

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE ORIGINS OF DURO LADIPO'S THEATRE

#### Introduction

There is no doubt that traditional Yoruba travelling theatre occupies a significant position in the sociocultural, political and religious milieu of the Yoruba people. This is because in most cases their ways of life, their world views and their being as a whole are commonly expressed through performance. This work seeks to investigate an aspect of Yoruba traditional theatre; this being the theatrical visual languages in the plays of Duro Ladipo - one of the most prominent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Yoruba playwrights and actors. The need to embark on this work is motivated by the need to bring to light the intrinsic values contained in the visual theatrics of Duro Ladipo's three Yoruba plays, namely *Oba Koso*,<sup>1</sup> *Oba Waja*<sup>2</sup> and *Oba Moro*<sup>3</sup>. The visual component of his plays takes one on a journey into understanding the aesthetics and expressions found in all aspects of Yoruba culture. It also explores the social, political and spiritual dynamics of Yoruba from an historical context and provides an extraordinary link into the life history of the avatars of Yoruba cosmology.

The *Eegun Alare (Alarinjo)*<sup>4</sup> theatre which is directly responsible for the birth of the Yoruba professional theatre, came out of the re-enactment of Yoruba legendary stories

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<sup>1</sup> *Oba Koso* means 'the king did not hang' in the Yoruba language, a term which refers to Sango, the legendary fourth king of Oyo and the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning.

<sup>2</sup> *Oba Waja* is a term used for describing a deceased king in Yorubaland.

<sup>3</sup> *Oba Moro* means 'the king who caught ghosts', a nick-name given to King Abipa, the fourth and last king to reign at Igboho as a result of an incident which occurred during his reign.

<sup>4</sup> *Alarinjo* is a term used in describing the Yoruba traveling theatre, a performance tradition of masked actors which found its roots in the Yoruba aristocratic society of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.

and myths such as the beliefs about *egungun*<sup>5</sup> masquerades (i.e., the spirits of the ancestors coming back to visit the living). The writings of key artists such as Chief Daniel Orowole Fagunwa, the father and pioneer of Yoruba indigenous fictional stories, the theatre of Hubert Ogunde, one of the foremost pioneers of Yoruba theatre, and the theatre of Duro Ladipo and fellow impresarios like Kola Ogunmola cannot be fully explored without an understanding of the history, language and traditions of the Yoruba. Ogunde was the progenitor of Yoruba professional theatre. He was a born entertainer who started his career in a Christian school and went on to become one of the greatest dramatists that Yoruba theatre has produced. He was a playwright, director, composer, singer, entrepreneur and lead actor who used his business skills to create a new art form for the Yoruba popular theatre. He brought a new light to theatre by attracting new audiences and creating potential venues which subsequent groups were able to use for performances. His commitment and positive role modelling paved the way for great actors like Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo.

Ladipo was born in 1926. I will explore the factors surrounding his birth and life in the next chapter. His influence by the *Eegun Alare* tradition and how he was influenced by individuals and institutions will be considered in line with his inspirations. It will also be necessary to establish how his environment and his background contributed to his practice and general concerns.

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<sup>5</sup> *Egungun* is used in reference to masquerade or masque; face covered with mask, the human embodiment of spiritual beings who were once people, believed to maintain links with their earthly relatives. The *egungun* festival refers to a festival celebrated every year in Yorubaland. During this time, the ancestral dwellers of heaven are believed to be physically visiting their community of living relatives in the form of *egungun*. *Egungun* is used here in singular and plural terms.

In exploring his theatrical visual languages, his choice of plays, their significance and composition, I will bring to light the intrinsic qualities and the unspoken dialogues necessary for the accessibility and transformation of the art form in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance, the significance of the sacred regalia of Sango in *Oba Koso* will be brought to bear to a universal audience as a relevant entity of Ladipo's theatre. A general overview of the Yoruba culture, origin and politics is essential to this study because Ladipo and his above-mentioned comrades were all inspired by different aspects of Yoruba traditions. The thematic preoccupations of their theatrical visual expressions have their origin in the Yoruba myths and legends as well as customs and rituals. The theories adopted by writers such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and Ola Rotimi were also born of the practices inherited from the *Eegun Alare* itinerant performance tradition. This theatre is usually meant for entertainment, but it is also educative. The forms of this theatre are diverse in nature. For instance, some practitioners stage plays about evils in society, but they also celebrate the culture and the Yoruba deities through their re-enactment of the traditions.

### **Aim/Purpose of study**

The aims of this study therefore, are in threefold: The first is to investigate the origin, background and context of Duro Ladipo's theatre in line with his influences, theatrical developments and visual languages. The second is to explore the importance and context of his dramaturgy in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*. The study will also examine the importance of his visual languages, their philosophical implications in the Yoruba matrix, how audiences have responded to them and the need to bring them to light in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Plate 1 cover picture from *THE RETURN OF SHANGO* (Beier, 1994) Duro Ladipo and Abiodun Ladipo in a performance of *Oba Koso* in Lagos (Photo: Jackie Phillips.)

Given these aims, the study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the significances of Ladipo's theatrical visual languages?
2. In what ways are theatrical visual languages in the *Egun Alare* theatre different from the modern Yoruba professional theatre?

3. What are the effects of these differences in the promotion and sustenance of Yoruba cultures especially among the youth?

4. How are costumes, props, backdrops, accessories, motifs, sculptures and colours used in Ladipo's theatre to depict the pantheon of gods and goddesses?

It is expected that this study will bring to light the values and significance of this theatre in the 21st century. In this chapter, I seek to validate the root of Duro Ladipo's theatrical visual languages through an assessment of the context of his background. As a Yoruba descendant who was completely influenced by his environment, Ladipo's theatre explored the myths and legends, rituals, festivals, history and the socio-political dynamics of his people.

For the purpose of clarity, this chapter of the thesis is divided into four parts: The Yoruba race and history; archaeology, social and political structures; the *Eegun Alare* performance tradition, and the Yoruba professional travelling theatre. The first part is sub-divided into two sections which accounts for the origin and history of the Yoruba. The first section defines who the Yoruba are. The second section explains the history and the various versions of the Yoruba ancestral story. The second part explores the findings of the different archaeologists who excavated Yorubaland in order to establish a link between Ladipo's theatrical composition, Yoruba history and the remains of archaeology.

The third part is sub-divided into four sections. The first section narrates the history of the government of early Yoruba society. The second delves into the various theories ascribed to the government of Yorubaland. The third describes the concept of power and the government structure of the Yoruba and the fourth is an explanation of the Yoruba

marriage system, the role of women and historical socio-development. The fourth part is sub-divided into two sections which explores a chronological account of the evolution of the Yoruba performance tradition. The first section traces back the history of the *Eegun Alare* tradition and its performance styles. The last section describes the birth and context of the Yoruba professional travelling theatre.

### **The Yoruba Race**

The Yoruba as a group of people from the south-western part of Nigeria share a border with the Republic of Benin, a country which is also an extension of the Yoruba home by virtue of their shared history. The descendants of the Yoruba can also be found in the diaspora, namely Sierra Leone, Ghana, the Gambia, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti and the Americas as a result of the displacement caused by the trans-Atlantic slave trade promoted by European imperialist enterprise. They have been estimated to have a worldwide population 'of over forty million' (Ka ma Baa Gbagbe, 2003: 8). They are united by a common language, Yoruba, which can be spoken in many dialects (see Johnson, 1921; Akinjogbin, 2002 and Ajayi, 1987: 174-214).

For many decades the Yoruba nation has been a subject of interest to scholars. Academics in the field of history, language, archaeology, anthropology, visual arts and theatre studies have researched different aspects of the Yoruba and expressed different opinions, guesses and conclusions based on their findings. Because of the inconsistencies associated with the records kept about the possible origin of the Yoruba, it is imperative to address the difficulties linked with the various suggestions in order to determine the

probable origin of the Yoruba and create a rational platform for the discussion of Ladipo's theatrical visual languages. The research conducted and the information collected and collated in the documentations of these scholars reveal the extent of the contradictions, similarities and differences found in some of the established schools of thought. This calls for a logical, philosophical and rational re-examination, re-comparison and re-sieving of evidence through a re-analysis of the findings of pioneering researchers. Some of the findings on the Yoruba origin, cultural traditions, politics, art forms, festivals, rituals and religious belief systems have been documented in the works of both recent and pioneering researchers. Some of these studies are presented in Johnson 1921; Law 1973; Abimbola 1973; Delano 1973; Ogunba 1973; Willett 1973; Ayorinde 1973; Williams 1973; Carroll 1973; Adetugbo 1973; Lloyd 1973; Smith 1973; Drewal, Pemberton & Abiodun 1989; Drewal 1989; Pemberton 1989; Ayandele 1979; Peel 2003; Ajayi and Smith 1964; Okediji 2002; Idowu 1973 and Idowu 1994 (a reprint of *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*).

## **ORIGINS OF THE YORUBA**

### **History**

Before the advancement of Yoruba writing, historical records were mostly derived from oral traditional records. As part of the King of Oyo's hereditary responsibilities, he was in charge of retaining chosen families as 'National Historians'. These historians are depended upon as repositories of ancient knowledge even though their information may vary. They are selected on the basis of their family heritage as historians and *griots* of the oral tradition. They are also royal musicians who play drums and cymbals for the king. It is however not unlikely that due to the late development of written text, some vital

elements of the history got omitted unnoticed (see Johnson, 1921: 3). In Johnson's discussion of the origin and early history of the Yoruba nation, he stated that 'The origin of the Yoruba nation is involved in obscurity' (3) and clarified the reasons responsible for the historical obscurities as being that:

The people being unlettered, and the language unwritten all that is known is from traditions carefully handed down (3).

Drewal emphasized the confirmation of these obscurities by saying, 'There are countless versions of the myth of the creation of the world and of human civilisation at Ile-Ife' (1989: 45). His discussion identified a common unifying factor in the general beliefs of the Yoruba about the origin of mankind and the creation story. The thread that links this identity is Olodumare,<sup>6</sup> whom every Yoruba believes to be the creator of the universe. They all describe how Olodumare sent one of his deities (*Orisa*)<sup>7</sup> to go from heaven to earth with the instruction to establish mankind and civilisation, but at this point there are differences of opinion in that some believe this *Orisa* was Obatala<sup>8</sup>, while others are of the opinion that this *Orisa*<sup>9</sup> is Oduduwa.

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<sup>6</sup> Olodumare is one of the Yoruba praise-names for God. Other names associated with God are *Aladeorun* (the owner of the crown in heaven), *Olorun* (Owner of heaven), *Oluorun* (the owner of the heavenly hosts), *Alagbala imole* (the owner of the land of light), *Olugbohun* (the one who hears all voices and languages), *Asoromaye* (He who keeps all his promises), *Olu* (the almighty), *Atererekariaye* (He whose glories are endless), *Eleda* (the owner of the human race), *Alamo tomowa* (the owner of the moulding clay that moulded us), *Oyigiyigi tinmileaye kijikiji* (the mighty breeze that blows the world to all directions), *Oba titi aye ainipekun* (the king who reigns for eternity), etc.

<sup>7</sup> *Orisa* is a term used for the Yoruba pantheon of gods and goddesses; a biblical equivalent of angels or saints; commonly used amongst the devotees of the gods in Yorubaland and the Yoruba descendants in the diaspora.

<sup>8</sup> Obatala is regarded as the head of all the Yoruba *Orisa*. He is also known as *Orisa-nla* 'father of all *Orisa*', and seen as an emblem of peace, rationality and intelligence. Yoruba oral tradition describes him as the moulder of the human form; the sculptor who shapes the unborn in the womb of mothers. He is also known as the first ruler of the pre-Oduduwa government.

<sup>9</sup> *Orisa* is used throughout to refer to the deities both in singular and plural representation.



These stories were further complicated in the oral traditional records. Some of those who go along with the belief that Obatala is male claimed that Oduduwa's gender was female, whilst Oduduwa's supporters are of the opinion that he is a powerful warrior, king and god, who came from an unknown abode, defeated the enemies of Ile-Ife and victoriously mixed with the indigenous original people of Ile-Ife, who were originally worshippers of Obatala. In a version of the Yoruba creation myth which supported the idea of Oduduwa's gender as female, Olodumare, the creator, was described as being the creator of the sky where he resides with all the pantheon of gods he created (see 1998: 116). The sea beneath the sky is the dwelling place of Olokun, the goddess of the sea. The rationality and thoughtfulness of Obatala in his capacity as the 'ruler of the mind' (16), prompted him to consult Orunmila,<sup>10</sup> the god of wisdom, on Olokun's behalf. He was concerned that Olokun was lonely and needed a companion. As a result of this consultation, Orunmila investigated the matter through the Ifa divination oracles to find out whether Obatala should go and be Olokun's companion. The outcome of the consultation was in agreement with the commencement of creation in the realm of the sea. Obatala was given instruction by Olodumare 'to descend' (116) into the waters to form the creation of life. Obeying Olodumare's orders, Obatala descended via a chain from the heavens, carrying with him a large globe which he released into the water. The globe 'broke into pieces', forming 'mountains and islands'(Arewa 1998: 116) and bringing about the growth of the palm tree which produced *Agbon*<sup>11</sup> and palm wine for consumption.

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<sup>10</sup> Orunmila is also known as Ifa, Yoruba god of wisdom and divination.

<sup>11</sup> Yoruba word for coconut. The palm tree is known as *igi ope* in Yoruba language.

Just like another myth of Obatala, this version says that he drank a lot of palm wine one day and fell asleep whilst on duty. His action had distracted him from his work and Olodumare not being pleased with Obatala's conduct, 'sent his daughter Oduduwa' (116) to go and rectify things. She was accompanied by Aje,<sup>12</sup> the goddess of wealth and money who came with her in 'the form of a chicken' (116) which resumed the duty of scratching the earth and extending it to further heights. Oduduwa gained ownership of all the areas that had been created by her as a result of the expansion of lands. Henceforth, she scattered all the seeds that had been given to her 'by her father' (116) on the land and there was an abundant growth of trees, plants and flowers. When Olodumare saw that the creation of the earth had been completed, he took a giant step from the heavens to earth. The step landed in Ile-Ife (see1998:116).

This symbolic land of love, Ile-Ife, automatically became a holy land; the original home of the Yoruba from where the Yoruba nation dispersed to all the other areas that comprise Yorubaland. When Obatala got up from his sleep, he realised that his task of creating land had been accomplished by Oduduwa. So they both united in enjoying the proceeds of the land. After a period of time, they were bored of loneliness and thought of the creation of the human race. Without any hesitation they set out in search of the appropriate materials to use for the moulding and 'Obatala dug clay from the earth and started moulding people' (1998:116). The moulded sculptures were then left in the sun to dry before the intervention of Olodumare who breathed life into them, so that they are composed of the vital force of life. This version also claims that 'Oduduwa is honoured

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<sup>12</sup> Aje is associated with good fortune or good luck in any type of legitimate business. This good luck could also be in terms of being promoted from a lesser status to a higher one.

as mother’, whilst Obatala fulfils the task of shaping ‘the unborn child’ in the domain of the womb. Both Obatala and Oduduwa were credited with watching over all the people on earth in this version, a view which is consistent and sympathetic to the roles of the pantheon of gods and goddesses as seen in Yoruba oral tradition. This view however, is not a very popular one among the Yoruba. It is very easy to consider this in the light of contemporary feminine views about gender responsibility, but the overwhelming view of Oduduwa as I believe, is mostly directed towards the acceptance of Oduduwa as a male god, and the first *Oonirisa* of Ile-Ife (in accordance to the revelations of Ifa and the Yoruba oral tradition). The issue of gendered responsibilities of human beings and divinities is an aspect of interest to researchers, anthropologists, historians and writers in the field, particularly the gender of Oduduwa which remains a subject of controversy. In explaining this debate, Drewal in his discussion confirmed that the Yoruba nation may once have been a matrilineal society, stressing that Yoruba cities such as Ile-Ife, Oyo, Owo, Ijebu, Ondo and others have occasionally been ruled by queens (see Drewal, 1989: 46).

In Johnson (1921), an alternative version of the Yoruba origin myth suggested that the Yoruba migrated into contemporary Yorubaland from Mecca at a period of time after the establishment of the Islamic religion (see 1921: 3-14). In his account, he explained that their migration was due to a religious conflict associated with Lamurudu, a one time king of Mecca. He identified Oduduwa, one of his sons, as the Crown Prince when the religious conflicts began. We have no records of the period of Lamurudu’s reign, but historical account reveals that ‘it appears to have been a considerable time after Mahomet’ (3). The account given of Oduduwa was that he was drawn into idol

worshipping during his father's rule. As a direct result of his dominant overpowering influence, he was able to gain many proselytes. He turned the prestigious mosque in the city into a pagan shrine because of his ambition to change the official religion of the people into paganism. Oduduwa was supported in his quest by the priest Asara, who was a specialist devotee of the idols and a sculptor. But Asara's son, Braima, was a devoted Moslem. Braima had offered to sell his father's handiwork for him even though he was not happy with the occupation, but he owed his father the obligation. Whilst he was working as his father's salesman, he was reported to have taken the opportunity to speak in metaphoric terms to his customers saying, 'who would' buy 'falsehood?' (4).

At an older age, Braima one day took the opportunity of the absence of his potential opponents to axe down all the idols that had desecrated the mosque. The Crown Prince had organised annual festivals 'in honour' (4) of the gods; and it was during one of his absences that Braima seized the opportunity to carry out his act of destroying the idols - so violently that the axe 'was left hanging on the neck of the chief idol' modelled in the 'shape' and size of a 'human' (4) being. When Braima was confronted during the enquiry made to find out who had destroyed the idols, Johnson confirmed that he responded in a similar way compared to the diplomatic answers given by Joash in the Bible when the Abiezrites accused Gideon his son of acting in a similar way to Braima as recorded in Judges, chapter 6, verses 28-33 (see 1921: 4). Johnson reported that when Braima was questioned about the incident, his responses to the men who interrogated him were as follows: 'Ask that huge idol who did it'. The men replied, 'Can he speak?' and he replied, 'why do you worship things which cannot speak?' (4).

For Braima's disrespect to their gods, he was ordered to be burnt alive; they collected pieces of wood in thousands and bought many 'pots of oil' (4) to fuel the fire. This act was what triggered the beginning of a war between the two powerful opposing parties. The followers of Mohammed who were previously oppressed emerged to be more powerful and were victorious over their opponents. In the process of the war, Lamurudu, the king, was one of the victims slain. Even more devastating was the expulsion of his children and all their sympathizers from the land of Mecca. They were reported to have all started their journey from Mecca. Oduduwa and his children were described as having been in possession of two of their idols when they escaped. He finally settled in Ile-Ife, where he met Agboniregun (Setilu) who founded the Ifa religion.

An army led by Sahibu was sent to destroy Oduduwa and his children, but was defeated in the process and a copy of the Koran was seized from them as a booty. The Koran was then kept preserved in the temple to be venerated by the generations to come as an object of sacredness. This object is called *Idi* which means something tied up, and is worshipped to this day. The oral traditional intelligence of the people has kept the records alive, but according to Johnson, traces of error are contained in the findings. One definite error which the present writer agrees with is that the Yoruba are surely not of the Arabian blood, which rules out the possibility of their coming from Mecca. Johnson confirmed that there are no written accounts of this nature in the records of Arabian writers, but also mentioned that it may have been exempted from being recorded officially. In Johnson's view, the Yoruba can be traced to an origin from the east because of their similarity with

some of the civilisations from east Africa. The importance of Mecca in the east may have led to generalising anything of historical worth to it because of its historical status as a holy land (see 1921: 5). Furthermore, the discussion mentioned that the Yoruba (Yarba) are ‘of the tribe of Nimrod’ (5), who are supposed to have originated from the remains of the children of Canaan. We are led to understand that they came to be established in West Africa because they were driven away from ‘Arabia to the western coast between Egypt and Abyssinia’ by ‘Yar-ooba, the son of Kahtan’ (5). During their migration, they were reported to have left their traces by leaving ‘a tribe of their own’ (1921: 5) everywhere they stopped or rested. The Yarba are considered to bear the same resemblance as the Nupe people, referred to as Noofee. But it remains uncertain who Nimrod was. It is thought that the name Lamurudu or (Namurudu) may have been the source of the tribal name Nimrod. The identity of Nimrod is further complicated when the two biblical Nimrods are brought into the limelight, Nimrod the son of Hasoul known as ‘the strong’, or Nimrod the ‘mighty hunter’ (6).

According to I.A. Akinjogbin, ‘most of the names’ mentioned by Johnson ‘are suspiciously similar to the stories you find in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible or in the Koran’ (2002: 15). In his discussion, he brought to bear the argument of some of the historical schools of thought that have researched the origin of the Yoruba, confirming that S.O. Biobaku, the historian, ‘accepted’ the view that the Yoruba came from the east and additionally ‘suggested that the migrating groups first settled around the Niger-Benue confluence’ (15) and gradually moved to their present locations. The discussion also brought to light the theory of an earlier scholar, Archdeacon Olumide

Lucas, who attempted to prove that 'Ile-Ife and ancient Egypt' (15) were related because of religious and linguistic similarities. Lucas's view may be supported by an extract from an early publication on Nigerian history which states:

We know very little of the beginning of the Yoruba people, but it is believed that Ife was their first settlement and it is the religious centre of the Yoruba race. They have certainly been settled in Nigeria since the early days, and they may have come from Egypt originally (1949: 29).

The story of the Yoruba origin is further complicated by Ile-Ife oral traditional views. According to this well known version which is attested to by the monument near the palace of the *Oonirisa*<sup>13</sup> in Ile-Ife, Oduduwa is regarded as the progenitor of the Yoruba nation and founder of the dynasty of all both paramount and traditional rulers of the entire Yoruba people all over the universe. Legend has it that he was the first *Oonirisa* descended from heaven on a traditional rope, bringing along a hen, a calabash and a cowry to the spot which is now known as Ile- Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba nation. This powerful story remains a subject of continuous speculation amongst researchers, philosophers, archaeologists and historians because of the varied narratives of the legend. According to Akinjogbin, the tradition confirmed that he landed 'on a small island in the midst of a world covered with water' (2002: 15). In his words:

He was said to have been commissioned by God to go and create land out of the watery surface of the earth. He had with him 16 wise men termed 'Ooye' (immortals), a lump of earth, some pieces of iron and a cock' (15).

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<sup>13</sup> *Oonirisa* usually, shortened as *Ooni*, is the title of the King of Ile-Ife.

This legend also tells us that ‘Oduduwa was not the first leader of this group’; it revealed that ‘power’ was ‘seized from the first leader Obatala’ because he became intoxicated ‘with palm wine on their way from heaven’ (15). The group ‘from heaven’ were reported to have reached ‘a small land area on the watery surface’, where Oduduwa used ‘pieces of iron’ to collect ‘a lump of earth’ and then placed ‘a cock on it’. The cock then ‘used its toes to spread the earth to create solid ground’ (2002:15). The suffix to Ile, Ife, meaning to expand, originated as result of ‘this act of spreading’ (15). In Akinjogbin’s words:

Researches that have been carried out in the Department of History at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in the last 30 years have shown that prior to the time of Oduduwa there were population settlements all over Yorubaland, Ife included (16).

Some of the communities identified as part of the pre-Oduduwa government included the Ifore in Ijebu-Ode where ‘the chieftaincy title of “*Olotu Ifore*” (Head of Ifore Community)’ still exists just like ‘the Ulesan and the Ilale’ in Ile-Ife, where ‘they have titles such as *Obalesun*<sup>14</sup> and *Obalale*’<sup>15</sup> still existing. There are a number of other groups in Yorubaland who also constitute part of the discovery of the pre-Oduduwa community. Therefore the evidence is overwhelmingly in support of two phases in the history of the Yoruba; the pre-Oduduwa phase and the Oduduwa phase. This latter aspect will be a subject of exploration when I discuss the social political structure of the Yoruba, but the first phase seems to have comprised highly sophisticated community of large groups that had their own rulers who were ‘apparently called Obas’ (2002: 16), as in the Oduduwa times. As revealed by Akinjogbin, ‘Biobaku believes that the Yoruba were settled in their

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<sup>14</sup> Means the king can sleep, in Yoruba language.

<sup>15</sup> Means the king at night, in Yoruba language.



present day habitat between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries' (18); he asserted that 'We will only be able to speak with a greater certainty when more archaeological researches have been carried out' (18).

### **Archaeology**

The archaeological school is represented by the likes of Leo Frobenius, Frank Willet, William Boscom, Omotoso Eluyemi, Haruna Al-Rasheed, Kenneth Murray, John Goodwin, Ekpo Eyo, Bernard Fagg and William Fagg (see Willet, 1973: 111-139). Between November 1910 and January 1911, Frobenius, the German born anthropologist, archaeologist and etymologist excavated some parts of Ile-Ife as part of his extensive field work in Yorubaland and other parts of Africa. Other parts of Yorubaland like Old Oyo and Ilesa were excavated by Willet 'in 1956-57 and 1959' (116). Frobenius's journey amongst the Yoruba people and the result of his findings led him to proclaim that the ancient civilization of Atlantis was founded by the Yoruba. In a 1955 article by Adewale Thompson, we are informed that:

There are so far, three well defined schools of thought on the difficult problem of the origin of the Yorubas. The Archaeological School represented by Frobenius the German Archaeologist who after extensive field work in Yorubaland declared that Yoruba is Atlantis i.e. The Yorubas were the founders of the Ancient civilisation of Atlantis from which the Atlantic Ocean derived its name.

The continent of Atlantis included modern West Africa, South and North America and Europe. South America being joined to West Africa. North America was not

far from what is now known as Europe. Atlantis was at a very early age subjected to volcanic eruptions which altered its size and configuration (Daily Service; Nigerian Newspaper, 30/08 / 1955<sup>16</sup> :p.5).

He additionally explained that ‘The last subsidence was mentioned by Plato and it occurred in the year 9,564 B.C. i.e. about 5,000 years before the dawn of history’ (5).

It makes a logical sense to learn more about our past through studying the remains of archaeological excavations as they may contain vital clues about the origin of a race. It is therefore necessary to examine the evidence of the archaeologists who have participated in the excavation of Yorubaland, particularly Ile-Ife; Willet gave a chronological account of some of the archaeologists involved (Willett, 1973:111-139). According to Willet:

By modern standards, the record of the circumstances of Frobenius’s finds is utterly inadequate. Very little is said about the excavations he undertook, and they seem to have been simply to find objects rather than to find evidence. It is very difficult to be sure where he found most of the pieces which are now in the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Berlin (116).

In spite of the inconsistencies of Frobenius’s findings, he was the first to draw ‘attention to the outstanding historical and archaeological importance of Ife and to the important naturalistic sculpture found there, although his interpretation of its origin is no longer acceptable’ (117), as revealed. The ‘burrowing’ technique he employed would not be

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<sup>16</sup> See reference: Adewale Thompson. 1955. ‘Origin of the Yorubas’, Daily service, unknown volume/number: 5.

considered or adopted by any modern day archaeologist.<sup>17</sup> As clarified by Omotoso Eluyemi, a renowned archaeologist and traditional chief:

The amazement Frobenius felt at the quality of the Ife artworks led him to compare them to Classical Greek works and suggests that “a race, far superior in strain to the Negro had settled there”. It has been proven that this statement is not true and Ife still make use of these objects in their rituals. The tradition of bronze-casting in Ile-Ife can still be observed today. The objects have been dated to the period between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, which is referred to as the “classical” period in Ife’s history (2005: 44).

More investigations reveal that ‘Further archaeological research in the “pre-classical” period has resulted in many finds by Paul Ozanne and Omotoso Eluyemi working at the Obafemi Awolowo University of Ile-Ife, some earlier than the 12<sup>th</sup> century’ (44-5).

Towards the end of 1938, when the foundations for a building at Wunmonije compound was being dug, ‘thirteen brass heads of about life size were discovered’, followed shortly by the discovery of four more in the earlier part of 1939, when ‘the upper part of a figure representing an *Oni*’ was also found (1973:119). The 1938 and 1939 archaeological expeditions of Wunmonije compound were recorded ‘by William Boscom’ who was then at Ile-Ife conducting some field work in anthropology ‘and by Kenneth Murray who was later to become the first Director of Antiquities’ (120). These latter developments confirmed the existence of a naturalistic art movement in Africa from the time of antiquity. According to Willet, ‘Since the naturalism of these works was comparable to anything that ancient Egypt, Classical Greece and Rome, or Renaissance Europe had

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<sup>17</sup> See Frank Willet, ‘Archaeology and History’ in S.O. Biobaku, ed., *Sources of Yoruba History*, Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1973: 117.

produced, it was assumed that they must have been made in one of these traditions' (1973: 120). In my opinion, this assumption is inadequate because these societies were independent of each other and as evident in Kenneth Murray's 1941 writing, 'Benin bronzes were being made before the Portuguese arrived' (120); in addition, 'the Ife pieces appeared to be ancestral to them' (120).

The desire to collate more evidence led to the reserving and purchasing of sites like Ita Yemoo which had shown indication of occupation in earlier excavations of 1957-1959. A fresh archaeological re-examination of the site from 1962-1963 recorded 'a radiocarbon date of A.D. 1470' close to 'the top of the pit', and at 'the bottom', a 'date of A.D. 960' was revealed (1973: 126). At the same time, 'another shrine' which we are told 'was located in the centre of an open courtyard' was found to contain parts belonging to 'two sculptures' and when the space was examined, they found evidence 'of A.D. 1060' and 'A.D. 1150' charcoal dates 'in the same layer' (126).

In 1960, Eluyemi excavated two Egbejoda sites and discovered about 75 terracotta heads described as being 'post-classical' in style, and some of them looking like those found at the Apomu site (1973: 132).

An important site was also excavated in Ilesha by Willet in October of 1959. Apart from discovering 'about 200 sculptures' (1973:134), a grave identified as 'a royal grave pit' (135) was also found. Some of the sculptures were reported to be stylised 'in a squatting position' and those with human resemblance were similar to the style of 'modern Yoruba

sculpture' (1973:134). Willet explained that some of the Ife pieces also 'show a stylistic progression' in the characteristics of the 'Yoruba sculpture' (135). The Ilesha sculptures were compared to the style of two sculptures located 'in the Ife grove of Igbodio' (135).

In establishing a link between the classical Ife art and Yoruba modern sculpture, Willet pointed out that the Ilesha discoveries are part of the nineteenth century era which has been extensively documented in the museum archives. It is thought that the naturalistic Ile-Ife classical sculptures and the Nok<sup>18</sup> culture may have come from the same origin.

According to Omotoso Eluyemi:

It is worthy of note that the great schools of Ile-Ife, Benin, Owo, Igbo-Ukwu and other traditions in wood, stone, ivory, metal and clay of the indigenous cultures of Nigeria can trace their ancestry to Nok terracottas, which have provided them with a legitimate and credible prototype (2005: 43).

Findings by Violata I. Ekpo also reveal that:

Archaeological excavations at sites such as Nok and Turga have connected the terracotta sculptures to iron working. Research has shown some Nok culture sites were continuously occupied from 4580 to 4290BC, about the time of the period of proto-Bantu dispersion in the area. Recent thermo-luminescent and radiocarbon dating, obtained from embedded elements in the charcoal of the sculptures, pushed the initial dating of the sculptures to between 900 BC and 1100 AD, though the

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<sup>18</sup> A complex type of ceramic sculpture from the northern part of Nigeria dated from 700-500 B.C. See Jan Vansina, *Art History in Africa*, New York: Longman Inc, 1984:7-12; 'Nok culture, named after the village on the Jos plateau where it was first discovered in 1929, is the earliest known terracotta tradition in sub-Saharan Africa. By 1977 about 153 terracotta pieces had been found during mining operations, mostly in secondary deposits (washed away from their original locations and deposited further downstream) at old riverbeds in the savannah region of central and northern Nigeria, southwest of the Jos plateau. Since then, new sculptures are being found in a constantly expanding area (currently 480 by 320 kilometres), including the middle Niger and lower Benue valleys (Ekpo, 2005: 48).

central cluster of dates between 500 BC and 200 AD is often cited as the classical period of Nok art (2005: 51).

In the royal grave that was discovered, a very tall king ‘of about forty’ was found; he was of a powerful physique and wore a necklace made of red stone *okun* and blue glass *segi* beads. He also wore an enormous bronze bracelet on his left forearm whilst on his right forearm he wore ‘eleven thinner bracelets’; his ‘head had been carefully removed after death and placed on his chest’. His body was flanked by two iron daggers with ‘bronze fittings’ (1973: 135). Also found in the grave ‘were two men, two women, and two individuals’ (135) whose gender could not be ascertained, but were believed to be between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. It was evident that:

Individual bones of some skeletons were scattered about the grave pit so it is clear that these people were not buried alive with the Oba. Several of them wore bronze bracelets and beads, and in the grave we discovered not only pots but an ivory trumpet, cowrie shells, and some bones of a goat or sheep (135-36).

Willett recalled a discussion he had with one of the ‘late *Owa* of Ijesha and his chiefs’; it came to light that ‘Atakunmosa and his son Gbegbaje’ were the ‘only two *Owas*’ buried in the site (136). The importance of oral tradition and archaeological findings as reliable historical evidence is demonstrated here. In most African traditions, the art of story telling is used as a way of conveying and retaining the history from one generation to the other. This is so in the case of the Yoruba; the knowledge of the elders is passed on to their descendants with the hope of keeping the stories and the tradition alive. In a discussion about the origin of the Yoruba, A. C. Burns stated:

Their ancestors have left them practically no written records or monuments, and their traditions, interwoven with myth and legend, are fragmentary and, in many cases conflicting (Burns, 1929:29).

In my opinion, this statement is not consistent with the evidence we have about the Yoruba. For while consideration must be given to the complexities of understanding some of the Yoruba myths and legends as evident in the narratives of the different versions of the Yoruba creation myth, it is not true to say that there were no ‘monuments’ and neither is it right to dismiss non-written oral records of what the ancestors left as valid concrete evidence. The testimony given regarding the identity of the Owas buried in the Ilesha site is not only a clear example of the role of oral retention in keeping records; the site of the discovery itself is a monument, in the same way that an Egyptian pyramid or tomb is a monument.

There is no doubt that the Yoruba matrix is complex, but it is these complexities that gave birth to the visual composition of the *Eegun Alare (Alarinjo)* travelling theatre and the professional Yoruba popular travelling theatre, which Ladipo’s theatre belongs to. The link between oral tradition, visual compositions of antiquities and the Yoruba theatre is clearly demonstrated in the evidence we have about the encounters of the archaeologists at the Ilesha site; the arrangements of the royal burial site are a reminder of the ritualistic practices of the Yoruba. The iron daggers used in flanking the king could be seen as a representation of Ogun<sup>19</sup>, the Yoruba god of iron and war, whilst the beads and bracelet decoration are a reminder of the accessories used by kings, chiefs and

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<sup>19</sup> Ogun is Yoruba god of iron and war. He is regarded as the patron saint of blacksmiths, hunters and farmers.

members of the royal household in Yorubaland, as reflected in the visual composition of Ladipo's theatre and the *Eegun Alare* performance tradition. As part of the Yoruba belief about the land of the ancestors and the after-life, the manner in which the human-remains and artefacts found were arranged, triggers the thought of being prepared for the next life and reminds us of the spatial and linear elements of theatre. Furthermore, the ritualistic nature of the sites located and the discovery of a royal grave brings to mind the ritualistic dimensions of Ladipo's trilogy; *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja* and his pre-occupation with the stories of Yoruba kings and deities. As evident in the archaeological documentation of the excavations conducted in Yoruba land (see 1973: 111-139), Ile-Ife has been a main focus because of its direct relevance in the history of the Yoruba nation. If the philosophies, rituals, traditional culture and taboos of the Yoruba are to be thoroughly examined, Ile-Ife is the obvious place to begin. The complex juxtaposition of all the potsherd pavements, burial sites, fragmentary sculptures, shrines and groves in Ile-Ife and its surroundings are a reflection of who the Yoruba people really are; the reminder of a civilisation that once flourished in maintaining their traditional culture and philosophies. The stylization of the artefacts and the general arrangements of the icons found at the various sites revealed that the Yoruba nation was highly sophisticated; their ritualistic burial practices are reminders of what was practised in ancient Egypt, Peru and other parts of the world.



## Social and Political structures

### Early Yoruba Society

The Yoruba system of government can be traced back to the beginning of their civilisation and still functions within the modern western style of government operating in Nigeria today. We are presented with different aspects of their socio-political dynamics in Akinjogbin, 2002 and Johnson, 1921. Historical records reveal that the Yoruba political system derives from the children of Oduduwa. This view is in line with that of the Ile-Ife tradition. In the words of Isaac Akinjogbin, ‘The process of establishing Oduduwa type of monarchy went on from about the 9<sup>th</sup> century until about the 15<sup>th</sup> century or later’ (2002: 20).

### YORUBA KINGDOMS



Fig. 1 Map of Nigeria showing Yorubaland. The Yoruba occupy the Southwestern part of the country.

We are informed that Oduduwa and his children developed hatred for ‘the Moslems of their country’; that is, Mecca, as revealed in one of the theories of the origin of the Yoruba and had ‘determined to avenge themselves of them’ (1921: 7), but due to the death of Oduduwa ‘at Ile Ife before he was powerful enough to march against them’ (7), his plan did not come to fruition. As revealed, ‘his eldest son Okanbi, also died there, leaving behind him seven princes and princesses’ (7) and it was from them that the Yoruba nation sprang according to Johnson:

His first-born was a princess who was married to a priest, and became the mother of the famous Olowu, the ancestors of the Owus. The second child was also a princess who became the mother of the Alaketu, the progenitor of the Ketu people. The third, a prince, became king of the Benin people. The fourth, Orangun, became King of Ila; the fifth, the Onisabe, or the King of the Sabes; the sixth, Olupopo, or king of the Popos; the seventh and last born, Oranyan, was the progenitor of the Oyos (1921: 8).

In evaluating the records of historians like Lloyd, Akinjogbin and Johnson, one must consider the context of their accounts in relationship to the period they were written. This is because societies are subject to changes and with those changes come certain inevitable adjustments in their social political structures. The Yoruba have a unique system of government which is evident in their general view of the world, their political organisation, their social conditioning, judgements and responsibilities. It is therefore important to place emphasis on the internal dynamics of the Yoruba from an historical perspective, in order to highlight some of the elements of Ladipo’s dramaturgy.

According to Akinjogbin, the social, political and economic structures of the Yoruba had been established since the time of the reign of Oduduwa in Ile-Ife to the earlier part of the nineteenth century (see Akinjogbin, 2002: 108). He explained that the practice of polygamy was already in place between the 11<sup>th</sup> century and 14th century AD. The establishment of on-going Yoruba social structures can therefore be dated back to at least the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (see 133).

Records of the oral tradition reveal that some of the Yoruba ancestors who were involved with wars like the *Kiriji*<sup>20</sup> wars of 1876-1886 left widows and children respectively needing husbands and fathers to care for them. This can account for the reason why married men found themselves with widows of deceased relatives as a traditional custom. The polygamous institution and indeed the government of the Yoruba nation had been fully established by the beginning of the nineteenth century and have continued till the present day, though certain changes have been made to suit the needs of a fast changing society.

Akinjogbin stressed that the study of the internal dynamics of a society are vital to the understanding of its structural context and it would therefore be unwise to discuss the existence of a society from a 'static' point of view. He stated:

It will be logical to think that small societies will have simple views of existence and large ones complex views. It is however conceivable that, even small societies may have complicated views, indeed more complicated than some larger societies.

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<sup>20</sup> *Kiriji* was derived from the boom sound produced by the cannon artillery during the civil wars of 1876-1886.

See Moyo Okediji, *AFRICAN RENAISSANCE: New forms, Old Images in Yoruba Art*, Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2002:5.

It is probably also true that each society's views of existence change in the light of changing circumstances (106).

With regards to the changes that may have affected their socio-political dynamics, Akinjogbin explained, 'there may well have been as many as six periods of political and constitutional change in the history of the Yoruba people', as far back as 'the earliest' dates recorded 'to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (2002: 108).

He further clarified the need to limit the context of the discussion in terms of geographical boundaries and exclude the Yoruba speaking peoples of the Benin republic, Togo and Ghana; that is, the Ga, the Ewe, the Krobo and the Adamgbe people of the above-mentioned countries, as their social systems may be similar to those of the Nigerian Yoruba, but the focus here is on the Yoruba in Nigeria (see 108).

#### **Four Theories of the Social Political Structures of the Yoruba**

In describing the social political structures of the Yoruba, I start by first considering the four main theories ascribed by various historians: The Imperial Theory, The Roman Empire Theory, The Empirical Theory and The *Ebi* Theory.

