling narrative that demands critical exploration. Directed by Tope Adebayo and Adebayo Tijani and produced by Femi Adebayo, *Jagun Jagun* follows the story of Ogundiji, a fearsome warlord whose dominance begins to falter with the arrival of Gbotija, a highly driven young warrior. Ogundiji, a conqueror infamous for his subjugation of kingdoms, faces a formidable challenge in Gbotija, whose resolve and growing influence threaten to dismantle the warlord’s reign. The film’s captivating storyline

and masterful execution have garnered widespread acclaim, with *Premium Times* lauding *Jagun Jagun* as a production that “raises the bar for Nigerian epic films” (Shola-Adido 2023). Beyond its cinematic appeal, *Jagun Jagun* has also found a place in academic discourses on postcolonial and neo-colonial ideologies.

Yemi Atanda (2023) notes that “*Jagun Jagun* is not merely a depiction of Nigeria’s political landscape but a broader critique of African leadership, where visionless, Machiavellian rulers hoard power to perpetuate postcolonial exploitation” (189). Despite criticisms of its blending of traditional and modern visual effects – an approach which I argue reflects the “professionalization” characteristic of the New Nollywood – and its perceived historical inaccuracies, Adebayo Tijani, one of the directors, clarified in a conversation with Atanda that the film is purely a work of fiction, and is not intended as historical documentation.

In her study *Depicting Neocolonialism in Screenplay*, Ihuoma Okorie (2024) examines *Jagun Jagun* through the lens of social prescribing. She argues that Ogundiji, under the guise of training young warriors, employs social prescribing as a tool of domination. While these men join Ogundiji’s School of Warriors with the hope of gaining competence, connection, and autonomy, Ogundiji systematically dashes their aspirations by using them as pawns to reinforce his own power. Okorie suggests that this strategy reflects a need for neo-decolonization, where African leadership must reject exploitative practices rooted in colonial legacies (376). Although Okorie’s analysis provides valuable insights, her focus is limited to social prescribing as a mechanism of dominance.

Thus, this study conducts a critical colonial reading of *Jagun Jagun*, arguing that the film presents a colonial narrative framed within an African Indigenous context. Through its depiction of its central characters, the film mirrors the dynamics of colonial rule,

offering a critique of subjugation and a call for resistance and self-determination. In this way, the film engages in a broader discourse on youth empowerment, illustrating how African youth, in the aftermath of colonialism, must reclaim their agency and challenge oppressive systems in the face of postcolonial realities. In the next section, I will provide a review of the historical context of colonialism to offer a foundational background that also serves as a critical framework for this study. This contextual grounding will pave the way for a more nuanced analysis of *Jagun Jagun* within its (post)colonial narrative.

Historical context: Colonialism

Colonialism refers to the establishment of colonies aimed at the “conquest and control of other people’s land and goods”, a project primarily carried out by European imperial powers across the Americas, Asia, and Africa (Loomba 2015, 20). Fundamentally, colonialism was driven by the pursuit of power and economic gain, regardless of claims that it aimed to civilize or develop the colonized communities. Historical records across the globe consistently support these primary motivations. Colonialism in Africa was a period defined by European powers’ exploitation and domination of African peoples and territories. It involved the systematic takeover of African lands, the establishment of colonies, and the extraction of resources for European benefit. Beginning in the late 19th century and lasting until the mid-20th century, this era subjected African societies to severe subjugation, including forced labour, segregation, land dispossession, and involuntary migration. The colonial experience profoundly disrupted African cultures, social structures, and economies, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence contemporary African societies.

From the onset of colonialism in Africa, colonizers propagated the notion of Western racial and cultural superiority over non-Western

societies. For example, Britain justified its presence on the West African coast by claiming it was tied to the promotion of Christianity and commerce. They further asserted that their mission was to bring civilization, progress, and enlightenment to the continent. However, numerous accounts highlight that these efforts primarily aimed to expedite the physical, cultural, and political domination of African nations, serving the colonizers’ interests while disregarding the needs and well-being of the Indigenous populations. The colonizers’ ideology effectively established a colonial culture within the societies they dominated, leading many colonized individuals to accept their perceived inferiority and the supposed superiority of their colonizers (Tyson 2006, 421). Ironically, numerous cultural and literary productions across the globe reinforced this ideology, further perpetuating these false narratives. However, these works often faced criticism for their lack of accuracy and objectivity, revealing the flaws and biases in their claims.

