

Viewing the African Political Leadership Challenge through the Lens of Music Drama: Reflections on Duro Ladipo's *Ọba Kòso*

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Abstract

In response to the question of the relevance of 'classical' African Studies to the contemporary need of the continent, this article explores the dynamics of leadership challenge as portrayed in Yorùbá music drama genre, using Duro Ladipo's most popular folk opera: *Ọba Kòso* (The king did not hang) as a case study. Thematic exploration of the opera was carried out to establish the linkages between leaders' (characters') traits and styles as portrayed in the play, and Nigeria's political leaders' engagement and responses to social contracts with their citizens. By comparing the outcomes of the actions, inactions and (in)decisions of Nigeria's political leaders and the attendant consequences on their subjects with those found in the opera. I argue that the African political leadership challenge is shaped by a combination of complex factors, including the leaders' charisma and the quality of citizens' engagements in the affairs of governance. These are largely occasioned by multiple effects of torrential and irresistible mob pressures on leaders. At the fringes of the debacle is a convergence of human fate and other coincidental elements within the various sites of the divide in the contestation for and utilisation of power as a whole.

Keywords: African underdevelopment, Political leadership, Yorùbá folk opera, Duro Ladipo, and Music drama.

Introduction

Leadership capital deficit remains a major bane of human development in Africa. The challenge of proffering workable and sustainable solutions to redress the repercussions associated with poor leadership has occupied the front burner in scholarly discourse and in general social discursive plane. Analysis of and conclusions on Africa's undesirable but avoidable state of affairs have been more from the lenses of social science-related disciplines such as political science, economics, psychology, sociology, security studies and so forth (Makinde 2005; Ukeje 2010; Adebani & Obadare 2010; Anazodo, Okoye & Ezenwile 2012; and Adah & Abasilim 2015) than from core humanities angle, especially the field of musicology. A handful of scholarly articles from the field of cultural studies on the subject matter (Eselebor 2014; and Adeduntan 2018) has not established much interconnection among artistic characters (actors), their products and the nature of political leadership in Africa on the one hand, and the state of affairs in the continent on the other. This lacuna becomes more pronounced against the backdrop of the writings on the picturesque heroic exploits of notable legends as recorded in different epics, annals and traditions of Africans (Conrad 1992; Austen and Jansen 1996).

It has long been argued that Africans ought to seek 'African solutions to Africa's problems.' This suggests that African scholars, and by extension, scholarship in Africa, should demonstrate capacity to proffer solutions to the multiplicity of challenges confronting the continent on many fronts. In so doing, there is the need to properly locate the challenge bedeviling African nations and specifically connect issues bordering on perennial leadership failure in contemporary times to the same corruptive practices and maladministration that characterised many of the leaders of the defunct ancient empires and peoples of Africa. Scholars have suggested that these were the same challenges that subsequently led to their collapse. For instance, Albert (2013) submitted that the type of resource mismanagement and wastages that characterised Nigeria's former President Goodluck Jonathan-led Administration was in many respects a replica of the high-handedness, self-aggrandizement, lack of sound judgment and wasteful spending typical of the reign of Mansa Musa, the famous leader of the defunct Mali Empire. Not only did they become the albatross of the empire, they also led to its final collapse shortly after his demise. Albert further justified his critique of both leaders' performance in governance by identifying common denominators in their administrations, which included economic recklessness, lack of accountability and looting of their nations' patrimonies. Specific attention was drawn to the records of Musa's stupendous display of his empire's wealth during his pilgrimage to Mecca and the prodigal-like attitude that characterised Jonathan's presidency. Albert

lamented the depletion of Nigeria's resources through wasteful spending on a large number of government-sponsored contingents to numerous international meetings such as the United Nations and the African Union.

This article demonstrates the relevance of 'classical' African studies to contemporary scholarship by interrogating the issue of leadership and the perennial challenge of underdevelopment of Africa. The paper is premised on the fact that a correct diagnosis of the taproot of Africa's long-standing experiences as well as her state of affairs will facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of the challenges of the time with a view to mediating the desired result for progress and development of the continent.

