

Discursive Constructions of Female Power in Yoruba Cinema: A Socio-Cognitive and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis Across Two Production Epochs

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Abstract

The issue of gender representation has been the subject of scholarly investigation over time. However, a comparative investigation of how power is ascribed to women in the 80s and the 2020s among the Yoruba of South West Nigeria, especially from a Critical Discourse perspective, remains sparse in the literature. This study thus investigates how power is discursively ascribed to women in Yoruba films from two distinct periods: the 1970s–1980s and 2020–2025. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it examines how female characters are represented in terms of agency, authority, and social influence. Drawing on van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and elements of multimodal discourse analysis, the study compares themes, dialogue, visual framing, and character roles across select films. Findings reveal significant ideological shifts in gendered power dynamics, reflecting broader sociocultural transformations and resistance to patriarchal norms. The study contributes to discussions on media, gender representation, and the intersection of culture and power in African popular culture.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, female power, multimodal analysis, Nollywood, van Dijk, Yoruba cinema*

1. Introduction

Cinema functions as an effective cultural technology through which societies narrate, legitimise, and contest authority, morality, and social hierarchy. In African contexts, film has played a particularly significant role in articulating postcolonial identity, cultural memory, and ideological transformation (Haynes, 2016; Krings & Okome, 2013; Ukadike, 1994). Yoruba-language cinema, emerging from travelling theatre traditions and evolving into contemporary Nollywood and streaming-era productions, represents a dynamic site where questions of gender and power are discursively negotiated.

Across production epochs, Yoruba films have depicted women as priestesses, market leaders, monarchs, witches, political brokers, and strategists. Yet the ideological framing of such authority has varied significantly. Earlier movies frequently positioned powerful women within moralising or cautionary narratives, framing female authority as anomalous, excessive, or destabilising (Ogunleye, 2003; Okome, 2007). Contemporary productions, by contrast, increasingly portray women as political actors, entrepreneurs, and agents of strategic governance (Haynes, 2016; Okome, 2021). Whether this shift constitutes substantive ideological transformation or a reconfiguration of older patriarchal anxieties remains analytically unresolved.

African gender scholarship has demonstrated that precolonial Yoruba social formations did not rigidly correspond to Eurocentric binary hierarchies. Instead, social status was often structured through seniority, lineage, ritual authority, and economic position (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997). However, colonial administration and missionary institutions restructured gendered governance, institutionalising patriarchal bureaucratic norms that privileged male authority in formal political spaces (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Cultural texts—including literature, theatre, and cinema—thus operate within historically layered gender ideologies, simultaneously maintaining memories of indigenous female authority and reproducing colonial-era patriarchal frameworks (Barber, 2000; Nfah-Abbenyi, 2005).

As Yoruba-speaking scholars with deep familiarity with the cultural settings of these films, we recognise that our interpretations are influenced by our positionality within the linguistic and cultural communities whose productions we analyse. This insider perspective enables access to nuanced cultural

meanings but also necessitates ongoing reflexive awareness. Section 2 provides a detailed positionality statement.

While scholarship on Nollywood has expanded significantly (Haynes, 2016; Krings & Okome, 2013), much existing research on gender representation remains either synchronic or thematically descriptive. Few studies undertake systematic comparison between classical Yoruba cinema of the 1970s–1980s and contemporary high-production films distributed through global streaming outlets. Moreover, there remains limited application of socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to African cinematic texts, particularly in relation to multimodal constructions of gendered authority.

This article addresses that gap by conducting a comparative CDA of four Yoruba-language films representing two production epochs: the classical theatre-influenced era (Efunsetan Aniwura, c.1975; Aiye, 1979) and the contemporary digital/streaming era (King of Boys, 2018/2021; Anikúlápó, 2022). These films were purposively selected as culturally prominent texts from each epoch. Together, they provide a comparative corpus through which shifts and continuities in gender ideology can be examined. We acknowledge a significant temporal gap between 1979 and 2018; the study therefore compares two discrete production epochs rather than a continuous diachronic coverage across five decades. The intervening video-film era (1990s–2000s) requires separate analysis beyond the scope of this article.

The study tackles the following research questions:

1. How is female power discursively constructed in Yoruba films of the 1970s–1980s, and how does this construction compare with films produced between 2018 and 2022?
2. What linguistic and multimodal strategies are deployed to legitimise or discipline female authority in each period?
3. To what extent do these representations reflect shifts in shared socio-cognitive gender schemas within Yoruba cultural discourse?

2. Positionality and Reflexivity

Both authors are Yoruba-speaking scholars trained in discourse analysis and English education, with extensive exposure to Yoruba cinema as both cultural consumers and academic analysts. This insider positioning provides advantages in accessing culturally specific meanings, interpreting pragmatic nuances in dialogue, and recognising intertextual references to Yoruba oral traditions and theatre history.

However, we also recognise that our gendered subjectivities—as male researchers analysing representations of female power—may shape our interpretations in ways requiring reflexive awareness. We have therefore engaged in peer debriefing with three female colleagues specialising in African gender studies and Yoruba cultural studies. A specific example illustrates the value of this process:

Initial blind spot identified through peer debriefing: In our first draft, we interpreted Eniola Salami’s repeated assertions of motherhood in *King of Boys* (“Mo jé iyá”—“I am a mother”) as exclusively a containment strategy—a narrative technique softening female authority. However, a female Yoruba colleague argued that in Yoruba cultural context, motherhood can also function as a source of legitimacy, moral authority, and social power, not simply a constraint. Drawing on Oyěwùmí’s (1997) analysis of seniority-based social organisation, she suggested that Eniola’s invocation of motherhood might be read as strategic appropriation of a valued social role rather than simple containment.

In response, we revised our analysis (Section 6.3.1) to reflect this ambivalence: maternal framing in contemporary Yoruba cinema functions both as relational re-anchoring and as a culturally legitimate claim to moral authority. This twofold reading more accurately captures the hybrid ideological layering theorised in this study.

Additionally, our academic training in Western discourse-analytic traditions may predispose us toward particular analytical categories; we have attempted to balance this with attention to indigenous feminist frameworks (Stiwanism, nego-feminism) discussed in the literature review. This reflexive orientation informs all analytical decisions documented below.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Gender, Power, and Historical Memory in Yoruba and African Contexts

Scholarship on African gender systems has continually challenged Eurocentric assumptions that patriarchy operated equally across precolonial African societies. In her seminal work, Amadiume (1987) demonstrated the fluidity of gender categories in Igbo society, where social roles are able to transcend biological sex. Similarly, Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that precolonial Yoruba social organisation was structured more by seniority and lineage than by rigid male–female binaries. These studies complicate simplistic narratives of African patriarchy and foreground indigenous systems in which women exercised ritual, economic, and sometimes political authority.

However, colonialism deeply transformed these structures. British indirect rule formalised male-dominated bureaucratic governance, marginalising women from institutionalised political power (Oyěwùmí, 1997). As Nfah-Abbenyi (2005) notes, colonial and missionary interventions introduced Victorian gender ideologies that privileged male leadership and domesticated female agency. The result was not a complete erasure of indigenous female authority but a layering of patriarchal administrative models onto pre-existing systems.

African feminist theorists have developed frameworks that resist Western feminist impositions while dealing with gendered inequalities. Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) concept of "Stiwanism" (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) foregrounds African women's agency within indigenous social structures rather than positioning them as victims awaiting Western liberation. Similarly, Nnaemeka's (2004) "nego-feminism" (negotiation plus "no ego" feminism) emphasises the negotiation, compromise, and accommodation that characterise African women's navigation of patriarchal structures. The frameworks are especially relevant for analysing Yoruba cinema, where female characters rarely mount direct challenges to patriarchal authority but instead negotiate power within existing cultural frameworks.