#### **The Imperial Theory**

The imperial theory 'was derived' from Johnson's records of the Yoruba history (2002: 109). This was a structure that was identified with one emperor ruling the whole of Yorubaland. The *Alaafin* of Oyo was seen as the head of all the other Yoruba *Obas*. The Oyo Empire was a very powerful and large dynasty. The reputation of Oyo had extended to European traders on the coast in the seventeenth century (109). Except for Benin which was not always linked to the Yoruba kingdom by foreigners, the other Yoruba

kingdoms were not known to them between the seventeenth and nineteenth century because they were not as famous as Oyo (see 109). They also did not have the military capability of Oyo; hence, it was difficult for Europeans to imagine that any Oba could rule independently in Yorubaland without the authority of the *Alaafin* (see 2002: 109). Since the Oyo kingdom was already known to the Europeans by the 17<sup>th</sup> century as an Empire, there is a possibility that it may have been recognised as an Empire before then, but we have no conclusive date. The *Alaafin's* position was accepted by the pioneering colonial administrators 'in Lagos' and it was with this concept in mind that they tried to bring the *Kiriji* war of 1878-1886 to an end (109). The first foreigners to be exposed to Yoruba history came to it through the study of Johnson's publication of 1921 and could not easily accept that the *Alaafin's* position did not make him the Emperor of Yorubaland (see 109). In signing the peace treaty of 1886 to bring to an end the *Kiriji* war, Akinjogbin asserted that the colonial administrators may have found it shocking that the *Obas* of Ekiti and Ijesha who were being represented by the *Alaafin's* messengers to bring a peaceful resolve to the war refused to acknowledge the *Alaafin* as their superior. They insisted that the *Alaafin* was their brother and the treaty was signed without the *Alaafin* contending their position, but the signing was executed with the condition referred to as 'clause three', implying that both kings, 'the *Alaafin* and the *Owa* shall stand to each other in relationship of the elder brother to younger brother as before when the Ekiti countries were independent' (2002: 110).

The concept of the imperial theory was further undermined in 1903 when the *Akarigbo* of Sagamu disagreed with the *Elepe* of Epe about the right to wear the crown. The *Akarigbo*

believed that the *Elepe* had no right to the crown and when the colonial authorities in Lagos were consulted they were told to refer to the *Alaafin* of Oyo who was seen as their Emperor for a resolution. The two *Obas*, however, did not want to be seen as being subservient to the *Alaafin* and therefore rejected the offer. When they were confronted, they responded that only the ‘*Ooni*’ of Ile-Ife could pronounce the last judgement. Prior to this incident, the administrators’ view of the *Ooni* of Ile-Ife was that he was just a regional ruler. They hadn’t the slightest idea that his power extended beyond Ile-Ife. When they eventually sent for the *Ooni* to come to Lagos, his verdict was that ‘the *Elepe* had no right to wear the crown’ (110) and this was accepted by both the *Elepe* and the *Akarigbo*.

### **The Roman Empire Theory**

It has been thought that the content of events as seen above contributed to the birth of the second concept known as the Roman Empire theory (see 110). This concept became the most popular concept of the Yoruba constitution and was first conceived ‘by P.A. Talbot around 1926’ (2002: 110). The theory compared Yorubaland to ‘the Holy Roman Empire’ style of government where the Emperor was in ‘charge of temporal and military affairs’ (110) while the Pope was seen as the spiritual head. In looking at the Yorubaland style of government from the Roman perspective, the *Alaafin*<sup>21</sup> was seen as the Emperor and the *Ooni* as the Pope. This was the origin of the placement of the *Ooni* as the spiritual head of the Yoruba. Even though this concept is widely accepted, it has also been argued in some Yoruba quarters that politics and religion can not be separated (see 111).

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<sup>21</sup> *Alaafin* is the title of the king of Oyo. Sango the deified god of lightning and thunder was the fourth *Alaafin* of Oyo.

Therefore each Oba is both a spiritual and political leader and has the power of the highest authority in their respective areas of jurisdiction. According to Akinjogbin, if the Roman Empire concept was to be strictly adhered to, the *Ooni* would only be seen to perform religious duties all over Yorubaland. He said that there was no evidence to suggest that the *Ooni* performs such duties during the national festivals. In fact during the festivals of deities, such as Oduduwa and Ogun, it has been noted that they were ‘presided over in Ile-Ife by other chiefs than the *Ooni*’ (2002:111). It is also not clear whether the *Alaafin* performs any political duties in other parts of the Yoruba kingdom apart from the Oyo Empire where he heads both political and spiritual affairs (see 111). His political and military might did not extend beyond Oyo. The role of the powerful army of Oyo did not include the protection of all Yorubaland from the invasion of their enemies. It is therefore evident in both theories that they sought to embrace a western vision of social structure without consulting the Yoruba about the general overview of their social arrangements, as highlighted by Akinjogbin (see 111).

### **The Original Ancestor Theory (Empirical)**

The third concept which has been considered to be similar to the *Ebi* theory was conceived by Dr. Elias. Elias’s concept was known as the original ancestor theory and it sought to establish the legitimacy of the Yoruba monarchy through an empirical form of research. His concept is however not very established and would require an in-depth study (see 111).

### **The Ebi Theory**

The *Ebi* theory is a concept which embodies the context of Yoruba historical records and the importance of lineage. The theory identifies ‘Ile-Ife as *Orirun*’ (2002: 116), a place that can not be removed. It is a style of government which does not force people together, but brings them into community because of their blood relationship. In this concept, privileges are first accorded to the elder, even if the younger offspring is wealthier and more powerful (see 116). The Yoruba *Obas* have been seen to conduct ‘their affairs’ (117) within the confinement of these family rules, and this is evident in their practices. One such practice that has survived till the present day is that of sharing the movable possessions of a deceased king. Any Oba who is regarded as ‘a direct descendant of Oduduwa’ is seen in this light and therefore when Ooni Ademiluyi and *Alaafin* Ladigbolu respectively passed away in 1930 and 1944, the practice was maintained among the Yoruba *Obas* (2002: 117). This ritual of inheriting and sharing a departed relative’s belongings is known to the Yoruba as “*Ogun jije*” or “*Ogun pinpin*” (117). The strength of the *Ebi* theory is that the *Obas* see themselves as members of the same family and therefore their territories are considered to belong to the same family. The ritual of burying departed *Obas* was conducted among the surviving *Obas*. This family affair was reported to have survived until recently; it ‘continued until the death of Oba Samuel Adesanya Gbelegbuwa II, the Awujale of Ijebu-Ode’ (2002: 117).

The only fundamental disagreement in this concept is that of establishing whether Ile-Ife or Oyo ‘was the centre’ (117) where decisions were made. Oyo was far more extensive in terms of land possession and military power. It would therefore seem appropriate for Oyo to be conceived and regarded as the natural headquarters but this assumption has been



disputed by all the Yoruba kingdoms. They all regard Ile-Ife as the *Orirun*<sup>22</sup>, ‘their place of origin’ even though it was far ‘smaller’, weaker and less known ‘outside Yorubaland’ (2002:117) and this has been ‘since Oduduwa period’ (118). According to Akinjogbin, ‘the word “headquarters” does not really adequately represent the position of Ife’ if one were to consider ‘*Orirun*’ by implication as a place that ‘cannot really be removed’ (118). One may then view Ile-Ife as the place of heaven of the Yoruba since it is referred to as ‘the cradle of Yoruba civilisation’ and spiritual home of the Yoruba.

The Yoruba family unit consists of the living, the departed ancestors who are sometimes buried in the house and the unborn children. It is believed that the spirit of the departed ancestors will always be present to watch over their living relatives. The unborn are also sometimes seen as the spirit of reincarnated souls; that is, the spirit of departed relatives (see 119). Whether a Yoruba person was involved in the military or the civil service, or dealing with spiritual and economic matters, he or she operates within the concept of Ebi.

In fact, ‘whatever a member of the Ebi has can be legitimately used by another member provided the owner does not need it’ (2002: 120). It is even possible that in the process of sharing, the legitimate owner deprives himself of the use of that item so that a needier member of family can use it; this is because of their ‘belief that whatever good or ill befalls any members of the Ebi befalls all’ (120).

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<sup>22</sup> *Orirun* means a place of heaven in Yoruba. Ile-Ife is regarded as the *Orirun*, place of heaven of the Yoruba - the place from where the Yoruba expanded.

This practice is evident in all aspects of the Yoruba life. A good example of this is highlighted in Akinjogbin's discussion about the *Iwofa*<sup>23</sup>. The concept of *Iwofa* is such that whenever a man finds himself in debt due to the acquisition of a new wife or as a result of the funeral ceremony of either of his parents, he may require a loan for which he has the right to use any younger member of the *Ebi* as deposit to his creditors in form of surety or guarantee. Any individual who has been used as surety is known as *Iwofa*. The *Iwofa* is expected to labour for the creditor pending the payment of the loan. The *Iwofa* himself may also repay the creditors if the debtor is unable to pay and in return is entitled 'to share in his movable property and inherit any of his young wives' (120) if he survives the debtor. From time to time, members of the *Ebi* will come together to celebrate special occasions like festivals, marriages and child naming ceremonies. Whenever there is marriage celebration or a new birth, messages of the good news are conveyed to other members of the family who would be expected to attend and take part in the rituals associated with the ceremony. Members of the family sometimes also contribute to the provision of money and items like the kola-nuts, guinea pepper, honey and yams needed for such ceremonies (see 120).

In case of a sudden death in the family, the entire *Ebi* unit 'are expected to be present' (2002: 120), not only to show their respect and console the immediate family of the bereaved, but to 'also perform certain obituary rites' (120) like purchasing the burial garment of the dead and ensuring that all the sympathisers are fed; by so doing they

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<sup>23</sup> *Iwofa* refers to a young person, who is used to deposit as surety to a creditor. Such a person is usually from the *Ebi* of the debtor and is expected to pay the creditor through work, until the debtor is able to pay back fully. If an *Iwofa* survives the debtor, without completing the payment, the *Iwofa* would pay and in return be entitled to inherit some of the debtor's movable property.

inherit all his movable belongings and his younger wives are assigned to other members of the Ebi family, so that the impact of his loss is minimised and also to ensure that his widow and their children are adequately looked after. The absence of a member of the family on such occasion is looked into with suspicion, especially if the lack of attendance was not triggered by sickness; in fact, death is seen as something that sometimes brings the family together as the Yoruba saying goes, '*iku ti isa oju ebi jo*', (Death gathers the entire Ebi) (120).

Order is maintained within the Ebi community in accordance to set rules and regulations. As a Yoruba descendant, my first hand experience of this is that members of the Ebi family strictly adhere to these rules as a form of guide to keep the community in harmony. Members of the community reside in a compound known as *agbo-ile* (see 2002: 120). *Agbo-ile* may be located in a single area or may be extended to other areas where they also have *agbo-ile* depending on the size of the family (see 121). The head of the Ebi family is referred to as the Olori Ebi (head of the family) or *Baale* (father of the house) and the position is usually occupied by the oldest male of *agbo-ile* (see 121). The overriding criterion for this choice is decided by age and not by the economic proficiency of the individual. The *Baale* as head of each household is prohibited from abusing his authority. He is the last to speak at family forums and his decisions are final and accepted as a collective representation of the voices of all the *Ebi* family. As part of his responsibilities, he pays members of the family a visit in the mornings to find out about their well-being and the action is in turn reciprocated by members of the family. In cases where the family units are scattered, he makes effort to get in touch with them from time

to time (see 121). According to Akinjogbin, 'There are indeed precise rules about what an elder is entitled to, and how he can forfeit his entitlements. There are also rules about what young and weak ones are entitled to' (2002: 121).

The integration of married women into their husband's *Ebi* is determined by the time of arrival into the family and not by age, therefore if a child was born into a family before the arrival of a wife, irrespective of her age, that child is believed to be an older member of the family. In fact, 'as a sign of respect' (121), such a child is expected to be called a pet name of the woman's choice and not his real name. As evident in Akinjogbin's discussion, 'What names she gives is entirely her prerogative and depends on the richness of her own imagination' (2002: 121). In addition, the name chosen could be allegorical in context, abusive, affectionate or even descriptive (see 121). 'Marriage is not regarded as an affair of the two young persons concerned, but the joining together of two *Ebi*' (2002: 121). Hence, in conducting marriage affairs, the families concerned invest a lot of their time in investigating the blood lineage of the couples in order to ensure that they are not related by blood.

For the interest of peace and justice in the land, perpetrators perverting the cause of order may be rewarded with harsh punishments. The *Baale* may sometimes deliberately apportion blame to himself in order to promote unity and prevent misunderstanding amongst individuals or families who may be at loggerheads (see 121-2). It is also possible that the management constitution of one *Ebi* is different from the other; therefore, what may obtain in one *Ebi* may be unacceptable in another. The collective units of villages and towns which make up the kingdoms are guided by the same

structures discussed above, even though different rules may be applied in accordance to the acceptable practice of the *Ebi*. The *Ebi* commonwealth is made up of kingdoms who share in the acceptance of the *Olori Ebi* leadership roles and the *Orirun* ancestry (see 122).

### **Power and Government Structure**

The overall head of the kingdom is the Oba (king). According to the Yoruba order of power, the king has ultimate power over his subjects. Certain chiefs are installed into special positions to create a bridge between the *Ebi* unit and the Oba. They form a body responsible for conveying messages to and from the Oba. The *Baale* of the *Ebi* is responsible for representing the interest of his family in liaising with the Oba through the chiefs.

Power is measured on four levels in Yorubaland: The first is in the context of actual physical powers, known as *agbara* in Yoruba language; it is a type of force which is used legitimately to achieve goals. The second is known as *ase* and translates as authority. This spiritual authority is associated with the power of Yoruba kings and their ability to give commands that are potent in nature. The third is related to stubbornness and forcefulness; this is known as *agidi* or *ipa*. The fourth is the concept of *gbajumo*; this type of power is accredited to individuals who have attained a certain level of personal success, either by virtue of their good character, trustworthiness or inheritance of a powerful position. *Gbajumo* status places the individual in a type of high society cult whereby he/she is able to influence changes in the society (see 2002: 149-51).

The power of the Oba as the ruler is directly from Ile-Ife as a descendant of Oduduwa. His powers stem from the Orisa. As part of the process of his ordination, he is expected to be raised to the status of an Orisa because of the levels of rituals involved. Therefore the king is regarded as next in rank to these gods. As a descendant of the gods, the Yoruba regard the Oba as *alase ekeji Orisa* or *igbakeji Orisa* meaning 'one who is next to the gods'. Whatever he says in the community is regarded as final. He combines both the legislative and judicial power in that his word is seen as law and he presides over the settlement of cases. He must not, however, be dictatorial because his powers are limited by certain cultural constraints. For instance, if a king was found to be dictatorial, he might be forced to die. The story of Sango in *Oba Koso* can be related to the type of fate that a King may be confronted with when he goes against the will of his people. Whenever a king dies in Yorubaland, it is believed that he has gone to join the pantheon of the Orisa. He is then seen as a lawgiver (see 152). This type of law giving is not of a physical nature but of a spiritual one, where only the wishes of the gods and the ancestors come to prevail. Because of the belief in the power of the greater cosmic forces, it was easy to ignore the use of physical force or see it as a secondary measure. The king is therefore seen as a greater spiritual force that must be obeyed. Obeying the king is an automatic reaction, parallel to how a younger person would automatically obey and respect an elder. The king should not resort to using violence and aggression of any nature to achieve his aims, even though it might sometimes be seen as best option. This is because his words are believed to be the words of the Orisa and therefore far more potent and effective than the use of force.

A king's spiritual powers are acquired through a series of rituals and initiation ceremonies before taking over the throne. He is believed to transform from an ordinary mortal to a comrade of the gods. According to Akinjogbin, 'In the process he changes from just himself into an embodiment of the corporate spirit of the community and repository of the undying essence of all the past Obas. Thus he is the link between the living and the ancestral spirits' (2002: 154).

The only type of spiritual power which is not conferred like any of the above is that of witches. The society of witches is a membership organisation of women only; and power is conferred on only members of the corporation. They are called *awon iya mi osorong*a in Yoruba language, meaning my mothers, the *osorong*a. Their power is always reflected on the smooth running of the Yoruba society. They are usually consulted during important religious and political occasions to find out whether they are satisfied. The occasion may not be complete without their blessing. They are known to be very powerful, but no in-depth research has been conducted about Yoruba witches (see 155).

The Oba as the ruler has the full participation of different parts of the community in the government. The chiefs are his closest advisers, and are normally between six and seven in number. They represent different sections of the community and contribute to the overall welfare of the kingdom. There are also women chiefs who are responsible for looking after the affairs of women because of the patriarchal nature of the society and they are empowered to contribute to the general governance of the entire kingdom. The power to exercise authority is only granted to those who have been constitutionally

elected to do so. The Oba and his chiefs are in charge of civil and military matters, while religious matters are presided over by the ‘*isoro* or *aworo* (priests and priestesses)’ (155). The roles of the different functionaries are well defined and are all under the control of the Oba who is the highest authority in the land.

The status and roles of the *agba*<sup>24</sup> (an elder) in the Yoruba *Ebi* theory is clearly defined. Social interaction ‘between individuals’ (2002: 123) in Yoruba society is maintained through the recognition of the position of the *agba*. As evident in Akinjogbin’s discussion:

The *agba* can be generally described as the senior, the oldest person within a group. He is not necessarily old or big. If he is an old man, he would be described as *agbalagba*. An *agba* simply means that when compared with the others in the environment he is the oldest (123).

The position of *agba* is determined first by biological age. For instance, in a committee of 12 people, if the oldest person was 40 years old and the other members were below his age, the 40 years old is the most senior; therefore, the *agba*. The *agba* is not determined by an individual’s power, wealth, height or size, but purely based on the date of birth of the person (see 123). In contrast to this concept of *agba* from a trans-cultural perspective, Akinjogbin compares this practice to that of the English:

The English custom whereby a younger person can address an older person by his first name as a sign of friendly familiarity is strange to Yoruba custom. Indeed such a practice will be regarded as extremely rude and intolerable. The *agba* is

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<sup>24</sup> *Agba* is a word which refers to an elder. An *agba* can either be biologically older or may be older in order of arrival into the *Ebi* family.



addressed in the second person plural pronoun of *eyin* (you) instead of *iwo* and in third person plural pronoun as *awon* (they) instead of *oun* (he) (2002: 125).

In polygynous families, the position of *agba* amongst the wives is determined by the first woman to come 'into the matrimonial Ebi' 'irrespective' of her 'biological age' (123). Another way in which the position of *agba* can be determined without relevance to the biological age is through the precedence of settling in a particular area before the arrival of others.

The Yoruba justice system places the *agba* in the forefront of maintaining law and order. The *agba* must be seen to display acceptable leadership qualities in reciprocation for the respect and honour given to him or her in society. He or she is expected to be patient and willing to accept responsibilities; be able to maintain strict confidentiality on matters of concern; consider the interests of younger people in the community; rational in the delivery of judgements and generous within his or her capabilities. Additionally, the *agba* is not expected to talk first when serious matters are being discussed. He or she is expected to listen to the opinions of all the others before making his or her own contribution. This is because the *agba* is considered to be wiser and listens first to the wisdom of others before speaking (see 125-6).

The concept of power in Yoruba society has never been stagnant. This is because of the power struggles associated with some of their historical narratives (see Akinjogbin, 2002, Ajayi, 1987: 174-214 and Crowder, 1968). These periods include the pre-Oduduwa time, that is, the Obatala government which was before the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D, but we are not

certain; and as Akinjogbin has rightly stated ‘We will only be able to speak with a greater certainty when more archaeological researches have been carried out’ (2002: 18), the Oduduwa period ‘around the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D’ (18), the period of contact with the Europeans, ‘from about the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century’ when they started trading on the coast of west Africa (66) to the 1<sup>st</sup> of ‘January 1900’ when ‘the British proclaimed a protectorate over Yorubaland’ (68), the period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century civil wars in Yorubaland; in the words of Akinjogbin, ‘No one could have thought that the small rebellion, which started in 1793 at Iwere, a very small inconsequential town within the metropolitan area of Oyo Ile would end up in one whole century of civil wars’ (69); from ‘1793 to 1896’ (2002:137), the period of colonial rule (1900 -1960) (77).

### **Marriage, Women and Socio-Development**

The *Ebi* system of government cannot be fully explored without discussing the vital roles of women as mothers, wives and active members of the community. In Akinjogbin’s discussion about marriage and the role of women in the *Ebi* system, Obatala who was monogamous, was identified as the last head of the pre-Oduduwa Ile-Ife society. He was married to only Yemoo, despite the availability of many women in Ile-Ife. He felt that one wife was sufficient for him. It was not that polygyny was not thought about at the time, but the desire was not ‘strong’ enough for Obatala to marry more than one wife (see 2002: 130).

When Oduduwa came to the throne, he was reported to have seized the crown from Obatala to become the *Are* (The head of all the Ile-Ife community). Apart from making

‘himself head of the thirteen communities’, he additionally changed the overall structure of the social system by moving all the thirteen communities into one ‘large town’ comprising different family groups. The thirteen heads of the community were deprived of political authority, but kept as ‘religious chiefs’ because of their knowledge of the appeasement of the gods of the land. They were also retained for economic reasons (see 131). Oduduwa also embarked on building a huge palace ‘for himself’ as king and ‘created a market’ (131) outside the palace; the market was transformed into an economic centre for Ile-Ife.

According to oral tradition, Oduduwa’s revolutionary wars went beyond Ile-Ife and extended to other parts of Yorubaland where his children established their kingdoms (see 133-4). Most of the newly founded kingdoms were established through wars despite the resistance of the pre-Oduduwa monarchy. As a result of these wars, its insecurities and the newly introduced system of economy, polygamy extended to other parts of Yorubaland (see 133).

Between the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, polygamy had become acceptable to the point that whoever was not polygamous was thought of as not ‘doing the right thing’ (2002: 133). The growth experienced by the Oyo Kingdom from the middle part ‘of the 16<sup>th</sup> century’ to the earlier part ‘of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’ was instrumental to the expansion of polygamy; it was a period when the kingdom used its military might in suppressing a high percentage of the northern and western part of Yorubaland. In fact, this expansion was reported to have extended beyond the boundaries of Yorubaland with

the acquisition of some parts of Bariba, Nupe<sup>25</sup> and the entire Dahomey Kingdom (see 134). As a direct result of this, Oyo palace became very large and the *Alaafin* married ‘hundreds of wives’ (134). These wives were not only used for the economic growth and administration of the empire, they were also assigned as heads of certain religious cults in the palace. In order to consolidate his power, the *Alaafin* indulged in marrying wives from Dahomey, Ibariba, and Nupe land.

The introduction of the transatlantic slave trade into Yorubaland from the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century lasted about 400 years. The first Europeans to arrive on the coast of West Africa under the camouflage of exploration when indeed they were capturing and shipping people away into slavery were the Portuguese who were reported to have reached Benin in 1497 (see 135). In justifying his view ‘that slavery was not indigenous in Yorubaland’ Akinjogbin stated:

The original document they wrote obviously showed that they did not meet any slave market there. They had to make a policy decision in Portugal where it was said that in order to save Africans for Christianity, they should capture them and take them to Europe to Christianise them. That was how slave trade was introduced into Yorubaland (2002: 135).

In questioning their rationale, he asked, ‘if they are to be Christianised, why not in their own land, why take them away’ (135). The British, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese and other European nations were all involved in the slave trade, so much so that they engaged in war in order to dominate ‘one another’s markets in West Africa and in the Americas’ (135). They created wars among West African communities so that the war

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<sup>25</sup>Nupe refers to a group of people from Niger state of Nigeria.

captives could be sold 'to them as slaves' (2002: 135). This practice led to the formation of European slave companies which were supported 'by their national parliaments' (136) to trade in slaves.

Between 1500 AD and 1830, the coast of West Africa was greatly devastated by the slave trade which took away young men from their families. The majority of them were exported to places in America and the West Indies (see 136), resulting in a shortage of men. It is estimated that the ratio of men taken to women was three to one; they were reported to have been 'inspected like animals, those to be taken away must have strong teeth and no beard' (2002: 136). The impact of this led to the availability of more women and the depletion of the population. Hence, women were ready to become the second, third, fourth or fifth wives. The rapid decline of the population also meant that in order to prevent the extermination of the race, it was imperative that women quickly gave birth to replacement children (see 136-8). These factors weighed heavily on how polygamy became widely accepted without protest and polygamy became recognised as 'the traditional system of marriage' by the later part 'of the 19<sup>th</sup> century' (2002: 136). It also became fashionable to have many wives who could be economically useful on farms during the harvest seasons (see 136).

The Islamic religion was introduced into Yorubaland before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the Northern part of Nigeria where Islam was introduced to the Fulani society in the 1800s; the Europeans first encountered Yoruba Moslems at Ajase, Port Novo in 1726 (see 138). As a result of the civil wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islam was able to gain popularity in

Yorubaland, resulting in the solidification of the already existing polygamous system of marriage.

Christianity was first introduced into Yorubaland in 1842, when the missionaries arrived in Abeokuta. Their evangelical work included the preaching of monogamous doctrines as part of the basic Christian expectation (see 2002: 138). The Christian proselytes were not immediately in acceptance of monogamous indoctrination; therefore the Church of England being the largest denomination introduced 'a rule that' provided you had been baptised, 'you could not be confirmed' if you were polygamous (see 138). It also formed part of the rule that if you had been confirmed, and had married more wives, you couldn't take part in the 'Holy Communion' (138). The rules were later relaxed because polygamy was already rooted in the way of life of the Yoruba.

As revealed, the system of marriage 'was not contracted on individual basis but on the basis of the *Ebi*' (2002: 139), since marriage is seen as an affair between two families. The elders of the male family would make contact with the elders of the female family on behalf of their son 'and ask for their daughter's hand in marriage' (138). After coming to an agreement, arrangements will be made by the *Ebi* of the bridegroom to pay the dowry of the bride. After payment, the bride would be escorted to her husband's house in a ceremonial procession which brought all the *Ebi* together. As part of the tradition, the new wife 'was handed over to the oldest woman' representing her husband's family. The position of the wife in her new *Ebi* was determined by the time of her arrival into the family. Therefore the power of the woman was well established within the *Ebi* family

system. Divorce was not allowed in traditional marriages. Every wife was allocated a room within the family house that would be jointly owned by her and her children. If there was a disagreement between the couples, it was not seen as their affair alone, but that of the whole family who would come together to settle the disagreement. Once the marriage had been blessed with children, divorce was never seen as an option (see 140). Divorce laws were first instituted in Yorubaland by the colonial administrators ‘in 1918’ (2002: 140) and within the context of the divorce system, when a woman had already given birth to children before the divorce, she continued to participate in important family events, provided her children still formed part of the family (see 140).

If a husband died within the traditional marriage system, the family would arrange for his widow to be taken over by a responsible family member who would then provide her with both ‘emotional and material’ requirements, especially if she was of a child bearing age. This practice was known as *Opo sisu*<sup>26</sup> (see 140). The aim was to make sure that the woman and her children were adequately cared for and for the children not to appear as fatherless. The fundamental responsibility of the woman within the *Ebi* commonwealth was to ensure that there was continuity. Therefore the role of the women in preserving the reputation of the family they marry into is a very powerful one; and it constitutes her major role within the family (see 141).

The Yoruba have always lived in urban settlements. Their towns comprise a congregation of various *Ebi* who have come together from different parts of Yorubaland. They are

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<sup>26</sup> *Opo Sisu* is the act of marrying the widow of a deceased relative and becoming responsible for her needs and her children’s needs. This practice is no longer active in Yorubaland.

headed by an 'Oba' (king) who is also the head of his own *Ebi*. The women also play an important part in the general government of these urban settlements. The political structure is made up of women who occupy some of the highest political offices in the town. Titles like *Iyalaje*<sup>27</sup> or *Otun Iyalode* were titles given to women. Politics and religion are interwoven in Yorubaland and women of such substance are found to be in charge of some of the most important political and spiritual positions of the power structure (see 2002: 141).

The power of women in Yoruba society is classified on three levels. The first is their 'power and influence' within the *Ebi* as mentioned earlier. The second is their power within 'the political order'; women were and are still very powerful and influential in matters affecting the overall political system of the kingdom or town. If they were unhappy about a particular situation, they could be led by the *Iyalode* to appear on the 'palace grounds' with their dresses worn 'inside out' as a sign of protest to show that they were not satisfied about something. It would then become an obligation for the king and his councils to effect changes that would rectify the situation they were unhappy about. They could also depose an Oba they did not like, by appearing completely naked in the palace. In a situation like this, the Oba would be quickly led out of the palace, so that he did not see their nakedness. If he were to see their nakedness, it would have implied 'that he had seen his heaven' (2002: 141); his passage into the next world. This type of exposure would mean that he was no longer entitled to live. If he did not see them, they would be appeased and the matter would be resolved to please them (see 141).

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<sup>27</sup> *Iyalaje* is one of the titles of the market women leaders. They occupy a powerful position within the Yoruba social structures and are in charge of all market affairs.



The third aspect of women's power is linked to the economic growth and stability of the community. A market was always located in front of the king's palace known as the 'Oja Oba' (central market or the king's market). These types of markets can be found in every Yoruba town and this was where most of the kingdom's economic engagements took place. Apart from buying and selling, the markets were also at the forefront of ceremonial activities. The market can be regarded as the embodiment of the communal spirits; in the sense that the events of this market place are integral to every single member of the community. Affairs of mutual interest and benefit started and ended in the market place. Virtually all the Yoruba religious festivals conducted in honour and appeasement of the ancestral spirits commenced and finished at the central market (Oja Oba). These Yoruba markets were usually headed by very highly regarded women. The significance of the market place in Yoruba society constitutes a very powerful force because of its choice as a place of dialogue with the ancestors through the medium of the *egungun* masquerades, the festival of the deities, Oro and the other festival celebrations. Therefore, when we look at the role of women as the bearers of life in the first place, it makes logical sense that Yoruba society recognises their role in the continuity of life (see 141).

In order to explore the way in which women's position has changed over the years, Akinjogbin discusses the chronological context of women's roles in line with the historical development of the Yoruba *Ebi* theory. He assesses the roles of some of the female historical figures in Yorubaland in order to determine whether their powers have increased or been undermined. The consideration of Yemoo's matrimony with Obatala revealed that Yemoo was like the queen when Obatala was the king. Because Obatala

adopted a monogamous system of marriage, Yemoo's role as wife, mother and a political force was very powerful (see 142). The monarchy of the time also witnessed equality in the distribution of inheritance between opposite sexes. As highlighted by Akinjogbin, 'There was at least one Ooni of Ife called 'Luwo'<sup>28</sup> who was the daughter of the longest reigning "Ooni" called 'Ogbooru' (2002: 143). Moremi, who is fondly remembered as the heroine of Ile-Ife, was an earlier *Ooni's* wife<sup>29</sup>. She was fully involved in the political battle between Ile Ife and her enemies. Her sacrifice restored order in Ile-Ife during the Oduduwa monarchical system (see 144). Similar accounts have been noted in places like Ilesa where *Arise* maintained power and also in Ondo where *Pupuupu* was recorded to have established the first monarchy of Ondo, where she reigned in the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>30</sup>; her dynasty is reported to be still active today. According to Akinjogbin, 'whenever an 'Osemawe' died, it was 'Pupuupu' who took over during the period of interregnum' (2002: 144). The evidence gathered so far indicates that women maintained power in the pre-colonial period; they occupied important positions at the height of the social political structures, in the religious and spiritual orders and the economic centres.

The effects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century civil wars contributed to trends that changed the position of women in Yorubaland. Apart from reducing the population of men and creating the availability of women needing husbands, it also created a void within the social structure because of the absence of the men who had gone to war. The order and management of

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<sup>28</sup> According to oral tradition, Luwo reigned around 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. as the 21<sup>st</sup> Ooni of Ile-Ife, but we have no written evidence of the precise period or date of her reign.

<sup>29</sup> We have no evidence of the monarchy or the name of the Ooni who was Moremi's husband, but her story as the primordial heroine of Ile-Ife is well known to the Yoruba people and has been the subject of one of Ladipo's plays.

<sup>30</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ondo\\_Kingdom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ondo_Kingdom)

the town's welfare became women's responsibility because most of the able young men were at the war fronts. They became the guardians of the community and were responsible for the defence of the frontiers in the absence of their men. It was also part of their responsibility to make sure that food was provided for the fighting soldiers. Therefore women played the role of sustaining the community through trade and were in charge of recruiting young soldiers for the ongoing wars. Women like Madam 'Tinubu in Abeokuta and Lagos and Efunsetan in Ibadan' (147) were politically very powerful in the areas they were in charge. The two women<sup>31</sup> were reported to be sisters; and they have remained a powerful force to be reckoned with in Yoruba history.

After the end of the war in 1893, the Europeans extended their authority to 'the interior' of Yorubaland. In 1900, they declared control over the territory of Nigeria and amalgamated 'southern and northern Nigeria in 1914' (2002: 147). The introduction of the European divorce law in 1918 destabilised the structure of the Yoruba marriage system and meant that marriages were reduced to an affair of the individuals involved; contrary to the *Ebi* system. The implications of introducing divorce laws led to the vulnerability of women in Yoruba society. Akinjogbin explained that, 'because of this, women lost a great deal of protection including that of '*opo sisu*', which is now regarded as barbaric' (148). Henceforth, colonial rule played a large role in the disempowerment of women in Yoruba society because women were no longer as politically, socially and

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<sup>31</sup> They were both active in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Madame Tinubu was born in Abeokuta. She was a powerful business woman, the *Iyalode* of Egbaland, a political activist and a leading nationalist. She was very active from about 1846 until her death in 1887. See <http://culturaltips.blogspot.com/2009/07/meet-madam-efunroye-tinubu.html>.; <http://www.africaeconomicanalysis.org/articles/38/1slave-trade-a-root-of-contemporary-African-Crisis/Page1.html>.

Madame Efunsetan Aniwura was the *Iyalode* of Ibadan. She was known to be a formidable business woman with a notorious character. She is the subject of one of Professor Akinwumi Ishola's plays.

economically powerful as they were in the *Ebi* system which did not deprive them of their rights to progress within the family; for instance, ‘For the first time, the wages system discriminated between the men and the women by rating women lower than men’ (2002: 148).

### **The *Eegun Alare* Performance Tradition**

An account of the context, narratives and evaluation of the *Eegun Alare* performance tradition have been examined in Adedeji, 1981, Jeyifo 1984, Gotrick, 1984 and Owomoyela, 1986. They are also known as *Eegun Apidan* (the Masquerade magicians/performers or strolling magicians) or *Alarinjo*. But *Alarinjo*, a word which literally means the walking dancers, travelling dancers or dance mummers, is no longer acceptable for describing such a performance tradition because of its meaning. Writers and scholars like Femi Osofisan and Dotun Ogundeji have argued that the name is not appropriate for such an important theatre because of the derogatory implications of the meaning of the word. In fact, I am not clear about Professor Joel Adedeji’s logic or reasons for using or adopting such a name for his pioneering work on the tradition, even though he was aware of the derogatory implications of the word, as clarified in his explanation:

The masque-dramaturges still go by their original descriptive name, *egungun apidan*, and their classificatory name, *oje*, and do not take it kindly to being called the *Alarinjo*—a name which originated as an abuse and which more or less picks them out and labels them as “rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars”. For the

purpose of appealing to their mass audiences and influencing their psyche, it became expedient for the masque-dramaturges to be identified as *Egungun*; as they “cannot very well ignore the shaping and restraining influence of the cult” (1981: 228).

In addition to this, the fact that the *Egungun* masquerades in Yoruba belief system are seen as representatives of the inhabitants of heaven, coming to visit their community of the living, and healing them of all forms of sickness and disease, makes it even more important not to refer to them with a derogatory name, but with reverence. Therefore, in the light of these factors, my account of their narratives will refer to them as *Eegun Alare*, a descriptive name which means the performing masquerades or the masquerade performers, except for where the other term has been used in a reference being quoted from an academic material.

The *Eegun Alare* performance tradition has its roots in the matrix of the Yoruba people; their belief system, religious rituals, their spiritual and social political dynamics. This is because the Yoruba civilisation was very expressive in its ritualistic, ceremonial and social political make up. The actors disguise themselves with masks and costumes and their repertoires are diverse in nature. According to Biodun Jeyifo ‘the performers are masked and their theatrical fare combines dramatised satirical sketches drawn from a corpus of stock character types, instrumental and vocal music, mimetic dancing, acrobatics and visual spectacle’ (1984:34). The tradition has seen a gradual decline, but remains alive in virtually every aspect of Yoruba theatrical expression.

In Jeyifo's discussion, he made reference to Adedeji's description of the historical account of the tradition. The account is made up of oral traditional records and historical documentations which revealed the content, evolution and decline of this practice. We have evidence that it took 'several centuries' (34) for the practice and transformations of this tradition to evolve before its ultimate decline in the nineteenth century (see 34). As an itinerant form of theatre, the factors responsible for its decline were mainly external; the penetration of foreign religious and ideological views of the European; Christianity, Islamic movements and secular bodies (see 34). These interventions were fundamental to undermining the growth of traditional institutions and Yoruba art forms. By the time of these interventions, this theatre tradition was at its peak of development (see 34).

The first written documentation about the *Eegun Alare* was recorded by Hugh Clapperton, the famous British explorer, who had seen the performance of a residential itinerant *Alare* troupe as a guest of the *Alaafin* of Oyo on Wednesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1826 (see 1981: 221). Clapperton's account of the performance was reported thus:

The third act consisted of the white devil. The actors having retired to some distance in the background, one of them was left in the centre, whose sack falling gradually down, exposed a white head, at which the crowd gave a shout that rent the air; they appeared indeed to enjoy this sight and the perfection of the actor's act. The whole body was at last cleared of the incumbrance of the sack, when it exhibited the appearance of a human figure cast in white wax, of the middle size, miserably thin, and starved with cold. It frequently went through the motion of taking snuff and rubbing its hands; when it walked, it was with the most awkward

gait, treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking barefooted for the first time over frozen ground. The spectators often appealed to us, as to the excellence of the performance, and entreated I would look and be attentive to what was going on. I pretended to be fully as much pleased with this caricature of a white man as they would be, and certainly the actor burlesqued the part to admiration (1966: 55; cited in Jeyifo, 1984: 34).

The Yoruba oral tradition tells us that the *Eegun Alare* performance tradition developed from the ancestral *Egungun* secret cult. According to Jeyifo:

Adedeji's historical reconstruction of the development and decline of this tradition shows that three clear phases were involved: a form of folk dance-mummery related to the cult of ancestor-worship supervised by the secret-cult Egungun society; a court entertainment "which waited on the pleasure" of kings and military chieftains of the city-states; a popular idiom which achieved its greatest technical and stylistic maturation under the impetus of professional competition for popular patronage and commercial success (35).

Jeyifo referred to Adedeji's description of the classification and distinction of the practitioners whose patronage was based and determined by class differences. The aristocratic society was in control of one section of the *Eegun Alare* troupes, while the other was under the patronage of the majority of the population. The establishment and development of the *Eegun Alare* theatre was crucially linked to the pattern of the aristocratic structural changes; therefore the theatre acted as a mirror which reflected the social, political and historical context of the Yoruba (see 35).

Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were two pioneering troupes; the Ologbin Ologbojo and the Esa Ogbin. The former specialised in entertaining the court of the governing elites only while the latter was instrumental in taking theatre to the masses and addressing the artistic needs of the people through a grassroots mobilisation approach. The Esa Ogbin itinerant troupe made sure the theatre was accessible to society at large. Their repertoire was far more extensive and diverse to accommodate the general needs of the society; hence they became very popular and attracted actors from practicing *egungun* families. The Esa Ogbin troupe inspired many of these *egungun* practitioners to seek to form their own groups (see Adedeji, 1981: 221-5).

The Ologbin Ologbojo troupe was established on a platform of political, spiritual and historical agendas; and was in operation by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The story began with Prince Abipa who became the fourth and last *Alaafin* of Oyo to reign at Igboho, which for a period of time was the capital of Oyo Kingdom (see Johnson 1921: 164-7 and 1981: 221). In the legendary story, *Alaafin* Abipa was reported to be preparing to return to Old Oyo with his people in order to fulfil the will of his ancestors, but he encountered opposition from his chiefs who were not in support of the move. When they became aware that the *Alaafin* was sending his priests to Old Oyo to appease the land, they found a way of disrupting his plans by gathering together all the handicapped members of their family; albinos, dwarfs and hunchbacks, and dispatched them as emissaries to hide near the ancestral graves. When the priests started their ritual purification of the land, the emissaries rushed out of their hiding places, dressed as apparitions. The priests believed that they were ghosts and returned back to tell the *Alaafin* to re-think his plan. The *Alaafin* had been secretly told about the ghost plan by his cymbalist who over-heard the



plot. The *Alaafin* kept quiet about it. He sent his best hunters to catch the emissaries. He then staged a performance by inviting all the chiefs concerned to a banquet and arranged for them to be served by their individual ghosts. The chiefs got the message and abandoned their plans. They were so embittered about their foiled plan that they murdered the *Alaafin's* cymbalist. *Alaafin* 'Abipa was nick-named Oba M'oro' (1921: 166), the ghost catcher, as a result of the incident. The ghost-mummers were retained as resident entertainers in the palace of the *Alaafin*, under the leadership of the *Alaafin's* chief entertainer, Ologbin Ologbojo (1981: 222). Since then the ghost story has become an annually dramatised piece during the Oyo's festivals of Orisa Oko, Orisa Mole and that of Oduduwa (see 1981: 223). The story will be explored further in my analysis of Ladipo's play *Oba Moro*.

