

Lighting as an Aspect of Cinematography in Transforming African Oral Traditions to Modern Media and its Psychological Effects using *Kúnlé Afoláyan's Aníkúlápó*

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Abstract

Lighting is a significant component of cinematography, which influences viewers' visual, psychological and emotional experiences. With an emphasis on Kúnlé Afoláyan's 2022 film *Aníkúlápó*, this paper explores the crucial role that lighting plays in converting African oral traditions into contemporary cinematic storytelling. Lighting becomes a crucial visual language that transmits ideas, emotions, and cultural subtleties that were previously expressed through speech, gestures, and surroundings when oral storytelling moves from traditional forms to the medium of cinema. Lighting in *Aníkúlápó* invokes the spiritual and moral aspects of African oral storytelling in addition to illuminating sights. While artificial lighting heightens the dramatic tension and highlights crucial moments of love, treachery, and divine intervention, the deliberate use of natural light highlights the film's ties to Yoruba cosmology and traditional locations. A psychological effect is produced by the way light and shadow interacts, engrossing viewers in the story and bringing them closer to the ancient world. This research investigates the many ways in which different lighting strategies captivate viewers. Lighting not only supports the visual narrative but also strengthens cultural memory and identity by emphasizing cultural symbols and enhancing emotional depth. Additionally, the psychological impacts of lighting are examined, with a focus on how it might emotionally engage viewers and help them develop a stronger bond with the stories. Afoláyan illustrates through *Aníkúlápó* how lighting unites contemporary cinematic expression with traditional African narrative, converting oral traditions into visually striking and culturally relevant media.

Keywords

Cinematography, Lighting, African Oral Traditions, Modern Media, Cultural Memory, Film Aesthetics



I. Introduction

It becomes imperative to know that narration is one of the typical tools in preserving culture. African oral traditions have historically relied on the power of voice, gestures, and community interaction to convey narratives. In transforming these oral traditions into modern media, particularly film, visual elements such as lighting take on new importance. Lighting in film serves as a psychological cue, guiding the audience's attention, enhancing emotional experiences, and creating a sense of atmosphere that mirrors the immersive qualities of oral storytelling.

Hadjoui Ghouti (607) opines that:

To tell the untold –through the lens of an African- Orality, as a hallmark in African literature, does not just provide a literary mine to be exploited by writers, it is an attempt to save the culture from being swept away by the Western tide. In most parts of Africa the situation is so difficult because colonialism took an aggressive form towards the indigenous religion or culture.

It is understandable that the western culture has gained ground on the African soil. Oral tradition has always been one of the tools to revive and preserve African culture and not to make it go into oblivion. Hadjoui (607) explains better in this instance that oral tradition is an attempt to save the culture. In doing this, it could be discovered that the use of western culture has also helped in preserving the African culture in one way or the other with the use of western technologies, i.e media equipments in telling the story. However, this equipments, enhance more effects and meanings to the story told. Sampsa Huttunen (275) explains that:

The art of cinematography can be viewed as an intriguing interplay of numerous cognitive and affective perceptual variables that enable the viewer's meaningful engagement. One of these variables is light and the way the cinematographer chooses to light objects and spaces. The lighting of a film set or location must participate in cinematic storytelling by establishing time and place, creating mood, and guiding the audience's attention to relevant story elements. Together with all the other visual and auditory elements of the film, lighting creates an orchestrated cinematic experience by relying greatly on the viewer's unconscious or subliminal affective-cognitive meaning making processes

In film production, light is an essential aspect to creating meaningful effect that tell the story the way it should be told. The absence of light in any production can never make a story clear enough for reasonable understanding. Huttunen makes it clear that the presence of light makes a robust justification for period of the story and creation of mood.

II. Review of Literatures

In cinematography, lighting plays a crucial role in determining the visual story, tone, and audience members' psychological reactions. Lighting is a transforming element for bringing rich oral traditions to new media formats in African film, where storytelling frequently pulls from them. As seen in *Aníkúlápó*, directors such as Kúnlé Afọláyan uses lighting to connect ancient African storytelling with modern filmmaking methods by fusing visual aesthetics with cultural authenticity.