Cultural production—literature, theatre, and cinema—became a site where these tensions were negotiated. Yoruba traveling theatre, which subsequently influenced early Yoruba cinema, frequently dramatised powerful women as morally complex figures whose authority required narrative containment (Barber, 2000). The ambivalent representation of female leaders in cultural texts thus reflects what might be described as historical ideological sedimentation: memories of indigenous female power coexist with colonial-era patriarchal anxieties.

This layered gender history provides the socio-cultural background against which Yoruba cinema must be understood.

3.2. Women in Yoruba Cinema: From Theatre to Nollywood

Yoruba cinema emerged from traveling theatre traditions led by figures such as Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo. These theatrical forms emphasised myth, morality, and communal didacticism, features that strongly influenced early film adaptations (Barber, 2000; Ukadike, 1994). As Haynes (2016) observes, early Nigerian films frequently encoded moral lessons within melodramatic narratives, frequently resolving social disorder through the reassertion of normative hierarchies.

Studies of gender representation in early Nigerian cinema suggest that women were frequently positioned within domestic, spiritual, or moralising roles (Ogunleye, 2003; Okome, 2007). When women occupied positions of overt authority, they were frequently portrayed as exceptional, excessive,

or morally compromised. Ogunleye (2003) notes that powerful women in Yoruba films were sometimes represented as witches, tyrants, or tragic figures whose downfall restored social equilibrium. For instance, the historical figure Efunsetan Aniwura, a powerful Ibadan chieftain, has been repeatedly dramatised as a warning story about female ambition and cruelty, in spite of historical evidence of her administrative capabilities (Adeboye, 2018).

The rise of Nollywood in the 1990s and its globalisation in the 2000s transformed production values, distribution networks, and narrative scope (Krings & Okome, 2013). Contemporary films increasingly depict women as entrepreneurs, politicians, and corporate leaders (Haynes, 2016). More recent scholarship spotlights the emergence of female anti-heroes and political strategists in Nigerian cinema, denoting a lean toward more complex portrayals of female agency (Okome, 2021). Films such as *King of Boys* (2018) and its sequel have been especially important in centring female political ambition within the crime drama genre.

However, scholars also caution against equating visibility with emancipation. In an analysis of contemporary African screen cultures, Dosekun (2020) argues that postfeminist aesthetics may coexist with deeply entrenched male-centered norms. Similarly, recent discussions in African media studies note that streaming-era productions often frame powerful women within narratives of moral ambivalence or relational vulnerability, hence complicating claims of ideological rupture (Okome, 2021). Osakpolor (2021) demonstrates that likewise in explicitly political Nollywood films, female authority is frequently contained through associations with illegitimacy or moral concession.

Ilori, Oyewo, and Oyeleye (2025) examine the representation of women in Funke Akindele's films, exposing a tension between surface-level empowerment and underlying patriarchal framing. Their analysis shows that even female-produced content may reproduce containment tactics, suggesting that the gender of filmmakers does not automatically determine ideological positioning. Similarly, Worlu, Harcourt-Whyte, and Enyindah (2025) investigate audience perceptions of female representations in contemporary Nollywood, finding that viewers negotiate between progressive and conservative readings depending on their socio-cultural positioning.

In spite of these developments, few studies provide systematic diachronic comparison between classical Yoruba cinema of the 1970s–1980s and contemporary high-production films. Even fewer analyse these shifts through a discourse-analytic lens that integrates linguistic and multimodal structures. The present study fills this gap by examining both eras within one unified analytical framework.

3.3. Critical Discourse Analysis and Gender Representation

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how discourse structures reproduce social inequality and ideological dominance. Among its prominent frameworks, the socio-cognitive model of Teun A. van Dijk (2006) emphasises the mediating role of shared mental models in the reproduction of ideology. In this framework, discourse is not simply reflective but constitutive: linguistic choices presuppose and construct culturally shared schemas. Feminist CDA, as articulated by Lazar (2005), builds on traditional CDA by foregrounding gendered power relations and interrogating how discourse naturalises patriarchy, emphasising subtle mechanisms of containment such as relational framing, moral evaluation, and discursive ambivalence.

Given that film is inherently multimodal, discourse analysis must go beyond dialogue. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that visual grammar—camera angle, salience, framing, and composition—operates analogously to the linguistic grammar in structuring ideological meaning. Machin and Mayr (2012) further demonstrate how multimodal resources contribute to the normalisation of power hierarchies.

Although multimodal CDA has been applied to Western cinema and advertising, its systematic use in analysing African filmic gender representation remains underdeveloped. The present study fills this gap by merging visual grammar analysis with linguistic discourse analysis.

3.4. Recent Developments (2022–2024) and the Remaining Gap

Three major gaps remain: (1) lack of systematic comparison between classical and contemporary Yoruba cinema; (2) limited operationalisation of socio-cognitive CDA in African film analysis; (3) insufficient micro-linguistic depth in gender studies of African cinema. The present study considers these gaps as specified in Section 3.5.

3.5. Positioning the Present Study

This article addresses these gaps by:

Conducting a structured diachronic comparison between 1970s–1980s Yoruba cinema and contemporary films (2018–2022)

Operationalising socio-cognitive CDA within multimodal film analysis

Integrating systemic-functional transitivity and modality analysis with visual grammar

Engaging African feminist frameworks (Stiwanism, nego-feminism) to interpret hybrid ideological formations

In doing so, the study moves beyond descriptive representation analysis to examine how filmic discourse constructs and presupposes shared gender schemas across time, while remaining attentive to the specifically African cultural settings within which these schemas operate.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), complemented by Feminist CDA and multimodal discourse theory. The framework is designed to move systematically from micro-linguistic structures to macro-ideological interpretation, while accounting for the multimodal nature of cinematic discourse.

4.1. Socio-Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis

The socio-cognitive approach developed by Teun A. van Dijk (2006) conceptualises discourse as mediating between social frameworks and social cognition. Ideologies are not simply embedded in texts; rather, they are reproduced through discursive structures that presuppose and construct shared mental models within specific cultural communities.

Van Dijk argues that discourse contributes to the formation and maintenance of socially collective representations—beliefs, norms, and evaluative schemas—that guide interpretation and action. These shared mental models operate as cognitive interfaces between textual structures and broader systems of dominance. Thus, the analysis of discourse must attend not only to surface linguistic choices but also to the cognitive presuppositions those choices activate and reinforce.

In this framework, "mental models" refer to individual cognitive representations of specific events or situations, while "social schemas" refer to culturally shared knowledge structures that organise perception across multiple contexts. Discourse works by invoking relevant schemas and constructing the mental models through which audiences interpret particular representations. When a film repeatedly associates female authority with moral transgression, it presupposes and potentially strengthens a social schema linking femininity to moral danger.

In the context of Yoruba cinema, filmic discourse participates in the construction and presupposition of culturally sedimented gender schemas. These schemas draw from precolonial gender formations, colonial patriarchal restructuring, and contemporary global feminist discourses. The socio-cognitive

approach therefore enables this study to interpret discursive patterns as manifestations of evolving, yet historically layered, gender mental models.

To operationalise this framework in film analysis, the following discursive categories were examined:

1. Nomination and Categorisation

How female characters are named and titled (e.g., queen, witch, Oba, tyrant) and how such labels position them within moral hierarchies. Nomination strategies may include official titles, kinship terms, or derogatory labels, each activating different cognitive schemas.