Esa Ogbin was an artist whose approach popularised theatre and attracted other practitioners to follow in his footsteps. The theatre became a medium that was fused with the celebration of the culture of the Yoruba; and was no longer exclusive to the aristocratic families (see 224). The *Eegun Alare* theatre found its bearing and flourished through the use of a historical, cultural and spiritual theatrical thematic. In Beier's description of this theatre tradition, he commented that, 'the performance of the *Alarinjo* dancers came closest to a western concept of theatre: masked actors satirized people, gods and animals and commented on the follies of mankind' (1994:3). The theatre became popular and the actors moved from one area to the other. They performed in market squares, palaces and from town to town, making a living on donations from their audiences. Their theatrical compositions were made up of brief sketches and

characterisations, combined with dance, songs and acrobatic exhibitions. The stories and plots were not always very prominent because there was no restricted access between the actors and the audience. This was because the art form was at its early stages and there was no idea of stage design and management in place at the time.

In establishing the roots of the *Eegun Alare* tradition, Adedeji writes:

Thus, Ologbin Ologbojo founded the Alarinjo theatre. A worshipper of Obatala and of the Oba clan, it is claimed that it was on account of his hybrid son, Olugbere Agan, that he established the theatre as a permanent part of court entertainments. To launch him, Ologbin Ologbojo got Olojowon, the master carver, to carve a wooden face mask and Alaran Ori, the costumer, to build a set of costumes. With these Olugbere Agan careered as a costumed actor and a strolling player. Ologbojo himself served him as the masque-dramaturge or animator who handled the improvisations while the Akunyangba, the palace rhapsodists, provided the choral chants (1981: 223-4).

According to Adedeji 'The Alarinjo first emerged from the dramatic roots of *egungun* (masquerade) as ancestor worship during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu, who acceded to the throne at Oyo Igboho about 1590, as a court entertainment' (1981: 221), two hundred and thirty-six years before Richard Lander and Hugh Clapperton were invited as guests to the court of the *Alaafin* of Oyo, where they witnessed a performance of one of the troupes that was resident in the court of the King at the time. However, it is important to stress that Adedeji's theory about the emergence of the *Eegun Alare* has been subjected to

scrutiny by Oyekan Owomoyela (Owomoyela, 1986). The case presented by the former in relation to this origin requires close examination. This is because of the direct relationship of Ladipo's play to the story, but also because we are presented with a different perspective of other possible origins of the Yoruba theatrical tradition. According to Owomoyela, 'Although Adedeji's thesis has achieved the status of almost unassailable authority on the genesis of Yoruba theatre, its arguments and means of arriving at conclusions raise questions and invite close scrutiny' (1986: 134).

In identifying the inconsistencies associated with Adedeji's thesis, Owomoyela questions the validity of some of his conclusions. For instance, he highlighted the implications of Adedeji's claim that the first emergence of the *Eegun Alare* theatre was when *Alaafin* Ogbolu (Abipa) came to power at Oyo-Igboho in the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the credit that Ologbin Ologbojo was responsible for the founding of the theatre. In assessing the validity of Adedeji's conclusions, Owomoyela examines the former's account of the emergence by re-constructing the story. He argued that Adedeji's account depends:

on the validity of some crucial assertions: that the characters the Oyo Mesi employed to frighten Abipa's emissaries were "actors" or "ghost-mummers" and members of the *egungun* cult—"ghost-mummer" is N.A. Fadipe's word for *egungun* (213, 265); that these characters were involved in masking or mumming at the appointed site; that they were subsequently made to perform a "show" at court as the king's means of rebuking his councillors, and later for the benefit of the general public; and that they were retained at court as "a band of entertainers" under the direction of the *ologbo*, who transformed them into professional actors and pioneers of "the traditional Yoruba travelling theatre." (1986: 236).

In comparing Adedeji's account with the sources of his historical references, Owomoyela identifies Robert S. Smith and Reverend Samuel Johnson as his main sources and explained that even the former was reliant on the latter for his account of the story of Igboho. He pointed out the obvious significant discrepancies that exist between the accounts given by Adedeji and his sources, stating:

The emissaries that the members of the Oyo Mesi sent to Oyo were not “a company of ghost-mummers,” nor were they “a company of actors”; and, furthermore, they had nothing to do with the *egungun*. The nobles who selected them to act as apparitions sought to take advantage of their *visible* deformities because Yoruba belief is that the spirits who inhabit hills and trees (oro or iwin) have grotesque, quasi-human shapes (1986: 239).

In addition, Owomoyela highlighted the conditions that enhanced the effectiveness of the initial display of the ghost characters as being that they lighted torches which revealed ‘their grotesque forms to the king’s messengers at the bottom of the hill; they would have nullified their natural assets for their roles had they donned masks’ (239). He argued that since these individuals are recognised in the Yoruba society as the creations of Obatala (Orisa Nla, the arch divinity of the Yoruba pantheon), referring ‘to them as “stock-characters” is misleading’ (239).

In clarifying the actions of Abipa in subjecting the captured ghosts to serve their respective masters who thought they were still playing ghosts on the hill of Ajaka during

the banquet in his palace, Owomoyela rightly argued, ‘There was no “show” involved, but there was no need for one. Indeed one might suggest that the unfortunate creatures could not have been expected to do a show and serve at the same time. The shock, not the play, was the thing’ (240).

When I asked Chief Yemi Elebuibon, a famous Nigerian Ifa priest, whether we can say that it was as a result of the king’s action of inviting the chiefs to the palace to be served by their ghosts and retaining the so-called ghosts as palace performers that led to the emergence of the *egungun*, he explained, ‘The Oba wanted to teach the chiefs a lesson by dramatizing what the Yoruba call *eno* (speaking in parables through carrying out an action). The chiefs did not tell the king that they would refuse to go. Since they did not oppose, the king could not confront them, instead, he devised a different strategy’ (Interview with Author, 2007). Therefore, the action of the king can be seen as a kind of unspoken dialogue, a type of visual language.

In examining the circumstances that led the councillors to murder the Ologbo, Owomoyela scrutinizes the account given by Adedeji that ‘the Ologbo found out about the secret mission because he was a member of the *egungun* cult and that he was poisoned for betraying their secret’ (240), explaining that even his sources, Johnson and Smith are not supportive of ‘either detail’ (240). In rationalizing the scrutiny, Owomoyela stated:

Although the *alapinni* is the titular head of the *egungun*, the one in question was involved in the plot in his capacity as a member of the Oyo Mesi, not as head of the cult, and, like the rest of the Oyo Mesi, he supplied a deformed person for the

enterprise, not a member of the *egungun* cult. The other courtiers who supplied deformed people had no connection with the *egungun*, and, indeed, neither did the Ologbo (240).

He referred to Johnson and Smith's investigation of how the *egungun* was introduced into the Yoruba society as it was recorded in both of their findings that it was during Ofinran's reign,<sup>32</sup> 'half a century before' (240) the *Oba Moro* incident. But while Johnson is of the opinion that the mysteries of the *egungun* were not known to the Yoruba people until they were introduced to the belief by the Tapas (Nupe people) (See Johnson 1921: 160), 'Smith speculates that since *egungun* is largely ancestor worship and ancestor worship is common all over Africa, the likelihood is that what was here introduced was additional rituals, rather than new ideas and belief' (1986: 240). Furthermore, Owomoyela highlights the need to clarify the Ologbo's role as that of the *Alaafin's arokin*; the king's cymbalist, praise singer and one who has knowledge of the history and 'the genealogy of the kings'(1921:58) and rightly compared their roles to that of the Wolof *griot* (See 1986: 241).

In light of the above discussions and Owomoyela's findings, the narrative of the origin of the *egungun* and the roles played by the parties concerned becomes clearer. In addition, the findings shed more light on Ladipo's *Oba Moro* with regards to how the analyses of the play can be further enhanced. It is also important to note that apart from the possible origins that have been discussed here, there are two other possible origins which are the mythological origins linked to Orunmila (Ifa), the Yoruba god of wisdom and divination and the inheritance origin believed to have been devised by trustees of the estates of

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<sup>32</sup> Ofinran reigned in the middle part of the sixteenth century. See <http://web.ccsu.edu/afstudy/updd14-1.html>

deceased people in settling their children's disputes about their father's properties. According to Elebuibon, 'the *Eegun Alare* tradition has been in place for a long time, it was not during the Abipa's reign that *Arinjo* tradition began. It was revealed in one of the Ifa verses that *Arinjo* had been around for a long time, not during the reign of Abipa. According to the revelation in Ifa, Orunmila was the central character in the performance' (Interview by author, 2007); in his words, 'I cannot put a particular time to it, but in one of my plays, 'Ifa Olokun Asorodayo' we saw that Orunmila himself participated in a theatrical performance' (2007). As revealed by Elebuibon, the song composed by Orunmila as a result of this performance goes thus:

*Ejeka sere, ejeka sere, ejeka sere ode Iwoye ejeka sere (2ce)*

*Aso obinrin so dale aso dale so obinrin (2ce)*

*Omi inu ni nko o ode Iwoye, omi inu ni nko o (2ce)*

*Erelu yekuro, Erelu yekuro ode Iwoye Erelu yekuro (2ce) (2007).*

Let us dramatise, let us dramatise, let us dramatise the story of the journey to Iwoye

She takes on the role of a woman and a traitor and the role of a traitor and a woman

You are feeling guilty, you are feeling guilty about your journey to Iwoye; you are feeling guilty.

Erelu stop lying, Erelu stop lying about your deceitful journey to Iwoye, Erelu stop lying

In addition to this, when I interviewed Ayo Opefeyitimi, an expert on the Yoruba oral tradition and literature at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, about the *egungun* origin, he made reference to one of the Ifa mythological origins as explored in one of

the verses of Odu oturupon<sup>33</sup> and explained, ‘it talks about those lineages in Yorubaland, who were original custodians of the *egungun* tradition; such lineages are the Oloje’ (2007), but clarified the fact that, ‘there are so many mythological stories linked to the tradition’ (2007) and brought to light the stories linked to the inheritance origin. As there are so many versions about the origin of the *egungun* tradition, detailed accounts of the different versions would require an in-depth examination that cannot be explored in the present discussion.

In rationalizing the context of this discussion in relation to the birth of the Yoruba professional popular theatre, the modern travelling theatre, Jeyifo argues:

If we agree with a scholar’s description of theatrical tradition as “the transmission of a code of rules (i.e. conventions) to which players, playwrights and audiences conform, and store of possible modes of representing action which accumulates over the generations”, the emergence and development of modern Yoruba Travelling Theatre as a vital, many-sided theatrical tradition in just four decades of its professional existence becomes a matter of considerable interest. Clearly, the historical emergence and growth of this theatrical tradition is to be seen in terms of both its roots in the traditional religious and secular performing arts of the Yoruba people and its more direct, immediate antecedents in the performances and entertainments engendered by the contact with European Christian missions and secular forces. And in reconstructing the rise and growth of this theatre form, the essential task is to identify the internal (i.e. artistic) and external (i.e. social, cultural and historical) processes involved, as well as the crucial agents of its formation and elaboration (1984: 35-6).

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<sup>33</sup> Oturupon is the name of one of the Ifa corpus.



## THE YORUBA MODERN THEATRE

### The Yoruba Professional Travelling Theatre

The Yoruba modern theatre has its roots in the churches. This became effective from the 1920s. The formation of independent African churches and denominations became influential in the emergence of Yoruba modern theatre. New churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim and the Apostolic Church were inspired to use Bible stories as plays to educate their congregations; especially those who were not literate. The proceeds collected from the contributions of the audience went towards the development of the 'church school' and other financial responsibilities (see Beier, 1994: 3). There was a mobilisation of amateur actors who were mostly colleagues and pupils recruited and taught by school teachers. Stories like the tale of Joseph and his brothers, Adam and Eve, Nebuchadnezzar and Samson were performed. An example of this type of performance is evident in Beier's account of his first encounter with Kola Ogunmola's troupe:

I saw *Joseph and his Brethren* in Ikerre Ekiti in 1953! I came across him by chance and I followed him for a whole week to Ado Ekiti and Ijero and other towns to watch him (77).

Theatrical performances were combined with an accompaniment of music from an orchestra. The main musical instruments were tambourines, bongos, iron gongs and congas which they used to compose music inspired by church hymns and the highlife genre<sup>34</sup>. The performances were often interjected with humorous lines which excited audiences (see 1994: 3).

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<sup>34</sup> Highlife is a contemporary style of traditional music that was popularised in places like Nigeria and Ghana. The music fuses traditional songs and African percussion with modern instruments like guitar. I am not certain about its roots, but it was already popular in Nigeria in the 1920s.

Hubert Ogunde was the progenitor of modern Yoruba professional theatre. He ‘was a born entertainer’ (4) who started his career in a church school and went on to become one of the greatest and most prolific dramatists to be produced by Yoruba theatre (see 1994: 3-5 and Jeyifo, 1984: 36). According to Jeyifo:

It is tempting to see in Esa Ogbin’s career a prefiguration of Hubert Ogunde’s influence and career: the basic outlines of the emergence and evolution of the old Travelling Theatre, the Alarinjo tradition, parallel, rather closely, those of its modern counterpart, the contemporary Yoruba Travelling Theatre (1984:35).

In highlighting his familiarity with the *Eegun Alare* tradition, that is, the *Alarinjo*, as referred to above, Jeyifo confirmed that when Ogunde was ‘a young boy he ran away with one of these companies, touring with the company for several months until his irate father, who had been away when his son absconded, personally effected his return home’ (39). Ogunde used biblical themes to produce plays before 1946, as evident in Jeyifo’s statement:

In the tradition of a long line of other song-writers and composers of the “Native Air Opera” and other forms of entertainment such as “Service of Songs” and “Cantatas” before him, Hubert Ogunde had been giving public performances of his own compositions in these forms for some two years, largely under the sponsorship and patronage of his denominational sect, the Church of the Aladura and other similar sects which requested his services (36).

When he became aware of the commercial viability of staging theatre performances, Ogunde resigned from his job as a policeman and recruited some of his former pupils and colleagues into his theatre. In 1946, at the age of ‘thirty’, the ‘ex-teacher’, ‘composer’

and ‘church organist’ had become independent of the church; he had founded the first professional modern theatre company in Nigeria, a company that would later be instrumental in the contemporary transformation of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre (see 36). He extended his repertoire with themes that were close to the heart of the audience and rented a truck to enable his troupe to travel. Ogunde was very professional and highly skilled at manipulating his audience for maximum efficiency. Beier confirmed that ‘No other Yoruba director understood his audience the way he did’ (1994:4). The quality of Ogunde’s plays was enhanced by the ‘opening glee’, which was composed of dancing beautiful girls, who shook their hips and rolled their eyes to the tune of playing saxophones (see 4). This act reached a climax when Ogunde emerged onto the stage, in the midst of these beautiful women to introduce the play they were about to perform (see 4).

Apart from Ogunde’s personal theatrical transformations, the evolution and rapid growth of the Yoruba modern Travelling Theatre tradition in its short period of existence became a formidable force to be reckoned with. Jeyifo explains:

Clearly, the historical emergence and growth of this theatrical tradition is to be seen in terms of both its roots in the traditional religious and secular performing arts of the Yoruba people and its more direct, immediate antecedents in the performances and entertainments engendered by the contact with the European Christian missions and secular forces (1984:36).

At the height of this art form, in the early 1980s, there were over ‘a hundred professional and semi-professional troupes’ (36), touring Yorubaland. Some also featured regularly on

television and radio. 'The last decade' of its four decades of existence witnessed a growth in the practice of this theatre. By 1960, when Nigeria became independent, there were only about twelve troupes left practising, of which only Hubert Ogunde's company and a few others were 'fully professional' ( 36).

Ogunde's entrepreneurial ability kept him afloat. He solved the problems of retaining actresses 'by marrying his best singers and dancers' (1994: 4). He was very political in nature. He was reported to have once recast a play with only female actresses because his boys had gone 'on a strike for higher wages' (4). In 1965, he was inspired to produce a play called *Yoruba Ronu* in support of Chief Awolowo when there was a political crisis in the Western Region between Awolowo and then ruling premier of Western Nigeria, Chief Akintola. He was reported to have staged this play in the presence of the premier concerned and was consequently 'banned' from conducting his theatre practice in the Western Region. He moved to Lagos which was then a federal capital territory and responded with 'another political play' (5). This time, he brought 'two ballot boxes' as props and used them to represent the two political parties respectively; one representing Awolowo's party, 'the Action Group' and the other representing Akintola's NNDP party (see 5) He created what Beier described as, 'undoubtedly a most successful piece of political campaigning', by inviting his audience to the stage to 'vote for the Action Group' (1994: 5). Ogunde's career lasted over fifty years. In his final years, he adapted to popular demand by switching to the production of films, thus undermining the live 'art form he had created and evolved for four decades' (5). His contribution to the Yoruba popular theatre remains a formidable force in the history of the art form.

Fellow impresarios like Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo also contributed immensely to the development and popularisation of the modern Yoruba popular theatre. In a 1954 written account by Beier about Kola Ogunmola's theatre<sup>35</sup>, he described Kola Ogunmola as 'a schoolmaster in a junior school' in Ado-Ekiti, who was 'about thirty years old', and had 'written and produced plays for seven years' (cited in 1984: 40). He explained that Ogunmola's company consisted mainly of Christians who were 'school children', 'fellow teachers', 'traders, seamstresses, etc' (40). In Jeyifo's analyses of this description, he observed that the Yoruba Travelling Theatre was at a stage of its development when performers and audiences were mostly made up of 'the lay congregations of the various Christian denominations' (40). There was a cultural renaissance in 1960s when Nigeria became independent. The need for a new social cultural identity was recognised and invigorated (see 57). This led to the promotion of the country's 'traditional and contemporary arts' (1984: 57).

Artists were supported by individuals, institutions, the private and public, including foreign and local sources in an unprecedented way (see 57). Considerable support and encouragement was given to artists like Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo by the University of Ibadan and individuals connected to the University. In 1962, Kola Ogunmola was able to 'expand the membership of his company' to become fully professional with the help of 'a substantial grant from the Rockefeller Foundation' (1984: 57), after about fifteen years of semi-professional existence. The grant was secured with the assistance of the staff of the University of Ibadan (see 57). His company conducted a

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<sup>35</sup> See Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*, Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1984:40.

workshop residency with the School of Drama, through which the members of his company became more familiar with some of the techniques and needs of the profession. This training may otherwise not have been possible because of the demands of a busy touring schedule. His connection with the University fostered one of his most popular productions, which was ‘an adaptation of Amos Tutuola’s’ fictional novel, *The Palm-wine Drinkard*. The production was first staged under the direction and assistance of the artistic staff of the School of Drama. It was also reported that the University of Ibadan and Ife organised seminars, workshops and festival to encourage the Travelling Theatre troupes (see 57).

In comparison to Ogunmola, Ladipo ‘initially received a less direct and focused encouragement’, but Ulli Beier was very instrumental to his success when he ‘was a member of the Extra-Mural and Adult Education Department of the University of Ibadan’ (1984: 57). Both Duro Ladipo and Ogunmola’s company first published their production transcripts and recorded their productions under the umbrella of ‘the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan’ (57). In terms of audience reception, we are aware that Ogunmola’s first performance at Oshogbo was well received, but some of the audience tried to compare his performance with that of Ogunde in a condescending way; they were already used to ‘Ogunde’s loud, sexy and boisterous productions’ (1994: 5).

The subtleness of Ogunmola’s dramaturgy was however gradually appreciated by audiences everywhere. Another famous production of his, entitled *Love of Money* depicted a man who was happily married with two children, but his vanity and greed led

to his downfall (see 5). This play became a type of morality reference point for Ogunmola to the Yoruba society. According to Beier, he had been able to expose ‘the weaknesses and foolishness of man’ without the help of allegorical characters’ (7). Ogunmola was a highly detailed playwright and performer. His dramaturgy was very effective ‘without the use of props’ (8), colourful stage or exotic costumes (see 8). He was able to use ‘his wisdom and warmth of his human sympathy’ (8) in appealing to his audience. This created immense popularity for him as evident in Beier’s account of his last performance at Oshogbo in 1972, ‘Never before has any actor received such a reception’ (cited in Jeyifo, 1984:69). According to Beier, Peter Brook who was also present during the performance stated that, ‘If the man had been hidden in the rafters above the stage, he would still have communicated with the audience’ (1994: 9). His death came shortly after this memorable performance.

At the time Duro Ladipo was making his debut in 1962, Ogunmola was already fully established and was at the height of his fame. Beier confirmed that, ‘Both companies were resident in Oshogbo; throughout their careers there existed an unacknowledged rivalry between them, which only once flared up into an open quarrel’ (Beier, 1994:9). At this time, there were already many other professional companies but Ogunmola and Ladipo were seen as pre-eminent (see 9).

According to Jeyifo, the influence and dominance of Ogunde has been controversial in the ‘critical attempts’ at reconstructing the history and ‘growth of the Travelling Theatre as a movement and as theatre form’ (1984: 37). He revealed that the school of thought

represented by Egun Clark believe that Ogunde was responsible for all the important imprint and transformations of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre. They argued that Ogunde was the supreme artist and father figure who was mostly responsible for the establishment of the contemporary Yoruba theatre which comprises other exponents; while the opposing views of Ulli Beier and Joel Adedeji, as expressed by Anthony Graham White, suggested that 'the story of its development (i.e. the Yoruba Travelling Theatre) is that of different companies, each shaped by the tastes of its founder, who usually writes the plays, produces them, arranges the music and plays the leading part' (cited in 37). As evident in Jeyifo's evaluation, this latter view credits the development of this art form as the joint efforts of 'Ogunde himself' (37), Kola Ogunmola, Oyin Adejobi, Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya, Akin Ogunbe and many others (see 37); the argument here is that the Travelling Theatre as a movement was developed by all the founder-leaders who contributed their techniques, styles and structures to the growth of the genre. In Jeyifo's discussion, his only opposition to the above two views was that both have forgotten to acknowledge that they were products of the same theoretical and critical orientation. He also noticed that the contribution of the audiences had been ignored as an integral part of the movement and indeed of any other popular drama culture (see 37-9).



## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Context of Ladipo's Theatre, his Influences and Theatrical Developments**

#### **Introduction: Birth, Early Life and Family (Birth and Early Childhood)**

Durodola Durosomo Duroorike Timothy Adisa Ladipo, more popularly known as Duro Ladipo, is one of the most important Nigerian dramatists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a pioneer exponent of plays scripted in the indigenous African language of Yoruba. The nature of Ladipo's being, the life he led as a playwright, composer and actor, his thematic considerations as a Yoruba playwright and the mystery of his death have been documented by scholars and researchers in Beier & Ladipo 1964; Beier 1994; Banham 1976; Clark 1979; Jeyifo 1984; Ladipo 1970; Ladipo, Armstrong, Awujoola & Olayemi 1972; Ogunbiyi 1981; Obafemi 1996; Ogundele, Obafemi and Abodunrin 2001; Ogundele 2003; Raji-Oyelade, Olorunyomi and Duro-Ladipo 2003; Soyinka 1975 & 1976.

This account brings into perspective the Nigerian historical and social-political developments that accompanied the chronological development of Ladipo and his theatre. The impact of Christianity on his life and theatre will be examined, along with some of the effects that monotheistic religions have had on African people - their culture, their religion and general way of life. The direct effect of these factors on Ladipo and his responses to them will be explored; his spiritual nature and its implication in the Yoruba belief system and his religious and family background will be discussed. The influences of Yoruba mythology and their cosmological world on the life and theatre of Ladipo will also be examined in accordance to their relevance.

### **Ladipo the *Abiku***

Ladipo was born at Oshogbo in the south western part of Nigeria on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1926 (Raji-Oyelade, Olorunyomi and Duro-Ladipo 2003:3) though other sources such as Ogunbiyi (1981: 334) erroneously claim he was born in 1931. Ladipo was believed to be an *abiku*<sup>36</sup>, the ‘born-to-die’ (2003: 1) child, believed by the Yoruba people to dwell in a separate spiritual realm from that of the living, where they live a parallel existence and make pacts with their mates to return by birth to the same parents several times until they either change or become tied down to the world of the living by spiritual means, in accordance with the Yoruba traditional belief system. In order to understand Ladipo’s theatrical pre-occupations, the intensity of his dramaturgy and the significances of the visual languages in his theatre, the mysterious nature of his birth and the belief that he was an *abiku* child cannot be ignored, because of the complexities of the spiritual attributes associated with these types of children among the Yoruba people. Therefore, it is necessary to establish whether there is a connection between him as a spiritual person and the roles he played as a dramatist. Since he belonged to the category of children who are believed to live parallel spiritual existences, the earthly world became a place for him to fulfill his constant engagements with death. This type of death is often seen as being dramatic and sorrowful as it tends to be premature in nature. For instance, a girl<sup>37</sup> of 14 years old, who had been identified as an *abiku*, was once reported to have deliberately confronted a speeding car that killed her. Although, when one examines the girl’s

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<sup>36</sup> See *Thunder-god on Stage* (2003: 3); *Ojulowo Ere Isedale Yoruba: Iwe Kini*, (Ladipo 1970: xii). See Babatunde Lawal ‘Ipilise: The Roots of Gelede’ in Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle*, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1996: 37-70.

<sup>37</sup> According to Mr Oluyole Lala, an eye witness, the incident occurred in Bukuru, Northern Nigeria in 1996. The girl concerned was a Yoruba girl.

incident critically, one could also associate the reason she ran into a speeding car to other reasons like insanity, but because of her *abiku* link, it became difficult for those who believe in the phenomenon to exclude the nature of her being from the reason of her death. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ezinma, one of Okonkwo's daughters was a spirit world child. And so is Azaro, in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.

Considerations must then be given to the implications of the meaning of this belief and how it might have influenced Ladipo's life and practice. The name given to him by his mother revealed a lot about the mystery of his birth and the feelings of his parents in not wanting their child to die prematurely. Duro, the prefix to his names, literally means "stay, wait, remain, do not depart or do not go" in Yoruba; Durodola means "stay for wealth", an entreaty by the parents for him to stay and enjoy life. Durosomo translates to "stay and be a worthy child or stay and be our child"; while Duro-o-rike signifies "stay so that you can experience how we will cherish you". 'His mother – Madam Dorcas Towobola Ajike Ladipo – strongly felt that the child was the same one that had tormented her in nine previous pregnancies' (2003: 1). To Ladipo's mother, it was a reality that was so disturbing for her that she recruited the services of an Ifa priest (*babalawo* or traditional healer), a family relative of hers, to consult the divination oracles on her behalf about the remedies that could be recommended by the Yoruba gods to ensure that the child survived. This was after engaging the efforts of the Christian missionary healers and doctors who were unable to help her son. In addition, several other traditional herbalists who were consulted first, had also tried different types of remedies on him before his mother took him to her relative, the Ifa priest from Ilesa who became very influential in Ladipo's life until he was over fifteen years old. It is interesting to note that this woman

who had no surviving child until Duro was reported to have been spiritually ‘forced’ to stay, later went on to have other children, including a set of twins, lending credence to the Yoruba belief that the factor of Ladipo’s *abiku* spirituality may have prevented the other children from being born (see Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 3). It is also important to know that Ladipo was very conscious of being an *abiku*. According to Chief Yemi Elebuibon, the renowned Ifa scholar and priest, who was also a member of Ladipo’s theatre, ‘He lived his life as if he knew he would not live long. All the time, he was always ready for death; he was always referring to death and he never feared death. He was conscious of himself as an Abiku. Whenever we returned from a journey, and the plane has landed, Duro would say, “Ah we survived Death today, we are alive this day.” He had premonitions about death all his life; and he predicted rightly how he was going to die. He predicted there would be rain and thunder on the day he would die’ (47).

In responding to the question of whether Ladipo was an *abiku* or not, this type of experience, if indeed it truly exists, can be devastating for the parents and family concerned, but since the experience is of a subjective nature that cannot be objectively quantified, the rationale for such a claim can not be scientifically substantiated. Therefore, my position about his spiritual nature is that he was an *abiku*, in accordance to the Yoruba belief system, the evidence given above and the roles he played as a dramatist; this aspect will form part of my later discussion about his plays.

### Early Traditional Influences and Religious Involvement

According to Ladipo's biographical documentation, his great grandfather was a *gangan* drummer and a devotee of Sango during the Jalumi<sup>38</sup> War in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Between 1830AD and 1840AD). The period of this war occupies a significant segment in the history of the wars that lasted hundreds of years in Yorubaland. The war was triggered by the Fulani and the Hausa who had been under the protection of Afonja, the political leader of Ilorin; they betrayed Afonja and killed him and political power was seized. According to I. A. Akinjogbin, 'The new Fulani authority in Ilorin then went to Sokoto to obtain a Jihad flag and promptly declared a war against all Yorubaland' (1830 A.D) (2002: 44). The Yoruba eventually won the war under the leadership of Oluyole of Ibadan. Because of the importance of Ladipo's great-grand-father as a performance artist whose skills were used to motivate warriors on the battlefield during wars, he was rescued and brought to Oshogbo for safety by Oderinlo<sup>39</sup>, one of the commanding war generals. This action was taken by Oderinlo because it was forbidden in Yoruba belief system for a drummer to be killed in battle (see Ladipo, 1970: xi-xiv). According to Ladipo:

Ogun ko gbodo pa onilu eyi ni idi re ti o fi rorun fun un lati ye ninu ogun naa eyi ti o mu egbegberun enia ku ninu odo Otin (xi).

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<sup>38</sup> Jalumi in Yoruba language refers to the act of being thrown into water. Omi, the literal meaning of water in the Yoruba language is not fully pronounced here in Julami, but implied with the verb, jula. The river where most of the Fulani army perished is known as the Otin River. I am not sure why the name was coined for the war, but since the soldiers were reported to have perished in the river, it may imply that they were thrown into the river or a trap may have been set to direct them into the river, either ways, it relates to contact with water. See Bade Ajuwon, 'Ogun's Irewoje: A philosophy of Living and Dying' in Sandra T. Barnes (Ed), *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989: 182.

<sup>39</sup> See Ladipo 1970: xi; Oderinlo is a Yoruba name which literally means, the hunter has gone for a walk.

War must not kill a drummer; this was the reason why it was easy for him to escape from a war in which thousands of people perished in the Otin River.

The history of performance continued in the family with Ladipo's grandfather who was a popular drummer and drum-maker (xi). We have no record of the exact period of his professional practice, but I believe he was still active until around the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of his relationship with his grand-son, Ladipo. Ladipo's father, Joseph Oni Ladipo, refused to join the family profession, preferring to adopt the emerging Christian belief and later going on to become an Anglican reverend (Catechist). The actual date at which Ladipo's father became Christianised is not stated, but we are aware that he died in 1963 and by the time of his death, we are informed that he had been in the service of the Church for 'fifty-one years' (2003: 5). This would imply that he converted in 1912, a period in which the colonial rule was in the process of being established in West Africa (1900-1914)<sup>40</sup>. Like all early adopters of Christianity among the Yoruba, Ladipo's father considered the worship of Sango and traditional drumming as heathen practices and prevented his children from becoming involved in them. Joseph Oni Ladipo wanted the young Duro to follow in his footsteps and become a preacher and a teacher; he inducted him as a lay-preacher in his church, All Saints Anglican Church, Oshogbo, in the early 1940s.

Ladipo had a fascinating childhood, living in a household with all the rituals of Christianity but also spending time with his grandfather, a strong Sango worshipper and

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<sup>40</sup> See C. Harrison, T.B. Ingawa and S.M. Martin, 'The Establishment of Colonial Rule in West Africa' in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, Volume Two, second edition, London: Longman Group Limited, 1987: 485-545.

drummer, from whom he learnt the art of drumming and singing (interview with Yemi Elebuibon 2007). From childhood, he was very interested in Yoruba traditions; he was a regular spectator at the performances of *Egungun* festivals and other ceremonies surrounding the worship of traditional deities. Under the influence of his grandfather, Ladipo researched the *Egungun* festival and Ifa rituals (Aworo Ose) at Ila-Orangun, near Oshogbo, as well as the Olua, Obatala, Sango and Otin festivals at Otan Aiyegbaju, in the company of the grandfather who was either a drummer or consultant to these festivals (interview with Peter Fatomilola 2007).

### **Ladipo's Education, Early Career in Teaching and Theatrical Background**

Ladipo's formal education started in 1930, the year in which the British colonial authority reformed their system of governance in Yorubaland. The reformation meant that 'a few traditional chiefs and a number of educated men and women were constituted into Yoruba councils and became advisers to the Obas' (Akinjogbin, 2002:81). Ladipo was a product of Anglican Christian missionary education in a period when the different Christian denominations were already rooted in Yorubaland and had established their religious and educational enterprises<sup>41</sup>. By 1942, Ladipo had been educated to the level of being awarded the 'Government Middle Two Certificate' (Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 4). This led him to become a pupil-teacher at the school attached to his father's church in Oshogbo. After the six-months training, he started his teaching career in 1943. As part of his early teaching experience, he taught at St. Philips Primary School, Otan-Ayegbaju and Holy

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<sup>41</sup> See 'The Era of European Hegemony and British Imperialism 1900-1960' by Emeritus Professor I. A. Akinjogbin (2002: 77-91), in *Milestones and Social Systems in Yoruba History and Culture*.

Trinity School, Omofe, Ilesa in the south western part of Nigeria. Ladipo's artistic beginnings can be traced back to his childhood. As reported:

Duro displayed an early interest in folk songs, traditional music and moonlight tales. As a precocious child who could imitate human actions and compose delightful songs at the briefest prompt, Duro would later use the dual advantage of Western missionary education and his innate cultural creativity to commendable effect (2003: 3-4).

Ladipo's early artistic engagements - learning how to play the drums, visiting the *Egungun* festivals and researching the Yoruba culture, became part of the backbone of his creative development as an artist. He first had the platform and experience of displaying his dramatic and musical abilities to an audience when he was teaching at St. Philips Primary School, Otan-Ayegbaju between 1943 and 1947. His headmaster, Mr. A. O. Odunsi, had written a play, *Suuru Baba Iwa* in which Duro Ladipo displayed his acting potential to an appreciative audience' (2003: 4).

While Ladipo was starting his teaching career in 1943, the Yoruba professional theatre was in the process of development - Hubert Ogunde, the doyen of the Nigerian theatre - was rehearsing and preparing for the staging of his 'Native Air Opera', *The Garden of Eden and the Throne of God*<sup>42</sup>. Before the establishment of Ogunde's theatre, the existing professional actors were the masked performers of the *Eegun Alare* performance tradition. According to Egun Clark, 'The career of the former teacher and police constable in the

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<sup>42</sup> See Egun Clark, 'The Beginning', *Hubert Ogunde: The Making of Nigerian Theatre*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979: 3-24.



theatre began long before his bold step in 1945. His first venture started under the patronage of the church. The church Ogunde attended in Lagos decided in 1943 to raise funds for a church building by presenting a 'Native Air Opera'. Rehearsals began in November 1943, but it was not until 10 June 1944 that the church was able to make its proud announcement' (1979: 5). The establishment of Ogunde's theatre marked the beginning of a type of theatre where the actors performed without masks. In addition, Clark explained that 'It was also Ogunde who withdrew the theatre from the traditional patronage of the court and religious organizations to rely solely on the patronage of the public. Ogunde thereby gave birth to the first Yoruba commercial theatre' (4), which inspired composers like Ladipo, as highlighted by Mr. Kiyinu, who was once the co-director of Ogunde's theatre (see Clark 1979: 12-3). In 1945, as Ogunde was in the process of recruiting members for his Theatre Company, Ladipo was becoming more immersed in teaching and developing his dramatic talents. The political situation in Nigeria and indeed, in the whole of West Africa was also undergoing change; the process of decolonisation was beginning to gain ground in the British West African colonies.

The objective of referring to Ogunde's practice and the political developments of the time is to bring into context the nature of the theatrical practice that was in place as Ladipo was developing as a dramatist and the historical events that coincided with his development. Ladipo's theatrical direction became more obvious in 1947 during a trip to his mother's home town, Ilesa. There, he met Mr. Alex Peters, who was involved with theatre as well as being the headmaster of a school. Ladipo had seen a production by Mr. Peters at Ilesa, but it is not clear whether the venue of the production was at Holy Trinity

School, Omofe, where Mr. Peters was serving as headmaster. They met again at Oshogbo where Ladipo enthusiastically asked Mr. Peters whether he could join his Ilesa based theatre group. Mr. Peters' acceptance of the request led Ladipo to leave Otan-Ayegbaju to continue his career as a teacher at Holy Trinity School, Omofe, Ilesa, where he could further explore his theatrical talents. During his period at Ilesa, he successfully demonstrated his leadership skills and creative independence. He discovered more about himself by engaging creatively with music and drama. The opportunity given to him as the choir leader of the school was instrumental to his theatrical development and his ability to guide others. It was noted that Ladipo 'became single-mindedly immersed in acting and music, leading the school choir to several remarkable outings' (2003: 4). During the academic year of '1948/49', Ladipo embarked on a journey to the northern part of Nigeria to continue his career. His destination was the United Native African Church (UNA) School in Kaduna, where he taught standard III pupils from 1948 until he returned to Oshogbo in 1956 (See Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 4-5). According to Beier, 'After completing his Standard VI Primary Level, he had been given by the church a six month crash course after which he was packed off to Northern Nigeria to be a teacher' (1994: 11), but another account indicated that Ladipo consciously made the decision to follow Mr. Peters, 'In the search of new challenges and in the travelling spirit of the *Alarinjo*, Alex Peters, with Duro Ladipo on his trail, moved to Kaduna in Northern Nigeria and both of them settled in the United Native African Church (UNA) School' (2003: 4).



Fig. 2 Map of Nigeria showing the location of Oshogbo in the south western part of the country and Kaduna in the northern part (see [www.geographic.org/maps/Nigeria\\_maps.html](http://www.geographic.org/maps/Nigeria_maps.html)).

This was a period of profound continued development and creativity for Ladipo. Apart from teaching, he was in charge of directing the dramatic society of the school and composing music for the church choir. He collaborated with Mr. Peters to produce M.S. Ayodele's play, *Omonide*, for the Dramatic Society of the school. The play was reported to have been well received, but in 1955, when he adapted Shakespeare's *As You Like It*,

he became instantly recognised for his genuine talent in playwriting, composing and musical arrangement (See 2003: 4).

While in Kaduna, Ladipo developed an interest in Mabel Johnson, a female pupil of the school of Itsekiri origin, whom he later married (see Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 4). The precise date of their marriage is not mentioned, but it would appear that the marriage had already taken place before Ladipo went back to Oshogbo in 1956. He was already a family man by the time he returned there and his theatrical development was in motion. According to Beier, Ladipo was retrenched from his teaching job because fully qualified teachers became available (See 1994: 11), but in a different account, he ‘returned to Oshogbo after obtaining the Grade Three Teachers Certificate’ (2003: 4). It would appear that he actually became more qualified than he was in 1942 when he attained his ‘Government Middle Two Certificate’, and it would seem unfair that he had been a victim of retrenchment, except if the requirement for the post he was actually applying for at the time was beyond his qualifications. Alternatively, the retrenchment meant by Beier may be referring to an incident that occurred in 1961 when Ladipo was teaching at Oshogbo. At the time, he was also working as a manager at the Ajax cinema, the only film theatre then in Oshogbo and had established a popular bar business.



Plate 2 Duro Ladipo in Kaduna, as lay reader, 1952

In reference to the record of the incident:

One day, he went on a seemingly uneventful publicity trip within the town, distributing leaflets and inviting the people to a film show at the Ajax. That publicity of 1961 marked a turning point in Mr. Ladipo's career. He was wrongly and

deliberately accused of distributing the campaign leaflets of an unpopular political party in that area of western Nigeria. Duro Ladipo was summarily relieved of his posting as a teacher but for an unrelated allegation of “negligence of duty” (2003: 6).

### **Ladipo’s Friendship with Ulli Beier and his Break with the Church**

Ladipo’s entrepreneurial skill, his creative spirit and love of life and humanity led him to meeting somebody who cannot be excluded in the story of his life in theatre. He came in contact with Ulli Beier in 1958. Beier was then living in Oshogbo and had attended the opening of Ladipo’s beer parlour, where E. K. Ogunmola, the playwright, actor, director and musician was invited as a guest musician. Ogunmola’s presence as a well known artist had attracted a large crowd that incidentally included Beier, who later became instrumental in Ladipo’s life and theatrical profession. At the time, Beier was teaching extra-mural studies at the University of Ibadan. As part of his duties, he also went to lecture in some of the neighbouring Yoruba towns and would return to his home in Oshogbo. Stimulated by Ladipo’s company, Beier became a frequent customer at his bar; he recalled the context of their conversations together, ‘We would talk about local politics, space-travel, Christianity, Yoruba history, the cold war, there was nothing he wasn’t interested in’ (Beier 1994: 11).