2.1 Lighting in Cinematography

Lighting is fundamental in defining the tone, atmosphere, and emotional resonance of a film. According to Brown (449)

Cinematographers do not need to know all the details of how each piece of lighting equipment works, but it is essential that they know the capabilities and possibilities of each unit, as well as the limitations. A great deal of time can be wasted by using a light or piece of grip equipment that is inappropriate for the job.

He explains that lighting in cinematography functions as both technical and artistic tool, creating depth, contrast, and focus while directing audience attention to key elements within a frame. High-key lighting is often associated with positive, vibrant moods, while

low-key lighting conveys mystery, tension, or drama. These lighting techniques help filmmakers visually interpret themes and emotions embedded in narratives, a crucial factor when transitioning oral traditions to a visual medium.

In African cinema, lighting often serves dual purposes: aesthetic and symbolic. The interplay of light and shadow can symbolize dualities central to African storytelling, such as good versus evil or life and death, themes that are prevalent in *Aníkúlápó*. Afoláyan's use of low-key lighting, for instance, enhances the mystical and suspenseful aura surrounding the protagonist's interaction with supernatural elements, aligning with the oral tradition's emphasis on metaphysical storytelling.

2.2 Transforming African Oral Traditions through Cinematography

To keep listeners interested, African oral traditions mostly rely on dramatic emotion, metaphor, and vivid imagery. Lighting and other aspects of cinematography play a crucial role in transforming these story components into powerful visual experiences when they are turned into a movie. Haynes (7-8) explains that:

The audience for the first film shown with a video projector, *Èkùn*, rioted, but finally everyone had to settle for what they could have. In spite of the volatile behavior of spectators gathered in theatres, many observers have noticed that Nigerian audiences care about the story a film is telling above all else—if they are happy with that, they will ignore all kinds of technical and other deficiencies.

The story in a film is of relevance to the Nigerian audience, yet it can be effectively portrayed using all of the cinematic components. He contends that in order to create updated yet culturally relevant stories, Nigerian filmmakers frequently use cinematic techniques to recreate oral traditions. Africans enjoy hearing a good story. In these adaptations, lighting highlights the stories' symbolic elements while also ensuring visual consistency. For example, the interplay between natural light and artificial illumination in *Aníkúlápó* mirrors the tension between tradition and modernity, a recurring theme in African oral narratives.

2.3 Psychological Effects of Lighting in Film

Lighting significantly influences the psychological impact of film on audiences. According to Katz (30), he explains that:

... color, lighting and style are more important than a technically exact physical description. For this reason, a dramatic presentation is best, and finished conceptual is are usually executed in a traditional illustration medium like gouache, tempera, oils, water color, colored inks, acrylics or mixed media.

Through the manipulation of brightness, contrast, and color temperature, lighting methods may elicit particular emotional reactions, such as anxiety, joy, or nostalgia.



Image 1



Image 2

Through the images above, one could observe the beauty of the lighting effect, which tells more of the story being told. Image 1 represents the view of a forest at midnight showing the reflection of a moon, while image 2 depicts the view of a palace at night with guards showing the reflection of natural olden days touch lights.

Katz (150) further explain that “the cinematographer's major responsibilities are lighting, exposing the film and executing the framing and camera movement determined by the production designer, the director and the cinematographer himself”.

Furthermore, Brown (99) also opines that:

In visual storytelling, few elements are as effective and as powerful as light and color. They have the ability to reach viewers at a purely emotion gut level. This gives them the added advantage of being able to affect the audience on one level, while their conscious brain is interpreting the story at an entirely different plane of consciousness.

The images above serve as a testament to Brow’s submission stating that light is an aspect of cinematography that is every effective and powerful in story narration. In *Aníkúlápó*, Afoláyan employs warm tones to evoke the vibrancy of Yoruba culture while using dim, shadowy lighting in supernatural scenes to heighten suspense and mystery. These techniques draw viewers into the story's emotional landscape, mirroring the psychological engagement traditionally achieved through oral storytelling.

