

# FILM REVIEW

**Tope Oshin, director. *Up North*.** 2018. 99 min. English/Hausa/Pidgin. Nigeria. Anakle Films, Inkblot Productions, and Netflix. No price reported.

A renowned producer and director of television and film, Tope Oshin is a female contemporary Nigerian filmmaker. As a graduate of the New York Film Academy, Tope Oshin is concerned with producing filmic narratives which address such topics as family life, patriarchy, gender violence, politics, marriage, toxic masculinity, female emancipation, and education. She has a number of popular films to her credit, including *Journey to Self* (2012), *In Line* (2021; a film about domestic abuse, deceit and betrayal), *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (2018; a film about same-sex/queer orientation in Nigeria), and *Amaka's Kin: The Women of Nollywood* (2016), a documentary produced in honor of the influential Nollywood female filmmaker Amaka Igwe. Other works she has produced include the late Biyi Bandele's *Fifty* (2015), and *The Wedding Party 2*, directed by Niyi Akinmolayan in 2017. Tope Oshin's films depict crucial modern issues and challenges that affect Nigerian youth in modern society. While she does not attempt to provide specific solutions, the artiste offers suggestions that are useful in addressing these problems in imaginative ways.

*Up North* narrates the transformative story of Bassey Otuekong (Bankole Wellington), who was born into affluence. Unlike his elder sister Idara (Michelle Dede), he believes life is a bed of roses and thus becomes spoiled and grossly irresponsible. As a rehabilitative measure, after he graduates from the university his father (Kanayo O. Kanayo) prevents him from changing his compulsory national youth service from Bauchi to Lagos (a decision common among most fresh university graduates who dread being posted to northern Nigeria) to help him develop the leadership qualities which will allow him to step into his father's shoes as director of his company. In Bauchi, Bassey experiences difficult situations that instill in him a sense of humility, creativity, and respect for fellow humans, along with a dedication to duty, all of which cumulatively transform him into a responsible person. He is compelled to take on the role of a sports coach in an all-female secondary school, as he navigates an unusual journey of self-discovery and awareness. His close affinity with Mariam (Rahama Sadau) and Sadiq (Ibrahim Suleiman) and

his display of practical developmental ideas contribute to the cooperation he receives from the school authorities and his students. While struggling to overcome a strained relationship with his father, coupled with a crucial need to prove himself worthy of emulation, Bassey is determined to contribute to local and state development in Bauchi state. Bassey's efforts encourage him further, until he succeeds in meeting and collaborating with the state functionaries, traditional leaders, and prominent authorities who run the state. Against the criticism of his sister Idara, he is smitten by the beauty, friendship, and maturity of Mariam (a widow and associate professor) with whom he finds true love, rather than accepting a matchmaking arrangement with the daughter of his father's business associate, Otunba (Akin Lewis).

The film not only illustrates the conflict between father and son but also the evolution of Bassey from a spoiled privileged boy to a self-determined and independent young man with a courageous debonair attitude, undeterred by any obstacle to accomplish his mission. He refuses to rely on the wealth of his father—a man he detests for his presumptuous flaunting of money—much to the admiration of unsuspecting village school teachers and students.

*Up North* is a film that is replete with important themes such as hard work, determination, humility, trustworthiness, cultural understanding, ethnic identity, and love. Tope Oshin expertly examines the issues of self-worth and the abilities of a youth to accomplish the unattainable in a strange land. Bassey represents an outsider who is confronted by the cultural and ideological differences between himself and the northern Nigerian citizens, but he surreptitiously and patiently imbibes the philosophies of coexistence, mutual relations, and understanding that can be achieved among disparate groups, all the while familiarizing himself with the world-sense of the people. By situating the narrative in northern Nigeria, Tope Oshin takes on the task of exploring cultural diversity, nationalism, education, and emancipation of the female child. There is also the coming of age of tourism in the northern region of Nigeria, which is dreaded as a site that has been consistently painted by the media as a terrorists' hideout. As Tope Oshin noted in a personal interview, "One would imagine armed bandits hiding behind stark desert-dunes waiting to pounce when you hear 'northern Nigeria'" (Whatsapp Interview, August 2022). Young graduates selected every year for National Youth Service, especially those from other regions in Nigeria, would vehemently refuse to go to northern Nigeria and renegotiate their placements elsewhere, just because of the terrorist attacks that take place in the north. But the irony today is that these terrorists have now spread across the entire country, armed to the teeth and tormenting and terrorizing innocent lives as they engage in the destruction of lives and properties.

In *Up North*, Tope Oshin shifts that narrative to present, as colorfully and heartwarmingly as possible, images of northern Nigeria as a peaceful region. The film offers images of locations encompassing the beauty and abundance of natural resources, tourist attractions, and open spaces. It depicts northern Nigeria as richly blessed with numerous cultural activities and traditional festivals, including the popular Durbar festival which is featured in the film.

These instances amplify the film's ethnography, which testifies to how Nollywood films function as cultural markers to help their characters as well as the audiences understand the people and their culture, world-sense, art, popular culture, beliefs, and knowledge systems.

The film featured other prominent actors, including Kanayo O. Kanayo, Adesua Etomi, Michelle Dede, Rahama Sadau, Ibrahim Suleiman, Rekiya Atta, Hilda Dokubo, Nafeesa Butu, and Sani Mu. Although most of the actors from Northern Nigeria featured in this film are normally associated with Kannywood (the northern Nigerian film industry), the film brings both Nollywood and Kannywood film actors together to create a splendid enactment that is quintessentially Nigerian.

Tope Oshin's *Up North* is as entertaining as it is sociological and ethnographic. The film's significance lies in the way it draws attention to the realities of the relationship between the older and younger generations, and how they can negotiate their dissimilar desires. The film also address the failure of patriarchy as well as the pitfalls associated with the age-long divisions that have characterized Nigerian polity since independence, demonstrating that an understanding of the principles of coexistence will enable and sustain the unity that Nigerians crave.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2023.37