Colonialism’s impact on Africa has been widely examined by historians, including African scholars, and powerfully explored by artists and cultural producers who have documented its traumatic legacy through literature, music, and film. Writers like Chinua Achebe, in works such as *Things Fall Apart*, explore the cultural disintegration and psychological burden imposed by colonial rule. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o critiques colonialism’s impact on language and education in *Decolonising the Mind*, while Wole Soyinka’s plays interrogate the clash between African traditions and Western ideologies. In music, the controversial artist Fela Kuti condemns the lingering effects of colonial exploitation and postcolonial corruption through several of his Afrobeat anthems. Nollywood, as a cinematic force, continues this tradition, with films like *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *October 1* (2014), and *Tòkunbò* (2024), among several others, reflecting on the colonial and postcolonial experiences of Nigeria. These creative works

serve as both a critique of historical and present injustices and a platform for reclaiming African agency and identity.

For Nigeria, this legacy of colonialism remains central to understanding its socio-political challenges and the narratives that emerge in its cultural productions. As such, films like *Jagun Jagun* can be viewed as part of this ongoing discourse, offering a platform to critique systems of power, reflect on historical injustices, and envision pathways toward reclaiming African identity and agency. With this context in place, I will now turn to my analysis of *Jagun Jagun* and examine how it engages with this theme of colonialism, while lending a voice to the call for African self-determination and youth empowerment. The analysis in this study will focus on several central characters, examining how their actions and interactions symbolically depict colonial ideologies, structures, and resistance. These characters – Ogundiji, the Kings and Regents, Iroyinogunkitan/Agemo, Gbogunmi, and Gbotija – were chosen for their pivotal roles in shaping the narrative and for how their individual journeys reflect key themes of domination, complicity, resistance, and empowerment. Additionally, the study will briefly explore the role of women and their agency in the discourse, highlighting the contributions of characters such as Erinfunto (Ogundiji's wife) and Morounmubo (Gbogunmi's wife), whose actions subtly influence the broader struggle for power and resistance.

Colonial allegories in *Jagun Jagun*

Produced by Femi Adebayo and directed by Adebayo Tijani and Tope Adebayo, *Jagun Jagun* was distributed via Netflix and released for streaming on August 10, 2023. It presents a captivating tale of war, love, and betrayal. Ogundiji, portrayed by Femi Adebayo, serves as a ruthless enforcer for corrupt monarchs, leveraging his power to subjugate weaker kingdoms for political and material gain. During a

campaign, Ogundiji captures Iroyinogunkitan (Bukunmi Oluwasina), raising her as his “daughter” but later using her mystical abilities to bolster his authority. He also establishes a military academy, coercing weaker kingdoms to send their youth for training to defend against stronger foes.

Supported by royal patrons, Ogundiji's ambition spirals into tyranny; he silences dissent and punishes disobedience with brutal measures. This tyranny reaches a turning point when Gbogunmi (Ibrahim Yekini), his deputy commander, refuses a suicidal mission and pays the price. Similarly, Gbotija (Lateef Adedimeji), a bold trainee with a mystical connection to trees, challenges Ogundiji's authority. His defiance earns him deadly tests, yet he triumphs, uncovering Agemo's identity as his lover, Iroyinogunkitan. In a climactic showdown, Gbotija defeats Ogundiji, ending his reign of terror.

Ogundiji, the son of Ogunrogba, stands as a powerful and fearsome colonial warlord who embodies both physical might and potent mystical abilities. He is described as a hurricane of destruction, a ruthless warrior, and the ultimate weapon wielded by corrupt and power-hungry monarchs to conquer weaker kingdoms and expand their territories. In his second appearance after he is introduced as “a ferocious weapon for any type of battle”, he emerges as a saviour in a critical moment, stepping in to rescue King Kayeja of the Keto Kingdom from the clutches of the thief Jigan. The Kingdom was under siege, and the King's life was on the brink of an abrupt end when Jigan prepared to strike. However, Ogundiji intervenes at the last moment, severing Jigan's arm in a dramatic display of power, leaving the thief likely to bleed to death. Yet Ogundiji's intervention is quite ironic as he is a thief vanquishing another thief, a colonialist eliminating a rival to consolidate his dominance. His calculated act of heroism serves to position himself as a “better thief”, one who not only eliminates opposition but also strengthens his



Figure 1: An image depicting subjugation and colonial power; Ogundiji stands elevated atop their backs, drumming, as shirtless sweaty warriors (emasculated bodies) circle below in rhythmic submission.

grip over the vulnerable. This duality reflects the paradox of the colonial powers, who often justified their exploitative practices by presenting themselves as protectors and saviours (Balandier and Cunneen 1952, 13–14). Ogundiji's true nature, however, is exposed: he is an instrument of oppression and domination, aligned with the colonial systems that cloaked their greed and violence in the rhetoric of order and progress.