2. Predication

The attributes assigned to female characters through adjectives, relational clauses, and evaluative descriptions. Predications construct the "whatness" of characters—their essential qualities—and thereby position them within moral and social frameworks.

3. Transitivity and Agency Mapping

Drawing from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), this analysis studies whether women are positioned as Actors (initiators of material processes) or as Goals/Carriers (recipients of action or bearers of attributes). Agency distribution reflects ideological positioning: who acts, who is acted upon, and who merely exists in states of being.

4. Modality

The use of deontic modality (must, should, cannot) versus epistemic or volitional modality (will, shall, can) indicates the degree of constraint or authority attributed to female characters. Deontic modality encodes social norms and obligations; volitional modality encodes agency and intention.

5. Argumentation and Narrative Resolution

How female authority is justified, contested, punished, or legitimised within the narrative structure. The narrative outcomes for powerful women—whether they triumph, are contained, or meet tragic ends—encode ideological judgments.

6. The Ideological Square

Van Dijk's ideological square (emphasise our good; emphasise their bad; de-emphasise our bad; de-emphasise their good) provides a macro-structural lens for identifying patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and moral evaluation in the depiction of gendered power. Applied to gender, this framework indicates how male authority is normalised while female authority is marked as exceptional and subjected to intensified scrutiny.

Through these categories, the study interprets language features as indicators of underlying socio-cognitive schemas concerning femininity, authority, legitimacy, and social order.

The socio-cognitive framework claims that discourse presupposes and may contribute to reinforcing shared mental models. However, we acknowledge that textual analysis alone cannot demonstrate actual cognitive effects on audiences. When we claim that certain discursive patterns "reinforce" schemas, we mean that they discursively sediment those schemas—making them available, normalised, and presupposed—rather than demonstrating causal cognitive impact. Future reception research (see Section 7.4) is required to test whether audiences indeed internalise these presuppositions. Within these limits, the framework stays productive for generating verifiable hypotheses and for systematically describing the discursive resources through which gender ideologies are textually constructed.

4.2. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

While van Dijk's framework supplies tools for examining ideological cognition, it does not foreground gender as a structural axis of power. Feminist CDA, as articulated by Michelle Lazar (2005), extends CDA by centring gendered power relations and interrogating the naturalisation of patriarchy.

Feminist CDA emphasises that gendered dominance is often reproduced via subtle discursive mechanisms, including:

Moral evaluation of female ambition: Women who seek power are subjected to intensified moral scrutiny

Relational framing: Defining women mainly through motherhood, partnership, or romantic relationships

Affective containment: Framing female authority as emotionally unstable or excessive

Discursive ambivalence: Simultaneous empowerment and moral suspicion within the same representation

This perspective is particularly useful for analysing contemporary Yoruba cinema, where female characters may appear empowered yet remain narratively anchored to relational or affective vulnerabilities. Feminist CDA enables this study to interrogate not only whether women are represented as powerful, but how such power is framed, legitimised, or contained inside broader male-dominated structures.

Lazar's framework also attends to the intersection of gender with other social categories—class, status, generation—which shape how female authority is evaluated. In Yoruba cinema, the evaluation of powerful women frequently intersects with age (older women may be framed differently from younger women), marital status, and motherhood, producing complex evaluative patterns.

4.3. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Film is inherently multimodal; meaning is constructed through the interaction of dialogue, visual composition, sound, costume, and spatial arrangement. To account for this complexity, the study uses visual grammar as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006).

Visual semiotic categories applied in this study include:

Camera Angle: Low-angle shots index power and authority; high-angle shots suggest vulnerability or subordination. Eye-level shots may suggest equality or neutrality.

Shot Distance: Close-ups suggest intimacy or intensity; long shots contextualise characters within their environment; extreme close-ups may suggest psychological interiority.

Salience: The degree to which a character is visually foregrounded through lighting, costume, colour, or framing. Salient elements are presented as most significant.

Framing and Composition: Central positioning versus marginal placement reflects symbolic prominence. The left-right organisation of visual space may encode given-new information structures.

Gaze and Interaction: Whether a character confronts the viewer (demand) or remains an object of observation (offer) constructs different viewer-character relationships. Gaze direction also constructs power relations between characters within the frame.

Costume and Regalia: Visual symbols of royalty, spirituality, or political authority encode social status and legitimacy.

Lighting and Colour: Lighting quality (high-key vs low-key) and colour palettes construct mood and evaluative positioning. Dark lighting may suggest moral ambiguity or danger; bright lighting may suggest virtue or transparency.

By analysing these features alongside linguistic patterns, the study demonstrates how visual grammar complements verbal discourse in constructing gendered power. Importantly, we attend to instances where visual and verbal meanings may contradict each other, producing ideological ambivalence.

While not central to our socio-cognitive framework, Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze" offers relevant insights into gendered looking relations. In classical Hollywood cinema, Mulvey argued, women are positioned as passive objects of male visual pleasure through shot/reverse-shot patterns, fetishistic framing, and narrative subordination. Yoruba cinema operates within different cultural and industrial contexts; however, we apply Mulvey's framework selectively to analyse shot/reverse-shot patterns and objectifying framing of female characters. Specifically, we coded whether powerful women are systematically positioned as objects of male characters' looks (via eyeline matches) or as subjects who control the gaze. This operationalisation appears in the multimodal coding for *Efunsetan Aniwura* and *King of Boys*. Mulvey is not invoked for aestheticisation or psychoanalytic claims beyond these observable gaze structures.

4.4. Integrative Analytical Model

The study adopts an integrative model linking:

Micro-structures: Clause-level linguistic choices and visual features (transitivity patterns, modal verbs, camera angles, compositional choices)

Meso-level patterns: Recurring narrative strategies and thematic clusters (relational re-anchoring, supernatural framing, moral ambivalence)

Macro-level ideologies: Shared socio-cognitive gender schemas (authority as masculine, female ambition as morally suspect, power as legitimately exercised through specific social locations)

This layered approach ensures that interpretive claims are grounded in observable textual and visual evidence, while also accounting for broader cultural cognition. The model also accommodates the possibility of hybrid or contradictory ideological formations, where micro-level empowerment may coexist with meso-level containment.

4.5. Theoretical Synthesis and Analytical Application

The integrated framework operates as follows in analytical practice:

Linguistic analysis identifies patterns of agency distribution (transitivity), normative framing (modality), and character construction (nomination/predication) at the micro-level.

Multimodal analysis examines how visual resources reinforce, complicate, or contradict linguistic patterns, attending particularly to how camera work, composition, and costume construct character positioning.

Narrative analysis considers how micro-level patterns aggregate into larger structures of meaning, particularly through character arcs and resolutions.

Socio-cognitive interpretation relates these patterns to shared cultural schemas, asking what understandings of gender, power, and legitimacy the films presuppose and potentially reinforce.

Feminist critique interrogates how these patterns contribute to the naturalisation or contestation of patriarchal structures, attending to subtle mechanisms of containment.

This integrated approach enables systematic analysis of how Yoruba cinema constructs female authority across two production epochs, revealing both transformation and continuity within evolving socio-cultural contexts.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case-study design informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The design is diachronic, comparing two historical clusters of Yoruba-language films: the classical era (1970s–1980s) and the contemporary digital/streaming era (2018–2022). Films are treated as multimodal texts in which dialogue, narrative structure, and visual composition jointly construct ideological meaning.