Utilitarian Values of Yorùbá Folk Opera

An exploration of Yorùbá folk opera offers a unique opportunity to connect the dots of Africa's long-standing challenge of underdevelopment to examples found in historical plays. The Yorùbá folk operatic tradition entails the staging of plays, which rely on Yorùbá songs with instrumental accompaniments presented in plot and characterisation development (Omojola 2014). Notable travelling theatre troupes dominated the theatrical landscape in Yorùbáland between the 1960s and 1970s, and popularised folk opera (Ogunbiyi 1981; Omojola 1994). Essential components of Yorùbá folk operas include Yorùbá language, traditional songs, musical instruments, dances and praise chant idioms such as *ràrà*, *ìjálá* and *oríkì*. All these elements are based on Yorùbá worldview, myths and legends (Samuel 2000). Beyond entertainment, Yorùbá folk operas are further appreciated for their utilitarian values, especially in historicizing socio-political events. They also provide a rear-view mirror and reflective model for understanding a whole gamut of issues bordering on the question of leadership in Africa.

Besides Hubert Ogunde, the acclaimed pioneer of Yorùbá folk opera, other respected names included Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and Oyin Adejebi, who are all deceased. Ladipo was perhaps the most prominent of them, partly because of his wide international exposure and also because of his famous historical plays. As a playwright and composer, Duro Ladipo's mythico-historical plays were based on myth and legends from Yorùbá cultural traditions (Ogundeji 1988). He used Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorùbás* as a guide, conducted intensive research into numerous oral traditions to obtain detailed information before composing the folk operas. Most of the stories in the plays have tragic end, leading to the transmogrification of the principal characters in each play. The operas included *Ọba Mọrọ*, *Ajagun Nlá*, *Ọba Kòso* and *Mọrèmi*.

Duro Ladipo's advocacy on the need for all Nigerians comprising common people and the elite alike to respect and cherish their own cultural heritage was effectively carried out through the promotion and performances of his mythico-legendary plays. As a creative artiste, he maintained a high level of proficiency in his productions as he made use of symbolic settings to produce suggestive realism in his plays. Ladipo varied the only stage used for each production through the use of simple painted back-drops with *àdirẹ* (tie and dye materials) to effectively convey scenery, mood and so forth. He also used cross-rigged lanterns with gels to depict various moods and produce desired lighting effects (Samuel 2000). Dress codes in form of costumes and stage properties (props), which reflect Yorùbá culture, were used in Ladipo's operas. In addition, the composer employed an array of costumes ranging from *gbéri Sàngó* (Sàngó's vest), to *òjá Sàngó* (Sàngó's girdle) and also *yèrì* and *òṣù Sàngó* as well as beads won by the *olori* (queens), chiefs and kings (Ogundeji 1998). His props included *sééré Sàngó* (Sàngó's gourd), *osé Sàngó* (Sàngó's axe), bow and arrow, animal horn used for *ofò* and *àfọṣẹ* (incantatory verses) and *irùkèrẹ* (the whisk). In all, Africa's quintessential culture materials were well pronounced in Duro Ladipo's plays. Part of his novel ideas in presenting Yorùbá plays included exploring cross-cultural synthesis as evident in his introduction of Agbor dancers – a group from a different cultural background – into one of his productions.

Objective and Methodology

The objective of this paper is to explore the dynamics of leadership/citizenship engagements as portrayed in Duro Ladipo's most popular work: *Oba Kòso* (The king did not hang). The author made a thematic analysis of the work and formulated issues bordering on the correlates of leadership traits/styles displayed by characters in the opera. Specifically, points of convergence were teased out in order to establish a nexus between the formulated issues and relevant governance sites characteristic of Nigeria's contemporary socio-political space, particularly since her return to civil rule in 1999.

The research approach adopted in this study was primarily archival method in form of text transcriptions and thematic analysis. Purposive sampling method was used to select *Oba Kòso*. In my reading of the different roles and actions of specific characters, protagonists and antagonists alike, I juxtapose different leadership traits (autocratic/dictatorial, belligerent, laissez-faire, transactional, situational and people-oriented) as located in the literature with those obtainable from specific leaders as portrayed in the opera. I argue that the outcomes of the actions/inactions and (in) decisions of Nigeria's political leaders and attendant consequences on their subjects are shaped

by a combination of complex factors. These include the charisma (or lack of it) of the leaders vis a viz the level and quality of citizens' engagements in governance, as well as the multiple effects of torrential and irresistible mob pressures on the leaders. At the fringes of this debacle is a convergence of human fate and other coincidental elements within the various sites of in the contestation for and utilization of power as a whole.