Central to Ogundiji's influence is his military academy, called "Ogundiji's School of Warriors", and ominously labeled as the "house of charms", "house of death", and "house of tribulations." This institution serves as a colonial apparatus, mirroring the way the colonial powers established institutions to indoctrinate and control Indigenous populations. As illustrated in Figure 1, in one striking scene, the warriors, who are shirtless and drenched in sweat, circle Ogundiji, who stands elevated at the centre, rhythmically drumming on the backs of other warriors. Captured through a rapid, shifting combination of shots – beginning with an overhead aerial view, then quickly moving to a medium shot, a close-up of Ogundiji drumming, and back to a wider frame of the circling warriors – the scene is

dimly lit, with sparse light cutting through the surrounding darkness to spotlight Ogundiji's dominating figure. While the use of low lighting and shadow accentuates the atmosphere of coercion and despair, this evocative imagery calls to mind forced labour and subjugation, positioning Ogundiji as a symbolic colonial architect. The visual symbolism also reinforces the systemic exploitation of the colonized, mirroring the historical practices of the colonial authorities, who manipulated Indigenous labour and resources to advance their imperial ambitions (Sadiq and Tsourapas 2023, 618).

In a conversation with Gbogunmi, Ogundiji remarks that some White men supplied him with weapons, subtly highlighting the role of European colonizers in introducing advanced military technology to escalate local conflicts and empower select African leaders to dominate others on their behalf.¹ This reflects the broader colonial strategy of "divide and rule", wherein colonial powers deliberately fostered internal divisions and armed

¹The images featured in this article are screenshots from the film *Jagun Jagun* (2023), directed by Adebayo Tijani and Tope Adebayo. Copyright is held by Netflix, Inc. These stills are used under the fair use doctrine for academic analysis, with no commercial intent.

selected groups to maintain indirect control (Christopher 1988; Morrock 1973). By deepening existing rivalries and destabilizing local alliances, the colonizers were able to entrench their authority and prolong their occupation. Thus, Ogundiji's acknowledgment of receiving advanced weaponry from White men positions him as a colonial figure who blends traditional and foreign methods of control to solidify his authority. A defining feature of Ogundiji's rule is his brutal enforcement of discipline, which reflects the oppressive tactics used by the colonial powers to suppress dissent and maintain control. For instance, when three of his warrior students disobey his order to join Modede's war, he punishes them by imprisoning them without food. Even after his wife, Efunfunto, pleads for mercy, Ogundiji remains unyielding. When a guard defies him by secretly feeding the prisoners, Ogundiji burns the man alive, demonstrating a terrifying level of authoritarianism. This act of extreme punishment mirrors the colonial violence enacted to subdue and reinforce the colonizer's absolute authority (Simatei 2005, 85; Price 2018).

Ogundiji's interactions with Gbotija further reveal his insecurities and obsession with maintaining power. Despite Gbotija saving his wife from assassins, Ogundiji remains dismissive, refusing to acknowledge Gbotija's bravery. Ogundiji's jealousy becomes particularly evident during a festival when Gbotija performs a feat that had only ever been accomplished by Ogundiji himself. This act threatens Ogundiji's carefully constructed image of unparalleled excellence and superiority, exposing his deep-seated insecurity. It mirrors the colonial anxiety of losing control to empowered Indigenous figures and the colonial propensity to resort to violence as a means of exerting control (Price 2018). Thus, Ogundiji devises three tests as a means to maintain control, hoping they will ultimately eliminate Gbotija. This calculated act of passive violence mirrors a colonial tactic for weakening resistance.