The analysis integrates three complementary approaches:

Socio-cognitive CDA (van Dijk, 2006)

Feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005)

Multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

This triangulated framework enables systematic movement from micro-linguistic structures to macro-ideological interpretation.

5.2. Corpus Selection and Rationale

Four Yoruba-language films were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

Cultural prominence and canonical status within Yoruba cinema

Centrality of female authority to the narrative (or, in the case of *Aiye*, significant female supernatural authority)

Representation of distinct production epochs

Availability for close transcription and repeated viewing

The selected corpus comprises:

Film	Era	Director	Production Company	Female Figure	Authority
Efunsetan Aniwura (c. 1975)	Classical	Unknown (theatre-derived)	Western Nigeria Television/WNTV	Historical chieftain	
Aiye (1979)	Classical	Hubert Ogunde	Ogunde Films	Supernatural/spiritual figures	
King of Boys (2018) + sequel (2021)	Contemporary	Kemi Adetiba	Koga Studios	Political power broker	
Aníkúlápó (2022)	Contemporary	Kunle Afolayan	Golden Effects Pictures	Mythic/historical agent	

Table 1: Selected Corpus; source: Authors' Own Compilation

The two classical-era films were selected from the available corpus of 1970s–1980s Yoruba cinema based on their explicit engagement with female authority and their canonical status within Yoruba film history. Efunsetan Aniwura dramatises a historical female political leader whose story has been repeatedly adapted across theatre and film, making it a key text for examining gender representation. Aiye, directed by the pioneering Hubert Ogunde, represents the spiritual-epic tradition and features prominent female supernatural figures.

We acknowledge that Aiye (1979) differs from the other three films in that its protagonist is male, and female authority is primarily supernatural rather than civic. The film was retained for three reasons: (1) it represents the classical era's treatment of female spiritual power, which was a significant domain of female authority in Yoruba cosmology and cultural texts; (2) excluding it would leave the classical corpus with only one film (Efunsetan), which is methodologically problematic; (3) comparison of supernatural vs civic authority across eras reveals an important shift: contemporary films locate female power in civic/political domains, whereas classical films often confined it to spiritual realms. This comparison is explicitly drawn in Section 6.1.4 and 6.4. A limitation, acknowledged in Section 7.4, is that no classical-era film with a mortal female political protagonist (comparable to Eniola) is available in accessible archive; Efunsetan remains the closest approximation.

The contemporary films were selected for their high production values, international distribution via streaming platforms (Netflix), and their explicit engagement with female political and mythic agency. Both received critical attention and sparked public discussion about gender representation in Nigerian cinema.

We explicitly acknowledge a significant temporal gap between 1979 and 2018. The study compares two discrete production epochs (classical theatre-influenced cinema of the 1970s–80s vs contemporary streaming-era cinema) rather than claiming continuous diachronic coverage. The intervening video-film era (1990s–2000s) is omitted by design, as our research question focuses on endpoint comparison. Future research should examine the transitional period.

Although the sample size is limited, qualitative CDA prioritises depth of analysis over numerical representativeness. The four films were selected for their ideological density and their explicit engagement with female authority, enabling rich comparative analysis.

5.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved:

Repeated Viewing: Each film was viewed in full at least three times to identify scenes central to representations of female authority. Initial viewing established overall narrative structure; subsequent viewings focused specifically on scenes featuring female authority figures.

Scene Selection: Scenes were selected where female characters:

Issue commands or directives to others

Exercise political, economic, or spiritual authority

Face moral contestation or judgment from other characters

Experience narrative punishment or legitimisation

Are visually framed in ways that construct power or vulnerability

Transcription: Relevant dialogue was transcribed verbatim. Yoruba utterances were retained in original form and translated into English, with attention to preserving pragmatic and cultural nuances. Transcription conventions followed standard discourse analysis practices, marking pauses, overlaps, and prosodic features where relevant to interpretation.

Still-Frame Capture: Key visual moments (throne scenes, ritual sequences, confrontation scenes, moments of symbolic positioning) were documented through descriptive visual coding and, where possible, frame grabs for detailed analysis.

Contextual Note-Taking: Analytical memos recorded recurring motifs, narrative outcomes, multimodal patterns, and initial interpretive observations. These memos were dated and archived to create an audit trail.

The units of analysis included:

Clause-level linguistic structures (transitivity, modality, nomination)

Lexical choices and evaluative language

Narrative justifications and resolutions

Visual composition (angle, salience, framing, costume, lighting)

5.4. Analytical Procedure

The analytical process followed five stages:

Stage 1: Familiarisation

Initial viewing of all four films identified recurrent patterns in the representation of female authority, containment strategies, and narrative resolution. Preliminary observations were recorded in analytical memos.

Stage 2: Micro-Linguistic Coding

Dialogue from selected scenes was coded for:

Transitivity patterns: Material processes (actions/events), mental processes (perception/cognition), relational processes (attribution/identification), verbal processes (saying)

Agency distribution: Who acts upon whom; who is positioned as Actor, Goal, Carrier, or Senser

Modality type: Deontic (obligation/permission), epistemic (certainty/probability), volitional (intention/willingness)

Nomination strategies: Titles, labels, forms of address

Predication strategies: Attributive language, evaluative descriptions

This stage drew on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) to map agency representation systematically. A sample coding frame is provided in Appendix A.

Coding was conducted by both authors independently for a subset of scenes (approximately 20% of the corpus) to establish consistency. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and coding categories were refined where necessary. The remaining scenes were coded by the first author, with periodic checks by the second author.

Stage 3: Multimodal Coding

Visual features were coded using categories adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006): Camera angle: Low, eye-level, high

Shot distance: Close-up, medium shot, long shot, extreme long shot

Framing and composition: Central vs marginal positioning; left-right organisation

Salience: Achieved through size, colour, lighting, focus, foregrounding

Gaze: Demand (direct address) vs offer (indirect); gaze direction within frame

Costume and regalia: Symbolic markers of status, authority, or spiritual power

Lighting and colour palette: High-key vs low-key; colour symbolism

Multimodal coding was conducted alongside linguistic coding, with attention to how visual and verbal meanings aligned or diverged.

Visual Feature	Efunsetan Aniwura (c.1975)	Aiye (1979)	King of Boys (2018/21)	Aníkúlápó (2022)
Dominant camera angle (female lead)	Eye-level, occasional low angle in conflict	Low angle for supernatural figures; high angle for vulnerability	Predominantly low angle	Eye-level to low angle
Lighting valence	Low-key, shadow-heavy	Flickering, low-key for witch scenes	High-key, controlled	Warm, rich tones
Costuming markers of legitimacy	Dark, heavy fabrics; minimal regalia	Ritual attire (marked as other)	Aso-oke, beads, Western power dressing	Rich fabrics, symbolic jewellery
Spatial positioning	Often marginal or isolating	Central in ritual, marginal in civic	Central, throne-like arrangements	Central in decision scenes
Gaze patterns (subject/object)	Often object of male gaze (shot/reverse-shot)	Object of awe/fear	Controls gaze; direct address to camera	Mixed; sometimes aestheticised
Disconfirming instances	Occasional low-angle acknowledging status	None identified	High-angle shots in moments of grief (sequel)	Eye-level in vulnerability

Table 2: Comparative Multimodal Coding of Female Authority across Four Films

Note. Coding categories adapted from Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) for visual grammar (camera angle, lighting, costuming, spatial positioning, salience) and from Mulvey (1975) for gaze analysis (subject/object distinction, shot/reverse-shot, direct address). The specific film observations are the authors' own.