Filmmakers can elicit empathy, anxiety, or fascination by intentionally placing lighting to accentuate face expressions or disguise specific characteristics. In *Aníkúlápó*, lighting shifts often coincide with the protagonist’s moral and emotional transformations, subtly guiding the audience’s psychological alignment with the narrative.

2.4 Challenges and Innovations in African Cinematic Lighting

According to Abiodun Olayiwola (191)

Video production evolved through the creative ingenuity of popular culture and entertainment in the urban Yoruba environment in response to the wholesome gap created by a crippling economic condition that engulfed Nigeria, and eventually the entire arts community, making motion-picture film production a tall dream

African filmmakers face unique challenges in achieving high-quality lighting due to limited resources and infrastructural constraints. Yet, directors like Kúnlé Afoláyan have demonstrated remarkable innovation, blending traditional aesthetics with contemporary cinematic techniques. Ekwuazi (1991) highlights how lighting in African films often reflects the region’s natural environment, using available light creatively to achieve authenticity.

Afoláyan's use of earthy tones and natural light in *Aníkúlápó* not only underscores the film's connection to Yoruba cultural heritage but also ensures a visually immersive experience for audiences.

2.5 Plot Summary of Kúnlé Afoláyan's *Aníkúlápó* (2022)

Aníkúlápó by Kúnlé Afoláyan is a story of love, ambition, treachery, and magical resurrection that takes place in the pre-colonial Yoruba Empire. The narrative centres on Saró (Kúnlé Rẹmí), an independent textile weaver whose path is characterized by the intricate relationship between power, desire, and the paranormal.

Saró comes to Òyó Kingdom in search of a new beginning and professional success, but his life turns upside down when he falls in love with Aróláké (played by Bimbo Ademoye), the youngest wife of the Aláàfin (the king of Òyó), and their extramarital affair challenges the rigid social and moral norms of the time. Disillusioned by her controlling marriage, Aróláké sees in Saró an opportunity for freedom, while Saró sees her as a means to riches and prestige.

After their romance is uncovered, Saró receives a death by beating sentence. He meets the legendary bird Àkàlà, who has the ability to choose between life and death, after being left for dead. Through her determination of rescuing him, Aróláké steps in, and they take control of the bird's mystical gourd, which has the ability to bring the dead back to life.

With the gourd in hand, the couple leaves Òyó and relocates to another town. Saró gains fortune and reputation from his power to resurrect the dead, but treachery results from his rising ambition and moral decline. He leaves Aróláké in search of new companions and power. His arrogance ultimately proves to be his undoing as Aróláké seeks retribution and forces him to deal with the fallout from his decisions.

The film looks at power, treachery, love, and the results of ambition. Through its language, clothes, music, and locales, it also showcases the Yoruba people's rich cultural past. *Aníkúlápó* is a celebration of Yoruba mythology and heritage as well as a warning story.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Kúnlé Afoláyan's Role in Transforming Oral Tradition into Modern Media

Kúnlé Afoláyan like other film producers has distinguished himself in the area recreating oral traditions into the modern cinematic. His film *Aníkúlápó* which was inspired by Ifáyẹmí Èlẹbúibọn in narrating the Yoruba cosmology serves as a compelling example of his efforts to translate Nigeria's rich oral traditions into modern media, allowing the preservation and transformation of these stories for contemporary audiences. Through *Anikulapo*, Afoláyan crafts a narrative inspired by Yoruba folklore, drawing on themes of love, betrayal, resurrection, and fate elements central to many African oral traditions. In the film *Anikulapo*, he uses the story of Àkàlà bird to explain the mystery behind life and death in the Yoruba cosmology.

The video employs visual storytelling to illustrate components of Yoruba cultural history, including language, costume, and settings that depict Nigeria's ancient landscapes and architecture. By centring the story in a traditional Yoruba setting, *Aníkúlápó* serves as a route for oral stories that have long been passed down verbally, transforming these narratives into a visual format that is accessible internationally. The film's character development and moral teachings mimic the cautionary stories of oral tradition, capturing the spirit of Yoruba mythology while offering a storyline that connects with global themes.