Ọba Kòso: The Plot

Ọba Kòso was based on the historical account of Aláàfin (King) Şàngó of Ọyó¹ and two of his army generals – Tìmi and Gbònkáà– who are constantly expanding his kingdom through conquests from wars. His townspeople however oppose the incessant wars because it is the rank and file in the military formation, largely comprising young and able-bodied men (husbands) and children that suffer casualties.

In the mythical play, Şàngó presents as an ambivalent ruler. On one hand, he is a petty and tyrant king whose intrigues fail woefully, and in the end, he has no one but himself to blame in the intricate power play. Deeply motivated by his insecurity, Şàngó deploys divide-and-rule tactics on many occasions, which backfired. An instance is his subtle failed attempt to exterminate Tìmi whom he pretentiously elevates to the status of a tax collector (*onibodè*), with the hope that he would be killed by the notorious Ijèşà bandits. Secondly, he set the two powerful generals against each other with a view to getting either or both of them killed such that neither constitutes a threat to his reign. In the ensuing battle, Gbònkáà defeats Tìmi but spares his life; an outcome which Şàngó declares unsatisfactory. He, therefore, contrives another scheme leading to another battle in the full glare of all townspeople in Akèşán market. Gbònkáà, who recognizes Şàngó's duplicity, seeks the aid of witches and fortifies himself in readiness for the second battle. He once again emerges victorious, but this time, beheads Tìmi and subsequently invades Ọyó. Unable to handle the humiliation, especially his supporters' desertion, Şàngó invokes thunder and fire and destroys many of them. He remorsefully abdicates the throne and hangs himself when his beloved wife Ọya leaves him to his fate. The story ends with Şàngó's devotees binding together to deify him, proclaiming 'the king did not hang' (*Ọba Kòso*), rather that he merely metamorphosed into a divinity.

1 Tradition has it that Şàngó was the third Aláàfin after Ọranmíyàn and Àjàká.

Engaging Africa's Leadership Question: A Canonical Exploration of Themes in *Ọba Kòso*

Media texts are, by and large, a reflection of the culture of which they are a part. In addition, song texts in particular serve as an investigator of human behaviour with some of the richest materials for analysis. As a result of the complex relationship that exists between text/language and tone/music, a musicologist has an additional responsibility besides analysing music 'in terms of itself', to include relating the music to the culture of origin. My starting point in this regard is therefore to identify dominant themes in *Ọba Kòso* and attempt a discussion of relevant issues based on my reading of the texts/songs in the opera. Thereafter, I draw some reflections on diverse aspects of Nigeria's political culture, especially their contextual relationships.

Praise theme

One of the commonest themes employed by Duro Ladipo in his folk operas is praise. This is generally referred to as *oriki* (praise chant/poetry). *Oriki* is a body of verbal and musical art characterized by the poetic, descriptive eulogy and historical narration about people, places, events or things. It is the largest store-house of verbal materials for the composition of Yorùbá oral poetry. Babalola (1966), Vidal (2012) and Samuel (2015) all agree that in content, *oriki* is a name or set of names, which includes nicknames, trade names and verbal slogans, known to the individual. As a musical and poetic form, it permeates the entire fabric of the Yorùbá society so much so that social occasions, including marriage, naming, coronation and funeral ceremonies, and so forth, provide avenues for showering praises and encomiums not only on the celebrant, but also on important guests and personalities present. Music performances at such occasions are regarded as incomplete without the rendition of *oriki* in one form or the other. The praises may focus on some of the endearing qualities of the recipient or some of the great exploits of his ancestors. Court bards, poets and musicians in Yorùbá palaces are assigned the recitation or performance of the *oriki* of incumbent paramount rulers and their ancestors. Custom prescribes that Yorùbá kings are revered and referred to as being next in rank only to the divinities. Consistent with this tradition, all palace scenes in Duro Ladipo's plays feature extensive chanting and singing of the monarchs' *oriki* and that of important chiefs by the court bard. For instance, the first scene of *Ọba Kòso* opened with the *oriki* of Şàngó chanted by Ìwàrẹ̀fà and interjected by *oloris'* phrases as follows:

Ìwàrẹ̀fà: *Ikú òòòòòò!*

Ikú òòòòòò!

Ikú bàbá-yèyè!

Aláṣẹ̀ èkejì òrìṣà!

Olori: *Kábiyèsí!*

Ìwàrẹ̀fà: *Alágbára lóri àwọn omọ olóri kunkun*

Ìjàngbòn lóri omọ aláìgboràn!