Disconfirming instances noted: In *King of Boys: The Return of the King*, several high-angle shots frame Eniola during moments of grief and exile, momentarily undermining the dominant low-angle legitimisation. These are noted in Section 6.3.4 as visual ambivalence. In *Aníkúlápó*, occasional eye-level framing during vulnerability (e.g., after romantic betrayal) complicates the empowerment pattern.

Stage 4: Thematic Clustering

Codes were grouped into recurring ideological themes across films and eras:

Discursive containment of female authority

Spiritualisation of female power

Strategic legitimisation of political agency

Relational re-anchoring of empowered women

Moral ambivalence in female leadership

Narrative resolution patterns (punishment, triumph, ambiguity)

These themes provided the organising structure for the findings section.

Stage 5: Socio-Cognitive Interpretation

Discursive patterns were interpreted through van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model. This involved identifying how repeated linguistic and visual structures presupposed and potentially reinforced shared gender schemas within Yoruba cultural cognition. For instance:

Relational clauses assigning attributes of cruelty or sterility were interpreted as presupposing moralised schemas of deviant femininity.

Low-angle shots combined with material processes were interpreted as constructing legitimate authority schemas.

Volitional modality in political speech was interpreted as presupposing schemas of agentive personhood.

This stage also drew on Feminist CDA to identify subtle containment mechanisms and on African feminist frameworks (Stiwanism, nego-feminism) to interpret hybrid ideological formations.

5.5. Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigour

To enhance credibility and transparency:

Reflexive Memoing: The researchers documented interpretive decisions throughout the analytical process and acknowledged their positionality as Yoruba-speaking scholars familiar with local cultural contexts. Memos recorded initial interpretations, alternative readings considered, and decisions about which interpretations to pursue.

Peer Debriefing: Selected coded extracts and preliminary interpretations were reviewed by two colleagues—one specialising in Yoruba cinema and one in African gender studies—to ensure interpretive plausibility and to identify potential blind spots.

Triangulation: Linguistic, narrative, and visual analyses were cross-checked to avoid over-reliance on any single semiotic mode. Instances where modes contradicted each other were noted as sites of particular ideological interest.

Audit Trail: Coding categories, analytical decisions, and interpretive developments were documented systematically, enabling reconstruction of the analytical path from data to findings.

Member Checking: While not feasible with film texts themselves, we shared preliminary findings with Yoruba-speaking colleagues and film enthusiasts to assess resonance with their interpretive experiences.

Given the interpretive nature of CDA, reliability is conceptualised not as replicability in positivist terms but as transparency and analytical coherence. The goal is not to produce the only possible reading but to offer a systematically grounded interpretation that illuminates patterns in the texts.

5.6. Ethical Considerations

The films analysed are publicly available cultural texts. All quotations are used for scholarly analysis under fair-use principles. Interpretations are presented as analytic readings rather than normative judgments of creators or performers. We acknowledge that our readings may differ from those intended by filmmakers or experienced by other viewers, and we present them as contributions to scholarly dialogue rather than definitive pronouncements.

This methodology ensures that claims made in the findings are grounded in systematically coded textual and visual evidence, satisfying the standards of methodological clarity required for high-impact discourse and media journals.

6. Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals a patterned ideological shift in the construction of female authority across the two historical clusters. However, this shift is not linear. Rather, contemporary films reconfigure gender schemas while retaining residual patriarchal cognitive structures. The findings are presented in three interrelated movements: (1) discursive containment in the classical era; (2) strategic legitimisation in contemporary cinema; and (3) hybrid ideological layering.

6.1. Discursive Containment of Female Authority in the Classical Era (1970s–1980s)

6.1.1. Transitivity and Agency Distribution

In Efunsetan Aniwura, female authority is frequently encoded through relational processes rather than dynamic material action. Consider the following utterances directed at or about the protagonist:

- (1) "Ó ni ìwà ikà." (She has a cruel character.)
- (2) "Ó jẹ́ aláìbímọ́." (She is barren.)
- (3) "Obìnrin aláìníyònú ní." (She is a merciless woman.)

These clauses assign attributes to the protagonist rather than positioning her as an initiator of political processes. Within systemic functional terms (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), she functions primarily as a Carrier in relational clauses rather than as an Actor in material processes. The focus is on her essential qualities—cruelty, barrenness, mercilessness—rather than her political actions or achievements.

The relational framing is particularly significant given the historical Efunsetan's documented administrative achievements. The film could have represented her through material processes of governance, trade, and political negotiation; instead, it foregrounds moral and physical attributes that position her as deviant.

By contrast, male chiefs are positioned as Actors in material processes:

- (4) "Àwọn ijoyé pinnu." (The chiefs decided.)
 (5) "Wón yó ọ kúrò." (They removed her.)

Here, material processes (pinnu—decided; yó ọ kúrò—removed her) encode legitimate political agency. The chiefs act collectively; Efunsetan is acted upon. Agency distribution thus reflects an ideological asymmetry: female authority is moralised and essentialised, whereas male authority is procedural and institutional.

The relational framing is not merely descriptive but evaluative. In Yoruba cultural context, attributes like barrenness carry profound negative connotations, positioning women outside the valued social role of motherhood. By emphasising Efunsetan's childlessness, the film activates a cultural schema linking female fulfilment and legitimacy to maternity. Her political authority is thus framed as compensating for or masking a fundamental lack.

In *Aiye*, women are positioned as Actors in material processes—but primarily within supernatural domains:

- (6) "A ó pa á run." (We shall destroy him.)
 (7) "Àjé ni wón." (They are witches.)

Although women occupy Actor roles, their agency is confined to mystical destruction rather than civic governance. The nomination "àjé" (witches) carries profoundly ambivalent cultural meanings: witches possess real power, but it is morally suspect power exercised in darkness and secrecy. Thus, agency is granted but spatially and morally circumscribed.

Notably, when male characters exercise supernatural power in *Aiye*, it is often framed as protective or restorative—countering the destructive agency of female witches. The ideological square operates here: female supernatural power is destructive (their bad); male supernatural power is protective (our good).

The relational framing of Efunsetan—as “Carrier” of negative attributes rather than “Actor” of political processes—exemplifies what Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) critiques as the reduction of powerful women to their essentialised moral and physical characteristics. From a Stiwanist perspective, the film denies Efunsetan the structural position from which to enact social transformation, instead containing her within a cautionary moral tale.

6.1.2. Modality as Ideological Policing

Deontic modality plays a significant role in constraining female authority in the classical films:

- (8) "Obinrin kò gbòdò hùwà bí ọkùnrin." (A woman must not behave like a man.)
 (9) "Kò lè joba." (She cannot rule.)

The prevalence of deontic constructions (kò gbòdò—must not; kò lè—cannot) encodes normative prohibition. These modal choices reflect what van Dijk (2006) describes as the discursive reproduction of shared ideological norms. The modal system constructs female leadership as transgressive relative to a culturally sedimented male governance schema.

Crucially, these modal statements are presented as general truths rather than as contestable opinions. They assume the status of cultural axioms, presupposing agreement from the audience. The socio-cognitive effect is to reinforce the schema linking legitimate authority to masculinity.

6.1.3. Nomination and Predication

Female authority figures in classical films are frequently nominated through morally loaded or marked categories:

"Àjẹ" (witch)

"Apáníláyà" (tyrant/oppressor)

"Obìnrin àìlémọ́" (barren/childless woman)

Predicative structures emphasise moral excess: "aláiníyònú" (merciless), "burúkú" (wicked), "ẹlẹgàn" (arrogant). This pattern activates a socio-cognitive schema linking female ambition to moral disorder.