Under the guise of promoting Gbotija, Ogundiji designs these trials to eliminate him, pitting him against his newly found ally. The first test, a battle against Gbogunmi, fosters internal division, reminiscent of how the colonial powers often turned Indigenous groups against one another (Christopher 1988; Morrock 1973). The second test, surviving in a coffin without food or water, reflects the psychological and physical endurance demanded of colonized subjects under oppressive regimes. The third test, which requires Gbotija to lead a small group of warriors to annihilate the Alaje people during their Festival of Wealth, vividly illustrates the colonial tactic of using the colonized to advance their oppressors' agendas. This test, particularly sending Gbotija on a near-impossible mission with only three warriors during a culturally significant celebration, highlights Ogundiji's blatant disregard for tradition and his prioritization of domination over communal values. It draws a clear parallel to colonial practices, where African traditions and values were dismissed as inferior and primitive, while the colonial powers consistently prioritized external interests over local development and unity (Parashar and Schulz 2021).

Gbogunmi, Ogundiji's deputy commander, occupies a complex position that reveals the dynamics of loyalty, complicity, and internal conflict within colonial systems. His character serves as an allegorical representation of local elites, militaries, or intermediaries who, under colonial rule, were caught between serving the interests of their colonial masters and preserving their values and connections. Gbogunmi, acting under Ogundiji's orders, is tasked with waging war against the village of Elesun, his mother-in-law's homeland. However, his sister and wife persuade him to reconsider, placing him in a paradoxical situation: to either conform to the will of the colonial master or honour the bonds of kinship and familial loyalty. Ultimately, Gbogunmi chooses to withdraw, driven by the deep

respect he holds for his sister. This decision, however, directly challenges Ogundiji's authority, an act of defiance that will come with grave consequences.

Upon learning of Gbogunmi's refusal to carry out the assigned task, Ogundiji's fury erupts in a tirade that captures the hierarchical nature of their relationship:

We are not mates! We are not on the same level!

We've never been in the same calibre. A dog can only wag its tail to its friend.

When did you become this? How dare you?

I am singing a warrior's song, and you're backing it up like a coward.

I gave you a task and you failed to carry it out.

You embarrassed me in the presence of the people that love me.

You turned yourself to a friend and a foe. One leg in, and one leg out.²

Ogundiji's reaction exposes the underlying dynamics of colonial oppression, where the colonized are reduced to mere tools in the service of their oppressors. Despite any superficial gestures of camaraderie, the power imbalance remains stark; although the colonized are drawn into systems of power, they are never regarded as equals but are kept firmly in a subordinate position, with their loyalty and submission expected to be absolute. Moreover, the confrontation showcases the personal and moral dilemmas faced by those like Gbogunmi

who are coerced into serving oppressive regimes.

Amidst the growing tension and with a furious Ogundiji determined to "deal with Gbogunmi", Gbogunmi begins to admire Gbotija, particularly after learning that Gbotija was the one who saved Ogundiji's wife from spirit assassins. His promise to provide Gbotija with charms reflects a subtle act of empowerment: a willingness to support a rising figure who might one day challenge the oppressive system. However, this admiration places Gbogunmi in a precarious position, torn between his allegiance to Ogundiji and his growing sympathy for Gbotija.

The tension escalates when Gbogunmi uncovers Ogundiji's true intentions for Gbotija. In a private conversation with his wife, Morounmubo, he confides that Ogundiji has set a death trap for Gbotija by assigning him perilous tests:

Gbogunmi: Ogundiji doesn't make suggestions. He only gives orders... Ogundiji is just not happy that Gbotija is celebrated by everyone.

Morounmubo: Despite all you said the boy has done for him. He still instructed you to kill him.

While this conversation presents the arbitrary and ruthless nature of Ogundiji's rule, it also reflects the forceful nature of colonial systems that exploited individuals as tools to sustain their oppressive regimes while simultaneously disregarding their loyalty or humanity. Gbogunmi's internal conflict in this moment draws attention to the profound moral and ethical dilemmas faced by those coerced into serving colonial systems, as they navigate the fraught terrain between their imposed loyalties and a burgeoning sense of responsibility to their community and shared humanity.

This moral conflict reaches its tragic climax in the confrontation between Gbogunmi

² The quoted lines are originally spoken in Yoruba. The English versions used here are drawn from the official subtitles provided in the film.