Olori: *Aláiyélúwà!*

Ìwàrẹ̀fà: *Akọkọlúkọ ebọ tí pa igún lẹ̀rù!*

Olori: *Aláṣẹ̀, èkejì òrìṣà!*

Ìwàrẹ̀fà: *òkèlè àkabù tí r'ògangan ìdí!*

Ìnàjù ẹ̀kùn tí dẹ̀rùb'ode!

Olori: *Kábiyèsí!*

Aláiyélúwà!

Aláṣẹ̀, èkejì òrìṣà!

Eunuch: Hail Death!

Hail Death!

Death, father-mother!

Commander! Second to the gods!

Royal wives: Your majesty!

Eunuch: One who has power over the Obstinate!

Trouble over the heads of the Disobedient!

Royal wives: Lord of life and being!

Eunuch: Giant sacrifice, too much for the vulture to carry!

Royal wives: Commander, Second to the gods!

Eunuch: The first morsel, which goes straight to the bottom!
The leopard's gaze, which frightens the hunter!

Royal wives: Your Majesty!

Lord of life and being

Commander, second to the Gods!

(Armstrong, 1970: 67- 68)

The reference to Šàngó as *Iku* (Death) in the foregoing passage connotes that his wishes, decisions and actions are final and incontrovertible. Just as a decision by death to strike or kill anyone is irreversible, so is the power of Šàngó over his subjects. There is a widely accepted view in the traditional Yorùbá society that the power of the monarch cannot be challenged. The phrase “Kabiyesi” (Your Majesty) literarily, “No one dares to ask him why” seems to confirm this notion. Every Aláàfin of Òyó to date is addressed as “Ikú, Bábá-yèyè”. Another interesting issue in his *oriki* is the combinatory attribute of father and mother (‘bábá-yèyè’) vested in the same personality, which more or less blurs any form of gender division in respect of the operations of the office of Aláàfin. In addition, Aláàfin Šàngó is described in the foregoing *oriki* as: ‘One who has power over the Obstinate! Trouble over the heads of the Disobedient’, nonetheless, he appears incapable of exercising firm control over his army generals’ infractions and acts of insubordination. An antinomy can be detected in his (in)action, which is not in tandem with the identity he is marked with. His helplessness as portrayed by a lack of political will to decisively deal with impunity of his army generals – Timì and Gbònkàà is not in sync with the appellations of his name.

The unprecedented victories by the warlords did not only bring fame and material gains to Aláàfin Šàngó, they also meant remarkable dividends for the arrow heads of his military operations. Largesse from their relentless wars includes acquisition of properties, choice location of land/area and distribution of captured slaves and indenture servants. The foregoing, however, were accompanied with apparent high costs to the townspeople. In unison, they expressed their objection to the consequent casualties comprising their young and grown-up children, husbands, and male household heads. Allegations are also rife suggesting that family members and relatives suffered in the needless wars. My reading of the actions of the heads of Aláàfin’s military

architecture in the above scenario as portrayed in the opera led me to draw some comparisons. First is an inference between the consequent effects of the war-mongering attitude of the two military leaders on the townspeople, on the one hand, and the negative impacts and attendant fatal consequences of the activities of multinational companies with their oil exploration and mining businesses on dwellers of areas where explorative activities take place in Nigeria, on the other hand. Members of the host communities, especially in the Niger Delta where oil explorations are carried out, have suffered environmental degradation as a result of oil spillages, wilful neglect and non-provision of social amenities. In addition, there are repeated reports of poor implementation of developmental programmes to ameliorate negative effects of these humanly induced disasters. Leading oil producing companies are complicit, supported by state brutality, in the exploitation of the natural resources found in the Niger Delta. In addition, the actors have been fingered as culprits in allegations of human and environmental rights violations against the people (Ukeje 2010).

Secondly, there exists a link between the connivance of community leaders and the political elite in the oil region areas, as well as the culpability of the multinationals, and this also has attracted much scholarly discussion (Obi 2004 & 2010; Amuwo 2009). Studies have focused on how and why different stakeholders as well as principal parties in the oil business profiteer from heinous crimes, which by all standards ought to be labelled as serious infringement against fundamental human rights (Obi 2008 & 2010). There are reasons to suggest a breach of trust among government functionaries, oil companies, community leaders who are cronies of the powers-that-be to the detriment of helpless members of the public.