The nomination strategies are particularly significant because they pre-empt alternative framings. Efunsetan could have been nominated as "Ìyálóde" (a title for female chieftains) or "olóri" (leader). Instead, the film predominantly uses morally charged labels that position her outside legitimate authority structures.

6.1.4. Multimodal Framing

Visual grammar reinforces this containment through consistent patterns:

Efunsetan Aniwura:

Lighting: Low-key lighting in many interior scenes creates shadow and obscurity around the protagonist

Framing: Efunsetan is frequently framed in medium or isolating shots that separate her from communal spaces

Composition: She is often positioned against backgrounds that suggest isolation rather than integration

Costume: Dark, heavy fabrics contrast with the lighter attire of other characters, visually coding her as ominous

Aiye:

Lighting: Ritual scenes featuring female supernatural figures employ low-key, flickering lighting that suggests danger and mystery

Camera angle: Female figures are sometimes shot from low angles that acknowledge their power, but the power is consistently coded as threatening

Colour palette: Muted, dark tones dominate scenes of female supernatural agency, while male ritual spaces may feature brighter or more varied colours

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), visual salience and lighting index evaluative positioning. The consistent association of female authority with darkness, isolation, and ominous visual treatment codes that authority as destabilising rather than legitimate.

In Efunsetan Aniwura, shot/reverse-shot patterns consistently position male chiefs as looking at Efunsetan with judgmental gazes, while Efunsetan rarely returns the gaze directly to camera or controls the visual field. This pattern conforms to Mulvey's structure of women as "image" and men as "bearers of the look," though the moral judgment encoded in the male gaze differs from the erotic gaze Mulvey described. By contrast, in *King of Boys*, Eniola frequently looks directly at camera (demand gaze) and is positioned as the subject rather than object of looks.

6.1.5. Narrative Resolution

Both classical films conclude with the containment or punishment of female authority:

Efunsetan is killed, her death framed as the restoration of proper order

In *Aiye*, the destructive agency of female supernatural figures is ultimately overcome by male-protected forces of good

These narrative resolutions perform ideological work: they demonstrate that female authority, when it exceeds acceptable bounds, must be corrected. The narrative arc moves from disruption (female power) to restoration (male order), reinforcing the schema that legitimate authority is properly masculine.

6.1.6. Socio-Cognitive Interpretation

From a socio-cognitive perspective, these discursive patterns presuppose and potentially reinforce a shared mental model in which:

Legitimate political authority is cognitively aligned with masculinity

Female authority is exceptional and requires explanation

Female ambition is morally suspect and tends toward excess

The proper narrative for powerful women is tragic downfall

Female power, when acknowledged, belongs properly to supernatural rather than civic domains

These schemas are not invented by the films but drawn from culturally available discourses. However, the films' consistent deployment of containment strategies—relational framing, deontic prohibition, morally charged nomination, ominous visual coding, punitive narrative resolution—works to naturalise these schemas, presenting them as inevitable features of social order rather than as contestable ideological positions.

6.2. Strategic Legitimation of Female Authority in Contemporary Cinema (2018–2022)

A marked shift occurs in *King of Boys* and *Aníkúlápó*. While containment strategies do not disappear entirely, they are substantially reconfigured.

6.2.1. Transitivity Reversal

In *King of Boys*, Eniola Salami occupies Actor roles in material processes central to political governance:

(10) "Mo kó ilé iṣòwò yì látípilè." (I built this business empire from the foundation.)

(11) "Èmi ló maa pinnu ẹni tó maa jọba." (I am the one who will decide who rules.)

(12) "Mo gbé e kalẹ, èmi náà lè wó ọ lulẹ." (I set it up, and I can also bring it down.)

Here, material processes encode strategic, institutional agency. Unlike earlier films, female authority is not merely predicated but enacted through action clauses. The first-person pronoun (*mo*, *èmi*) positions Eniola as an agent who initiates, decides, and controls outcomes.

The transitivity shift is striking when compared to classical representations. Efunsetan was primarily characterised through what she was (cruel, barren, merciless); Eniola is characterised through what she does (builds, decides, sets up, brings down). The grammatical positioning of women as Actors in central processes signals a cognitive shift: authority is no longer structurally gender-exclusive.

Similarly, in *Aníkúlápó*, Arolake performs material and mental processes tied to decisive intervention:

(13) "Mo fún ọ ní èmí." (I gave you life.)

(14) "Èmi ló máa yan ẹnì tó máa wà láàyè." (I am the one who will choose who lives.)

These utterances position Arolake as an agent of life and death, wielding authority comparable to divine or royal power. The material process "fún" (gave) positions her as source and origin; the volitional "máa yan" (will choose) positions her as decision-maker.

6.2.2. Modality and Volition

Modal constructions shift from prohibition to volitional assertion:

(15) "Èmi ó gba agbára." (I will take power.)

(16) "A ó darí." (We shall lead.)

Volitional modality (ó—will/shall) encodes certainty and entitlement rather than restriction. The shift from *kò lè* (cannot) to *ó* (will) is grammatically simple but ideologically significant. It presupposes that female political agency is possible and legitimate; the question is not whether women can lead but what they will do with power.

6.2.3. Nomination and Re-Signification

The appropriation of the title "Oba" (king/sovereign) in *King of Boys* destabilises male-coded sovereignty:

(17) "Wón ń pè mí ní Oba." (They call me King.)

Nomination functions here as discursive re-signification: a historically masculine title is claimed without linguistic qualification or apology. This differs sharply from earlier films where female titles were marked or contested. The film does not need to invent new vocabulary for female authority; it simply asserts that existing vocabulary can apply.

In *Aníkúlápó*, Arolake is never diminished by the absence of formal title; her authority is enacted rather than nominated. The film's mythic framework allows female authority to be presented as foundational rather than exceptional.

6.2.4. Multimodal Legitimation

Visual grammar in contemporary films systematically reinforces legitimacy:

King of Boys:

Camera angle: Eniola is frequently shot from low angles that position the viewer looking up at her, visually encoding dominance

Framing: Central framing in scenes of political negotiation positions her as the narrative and visual focus

Salience: In group scenes, lighting and focus privilege Eniola, marking her as most significant

Costume: Regal *aso-oke* attire, elaborate beadwork, and Western power dressing combine to signal authority across cultural registers

Composition: Throne-like seating arrangements in her home position her as sovereign in her domain

Aníkúlápó:

Camera angle: Arolake is often shot at eye level or from low angles that acknowledge her agency without fetishising it

Costume: Rich fabrics, symbolic jewellery, and elaborate styling mark her as a figure of significance

Framing: In scenes of decision, she occupies central compositional space

Colour palette: Warm, rich tones in scenes of her agency contrast with cooler tones elsewhere

The multimodal ensemble constructs female authority as institutional rather than aberrant. The visual grammar that classical films used to mark female power as ominous is now deployed to mark it as legitimate.

Eniola's frequent direct address to camera ("demand" gaze in Kress & van Leeuwen's terms) constructs viewer alignment and recognition of her authority. Unlike classical-era framing, she is rarely positioned as an object of judgmental looks. When male characters look at her, it is typically in response to her initiatives—she controls the gaze economy.