In 1961, the year after the Nigerian independence, their friendship also extended to an artistic one, when Ladipo invited Beier to his ‘Easter Cantata’ performance at the ‘All Saints Church’ in Oshogbo and disclosed his early theatrical experience with Mr. Peters at

Kaduna to him (13). Prior to this disclosure, Beier was unaware of Ladipo's artistic preoccupations. The performance was a huge success and was packed with a large audience, but it created a lot of controversies between Duro and the church, and Duro and his father. These experiences led him to further explore other avenues of exploring his musical and theatrical interests with the encouragement of Beier (see 1994: 13-4 and Ogunbiyi 1981: 335).

In Beier's documentation of the Cantata presentation, he highlighted the 'narrow-mindedness and insensitivity' (1994: 14) of the church in the way they restricted Ladipo's production by insisting that he structured the performance with intervals of boring church hymns and organ music. In addition, he explained that they were not tolerant of the *bata* and *dundun* drums which they derogatively associated with idol worshiping and made efforts to subdue how it was played. Beier was so outraged by the way the church treated Ladipo's performance that he wrote a letter which he described as 'an aggressive letter to the Daily Times' (1994: 14) about it; this was the letter that triggered the elders' anger, including Ladipo's father, so that they reacted negatively towards Duro. He was banned by the former from carrying out his usual church lesson reading responsibility and threatened with excommunication. Beier pointed out that 'Duro's father was horrified by his son's heresies and was on the point of disowning him, but Duro was unrepentant' (1994: 14). In Yemi Ogunbiyi's, *A Tribute to Duro Ladipo*, he documented Mr. Omidiji Aragbabalu's review of the Easter Cantata in *The Daily Service* of 17<sup>th</sup> June 1960 (see 1981: 335). What is not certain is the date the tribute was recorded. We are told that it was written in June 1960, but as indicated in Beier's statement about the time Ladipo told him of his intention of staging the Easter Cantata, the conversation was as follows:

‘I want you to come to All Saints Church next Sunday ‘, said Duro unexpectedly one April evening in 1961. I replied: ‘Duro, I haven’t been to church for twenty five years and I won’t come now, not even for your sake.’ Then he added: ‘Ah, but I have written an Easter Cantata!’ ‘In that case, I’ll have to come!’ (1994: 13).

By highlighting this, my intention is to establish whether Ladipo had staged an Easter Cantata in the same church in 1960 before that of 1961, but this account cannot be substantiated, therefore it would appear that an error may have occurred with the date recorded by Yemi Ogunbiyi. The way the church treated Ladipo did not quench his thirst for the theatre. Instead of being depressed and disappointed, he re-directed his focus towards developing his creativity. The first play he staged after his problem with the church was a comedy called *Ore Kofero* and it was staged a few months after the cantata in 1961. His inspiration for writing the play may have been a protest against the way he was treated by the church because the play’s title in Yoruba translates as “a friend does not like lies”, but we have no evidence of his intended message and the names of those included in his cast for the play. The play was not successful and was performed at Oshogbo Teachers College; it explores the story of two orphans who were exploited by their late father’s friend over their inheritance. They were later rescued by the ghost of their father, who frightened their guardian to change his ways. When the moral of the play is examined, metaphorically, the intervention of the ghost of the orphans’ father, in frightening their guardian to change his ways, could be seen as Ladipo’s way of addressing the church to change their ways and embrace new ways of doing things. Beier’s review of the play revealed that it was ‘built on the conventions of the Yoruba travelling theatre. The plot was naïve, the acting crude and the music boring. Duro had



gone back to the routine bongos and tambourines, thus throwing away his trump card as a composer' (1994: 14). Beier was concerned that Ladipo was undermining his creative edge as a composer.

In comparing the play to the works of other Yoruba dramatists of the time, Beier observed that the production did not embody the social manners of the Yoruba and the passionate boldness associated with the works of E. K. Ogunmola and Hubert Ogunde respectively (14). By highlighting this early play, the intention is not to collate or give an account of his works as a dramatist at this point, as this will be discussed in more detail later on, but to help in accounting for the order of his engagements after the church incident and establish the connection between his practice and the Yoruba travelling theatre. Beier's role in encouraging Ladipo to adopt his own unique style of acting was highlighted during a conversation between him and Segun Olusola, 'the first television producer in Africa' (1994: 76), on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1993:

I tried to make him see that slapstick comedy was not his thing and that there were enough others doing it. I made demands on him – human demands. I demanded that his new cultural awareness should be expressed in his plays (79).

Ladipo's experience with *Ore Kofero* did not stop him from proceeding to stage a musical show later in 1961. On this occasion, he presented a Christmas Cantata which embraced a wide use of his musical talents; he fused the *bata* drums with the *dundun* drums and created a production that was well received by his audience at Oshogbo Teachers Training College. The college seems to have had a space that was used for regular performances

and Ladipo had already established a relationship there through his staging of *Ore Kofero*. Schools, colleges and churches were popularly used for performances during this period. The success of the Christmas Cantata ‘established Duro’s reputation as a composer overnight’ (1994: 14). With the help and support of Beier, WNTV (Western Nigeria Television) and the Mbari Club at Ibadan went on to present Ladipo’s Christmas Cantata; his long time friendship and professional association with the television producer, Segun Olusola, started during this period; they first came in contact with each other at Ibadan. We have no record of the names of those who were part of Ladipo’s company at the time, but it came to light that ‘In the same year of 1960, after the disastrous experimentation at the All Saints, Duro Ladipo staged his version of Christmas Cantata, out of church, featuring students of Grade Two Teacher Training College, Oshogbo’ (2003: 6).

Olusola contributed enormously to the development of Ladipo’s theatre from this time onwards. He kept Ladipo’s company occupied with the commission of many plays for television for a considerable length of time. Olusola stated that he ‘first met Duro when he performed his Christmas Cantata at Mbari Club in Ibadan, in 1961’ (1994:75), but according to Beier in *Easter Cantata*, ‘It was at the studios of WNTV that Duro met Segun Olusola’ (1994: 14). From this evidence, we can conclusively say that they met in 1961, even though the locations recalled might be different. Olusola revealed that his first television production with Ladipo was *The Last Supper* and recalled that he ‘used to go to Oshogbo to rehearse the company in Duro’s backyard’ (75). This would imply that *The Last Supper* had been on television between December 1961 and the early part of 1962, before the Mbari Mbayo Club was created in Oshogbo because Ladipo had not

established a performance space in Oshogbo then. In order to establish the length of Olusola's professional engagement with Ladipo after he left Ibadan for Lagos in 1964, he explained during a conversation with Beier:

In Lagos I mainly produced plays. In 1964, 1965, 1966 – until I went to Enugu. That's when I produced some of Duro's big stage productions: *Oba Koso*, *Oba Waja* and so on. In 1965 we had the first Nigerian Television Drama Festival. We had a live drama production every night for seven nights. I remember we had Wole Soyinka's *Brother Jero* and J.P. Clark's *The Masquerade* and *The Raft*, we had two plays by Duro and I think we had an Ogunmola production as well (1994: 76).

**The Mbari Mbayo Club in Oshogbo; the Creation of the Mbari club, its importance and the context of the art and cultural practices in Oshogbo and other parts of Yorubaland**

After Ladipo's successful Christmas Cantata in Ibadan, he returned home inspired by his experience and the interest he had generated with his presentation. His introduction to the world of other Nigerian artists and writers who were already recognised internationally became a catalyst to how he envisaged his own creative world. The name Mbari means creation in Ibo and rightly portrayed the activities of the members of the club. In John Okparocha's *Mbari: Art as Sacrifice* (1976), he fully explored the context of Mbari in Ibo (Igbo) land. The club was both an intellectual and a creative power house that was involved with the publication of the important literary journal, 'Black Orpheus', theatrical productions and art exhibitions. The club was founded in 1961.

Ladipo's Ibadan performances had triggered an idea in his mind - which would later be a factor to his development as an artist, his contribution to the Nigerian theatre and art in general and his conscious awakening to the historical, cultural, socio-political and cosmological importance of the Yoruba universe. The visionary idea was that of creating an Mbari Club in Oshogbo. He wanted to bring the type of creative activities he had been part of in Ibadan to Oshogbo. His desire for a similar creative model was fuelled by his concern that Oshogbo needed an injection of such energy to make the town a lively place. The founding members of the Mbari club where Ladipo had performed in Ibadan were already established writers, scholars and artists then as noted by David Kerr, 'It derives from the Mbari Club' in Ibadan, 'a literary/artistic/cultural club founded by Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark and Ezekiel Mphahlele' (1995: 96). Professor Martin Banham<sup>43</sup> confirmed that Ulli Beier and Demas Nwoko were also part of the club.

Ladipo's proposition to create an Mbari Club in Oshogbo came unexpectedly to Beier, 'He said to me: I want to have a Mbari Club in Oshogbo' (1994: 15). As this was a type of proposition that required a strategic approach to execute, Beier was immediately concerned that such a venture might not be so successful in Oshogbo because the types of conditions that made the establishment of such a club possible and realistic in Ibadan were not in place in Oshogbo. For example, he considered the difficulty that might be encountered in trying to secure international funding for such a project in a town like Oshogbo that was not known in comparison to Ibadan that already had international status 'as the Nigerian University town' (1994: 15). Furthermore, he strongly felt that because Oshogbo had not produced an artist of international status at the time and did not have an

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<sup>43</sup> Emeritus Professor Banham, of Leeds University was a member of staff of the University of Ibadan during the 1950s and 1960s.

institution that could be regarded as a recognised site for intellectual engagements, the criteria for accessing international project funds were not in place. In addition, the idea of theatre being presented in Yoruba language, attracting patronage, did not seem promising and convincing for Beier. These factors were clearly identified and brought to Ladipo's attention, but he was not prepared to entertain the obstacles, instead, he offered to convert his bar and family compound to an Oshogbo Mbari Club. The fact that Ladipo was willing to actualise his desire for a theatre in Oshogbo by making such a sacrifice was a commitment that Beier could not ignore. He agreed to support Ladipo's project and sourced funding for converting Ladipo's beer parlour into an Mbari Club. He succeeded in securing the sum of two hundred pounds from Ezekiel Mphahlele, his ex-colleague, who was then heading 'the African Programme of the Congress for Cultural Freedom' (1994: 15) in Paris. The Popular Bar was converted and renovated to contain what Beier described as 'one of the most basic performing spaces ever built' (1994: 15). Apart from the theatre space, the conversion also included space for art exhibitions and a recital room. The stage was constructed with mud and cement in the spacious family compound and fitted with a couple of spot lights. The veranda of the building was adorned with wooden sculpted screens that were carved by Susanne Wenger (popularly known as Susanne Wenger-Alarape), the Austrian born artist who later became a high priestess of the goddess, Osun, and lived in Oshogbo. The sculptures distinguished the club from the other buildings that were situated on Station Road, where the theatre was located.

Once the space was ready and a day had been chosen by Ladipo to launch the opening of the centre, recruiting of actors for membership of his company was embarked upon. A decision was reached by the Department of Extra-Mural studies, University of Ibadan, to

assist Ladipo in organising a schools drama competition to award three prizes for the most outstanding performances, but the result was not that exciting as explained by Beier:

It turned out to be one of those gutsy Nigerian renderings labelled ‘Cowboy Shakespeare’ by Wole Soyinka. Julius Ceaser’s heroic resistance as he is set upon by the conspirators was popular theatre at its best. I cannot now remember how many actors were singled out from Duro’s troupe, but the big discovery was undoubtedly Ademola Onibonokuta, who was to become one of Duro’s lead actors. In the early days many of our friends and acquaintances were drafted into the theatre as well: Duro’s sisters, his children, his barman, Jacob Afolabi and my friend and co-author Bakare Gbadamosi (1994: 17).

The centre was declared opened by Oba Adenle, the Ataoja of Oshogbo (King of Oshogbo) on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1962 (2003: 6-7). The occasion was marked with the premiere of Ladipo’s first historical play about Oyo-Yoruba kings, *Oba Moro* and an exhibition of Susanne Wenger’s works. . In attendance at the opening were Ulli and Georgina Beier, Susanne Wenger and a group of well wishers. Another notable person attending the exhibition opening was the celebrated African American painter Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)<sup>44</sup>. According to Beier, the part of the Alaafin was played by Ladipo, whom he described as being ‘impressive in his first major role’ (1994: 20). The cast also included Tijani Mayakiri who played the hunter and Ademola Onibonokuta as the priest. The latter’s role of the priest was well received by the audience who were amazed with his recitation of the Yoruba incantations, though they were reported to have ‘been so conditioned by other theatre companies to regard an orisha priest as a comic

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<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.cs.washington.edu/building/art/JacobLawrence>

figure that they burst out laughing' (1994: 20). In Beier's assessment of the limitations of the play, he noted that Ladipo hadn't perfected the act of being in total control of the audience because of the inconsistency of the acting, the arrangements of the scenes and the music utilised, but credited the success of the play in bringing to life the history of the Yoruba.

The history of Yoruba kings, the Yoruba traditional religion, culture and socio-political system was not something that had been incorporated into Ladipo's Anglican education curriculum, as the aim of the missionaries was not to promote African history or culture, but to impose their own western values and Christian indoctrination. As revealed during Beier's conversation with Olusola about Ladipo:

You see, long before becoming a playwright he was intensely curious about my involvement with Yoruba culture, in particularly with the Shango priests. He saw them going in and out of my house: Shango priests from Ede, from Ota Aiyegbaju, from Illa Orangun, Ilobu or Ifon. He was curious. And remember: there was another powerful influence on him: the Timi of Ede. Timi Laoye had been my introduction to Yoruba religion, because he looked at it with such ease, with such total lack of prejudice (1994: 80).

It was from the selection of stories recommended by Beier from Johnson's *The History of the Yoruba* that the choice of *Oba Moro* was made (see 1994: 17-30). The context of the story provided Ladipo with the opportunity of employing his full skill as a composer for the play. The setting of the story meant that musical instruments like the *bata* and the *dundun* (talking drum) needed to be incorporated into the structure of the play as an imperative ingredient of the narrative. Ladipo's knowledge of the language of these

musical instruments and his talent as a composer became indispensable to the direction of his creative growth.



Plate 3 Mbari Mbayo anniversary, 1963: carvings from the Shango shrine of Timi Laoye of Ede are displayed in front of the Mbari, in preparation to be carried in a procession through Oshogbo. Tijani Mayakiri (left) leads the orchestra on a *bembe* drum. (Photo: Richard Wolford)



## **Ladipo's Organisational Structures, the Mbari Mbayo Departments and their Functions**

The Mbari Mbayo Club was made up of three main departments, exploring theatre, Yoruba poetry and visual arts, even though the bar business was still operating. The production of plays and rehearsals was organised regularly by Ladipo to ensure that a strict theatrical discipline was maintained by his actors, dancers and musicians. In organising rehearsals, tours and keeping the actors together, Ladipo experienced difficulties with finance and other practical requirements of the theatre, including transportation, erecting stages whenever he was on a tour with his troupe and improvising with alternative lighting if no electricity was available. But his company received external financial backing.

In *The Return of Shango* (1994), Beier brought to light some of these difficulties and the strategies employed by Ladipo in solving them, explaining that 'Duro had to hire a lorry to go on tour. Such transport was often unreliable and the company spent many a night camping on the road' (49). During their tours, they were reported to have performed in venues like school halls and council halls, where platforms were not available for stages, hence, Ladipo 'would hire planks and 44 gallon drums to improvise a stage' (49). Furthermore, the problem with adequate electricity supply was solved by improvising with using many lamps for lighting the stage. As Beier revealed:

A four gallon kerosene tin, when cut in half, would serve to shield the audience from the glare. After the performance the company would doss down in the hall on benches

and mats. Often they cooked their own evening meal. The biggest problem was always how to make ends meet. Duro had to feed 25 people – whether he was performing or not. At times he was obliged to produce a monthly or even a weekly television play for sheer survival. During the Mbari Mbayo days I was able to organise enough outside support for him to spend six weeks each year on his major productions (49).

Ladipo struggled to maintain a stable acting company. His troupe members were always suspicious that he may be hiding away some money, without considering the enormous expenses incurred on overheads.

The poetry department of the Mbari also played a major role in the promotion and development of the centre. The section focused mainly on bringing to life the Yoruba legends and folkloric tradition through poetry. The recitation performances of the prominent Ifa scholar and high priests, Yemi Elebuibon, Ademola Onibonokuta and Lere Paimo were instrumental in resuscitating some of the most important genres of Yoruba oral poetry; they explored *Odu Ifa*, *ijala*, *rara* and *oriki*<sup>45</sup>. The sessions were so popular that two Yoruba kings became regular participants, as explained in *Thunder-God on Stage*:

Two Obas – the Timi of Ede and the Ataoja of Oshogbo – were particularly active in this section; but while the Ataoja was interested in poetry, the Timi expressed his talents through the talking drum. Timi's works on the Ifa oracular verse can be described as exciting and the Ataoja's philosophical poems as remarkable (Raji-Oyelade *et al*, 2003: 7).

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<sup>45</sup> Odu Ifa is in relation to the verses of Ifa. Ijala is a genre of poetry that is associated with the hunter's guild, whose members are usually devotees of Ogun, the god of war and iron, while rara and oriki are praise songs orientated poetry.

The visual arts department of the Mbari Mbayo Club was led by artists of the calibre of Susanne Wenger and Georgina Beier, Ulli Beier's wife, who had been living in Nigeria among the Yoruba people from the early 1950s. They organised workshops in exploring different art techniques that were inspired by the rich Yoruba visual arts tradition that was already in place in Oshogbo. Some of the students who attended the workshops were already skilled artists. Among them were those who specialised in the traditional art forms that have been in Yorubaland for generations, while some were practising Yoruba contemporary artists. In Beier's statement, 'By the time Georgina Beier conducted her workshop in 1964, many passers-by crowded in and watched with curiosity the young people at work' (1994: 21).

**Duro Ladipo, the Dramatist: The Historical Context of his Theatrical Development and his Dramaturgy (1962-1977)**

In 1962, Caroline Abiodun Olufarati, who would later become Ladipo's second wife, a lead actress and singer in his theatre, first visited the Mbari centre. As a young princess from Epe-Ekiti; her father, I. A. Olufarati, was a High Chief 'of the Arowosapo ruling house in Epe-Ekiti and her mother was Madam Mary Olabomode' (2003: 8). Her first introduction to Ladipo was in 1963, even though she had been a regular spectator at the Mbari centre since 1962. Her singing ability was stronger than that of her acting, but with her continued interaction with Ladipo, he discovered that she was a talent waiting to 'explode'. As a dramatist who was just becoming established, he wanted such a talent in his company, therefore, he continued to encourage her positively to improve her theatrical

confidence. Because of Ladipo's devotion to nurturing her, she became comfortable with him and developed a liking for him. Two months after their meeting, Abiodun agreed to start attending Ladipo's rehearsals and as noted in *Thunder-god on Stage*, 'Abiodun matured quickly as an actress and coupled with her soprano delivery of rare Ekiti songs, Ladipo found her irreplaceable and indispensable' (2003: 8-9). The importance of highlighting Abiodun's introduction to Ladipo at this stage is not only to account for how she met Ladipo and her marriage to him, but to bring into perspective-the importance of the role she played as an actress, singer and a reliable partner in Ladipo's life and the development of his theatre from an early stage.

Before their marriage, Abiodun had been performing in Ladipo's theatre, but the opportunity of taking on a major character only came after the anniversary of the Mbari Mbayo Club. When the anniversary of the club was celebrated with the first performance of *Oba Koso* in 1963, the character of Oya, Sango's wife was played by Funke Fatiregun, a member of the group who defected to Ogunmola's theatre after the anniversary celebration (see Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 9). It is not clear why she defected, but the situation created a vacant position for Abiodun to occupy; she became the lead actress in Ladipo's theatre, demonstrating her great talent in singing and giving life to the characters she embodied. Beier gave an account of her importance to Ladipo's theatre and her marriage to him (See 1994: 23-30). He stated that 'She was irreplaceable. Abiodun was an Ekiti girl with an unusually expressive voice and a powerful stage presence. Small, strikingly beautiful, with very large eyes, she brought a new dimension to the

performance by introducing her Ekiti style of singing with its ancient harmonies. She alone could match Duro's towering stage presence' (1994: 23).

*Oba Koso* is an historical tragedy that is based on the story of Sango, the fourth *Alaafin* (king) of Oyo who became deified to the status of the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning after his death. In staging *Oba Koso*, Ladipo referred to the text of Johnson's *History of the Yoruba* as he had with *Oba Moro*, but he additionally conducted in-depth research about the story. In Akinwumi Ishola's *Modern Yoruba Drama* (1981), he dedicates a section to exploring the context of the historical plays written by modern Yoruba dramatists and argues that some of the plays have enjoyed great successes, irrespective of not adhering to the true narratives of the Yoruba history. He states that 'The Yoruba historical playwright, like his counterparts in other literatures, is not a historian' (1981: 403), therefore, not all historical plays are true to the actual facts, but seek to give their own interpretations of history. Ladipo's *Oba Koso* was one of the plays scrutinised by Ishola. He writes:

Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso*, is based virtually on Hetherset's story about Sango in *Iwe Kika Ekerin Li Ede Yoruba*. Hetherset's story itself is a subjective Christian edition of the real story of Sango as known by traditional historians and Sango devotees. Johnson, the famous Yoruba historian, remarked that the tragic quarrel between the two war generals, Gbonkaa and Timi, did not happen during the reign of Alaafin Sango. In history, Sango was not as pitiable as is portrayed in *Oba Koso*. The name *Oba Koso* does not mean "the king did not hang" it means "the king of Koso". Sango is also called *Oluoso*, i.e. Olu of Koso. This is the real meaning among Sango devotees and the poetry chanters who are custodians of oral history.

Hetherset may have edited the story of Sango to suit his Christian interests. Ladipo, however, must have had additional reasons. If Sango in this play is to be a tragic hero, then the audience has reasons to pity him somehow. Perhaps that was why Duro Ladipo preferred Hetherset's story in the first place. So, it appears that ordinary history was not good enough for Ladipo's play (1981: 403).

In contemplating and rationalising the subjective nature of Ladipo's *Oba Koso*, Ishola brings to bear the creative tendencies of a playwright or indeed of any creative mind, to create historical plays or a piece of art that has an element of themselves in it. Ladipo did not rely on mainly historical texts. Even when Beier gave him Johnson's book for research, Ladipo conducted his own empirical research and fused that with his experience of the Yoruba cultural tradition.

In Beier's documentation of Ladipo's initial preparation, he revealed that he (Beier) had, 'introduced him to Sango priests in Oshogbo, Ede and Otan Aiyegbaju' (1994: 26). Beier's review of the performance confirmed that the explosive nature of the play was unusual for the audience who were amazed and overpowered by what they had witnessed; they had never seen such a performance in Yorubaland. They were completely captivated by Ladipo's breathtaking characterisation of Sango and Onibonokuta's incantations in his role as Gboonka.

Ladipo's national and international recognition originated in 1963; the same year that Nigeria was declared a republic. His troupe was invited to perform in Lagos. The trip was

initiated by Beier, who directed them to perform Ladipo's "Christmas Cantata" in the National Museum of Nigeria, Onikan. This was also the year that the German Cultural Centre in Lagos hosted the staging of *Oba Koso*. The idea of staging the play there came from Beier. It was such a great success that it prompted Count Posadowski Wehner, the West German Ambassador, to suggest the staging of the play for the 1964 Berliner Festwochen (See 2003: 10).

The first trophy award by the Arts Council of Nigeria was presented to Ladipo by the 'Federal Government of Nigeria' for being judged the most outstanding performing artist in 1963, before embarking on the trip to Berlin in 1964. The occasion was held 'at the Federal Palace Hotel' and was accompanied by another staging of *Oba Koso*. In *Thundergod on Stage*, his troupe was reported to have been 'treated like the king's company' (2003:11). The honours received were crucial to how his father, Reverend Oni Ladipo, later came to terms with his son's theatrical engagements; he died a few days after the award, but they both had the opportunity to reconcile and settle their differences. The Reverend was reported to have commented thus, "Ah, *oyinbo lo so pe ko dara, awon na ni won tun so pe o dara!*" (2003: 11) (Isn't it surprising to realise that the white man who devalued our culture as worthless, has now turned around to recognise your practice of the same culture?).

As part of Ladipo's national theatrical engagements, the second anniversary of the Mbari Mbayo Club was celebrated with the presentation of *Oba Waja* in 1964. As an historical tragedy, the subject of the play is an account of a true political incident that occurred in

the ancient Yoruba kingdom of Oyo in 1946, during the funeral obsequies of the *Alaafin*, when one of his senior chiefs was prevented from committing ‘death’ by the colonial authorities who regarded the ritual as a barbaric act. Wole Soyinka’s most famous play, *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) is also about this incident.

### **Changes in Ladipo’s Life after his three Major Plays**

The most significant change experienced by Ladipo after his three major plays was his troupe’s international invitation to perform in Berlin in 1964. Prior to embarking on the journey, Ladipo found himself in a difficult position with the Nigerian passport office who had not issued their passports. The passport officials felt that the number of people going were too high, irrespective of the fact that they had all been issued visas by the West German Embassy. Ladipo was very disappointed and angered by their unpatriotic action, so much that he ‘threatened to drown in the lagoon if all the passports were not duly processed’ (2003:13). After obtaining their travel documents, there were only five nights left for the company to rehearse *Oba Koso* before their departure in September of 1964. The rehearsal’s aim was ‘to produce a version of *Oba Koso* that might be understood by a German audience that did not know Yoruba’ (1994: 32). Ladipo recruited Beier and Georgina as guinea pigs to act as if they were the European audience, in order to assess whether the mood of the play could be comprehended by the European audience. The length of the play was condensed to seventy minutes to suit the European audience (see 32), in comparison to the usually much longer Nigerian version; sometimes up to two hours as revealed by Abiodun Duro-Ladipo (interview with author, 2007).



Beier confirmed that the new version ‘was so intense, so full of new impressions and surprises that the audience lost all sense of time’ (32). This observation highlights the importance of being able to adapt to a theatrical language that communicates the narratives of a play to a universal audience, therefore, Ladipo had successfully broken a barrier that may otherwise have existed in extending his dramaturgy to audiences of non-Yoruba origin who were not familiar with the language.

While in Berlin, the company were well looked after and their performance was thoroughly enjoyed by the audience. Beier stated:

Theatre audiences in Berlin were the best we ever experienced; their intelligent concentration and their enthusiastic participation carried Duro’s performance to new heights. The hall was small and the platform low. The utter simplicity of the stage encouraged interaction between actors and audience.

After the performance, people climbed on stage, shook hands with the performers and talked to them. Often an hour went before the company could leave the theatre. Among the audience were distinguished actors and musicians. The Director of the Berlin Opera, Rudolph Sellner, was so enthusiastic that he invited the entire company to the dress rehearsal of *Zauberflöte* conducted by Karl Bohm (33).

The reviews of the performances were highly complimentary. The play ‘was rated as one of the great highlights of the festival, on par with the Stravinsky concert’ (35). “The festival also brought Ladipo immense popularity in Nigeria, for Dr. Karl Wand, the zealous Cultural Attache’ of the German Embassy, managed to place seventy mentions

and reviews of *Oba Koso* in the Nigerian press” (35). The Berlin festival prepared Ladipo for more international tours. Unknown to him, during his company’s performance in Berlin, the Commonwealth Arts Festival organisers who were present were assessing his company. ‘The suggestion of an invitation was made but then a formal notice had to be sent’ (2003: 13). After all the formalities involved, Ladipo’s company was selected for the Commonwealth tour. The Nigerian government carried out the selection process after their Berlin tour. It began in April, shortly after the third anniversary of the Mbari Mbayo Club and ended in May of 1965.



Plate 4 Brazil 1974/75: Dr. Prof. Jose Mendes Ferreira, hosted Ladipo's company for three months from November 1974 – January 1975 (see 2003: 181)

In March 1965, Ladipo celebrated the third anniversary of the Mbari Mbayo Club with the staging of *Eda*. The play was translated into Yoruba by Ladipo and entitled *Eda* from an adaptation of *Everyman* that was written by Ulli Beier, but published under the

pseudonym of Obotunde Ijimere. The translated version of the play portrays Eda, the Yoruba version of Everyman, as a corrupt, rich, Yoruba politician who was dancing and enjoying himself with his lover, Bisi, when he was summoned by Death! Death introduces himself and informs him that he had been sent by Olodumare to take him. Eda in shock wonders if his servant, Money, will come along with him, but to his dismay, Money declines! Therefore, when Eda was about to be taken away by Death, his prayer was to be given birth to via reincarnation by his pregnant daughter. The staging of the play coincided with a period of political unrest in Nigeria. The Yoruba people were divided in loyalty in relation to the political parties they supported. The supporters of the Action Group and the NNDP were at loggerheads<sup>46</sup>. Lere Paimo, who played the part of Eda, became instantly recognised as one of the most talented actors of Yoruba comedy. His performance as Eda had established his acting reputation, but had also unintentionally triggered some political sensitivity amongst the audience. It transpired that one of the politicians, the Premier of Western Region, was from the same town of Ogbomosho as Lere Paimo, and they both had the same type of traditional facial marks of the Ogbomosho-Yoruba people. Beier disclosed that ‘some people in the audience read

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<sup>46</sup> In 1965, the political uprising that had developed from 1962 when ‘Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the Action Group, whose stronghold was Western Nigeria’ ‘resigned the premiership of the Western Region in order to become leader of opposition in the Federal Parliament’ had escalated. Awolowo’s position was then taken over by Chief S.L Akintola, his deputy. Awolowo had advocated ‘a new political philosophy which he called democratic socialism’, but his action had ‘alienated some of the influential businessmen in his own party’. Therefore, Akintola ‘and other members of the Action Group disagreed with what they’ regarded as a political confrontation. Awolowo and some ‘staunch’ members of his political party, the Action Group, were ‘accused of plotting to overthrow the Federal Government and eventually charged with treason’ and sentenced. Chief Akintola launched a new political party known as NNDP, taking along with him some members of the Action Group and those of the ‘opposition party’, the NCNC, who were loyal to him. By ‘October 1965’, Chief Akintola ‘decided to face the electorate in the Western Region. In spite of the heavy patronage dispensed by the provisional government, the Western Region had remained loyal to the Action Group. They voted heavily against NNDP, but to save his position Chief Akintola decided blandly to rig the elections. The fraud was blatant: in some cases the election results were simply reversed in the official announcement’. Hence, this led to civil unrest (Beier, 1994: 53-4).

an unintended political message into the performance' (1994: 66). The summary of the impact of *Eda* on the audience is important in demonstrating the power of Ladipo's dramaturgy, and theatre as a weapon of communication for socio-political ideas, even when messages are not intended. Ladipo's role in the play was confined to the prologue, where he played the part of God in heaven. He was reported to have excelled in the performance, authoritatively displaying his recitation of powerful incantations that were accompanied with the chorus style of Ekiti-Yoruba origin.

Ladipo's troupe started preparing for the Commonwealth Festival and a subsequent tour of other parts of Europe in the early part of September, 1965. He had finalised arrangements with the promoter of the extended tour to perform in West Germany, Holland and Austria. Ladipo's troupe embarked on their journey on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1965. The festival lasted three weeks. *Oba Koso* was staged in London, Cardiff, Liverpool and Glasgow with outstanding success. The performance at the Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool could be regarded as the most successful show; but equally groundbreaking were those of the Scala Theatre, London and the King's Theatre, Glasgow (see 2003: 15). They did however have some difficulties with the disappearance of *Eda's* set, the play designated for the post-Commonwealth tour. The set was specifically designed by Georgina Beier for the play, but they couldn't find it when they got to Heathrow airport. Ladipo was reported to have suspected that one of the rival theatre companies may be responsible. In Beier's words, 'It was difficult to understand how a stage set of that size could simply vanish. Georgina spent three days searching for it in the cargo sheds of London airport' (1994: 40). It later came to light that the set did not leave Lagos.

Beier also recalled an incident that occurred on their first night in England. The staff of the Royal Hotel where they were lodged was racially prejudiced towards the cast. Instead of being served in the same lounge as the rest of the public, they were deliberately secluded and confined to a different room which was specially prepared as a temporary dining room; they were served in the same space with some 'Thalidomide children'. Although Beier was disgusted and appalled with the attitude projected towards them by the staff of the hotel, he made a conscious decision with his wife, Georgina, not to make the situation obvious to Ladipo and his troupe as it was their first day in the United Kingdom. But he and Georgina confronted the management of the hotel about their strong reservations and disagreements.

Their situation was different when they arrived at Liverpool the next day. They were given an affectionate welcome by the mayor of Liverpool who personally received them. They later performed at the Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool where their performance was highly praised. They became an instant attraction with the production technicians and the artists they came in contact with. Before they left Liverpool, they were contacted by the BBC office in Cardiff. The BBC was interested in filming *Oba Koso*, but they wanted Ladipo to condense the play to 30 minutes. Ladipo's creative ability to adapt to situations was evident in his re-writing of the script to suit the BBC's requirement. The Commonwealth Festival tour came to an end with a performance at the Scala Theatre in London. Ladipo's Troupe was invited to Buckingham Palace, where they were awarded a medal for their excellent performances. It also came to light that 'The impressive mark of *Oba Ko So* became highlighted when an old woman fainted as King Sango emitted fire

from his mouth; on recovery, the woman expressed delight for witnessing that show in her lifetime!’ (2003: 15).

The troupe’s extended tour of Europe covered; Brussels, Liege, Bonn, Stuttgart, Cologne, Vienna, Salzburg and Frankfurt (see 1994: 90). They first travelled to Amsterdam where they rested for nine days (See 88), before travelling to Brussels, where the first performance of their post-commonwealth tour began.

Ulli Beier, who joined the company in Brussels with Georgina, described Ladipo’s experience with his male actors and the audience as being among the most horrible moments of his life. Ladipo’s ‘male actors went on strike’ on their arrival night because they wanted increased payment, and then Ladipo injured himself when he accidentally slipped and landed in the pit of the theatre, ‘during rehearsal’ (1994: 41). Ladipo’s problem with the cast was resolved with Beier’s intervention, but he couldn’t continue his rehearsal as scheduled. The management of the theatre insisted he was taken to the hospital for his bruises and injury to be examined (See 41). In reference to the audience response to their performance and the behaviour of the stage management team, Beier revealed that “Duro never experienced such an unfriendly atmosphere before or since. The audience was ice cold and audibly hostile. Maybe they were disappointed at seeing an African performance without bare tits – because Keita Fadeba’s ‘Ballets Africain’ had been there the week before” (1994: 41). Their performance was deliberately disrupted by those in charge of managing the stage. According to Beier, the lighting cues were not

followed, they dropped the curtain before a scene came to an end and the set constructed specially for *Eda* crashed down.

In contrast to how their performance was sabotaged in Brussels and the behaviour of some of his cast members, the rest of their tour was described as being ‘highly successful’, especially in places like Germany and Austria. In a newspaper conversation with Ladipo on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1968 about the tour, he confirmed, ‘In Vienna, I signed more than two thousand autographs’ (2003:16). Their tour ended at Frankfurt, where they performed at the European Theatre before they left on the last day of October 1965.

While they were on tour, the company became aware of the escalation of the political unrest in Nigeria. According to Muraina Oyelami in *My Life in the Duro Ladipo Theatre*, ‘In Brussels we received worrying news from home. Elections had been held in Western Nigeria and though the people had voted massively for the Action Group, Chief Akintola, the NNDP Premier simply changed the results on the radio and declared himself the winner’ (1994: 90). When Ladipo’s troupe returned to Lagos from the tour, the political climate had become very intense, to such an extent that they were advised to cover their ‘truck with palm leaves (the symbol of Action Group) and shout the party’s slogans, in order to travel safely on the road’ (90). They followed the instruction and travelled to their destination in Oshogbo without any interruptions. In November 1965, Ladipo was belatedly honoured with the award of Member of the Order of the Niger (M.O.N) that was nationally announced by the government on Nigerian Independence Day in 1964. A



month and half later, there was a dramatic change in the political situation of Nigeria. There was a bloody military coup in January 1966. According to Oyelami:

We were at Ibadan on the morning of January 15<sup>th</sup> 1966, when we were told that law and order had broken down in Lagos. We had performed in Ibadan the previous night and were getting ready for another performance, but when we heard about the military coup, we quickly returned to Oshogbo (91).

Nigeria was in chaos and theatre practitioners were restricted as result of the uprising.

The theatrical activity of Ladipo's theatre was mainly confined to national tours from the end of 1965 to the beginning of 1973. After the Berlin tour of 1964, he was able to purchase his own touring truck. The Commonwealth Festival tour of 1965 also afforded him the luxury of buying a car that gave him the added opportunity of travelling with his wives in a more comfortable way (see Beier 1994: 49). His performance venues included teachers colleges, secondary schools, and town halls within the then three regions of Nigeria.

In 1968, Ladipo celebrated the anniversary of his troupe's international recognition. A week's festival was organised and marked with staging six of his plays. The then commissioner for 'Economic Planning and Social Development', Chief Kolawole Balogun was responsible for launching the event which started on 30<sup>th</sup> September and ended on 5<sup>th</sup> October (1968). Most of the income made from the event went into the

‘Troops Comfort Fund’ that was put in place by the Federal Government to unite the country during the civil war that began in 1967. The war did not stop Ladipo from his theatrical activities. He succeeded in establishing ‘The Cultural Entertainment Group of Nigeria’ in 1969, but as Beier revealed, ‘The Nigerian civil war severely restricted Duro’s travelling and nearly ruined him financially’ (1994: 59). His motive for founding the organisation was to unite the country through theatre; therefore, his theatrical project was inclusive of young people from the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. In Ladipo’s words:

The objective of the cultural tour was to “experiment on the possibility of having a national group of Hausa boys and girls in our team” and “to create an impact on cultural exchange as a means of promoting unity in Nigeria through entertainment.” (2003: 17).

In 1970, after the Nigerian civil war, the seventh year anniversary of being recognised internationally was celebrated by Ladipo’s troupe; it was also his ninth year in professional theatre, therefore, ‘a “Duro Ladipo National Theatre Festival of Yoruba Cultural Plays and Dances” was organised with the cooperation of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan’ (17). From the ‘3<sup>rd</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup>’ November 1970, the following plays of Ladipo were staged for the celebration: *Aare Akogun*, *Ajagun-Nla*, *Ominira Alajobi*, *Aaro Meta*, *Oba Koso* and *Moremi*. *Aare Akogun* is a Yoruba adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Ajagun-Nla*, first staged in 1967 (see 2003: 187-92), is a play in which the thematic consideration was based on power game.

Ladipo's creative engagements were intense. In writing his plays, he was not in the habit of writing a complete script; he never thought it was necessary. He adopted a process whereby the first step he took was to briefly sketch a preliminary draft of the scenes and identify the actors for the characters. The next step was to teach the actors concerned the relevant songs of the play (see 1994: 61). For Ladipo, music came first. As explained by Beier, 'He tried to capture the mood of a scene through a melody, then fitted the words to the music later on' (61).

This method of working was good for his actors, as they were not all formally educated. The freedom of improvisation was naturally nurtured by Ladipo's style of creating dialogue and structuring his plays. For example, *Onibonokuta* and *Mayakiri*, his lead actors were reported to have taken advantage of Ladipo's way of working - to be constructively creative; they had the habit of coming up with new dance routines in a surprising way and were known to sometimes 'prolong certain scenes, especially when they had established particularly good relationship with their audience' (1994: 61).

Ladipo's flexible approach to performance was instrumental to the development and success of his plays. It created the opportunity for improvement; his actors were able to continuously transfer their performance experiences from one show to the next. The first time it became necessary for Ladipo to start writing text was 1964. This was because the German producer, Klaus Stephan, was producing a film of *Oba Koso* and requested a full script of the play for translation into subtitles for the German audience. This development

meant that Ladipo needed to produce the text in English, but it was first necessary for him to write the text version in Yoruba in order to make the translation possible. Ladipo's experience of writing the script became a turning point on how he started to look at his work. Beier, whom he consulted with in translating the Yoruba text into English revealed that the exercise gave him 'the opportunity to see Duro's genius at work: his quick responses, his inventiveness' (62). The success of producing *Oba Koso* in English was directly responsible for the step he took with Beier to also translate *Oba Moro* and *Oba Waja* into English. This effort led to the publication of *Three Yoruba Plays* 'in 1964', the same year that the German film script of *Oba Koso* was commissioned (1994: 61). In comparing the context of Ladipo's international performances with his national performances, the text of *Oba Koso* that Ladipo refined for the Festival in Berlin was more compact than the one staged for the Nigerian audience; this was partly due to the way actors like Onibonokuta and Mayakiri were able to prolong certain scenes with their own improvisations. As Beier explained, 'The performances he evolved for European audiences were highly structured and disciplined. He presented a very intense and definite form. In Nigeria he allowed himself more time and more room for improvisation. When the audience responded with excitement to a certain scene, the actors would simply elaborate on it!' (1994: 80).

Ladipo was a highly prolific playwright and composer. According to Beier, 'He was extraordinarily productive: Professor Tekena Tamuno in his obituary lists 36 plays, but if one were to count all his television performances, there would be many more' (1994: 69). Each year Ladipo devoted six weeks to his big plays and his company was made up of 25 members. The most prominent of his actors were Onibonokuta, Mayakiri, Lere Paimo

and Abiodun, his wife. He had the gift of being able to bring people together. Apart from being actors, amongst the company were painters and musicians who later established themselves as musicians, theatre directors and painters of independent standing (see 76).