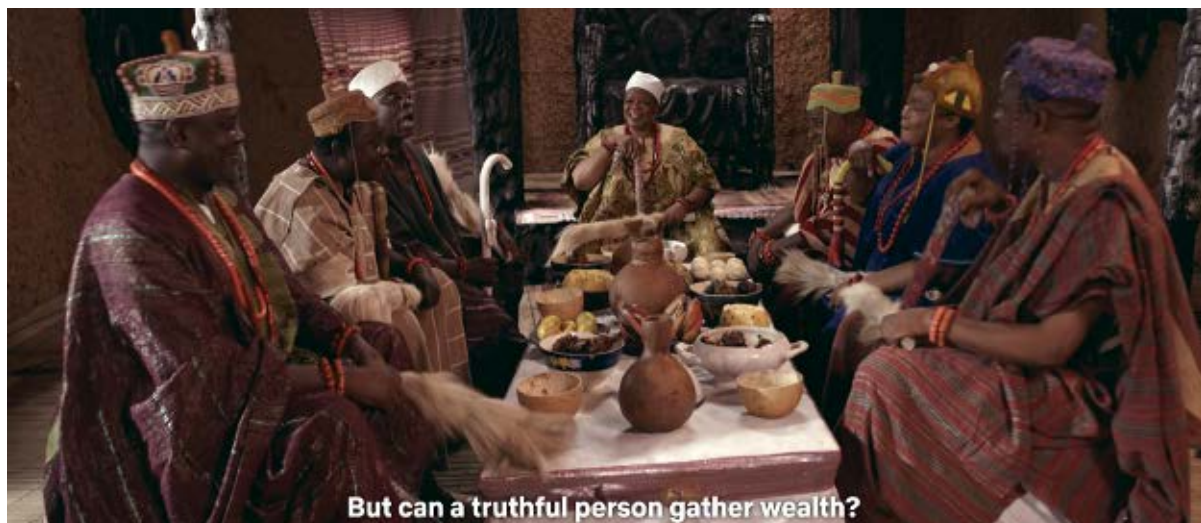


Figure 2: An image portraying self-serving indulgence. The Kings and Regents sit feasting and laughing, epitomizing the greed and complicity of African elites in systems of oppression.

and Gbotija. Gbotija, who regards Gbogunmi as a father figure, is forced to face him on the battleground, a poignant and devastating moment that encapsulates the insidious effects of colonial manipulation. Trapped between his loyalty to Ogundiji and his growing bond with Gbotija, Gbogunmi ultimately falls at the hands of the very person he admires. This act illustrates how colonial systems deliberately pit the colonized against one another, fostering division to prevent unity and resistance. As Frantz Fanon (1963, 11) aptly notes, the colonial system thrives by dividing the colonized into factions, setting brother against brother, and sowing seeds of mistrust and hostility.

The Kings and Regents in *Jagun Jagun* symbolize the role of local elites in sustaining colonial power structures. Like African chiefs and rulers during colonial rule, these monarchs are portrayed as complicit agents, whose political scheming and self-serving agendas reinforce Ogundiji's dominance while enabling the oppression of their own people. Figure 2 captures a scene in which the Kings and Regents, adorned in elaborate regalia, sit around a lavish banquet table, feasting and laughing, an image that encapsulates their indulgence and detachment from the struggles of those they are meant to serve. The camera's framing of

their exaggerated display of wealth and camaraderie, set against the broader context of violence and oppression in the film, demonstrates their complicity in sustaining exploitative systems for personal gain. Furthermore, their dealings with Ogundiji, a figure emblematic of colonial authority and exploitation, driven by personal gain and political expediency, reflect the colonial strategy of "co-opting the native elite through assimilation or bribery", as observed by Morrock (1973, 129). This dynamic also aligns with Fanon's (1963) critique of the "native bourgeoisie", a class he describes as a "sham from beginning to end" that "has played a double game", simultaneously advancing colonial interests and betraying the aspirations of their own people (10). In one particular scene, the King of Modede Kingdom is embroiled in a feud with his younger brother, who claims to have relinquished the kingship title to him, only to be repaid with betrayal when the King orders an attack on his farm.

While this conflict over farmland reflects the disunity that exists between African brothers (or nations), Oba Alayaki's decision to seek Ogundiji's intervention to resolve the familial dispute effectively surrenders his agency, allowing an external force to dictate the resolution of internal matters. This mirrors the

colonial strategy of exploiting divisions within local communities to consolidate external dominance (Christopher 1988). This disunity, however, speaks to a broader issue that persists in postcolonial Africa, where the ideal of African unity often remains more rhetorical than realized. Many African nations continue to grapple with internal conflicts and regional rivalries, leaving them reliant on external powers – the very colonial forces that once subjugated them – for political, economic, and infrastructural support. This ongoing dependency perpetuates a neocolonial dynamic, where true self-determination remains elusive, and the promise of collective strength and solidarity among African nations remains a distant aspiration.