6.2.5. Socio-Cognitive Interpretation

These discursive patterns suggest the presupposition and potential reinforcement of an expanded gender schema in which women can cognitively occupy the role of political Actor. Several factors may contribute to this shift:

Broader socio-political changes: Increased female participation in Nigerian politics and business provides real-world referents for cinematic representations

Global feminist discourse: Transnational circulation of feminist ideas through media and advocacy creates new discursive resources

Streaming platform economics: International audiences may demand or reward different gender representations

Female creative leadership: King of Boys director Kemi Adetiba brings a gendered perspective to filmmaking, though as Ilori et al. (2025) note, female production does not automatically guarantee progressive representation

However, the schema remains layered rather than fully transformed. Contemporary films expand the cognitive space for female authority but do not entirely dismantle older schemas.

6.3. Hybrid Ideological Layering

Despite expanded agency, contemporary films retain subtle containment mechanisms that produce hybrid ideological formations.

6.3.1. Relational Re-Anchoring

Eniola's authority in King of Boys is narratively softened through maternal framing:

(18) "Mo jẹ iyá." (I am a mother.)

(19) "Ọmọ mi ni gbogbo nkan fún mi." (My child is everything to me.)

Our initial reading interpreted this exclusively as containment—a narrative device softening female authority by anchoring it in relational identity. However, peer debriefing with female Yoruba colleagues revealed an alternative reading: in Yoruba cultural context, motherhood is a significant source of moral authority, seniority, and social legitimacy (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Eniola's assertion "Mo jẹ iyá" may

therefore function simultaneously as relational re-anchoring (binding her authority to a traditionally female role) and as a strategic claim to culturally legitimate power. This ambivalence exemplifies negoti-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004): Eniola negotiates patriarchal structures by appropriating a valorised feminine identity as a platform for political agency, rather than rejecting it.

Thus, maternal framing in contemporary Yoruba cinema constitutes a site of ideological tension: it may serve to contain female ambition, yet it can also legitimise such ambition within culturally intelligible terms. The hybridity theorised in this study encompasses this duality.

6.3.2. Moral Ambivalence

Empowered women in contemporary films are frequently framed as morally ambiguous anti-heroes rather than unambiguously legitimate leaders:

Eniola's moral ambiguity (as a crime lord) reflects Nnaemeka's (2004) observation that African women's negotiation of power often involves accommodation and compromise within imperfect structures. The film does not imagine a "pure" female leader because its ideological context does not provide that discursive resource. Instead, Eniola's power is real but compromised—a realist portrayal of political agency under patriarchy and corruption. Arolake's interventions, while decisive, emerge from personal grievance and involve deception.

This ambivalence reflects ongoing ideological negotiation within shared cultural cognition. Contemporary films can imagine women in power, but they struggle to imagine women in power as uncomplicatedly good. The residue of the classical schema—which associated female authority with moral disorder—persists in the moral complexity of contemporary female protagonists.

The contrast with male protagonists is instructive. *King of Boys* features multiple male politicians who are equally or more corrupt than Eniola, yet they are not marked as morally problematic because of their ambition. Their corruption is individual failing; hers is freighted with gender significance.

6.3.3. Narrative Vulnerability

Contemporary films also preserve narrative vulnerability for their female protagonists:

Eniola's trajectory includes profound personal loss, exile, and precarious return

Arolake's ultimate position remains ambiguous; her agency is exercised but its consequences are uncertain

Male protagonists in comparable narratives may also experience vulnerability, but it is rarely gendered in the same way. The vulnerability of female protagonists often reads as the price of power—a narrative logic that assumes female authority carries costs that male authority does not.

6.3.4. Visual Ambivalence

Multimodal analysis reveals moments where visual grammar complicates linguistic empowerment:

In *King of Boys*, scenes of Eniola's greatest power are sometimes followed by isolating shots that emphasise her loneliness

Aníkúlápó occasionally frames Arolake in ways that aestheticise rather than empower, inviting spectatorial contemplation rather than identification

These visual choices do not cancel the linguistic empowerment but layer additional meanings onto it. The result is ideological hybridity: simultaneous assertion and qualification of female authority.

As noted in Table 2, *King of Boys: The Return of the King* includes several high-angle shots framing Eniola in moments of grief (following her son's death) and during her exile. These do not cancel the dominant low-angle legitimation but add a layer of vulnerability. Similarly, *Aníkúlápó* includes eye-level framing during Arolake's moments of romantic betrayal, momentarily shifting from empowered to vulnerable visual positioning. These visual ambivalences are sites of ideological layering rather than contradictions.

6.4. Comparative Synthesis

Discursive Feature	Classical Era (1970s–1980s)	Contemporary Era (2018–2022)
Transitivity	Women as relational Carriers; attributed essential qualities	Women as material Actors; enact political processes
Modality	Deontic restriction (must not, cannot)	Volitional assertion (will, shall)
Nomination	Witch, tyrant, deviant, barren	Oba, strategist, sovereign; or unmarked
Predication	Moral excess (cruel, wicked, merciless)	Strategic competence (powerful, decisive)
Visual framing	Ominous lighting, isolating shots, marginal composition	Central framing, low-angle shots, regal costuming
Gaze patterns	Object of male judgmental gaze	Controls gaze; direct address to camera
Narrative outcome	Punishment/containment; death or defeat	Ambiguous triumph; power achieved but qualified
Relational framing	Authority explained through lack (childlessness)	Authority anchored in maternal identity (ambivalent)
Moral positioning	Clearly marked as morally deviant	Morally complex anti-hero; ambiguity preserved

Table 3: Discursive Construction of Female Authority across Epochs

Note. Analytical categories are based on Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), van Dijk (2006), Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), Mulvey (1975), and Lazar (2005). Era characterisations are the authors' own.

6.5. The Ideological Square in Operation

Van Dijk's ideological square provides a useful framework for understanding the differences between eras:

Classical Era:

Emphasise their bad: Female authority is cruel, excessive, destructive

Emphasise our good: Male authority is procedural, legitimate, restorative

De-emphasise their good: Women's achievements are backgrounded

De-emphasise our bad: Male failures are individual rather than systemic

Contemporary Era:

Emphasise their good: Female competence, strategic vision, political skill

But retain their bad: Moral ambiguity, violence, corruption

Male authority is no longer uniformly good but is not marked by gender

Female authority remains marked, even when empowered

The ideological square is partially inverted—female competence is foregrounded—but not entirely dismantled. The persistence of moral marking for female authority indicates that gender remains a salient category for evaluation in ways that it does not for male authority.

6.6. Theoretical Implications

The findings extend van Dijk's socio-cognitive model into multimodal African film discourse by demonstrating how evolving gender schemas are discursively constructed across time. Several theoretical contributions emerge:

1. **Schemas as Layered:** The concept of "hybrid ideological layering" suggests that cognitive schemas are not simply replaced but accumulate. Contemporary representations of female authority draw on expanded schemas while retaining residual elements of older schemas. This layering produces ideological complexity that linear models of progress cannot capture.
2. **Multimodal Articulation:** The integration of linguistic and visual analysis reveals how different semiotic modes may reinforce or complicate each other. Instances where visual framing qualifies linguistic empowerment are particularly significant for understanding ideological ambivalence.
3. **African Feminist Specificity:** The patterns identified resonate with Nnaemeka's (2004) *negofeminism*: female characters in contemporary films negotiate power within existing structures rather than overthrowing them. Their agency is real but constrained, producing the hybrid formations we have documented. Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) *Stiwanism* also illuminates these representations: women transform social structures from within, through strategic negotiation rather than revolutionary rupture.
4. **Containment as Persistent:** The persistence of containment mechanisms—relational re-anchoring, moral ambivalence, narrative vulnerability—suggests that ideological transformation in gender representation proceeds slowly and unevenly. Empowerment and containment are not opposites but co-existing strategies within contemporary discourse.