In 1973, Ladipo's troupe was invited to Nancy, France, for the *Mondial du Thietre* Festival. The agreement made with the festival organisers about the troupe's transportation cost was for Ladipo's company to be responsible for their payment to the festival and in return the organisers agreed to be responsible for their accommodation and feeding for the three weeks duration of the festival. *Oba Koso* was presented. The troupe's performance was very rewarding in serving as a networking period for them and led to many positive recommendations. The festival organisers and the families who hosted the different members of the troupe were very generous to them; the former took care of their fares back to Nigeria and they were individually presented with gifts by their hosts in appreciation of their performances. The trip became a springboard for other international performance invitations that would extend to 1977, the year that Nigeria hosted the Festival of Black Arts and Culture (FESTAC). From September to October, 1973, Ladipo's troupe was invited to a 'Yoruba Festival' in Zurich, Switzerland. This international cultural event lasted a period of four weeks in which *Oluweri* was performed. The play is an adaptation of an Ijaw legend that was reported to have been researched by Beier, but the title of the play in Yoruba, is another name for Yemoja, the goddess of the sea. The play was such a great success 'that an encore was requested at the glass-roofed court of the University of Zurich' (2003: 19).

After the tour, Ladipo's troupe was engaged in a period of intense international theatrical activities. Over a short period of time, he had presented *Oluweri* and *Oba Koso* to audiences across different continents. In 1973, they also performed at the seventh Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts in Iran, the Belgrade Bitez International festival in Yugoslavia and the Rome Arts Festival in Italy. They were also meant to have gone to Israel from Rome to perform, but the plan was abandoned due to the uncertainty of whether war was imminent in the Middle East at the time (see 19).

As the first troupe from Nigeria to have successfully staged plays to international audiences in Europe, at the end of the later part of 1974 Ladipo had reached a threshold in his career. He had the burning desire to extend his international tours to America and other parts of the diaspora. He therefore recruited the services of an agent in America, Mel Howard. While preparing for an American tour in 1975, another opportunity came for Ladipo to tour Brazil with his troupe. The tour was organised by one Mr. Lola Martins, who at the time was Managing Director of Afro Beat Nigerian Magazine. The troupe embarked on the journey to Brazil on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1974. On arrival there, they discovered that the promoter hadn't made arrangements for their accommodation. The problem was solved by Dr Jose Mendes Ferreira, a Latin American doctor of African origin, who resolved their accommodation problem. In addition, he took on the responsibility of feeding them for the three months of their tour in Brazil. The tour was successful. They were received with great respect and enthusiasm in places like Sao Paulo, Salvador, Bahia, Curitiba, Brasilia, Port Alegre, Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro. In some of these places:

Duro Ladipo was widely admired and with especial reverence, almost deified. He was to many the modern reincarnation of Sango, the legend whom he re-created on stage and upon whom his own fame crystallized (2003: 21).

These responses were not just a coincidence, but something deeply rooted in the identity of this people. They could identify with their roots through Ladipo's characterisation of Sango. Many Brazilians are devotees of the Yoruba gods who have been able to trace their roots to Nigeria. In Brazil and other parts of the Caribbean, this form of religion is known as Santeria and has come about as a result of the syncretism of the Catholic Christian religion with Ifa and the ancient Yoruba religion (See Drewal, 1989: 199-234, Neimark 1993: xii and Soyinka 1976: 1). Beier confirmed how Ladipo was emotionally affected by his audience reception:

The performance in Bahia, Brazil, in 1969 was the most gratifying to Duro. A large section of the audience was composed of Yoruba descendants, and many were *olorishas*. The emotion aroused by this performance was so powerful that Duro sat down that night and wrote me a long, moving letter – the only letter he ever wrote to me in his whole life (1994: 27).

There is an error with the year referred to by Beier because Ladipo did not engage in any international tour in 1969 (See 2003:17). In fact, the actual date of the letter was noted elsewhere by Beier himself:

In Brazil Oba Koso was more than an interesting foreign play: it was a powerful interpretation of the living religion in Brazil. In 1975 Yoruba religion was far more alive in Brazil than in Nigeria, and there were no signs of it fading away, on the contrary: it was growing with an increasing number of white worshippers joining

candoble'. Yoruba had changed, of course, in the diaspora. It had adapted itself to its Latin American surroundings, but it was this very flexibility that gave it its vitality (1994: 216).

In appreciation of Ladipo's tour in Brazil, the mayor of Sao Paulo awarded the troupe with a 'Grand Medal' before they left Brazil for the pre-arranged tour of America. There were two major reasons why Ladipo preferred to go straight to America from Brazil. The first was that he was being mindful of the travelling expenses. The other reason was that he was certain that some of his troupe members might take advantage of the return to take some time off from their busy rehearsal schedules. They embarked on the tour and from February to April 1975, they took part in the Third World Theatre Festival, performing in Boston, Ohio, Chicago, Washington and New York. The promoter, Mr. Howard, was a highly reliable professional who made sure that the troupe enjoyed comfortable accommodation and were fed properly. He additionally arranged a performance that also took the troupe to Victoria Island in Canada. In March 1975, *Oba Koso* was staged in the following theatres, venues and locations in America: The Marjorie Young Bell Convocation Hall in Sackville, New Brunswick, Harvard Loeb Drama Centre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Mechanics Theatre in Baltimore, the New York City Community College Festival of the Arts and the Westport Playhouse in Connecticut. An award was given to the troupe by the Mayor of Washington D. C. as appreciation for staging *Oba Koso* when the tour came to an end. For the American audience, Ladipo produced a more compact and revised version of *Oba Koso* that was reduced in length. He was assisted in the process by the promoter to ensure that it was suitable for the international audience in America. The tour was a memorable one for Ladipo, except for



the few problems he encountered with some of his troupe members. It came to light that ‘The troupe had been on the road for six months. It was becoming difficult for Ladipo to get the attention and cooperation of all’ (2003: 21). An incident occurred in Canada involving one of the drummers. He had been specially recruited directly from the *Alaafin’s* (King of Oyo) court for the tour. He claimed that one of the other drummers had been disrespectful to him and he was not going to engage with the drummer anymore or get off the tour bus. Also the masquerade performer from Ede who was also part of the tour became tired and wanted to go back home. An account of the situation revealed that ‘he had stayed for too long from his ancestral home. He threatened that he would use *egbe* (Yoruba transportation talisman) to return home to Ede. To this, Duro Ladipo simply said, “Be careful when you use *egbe*, for you may end up in the ocean!”’ (2003: 22).

One of the last major national performances of Ladipo’s troupe was staged in 1977, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Festival of Arts and Culture that was held in Nigeria between January and February of that year. He was initially not included in the festival’s performances, but Ladipo, being an artist who had successfully toured around the world, and broken theatrical boundaries as a cultural ambassador of the country, felt unjustly left out and decided to address the situation in his own way. As revealed:

On the opening day, he appeared, accompanied by two drummers, at the gate of the National Stadium, Lagos. Breaking protocol, the dramatist, incarnate of *Sango*, at the very height of his popularity, swayed and moved majestically to the deep sonorities of *bata* drums. Duro Ladipo had practically embarrassed the forgetful officers who missed him out in the list of invited troupes. His brief appearance was

electrifying, causing the Head of State, Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo, to point questions in the direction of the Local Organising Committee of the festival (Raji-Oyelade *et al*, 2003: 22-3).

The intervention of the Head of State prompted an immediate response that led to the dispatching of a letter written by the Federal Ministry of Information's cultural section and dated 27<sup>th</sup> January 1977; it was an invitation letter for Ladipo to perform with his troupe for the festival's grand finale. The letter was written by Dr Garba Ashiwaju, Federal Chief Cultural Officer, under the directive of the Head of State.

Ladipo's last international tour was also in 1977 to France and Germany. Ladipo's troupe had been specially invited 'to perform at the Third World Theatre Festival in Paris in October' 1977 (22). They were funded by 'the International Theatre Institute'. Ladipo returned from his last tour with the intention of embarking on some new projects. He wanted to convert his residence at Bode Wasimi in Ibadan into a model of the Mbari Mbayo Club in Oshogbo; he wanted it to be a centre for exhibition and a place for artists to congregate. He also wanted to explore more television and film production. He felt that it was necessary for him to use media in reaching his audiences in Nigeria, since he had an established following. *Igbo Irunmole* was his last series for television broadcast. It was adapted from D. O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole*. The book was translated into English by Wole Soyinka, entitled, 'Forest of a Thousand Daemons'. In exploring the film industry, 'Ladipo played a major role as actor, composer and music director in the production of *Ajani Ogun* (by Ola Balogun with English & French subtitles), the first

Yoruba film shot on location in Ekiti, 1976' (2003: 24). In January, 1978, Ladipo was appointed as 'Artist-in Residence' by 'the Institute of African Studies', University of Ibadan. However, Ladipo's dreams were not all fulfilled.

His death was a complete shock to the theatre world and the country, but he had premonitions of his own death and hinted some of those close to him about it. He was only sick for a short period of time and nobody expected him to die through the illness. Like Shakespeare (Burton, 1958: 21), Ladipo died at the age of 52. But his exit was as dramatic as the theatrical life he led. Testimonies and accounts of the events that occurred before his death and at the time of his passing were very revealing, dramatic and bore all the hallmarks of a true incarnate of Sango, the demiurge he characterised in his life time (See 2003: 35-68). As was rightly stated:

Duro Ladipo was, after all, the mortal and artistic representation of *Sango*, the legend and the myth all rolled into one. He must have breathed his last in a hail of storms and lightning on March 11, 1978. The heavens opened up; thunder struck; and when Nature's anger subsided, the news wafted in sheets of rumour: "Duro Ladipo is dead" (24).

Nine days before he died, he was reported to have informed Ademola Onibonokuta, one of the founding members of his troupe 'that he was ready to go somewhere yet unknown; Ladipo was said to have added that if he did not return from his 'Undisclosed' destination, a statue of his should be erected at the railway junction in Oshogbo' (24). He also told his friend, collaborator and a Fellow of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Wale Ogunyemi (1939-2001) that he was dying. According to the revelation, he 'stopped drinking wine one year before his death. Ogunyemi was surprised

at this and queried his colleague's withdrawal from wine. Ladipo looked at him and said offhandedly, "Ah, ma wo e. Mo ti nku lo die die" (Look at you. I am dying slowly!) (25).

Chief Mrs Abiodun Duro-Ladipo, his widow, revealed some of these mysterious attributes and some of the signs she observed in him during his last days. According to her, she had noticed that Ladipo's eyes were red and wondered why, but his response was unusual, he asked her if she was comfortable looking at them. When Ladipo's wife responded positively that she had no problem with the colour of his eyes, he gave her more insight about the significance of his red eyes; he told her to be worried when they become white. After a period of time, she noticed that Ladipo's eyes had become white and alerted him. But Ladipo was already aware and acknowledged her observation (Interview with author 2007). This was a sign of something imminent; a transformation associated with the nature of his being. As evident in her response to one of my questions, she revealed her true picture of Ladipo:

**Q:** As somebody who was very close to Ladipo, both on stage and in real life, what can you tell me about him that others do not know about?

**A:** Apart from being my husband, he was a very good human being. He was god-like in character and was contented with what he had. He was never materialistic or money driven. This may be by virtue of his nature because he was not an ordinary man; not at all!! Not an ordinary person!! He is not an ordinary person!! No, no, no!!

These accounts can be corroborated with the testimonies given by some of those who witnessed his transformations, his collaborators and those close to him, both culturally and intellectually (see Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 35-58). Chief Yemi Elebuibon who had been linked to Ladipo since 1962, revealed the occurrences of the dramatist's last days on earth, before he witnessed his passing (See 47). In relation to Ladipo's link to Sango, he gave an insight into an incident he witnessed when he was on a journey with Ladipo. They had seen Lamidi Fakeye, a famous Yoruba sculptor, with a policeman who had stopped him for questioning about his expired driving licence. Ladipo was reported to have intervened because the policeman had seized the licence and changed position to continue controlling the traffic. Elebuibon stated that 'he walked up to the policeman and demanded for the licence. The officer hesitated. Then Duro looked at him intensely and said "Bring the document young man, *Sango* speaks...." The policeman promptly returned the licence, to everyone's dismay'. (47).

Elebuibon explained that he had visited Ladipo in response to his invitation to conduct a special session of Ifa divination at the University of Ibadan after his appointment. This was when he found out that Ladipo had been unwell for a number of days and noted that 'His eyes had turned white' (48), an observation which substantiates that of his wife. Ladipo was then taken to the hospital at Jericho in Ibadan, in the company of Elebuibon, whom he had requested to come with him. The hospital admitted him, but he was still able to discuss some important issues with Elebuibon. During their discussion, Elebuibon wanted to know what he meant when he said something that implied that he may no longer be around. According to Elebuibon, 'He said, "Afara ti fe ja bayii" (the bridge is

about to fall now). He then directed me to ask his first wife who had the last born for him to come with the child, warning me strongly not to let his own aging mother know about the errand' (48). Ladipo was later transferred to the University College Hospital (UCH), where he spent his last few days. In accounting for his last hours, his brother, Reverend Emmanuel Olugboyega Ladipo, Ojeniyi Amoo (Akaraogun) and Elebuibon were all present when he requested the attention of the latter. In his words:

He invited me to his bedside; he held my hand, rubbed it for a long time and spoke words that I didn't understand. Hours after then, in the early morning, about 2.00 am, he passed on. And it was at that moment that it began to rain and thunder heavily. At Jericho, he had a tape with him on which he recorded instructions on how he was to be buried, what should be done, and what should not be done once he was gone (48).

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **The Importance and Context of Duro Ladipo's Three Major Yoruba Plays: *Oba Moro, Oba Koso & Oba Waja***

##### **Introduction**

Ladipo's plays were staged in the Yoruba folk opera tradition. The tradition originated 'in the church' in the 1920s when the newly formed 'African churches' started to turn 'biblical stories into plays in order to acquaint their largely illiterate congregations with biblical tales, and the performance was used to raise money for church schools and other activities' (Beier, 1994: 3). They used songs and music in their moralistic plays; hence the term 'Yoruba Folk Opera' was born because of the heavy reliance on music and song in their performances. Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo were the principal exponents of this kind of theatrical tradition<sup>47</sup>. The practitioners explored myths and legends. They were preoccupied with the use of indigenous folklores and idioms that are similar with those found in traditional festival performances like that of the *egungun* and the deities. Apart from their use of two and three dimensional traditional visual aesthetics, the language of their theatre is a combination of the chanted genres of the Yoruba oral tradition and traditional drumming, singing, dancing and imitations.

In comparison with his fellow dramatists of the Yoruba folk operatic theatre tradition, Ladipo's use of indigenous oral performance forms was more pronounced. Olu Obafemi explained that the dramatic production of the folk operatic dramatists of the time 'ranges widely between the serious historical-mythological dramas of the late Duro Ladipo, through Hubert Ogunde's political satires and morality plays' to the comical fantasies of

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<sup>47</sup> See Ogunbiyi, 1981: 17-24 and Beier, 1981: 321-31

Kola Ogunmola and Moses Olaiya's comedies (1996: 13). This evidence confirms that Ladipo was distinguished for his Yoruba historical plays, whereas Ogunde specialised in morality plays and political satires. Ogunmola also staged morality plays and was known for his comical fantasies.

Ladipo's plays bring to light the world view and philosophies of the Yoruba people; their rituals, myths and legends, and socio-political dynamics through his dramaturgy and visual aesthetics. Some of Ladipo's major work includes *Oba Moro* (1962), *Oba Koso* (1963) and *Oba Waja* (1964). An English translation of the trilogy has been documented by Beier and Ladipo (1964). Other publications on *Oba Koso* include Ladipo (1970) and Ladipo & Armstrong (1972). The English version of the texts forms the basis of my analysis. This chapter explores the production history of the plays, how Ladipo derived his inspiration, his dramaturgy, the significance and originality of the plays and how they were received by audiences. A critical analysis of the performances, the texts and the ritual dimensions of the plays forms part of this exploration. For the purpose of a trans-cultural exposition of Ladipo's theatre, a semiotic paradigm will be employed in analysing some of his texts in this chapter.

Just like his contemporaries, Ladipo's theatre was entertaining, but defined by the manner in which he used certain key elements in his plays. Apart from writing his plays in Yoruba and reflecting Yoruba iconic images through his visual languages, his dialogues were delivered in the form of such indigenous Yoruba oral poetic forms as *oriki* (praise songs), *ofo* (incantations), *Ijala* (hunters' chant) and dirges. By establishing how these



elements are structured into the framework of Ladipo's plays as a type of theatrical trademark, a springboard is identified to aid an understanding of his theatre in general.

According to Ogunbiyi:

Duro Ladipo manifested qualities which were to become the hall-mark of his style—the dexterous use of traditional musical instruments, chants and dance steps. And in each case he was able to justify his different techniques and stylistic preferences (1981: 339).

Ladipo's pre-occupation with the subject of Oyo Yoruba kings, the type of actors he employed, the dance, his use of *oriki* (praise) songs and incantations belonging to different genres of Yoruba performance styles as dialogues and monologues are consistent with his theatre. In the words of Femi Osofisan as cited by Foluke Ogunleye in her exploration of how this type of theatre has been a repository for preserving cultural tradition:

This theatre... has all the ingredients of the epic stage, with much colour, movement and agitation...the idioms of the grandiose; we see the splendour of courts... with the brouhaha of courtiers, courtesans and musicians... the towering figure of the hero himself. The playwright takes the figure of extant legends or myths and brings them on stage, mostly to revive a tradition, identify with a glorious past and reclaim a heritage (Osofisan, 1973: 354-355; cited in Ogunleye, 2002: 64).

In identifying the common elements of Ladipo's theatre, it is also essential to highlight the way he fuses elements of Western theatre with Yoruba traditional performance forms, using their historical, mythological and oral narratives in his plays. He used actors who were from a similar background and they performed on raised stages. Ladipo's theatre

was a type of hybrid theatre; one which combined Western theatrical elements with indigenous Yoruba oral forms. For instance, his plays are scripted and staged in a space where audiences pay to see the performances like that of the conventional Western theatres, but defined by his use of Yoruba language and their traditional performance forms like story telling, mime, dance and music.

In Martin Banham and Jane Plastow's exploration of the nature of African theatre, the plays of modern African dramatists like Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, and the factors responsible for their emergence in terms of the colonial and indigenous influences and some of the dramatic elements enshrined in their production, they not only identify the entertainment value of African theatre, their findings also confirm their syncretic nature as reflected in their words:

It draws on indigenous performance traditions including dance, music, story telling and mime, and combines them with ideas of drama drawn from experiences of Western colonisation, to create theatre forms which are syncretic and inclusive in both form and content. At its best African theatre is total experience of mind, body and soul which engages with, and feeds off, a highly responsive, involved and vocal audience (1999: vii).

As evident in Banham and Plastow's exposition, 'much modern African theatre refuses to be compartmentalised into a particular form of presentation' (vii). Their syncretic nature as highlighted in their discussion is directly related to the mixture of different elements from different sources to produce an original type of theatre. In relation to the syncretic nature of the Yoruba folk operatic theatre tradition, the practitioners were all influenced by the conventional western theatrical form, but different in how they deployed it in their

work. Unlike Ogunde who combined western musical instruments like the saxophone with traditional Yoruba drums in his music, and Ogunmola who used congas and tambourines (see Beier, 1994:5), Ladipo used only Yoruba traditional musical instruments like the *bata* and *dundun* (talking) drums, *sekere* (seed rattle), *agogo* (bell) and the *toromagbe* (whistle). He fused the language of these traditional musical instruments with the lyrics of *oriki*, *ofo* and Yoruba dirges in producing authentic ancient melodies that are representational of the genres of Ifa and Yoruba oral literature.

In addressing the question of identifying the ideal universals of this form of theatre as a platform for their descriptive and critical analysis, Biodun Jeyifo argues that the employment of this type of 'principles would recognise the important fact that the Travelling Theatre is *not* a folk expression created within the context of timeless folkways, mores and institutions, but a modern, popular cultural expression, remarkably open to varied influences, as are all popular art forms in the modern period' (1984: 13). He further explained that 'the troupes show such a diversity of approaches to traditional artistic material, that we cannot hope to obtain systematic uniformities all around' (13).

In exploring Ladipo's theatrical techniques of structuring his plays, Ogunleye asserted thus:

One technique that runs through most of Ladipo's plays is the festival structure. The plays always open on a festive note- dancing and singing. There is a general mood of celebration in which everyone is involved. This is reminiscent of traditional African festivals (2002: 68).

For instance, this attribute is evident during the annual festival celebrations of deities like Osun in Oshogbo. As the goddess of fertility, her devotees will sing, dance and pay homage to her with poetic chants and songs. This also obtains during the annual Olojo festival of Ogun, the Yoruba demiurge of war, when his devotees will dance to the tune of the music of iron gongs and *dundun* drums and chant the poetic *ijala* chants in homage to the god. The atmosphere calls for the use of traditional musical instruments as an essential part of the ritual celebration. In substantiating the use of this technique in traditional performance settings as indicated above, Ogunleye explains:

This technique is utilised to induce audience participation as obtains in live festival performances. This festival atmosphere is fostered through the use of poetic chants in praise of God, gods, heroes and heroines. It tells of their special attributes, spectacular achievements, likes, dislikes, and a lot of other laudable characteristics. Through such chants, the audiences become acquainted with such characters and are impressed or repulsed by their characteristics, depending on what the ultimate goal of the dramatist may be (68).

Music was integral to Ladipo's creative process. He confirmed that his creative process began with musical composition (see *The Creative Person*, 1970). He used music in different ways for creating the moods of his plays; in signalling appropriate dramatic changes and as cue for introducing the scenes of his plays. Apart from the musical function of the Yoruba percussive instruments (*bata*, *dundun*, *sekere* and *agogo*) in communicating the theatrical messages of his plays, the dialogue of his plays is conveyed with music chanted in the poetic lyrical language of Yoruba oral tradition. In bringing to

bear Ulli Beier and Graham White's assertion that Ladipo's theatre is lyrical in its 'structural progression', Ogunleye explained that this is directly due to Ladipo's experience of 'two traditions', which she identified as follows:

This is a result of influence from two traditions-the festival drama, where there are no spoken dialogue' (*sic*) Ladipo was exposed to this tradition as he followed masquerade about in his early life. The other tradition is the church cantatas and the native air opera comprised mainly of lyrical narratives (2002: 69).

In examining the type of language that flows through Ladipo's trilogy, one must consider their implication in accordance to their relevance in Yoruba society. Apart from the musical and visual languages of his theatre, the type of chanted language that he deployed is profound, religious and spiritual in nature. But the language exists in two categories, the metaphysical and the ordinary, and derives from Yoruba oral literature. The language used by characters who are initiated members of a cult is metaphysical in essence, while that of the uninitiated is ordinary. For instance, *ofo* (incantation) is a genre of Ifa oral poetry that is believed to be potent and therefore can only be used by priests and initiated devotees of an esoteric body. *Oriki* (praise poetry) is, however, the most common type of Yoruba oral poetry in Ladipo's theatre. By virtue of the predominance of *oriki* in Yoruba oral tradition, it is not confined to the initiated, but forms part of the language that is used by the generality of the people for chanting ancestral praises.

As an important feature of Yoruba festivals, rituals and celebrations, Ladipo used dance as part of the structural elements of his theatre. The type of music he created as a result of his synthesis of Yoruba musical instruments with the genres of Ifa poetry and Yoruba oral performance presents an atmosphere that calls for dance in his plays. There is no doubt that Ladipo's fellow dramatists all contributed positively to the development of Yoruba theatre and used traditional elements in their plays, but Ladipo's use of traditional elements was the most significant because of the originality and meaning of his visual and chanted languages in Yoruba society. Obafemi confirmed that 'Ladipo's reliance on tradition for theatrical expression is the most profound of all the theatre practitioners using this mode' (1996:15). For instance, his use of visual resources for theatrical expression was the most thought provoking and intellectually challenging in terms of the philosophical embodiments of the visual components as unspoken dialogues. It is the fusion of all these elements that makes Ladipo's theatre a hybrid one, one which presents the audience with a total theatrical experience, entertainment and enlightenment. This exploration chronologically examines the following plays in accordance with their order of staging: *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*.

### ***Oba Moro* ('The King who Caught Ghosts')**

#### **Production History of *Oba Moro***

As Duro Ladipo's first major play, *Oba Moro* was first staged in Oshogbo for the opening of the Mbari Mbayo Club on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1962 (see Beier 1994: 17, Ogundele 2003: 163 and Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 6). According to Wole Ogundele, the

play was also first publicly performed 'on March 17' (2003: 163). Since there was a public preview of the play - four days before the official opening of the club, this may have been Ladipo's way of creating awareness and informing the public about the opening of his new venue, but it is not clear whether the performance took place outside or inside the club and we have no details of this particular performance. The Mbari Mbayo performance space was 'roughly 24 by 30 feet' in size (Beier 1994: 15). In Georgina Beier's description of the size of the stage, she explained that 'The actors performed on a small stage made of solid mud about one metre high, m. 6.30 wide and m. 3.30 deep' and 'At the back of the stage plywood sheets painted a greyish mauve were erected to form a screen' (1994: 113). A few lighting spots provided the stage light and the backdrop that was used was made with a 100% cotton fabric, designed with the Yoruba starch resist textile technique and dyed in indigo. In comparison to the size of most proscenium theatre stages, the space was small, but was ideal for the staging of *Oba Moro*. My reason for asserting this is that Ladipo was well aware of the capacity of the space when he chose to convert his 'Popular Bar' into a 'theatre club' after he had performed at the Mbari Club in Ibadan and had been inspired to establish a similar venue in Oshogbo (1994: 15). Moreover, since the idea of such a venue was still reasonably a new concept in Nigeria, the space suited the number and type of audience that Ladipo was aiming at for the time; and as revealed in the previous chapter, the Club was also a multifunctional venue with an art gallery, in line with Ladipo's artistic vision. In terms of the essence of rituals in Yoruba society, the space accommodated the structures adapted by Ladipo in communicating the story; the use of drums, *ofo* (incantation), *oriki* (praise songs) and dance, for example, became the interjecting mediums for the interpretation

process in terms of the plot and acting sequences. Wole Soyinka stated that ‘Sound, light, motion, even smell, can all be used just as validly to define space, and ritual theatre uses all these instruments of definition to control and render concrete, to parallel the experiences or intuitions of man in that far more disturbing environment which he defines variously as void, emptiness or infinity’ (1976: 39-40).

The cast of the play was made up of Ladipo who took on the leading role of the Alaafin; Ademola Onibonokuta who played the role of the Priest and Tijani Mayakiri who played the role of the Oluode (head hunter). Also included in the cast were six ladies who acted the part of praise singers – the Oloris. According to Wole Ogundele, the young women were members of the ‘Layiokun’ household in Oshogbo, a famous family of Sango worshipers (2003: 163). In staging the play, Ladipo wanted to use ‘Sango’s praise chants’ so he recruited the young ladies, but we have no reference of their names (163). As revealed in the previous chapter, Onibonokuta had been discovered during a competition to recruit actors for Ladipo’s company; as a talented actor he excelled in his knowledge of the oral tradition and the Ifa incantations which he had learnt from his father who was ‘a very powerful herbalist’ (1994: 50). Mayakiri was both an artist and an actor who was discovered during early art workshops at the Mbari Mbayo Club in the 1960s led by Sussane Wenger and Georgina Beier (See Oyedola, 1976: 119 and Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 7). None of Ladipo’s theatre members had been to a conventional theatre school, but Ladipo gave his actors the opportunity to develop by encouraging them to develop their own characters. Onibonokuta confirmed that he was always thorough and particular about the plays he staged (See 1994: 92-7). In his words, ‘Many



people have referred to Duro as a great playwright, director and organiser. But to many of us who worked closely with him Duro Ladipo was a messenger of God who came to preach to the world through the stage and through his angel-like songs' (1994: 93).

### **Audience Responses and the Subsequent Staging of *Oba Moro***

During the first staging of *Oba Moro*, the audience was challenged to think about their history and the influences of the religious and colonial enterprises on their heritage. This assertion is based on the historical narrative of the play, its religious and metaphysical dimensions and the evidence that such a performance had not been seen in Yorubaland before. Beier's review of the play as a member of the audience confirmed that Ladipo 'had made a breakthrough' in presenting an historical play that was not 'mere entertainment', but related to the people and was not judgemental of their religious affiliations and level of education; a rational and challenging performance that demanded a 'greater' attention from the audience (1994: 20). The audience thoroughly enjoyed the play and were captivated by the roles played by Ladipo, Onibonokuta, Mayakiri and the praise singers, but Beier noted that more attention was needed in balancing the presentation of the play, so that Ladipo could gain more control over 'the emotions of his audience' (20). He however stated that Ladipo 'had brought a new seriousness and dignity to Yoruba *opera*'; Ladipo boldly challenged his audience to think differently with his new approach to the Yoruba opera because of the historical subject of his play, the style and form of the play, something that had never been done by anyone 'before him' (20).

The duration of the performance was not indicated, but the play consists of six scenes that may have lasted between sixty and eighty minutes in presentation. Subsequent to the staging premiere, the play was ‘performed in Ilesa Town Hall in the first week of April and then taken to Mbari Club Ibadan in May’ (Ogundele, 2003: 163). The photographic evidence of the play being openly rehearsed and performed freely to an audience in Oshogbo in 1963, gives us an indication of how Ladipo also took the play to the audience as part of the production history of the play (See Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 110).

The play was also produced as a television drama by Segun Olusola between 1964 and 1966 (See 2003: 138). One of the major differences between the staging of *Oba Moro* in 1962 and the televised version was from a visual perspective; in the theatre version of 1962, Ladipo used Sango’s paraphernalia, whereas in the televised version he did not. Instead, he dressed normally as a king, sitting on his throne and holding a horsetail, as evident in the photographic documentation of one of the scenes. Ogundeji confirmed that ‘in the early’ 1960s, ‘At the beginning of television in Nigeria, Duro Ladipo’s plays dominated the screen for quite some time before’ the other dramatists (2003: 65). He identified four stages that are associated with the development of Yoruba drama for television, explaining that the first stage was of monthly productions, while the second stage moved to weekly drama shows both with plays lasting between thirty and forty-five minutes.

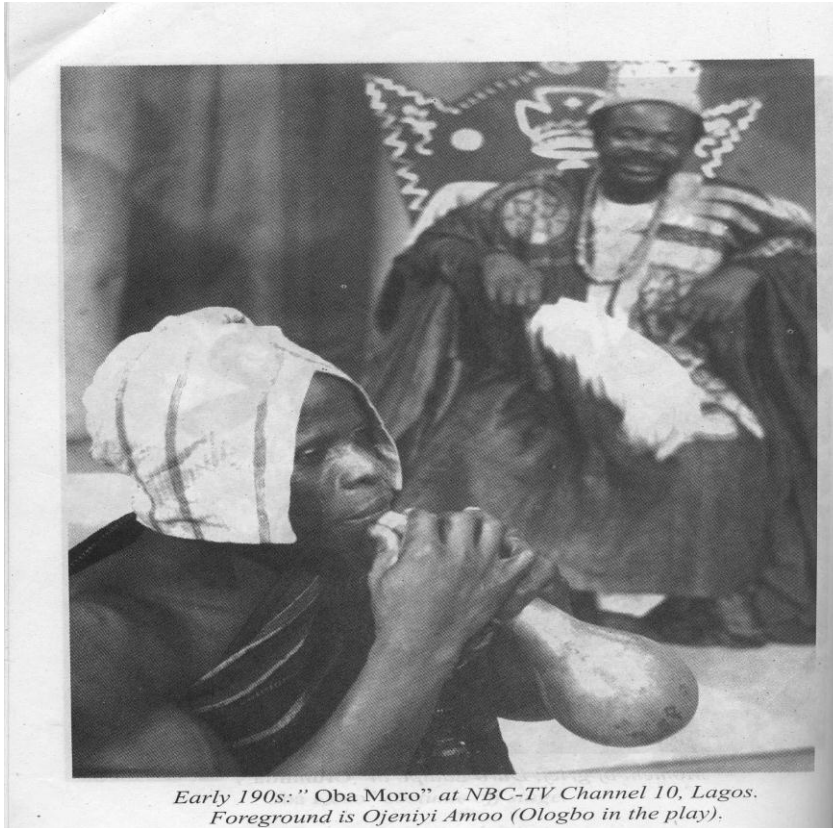


Plate 5 Duro Ladipo as Alaafin and Ojeniyi Amoo as Ologbo in the televised version of *Oba Moro*

During the third stage, full-length plays were presented to last from one to two hours and the last stage was a serialised presentation. According to Ogundeji, 'The whole serial, which runs at times for thirteen or more weeks, is therefore a single play. A slot of about one hour is also allowed for each episode in the series' (65).

### **The Significance of *Oba Moro***

The springboard of the inspiration to stage *Oba Moro* was Ulli Beier, who explained, ‘I wanted to get Duro out of the slapstick routine and into a production which would make full use of his musical gifts. I gave him Johnson’s *History of the Yoruba*, where I had marked a number of stories as possible themes. Duro had never read the book, for his Anglican teachers had attached no importance to Yoruba history’ (1994: 17). Beier’s recommendation became a vital tool that led Ladipo into conducting more research into the history and world inhabited by the Yoruba. The outcome of his research led him to the choice of *Oba Moro* as his first subject of exploration. This is because he was comfortable with the story line and knew that he could employ his creativity in extending the potential of the story (See 17). His previous experience of exploring slapstick comedies like *Ore Kofero* was useful; He would set almost all the scenes in the court of the King of Oyo and was aware ‘from the start that’ *bata* and *dundun* (talking) drums were essential for the musical composition of the play (1994: 17), since they form part of the musical accompaniment of the ritual in the palace. For instance, when the King is being praised for his greatness with his *oriki*, part of the function of the *dundun* is to convey the message through drum language, as an important communication tool. According to Beier, ‘Duro used as skeleton the text from Johnson’s *History*, then fleshed it out with his own research. From that moment on, he became an eager collector of *oriki* and other Yoruba poetry which he incorporated skilfully into his plays’ (17). In bringing to light the importance of this discussion and substantiating its rationale in line with the subjects of Ladipo’s plays, his theatrical vision and the key elements of his theatre, Ladipo stated:

*Bi awa yio ti bere si ka awon ere Duro Ladipo, a bere si ika nipa owon olokiki enia ni ile Yoruba, a si bere si imo nipa orile wa, ati ijinle itan isedale Yoruba. Akojopo awon ere ti a nte jade lori eko ati idagbasoke ede Yoruba wonyi fi ara we awon ere ti Ogbeni Shakespeare ti ko ti yio mu ki a ni akiyesi kikun ati ekunrere alaye lori itan Yoruba ati enia inu re paapaa awon oba ati awon orisa (1970: xi).*

When you embark on reading Duro Ladipo's plays, you start to learn about famous important personalities in Yorubaland, you become more aware of the world of the Yoruba and their creation stories. These plays that have been written and published in Yoruba language can be compared to some of the plays written by Shakespeare, as they provide us with in-depth knowledge and full understanding of the stories of the Yoruba people, particularly their kings and their deities (author's translation).

When an assessment of the reasons Ladipo compared his plays to the plays of William Shakespeare is conducted, they become evident through a comparative study of some of Shakespeare's historical plays and tragedies. The most obvious similarity that exists is between Ladipo's trilogy of *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*, and Shakespeare's historical plays such as *Richard III* and *Henry V*. Both dramatists explored the story of kings in relation to the historical narratives of their nations. Even though their plays are scripted in different languages, both use poetic language and convey deep philosophical messages. For instance, in Ladipo's *Oba Moro*, when the Ghost emissaries are captured by Oluode in the forest of Ajaka, he tells them that they have been captured by Ogun. In Oluode's reference to Ogun as the one who captured the Ghosts, he metaphorically refers to himself as a vessel of the god in catching the ghosts by making it known that he had used Ogun's charms which have the power to capture creatures of the sky, the earth, the

trees and the grass. As a devotee of Ogun, Oluode's charms, his association with the ijala chant (the Yoruba poetic genre dedicated to Ogun by the Yoruba hunters) and his use of the machete as a paraphernalia and emblem of Ogun's power for instance, enhance his metaphysical aspect and make him able to imitate the attributes of the god as the lord of the forest (See S.A. Babalola, 1966: 1-18).

Another common aspect of Shakespeare's and Ladipo's plays is that there is an inherent musicality in the way they are structured and delivered. In the verses of Shakespeare's plays, he uses the Iambic pentameter (see Stillman, 1966:16) to produce a musical rendering that can be compared to the way Ladipo uses *ofo* incantations, *oriki* (praise songs) and proverbs in his plays. Apart from adapting the operatic chanting mode in the delivery of his dialogue, Ladipo's arrangement of the presentation of these genres of poetry and the natural tonal way in which Yoruba is spoken make the language even more musical.

*Oba Moro* was a wake-up call to the audience and Ladipo himself, in terms of the reclamation of history and understanding of the Yoruba religion and literary genres. The play called for a re-definition of cultural identity, re-education of the mind and an evolutionary creative originality (See 1994: 26 and Ogundele 2003: 164-5). This conscious awakening was orchestrated by the need to repair some of the damage that had been inflicted by the European colonial governance of Africa and by missionary enterprises.

Crowder confirmed that ‘The European and ‘Europeanised African’ missionaries regarded traditional society without understanding and with contempt’, as they waged a war against the grassroots of the African traditional society (1968: 364). He substantiated this confirmation with Ayandele’s statement that they denounced the polygamous way of life ‘in favour of disordered monogamy, producing disrespectful and detribalised children through the mission schools, destroying the high moral principles of indigenous society through denunciation of traditional religion, without an adequate substitute, and transforming the mental outlook of Nigerians in a way that made them imitate European values slavishly, whilst holding in irrational contempt features of traditional culture’ (364-5). It was against this backdrop that Ladipo made his post-colonial theatrical statement with *Oba Moro*. The 1960s was a period of post-colonial re-evaluation. It was a period immediately after Nigerian independence from Great Britain; the second anniversary of the Nigerian independence had not been celebrated when Ladipo’s *Oba Moro* was staged. Ladipo’s vision of exploring the importance of the Yoruba matrix; history, religion, socio-political dynamics and cosmology through a theatrical medium was a much needed pioneering progressive response to reinstate the value system of the Yoruba people for the new post-colonial world.

*Oba Moro* accounts for the historical context of how King Abipa orchestrated the capturing of ‘false ghosts’ around 1590 A.D. (see Adedeji, 1981: 221). But apart from this, through the dramaturgy employed, we are presented with the rituals associated with the Yoruba people, their relevance to the social and spiritual order that exist in the Yoruba world and their implications. The intricate nature of how rituals are woven into

the order that prevails in Yoruba society becomes evident through their theatrical exposition, musical traditions, their oral poetry, songs and drum languages, Ladipo's in-depth knowledge of Yoruba, combined with his talent as a composer were indispensable to how the play was presented. The structural elements of the play were instrumental to its success and how it was perceived. According to Beier, 'Much of the dialogue was chanted in conventional Yoruba theatre style, but the classical drumming was vigorous and injected tremendous energy into the performance' (1994: 20).

The importance of Yoruba kings as powerful protagonists in the direction of their people and the decisions they make was highlighted in the role of the King (*Alaafin*) throughout the play, in a way that can be compared to the role of the King in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Henry decides that he has the right to the French crown and sets out on an expedition with his army to pressurise the then King of France for his claim, but at the battle of Agincourt, when he realises that the French soldiers are highly sophisticated and far more in number than his own small army, he delivers an exhortative speech to his soldiers to encourage them (See Geddes & Grosset 2001: 307). This leadership quality displayed by King Henry can be similarly seen in the role of the King in *Oba Moro*; the King reminded his people of the need to return to their ancestral land and directed all the necessary steps towards achieving the mission (see Johnson 1921: 164-6 and Adedeji 1981: 221-47). For example, in the last scene when he orchestrated the captured deformed ghosts to serve their respective masters in the palace, he was bringing to light an aspect of his ultimate power as a Yoruba king, in being able to give *ashe* (command). The king's action in deciding to return his people to their ancestral land can also be seen



as a metaphoric statement that Ladipo is using in the play to inform his audience that it was time for them to take a look at their roots and start valuing and respecting their tradition.