Iroyinogunkitan, sometimes referred to as Kitan and also known as Agemo in her masked and deadly form, is a multifaceted character who embodies both enforcer and victim within colonial power dynamics. As Ogundiji's most formidable weapon, she exemplifies how colonial systems co-opt and manipulate the colonized, transforming them into instruments of oppression, stripping them of their autonomy and agency, and repurposing them to serve an oppressive agenda. The weight of her role is finely voiced through the narrator when she emerges on the battlefield, summoned by Ogundiji in desperation as his student warriors falter:

Agemo! When the finest students of
the warlord fail in battle,

When the war becomes
unconquerable,

Ogundiji calls on the Masked-
Demon assassin called Agemo.

Kitan's transformation into Ogundiji's instrument of terror begins with the destruction of Oniyo village. Ogundiji plunders the village, massacres her family, and spares only

her, raising her under the guise of being his "adopted daughter". In reality, he methodically erodes her humanity, reshaping her into a deadly weapon for his oppressive schemes. Her tragic journey reaches its climax when, as Agemo, she is sent to kill Gbotija after he completes his final arduous test. In their confrontation, she is fatally wounded, and when Gbotija unmask her, he discovers to his devastation that Agemo is Kitan.

In her final moments, Kitan delivers a haunting confession: "My times with Ogundiji opened my eyes to the harsh reality, that people exploit innocent children who aren't theirs for their evil schemes... Ogundiji turned me into a whip for the innocent." Kitan's statement and her experience of Ogundiji's incessant plundering of villages, which is the story of many, poignantly captures the dehumanizing process of colonial exploitation, where the colonized, represented as "innocent children", are systematically stripped of their agency. Aimé Césaire, in his seminal *Discourse on Colonialism*, describes this process as "thingification", where:

societies [are] drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out... thousands of men sacrificed... millions of men... tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkies. (1950, 42–43)

Yet Kitan also embodies the paradox of the colonized, who internalize and perpetuate the very structures of their oppression. In fact, her transformation reflects the Yoruba proverb, *Bí ewé bá pẹ́ lára ọṣẹ, á d'ọṣẹ*; this literally means "if a leaf stays long enough on a block of soap, it becomes soap", but figuratively it implies that prolonged exposure to certain influences or environments can lead to assimilation. In this case, Kitan embodies the colonialists by

adopting their values, behaviours, and ideologies. One instance of Kitan's participation in this colonial framework occurs when Gbotija speaks out against the inadequate food rations provided to the warriors. As the one overseeing their feeding, Kitan is enraged by his defiance and orders him to be flogged for questioning her authority. In this moment, she enforces Ogundiji's oppressive rules, further entrenching the colonial dynamic of submission and control.

It is also pertinent to recognize the role of women in *Jagun Jagun* and how they operate as agents of both resistance and complicity. As previously mentioned, the female Regents, in collaboration with the Kings, align themselves with Ogundiji, reinforcing the structures of oppression. Similarly, Iroyinogunkitan/Agemo embodies the dual role of colonizer and victim. Additionally, characters like Morounmubo (Gbogunmi's wife) and Erinfunto (Ogundiji's wife) offer a nuanced exploration of women's agency, revealing their ability to both sustain and resist colonial frameworks.

In one scene, following Gbogunmi's death, the Kings and Regents express disappointment in his charms and satisfaction with his demise, citing his refusal to carry out Ogundiji's orders. During this discussion, Morounmubo, a daughter of one of the Kings and the widow of Gbogunmi, boldly confronts the complicit rulers, delivering a scathing critique: "So you all part of the wicked people of this world. So you are the evil ones behind the mask." Her words pierce through their facade of authority, exposing the moral rot at the core of their leadership. Morounmubo's fearless confrontation underscores the transformative power of women's voices in challenging systemic corruption. From the Aba Women's Riot and the Anlu Rebellion to influential figures like Miriam Makeba and Funmilayo Kuti, scholars have extensively documented the resistance of African women against oppressive colonial systems (Tamale 1996; Fafowora 2024; Simola 1999; Victor and Segun 2017;

Bouka 2020). The Aba Women's Riot of 1929 and the Anlu Rebellion of 1958 were pivotal moments in which African women directly challenged colonial exploitation and political injustice. Likewise, Miriam Makeba, a globally celebrated South African singer and activist, and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a pioneering Nigerian nationalist and feminist, became powerful symbols of anti-colonial resistance through their activism and leadership. Morounmubo's actions align with this legacy of defiance, positioning her as a symbol of resilience, even if her resistance proves short-lived.