In interrogating the dynamics of different leadership qualities displayed in *Ọba Kòso*, it is important to examine how Aláàfin Şàngó's leadership style is implicated in addressing the challenges with which his subjects were confronted. The portrayal of Aláàfin Şàngó in the epithet presented by Ìwàrẹfà in the chant smacks of impunity and more or less expresses a blanket cheque for Şàngó to engage in executive rascality. It presents an example of how a leader indirectly compromises his authority, subtly engages in abuse of power and ultimately promotes corruption. Just as all appeals by Şàngó's subjects to elicit positive response to their plights and to exercise firm control on his army generals were ignored, so also have different Nigeria's presidents failed to punish infractions and gross misconducts of their appointees. Such inertia has often drawn criticisms from members of the society. It is against this backdrop that the failure of Nigerian political leaders to curb the excesses of their cronies and benefactors who are sometimes referred to as 'the cabals' can be contextualized. Evidence abounds of how Nigerian leaders have

largely been paying lip service to the issue of fighting corruption, and thereby displaying laissez-faire leadership trait. Ejimabo (2013) identified a litany of challenges responsible for poor governance in Nigeria, including continuous disregard for the rule of law on the part of the government and the governed alike, breach of public trust as evidenced in mismanagement of resources (decadence in amenities and infrastructures) and instability of government. The greatest of the problem however seems to be the unmitigated level of corruption, which is not only disturbing but has also assumed an endemic status.

Still on the subject of *oriki*, it is instructive to refer to Ogundeji's (1998) observation of two phrases from Šàngó's *oriki*— "*Akokólúkò, èbò tíi pagún l'èrù*" (Enormous sacrifice too much for the vulture) and "*Òrìṣà tíi b'ológbò lèrù*" ("The god who frightens the "cats"), which underscore that Šàngó had power over wizards and witches. The reason being that at a cultic level, *igún* (vulture) or *eye* (bird) and *ológbò* (cat) are generally metonymizations of witches among the Yorùbá. In explaining the point above, I wish to draw attention to Ehineni's (2017: 131) submission on the use of metaphors by the Yorùbá to draw from their experiential cultural contexts, showcase core values of the culture and function as veritable vehicles for conveying deeply loaded cultural messages in Yorùbá rhetoric. It is against this backdrop that the epithet of Šàngó as an "enormous sacrifice" too powerful a being (god) to be harmed by witches or witchcraft could be explained. Šàngó's entries in the plays were always preceded by his eulogy either fully or partly chanted. For example, in scene three, the *olori* were paying obeisance to Šàngó in the court according to Yorùbá custom and tradition by chanting his totem, accompanied with drumming as follows:

Olori: Kábiyèsí!

Atóóbájaiyé!

Olówóò mi, ọkọ̀ mi o!

Èni a ní níi gba'ni!

Òòṣà gba tẹ̀mi yẹ̀wò

Ifá lo ní gbọ̀wọ̀ ewúré

Šàngó Ewégbẹ̀mí l'onígbòwọ̀ mi!

Bóo bá d'oyin, o má mà ta mí!

Bóo bá d'ògídán, o má mà p'èran Ìyáà mi jẹ!

Olójú orógbó!

Şàngó Olúkoròoooo!

Royal wives: Your Majesty!

With whom one can associate and enjoy life

My master, my husband!

The one whom a person has is the one who saves him!

O (God), consider my case

Ifá is the surety for goats

Şàngó Ewegbemi is my Sponsor!

If you become a bee, don't sting please!

If you become a leopard, don't devour my mother's goat please!

With eyes white as bitter kola!

Şàngó fierce lord!

(Armstrong, 1970: 90-91)

The foregoing eulogy was chanted in free declamatory style, followed by a song in strict time, supported with heavy drumming on the *bátá* and accompanied with vigorous stamp dance steps characteristic of Şàngó cult performance by members.