As part of Ladipo's innovation in the play, he creatively adjusted some of the names of the characters and the roles they played as reflected in the original historical record to suit his artistic sensibilities. For instance, it was evident at the beginning of the play that Alafin was referred to as Ajiboyede, whereas the king concerned with this incident as revealed in the historical record was King Abipa; 'From this incident, King Abipa was nick-named Oba M' oro (the king who caught ghosts)' (1921:166). Ajiboyede was the previous king and father of Abipa; Oluode, the name given to the hunter's character, is a title given to the head of the hunters in Yorubaland. According to the historical account of the story, 'Boni, Igisubu, Alagbata, Loko, Gbandan and Olomo were the six famous hunters sent' (165) on the mission; but Ladipo converted the role of the six hunters to that of one hunter whom he called Oluode, to demonstrate the importance of hunters in Yoruba society. Furthermore, we are told in the historical account that 'The Basorun sent a hunchback, the Alapini an albino, the Asipa a leper, the Samu a prognathi,<sup>48</sup> the Laguna a dwarf, the Akiniku a cripple' (165), but in Ladipo's *Oba Moro*, the Bashorun sent a dwarf, the Samu a leper and a hunchback, the Akinniku an epileptic and the Asipa sent no representative, although he was part and parcel of the plot. The Laguna was portrayed as sending the Idiot, whereas the Idiot was not one of the deformed ghosts in the original story, therefore, the prognathi, who represented the Samu in Johnson's text was replaced

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<sup>48</sup> A prognathi is another description for somebody with a deformity of a projected lower jaw (also known as prognathous)

with the Idiot in Ladipo's text. The only Chief whose deformed ghost corresponds to the historical account in Johnson's text is Alapini.

Although we have no account of his reasons for these changes, one of the dramatic reasons may be for example that of the practicality of finding an actor who would agree to play the part of a prognathi. It may also be in accordance with how the characters fit his story line, or his desire not to produce an exact replica of the historical narrative, therefore, one may look at it as a form of adaptation that does not diminish the original story in terms of context, content and understanding. Furthermore, it may actually be as a result of Ladipo's own empirical research and exploration of the oral traditional records of the story.

Ladipo's theatrical vision was to highlight the importance of Yoruba history and critique to the effects of the colonial administration and their religious enterprises on Yoruba traditional life. With *Oba Moro*, he was also seeking to establish a firm intellectual and artistic base for the society's re-evaluation of itself and its outlook on life. Therefore, *Oba Moro* was the first historical play to be staged in Yorubaland. Ladipo was the first indigenous dramatist to adopt a western dramatic structure and style of presentation that fully embraces the use of the traditional language and musical instruments. He was the first to portray the aesthetic of Yoruba art in his theatre whilst challenging the mind intellectually to ponder upon the philosophies associated with the visual and musical languages of his theatre. Ladipo had clarity of thought in terms of the educational value of the theatre and the need to script and publish his plays for the progress of education in

schools (This inclination may also be due to his background as a teacher); Ogunbiyi revealed that the Mbari-Mbayo club was ‘a meeting point for young artists seeking to develop their talents’ and ‘festivals were arranged, competitions organised and quite a few *Mbari-Mbayo* books were published’ (1981: 337). He confirmed that ‘during the 1966 season, “eight young theatre groups around Oshogbo including Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs” performed fortnightly on the *Mbari-Mbayo* stage’ (337-8).

### **Plot Synopsis of *Oba Moro***

*Oba Moro* is an historical account of how Alaafin captured the false ghosts who were sent to frustrate his plans to return his people to their ancestral land of Ajaka in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The people of Oyo had been displaced from their original homeland of Oyo-Ajaka because it had been destroyed as a result of their war with the Ibaribas. They had re-located to Oyo-Igboho as a temporary capital, but when Alaafin Abipa decided it was time to fulfil the will of his forefathers to return his people to their ancestral land of Oyo-Ajaka, his plan was met with hostility from his council of chiefs, the Oyomesi, who were already settled and comfortable with their lives in Oyo-Igboho and were therefore not anxious to move their families back to Oyo-Ajaka.

Set in Oyo-Igboho and the ancestral tombs of Oyo-Ajaka, the play begins with homage to the ancestors and Alaafin. The powerful sound of drums announces the entrance of Ologbo, the Alaafin’s praise singer and town crier, into the palace; he chants the praises of Alaafin, acknowledging his power as one who has the ability to read the secret thoughts of others. The sounding of the state drums then precedes the entrance of Alaafin

and the Olori (Alaafin's wives), a cue that signals the appearance of Alaafin throughout the play. The Chiefs join them in the palace and Alaafin reveals his intention to relocate the people of Oyo back to their ancestral land of Oyo-Ajaka in accordance to the wishes of his dead father, the previous Alaafin. But when the Alaafin leaves the scene with his Olori, the Chiefs, knowing fully well that in accordance to the tradition Alaafin will send his priests to the ancient ancestral tombs to offer sacrifice to the ancestors in preparation for the move, plot to go against his wishes by going along with Samu's suggestion to each send a deformed member of their families disguised as ghosts as emissary to the ancient site, so as to disrupt the Alaafin's plans. The Ologbo, who has been secretly watching them, comes into the scene and starts to dance. The Chiefs respond by dancing.

In the second scene, the Alaafin informs the Oyo People of the relocation plan and instructs Iyalorisha and Babalorisha (the priests) to start preparing the sacrificial goods needed for the propitiation ritual of the Ajaka tombs. The scene that follows witnesses Babalorisha and his entourage of priests taking the sacrificial pot to the ancient site at night. However, as he begins the ritual incantation the emissaries, disguised as ancestral ghosts, emerge from their hiding places, shouting and protesting against the Alaafin's relocation plan and disrupting the ritual in progress. Both Babalorisha and his entourage become so scared that they scatter in all directions.

The fourth scene is in the palace of the Alaafin, where his Olori are singing his praise. This is interrupted by the sudden entrance of Babalorisha and his entourage. He narrates their experience at Ajaka to Alaafin who immediately calls on Oluode, the head hunter, to investigate the incident. However, Ologbo enters and reveals the Chiefs' plot to Alaafin. The Alaafin then orders Oluode to go and apprehend the ghost emissaries and smuggle

them into his palace at night. In scene five, we witness the spiritual power of Oluode in the forest of Ajaka. He commands the ghosts to come out of their hiding places through his incantations. Obeying his command, the Ghosts emerge and are apprehended. Alaafin invites the Chiefs to a banquet in his palace in the last scene, but while they are drinking their palm-wine, their Ghost emissaries who were supposed to be in the forest of Ajaka, enter and serve food to their respective masters without uttering any word. The chiefs are bewildered and soon Alaafin enters to challenge their behaviour and question their integrity. As the Alaafin exits the Chiefs realise that their secret was revealed by Ologbo and so they murder him. The Alaafin, saddened by Ologbo's death, orders his people to prepare the body for a state burial in Oyo-Ajaka.

### **Analyses of Ladipo's Dramaturgy in *Oba Moro***

Ladipo's *Oba Moro* is a fusion of comedy and tragedy set in Oyo Igboho and Oyo Ajaka. The play begins with an important question that arises because of the literal meaning of its title. The question is: is the king truly going to catch ghosts? We do not know, but according to the title of the play, *Oba Moro* in Yoruba means 'the king who caught ghosts' or 'the king caught ghosts', therefore, it was established at the beginning of the play that such a thing may occur, but we are not sure how; hence, this uncertainty becomes the dramatic root of the play.

One of the most important themes of the play is trustworthiness. The decision of the Chiefs to send false ghosts to the forest of Ajaka in order to disrupt the Alaafin's plan of relocating his people to their ancestral land shows that they are not trustworthy. As members of the ruling council of Oyo, the Oyomesi, if their plot had succeeded, the king

may have been forced to change his plans because of their betrayal and selfishness. This theme is universal in essence and relevant to modern day society and life in general. It highlights the importance of being able to trust your family, friends, neighbours and even your government. The recent political uprisings around the world are born partly as result of the people's lack of trust in their governments.

Loyalty is also an important theme of the play. Alaafin's decision of re-locating his people to Oyo-Ajaka is due to his loyalty in honouring the wishes of his forefathers; his desire to appease the ancestors so as to maintain a balanced socio-spiritual and socio-political order. For Alaafin, order among his people and the ancestors is paramount. He refuses to be distracted by the wealth that his people have acquired in Oyo-Igboho in order to maintain his loyalty. When we relate this theme to our modern society, loyalty is no longer assured because some people's loyalties are divided between materialistic wealth, greed, corruption and selfishness. The decision of Ologbo to reveal the secret of the Chiefs to Alaafin is because of his allegiance to his king. He maintained his integrity by disclosing the truth to Alaafin as a loyal cymbalist.

The play also highlights the importance of ritual in the consciousness of the people. They are united in their attitudes and relationship to the gods. Their desire to maintain a spiritual order is evident in the responses of the priests and Oluode, the head hunter, to the Alaafin's call. As spiritual leaders and custodians of the Ifa religion, the conducts of the priests in preparing the ritual sacrifice for the appeasement of their ancestors in the

tombs of Oyo Ajaka shows their faith in the gods and reflects the communal attitude to the gods as their protectors. The Oluode responds to the emergency call of Alaafin by virtue of his position as a highly decorated warrior and his rank in the esoteric order of the hunters. His responsibility of being in charge of the kingdom's security and ensuring that invaders and unscrupulous elements are accordingly dealt with comes to bear in his manner of dealing with, and capturing the ghost emissaries of Oyo Ajaka.

One of the most exemplary characters in the play is Ologbo. Apart from performing his duties efficiently as the palace poet, he displays his loyalty to Alaafin in his character. As reflected in the text at the beginning of the play, he introduces the entrance of Alaafin and the Olori into the palace as part of the role of his character. He chants the praise *oriki* of Alaafin in bringing to light his attributes in accordance to Yoruba belief system. This is in line with the role of his character and highlights his importance in the Yoruba socio-political order because they are the town criers who are seen as repositories of the ancient oral tradition; just like the *griots* of Mali, Senegal and Gambia, his knowledge of the tradition is reflected in the poetic chants. The message in his chant indicates that the king is going to be present in the arena; hence he assumes the role of a path clearer like Ogun, the Yoruba god of war, who he mentions in his dialogue. This is in reasserting the physical and metaphysical order that prevails in Yoruba society. This also occurs in the second scene when he notifies the Oyo people that the day is a 'day of sacrifice in Oyo' (1964: p. 40) before the Alaafin enters to reveal the plan of the sacrifice to his people. In fourth scene, he reveals the secret of the Chiefs to the king as a loyal cymbalist, an allegiance that pronounces his importance as a character in influencing the direction of

the kingdom's progress. As evident in the last scene, Ologbo maintains the role of his character in being loyal to Alaafin, but pays with his life as the tragic character in the play. His death is however cathartic in restoring communal order as shown at the end of the play when all the people of Oyo come together and respond in accordance to the king's wish of re-locating to Oyo-Ajaka; in supplication, reverence and in accordance to the honour bestowed upon him by Alaafin, the people prepare his body for burial among their ancestors in Oyo-Ajaka.

As the protagonist of the play, the character of Alaafin adequately portrays his responsibility as the one in charge of the socio-political and socio-spiritual order of his kingdom. As reflected in the script, the first time we see him doing this is in the first scene when he reveals his intention of commencing the rituals necessary for their return to their ancestral homeland of Oyo-Ajaka to his chiefs. He rationalises the reasons for the imminent return in his words to them:

Let us obey my father's last command: Let us abandon this place of refuge  
And rebuild our glorious city Oyo Ajaka (p.37).

In the second scene, his role becomes reinforced when he orders the priests (Iyalorisha and Babalorisha) to take the ritual sacrifice to Oyo Ajaka and when they return with news of their encounter with the Ghosts in the fourth scene, he immediately takes action as part of his duty, calling on Oluode and ordering him to go and capture the Ghosts from Oyo Ajaka. The Oluode's quick response shows that the Alaafin as a character is being placed in the position of a Yoruba king and demonstrates what obtains in Yoruba society as far as respecting, honouring and obeying the king's command are concerned.



Alaafin reaffirms his power and authority as the commander in charge of his people in the last scene when he invites his traitors, the Chiefs, to a banquet in his palace and orders their respective emissaries to serve them. This is a show of his ultimate power to demonstrate his control over his kingdom. The Chiefs' expression of remorse and shame testifies their regret and places Alaafin firmly in the position of one who can challenge and correct their wrong doings as evident in their unanimous words to him: 'We stand ashamed—Oba Moro! Have mercy on us—forgive us. To Oke Ajaka we will follow you. To pay homage to the tombs of your ancestors!' (p. 49).

Another outstanding character in the play is Oluode whose positive swift response to the call of Alaafin in the fourth scene leads to the capture of the Ghost emissaries of Oyo Ajaka. One of the most attractive elements of his character is his confidence. In a picture of the fourth scene that will be explored in the fourth chapter, Oluode appears as an archer and dresses in the hunters' sacred regalia that distinguish him from the Alaafin. He dances in the tradition of the Yoruba hunters who are well known for their bravery and understanding of the metaphysical dimensions of the Yoruba world and the sacred nature of their hunting forests. In the fifth scene of the play's text, Oluode ventures into the forest of Ajaka with bravery, confidence and determination to capture the Ghost emissaries. Chanting with authority, he calls them to 'come out of' their 'hiding place' and warns them of the repercussions of not complying before we see them obeying his command. In S.A. Babalola's exposition on *ijala*, the Yoruba genre of poetry that is dedicated to Ogun, he confirmed that 'Hunters predominate among the worshippers of

the god Ogun, and with this is connected the belief that Ogun in his earthly life was a hunter and that as a god he is the controller of all iron implements, including guns, cutlasses and swords' (1966: 3).

Music is an important element of the play's dialogue. Apart from the chanted musical dialogue of the play, dialogue was also conveyed with the drum language. The intense introductory traditional classical drumming that precedes the rising of the curtain highlights the importance of drumming as a ritual of homage (*ijuba*) in the court of the Yoruba kings and Yoruba society as a whole. As an essential musical instrument that is used in the composition of the music of the gods, the drumming is a reminder that the Yoruba kings are seen as the representation of the gods in Yoruba society, therefore reinforcing the spiritual and social order that governs the Yoruba world. The drum language that comes after Ologbo's chant in the first scene of the script is a direct reference to how kings are perceived in Yoruba society; it confirms their political authority and roles as powerful forces in the esoteric order of the society as evident in the words of the language:

Eru Oba ni mo ba, Oba to (It is the King that I fear, the mighty King) (p. 36).

Apart from the intense heavy drumming at the beginning of the play, this drum language is the only instrumental music that is consistently used throughout to establish the mood of the play; it serves as a signal that precedes all the appearances of Alaafin and his utterances, hence functioning as an informer who notifies us that the king is about to say something or will be present in the arena. The consistent use of this musical language and

its implication in terms of meaning is a constant reminder of the importance of the Yoruba kings and the power bestowed upon them by virtue of their position.

As part of the structural elements of the play, the socio-spiritual and cultural importance of dance as an essential component of ritual in Yorubaland is highlighted. As reflected in the script, this first occurs in the first scene after Ologbo finds out about the secret of the Chiefs without their knowledge. He dances to entertain them and they reciprocate as part of what obtains in Yoruba culture during festivals, ceremonies and celebrations. In the second scene when the ritual sacrifice for Ajaka is being conducted, we also see Alaafin dancing as he calls for the ancestors to accept his offering. In the photographic evidence of the fourth scene, this also happens when Oluode responds to the Alaafin's call. He dances and sings in accordance to the mood of the occasion. From a theatrical perspective, costumes also form an important element of the play that is used in identifying the characters and creating effects where necessary. For instance in the fourth scene, Alaafin wears the sacred regalia of Sango, though his character is not that of Sango, whereas Oluode wears the accessorised hunters costume and armed with his bow and arrows to show their identities in accordance to Ladipo's theatrical vision.

Like most of Ladipo's plays, the language used in *Oba Moro* is of two different types: the chanted/musical and the unspoken (the visual), but the chanted dialogue remains the focus of this particular discussion. The chanted language derives from Yoruba oral literature, but comes in two kinds. The chanted *ofo* (incantation) and *ijala* (hunters poetic chant) are essentially reverential in the ritualistic sense and belong to the realm of Ifa, while the *oriki* is part and parcel of the language that is used in Yoruba society for

praising deities, kings and individuals, depending on their status and family background. The differences that exist in the use of *ijala*, *ofò* and *oriki* is that while the latter can be conveyed by the uninitiated and the initiated, the *ofò* and *ijala* can only be used by the initiated because of the implications of the potency of the words. The language of the Priests (Babalorisha and Iyalorisha) and Oluode are associated with only the initiated as evident in their use of *ofò* and *ijala* respectively. The *oriki* used by the Oloris (the King's wives) in their chorus responses songs and the people of Oyo's language are influenced by the Yoruba oral tradition. These attributes confirms the ritualistic essence of the play in reflecting and conveying the socio-spiritual narratives of the Yoruba people to the audience as evident in the context of the play's text.

### **Analyses of *Oba Moro's* Text**

In bringing to light the importance and literary context of the play's text, one must explore their meaning in relation to the information they convey and the ideas and philosophies embedded in them. At the beginning of the play, Ologbo pays homage to Alaafin, chanting his *oriki* in recognition of his importance and power as a Yoruba king as reflected in the text below:

Ologbo:   Ajiboyede, born never to be killed,  
               The king who installs kings  
               The children who dislike you will die,  
               The elders who dislike you will be ashamed.  
               The alter of Ogun in the house  
               Can never be moved into the street.  
               No one could dare to move

The market shrine of Ogun into the house.

The enemies who try to disturb you

Will only disturb themselves (1964, p. 35)

The reference to the King as a person who can never be killed conveys a deeper philosophical meaning in Yoruba thought. This is because the Yoruba do not believe that a king dies. Whenever a King passes away, it is believed that he has merely become part of the embodiment of the kings in succession. Therefore, any king that is on the throne is an embodiment of all the previous kings. This belief is confirmed when Ologbo refers to the king as one who installs other kings, meaning that the King will always be part of the crowning ritual of all the other kings after him. From a metaphysical perspective, the Kings in Yorubaland, being representatives of the Yoruba gods implies that the description of the attributes of Ogun, the Yoruba demiurge of war and iron, is directly related to the King. Therefore, when the King is viewed from the dimension of these paradigms, Ologbo brings to bear the status of a King in the Yoruba matrix.

When the Chiefs greeted the king as they enter his palace, they are complying with the Yoruba custom of respecting elders and showing their closeness to the King as kingmakers and community leaders who share in the responsibility of preserving order for the communal existence. They collectively re-affirm his authority and power as a King:

Chiefs: Kabiyesi, owner of the world,

Owner of the palace, second to god.

Kabiyesi, the only one

Who shakes the forest.

We rely on you, we lean on you

You own us, Kabiyesi (p. 36)

Kabiyesi (one who cannot be questioned), is the highest accolade reserved for the Yoruba Kings because of the power bestowed upon them in the conscience of the Yoruba world; he speaks to his people with reassurance:

Alaafin: Peace be with you all.

Nobody can command the whirlwind

To stay in one place.

Nobody can command the creeper

Not to spread out his arms.

We can kill today

We can kill tomorrow.

People merely use their mouths

To kill the kernel by the roadside.

The water that will cook an egg

Will never stick to its back.

The sacrifice under the Iroko tree

Will merely make the Iroko tree fat (pp. 36-7).

This poetic delivery of Alaafin is an affirmation and confirmation of the magnitude of his power and confidence as the leader of his people; peace being his ultimate wish for his people, he metaphorically uses the ‘whirlwind’ and the ‘creeper’ in the context of their affinities, to describe himself from a metaphysical perspective and in accordance to the Yoruba world-view. The indestructible essence of water as a gift of life is pronounced in accordance to the Yoruba belief that *omi o lota* (water has no enemy). The sacred nature of the *Iroko* tree in Yorubaland as a tree believed by the Yoruba to be the habitation of Oluwere (name of the inhabiting spirit) is synonymous with sacrificial rituals; therefore, any sacrifice conducted under it would only serve to nourish it from a metaphysical context, hence contributing to its wellbeing. These descriptions reveal how the King sees himself and how he is perceived as the protagonist responsible for the wellbeing of the communal spirit.

In restating their position as kingmakers, the Chiefs remind the king of their importance in the socio-political order of the community, hailing him as the commander in charge, while they metaphorically express feelings of genuine concern about his proposal by reminding him of the annual celebration ritual of the *egungun* masks, when ancestral *egungun* masquerades, known as Ara Orun ( the inhabitants of heaven) are ushered out from their Igbale (their shrine of descending, ascending and transformation) by traditional Yoruba poets, who sing their praises as they visit the community of their living relatives, in order to heal the community of diseases and restore communal harmony and order:

Chiefs: We do not go to visit the Egungun masks

In their sacred groove!

But it is they who come to meet us here.

We shall deliberate on your proposal (p. 38)

When the Chiefs' response is properly examined, they were showing signs of defiance. This is because their reference to the visit of the *egungun* in their sacred grove is an abomination in Yorubaland, as they are regarded as the ancestors from the land of the dead (Ara Orun). Therefore, because the living cannot objectively pay a visit to the land of the dead, the Chiefs were metaphorically referring to the ancient Oyo city as the land of the dead, which the living must not visit.

Their determination to disrupt his plans becomes evident when Alaaafin leaves the scene with the Olori (wives) without saying a word in response to their answer. They discuss their disagreement with his plan and Alapini raises the question of whether the King expects them to abandon their comfortable homes for the bush and the Chiefs respond unanimously in agreement:

Alapini: Does he expect us to abandon the houses

we built and

To go and live in the bush

Chiefs: We shall not agree, we shall not accept

To go and live in the bush (p. 38).

Samu: I am determined not to accept this crazy plan.

Let the ancestors look after themselves

Let the Egungun deal with them.



But how shall we defy the King?

How can we thwart his plans

Without rising in open revolt (p. 38).

These statements indicate the Chiefs' complete discontent with the Alaafin's plan, but the strategy of how they will obstruct his plan requires implementation. The reference that the ancestors should look after themselves with the help of the *egungun* is indicative of the serious measures the Chiefs are embarking upon, without considering the implications. This is because in Yoruba society, one must not make such cruel statements about the dead (ancestors). The arduous process of their journey from the land of the dead to the land of the living and their transformation into the *egungun*, requiring a passage through the timeless and space-less zones is a testimony to their commitment and love for the living. Therefore, Samu's statement as somebody who is highly placed in the political hierarchy of the Yoruba and understands the implications and repercussions of such utterances in the Yoruba world order can be deemed as careless, desperate and irresponsible.

When the Idiot, a member of Laguna's household, enters and interrupts their meeting, stammering as he approaches his master, Laguna was not in the mood for him. He orders him to leave. But the comment of Basorun as the Idiot mumbles away in response to his master's order becomes a catalyst in their decision to go against the King's plan to return his people to the ancestral land:

Basorun: Who was that frightening creature?

He looked more like a spirit than a man!

The implication of Basorun's comment about the Idiot triggers a thought that leads them to the idea of recruiting deformed members of their families to play the parts of ghosts in forest of Ajaka. These types of people are known as Eni Orisa in Yorubaland; they are seen as the children of Obatala, the Yoruba god of reason and arch divinity of the Yoruba pantheon. He is believed to be the sculptor who moulds the unborn in their mother's womb and these creatures are believed to be sculpted/created out of proportion by him when he was intoxicated with palmwine, therefore, they are regarded as his children and found in his shrine in Yorubaland.

The King's role in telling his people about the commencement of the customary (in accordance to the Yoruba tradition) preparation ritual of returning to their ancestral homeland of Oyo-Ajaka introduces the order in which such rituals are conducted in Yoruba society. This was evident in the delivery message of the King that comes shortly after the Ologbo's chant:

Alaafin: Today the sacrifice shall be sent  
 To Oyo Ajaka, to appease my ancestors.  
 Can a man be afraid to live in his own house?  
 Can he find it tiresome to inhabit his own compound?  
 Baba Orisha-you who can speak to the gods,  
 Iya Orisha-you who know how to deal with our fathers:  
 Take this sacrifice and tell our ancestors  
 That we are coming home.  
 We have been working hard on the farm all day,

Now we are coming home to rest by the fire (pp. 40-41).

In the introduction of the King's message, he revealed his intention of proceeding with the Oyo-Ajaka appeasement ritual and assures his people of being in charge. His reference to Baba Orisha as one able to communicate with the gods and Iya Orisha as one who understands the ancestors respectively brings into perspective, the roles of priests as custodians of the Ifa religion and the Yoruba religion. In asking the priests to take the sacrifice to the ancestors and sending a message to them, the King confirms the role of priests as messengers and intermediaries between the living and the gods in Yoruba society.

In commencing the ritual in accordance to the King's order, Iyalorisha and Babalorisha chanted in call for the ancestral mothers to accept the ritual offering of their son:

Iyalorisha &

Babalorisha: The King commands you to get up.

As one commands the wife of eighteen days

Who must not address her husband by his name.

Mother of Lagumoke, come and receive your son's offering.

Let the spirit appear,

Who can carry away a man's song.

ODEDEKUNDE

Spirit of Oro come out and receive the offerings! (p. 41).

The ultimate wish of the King for his offering to be accepted by the ancestors is expressed in their mention of command (*ashe*) which highlights the importance of *ashe*

and the conditions that may trigger how it can be used by the King. The comparison made with his command is a metaphor which gives weight to the nature of his command since it is forbidden for a wife to call her husband by name in Yoruba society, especially if she is only eighteen days old in her husband's home. The question of who has the credential or ability to carry a man's song away is very significant to the ritual in progress, but the song does not only mean the literal sense of singing and chanting to enchant the chords of the soul and the spirit; the song is representational of the prayers and the wishes of Alaafin to return his people to Oyo-Ajaka in peace. The relevance of calling on Oro is symbolic of the role of Oro in Yoruba cosmology. Oro is a powerful ritual which is conducted in order to resolve different problems in the community; it may be for the purpose of averting life threatening diseases, a potential quarrel or for even getting rid of unscrupulous individuals within the community. Just like the *egungun*, the ritual of Oro takes place in the forest. But unlike the *egungun*, Oro cannot be seen, it is an invisible force believed to be the spirit of the dead. Ladipo brings to bear, the importance of Oro in Yorubaland, in compliance with his vision to preserve the cultural traditions of the Yoruba through his theatre.

Babalarisha raises his voice in chant for Oro to accept the King's sacrifice and lifts the ritual calabash which he then carries on his head for the journey to Oyo-Ajaka, along with his entourage of priests. On reaching the tombs of the ancestral Kings at night, Babalarisha and his fellow priests declared the offerings and Babalarisha continues the ritual with incantation:

Babalarisha: Children of the farm, children of the forest,

Come here to celebrate.

The one who will not appear,  
 His wife will be seduced!  
 The King has asked us bow to you,  
 Our fathers, who have found this land.  
 To you who first cleared this forest  
 And planted the first yam in this soil  
 In which you now lie.  
 When the earthworm bows to the soil,  
 The soil opens up its mouth to him.  
 Let the forest open up its gate to us,  
 Let it welcome our return to this land,  
 May this sacrifice be received (pp.42-3).

The children being referred to by Babalorisha are the ancestors, in whose tombs the ritual sacrifice is being performed. In using the seduction of somebody's wife as a form of punishment for not conforming, gives the drama a comical edge and shows that the ancestors have a humorous side to them, but far beyond that, it represents part of the ritual lamentations of the priests for the offering of the King to be accepted. The homage paid to the ancestors as the founders of the land who were responsible for the first clearing and using of the land, highlights how the ancestors are viewed in Yorubaland, in line with Ladipo's vision of bringing them into prominence.

While the priests were progressing with the rituals, they heard strange screams from the forest. The false ghosts are protesting and Babalorisha responds:

Babalorisha: Spirits of the forest:

Do not disturb the sacrifice! (p. 43).

Ghosts: No chance! No chance! (p. 43).

In urging the spirits to allow the ritual to continue, Babalorisha was not only referring to the spirits of the ancestors, but also other invisible spirits of the voids. When the Ghosts emerge from their hiding place with screams that scatter Babalorisha and the other priests into complete disarray and confusion, we become aware that the situation requires addressing immediately as evident in Babalorisha's instruction to his ritual team:

Babalorisha: Don't look back!

Don't look back!

Oro is coming! We are rejected! (p. 43)

In accordance to the historical account of the story, the Ghosts' protest directly brings to light the experience of the priests when they reached the ancestral site to conduct the ritual as planned.

Babalorisha's instruction to the priests not to look back highlights some of the precautionary measures associated with Yoruba rituals. This is because it is sometimes believed that when somebody looks back after conducting a ritual, the individual or group of people concerned may be subjected to ominous repercussions and, in some cases, it may be part of the conditions of the ritual that whoever was concerned does not look back. This type of situation can be compared to that of the wife of Lot in the Bible who turned to a pillar of salt because she violated the instructions of the angels to her family not to look back at Sodom and Gomorrah, the city they were leaving because it was being destroyed with fire as a result of the sins of the men of the city (See Genesis 19: 1-29).

When the Alaafin becomes aware of the incident of Ajaka, he calls on Oluode as part of the procedures that obtain in Yoruba society whenever such an incident occurs:

Alaafin: Oluode-Head of the Hunters!  
 You who knows the secret of the forests,  
 You who can penetrate its darkness:  
 Come here! (p.44).

Oluode: Kabiyesi!  
 This is a small matter!  
 You are a strong man, tough like a rope.  
 Fresh like the bitter leaf growing by the river.  
 Nothing can be difficult  
 To the head of your hunters!  
 Will you help me to sing?

Oluode starts to sing and dance:

Ogun, god of iron,  
 You will do it for us!  
 Whoever thought of sending the one with big cheeks  
 To such a fearful place?  
 The one with big cheeks, the eater of clay!  
 Who sent him to such a place?  
 Ogun, the god of iron,  
 Will surely do it for us (p. 45).

In this dialogue, Alaafin refers to Oluode as one who is equipped with the knowledge of the forest's secrets and cannot be obstructed by 'its darkness' because of the role of the Oluode in the community. As highly decorated hunters and warriors, they are versed in the understanding of the workings of the forest, both geographically and esoterically. As part of their responsibilities, they conduct the rituals associated with the traditional Yoruba hunters and defend their jurisdictions as war leaders in the interest of their people. Therefore the Alaafin's call for the Oluode would be necessary and essential in any situation similar to this in Yoruba society.

In Oluode's response to the call of the Alaafin, he acknowledges the king's position as one whose decisions cannot be questioned and confidently assured the king that the matter would be resolved. He sings and dances not only to reflect the characteristics of Yoruba hunters, but also as actions that are triggered in Yoruba society during ceremonial rituals like the festivals of the gods, harvests, installation of kings of chiefs and kings etc. Oluode's call for Ogun is a direct reflection of his association with the deity and his questioning of the reason why anyone would send a person who has 'big cheeks' to a place as frightening as the forest is an indication that he suspects something unusual. His suspicion becomes a reality when Ologbo enters to reveal the secret plot of the Chiefs to Alaafin. We then see Oluode leaving the palace in a reflective mood about the action of the Chiefs.

On reaching the forest, Oluode chants his incantations, authoritatively commanding the false ghosts to surrender themselves:

Oluode: Who else would carry this heavy load to heaven!

I am as confident as the leaf of the sweet potato,



That grows without a seed.  
 I am the spirit that swallows the serpent alive!  
 You in the bush there!  
 The time has come for you to keep quiet!  
 Let this bush become a difficult place for you!  
 Let the soft wind come,  
 Let the storm wind come,  
 Let Sango himself descend on you!  
 No one can use a hoe to break a kola-nut.  
 No one can see leaves grow on the back of a fly.  
 The antelope is admired for its beauty,  
 The leopard is respected for its strength,  
 I will teach you to respect my charms!  
 Your incantations cannot touch me:  
 When a pig grunts, the noise dies in its throat!  
 Whether you are human  
 Or whether you are spirits  
 Come out of your hiding place! (pp. 46-7).

The context of Oluode's incantation in the forest is reflective of the recitation of a brave hunter, whose ultimate mission is to subdue and conquer the powerful forces of the forest with the power of his incantations. In this case, the Ghosts could not withstand the charms and esoteric knowledge of Oluode. He warns them about the repercussions of not complying with his orders, asking whether they were prepared to take a heavy luggage with them to heaven; this is in reference to the burden associated with losing their lives

for the sake of the Chiefs' mischief. He continues by revealing the magnitude of his power to them by referring to himself as a spirit who was capable of consuming a serpent. He reiterated the importance and urgency of their immediate surrender by highlighting the question of time limitation and reinforces this sense of urgency in his command for the bush to become a problematic habitation for them. From a metaphoric perspective, he uses the elements as part of his weapon in his determination to capture them. The mentioning of Sango's name is in reference to his agency of thunder and lightning, as the Yoruba demiurge of thunder whose lightning stone is believed by the Yoruba to have the capacity of penetrating even the most concealed of crevices. The ghosts emerge from their hiding, confessing to the Oluode that they were sent by the chiefs and Oluode tells them that they have been captured by Ogun as reflected in text below:

Oluode: Ogun has caught you!  
 You may deceive the one with fat cheeks,  
 You may deceive the clay eater!  
 But you can never deceive Ogun.  
 With Ogun's charms,  
 I catch the hawk in the sky,  
 The grasscutter under the earth,  
 The civet on the tree  
 And the antelope in the elephant grass.  
 Ogun has caught you all! (pp. 47-8).

***Oba Koso* ('The king did not Hang')****Production History of *Oba Koso***

As already indicated above, the staging of *Oba Koso* developed in complexity over time. As part of its subsequent production, the performance of the play 'in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo, where the descendants of the three protagonists, Shango, Timi and Gbonka actually sat in the audience!' was of great importance (1994: 27). We have no recorded date of the performance, but it may have taken place in 1970 since the performance was featured to accompany Ladipo's television documentary of 1970. Ladipo's excitement about their presence was reflected in the documentary. He acknowledged the importance of their presence and commented that a 'new era' had started in the history of the Yoruba, since it was the first time that such a play had been staged in Yorubaland in the presence of the descendants and titleholders of the characters concerned.

According to Ogunbiyi, the play was 'performed some 2,000 other times at home before Duro Ladipo's death' (1981: 345). These included performances in schools, in traditional ceremonial festivals of Sango, in university venues, in market squares and in the 'palaces of Obas, and in particular, before two successive reigning Alafins of Oyo' (345). The play was staged in fifteen different countries (See 345).

### **Audience Responses**

In comparison to *Oba Moro*, the impact of *Oba Koso* was heightened for the audience because the play not only explores the narratives of the historical Sango, the fourth Alaafin of Oyo; it deals with the divine mythological Sango. In examining the responses of Nigerian audiences to *Oba Koso*, Ladipo's performance in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo is a good example.

Although the television documentary of the play in the palace did not show the visual representation of the stage at the moment of Sango's message, we are informed in the text of the script that this moment was preceded by the effect of thunder and lightning from the heavens. But what was evident in the expression of the audience in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo, the venue of the performance, was a complete feeling of reverence among them as Sango's voice was speaking from where we can regard as a different realm of consciousness, as far as the feeling of spacelessness and timelessness are concerned; a transient experience of divine cosmic intervention, we may say, it is. While the reaction of the reigning Alaafin who was in the audience is that of absolute focus on the performance, we also see the Timi of Ede in the audience, totally immersed in the performance; in fact, when he saw the characterisation of himself in the play, he burst into a type of laughter that can be regarded as the laughter of joy, enjoyment and total content.

Ladipo's tours of Europe, Brazil and America also proved to be highly successful, but only the latter needs to be explored here since the others have been discussed above. Reviews of the tour revealed that it was a ground breaking for Ladipo. Reviews proved

that Ladipo was able to communicate the essence of Nigerian folkloric tradition to American audiences (see Beier, 1994: 209-14 and Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 83-98). The world of the Yoruba people was re-enacted for them through the historical and mythological legend of Sango. The performances of Ladipo's troupe in most of the venues revealed that the audiences were captivated by the energy of *Oba Koso* as evident in Alan M. Kriegman's review of the play in *The Washington Post* of 20<sup>th</sup> February 1975:

One could easily begin by describing in raptures the individual enticements of "Oba Koso," the Yoruba festivity. Perhaps it is enough to say that anyone who truly loves the art of theatre, or the arts of theatre, rather cannot afford to miss "Oba Koso." For what this magical company is showing us, in its North American debut tour, is theatre in that pristine state of vibrancy and integrity to which all theatre throughout history has aspired.

What "Oba Koso" discloses is that perfect unity of means and purpose for which we westerners have so long revered the classical drama of the Greeks, and which the literati of the Renaissance tried so hard to recapture; which Monteverdi and Gluck and Wagner and others attempted to instill into the world of opera; and which our most radical modern thespians, from Grotowski to Peter Brook, have striven so diligently to emulate. It is that fusion of arts that our partisans of "multimedia" have been shouting about. Only they are obliged to approach it from the outside in, trying to synthesize disparate pieces, trying to restore wholeness to a conglomeration of separate identities (2003: 95-6).

The American audiences were able to identify with the characters of the play through the play's dramaturgy and the presentation style adopted; as noted by Didier Delaunoy, 'Though performed entirely in Yoruba, the show is easily understandable, thanks in large part to the informative synopsis distributed to the audience, and thanks to the fact that it is basically, a very visual spectacle' (90). In bringing more clarity to the understanding of the audience, the impact of the synopsis was substantiated in Kriegman's advice to those wishing to see the performance during the tour:

One piece of advice – read carefully the synopsis of the plot, which is spelled out in the Yoruban tongue by the players— before the lights go down. The complexities will be perfectly clear on stage if you do (92).

For many in the audience, seeing *Oba Koso* was a journey to the heart of ancient Yorubaland, as evident in Carol Pearce's review of the play in the *Chicago Sun-Times* of 6<sup>th</sup> March 1975:

*Duro Ladipo*, with his national theatre company theatrically transported the audience from La Mama's Annex to his homestead of Nigeria (87).

In the article by Thomas Willis (2003: 84-5), the presentation of *Oba Koso* was compared to the Greek classical theatre because of the similar way in which tragedy, power conflicts, poetry and magical elements are structured into the play. The article revealed that this reality was apparent because of the way the plot of the play was translated into English in the program circulated to the audiences. The nature of the monodies, the songs and the language of the dialogue were described by Willis as being reminiscent of anthropological studies, but an unusual sight for western audiences. He identified the

essence of the drum languages, the dance and the mime as universal languages that transcended barriers and brought to light their comprehension of the role of the characters in the play (See 84-5). Yemi Ogunbiyi recalled his meeting with Ladipo in New York during the American tour of 1975. As a member of the audience who witnessed the staging of *Oba Koso* in New York, he had the opportunity of discussing the growth and developments he noted in Ladipo's troupe's performance and the transformations he believed *Oba Koso* had been subjected to over the years; as a member of the audience who had been privileged to see Ladipo's performance on many occasions, he noted that the performance of *Oba Koso* had improved compared to the one he saw 'eleven years before' (1981: 333), but he was not specific about what the improvements were.

### **The Development and Significance of *Oba Koso's* Staging**

There can never be another Duro Ladipo and when you see him on stage, for me his role in *Oba Ko So* was unique. There can never be another 'Sango' the way Duro Ladipo would play it (Olusola, 2003: 40-41).

As Ladipo's most popular play, the huge success of *Oba Koso* can be attributed to a number of reasons: The first can be credited to the creative vision of Ladipo to produce a play that explores the duality of Sango as a human being and a god; the historical Alaafin and the mythological Sango. In comparison to his previous play, he was presenting something new about the Yoruba world to his audience; an exposition on the characteristics of the Yoruba gods through the image of Sango; a ritual re-enactment of the rite of passage of the Yoruba gods. He was educating his audience about the Yoruba deity while also presenting the story of a king's life. Sango's image was introduced to the

audience through the iconographies displayed. The ‘sight’ of Ladipo emitting ‘fire’ in his characterisation of Sango was definitely something new to his audience and the Yoruba folk operatic theatrical tradition (see Ogunbiyi, 1981: 348).

Ladipo’s characterisation of the god was so powerful that for the rest of his life he was linked in popular imagination with Sango. As Yemi Elebuibon explained Ladipo became seen as a vehicle for the spirit of Sango to dwell in; he confirmed that apart from his stage presence, he carried the aura of Sango’s awe with him anywhere he went and this continued to the day he died (see interview with author, 2007).

As with *Oba Moro*, Johnson’s *History of the Yorubas* led Ladipo to the story of Sango as the subject of his second major play (see 1994: 26). The staging of the play was a great challenge for Ladipo - firstly because the story combined the attributes of a god and a king in his characterisation of Sango and secondly because no other dramatist in Nigeria had explored the story of a deity in a play before. Furthermore, his church missionary education had not encouraged him or any Yoruba Christian to learn about the Yoruba deities. Hence, ‘The decision to produce *Oba Koso* challenged Duro’s entire education’ and ‘became the turning point in his life’ as asserted by Beier (26). Johnson’s text was just a starting point for Ladipo. He embarked on research which included consultation with Yoruba kings and custodians of Yoruba tradition. Ladipo also used the materials he gathered and engaged actors who were rooted in the knowledge of Sango and Yoruba cosmology. For instance, we are informed that he consulted with the Layiokun family, the Sango worshipping family he had engaged during the staging of *Oba Moro*, ‘for more



insight into the character of the deified King as well as for more of the chants' (Ogundele, 203: 163).