Erinfunto, Ogundiji's wife, embodies a similar duality, oscillating between complicity and resistance. Her decision to remain barren, an act that empowers Ogundiji to ascend as a powerful warlord, demonstrates her pivotal role in his rise. Yet her invisibility within his public persona, especially in relation to active political engagements speaks to the broader condition of women under patriarchal and colonial regimes. However, Erinfunto's ultimate act of rebellion, stabbing Ogundiji with the very dagger used by Agemo, marks a decisive shift. In that moment, she transitions from a complicit partner to an agent of justice and resistance. Notably, without Erinfunto's intervention, Ogundiji would probably have overpowered Gbotija and other opponents and continued his reign of terror. While her decisive action underlines the latent power African women hold, even within systems designed to suppress them, it also highlights the critical role women play in dismantling oppressive structures, both in fiction and in historical realities.

Gbotija, the son of Lagbayi, emerges as a defiant figure whose journey encapsulates themes of colonial resistance, subjugation, and eventual emancipation. His unique ability to communicate with forest trees, symbolizing a deep connection to nature and ancestral heritage, reflects his rootedness in Indigenous identity and knowledge. From the moment Gbotija arrives at Ogundiji's School of Warriors, he

demonstrates a rebellious spirit, challenging the oppressive structures designed to subdue him. Gbotija's defiance is vividly illustrated when insufficient food is rationed out to the warriors on the orders of Kitan. Refusing to accept the inadequate supplies, Gbotija boldly tells the maid to return the food, declaring it "insufficient and impossible." His defiance, interpreted as being "stubborn-hearted", leads to a brutal public flogging, during which he proclaims, "Maybe you should just kill me, because I won't keep quiet. I won't stop saying the truth. Fighting on [an] empty stomach, and wielding swords in poor health, is not what Oduduwa wants."

This moment reflects the spirit of anti-colonial resistance, as Gbotija embodies the refusal to be silenced by the oppressive forces around him. His defiance critiques the exploitative practices of colonial powers. His voice echoes the resistance movements of historical figures such as Thomas Sankara and Nelson Mandela, who emphasized the importance of speaking truth to power despite the personal cost. Sankara, in particular, championed a vision of a self-reliant, decolonized Africa driven by youth empowerment and collective action. However, the political instability and neocolonial entanglements that plague present-day Burkina Faso illustrate the enduring difficulty of realizing Sankara's emancipatory ideals. In this light, Gbotija's struggle, while honouring the legacy of resistance in African societies under oppressive regimes, also serves as a reminder of the continued need for vigilance and action in the face of evolving forms of domination. Gbotija's motivation to join Ogundiji's School of Warriors is rooted in a desire to avenge the annihilation of his village, Iwon. This mirrors the colonial reality, where many Indigenous people, in their quest for survival and justice, sought to master the very tools of oppression used against them (Burton 2020; Ghafar et al. 2024). However, his eventual realization that Ogundiji was responsible for the destruction of his village brings a

sharp clarity to his mission, transforming his personal quest for vengeance into a broader critique of colonial exploitation and betrayal.

The relationships Gbotija forms, particularly with Gbogunmi and Kitan, are worth interrogating as reflections of the psychological and emotional manipulations fostered by colonial systems. Gbotija refers to Gbogunmi, who was partly operating under the colonial framework, as "My father!", even after killing him in a duel orchestrated by Ogundiji to eliminate him. This moment, accentuated by flashbacks to Gbogunmi's earlier paternal gestures, highlights the deeply ingrained colonial tactic of fostering dependence and emotional attachment between the oppressor's enforcers and the oppressed. Gbogunmi's words, "I will be there for you like a father," reflect a romanticization of the colonial figure who, despite his role in perpetuating oppression, is humanized and even revered. It is pertinent to note that colonialism is not merely a physical endeavour but also a psychological condition deeply embedded in the social consciousness of both the colonizers and the colonized (Nandy 1983, 2; Wijesinghe 2020, 2). By relying on psychological manipulation (in this case through "bonds"), the colonial powers legitimized their operations and deepened the colonized's internalization of their subjugation.