We reiterate that claims about “reinforcing schemas” refer to discursive sedimentation—the textual presupposition and normalisation of gender schemas—rather than demonstrated cognitive effects. The socio-cognitive framework generates testable hypotheses for future reception research (Section 7.4).

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how female authority is discursively constructed in Yoruba cinema across two historical clusters: the classical era of the 1970s–1980s and the contemporary digital/streaming era (2018–2022). Through a socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis of Efunsetan Aniwura, Aiye, King of Boys, and Aníkúlápó, the analysis demonstrates both ideological transformation and continuity in the representation of gendered power.

7.1. Summary of Findings

At the micro-linguistic level, classical films predominantly positioned women within relational processes, assigning attributes such as cruelty, sterility, or spiritual excess, while reserving material political agency for male actors. Deontic modality further policed female authority, encoding prohibition and normative constraint. Multimodal framing reinforced this containment through ominous lighting, isolating shots, and symbolic associations with moral disorder. From a socio-cognitive perspective, these discursive patterns presupposed and potentially reinforced a culturally sedimented schema in which legitimate political authority was cognitively aligned with masculinity.

By contrast, contemporary films such as *King of Boys* and *Aníkúlápó* exhibit a marked redistribution of agency. Female protagonists occupy Actor roles in material processes central to governance and strategic decision-making. Volitional modality replaces prohibition, and nomination practices re-signify historically masculine titles. Multimodal grammar—low-angle shots, central framing, and regal costuming—visually legitimises female sovereignty. These shifts indicate a reconfiguration of shared gender schemas, reflecting broader socio-cultural transformations shaped by urbanisation, global media flows, and feminist discourse.

However, this transformation is neither total nor linear. Contemporary portrayals frequently reinscribe relational framing, moral ambivalence, and narrative vulnerability. Female authority remains narratively entangled with motherhood, romance, and ethical ambiguity. Thus, ideological change in Yoruba cinema is best understood not as rupture but as hybrid reconfiguration: empowerment coexists with residual patriarchal cognition.

7.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to scholarship in three significant ways.

1. Extension of Socio-Cognitive CDA to African Film

While Teun A. van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model has been widely applied to political and media discourse, its systematic operationalisation in African cinematic analysis remains limited. By integrating transitivity analysis, modality mapping, nomination/predication strategies, and visual grammar, this study demonstrates how filmic discourse constructs and presupposes shared gender mental models across time. The findings illustrate that ideological cognition in film operates through both linguistic and multimodal structures, and that schemas evolve through layering rather than replacement.

2. Methodological Integration of Linguistic and Visual Grammar

The study advances methodological practice by integrating systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) with multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This layered analytical model enables a precise mapping of agency distribution and ideological positioning, moving beyond thematic description toward structural explanation. The coding framework developed for this study (Appendix A) provides a model for future research on filmic discourse.

3. Reconceptualising Gender Transformation as Hybrid

Rather than framing contemporary Yoruba cinema as evidence of straightforward feminist progression, the study proposes the concept of hybrid ideological layering. Female authority is increasingly legitimised in grammatical and visual terms, yet residual patriarchal schemas persist in narrative resolution and relational framing. This conceptualisation contributes to African feminist media studies by theorising gender transformation as cognitive reconfiguration within historically layered discursive systems. It resonates with African feminist frameworks that emphasise negotiation, accommodation, and strategic transformation rather than revolutionary rupture.

7.3. Implications for African Media and Gender Studies

The findings suggest that Yoruba cinema functions as a dynamic site of ideological negotiation where historical memory, colonial legacies, and global feminist discourses intersect. The coexistence of empowerment and containment reflects a broader transitional socio-cultural context in Nigeria, where expanding female participation in politics and business coexists with persistent patriarchal norms.

For media practitioners, the study highlights the importance of attending not only to whether women are represented but how they are represented. Films that feature powerful women may nevertheless reproduce containment through relational framing, moral ambivalence, or visual qualification. Conscious attention to these mechanisms could support more fully realised representations of female agency.

For educators and policymakers, the findings suggest that media literacy programmes might usefully include attention to subtle discursive mechanisms of containment. Audiences who learn to recognise relational re-anchoring or moral marking may be better equipped to critically evaluate gender representations.

For scholars, the study demonstrates the value of diachronic comparison and integrated multimodal analysis. The hybrid formations identified here would be invisible in synchronic or monomodal analysis.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of analysing African screen cultures through structurally grounded discourse methods. As Nollywood continues to expand globally, its gendered representations contribute not only to national cultural discourse but also to transnational imaginaries of African femininity and power. Understanding the complexity of these representations—their simultaneous empowerment and containment—is essential for accurate cultural analysis.

7.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research:

Corpus size and composition: The study is limited to four films. The classical-era corpus is particularly constrained: Efunsetan Aniwura is the only readily available classical Yoruba film with a mortal female political protagonist, and Aiye features supernatural rather than civic female authority. Future research should locate additional classical-era films (potentially in archives or private collections) and include films from the intervening video era (1990s–2000s) to enable genuine continuous diachronic analysis.

Temporal gap: The 39-year gap between Aiye (1979) and King of Boys (2018) means this study compares endpoints, not a continuous trajectory. Research examining films from the 1990s and 2000s is urgently needed.

Audience reception: This study focuses on textual analysis. Future research should employ focus groups, interviews, or survey methods to investigate how audiences cognitively process these representations, testing the presuppositions identified here.

Comparative analysis: The study focuses exclusively on Yoruba-language cinema. Comparative analysis with Hausa Kannywood or Igbo-language films would illuminate regional specificities.

Production context: While we note the gender of directors, we do not systematically examine production contexts. Future research could investigate how funding sources, distribution platforms, and target audiences shape gender representations.

Quantitative corpus-assisted analysis: The qualitative approach could be complemented by corpus-assisted methods tracking modal and transitivity patterns across larger datasets.

Streaming platform effects: Research could investigate how platform algorithms and international audience expectations shape production choices.

7.5. Final Reflection

Across the two production epochs examined, Yoruba cinema reveals a complex ideological trajectory. Female authority, previously discursively contained and moralised, is now grammatically enacted and visually legitimised. However, the persistence of relational anchoring and moral ambivalence indicates that socio-cognitive transformation is ongoing.

The journey from Efunsetan's tragic downfall to Eniola Salami's ambiguous triumph is not a simple narrative of progress. It is a story of negotiation, layering, and hybrid formation—of new schemas emerging while older ones persist. Yoruba cinema, therefore, does not merely mirror social change; it participates in the gradual renegotiation of gendered power within a historically layered cultural imagination.

In Eniola's assertion, "Èmi ló máa pinnu ẹni tó máa jọba" (I am the one who will decide who rules), we hear a claim that would have been unthinkable in the cinema of the 1970s. Yet we also hear the echoes of older schemas in the moral complexity that surrounds her. The hybridity is not failure; it is the texture of ideological change as it actually occurs—uneven, contested, and incomplete.

As African feminist frameworks remind us, transformation often proceeds through negotiation rather than rupture, through strategic engagement rather than outright rejection. The women of contemporary Yoruba cinema—Eniola, Arolake, and others—embody this negotiated transformation. They do not simply inherit power; they claim it, reshape it, and pay its price. Their stories, in all their complexity, offer rich material for understanding how gender, power, and culture intersect in contemporary African screen media.

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