From the presentation of the *oriki*, Aláàfin Şàngó is described as a benevolent leader whom his people consider as humane as well as a deliverer (saviour) in whom they confidently seek refuge. Furthermore, Şàngó is also eulogized as someone whom the chanter/subjects considers approachable. In the phrase: *Eni a ní níí gba'ni!* (The one whom a person has is the one who saves him!), he is presented as a compassionate leader who swiftly heeds his subjects' calls for help. Other interesting information emerges from Şàngó's *oriki* as we learn that this admirable trait is somehow contrapuntally veiled and encased in a virulent personality considering his temperament. The same Şàngó who is presented as a just and an attentive adjudicator; a leader to whom their cases are pled for prompt action, is ironically referred to as a stinging bee and a devouring leopard who instils fear in his prey. This could be interpreted as the importance of the office he occupies as a leader. On the

one hand, he is an attentive advocate to his subjects' pleas and eager to serve to ensure his citizens enjoy a good quality of life. On the other hand, the unequivocal nature of the authority he carries is enormous and commands much reverence at all times. Therefore, in contrast to his benevolence, Šàngó is described as a fierce lord who could be ruthless.

I proceed to draw a comparison between Šàngó's portrayed image and that of President Muhammadu Buhari to illustrate this point. Based on the latter's pedigree, he is reputed to be firm and forthright; a no-nonsense leader and described as anti-corruption personified. Many Nigerian citizens had presumed his administration would decisively tackle all forms of indiscipline, fight corruption to a standstill and promote fairness and accountability in governance. However, certain occurrences in Buhari's administration overtime suggested that the decibel level from the voices of praise chanters has steadily risen and has exceeded the threshold of hearing such that like his predecessors in office, he has lost touch with realities. His critics justifiably refer to allegations of corruptive practices levelled against notable members of his kitchen cabinet being treated with kids' gloves. They also accused him of being bitten by the bug of 'power obsession', especially after declaring his intention to seek a second term in office in spite of his ailing and old age. He is seen as an insensitive leader who ignored the plights of his subjects and their cry against injustices, poverty and insecurity across the land. A notable example of the sense of insecurity across the nation is the ceaseless murderous acts of the Fulani herdsmen in the North-central region of Nigeria (Akov 2017; Okoli & Ogayi 2018).

From the presentation, it is also possible to establish a nexus between praise chanting and sycophancy. Oftentimes, Nigeria's political leaders are deafened by the musical art of praise singers such that they gradually lose touch with realities and become blinded to the woes of the downtrodden and by extension, the masses. To this end, sycophancy has remained a demoralizing challenge to good governance in Nigeria (Onanuga 2018). On many occasions, the country has witnessed different organized groups with specific individuals acting as arrow heads and government sponsored coalition forces leading campaigns to encourage any government in power to perpetuate itself in office. These have been the situation in spite of constitutional provisions stipulating maximum number of tenure obtainable for executive offices or public outcry against ineptitude and repression in governance. Notable examples are President Obasanjo's failed attempt to seek a third term in office and a government-sponsored group known as the 'Transformation Agenda Movement' (TAM), which publicly canvassed for another term in office for the Goodluck Jonathan administration. One cannot, therefore, underplay the possible effect of the pressure from sycophants on leaders' insensitive actions,

thereby leading them to undertake fruitless political voyages in their desire to cling to power at all cost.

Conquest theme: Captivating the mind of the masses

Members of the political class, especially leaders, are verse in deploying slogans, phrases and vignettes as propaganda to win over the interest and minds of the electorate. This is common during electioneering campaigns or through the power of the media, which is largely under the control of the State in spite of the well-publicized liberalization policy on the media. One could also liken the effect of such campaign promises, rhetoric and propaganda on the minds of the electorate to the kind of oratory power of incantation by chanter over his victim(s). Empirical evidence will be required to establish the possible effects of politicians' enigmatic smooth talks as agency for political mobilization and domination of the masses. However, this is outside the scope of this paper.

Mobilization of warriors to battle as well as military calls meant for sensitizing and promoting a war-like feeling in a warrior is conveyed through war cries and war songs which usually take the form of exclamatory calls and sharp responses. A good example is found in *Oba Kòso* during the first battle between Gbònkàà and Timì at Èḍe:

Gbònkàà: *Gídígbò gídígbò!*

Ará Èḍe: *Èè!*

Gbònkàà: *Gídígbò gídígbò!*

Ará Èḍe: *Èè- èè!*

Gbònkàà: *Ilè mọ ọ, lónì o*

Gbònkàà: Hip! Hip! Hip!

Townspeople: Hurray!

Gbònkàà: Hip! Hip! Hip!

Townspeople: Hurray!