Similarly, the relationship between Kitan and Gbotija complicates the narrative of resistance. Kitan, who initially orders Gbotija's flogging, later instructs that he be treated and pampered with fruits and food. This shift mirrors the colonial pattern of alternating brutality and benevolence, a tactic designed to confuse and pacify the colonized. This dynamic reflects what Ashis Nandy (1983) identifies as the "style of managing dissent" within the "culture of colonialism", where the colonized are controlled through a calculated system of "socioeconomic and psychological rewards and punishments" (3). The severity of this manipulation is meaningfully conveyed in Figure 3, which captures Gbotija immediately



Figure 3: Visual representation of enduring colonial trauma, with the scars on Gbotija's back symbolizing the physical and psychological toll of oppression.

after his punishment. His back, raw and bloodied from the lashes ordered by Kitan, becomes a stark visual marker of both physical pain and psychological trauma, further evincing the reduction of the colonized body to a site of punishment, control, and coerced endurance. The pastoral landscape, which is calm, sunlit, and deceptively serene, stands in jarring contrast to Gbotija's brutalized figure, slumped against a tree. Behind him is Kitan, who stands upright and composed, gazing at him with a detached confidence that suggests he should simply move on. This visual tension reinforces the discord between the colonizer's performative benevolence and the underlying reality of domination. Although Kitan later shows gestures of care, such acts are ultimately hollow against the enduring evidence of violence. The scars etched into Gbotija's body serve as a lasting reminder of the exploitative foundations of their relationship, symbolizing the long-term psychological and material consequences of colonial rule.

Additionally, Gbotija's acceptance of her care, despite his awareness of the harm she has inflicted, underscores the enduring psychological impact of colonial mentality, where the colonized, even in resistance, grapple with

internalized subjugation (Utsey et al. 2015, 198). As Ronald J. Horvath (1972, 45) aptly noted, the body of literature on colonialism would be boundless, and rightly so, as colonialism has been one of humanity's most enduring and significant preoccupations. What *Jagun Jagun* has done is to contribute to this ongoing discourse of colonialism, an unforgettable historical event that lasted almost a century and is still manifested in contemporary forms under the harsh suns of independence.

Conclusion

This study has explored *Jagun Jagun* as a potent cinematic allegory of colonial power structures, illustrating the dynamics of oppression, resistance, and self-determination. By dissecting the characters of Ogundiji, the Kings and Regents, Iroyinogunkitan/Agemo, Gbogunmi, Gbotija, Erinfunto, and Morounmubo, the study argues that the film exposes the complicit roles of local elites, the exploitation of the vulnerable, and the psychological and material impacts of colonialism on African states. While these characters reflect the tensions between submission and resistance and shed light on the devastating toll of colonial

domination and on aspirations for liberation, the enduring shadows of colonialism explored in *Jagun Jagun* are not confined to the past, as they continue to shape the sociopolitical realities of contemporary Africa.

In this context, *Jagun Jagun* emerges as a rallying call for African youth to reclaim their agency and step forward as leaders in dismantling the lingering shackles of all forms of colonial exploitation. This message resonates powerfully in the light of Africa's predominantly youthful population, with approximately 60% of its inhabitants under the age of 25 (Adebisi et al. 2024). Such a demographic advantage does present a transformative opportunity for the continent, as the energy, creativity, and resilience of its youth can be harnessed to drive socio-political and economic emancipation. *Jagun Jagun* not only reaffirms Nollywood's

capacity to interrogate societal structures and inspire change but reflects Africa's historical struggles while envisioning a future grounded in unity, agency, and resilience. The film also acknowledges that cinema can transcend mere entertainment, confronting external forces, mobilizing resistance, fostering solidarity, and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge and practices. Its compelling storytelling has earned widespread acclaim, which is reflected in its numerous nominations and awards: three at the 2024 Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA), six at the 2024 Best of Nollywood Awards (BON), and one for Best Indigenous Language Movie at the 10th Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Awards (AMVCA) (Ayodele 2024; Vanguard 2024; Adewoyin 2024). All of these accolades highlight the film's positive reception and its cultural significance.

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