The kings he consulted with included the Alaafin of Oyo, the Ataoja of Oshogbo, the Timi of Ede, the Ooni of Ile-Ife, the Olowo of Owo and the Alake of Abeokuta (see Ladipo's television interview documentary of 1970, *The Creative Person*, Raji-Oyelade et al 2003:7 and Beier 1994: 51 and 80). The information he gathered, combined with his own knowledge and research into Ifa and Yoruba cosmology were crucial to how he characterised Sango as the main protagonist of the play, the dramaturgies he employed and the structure of the play. For instance, since Sango was known to be the patron saint of musicians and a performing artist whose name was synonymous with the use of the *bata* drums as his sacred musical instrument, so Ladipo employed the *bata* drums to portray the true essence of Sango.

As a result of Ladipo's portrayal of Sango and his investigations about the nature of the deity, 'the dignitaries of the Anglican Church accused Duro of being a worshipper of idols' (1994: 27). Unfortunately, this type of derogatory reference was not unusual; it was a terminology designed to humiliate anyone who was thought to be associated with orisa worship. Ladipo however was not prepared to be distracted by their abuse; and 'the more time he spent with Shango priests in Oshogbo, the more he began to identify with his role' (27) as Sango. At this point, Ladipo became more observant and conscious of his daily experiences as demonstrated in one particular account:

One day, as he was cycling from Ilobu to Oshogbo, he was attacked by a swarm of bees which settled on his head. Later he was found unconscious and taken to hospital. To Duro it was a clear sign that he had offended Shango. Accordingly, he went to the shrine to make a sacrifice and ask the *orisha's* permission to represent him on stage (Beier, 1994: 28).

It was as a result of this incident that Ladipo made it mandatory for a cock to be sacrificed as a form of ritual whenever he was going to perform *Oba Koso* (See 28). Ladipo's actors were also heavily involved in the research; they were responsible for developing some of their own characters for the play and this was encouraged by Ladipo. According to Muraina Oyelami, a one time member of Ladipo's troupe, 'Most of his plays were not written; after a story had been told and the characters chosen, it was usually the duty of each actor to create his own part' (1994: 82). Even though *Oba Koso* was eventually scripted and published, this is a clear example of actors' involvement as seen in the case of Tijani Mayakiri and Ademola Onibonokuta in their respective roles as Timi and Gbonka; they were reported not to have just 'created their own incantations, but also made their own costumes' (82).

In conveying the story to the audience, Ladipo continued to develop the play, especially after the first staging. The concern highlighted that Sango's suicide had not been cathartic during the first performance because of how he was portrayed as a tyrant. Ladipo sought to bring to light the good qualities of Sango. He was reported to have changed 'the mood of the music wherever Shango's oriki spoke of his generosity and his humour', so as to 'emphasize these qualities in his character' (Beier 1994: 27). He also introduced other

characters and stories not associated with the historical Sango. In the original historical account, war was not the reason Sango abdicated his throne, even though he engaged in many wars because of his fiery nature and his ambition to expand his territory.

In the historical account, it was the decision of Biri and Omiran, his loyal slaves, not to escort him to Nupeland that was the humiliation that pushed him to hang himself in a Shea butter tree (*Aayan*) (See Johnson 1921:152). However, in Ladipo's *Oba Koso*, Oya was the only one who accompanied him and decided to return and she played a major part as a character. This also applied to the roles of Timi and Gbonka; in fact, the story of Gbonka and Timi was not during the reign of Sango, it was much later on. Their fight was reported to have taken place long after the death of Sango, during the second reign of Ajaka and the reign of Aganju, Ajaka's son (see Johnson, 1921: 155-8).

It is also important to note that Gbonka is a title (the Gbonkaa) and not a name (See 157) This is significant because his re-arrangement was not just confined to names, he also used important Yoruba titles as names for his characters as evident in his use of Oluode (head of the hunters) in *Oba Moro*. I believe that Ladipo's decision to change some aspects of the story was born out of his genuine concern to represent the mythological and historical Sango as well as presenting the Yoruba matrix in accordance to their narratives. His empirical research into the Yoruba oral tradition and his consultation with custodians of Yoruba tradition were crucial to the changes he made. The records of Ifa about the primordial mythological Sango also provided Ladipo with a firm basis for

changing aspects of the historical record so as to explore the characteristics of the deity, which he fused with the historical account of Sango.

In Bob Garrett and Thomas Willis reviews of *Oba Koso*, they both saw a similarity in some aspects of the play with Greek tragedies. For instance, the latter compared the ‘story’ to the Greek stories (See Raji-Oyelade et al 2003: 84), while the former compared the women’s ‘chorus’ to that found in the Greek theatre because of the ‘sometimes wailing haunting melodic supplications’ of their songs (85). Ladipo’s *Oba Koso* was not only instrumental as an avenue to learn more about the Yoruba gods and their attributes, it also provides us with a platform for a comparative study of the Greek and Yoruba gods. For example, some of the attributes of Sango as the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning are found in Zeus, the Greek god of the sky who uses the lightning ‘thunderbolt’ (Woff 2003: 5) as a weapon in the same way that Sango does. Apart from being the Greek god of ‘thunder and lightning’ (The Encyclopedia of Ancient Myths and Culture, 2003: 35), some aspects of Zeus’s visual representation included his appearance ‘as a long-haired (sometimes plaited up), mature and somewhat imposing figure’ (35), an aspect which is directly related to Sango in terms of his physique, the way he plaits his hair and even in the way he was represented by Ladipo in *Oba Koso*. Ladipo’s exploration of the story of Sango was instrumental to the direction of the post-colonial theatrical subjects because he inspired other Nigerian dramatists to consider the exploration of historical and mythological stories in their thematic considerations. As stated by Ogundele:

The phenomenal success of *Oba Koso* would start a trend of historical drama in the Yoruba travelling theatre which literary dramatists in English and Yoruba would later

take up. Yoruba audiences also began to be better educated about their arts of poetry, music and dancing (2003: 165).

Two good examples of these dramatists are Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan as evident in their *The Gods Are Not to Blame* and *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* respectively. Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* is an adaptation of *Oba Koso* and was first staged in 1997. Osofisan confirmed that his decision to adapt the play was mainly due to the desire he had to answer some 'old questions' that had been 'stirred up in' him by Ladipo's *Oba Koso*, 'which were still unanswered' (2003: 56). According to Osofisan, 'the spirit of Duro Ladipo breathes through every page of' (56) *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*; in his words:

His *Oba Ko So* was my starting point. Or rather, if you wish, it was the scaffolding around which my story constructed its own *beingness*. Such is the seminal impact of Ladipo that no re-reading of Sango's legend can be possible any more without reference to his *Oba Ko So*. Thus the arteries along which my story grew its branches were those old questions which Ladipo's play had raised (56).

With regards to Ladipo's influence on Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, some aspects of *Oba Koso* were also reflected, even though the play is an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The main reasons for this attribution is that the play also explores the characters of the Yoruba gods, their rituals, their socio-political structures, myths and legends and cosmology, and as mentioned earlier, Gbonka was also a character in the play. But fundamentally, the play brought to bear, the tendencies of Ogun, the Yoruba demiurge of war, and his ritualistic attributes as noted in the character of King Odewale, who killed his father and unknowingly married his mother in the same

way as Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In Wole Ogundele's review of the impact of Ladipo's *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso* on the Yoruba people, he stated:

If these two plays brought about the education of Duro Ladipo himself, they also started the re-education of the Yoruba people as a whole – through drama. Ignorant of their own history, educated Yoruba audiences in Nigeria suddenly began to know that Sango was not just a dreadful god whose priests are to be avoided, but the name of a historical king in an important period of history (2003: 165).

According to Beier in *Border Crossings*, 'Duro will always be remembered as the playwright whose insight into Yoruba history and religion caused a whole generation to perceive their tradition in a different way' (1994:43). As the first historical play of a Yoruba king that became deified and a story which brings to life the ritualistic and metaphysical dimensions of the Yoruba from a different perspective, Ladipo was extending the scope of his theatrical subjects in order to challenge and seriously engage with his audience about the reality of the world they inhabit. The effects of the European colonial enterprise on the education and religious inclination of the West African people had been a hindrance to the exposition and understanding of their history, cultural traditions, cosmological dimensions, rituals and belief system. Ladipo's continued theatrical exposition of the Yoruba historical narratives is not only reclaiming the history of his people, but also bringing to light the importance of their arts, cultural heritage and values. As evident in a 1964 television documentary<sup>49</sup> by Francis Speed and Ulli Beier, the influence of the Islamic and Christian missionary enterprise was reported to have been a major factor that contributed to the decline in the practice of some of the Yoruba

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<sup>49</sup> See *New Images; Art in a Changing African Society*, produced for the National Education Television Network (NET) in Nigeria in 1964.

traditional art forms that are inspired by the Yoruba cosmology. The main reason for this was because most of the practising Yoruba artists who were renowned for their exploration of the Yoruba myths and legends and cosmology had been converted to the new Christian and Islamic religions whose philosophies and doctrines are opposed to the nature of the subjects they explored with their art form. A scrutiny of the subjects of Ladipo's theatrical preoccupation are a clear illustration of Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytical evaluation and analyses of the effects of the colonial enterprise and decolonisation on the consciousness of the colonised people of Africa. He writes:

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters (1965:31).

This is not to imply that Ladipo was violent. This is because the violence referred to by Fanon directly relates to how the colonial masters devalued African culture. It is this violence that Ladipo addressed with his theatrical activities and the subjects of his plays in order to enlighten his audience about the negative influences of the colonial enterprise. As part of his inspiration for *Oba Koso*, Ladipo explained that since Sango's story is an ancient one that took place centuries before the coming of the Europeans and their constitutions, it was a suitable one for engaging the mind of the youths and the society at large. He blamed the influence of the European modern life on the declining attitude of some of the youths who no longer had respect for their elders (see television

documentary, 1970; *The Creative Person*). As an integral part of the Yoruba custom and courtesy for the youths to prostrate for their elders, he cited a good example of how some of the youths had embraced the European attitude of shaking hands with their elders, something which is directly against the tenets of Yoruba tradition. Ladipo's engagement with a story that portrays the rich heritage of the Yoruba not only addresses this latter concern, but fundamentally brings into context, the importance of the Yoruba history, religion, arts, politics, cosmology and socio-spiritual dimensions. Because of the philosophical and psychological implications of the morals of Sango's story, Ladipo was concerned about the motive of the Europeans in condemning the Yoruba ancient religion of worshipping deities like Obatala and Ogun by referring to their devotees as pagans. Hence, as part of his theatrical vision, he felt the need to rectify the condemnation with the story of *Oba Koso*. In fact, he drew upon his knowledge of the bible to rationalise the story of Sango by comparing the experience of Jesus Christ with that of Sango; he saw a similarity between Jesus and Sango in the sense that the former is still being worshipped by his followers and the latter by his devotees after his deification, despite the fact that Jesus was rebuked and killed for coming to save the sinners in the same way that Sango was driven to commit suicide after abdicating his throne because of his people's betrayal, the same people who deified him (see television documentary, 1970; *The Creative Person*).



### **Plot Synopsis of *Oba Koso***

*Oba Koso* is a ritualistic play which weaves together the historical and mythological narratives of Sango, the fourth Alaafin of Oyo who was deified after his death, and Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. Sango is a warrior king who engages in war with his neighbouring communities because of his ambition of enlarging his territory; his people are suffering from the loss of loved ones on the battlefield and they raise their voices in protest against the wars. But Sango refuses to listen to the elders who were delegated by the people of Oyo to persuade him to stop the wars.

In the play's opening scene, Sango's last wife enters the palace, carrying a mortar, Sango's royal stool. She chants in homage with *ibaburuburu*, an intense deafening type of wailing and ovation. We then hear the music of the drums and Iwarefa, Sango's palace poet, enters the scene with the Olori; he chants Sango's *oriki* and the Olori respond with reverence, love and respect for their husband. The ritual continues as Iwarefa sings and dances to the sound of the *bata* drums; an instrumental element of the play's structural component. We then see Sango come into the scene with Oya, his most senior wife, extending his gratitude to the people of Oyo. The scene becomes transformed with the entrance of Timi and Gbonka, as they respectively dance to the tune of the *bata* drums and the *agogo* bell; in jubilation, the generals give account of their victorious war to Sango, declaring their bounties from the battlefield. This precedes the entrance of the town's people who express their wishes for the wars to end, but the generals leave in contempt rather than hearken to the demands of the people. Sango declares his support for his generals, but Oya, his favourite wife, manages to convince him to prevent the generals from going back to war. In doing so, Sango ponders as he realises that the

generals are no longer controllable. Oya then interjects with a suggestion, advising Sango to send Timi to Ede to become the guardian of his kingdom's frontier in hope that he dies in the hands of the Ijesha warriors. In scene two, Timi goes to Ede where he receives a warm welcome from the people. Impressed with his credentials as a warrior, they decide to make him their king. In the next scene, Sango becomes aware of Timi's installation through Olofofo who brings the news to his palace and agrees with Oyo people to order Gbonka to go and capture Timi from Ede in the hope that one may kill the other. The fourth scene accounts for the fight between the generals. Gbonka uses his efficacious incantations in challenging Timi to a fight. Timi responds in retaliation and shoots Gbonka with his mysterious arrows of fire, but they all miss their targets. Gbonka then engages in an incantation which hypnotises Timi into a deep sleep and then he captures him. Gbonka returns to Sango's palace in Oyo with the sleeping Timi in the fifth scene and Sango is unhappy that the two generals have returned alive. However, he praises and hails Gbonka as a powerful warrior and orders him to go for a rest. This happens before the entrance of the Oyo people; they advise Sango to order a second fight between the two generals at Akesan market to show how Timi was captured. Sango reveals the plan to Gbonka, but Gbonka is unhappy with the news and leaves the palace in anger, while Timi rejoices with incantations accompanied with the *bata* drums for being given another chance to confront Gbonka.

The sixth scene is a moving one which marks an important climax in the play; the angst created by the news of a second fight at Akesan market finally pushes Gbonka to a venture in the forest of the Witches at night. Here, he pleads with the Witches for support as a powerful metaphysician, using his wisdom of the Yoruba efficacious incantations in

appeasing them to grant him victory over Timi and to overcome the conspiracy of Sango and the Oyo people. The Witches respond in kindness, promising to empower him. The seventh scene at Akesan market opens with a gathering of Oyo people and the Olori are chanting the praises of Sango and eagerly awaiting the commencement of the fight. Iwarefa enters to give the fight a go ahead on behalf of Sango, just as Sango, Oya and the Oyomesi chiefs enter the scene. Sango is emitting fire from his mouth and his eyes are red. He calls on the generals and orders the fight to start. Oyo people hail Timi, encouraging him to use his arrows of fire, but he fails to hit Gbonka, who is busy with his recitation of incantations that brings confusion to all the spectators. He then uses a commanding tone in telling Timi to go into a slumber. Timi falls into a deep sleep and Gbonka beheads him. The people scream in confusion and agony as they witness the blood bath and Gbonka confronts Sango in a rude, threatening and disgraceful manner. He accuses Sango of betrayal, challenging his authority, power and ability to emit fire. To prove his immunity from the danger of fire, Gbonka arrogantly requests to be tied and dumped alive in a pyre and leaves in anger. In shock and surprise, the people deliberate over Gbonka's challenge, wondering whether Sango's wrath has finally come upon him, as they prepare the fire. Gbonka returns and enters the fire but to the surprise of all he reappears unhurt and openly defies Sango by telling him that his fire is harmless in comparison to his own powerful incantations. He gives Sango an ultimatum to leave the town and then exits in anger. Oyo elders intervene in fear, urging Sango to accept the situation and leave for Tapa, his mother's place of origin. Gbonka returns and talks to Sango in a condescending way. Sango, unable to withstand the insults and humiliation,

lashes out in uncontrollable anger and kills many of his people. Gbonka escapes with some others.

The last scene is in the bush (an open space), where we see Sango and Oya on their way to Tapa land. Sober, tired and feeling lonely, Sango expresses remorse for his action. Oya, as his only loyal companion on the journey, praises her beloved husband in adoration. But when she decides to discontinue the journey and return to her homeland of Ira, Sango, feeling deserted and unable to bear the pain of loneliness and humiliation, resolves to hang himself in an *Ayan* tree. Oya tries in vain to stop his suicide. News reaches the people of Oyo and the Magba, Sango's intimate friends. But in protest and proclamation of his undying essence and power, Magba insists that Sango is not dead; that he will ever speak with the sounding of the *bata* drums and dance to the tune of the *dundun* drum. We then see the transformation of the heavens with lightning and thunder. Fear engages the heart of Oyo people as the earth trembles, before we hear Sango's voice which reassures them that he lives still. He promises them happiness, love, wealth and peace, if only they will pay homage to him. The Oyo people respond with reverence and praises for Sango, pronouncing his undying essence in "Oba ko so!" (The king did not hang!).

### **Analyses of Ladipo's Dramaturgy in *Oba Koso***

The play is a ritual drama and the dialogue was conveyed in the Yoruba operatic style. Ladipo's dramaturgy in *Oba Koso* embodies a continuum of visual languages, musical languages reflected through the music of the drums and the accompanying songs,

language and dance that provides a powerful structure to the play. The play is essentially structured with the same elements as that of *Oba Moro*; the backbone of *Oba Koso*'s dramaturgy derives from the ritual order that prevails in Yoruba society and their oral tradition through the various poetic genres. But there is a question of an ambiguity which stems from the title of the play. This is significant because the play derives one meaning of its title from this view that *Oba Koso* means 'The king did not commit suicide' or literally, 'the king did not hang'. The other meaning refers to Sango as *Oluoso* or Olu of Koso (an historical title of Sango as *Oba Koso* "the King of Koso"), as explained previously.

In the first verse of Ifa's Odu of "Ogunda Meji", reference was also made to Koso, Sango and his attributes as evident in the extracts from the text of the Odu:

Bi o ba burin burin, bo o ba de Koso, ilee babaa re nko, bi nwon ba se gbegiri, bi nwon ba roka, Bi nwon ba fun o lorogbo atakuko adie kan nko. Sango ni bi mo ba ti yo tan, Ng o pada silee mi ni (Abimbola, 2006:92).

For when you have walked and walked, when you reach Koso, where is your father's home located? If they cooked bean soup, if they stirred yam flour, if they gave you bitter-kola and a cock. Sango said when I have eaten and I am nourished, I will surely go back to my home.

Therefore, in terms of semiotics, the title of the play is significant to the plot of the play because of the implication of the similarities between the attributes of the primordial Sango and the historical Sango. The ambiguity of the title also raises the question of a possible tragedy that may be as a result of suicide by hanging. In examining the context

of Ladipo's theatrical frame work from a performance perspective, my analysis is mainly based on the televised staging of *Oba Koso* in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo, as documented in *The Creative Person* (television documentary 1970), but this analysis does not include the philosophical context of his iconography, as this will be discussed later.

The themes of the play include ambition, oppression, loyalty, betrayal and love, but the most important theme highlights the need to take others into consideration, especially when making decisions that affect their lives. In Sango's character, he displays the attributes of a dictator, refusing to listen to the genuine concerns of his people to stop his wars. Oyo people are suffering because many of their children have died on the battlefield, but Sango would not order his generals, Gbonka and Timi, to stop the wars because of his ambition of expanding his territory and this leads to chaos in the kingdom. This is a universal theme which reflects in today's society, where leaders are more concerned about their own selfish desires and ambition. Those in the position of authority and power continue to oppress their people and others as reflected in the recent and continued uprisings in many parts of the world. As far as the abuse of power is concerned, Sango's case is a good metaphor for modern society's re-evaluation of itself.

Loyalty and love come to bear in Oya's honest advice to Sango to discontinue his wars and her ability to convince him to call back his war lords (the generals) from the battlefield. It is also her loyalty and deep love for Sango that drives her to the decision of going on exile with him after leaving his throne before she decides to return. She is a reflection of an intelligent strong woman. Her influence on a personality like Sango

demonstrates her powerful influence in the socio-political dynamics of the empire and brings to light the courage and power of women in the African society. She recognises the problems and effects of war on the general population and tries to do something positive to stop it.

In terms of emotional expression and the tragedy of the play, betrayal forms a strong theme. This is reflected in Gbonka's reaction to the announcement of a second fight with Timi at Akesan market in Oyo. Gbonka becomes aware that Sango, Timi and the people of Oyo are conspiring to get rid of him and decides to take action. He embarks on a journey to the forest at night to consult and ask for the help of the witches in defeating Timi. His deep feeling of betrayal is shown in his lamentation incantation song which explores the context of the Yoruba metaphysical world of the witches and the gods.

In terms of characterisation, the most formidable character of the play is Sango. Not only do we see him in his elements as the Yoruba demiurge of lightning, we witness the metamorphosis of the historical Sango from a king to a deity. Sango is characterised as a powerful king and warrior through his *oriki* praise poetry and the homage paid to him by his friends, his wives, his chiefs, his war lords and the people of Oyo. The opening of the play with the symbolic ritualistic entrance of Sango's wife that was accompanied with the ululation and loud noise known as *Ibaburuburu* marked the beginning of homage to him. The order which obtains in the courts of the Yoruba kings comes to life whenever Sango appears. But apart from this, the awe associated with the mythological Sango is reflected in his portrayal; he is wearing the sacred colourful regalia of the deity, he plaits his hair and uses his paraphernalia. He also emits fire from his mouth and his wives placate him whenever he is angry, for fear of his wrath. The magnitude of his anger becomes evident

after the death of Timi. When Gbonka provokes him, he responds, ‘What? I Sango?—I Sango?’ (1964: p.27) He then lashes out and kills many of his people before committing suicide on his way to Tapa land. This attribute of anger is associated with both the mythological Sango and the historical Alaafin Sango. In fact, it is sometimes used in praising or placating him as evident in the first scene of the play, where Timi refers to his attribute of anger when praising Him:

O ba baale jiyān gangan tan, o tun wa p omo re s iloro!

Obenle-ja-wuukan!

Jagunlabi—ja-nibi t o gbe-jeko-ana! (Ladipo, 1970:p. 5)

You had a meal with the head of the family and killed his son on the porch!

In the process of fighting with the house owner, you uprooted the pillars of his house!

The born-fighter fights where he had a meal of corn-meal yesterday! (Author’s translation)

Oya is also an important character in the play. Her position as the head of the Olori and her love for her husband is reflected throughout the play. She is portrayed as a loyal wife who is able to calm her husband’s anger and we see her beside him in most of the scenes of the play. She is also more elegant in her dressing than the other wives. Her hairstyle and the colour of her costume are similar to that of Sango and she is also holding a horsetail to establish her royalty. Her reaction to the death of Sango reveals her passion for her husband as she remains in adoration for him through her lamentation song. As the



deified goddess of the departed souls, Oya's reaction can be understood in the context of her role as the guardian of the souls of the dead in Yoruba mythology.

Another remarkable character in the play is Gbonka, one of Sango's war lords. He is portrayed as a highly decorated warrior whose powerful incantations are efficacious. When Sango orders him to go and capture Timi, the other general, from Ede, he uses the power of his incantation in capturing him. Timi shoots Gbonka with his flying arrows of fire, but they all fail to hit the target and prove useless to Gbonka who responds with his incantations, commanding Timi to sleep. The motion of the movement of Timi's body, gradually responding and becoming weak until it comes to stillness, conveys a powerful image of somebody being conjured.

The power of Gbonka's character is further intensified when Sango orders a repeat of the fight at Akesan market. Gbonka senses a conspiracy. He sees no rational reason for Sango to order another fight with Timi at Akesan market, knowing fully well that he had defeated Timi at Ede. His attributes as a brave warrior and hunter become more evident when he decides to venture into the forest at night to consult with the witches about the betrayal of Sango, the people of Oyo and Timi, his comrade. His action is reflective of not only that of a brave hunter, but of a metaphysician who has a deep knowledge of Ifa and the occult. We see this in the outcome of his consultation. The witches promise to help him, he goes ahead to fight Timi at Akesan market and this leads to the death of Timi.

Music plays a major part in the structure of *Oba Koso*. Just like *Oba Moro*, the music comprises both the chanted and the instrumental. The powerful thundering music of the drum that follows the entrance of Sango's last wife reinforces the sense of ritual homage and reflects the attributes of Sango as the Yoruba god of thunder. The drums used include the *bata* and the *dundun* and they are played throughout the play in creating moods and for changes in the scenes. A combination of the melodies of the drums and the chanted songs forms the music and dialogue of the play. The praise poetry of Sango that is combined with the language of the drums brings to bear the importance of *oriki* (praise chants) in reverence to the Yoruba archetypes and the rituals associated with them and the Yoruba kings. As pointed out by Soyinka in his discussion about these archetypes:

To speak of space, music, poetry or material paraphernalia in the drama of the gods is to move directly from the apparent to deeper effects within the community whose drama (that is history, morality, affirmation, supplication, thanksgiving or simple calendricity) it also is (1976: 5).

Soyinka's statement is substantiated by the action of the palace poet, Iwarefa, from the start of the play when he enters the palace with some of Sango's wives (Olori), accompanied by the sound of the *bata* drums. Using the call and response performance style, Iwarefa leads the chanting of Sango's *oriki* (praise names), thereby establishing the responsibilities of his role in relation to Sango. He uses metaphoric expressions in describing the attributes of Sango as a powerful king, deity and metaphysician.

The whistle (*toromagbe*) and the bell (*agogo*) also form part of the musical instruments used. For example in the fourth scene, when Gbonka goes to Ede to capture Timi who had been reported to have made himself the king of Ede, the rhythm of Gbonka's efficacious incantation accompanied by the musical sound of the *toromagbe* energised the void and the voices of Gbonka, Timi and the people of Ede interacting in confrontation, sends a message of unpredictability. Music also plays an important role when Sango embarks on a journey back to Tapa land with his loyal wife, Oya, and commits suicide when Oya changes her mind not to continue with the journey. Oya's piercing song in lamentation for her beloved husband, confirms the death of Sango and this is intensified with the piercing notes of the chorus. When sound fades off the scene, we hear the lonesome voice of Sango from the abode of the dead, calling on all the people of Oyo and Yoruba land in general, to worship him and promising he would always be supportive of them. The reverence associated with this type of manifestation is divine and ritualistic in nature.

Towards the end of the play, we also see a procession of drummers in action, playing the *bata* drums, in complement of the defiant song of the Olori and Sango's friends who are positioned strategically on the stage and singing: *Oba koso*, the King did not hang. In relation to importance of the *bata* drums in *Oba Koso*, the instrumental musical components of the play would be incomplete without their use. This is mainly because of Sango's link with the *bata* drums in Yoruba mythology. As the patron saint of musicians, he is a renowned performing artist who loves and dances to the tune of the *bata* drums. We are told in the myth that the drum is named after Sango's late close friend, a master

drummer who plays the *bata* drums. This aspect will be discussed in details later as it relates to the iconography of Ladipo's theatre.

Dance is also structured into the play, but mostly in association with the music of the *bata* drums and chants. Whenever you hear the music of the *bata* drums in Yoruba land, it calls for a type of celebration, homage and worship that are intricately linked with dance, particularly in relation to Sango and the *egungun* masquerades and especially among devotees, priests, praise singers etc. We see this in the character of Iwarefa who dances to the tune of the *bata* drums as he sings in homage, the praises of Sango at the beginning of the play. When Gbonka captures Timi in Ede, we also see that he dances in jubilation with intensity to the sound of the *bata* drums and the song to celebrate his victory. In considering the fact that Gbonka and the captured Timi are friends and comrades at arm, his jubilatory dance is not a good sign for Sango who expects one of them to be dead, and neither is it a good sign for the friendship of Gbonka and Timi. We see the hallmarks of enmity and conflict that may be the root of unfolding tragedy. The energy of dance also comes to prominence at the end of the play where we see the Olori dancing intensely to the tune of the *bata* drums after the death of Sango.

The language in *Oba Koso* is associated with the different genres of Ifa Yoruba oral tradition and just like *Oba Moro*; the language of the characters is defined by their status in the socio political and socio-spiritual dynamics of the Kingdom. But the language also 'operates on two levels' (1996: 22) as rightly clarified by Obafemi; that is the language of the "initiated" and the "uninitiated". The status of Timi and Gbonka as highly decorated warriors and hunters who belong to the cult of Ogun means their language is potent and

reverential in nature; therefore, the incantations (*Ofo*) in the play were mostly delivered by them.

The identity of Gbonka as powerful metaphysician is further revealed from a different dimension through his language. This occurs in his dialogue with the witches in the forest at night. They all have an understanding of each other's language as a reflection of the relationship that exists between them. They are all members of esoteric bodies and there is a certain kind of familiarity in their address of each other. The other language comes in form of the praise chants (*oriki*) which is used by the people of Oyo in the play and this is not restricted to the initiated as earlier revealed.

A combination of these elements in line with Ladipo's dramatic vision provides the play with a successful dramatic distinction. The visual apparatus utilised and the poetic and drum languages all contribute to the ritual explosion of the play. In Soyinka's review of the play, his summary of how the ritual in *Oba Koso* was realised and the agents responsible was thus:

If one may borrow a metaphor from the terminal motif of the play, we would perhaps speak of the effect of sheet lightning as opposed to the more common forked variety. Such was the summation of a parallel erasure of individuation even among the theatrical augmentations percussion, motion, chanting, even the costuming which so palpably derived from the formalized body rhythms of the 'performers': all these dissolved in the fluidity of the ritual emission (1994: 74).

Soyinka's symbolic definition of the impact of the play, confirms how the effects of lightning - as something associated with Sango was realised with light. The power of the characters' performances as individuals within the play comes to bear as corresponding in effect to one another, in producing a balanced effect of ritual enactment that was realised with the spatial image of the space and aided by the structural elements of play. In Obafemi's critical examination of *Oba Koso's* structure, he argued that 'The structure of *Oba ko so* is not weak, nor are the episodes 'amorphous' as earlier claimed by critics' (1996: 21). He confirmed that the repetitive nature of the drum and dialogue language, dance and songs forms part of the structuring of the play in realising a cohesive presentation (See 21).

### **Analyses of *Oba Koso's* Text**

In exploring the context and meaning of *Oba Koso's* text, the play opens with the entrance of Sango's last wife who brings the mortar which Sango sits on to the stage as part of her responsibility. This was not apparent in the translated version of the play's script, but forms an important link to the visual languages of Ladipo's theatre if we are to understand the significance of the mortar to Sango as one of his paraphernalia of ritual that will be fully explored later.

In my opinion, the absence of this important iconographic element in the translated version of the play undermines the understanding of Sango's personality and Ladipo's visual composition. Because of this, my analysis of *Oba Koso* is based on the original Yoruba text. Apart from the differences that have been highlighted by Banham between

Beier's translated version of *Oba Koso* and that of Armstrong, Awujoola and Olayemi in the first scene of the play (See Banham 1976: 19-23), other aspects of the text will come to light here. This is important in bringing into perspective, the cultural and philosophical understanding of the play to further enhance the visual comprehension of Ladipo's theatre. Without using the original text of *Oba Koso* in particular for analysing the play, these important aspects of the Yoruba matrix remains unattended as Banham rightly argued:

Much of the force of these Operas must be lost in any English translation, but as Yoruba is clearly an unusual language for anyone to possess who is not himself a Yoruba, then it is through the English versions that we have to approach the themes and ideas of Ladipo's plays. But it would be wrong to place too much emphasis upon texts, important though they are both as literature and for the information and ideas they convey (21).

I believe that it is crucial to bring this aspect to light in order to see Ladipo's work is evaluated, so as to create easier accessibility for scholars, researchers and students to understand his theatre better. Some of the attributes of Ladipo's plays that have been lost in translation will also be examined.

For instance, we are given insight into the nature of the Yoruba world and the characteristics of both the historical and mythological Sango through the context of the play's text. At the beginning of the play, the attributes of Sango are revealed through his *oriki* by Iwarefa and the Olori:

Iwarefa: Iku oooooo!

Iku baba-yeye, alase, ekeji orisa!

Iwarefa: O death, the mighty one

Death, the mighty one, father and mother and second in command to the  
gods

Olori: Kabiyesi

Olori (wives): Long live your majesty.

Iwarefa: Alagbara lori awon omo olori kunkun!

Ijangbon lori omo alaigboran

Akokoluko ebo ti i pa gun loru!

Inaju ekun tii derub ode! (1970: pp.1-2)

Iwarefa: The mighty one who subdues stubborn children.

He whose stubbornness is far greater than any child's.

You are a sacrificial ritual that frightens the vulture.

You are the tiger who frightens the hunter with a gaze.

Iwarefa: Afeni ti kogila kolu,

Afeni Esu nse

Lo le kolu Esu

Lo le kolu Sango,



Afeni ti Sango o pa! (p.2)

Iwarefa: Only a person who is possessed by evil

Only a person who is being deceived by Esu

Could dare to confront Esu

Could dare to confront Sango

Only a person who Sango may kill!

Olori: Oloju orogbo,

Eleeke obi o!

Eegun ti i yona lenu

Oosa ti i bologbo leru!

Aji-saiye-gbege, oko iya olorogbo!

Eni foju di o, Sango a gbe e!

Sango, olukoro ooooooo! (p.2)

Olori: Eyes like bitter-kola,

And cheeks protruding like kola-nuts!

The masquerade that emits fire through his mouth!

The deity who frightens the cats!

One who wakes up and leisurely enjoys life, the kola-seller's husband!

Anyone who undermines you (Sango) will face your wrath!

Sango, the mighty fierce lord!

Homage is paid to Sango as a powerful archetype. The Olori conveyed this in referring to him as a masquerade that emits fire from his mouth. They also highlighted his love of bitter-kola-nuts and the likeness of his cheeks to the ordinary kola-nuts. In the Yoruba tradition, some of the components of Ifa's ritual recommendations include bitter kola-nuts and red kola-nuts as they are used in the appeasement of the gods. Therefore, in referring to Sango as one whose eyes are like bitter-kola-nuts, we are being directed to the white colour of bitter-kola which is part of the colour constitution of the eyes and the importance of the eyes as part of the sense organs from a spiritual perspective; hence, the clarity of thought is evoked with the colour, but also, the purity of another existence. The comparison made between Sango's cheeks and red kola-nuts<sup>50</sup> is significant because Sango as a deity does not accept red kola-nuts for rituals; hence, the offering of bitter kola-nuts is recommended and acceptable. The expression, *Orogbo ni e mu wa, Sango o gba obi* ('It is bitter kola-nut that should be offered, Sango does not accept red kola-nut') that often accompanies Sango's praises is directly related to this reason and also substantiates the fond reference to Sango as the husband of the bitter-kola seller. When the ordinary kola-nut is chewed, it leaves a bright orange-red residual colour in the mouth and since red is already prominent in different aspects of Sango's personality, it implies that he already has the elements of red kola-nuts in him and to also consume red kola-

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<sup>50</sup> Kola-nuts are used for rituals and offerings in Yoruba society.

nuts would be similar to bringing together two positive electric charges to conduct electricity, a result that may be catastrophic.

Referring to Sango as a masquerade that emits fire does not only substantiate his ability to emit fire as a deity, but also directs our attention to his importance in one of the stories of the origin of the Yoruba mask performance tradition as revealed in the Yoruba oral tradition; we are informed that he ‘founded the ancestor worship (*Egungun*) festival to honour his departed father’ (Adelugba, Obafemi and Adeyemi, 2004: 140), as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century before the practice became formalised two hundred years after (See 138-156). Ladipo’s imitation of Sango’s act of emitting fire in his heart rending characterisation of Sango (See 2003:15), triggers the thought of one of the Greek Olympian gods, Hephaestus, the god of fire (See Richard Woff, 2003: 13). The essence of fire in these deities is a reminder of the universalising energy of the element.

The aura surrounding Sango in terms of awe and his metaphysical powers becomes highlighted in reference to him as a deity who frightens cats. This is because when consideration is given to the personality of cats as domesticated animals that would not normally be afraid of humans, it would seem odd for cats to be afraid of Sango; therefore, two extraordinary things are being revealed about Sango. Apart from the awe of his visual physicality, our attention is also being directed to the metaphysical realm of the Yoruba belief, that some metaphysicians can transform into the disguises of animals to commit atrocities or for other reasons. Hence, as part of Sango’s power as a deity, we are being informed of an aspect of his metaphysical attributes of bringing fear to such forces.

In the event of his confrontation with such forces, the consequence of such an encounter is confirmed in the reference to his wrath descending upon them. From a semiotic interpretation of the representation of such animals in Yoruba belief system, Ogundeji rightly stated, '*Igun* (vulture) or *eye* (bird), in general, and *ologbo* (cat) at a cultic level, are metosymbolizations of witches or witchcraft' (2010: 64). Hence, the awe associated with Sango as a supernatural entity and powerful metaphysician comes to bear from the beginning of the play through the homage paid to him by Iwarefa, and this continues wherever Sango was being referred to in the play.

Another dimension of the Yoruba world is revealed in Gbonka's dialogue with the witches at night. As a genre of Ifa, he uses incantations in communicating with them (See 1970: 38-40). He reaches the forest and raises his voice to them with a lamentation from the depth of his soul. He pays homage to the wizards and witches and begs them to intervene on his behalf:

Gbonka: Olori igbooooooo oooo!

Olori igbooooooo oooo!

Osoole, e tun mi seeee!

Aje aiye, e tun mi se!

Tigi-tope ni i saanu afomo!

Aiye gbogbo e wa lati saanuu mi o!

A ki i beekuu dunuugbo?

A ki i befon-on dodan!

A ki i b Olukoree dupoo baba re!

Oro l o se bi oro l ode Oyo,  
 Obaa Sango ni ng lo ba Timi ja  
 ni ilu Ede.  
 Mo ni mo jagun eleekini o,  
 Mo mo, mo, mo segun eyin agba!  
 Sango ni ng o tun ja naa ja o!  
 L e se ri mi  
 Eleekini ree o.  
 Ani e je mi!  
 Eekeji ree o.  
 Mo mo mo mo ni e je mii!  
 Itun l o ni e f ohun rere tun mi see!  
 Ifa l o ni e f ohun rere fa mi!  
 Abeere naa l o ni e f ohun rere beere mi!  
 A ki i binu agbe t oun t aro,  
 A ki i binu a . . . aluko t oun t osun,  
 A ki i binu odidere t oun t koode idi e.  
 Omo ara aiye e mo, mo, mo, mo binu o.  
 ASURE-tete-waiye l oruko tin won np' Oduduwa  
 L ojo ti mbo wa sodeesalaiye!  
 Nwon ni tani o siwaju  
 O l af Ogun  
 Tani o tele e  
 A . . .a . . .af Orunmila.  
 Aaro taa gbobee ka meta ni ise  
 Enyin l e siketa l ojo naa lohun!

E waa gbera, e mbo was ode isalaiye.

E waa kangbo Olukoko-mo-jo-gbo.

E kan eluju kan ti mbe lehinkule Orunmila.

Nwon ni o sona mo (1970: pp. 38-9).

Gbonka: Forest head, I pay homage....!

Forest head, I pay homage....!

Wizards at home, please empower me!

Witches of the universe, please empower me!

The trees of the forest, including palm trees, do have compassion on the mistletoe!

Please unite and have compassion on me, all peoples of the world.

We do not compete with the rat for his forest habitation!

We do not compete with the buffalo for grasslands!

We do not compete with the heir to the throne for his father's crown.

A crisis is developing in Oyo

King Sango had sent me to engage in a fight with Timi at Ede

I fought the first fight and won, my elders

Sango has ordered for the fight to be repeated, that is why you have seen me.

This is my first call

Please come to my aid

This is my second call

Please attend to me

The itun beads have requested that you use your voices in my favour

The Ifa beads have requested that you use your voices in my favour

The abeere seeds have also requested that you use your voices in my favour.

Nobody will be angry with the blue touraco bird because of its colour.

Nobody will be angry with the aluko bird because of its purple colour

Nobody will be angry with the parrot because of its red tail-feathers.

People of the world, please do not be angry with me.

The one who hurried quickly into the world is another name for Oduduwa

On the day he was descending into the world!

He was asked to decide on who should lead

His choice was Ogun

Who should follow him?

He said, Orunmila.

The wood fire that warms the pot of soup is supported by three stones.

You were the third in line on that day.

You all embarked on your journey into this world

You encountered the forest of Olukoko-mo-jo-gbo

You encountered a thick forest behind the residence of Orunmila

And it was confirmed that the road was blocked

He starts by first calling on *Olori igbo* (the forest head) as a form of introduction to a ritual that was necessitated by what he considered unjust treatment. Therefore, when he pays homage to the presence of the invisible forces of the forest, acknowledging the presence of their leader and all the spiritual forces in habitation, his call can be compared

to the first expression of anyone on pilgrimage to a holy or sacred land, or even a priest who is conducting a ritual in a temple or in the shrine of a god.

He was convinced that he had been betrayed by King Sango, the people of Oyo and Timi because of the news of a second fight with Timi. This implies that Gbonka wants the witches to empower him even more, so that he can conquer Timi in the scheduled fight at Akesan market. Since it is impossible for anyone to compete with rats for their residencies in the forest or the buffalos for their savannah habitation, the same way that no one can take the position of a crown prince as the rightful next in throne, Gbonka uses these paradigms in rationalising the importance of his ritual and the need for his incantation to be efficacious. Questioning the irrationality of being angry with birds because of the colours of their feathers, in supplication, he asked to be considered, embraced and projected with a good and positive voice, as prescribed to him (*Abeere naa l oni e f ohun rere beere mi!*); he uses the creatures of the universe and the tendencies associated with them by virtue of their being, to project the position he found himself in.