Gbònkàà: You are in trouble

(Armstrong, 1970: 97)

More often than not, leaders of political parties deploy similar catchy phrases and party slogans as a means of mobilizing members, especially during electioneering campaigns. In the same vein, warring groups in Ladipo's plays also adopt war songs with frightening texts as a psychological weapon to weaken the psyche of the adversary. The foe is often described as an "extremist". An example from *Oba Kòso* is found when Gbònkáà boasted that he would come out unhurt if thrown into the fire to be prepared by the townspeople of Òyó. His action amounted to an insult on Şàngó and for which Gbònkáà was referred to as "*Alásejù*" (an extremist) who must be disgraced.

In Duro Ladipo's folk operas, after a party has won a battle or succeeded in quelling a rebellion, the victorious group usually burst into singing and dancing in celebration of the victory over the vanquished. For instance, in *Oba Kòso*, Gbònkáà bursts into singing and dancing after his first victory over Timì at Èdẹ when he, declares:

Şe b'ómi ní oo paná

(Ladipo, 1970: 29)

Water it is that will quench fire

(Armstrong, 1970:99)

Victorious political parties, stalwarts and their supporters engage in jubilant singing and dancing following their victories at different polls. The chanting of their party's slogans usually fills the air. Examples include: "Power to the people" by the People's Democratic Party and "Change" by members of All Progressives Congress!

Leadership Failure: Who is to Blame?

A number of leadership traits are displayed by different characters in the play: *Oba Kòso*. Starting with Aláàfin Şàngó, one can identify a combination of *laissez-faire*, quasi people-oriented, situational and pseudo-democratic leadership traits and style. The two warlords in the opera (Timì and Gbònkáà) expectedly showed a combination of dictatorial and belligerent leadership style, while the Òyómèsì (chiefs) displayed leadership traits which can be described as midway transactional and situational. On the part of a majority of the followers, they were non-committal. They also betrayed the trust Şàngó reposed in them when they abandoned him when it mattered most.

In many respects, the responses of several persona dramatis including the Òyómèsì, townspeople, signifying the masses, and also the *Oloris* (queens), in

the story of *Oba Kòso* resonate with the theme of fair-weather friendship that characterizes Nigeria's politics. Evidence abounds to confirm that once a Nigerian leader is ousted because of any serious and irreversible political blunder, sometimes through acts of commission or omission, the leader stands the risk of being in double jeopardy through further loss of public support. A majority of the populace is often unsympathetic to the leader's unfortunate predicaments at such a 'dark hour'. It is inconsequential whether the leader made an honest error of judgment or a well-intentioned decision had backfired in the course of legitimately pursuing a goal of common interest to all. A Yorùbá adage: *owó epo l'omọ aráyé n bá'ni lá, wọn kì í bá'ni lá owó èjè* (many people will flock around you when the going is good but abandon you in days of adversity) aptly captures this situation. Indeed, the leader is often deserted by associates and beneficiaries, and made to suffer the consequences alone.

Occasionally, providence might make the leader retain an unalloyed loyalty of close but few allies. Former President Jonathan was reported to have bemoaned the betrayal he suffered from his political associates who allegedly misguided him into committing political blunders, which resulted in his loss of the presidential election in 2015. This reinforces the notion of 'there is no permanent friend in politics, but permanent interest'. Another Yorùbá adage: *pàtẹ̀pàtẹ̀ ni yó kù, b'ọ̀jà bá tú, yóò ku pàtẹ̀pàtẹ̀* (the hawker's fate, in terms of loss or profit, is determined at the end of each market session) offers an appropriate explanation in this respect. Similarly, various events that played out during the struggles for the actualization of Chief M. K. O. Abiola's mandate by pro-democracy organizations following a free, fair and credible presidential election held on June 12, 1993 have been well documented in the annals of Nigeria's political history (Nwokedi 1994; Muse & Narsiah 2015). More importantly are the reports of the infamous betrayals and treasonable acts committed by associates and relatives of Chief Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the election. Several individuals were fingered as betrayers of the cause for which Abiola stood, fought and later died. Ekanade and Odoemene (2012) noted that the Abacha military junta, which was lacking in credibility and legitimacy, successfully shopped for two powerful but pliable leaders of the party under which Abiola contested the election, to negotiate away the victory of their party at the June 12 general elections. Even Abiola's running mate (Ambassador Babagana Kingibe) was accused of trading off the mandate by accepting to serve as a minister under the cabinet of the usurper and Abiola's chief tormentor. Also included on the list of fair weather friends are traditional rulers from Yorùbáland – his region – and those who abandoned the struggle as soon as he was incarcerated by the General Sani Abacha junta.