Afoláyan's approach in *Aníkúlápó* modernizes the depiction of Yoruba culture by using cutting-edge cinematography, costume design, and production methods. These selections not only conserve traditional components, but also recast them in the vocabulary of contemporary film. The digital format enables larger distribution, connecting the past and present, as well as local and worldwide audiences. Afoláyan uses *Aníkúlápó* to not only turn oral tradition into modern media, but also to give these rich cultural traditions fresh vitality and importance in a more globalized society.

Aníkúlápó offers a rich example of how African oral traditions, particularly Yoruba myth and folklore, are reimagined through modern cinematic techniques. The film's use of lighting plays a critical role in shaping the psychological experience of the audience, evoking the mystical and moral dimensions of the narrative.

3.2 Lighting as a Tool for Cultural Representation

Lighting in film is not only a technical aspect of production but also a critical tool for cultural representation. In *Aníkúlápó*, Afoláyan uses lighting to capture the essence of Yoruba cosmology, particularly the mystical and spiritual elements that are central to the film's narrative.

a. Representation of the Supernatural

The supernatural is frequently included into African oral traditions, with gods, spirits, and mystical entities playing important parts in humans' lives. *Aníkúlápó* uses lights to create a visual image of the supernatural which enhances the effect of Àkàlà spiritual bird. For example, when Saró meets the legendary bird Àkàlà, the lighting changes to a more ethereal, otherworldly tone. The use of soft, diffused lighting with a slight glow heightens the sensation of otherworldliness, instilling a psychological sense of awe and reverence that is common in oral storytelling when supernatural components are added.

b. Cultural Symbolism

Natural elements such as the sun, moon, and fire are frequently used as symbols in oral traditions.



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

The above images show the effect of natural daylight on different locations in *Aníkúlápó*. Image 3 depicts the view of the forest in daylight compared to how it is depicted in image 1 that shows the same view at midnight. This is done to set a different mood in the story. Image 5 shows the same daylight but in a dim temperature compared to Image 6, which has a brighter tone of the sun despite it being shot in a semi-opened environment.

Lighting at *Aníkúlápó* reflects these symbolic links because each scene reflects different symbols that contributed to the development of the story. The film's frequent use of warm, golden lighting in village scenes portrays a sense of vitality, warmth, and community, all of which are important virtues in traditional African communities. This lighting scheme emphasizes the connection to the soil and the community way of life that is frequently highlighted in oral traditions. This has the psychological impact of strengthening viewers' connections to their cultural heritage by reminding them of the symbolic meanings buried in their traditional stories.

3.3 Psychological Effects of Lighting on Emotional Engagement

Lighting is a powerful psychological tool that influences how audiences emotionally engage with a film. In *Aníkúlápó*, Afoláyan uses lighting to heighten emotional responses, creating an atmosphere that mirrors the emotional intensity of the story, which is a core aspect of African oral traditions.

a. Mood and Atmosphere

In oral storytelling, the storyteller's tone and expression are important in establishing the mood. *Aníkúlápó* uses lights to establish the ambiance, rather than the storyteller's voice. For example, in moments of treachery or moral breakdown, Afoláyan employs gloomy, murky lighting to create a feeling of foreboding and anxiety.



Image 7



Image 8

The contrast between light and gloom in these situations reflects the moral dichotomies common in oral traditions, in which people are rewarded for virtuous behavior and punished for greed or treachery. The psychological consequence of this lighting is increased emotional involvement, as viewers are unconsciously prompted to experience worry, terror, or empathy in response to the visual signals offered by the lighting.

b. Emotional Catharsis

African oral traditions frequently include a climactic moment of emotional release, also known as catharsis, in which the audience reacts strongly to the story's conclusion. In *Aníkúlápó*, lighting enhances the cathartic experience. In the climactic scene in which Saró faces the repercussions of his avarice and betrayal, the lighting becomes harsh and merciless, with stark contrasts between light and shade. This visual harshness reflects the emotional weight of the scene, allowing the audience to feel a profound feeling of catharsis

as they watch the moral ending of the narrative. The psychological effect is one of emotional closure, with the audience experiencing a feeling of justice and moral pleasure.

3.4 Lighting and the Transformation of Oral Tradition's Temporal Structure

In oral storytelling, time is often fluid, with narratives moving back and forth between the past, present, and future. Lighting in *Aníkúlápó* helps to visually convey this fluidity of time, a common feature in African oral traditions.

a. Shifting Temporalities

Afólayan employs lighting in *Aníkúlápó* to represent changes in reality, memory, and time. Flashback scenes, for instance, frequently have a softer, dreamier feel to them, which helps to psychologically separate the past from the present. This is similar to how stories are told orally, when the audience is led through several temporal levels of the story. This use of lighting has the psychological effect of assisting viewers in navigating the story's intricate structure, making it simpler to follow the events' non-linear evolution while preserving their sense of immersion in the film's legendary setting.

b. Memory and Nostalgia

In *Aníkúlápó*, lighting also arouses feelings of remembrance and nostalgia, especially in sequences that show the protagonist's past, carefree existence. By echoing the idealistic recollections sometimes elicited in oral storytelling, the warm, soft lighting in these situations establishes a psychological link with safety, warmth, and nostalgia. The story's emotional effect is increased by this contrast with the harsher lighting utilized later in the movie, as Saró's life becomes more ethically complex. Because viewers are forced to feel the weight of moral implications and the loss of innocence, this lighting style has the psychological impact of deepening their emotional connection to the story.

3.5 Lighting and Psychological Immersion in Moral and Spiritual Themes

It becomes imperative to know that African oral traditions are rich with moral and spiritual themes, often conveying lessons about right and wrong, fate, and the spiritual forces that govern the universe. In *Aníkúlápó*, lighting is used to visually represent these themes, creating a psychological experience that mirrors the moral and spiritual lessons of traditional storytelling.

a. Moral Dualities

One important psychological technique in *Aníkúlápó* is the use of lights to emphasize moral dualities. For instance, situations involving moral quandaries or moral failures are frequently characterized by strong lighting and deep shadows. The viewer experiences psychological strain and ambiguity as a result of this visual difference, which mirrors the actors' internal moral conflict. This is similar to the oral tradition's emphasis on moral teachings, which encourages the audience to consider the ramifications of moral decisions.

b. Spiritual Atmosphere

Aníkúlápó's lighting also evokes a spiritual mood, especially in sequences where the main character deals with otherworldly powers. The lighting assumes an ethereal, even heavenly character in sequences involving the magical bird *Akàlà*, with soft, shining light that evokes an otherworldly feeling. This is similar to the spiritual aspects in oral traditions, where the supernatural is frequently depicted as a guiding principle in mortal.

The audience's connection to the moral and spiritual lessons of the narrative is strengthened by the psychological impact of this illumination, which increases awe and reverence for the story's spiritual elements.

IV. Conclusion

As shown in Kunle Afolayan's *Aníkúlápó*, lighting as a component of cinematography is essential to converting African oral traditions into contemporary media. More than merely a technical aspect, lighting in movies is a potent psychological weapon that influences how the viewer feels and thinks about the narrative. Afolayan bridges the gap between oral and visual narratives by using lighting to elicit cultural symbols, improve psychological involvement, and adapt traditional storytelling aspects to cinema.

The rich moral, spiritual, and cultural aspects of Yoruba oral traditions are transformed into a visually engaging experience in Kunle Afolayan's *Aníkúlápó* through the use of lighting. The video effectively replicates the psychological effects of traditional oral storytelling by employing lighting to elicit emotional reactions, lead viewers through time changes, and symbolize moral and spiritual concepts. This emphasizes how crucial cinematographic methods are to conserving and updating African cultural history while retaining its richness in terms of emotion and theme. Lighting will continue to play a vital role in maintaining the emotional and cultural core of African oral traditions when they are incorporated into contemporary media. This change has complicated psychological repercussions, but in the end, it makes it easier to interact with African cultural narratives in the contemporary world on a deeper and more immersing level.

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