Finally, a tradition of preservation of honour, which is a well-established practice that characterized the pre-colonial African leadership and a major

factor that crystallized their transmogrification status as recorded by oral traditions is in short supply among contemporary political leaders. Rather than perpetuate self in power and be roundly disgraced, leaders of old who lost out in political contestations or defeated army generals (mighty men of valour) on battle fields often resigned their appointments and went ahead to commit suicide in order to preserve the honour and sanctity of the office they once held. In the same vein, any leader accused of felony, alleged to have been directly or remotely linked with thefts, robbery, arson, murders and so forth or some grievous misdemeanours and antisocial behaviour followed similar path by adhering to the doctrine of preserving their honor. This was expressed in the folk opera when Alááfin Sàngó, as powerful and as revered as he was, opted for throne abdication, was exiled and paid the supreme sacrifice in order to avoid any further disgrace. However, such a practice is rare among the present crop of Nigerian rulers (supposed leaders).

It is a strange phenomenon for principal government functionaries to resign or step aside from office in response to allegations of crimes levelled against them. The situation cuts across the three arms of government ranging from Babachir David Lawal, the former Secretary to the Federal Government (Executive) who was implicated in financial impropriety, to Senator Bukola Saraki, the former President of the Senate who also doubled as the Chair of the legislature and who faced criminal trial bordering on non-declaration of assets. Armed robbery suspects who served as political thugs to the latter also indirectly implicated him as aiding and abetting their nefarious operations. In the same vein, judges who ought to be non-partisan and impartial have also been accused of perverting judgment as a result of financial inducement. It is most likely that Ms Kemi Adeosun, Nigeria's former Minister of Finance, forced resignation from office following prolonged public outcry against her continued stay in government, was more or less, a form of controlled political collateral following allegation of discharge certificate forgery for the mandatory one-year service programme for all graduates as prescribed by law. Without any fear of contradictions, it may be submitted that the present crop of political leaders in Nigeria lack any moral rectitude since many of them refuse to resign from office or step aside to clear their names whenever allegations that could tarnish their image are levelled against them as obtainable in other climes. Such leaders downplay the negative implications their actions have on the institutions they represent. This stance is a strange departure from the norm and does not in any way represent the practice of African leaders in the past (pre-colonial era). Factors responsible for a negative turn of events are a recipe for another scholarly paper worth engaging.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrated the capacity of the scholarship of ‘classical’ African studies to respond to contemporary issues by interrogating the issue of perennial of leadership failure in African society. I explored the dynamics of leadership engagements portrayed in Yorùbá music drama genre using Duro Ladipo’s most popular folk opera: *Ọba Kòso* (The king did not hang) as a case study. An examination of the content of the opera (thematic analysis) was undertaken to reveal a nexus between various traits and styles displayed by select leaders in historical plays and how Nigeria’s leaders engage and respond to the social contracts between them and their citizens. The paper is theoretically premised on the fact that an understanding of how the experience of the Ọyó townspeople in the popular Yorùbá folk opera - *Ọba Kòso* microcosmically coalesces with that of a majority of the Nigerian citizens in many respects is required. To a large extent, one can conclude that Nigeria teeters towards the edge of the precipice occasioned by irresponsible weak leadership and uninspiring reactionary followership, which have continued to threaten the country’s century-long coexistence.

There was a deliberate attempt by the author to deviate from the usual rhetoric of blame that characterizes the writings of postcolonial authorities. More often than not, postcolonial discourse tends to place the responsibility of Africa’s calamitous political misfortunes and ineffective system of government, intractable economic woes, underdevelopment and other related dysfunctional social system solely or squarely on the door steps of the Europeans. Scholars have argued that it was the vicarious colonialists’ incursion of African space and attendant system the invaders set up that reversed the people’s good fortunes. On the one hand, they blame the colonialists for their own woes but fail to look at the mirror to catch a glimpse of self with a view to identifying the conniving culprits of retrogression. On the other hand, typical African scholars secretly desire to be like the people they accuse. My attempt in this essay was, therefore, to demonstrate through a dialectic presentation of a classic case study of the actors in the play – *Ọba Kòso* – that what is playing out in Nigeria’s pseudo democratic experiment, and by extension her postcolonial experience, is a re-invention of the old order, especially when viewed against the socio-political background and adjoining realities of the pre-colonial era.

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