He refers to an important Yoruba mythological story of creation that is associated with the witches (*awon iyami*). He reminds them of their importance, greatness and power, and the need for them to support him metaphysically. The story brings to light the role of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba race, as the one who was in charge of assigning the roles played by the gods on the day they were descending from heaven to earth; Ogun, the demiurge of iron, was nominated to lead the way, Orunmila, the god of wisdom was the second to be nominated and the witches were the third in place as part of



the journey. But when they encountered a difficult thick forest and could no longer proceed, Ogun cleared the path with his machete and a sacrificial lamb was found for an offering before they continued their journey. This later reference is universal in essence and relevant to different belief systems.

### ***Oba Waja* ('The King has gone into the Loft' or 'The King is Dead')**

#### **Production History of *Oba Waja***

*Oba Waja* was first produced in Oshogbo in 1964. The play was staged to mark Mbari Mbayo's second anniversary (See Beier 1994: 44). Apart from the English text of the play, no photographic or recorded evidence of the play has been located for this study. Attempt to locate an archive of the play during my field work in Nigeria in 2007 was unsuccessful. According to Chief Segun Olusola, 'I first produced it for television in 1964, and now I don't know if there's any record of it anywhere because *Oba Waja* contains some very unforgettable dirges' (2003:39). Because of this, my exploration of the play will be limited to the records available about the play, my analyses of the text and useful comparative studies that will enhance the understanding of the play and its visual composition. The play was first performed on the Mbari Mbayo stage, where Ladipo's two previous plays had been performed.

After the first staging of *Oba Waja* in 1964, the play was subsequently produced for the television audiences. Olusola confirmed that he produced the play for television until 1966 (See 1994: 76). But we have no documented review of another stage performance of the play.

### **Audience Reception and Impact**

The duration of the first performance was not indicated, but Ladipo's role as the British officer was seen as unique and impressive because for the first time, his historical play was showing the European encounter with the African "natives" and their way of life and Ladipo was playing the role of the colonial officer. Beier confirmed that his characterisation of the British officer was in no way comparable to his portrayal of Sango, 'but he gave a plausible performance' (1994: 44). As a play which explores the negative effects of the colonial enterprise on the culture of the Yoruba people, Beier argued that Ladipo 'attempted something quite difficult – he presented a historical event seen through the opposing views of two cultures' (44) with a 'great lyrical beauty', but he thought the play 'lacks the subtleties and ironies of the *King's Horseman*' (44), Soyinka's version of the story.

### **The Development and Significance of Staging *Oba Waja***

The story of *Oba Waja* came to life through Piere Verger 11<sup>51</sup>, who narrated the story to Beier. Beier gave Ladipo the synopsis of the story in 1964, but explained that he had earlier summarised 'the episode to Wole Soyinka; suggesting he use it for a play' (1994: 44), three years before *Oba Waja* was written by Ladipo. In accordance to the original story, the actual Olori Elesin remained alive, but in Ladipo's *Oba Waja*, he 'kept fairly closely to the facts, except that he makes the Olori Elesin kill himself in the end' (Beier, 1964: 74). Chronologically, the historical order of the periods in which the stories of Ladipo's trilogy unfolded started with *Oba Koso*, the story of Sango, which was around

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<sup>51</sup> See postscript: Beier, 1964: 74; We are told that Mr Verger was in direct contact with the District Officer concerned and was able to verify the story from him.

the 14<sup>th</sup> century (See Akinjogbin, 2002: 31-2). The second story in the order is *Oba Moro*, which took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (See Adedeji, 1981: 221), while the latest, *Oba Waja*, was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1946, when the incident of *Oba Waja* was unfolding, Ladipo had already been teaching and he was also already involved with theatre, therefore, it is the only historical incident of the trilogy that occurred in his life time.

Ladipo's theatrical vision of propagating the importance of the Yoruba culture through his plays, led him to the staging of *Oba Waja* as a continuation of his theatrical mission, but in contrast to *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso*, the king is not actually a character in the play, except for his brief appearance as a ghost when he confronted Olori Elesin. Instead the story is centred on the rituals associated with his death. Therefore, Ladipo was presenting something different; he was taking his audience into another phase of understanding the Yoruba philosophies through a drama which explores the burial obsequies of the Yoruba kings and the implications of not performing the rites. The intervention of the British District officer in the spiritual affairs of the people highlights an aspect of the restrictions imposed on the African way of life by the colonial imperialist administration. Since the incident occurred in 1946 at a time when decolonisation was being advocated in the British West African colonies (See Aluko 1987: 693-735), Ladipo's exploration of the story was important in accounting for part of the effects of the colonial rule on the Yoruba culture and belief system.

He was also adding a new repertoire to his historical plays as the first Yoruba opera to deal with the subject of *Oba Waja*, hence, maintaining a reference point for Yoruba historical and literary exploration and inspiring other Yoruba dramatists to explore similar theatrical themes. This is because when the context of the rituals explored in *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso* are examined in accordance to their dimensions in Yoruba belief system, they bring to light the nature of the rituals associated with the subjects of the plays and this is the same with *Oba Waja*. For example, by virtue of the nature of the subject of the play, the ritualistic dimension demands the use of dirges, monodies and threnodies that are associated with mourning the dead in Yorubaland, but also specific in classification in *Oba Waja* because of the status of the King in Yorubaland and the spiritual order that guides how his journey is conducted after transition.

### **Plot synopsis of *Oba Waja***

*Oba Waja* is about a real incident which occurred in 1946. During the funeral obsequies of the Alaafin of Oyo, Olori Elesin, his horseman, was prevented from committing ritual suicide by the British colonial district officer who condemned the act as barbaric.

The play begins in the bedroom of the District Officer, from where he and his wife, Jane, are watching the dead Alaafin's funeral procession. Drummers and dancers are visible in the moonlight and elders and women taking part in the procession are chanting dirges, mourning and celebrating the transition of their king. Jane complains about the noisy procession while her husband tries to calm her by rationally explaining the reasons for the ritual. But she threatens to go back home on the next boat if the D. O. does not stop the

ritual. The D.O. explains to her that such matters are out of his jurisdiction. However, he promises to take action as the voices and the music of the mourners fade away into the night. The second act opens at the king's market in Oyo. A number of women sitting on the left side of the stage beckon customers to buy their wares. Soon a procession of women accompanied with drum music enters. They chant praises of Ojurongbe Aremu, Olori Elesin, who will be escorting the dead King on his journey to the land of their ancestors. Elesin soon joins the procession, chanting in a mournful tone and announcing that the time has come for him to go to heaven. As the ritual intensifies, the D.O., accompanied by policemen, enters, stops the proceedings and orders the arrest of Elesin. The third act is set in Elesin's house where we see the people of Oyo come to express their disappointment in him for obeying the orders of 'the European'. They curse him and walk out in anger even as Elesin tries to convince them that his charms were rendered impotent. The insults continue in the background until the Alaafin's ghost enters to also express his disappointment in the Elesin, informing him that he had chosen a 'new attendant' and warning him of the repercussions of his betrayal. In the fourth act, Dawudu, Olori Elesin's son, becomes aware of the Alaafin's death in a highlife bar in Ghana and prepares to return home to bury his father who must, according to tradition also die in order to accompany the king to the abode of the dead. In the last act, Dawudu returns home from Ghana for his father's burial, thinking he was dead. Elesin's household is happy to see him. But when Elesin enters the scene, Dawudu screams at the horror of finding his father alive, wondering whether the Alaafin was not truly dead. Elesin tries to explain why he is still alive to Dawudu but he responds with complete shock and disappointment in his father for not keeping in line with the tradition. Then he

stabs himself to death. The people of Oyo blame Elesin for the unfortunate death of Dawudu, reminding him of the consequences of not fulfilling his duties in accordance to the demands of their tradition.

Elesin laments the death of his son and appeals for his people's understanding and pity. He blames the D. O. for his predicament. As the people respond to Elesin, the D.O. enters and they immediately confront him, rebuking him for the atrocities he has brought upon them by interfering in Elesin's ritual suicide. Dawudu's wife descends upon the D.O. and her father-in-law with insults. The play reaches a climax at this point with the deliverance of Elesin's final words of regret, pain and sorrow, lamenting the uncertainties of the journey ahead. He then commits suicide. The D.O. in confusion tries to give excuses for his actions as he could not understand why his orders have destroyed the people's communal well being. But the people maintain their position on the atrocities of the white man's laws. The play ends with the women wishing Elesin a peaceful journey across the river.

### **Analyses of Ladipo's Dramaturgy in *Oba Waja***

The elements of Ladipo's dramaturgy in *Oba Waja* are similar to those employed in *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso*, but there is also an ambiguity with the title of *Oba Waja* because of the literal meaning of the word. In Yoruba language, *Oba ti wo aja* implies that the King has gone into the loft. But the actual meaning in relation to the King is that he is dead. Therefore, the loft (*aja*) is used metaphorically to denote that the King is dead since according to the Yoruba belief, their kings do not die, but are believed to become part of

the embodiment of the previous kings and those to come as already highlighted in this study. The fact that the king is dead does not also tell us about the obstacles that would be confronted in relation to his burial rites nor are we even aware of the subject that the play will explore in relation to his death; as the title could also imply a reference to any of the Yoruba kings since the title did not include the name of any particular town or kingdom in Yorubaland. Therefore the title of *Oba Waja* is significant to the plot of the play in conveying the feelings of suspense and uncertainty in the mind of the audience.

The dominant theme of the play is in relation to the importance of maintaining a balanced socio-spiritual and socio-political order. In accordance to the tradition, the death of Alaafin calls for his Olori Elesin (Commander of the King's Horse) to accompany him to the abode of the dead. In order for the Alaafin to cross the bridge that links the land of the living to the abode of the dead, the responsibility of the Elesin is to make sure that the journey was not lonely for him; in other words, he must not be left alone to encounter any difficulties in transition. The Elesin, whom he had entrusted with some of his most important earthly undertakings, is expected to complete his duties by accompanying him to his destination.

The intervention of the District Officer in a matter so important to the spiritual well being of the community highlights how the dominance of the colonial authorities impacted negatively and devalued the Yoruba culture. It brings to life an aspect of this world that is concerned with death and the responsibilities of the living for the dead so that a balanced and peaceful existence can be maintained between them and the living, between the

living themselves and even the unborn. Hence the wilful act of death that the ritual demands from Elesin is part of his service to the dead in maintaining a socio-spiritual order since the ritual is believed to give him the freedom to serve his master in the after life.

Patriotism is another strong theme in the play. This is reflected in the attitude of Dawudu, when while in Ghana, he becomes aware of the Alaaḥin's death. Without hesitation, he leaves Ghana with his wife to attend the burial rites. He is aware that by virtue of his father's position as the Alaaḥin's horseman, his wilful death would take place. But when he reaches home and discovers that his father is still alive, he kills himself. He sacrificed his life to ensure that spiritual order is maintained within the cosmos of the Yoruba because of his patriotism. Patriotism is also highlighted in the attitude of Dawudu's wife, the Elders and the people of Oyo.

Tolerance is also a significant theme in the play. The need to understand and tolerate other people's cultural and spiritual way of life is highlighted in the behaviour of the District Officer's (D. O) wife, whose ignorance and lack of tolerance is shown in her attitudes towards the Alaaḥin's funeral obsequies. When she was informed about the nature of the ritual in progress by John, her husband, she threatens to leave if the ritual was not stopped by her husband as evident in their dialogue. The District Officer was initially sympathetic with the tradition of the people and had not considered interrupting the ritual until his wife becomes concerned. It is quite obvious that Jane could not come to terms with her husband's explanation; she reduced the ritual in progress to human



sacrifice and barbarism because she could not rationalise and justify the reason why the king's death should have to claim more lives. At this point, we are witnessing the difficulties associated with comprehending the philosophies of a different tradition. As highlighted in their conversation, Jane on one hand was displaying her humanity, while on the other hand, her ignorance of a different tradition, which she sees as uncivilised.

In terms of characterisation, the play's plot is established by the character of the D. O and his wife because of their decision to interrupt the ritual in progress at the beginning of the play. We see that the D.O is aware of what is going on and he tells his wife about it, but she insists that her husband must stop the ritual. The ritual in progress is visible to them from their window. They could see the drummers and the dancers 'in the moonlight' (p. 55), but no consideration is given to the participants who are paying their respects to their dead king. The lack of tolerance in the character of the D. O and his wife becomes more evident when the D. O enters the king's market in Oyo to stop the ritual in progress.

In exploring Ladipo's characterisation of the District Officer, when I interviewed his wife, Mrs Abiodun Duro-Ladipo about it, she was unfortunately unable to provide me with any recordings or photographic archives of the play, but according to Sola Adeyemi<sup>52</sup> who once came across one of the photographs of the scenes in Ladipo's house, he confirmed that Ladipo was dressed in the uniform of a colonial officer in the play. He also confirmed that Ladipo's face was not painted like a European when I enquired whether that was the case. In all the scenes he appeared, he was wearing the helmet of the colonial British officers, a long trouser and a shirt decorated with medals

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<sup>52</sup> Sola Adeyemi is a writer, actor and theatre scholar of Yoruba origin.

like that of a war hero. In the light of this evidence, we see Ladipo venturing into a different acting territory that is completely different from that of *Oba Moro* or *Oba Koso* where he respectively portrays Alaafin Abipa and Alaafin Sango. Here, he takes on the persona of a British colonial District Officer and his encounters with the Yoruba tradition and became the character, portraying how he conducts himself at home with his wife and when on duty doing his job, how he wears his uniform and how he speaks. In Richard Schechner's exposition on the different levels of performance, he categorised the elements contained in different types of performances and how they can be distinguished, highlighting the part played by the human brain (see 1990: 19-49). He asserted:

Theatrical performance – from trance to Oliver to kathakali – seems to be a peculiar human activity in which there is high arousal of both ergotropic and trophotropic systems while some of the centre – the “normal I” – is held back as an observing-controlling self. Performing training is the development of a number of communicative skills *plus* learning how to arouse the two extremes of brain activity without cancelling out the centre “I” self; the theatrical performer never wholly loses self control. Precisely how this is done in terms of neurobiology remains to be discovered (39).

Therefore, in exploring the D. O's character and the transformations involved, consideration must be given to the rational in Schechner's discussion - for what becomes of a performing artist in the process of 'becoming the character'; the influence and 'power' of the 'brains activity' and 'self control' cannot be undermined. Schechner explained that 'Performing artists', including 'meditators, shamans and trancers' 'work on themselves, trying to induce deep psychophysical transformations either of a temporary or permanent kind. The external art work – the performance the spectators see

– is the visible result of a triologue among: (1) the conventions or givens of a genre, (2) the stretching, distorting, or invention of new conventions, and (3) brain-centred psychophysical transformations of self’ (40-41). As evident in this explanation, Ladipo’s successful portrayal of the District Officer can be attributed to his commitment as a dramatist, his discipline and ability to adapt in acting terms; in other words, what Schechner refers to as a ‘trialogue’ becomes effective. For a performer to engage theatrically with an audience, he uses all the tools at his disposal in ensuring that his performance was well received by the audience; he/she needs to appear convincingly and wants to make sure that that was the case, therefore, they task themselves as argued by Schechner:

The devices of performer training go beyond the physical into realms of stimulation, feigning, pretending, playing around with – all kinds of “as if-ing.” Every performer knows that this kind of playing around is a dangerous game verging on self-deception-as-truth (41).

The Elders and the Women conducting the ritual processions are also very important characters in the play. Their commitment in ensuring that order is maintained is evident in the part they are playing in the ritual rites of the dead Alaafin. We see the Elders leading the procession at the beginning of the play and we see the Women leading the ritual of the Olori Elesin in the king’s market as part of their responsibility for the community of the living, those unborn and the dead.

The calibre of those taking part in the ritual (Elders and Women) is an indication that the participants are members of an inner circle or initiates of a particular cult in the community. For instance, the scene of the ritual being conducted at night under the

moonlight is a powerful theatrical orchestration of the conditions needed for such rituals to take place; that is, sacred rituals as evident in Richard Schechner's performance chart where he categorises the type of sacred rituals that are 'private and restricted', 'conducted in 'sacred' spaces, 'found' spaces and 'outdoor' spaces' (1990: 20). In considering the theatrical context of the scene, we see that Ladipo respectively presents us with a spatial wholeness that combines not only the conduct of the D.O and his wife in private-discussing the nature of the ritual in progress and the D.O, intending to disrupt the ritual so as to please the former who believes that the ritual is barbaric and must not be condoned but also of those participating in the on going ritual. This adequately establishes the plot of the play in highlighting the problems associated with not understanding the belief system of another culture and triggers the thought of the possibility of repercussions, conflicts and disagreements if a violation occurs.

Dawudu is one of the most exemplary characters. As the first son of his father, he responds quickly like a true son to the news of Alaafin's death and as a tragic character, his concern for a peaceful existence in the Yoruba order is highlighted with his death. Before he stabs himself, he confronts his father for bringing shame to the tradition, 'Shame, shame on you my father, shame! Is it in your time that the world is spoilt?' (1964: p. 68) and reminds the people not to forget their history.

In terms of the tragedy of the character of Dawudu and the Elesin, when we consider the importance of the funeral obsequies of the dead Alaafin in relation to the peaceful communal existence of the people, they cannot be regarded as tragic characters because

of the essence of the ritual associated with their death. Their death is as a result of their will to maintain order within the cosmos of the Yoruba as part of their duty to the community of the living and the dead. The death of the Alaaḡin which in itself cannot be seen as a tragedy had already taken place as a natural occurrence which any Yoruba king will inevitably experience, especially after a long reign. Therefore, the death of Ojuronḡbe and Dawudu in the play can only be beneficial in restoring social and spiritual order to the people. The death of the Alaaḡin has created a void on his throne that needs to be filled and this void cannot be filled with the installation of the next king in line to the throne, unless the funeral obsequies of the dead king are conducted in accordance to the demands of the traditional rituals associated with the funeral of Yoruba kings. It is then that communal peace can be restored in the socio-political order of the kingdom because clearance will then be given for the new king to be installed and the fear of the unpredictable repercussions that may have been an obstacle for his installation becomes dispelled. Furthermore, the death of Ojuronḡbe and his son, spiritually reassures the community that the king's soul has finally embarked on his journey safely without any difficulties in transit; as it is the belief that the commander of his horses' soul would accompany him to make his journey smooth to the land of the ancestors.

In bringing to light the role of Ojuronḡbe, the King's *Elesin* (horseman), Obafemi critically examines Professor Robert Armstrong's evaluation of the character's role. Armstrong's analysis was based on the use of 'his mythoform theory' which Obafemi describes as his 'attempts to establish a universal critical platform for treating all mythical tragedies irrespective of cultural differences' (1996: 18). According to Obafemi,

his use of the theory in establishing ‘the cross-cultural validity of the tragic form’ with the example of Ladipo’s *Oba Waja* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* is valid on one level, but questionable on another level. In cultural terms and in some particular ‘ways’, he explained that the theory embodies the attributes of the human consciousness. For instance, he highlighted Armstrong’s acknowledgement of the reaction of the Oyo people in *Oba Waja* in their anger at Ojurongbe’s failure to fulfil his traditional rites, leading to the action of Dawudu, his son who took on the responsibility of ‘dying wilfully’ in his place as ‘cathartic’ from ‘the Aristotelian’ (18) perspective. In evaluating the validity of Armstrong’s theory in relation to the death of Dawudu, Obafemi writes:

While this assertion that Ojurongbe’s ‘role bungling’ is a threat to the community’s sense of security, hence giving rise to fear and terror which Dawudu’s death removes, is accurate, one finds Armstrong’s employment of Aristotle’s theory to establish the universality of the tragic notion untenable as it is not textually vindicated. For instance, while *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of character, *Oba Waja* is not. It is not appropriate to refer to Ojurongbe or Dawudu as the tragic hero in the drama. A drama such as *Oba Waja* centred not on heroism but on social order, does not require a tragic hero (19).

As evident in this response, the communal catharsis generated by the action of Dawudu in performing the duty of his father is acceptable because the community is relieved of the possible repercussions that may otherwise have befallen them for violating the traditional rites, and this is universal in essence, but as rightly expressed by Obafemi, neither Ojurongbe or Dawudu are tragic characters because of the nature of the ritual as part of the Yoruba world view of maintaining both a physical and spiritual order within the cosmos.

Just like Ladipo's other operas, the play is structured with a combination of instrumental music, dance, songs and poetic dialogues, but the nature of the songs and chants in *Oba Waja* are dirges associated with mourning the dead in Yorubaland and the dialogue remains confrontational throughout the play. In Olusola's evaluation of the play, he remarked that Ladipo's 'mastery of Yoruba dirge and his staging of "war dance" are two very significant contributions that he, as an artist, made to Yoruba theatre' (2003: 39). He particularly felt that 'The dirges in *Oba Waja* are so remarkable that they're not easy to match; even in translation' (39).

At the beginning of the play, the instrumental music of the drum and the Agogo (bell) accompanies the ritual procession and establishes the death of the Alaafin. We also see that the Women leading the ritual of Elesin in the king's market enter with drums as part of the musical instruments of the ritual in progress. The importance of the drums is being highlighted here as part of the component musical instruments of such rituals in Yorubaland because the sound and melodies produced with the drums is essential for creating the mood of the occasion. The nature of the music is defined by the crescendo of the drums. In fusing the dirges with the sound of the drums, gaps must exist in the rhythm for the pronouncements of the dirges to be heard. At this point, we are not only being presented with the important role of the drummers in playing the musical instruments, but also the function of the drum languages in communicating important messages about the context of the ritual and the progression order of the ritual. The chanted music conveys the dialogue of the play. But the dialogue is both reverential and confrontational. The

dirges are reverential and are in monodies and threnodies, whilst the confrontational dialogue exists on two levels; the alien and the internal. The alien dialogue is foreign and oppositional, while the internal sings against the oppositional voice in maintaining their tradition.

Another type of music that features in the structural element of the play is the high life music in the fourth scene in Ghana, where Dawudu is enjoying himself in a bar when he hears about the news of Alaafin's death. Apart from providing the play with a change of scenery that shows the socio-cultural dynamics of life in another West African country, this is the first time that Ladipo has used a music that is not entirely Yoruba in his play. This is because the high life music is not indigenous to Yoruba, but a genre that originated in West Africa and became popular in the 1960's and 70's. The music is composed of different musical instruments like the guitar and the conga drums and the lyrics explore different aspects of life. The lyric of the highlife music in the scene is in Ghanaian language to reflect the Ghanaian version of the music and to establish the location.

Dance is also an important element of the play's structure that defines the mood of the ritual and this is accompanied with both the instrumental and chanted songs. This is shown at the beginning of the play where the dancers are dancing and chanting in dirges to the tune of the drums. Dance also comes to prominence in the highlife bar in Ghana, where 'men are drinking beer at the table and others are dancing with prostitutes' (1944: p.65). But it is important to stress that the type of dance that features in funeral obsequies



in Yorubaland is choreographed in slow procession movements and this is why we see it implied in the Elders chant at the beginning of the play, ‘We must not see it. It is forbidden. The king is dead and never shall we see him leaving the palace in procession’ (p. 55). The king cannot be part of the procession because he is dead; therefore procession is highlighted as part of the dance movements for mourning the dead. The mood created by the music of the drum languages, the poetry of the songs, the dialogues and dance are all distinctive to the nature of *Oba Waja*’s subject, therefore emphasising the importance of the ritual. As summarised by Olusola in his tribute to Ladipo, ‘Duro Ladipo lives on in those songs, and in those dirges’, in the same way that his image as Sango can never be forgotten (2003: 41).

The language used in the play mainly derives from the Yoruba oral tradition like Ladipo’s other plays. But apart from the language of Ifa which forms the chanted songs of the Elders and Women and is associated with the ritual in progress, the other language is that of foreigners who have no understanding of the Yoruba culture. For instance, while the language of the Elders, the Women and the Olori Elesin conforms to the realm of the Yoruba cosmology and the Yoruba oral tradition, the language of the District Officer and his wife does not, instead, they speak with a reactionary response that conforms to their own value system and needs as evident in the text of the play.

### **Analyses of *Oba Waja*’s Text**

The text of the play confirms how the language of the play unfolds through the characters concerned as the play progresses; hence, we are able to assess the implications of their

dialogues in accordance to the Yoruba world-view and from a wider universal perspective. The meaning of the language of the play, the songs and the context of the dirges becomes more understandable through an analysis of the context of the text. It is clear from the nature of the Elders and Women's chants that the ritual in progress is related to the rites of the dead, a dirge that identifies who has passed and the importance of the individual as evident in their mourning song.

The importance of the king and the effects of his departure on the communal existence of his people are pronounced through their ritual lamentation. The poetic language of the dirge captures the sorrowful and powerful essence of the ritual of mourning in Yorubaland, but it is important to stress that the nature of the dirges depends on the status of the deceased, how he died and whether he or she was young or old. In this case, it is obvious that the king's burial rite requires a special attention in terms of the context of the ceremony and those involved in conducting the rituals:

Chorus &

Agogo:           We must not see it.

                  It is forbidden

Elders:           The coconut is lost

                  Under the huge silk cotton tree.

Chorus:          Yeeeeee!

                  The coconut has failed

                  To bear another fruit.

                  The iron gongs resound.

                  The funeral gongs

Make us tremble with fear.

Elders: Farewell, farewell,  
We shall never set eyes on him again,  
Unless we meet his double.

Chorus: Ye, ye, ye, ye!  
The king has gone  
The owner of the palace is dead.  
Our father returned home,  
He entered into a deep forest.  
We shall not see him return from there,  
Except in our dreams (1964: p.55)

Elders: We must not see it  
It is forbidden.  
The king is dead  
He has crossed the river of life.  
He has crossed the river into darkness.  
The owner of the palace  
Shall be buried with the beating of gongs.  
The sound of the funeral gongs makes us tremble,  
When wild animals scatter in fear.  
Saworo, ye, ye, saworo (p.55-6).

Women: Ololade, my great husband,  
Ogurogbe, my great husband  
They say is forbidden to see you.  
We must not see you, we must not see you.  
The road death travelled on to capture you

Lies hidden in the bush.

Alafin has become a burning sun,

Shining like red hot iron.

Warn all strangers to leave this town,

Steep all your brooms in magic potions.

The eyes of the dead are gleaming in the darkness

Alafin has become a spirit (p. 56).

In accordance to the Yoruba world view, the farewell song of the elders is a demonstration of their sorrow for the loss of someone special to them; someone who has transformed into another existence. This type of feeling is universal in essence, but the psychological effects are different because of differences in belief systems. Their reference to the crossing of the river into the darkness, confirms part of the Yoruba belief that the soul of the dead will cross the bridge between the lands of the living, to the land of the dead which is the unknown darkness. The intensity of the reverence in homage to the passing of a great personality like the Alaafin is pronounced in the Elders' reference to the musical sounds of the gongs, a salutation reserved for such great personages in Yorubaland. The expression of 'ye' in the Chorus is an indication that mourners are weeping in lamentation and the poetry of their song brings the reasons to light. This feeling is reinforced in the Women's song, the metaphysical power of the king is called upon, through the elements of the sun and red hot iron, as evident at the beginning of the procession.

In continuation of the ritual, the Women in charge of conducting the ritual of Elesin in the king's market intensified the mood of the play. This is conveyed in their chanted dialogue with Elesin and the people of Oyo before the ritual is stopped by the D.O:

Women: One hand by itself cannot lift the load on the head  
 Ajeje—it is a fact.  
 Alaafin must not cross the river alone.  
 Ojurongbe Aremu, commander of the king's horse;  
 Follow in your father's footsteps.  
 The forest will be ashamed,  
 If the elephant eats and he is not satisfied.  
 If the red camwood is used up in the calabash,  
 The child cannot anoint its body for the feast.  
 If your courage runs out,  
 How shall the king confront the gateman of heaven?  
 You, owner of crown, born into a big house,  
 Ojurongbe Aremu  
 Do not allow the world to spoil in your own time.  
 Will you stay behind to eat earthworms and centipedes?  
 Follow your king and share his meal in heaven.  
 Commander of the horse, come forth, we are expecting you.  
 Today you are the owner of the market,  
 Today the town belongs to you.  
 Follow the footsteps of your father.  
 The forest will be ashamed,  
 If the elephant eats and is not satisfied.

The forest will be ashamed

Olori Elesin: Eeoh, eeoh, eeoh, eeoh!

The child is weeping.

Chorus: Eeoh, eeoh, eeoh, eeoh!

The child is weeping

Oloro Elesin: I Ojurongbe, owner of crown,

I am going to heaven to rest.

Chorus: Eeoh, eeoh, eeoh, eeoh!

The child is weeping.

Olori Elesin: No oracle can cure a hunchback

No medicine can heal a cripple

No doctor can cure hunger.

Chorus: Eeoh, eeoh, eeoh, eeoh!

The child is weeping.

Olori Elesin: Who can obstruct the elephant?

He is not an ordinary animal

That could be beheaded with a machet.

He is not an ordinary animal

That can be trapped by the hunter.

If thick creepers try to obstruct his road,

The elephant and the creepers will go together.

Chorus: Eeoh, eeoh, eeoh, eeoh!

The child is weeping.

Women: Ojurongbe Aremu, owner of crown,

Commander of the king's horse

When one reaches the door of one's father's house,

One's courage fails.

But you are the strong wizard

Whose heart has learnt

To resist the thrust of a knife.

You are a spirit

Who drinks water from the foot of the plantain.

Your chest is brown

Like the rat that lives at the foot of the palm,

Arise and stand!

Follow your father's footsteps.

Whether you bring sacrifices,

Or prepare magic potions—

What you are destined to do today you must do.

Today is your day:

Walk freely, owner of the market.

Rejoice, owner of the town.

Do not stay behind to eat earthworms and centipedes.

Today you shall share the king's meal in heaven.

Olori Elesin: Today I shall accompany my king across the river.

No gate-keeper shall bar his way when I am at his side.

Today I shall fly to heaven like the fruit pidgeon.

Today I shall leave you and walk the ground like the hornbill.

Oyo People: Eeoh, eeoh, eeoh, eeoh!

The child is weeping.

The hornbill is sad

When the pidgeon rises to heaven,

Leaving him to stalk the ground!

Olori Elesin: Alantere O! Antere

This day belong to me

Antetere

Nothing can stop me now

Antere

In dreams we shall meet

In riches

And with children

We shall meet

Where there is no more punishment.

Alantere O! Antere (p. 58-60).

In contrast to the language of the mourners which reveals an aspect of the metaphysical world of the Yoruba in relation to their supplication for the dead and the beliefs surrounding the journey of their king's soul to the land of the dead, the language of the District Officer and his wife contradicts the spirit of the ritual in progress:

D.O.'s Wife: For God's sake, John!

Can't you stop this noise?

Can these people never keep quiet?

D.O.: I am sorry, Jane. These people are burying their king.

There is nothing I can do about it. We'll have to put up with it.

D.O.'s Wife: Burying their king?

What are you talking about! I thought they'd buried him last week!

Can these fellows never stop celebrating?



D.O.: The Alafin of Oyo never dies alone.

These people believe that a king must be accompanied by his dignitaries.

Tomorrow, the commander of the king's horse will die a voluntary death,  
in order to accompany his king.

D.O.'s Wife: What?

Do you mean that in the twentieth century we still have human sacrifices in this  
town—and under British rule?

D.O.: This is not human sacrifice. Nobody will kill the man.

He will die by simple act of will.

D.O.'s Wife: And you tolerate that under your own jurisdiction?

Are you not here to bring civilisation to this people?

And you allow these barbaric things to happen?

D.O.: I am here to maintain law and order, not to interfere in people's lives.

D.O.'s Wife: You are here to prevent this type of savagery.

I am disgusted with you. You are letting down the side.

I promise you, that if you will not stop this ugly business then

I will take the next boat home.

D.O.: Now don't get excited. I will see what I can do tomorrow—I'll do

it for your sake. But I assure you that these things are better left alone (p. 56-7).

In considering how the seriousness and importance of the subject of *Oba Waja* was conveyed to the audience through the construction of the script and how it was delivered, the language was neither subtle nor diplomatic. The intensity of this approach is in line with Ladipo's dramatic vision of addressing the inconsistencies of the colonial Christian enterprise with his plays; his early experience as a lay reader in his father's church, his understanding of the values proclaimed by the missionaries and his ability to rationally

discern between the context of the Bible scriptures, the Yoruba belief system and the values projected and imposed by the Christians on their proselytes without considering the implications of their actions contributed greatly to his dramatic approach in *Oba Waja*.

### **Ritual Theatre and the Ritual of Ladipo's Theatre**

By virtue of the nature of ritual as something that is intricately woven with life, time, space, order and the way we live, theatre being an important vehicle for imitating life and re-enacting the bravery, morals, intrigues, sacredness and the rite of passage of the gods, remains a powerful tool for bringing to life the components of ritual and how they manifest. In exploring the importance of ritual and how it is embedded in Ladipo's theatre, it becomes imperative to ask the following questions: What constitutes a ritual? Can rituals be distinguished? Ritual by nature is engineered by life; by the changes we experience and orchestrate daily, whether as reflex or religious actions; tangible and intangible (the secular and the sacred). Rituals are defined and distinguishable by the very nature of the act concerned; whether sacred or secular, how the ritual is conducted, where the ritual is conducted and why the ritual is being conducted.

In theatre, no established rule or model has been concretised for analysing ritualistic plays, but the subject has been an area that continues to attract scholarly attention, as evident in the debates of theorists like Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. Turner for instance explored the context of social drama and its 'relationship' with the process of

‘ritual’; he identified the nature of theatre in communicating the ‘sacred’ ‘mythical’ ‘archaic’ and the ‘ritualistic’ (see 1990: 8-18) and recognises a ‘threshold’ ‘in the rites of passage’ ritual in theatre, which he described as ‘a no-man’s land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural future as anticipated by the society’s normative control of biological development’ (11). He also summarised how ritual is reflected in theatre thus:

Theatre is one of many inheritors of that great multifaceted system of preindustrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos, interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and their solemnity, uses all the sensory codes, to produce symphonies in more than music: the intertwining of dance, body languages in many kinds, song, chant, architectural forms (temples, amphitheatres), incense, burnt offerings, ritualized feasting and drinking, painting, body painting, body marking of many kinds, including circumcision and scarification, the application of lotions and drinking of potions, the enacting of mythic and heroic plots drawn from oral traditions (12).

Schechner, a collaborator with Turner, also believes that every performance is inclusive of rituals which may reflect through every day performance of greetings, emotional displays, family engagements, professional and sporting activities, theatre, dance, rites, ceremonies and spectacular performances, as evident in what Turner refers to as ‘social drama’. He demonstrated this through his theory of the web and the fan (see Schechner, 2003).

Rudolph Laban stated that ‘Movement has always been used for two distinct aims: the attainment of tangible values in all kinds of work, and the approach to intangible values

in prayer and worship. The same bodily movements occur in both work and worship, but their significance differs' (Laban 1950: 4). Therefore, one could see the curtsy of a ballet student to a ballet teacher, the respect in the theatre tradition, the shaking of hands, the court procedure of making an oath of truth, the inaugurations of Ministers or President of Nations, bank holidays, etc, as part of secular tangible rituals. In the African tradition, the ritual of homage to divinities, personification of deities and imitation of spirits are all associated with sacred intangible values. The simple act of kneeling or bending down to the elders that is found in the African culture can only be associated with tangible values, the secular values. The latter is associated with physical and external needs, while the former is linked to spiritual values and worship which is, in my opinion, an aspect of the human soul.

Ritual in African theatre has been a subject of exploration for a number of African playwrights. Ola Rotimi argued that an objective criterion was needed in classifying drama in African ritual (See 1981: 77-80). He explained that since drama is generally accepted as 'an imitation of an action . . . or of a person or persons in action' with the intention of either entertaining, enlightening or combining 'both' (77), not all African rituals are based on imitations and those that are, are re-enactments of certain earthly experiences or the personification of a particular entity or power. This implies that the action of movement is displayed in their presentation to enlighten or to entertain as in drama, while 'others' may just 're-present certain powers without the mimetic impulse to recreate the ways and details of those powers' (77) and this is when it cannot be classed as drama, but pure ritual (Rotimi, 1981: 77). He advised that clear objectivity was

important in discerning what drama is in ritual, since some types of non-imitation rituals have been mistaken for drama. Instances of dramatic and non-dramatic rituals were illustrated with some of the African ritual ceremonies and their differences were clarified. He stated that, 'While the exciting series of "abebe" dance processions that highlight the seven-day long Edi Festival of Ile-Ife cannot be called Drama, the mock-duel scene preceding the festivals is drama' (Rotimi 1981: 77).

He also highlighted the differences between the Gelede masquerades and the Egungun Apidan (*Eegun Alare*) performing tradition, distinguishing Gelede as a type of ritual that cannot be classified as a drama; he substantiated this with the fact that the Gelede only performs the function of appeasing the community of the witches (*awon iya wa*), but no entity or power is being imitated or personified. He stressed that the *Eegun Alare* performance is both ritualistic and dramatic in nature because of the elements of imitation and transformations associated with their performances. This is evident in their ability to transform into creatures like the python using a method he described as 'the magic of adroit costuming' (78) to mutate. In defining drama in ritual, Rotimi concluded that 'it is only appropriate that the word Drama when used to refer to traditional displays should imply an immanence of Suspense and or Conflict within the body of the approved action' and if 'Suspense or Conflict is absent, then the meaning of the term must needs rest on the broader sense of mimesis in the performance' (80).

In Soyinka's exploration of the roles of ritual archetypes in theatre, he focused on Obatala, Ogun and Sango as paradigms, highlighting their importance and how they

manifest. He explained, 'They are represented in drama by the passage-rites of hero-gods, a projection of man's conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonise with his environment, physical, social and psychic' (1976: 1). Man's identity with the role of the archetypes as portrayed in drama was drawn upon as his way of exploring further heights of reality, which allows him to live in the consciousness of the circle of time, even though the creativity may be consciously derived. Soyinka referred to 'the cyclic consciousness of time' (2) as the domain that becomes reachable in the portrayal of the gods in drama. This is in relation to how man can be part of a timeless and a space-less existence as a result of the transformations experienced during a performance which imitates or personifies an avatar or an agent of the cosmic forces. His exposition brought to bear how the rites of the passages of gods can be understood from both a universal and theatrical perspective and the role of man in recognising the symbolic essence of the archetypes through the medium of dramatic expressions, where they become vessels in manifesting the attributes of the gods.

In re-enforcing man's dramatic role of representing the rite of passage of the gods, Ladipo's *Oba Koso* represents a model which embodies the necessary thematic considerations and visual ingredients for this type of theatre. The arena in which the ritual performance of the gods is re-enacted moves beyond the physical stage. This is because of the metaphysical tendencies of such performances; an experience which may manifest in form of a trance, in which the actor becomes immersed in a different realm of consciousness. This experience may be transient or prolonged, but remain an occurrence that sometimes forms part of the rite of passage. In the words of Schechner:

Trance performances are on or even over the edge: self control is reduced to minimum or absent, thus the necessity for helpers – people who stay out of trance specifically to aid those who are in trance, preventing injuries, assisting the trancers as they come out of trance. The crazy lady in La Guardia Place is not in trance because she has no way out. She has been surrendered to, or been taken over by, schizophrenia. The normal “I” self has been permanently abolished (1990: 40).

Erving Goffman, the renowned sociologist and anthropologist who ‘built his work on the basis that everyday life is framed and performed’ (25) stated:

The entranced person will be able to provide a correct portrayal of the god that has entertained him [because of all the contextual knowledge and memories available; that] the person possessed will be in just the right social relation to those who are watching; that possession occurs at just the right moment in the ceremonial undertaking, the possessed one carrying out his ritual obligation to the point of participating in a kind of skit with persons possessed at the time with other spirits (1959: 74; cited in Schechner 1990: 25-6).

In ritual performances, a different state of consciousness that can be described as the void of the gods becomes reachable by the entranced individual. Therefore, in evaluating the context of this discussion, the nature of ritual and the need to devise an ‘appropriate mode’ for the analyses of ritual dramas, what is implicit in the theories and analyses explored here demonstrates that ritual is recognisable in theatre, but because of the complex nature of rituals and their context, it is through researching their origins and

understanding their religious, cosmological, social-spiritual dynamics that the philosophies embedded in them can come to light.

In exploring the ritualistic dimensions of Ladipo's theatre in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*, in relation to this discussion, one must consider the context of their rituals, the origin of the rituals in accordance to the Yoruba world view, the importance and classification of the rituals and how they are integrated into Ladipo's plays. The rituals in Ladipo's trilogy consist of both secular and sacred rituals that are intricately linked with the Yoruba way of life and belief system. The secular rituals reflected in the three plays are associated with everyday reflex actions that Laban refers to as 'tangible' rituals; these types of actions are part and parcel of every day life as highlighted earlier on and they are similar to what obtains in other societies, but may vary in accordance to the gestures applied, depending on the cultural, socio-spiritual and socio-political dynamics of a people. For instance, as evident in *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso* respectively, the verbal greetings and gestures of the chiefs, the Oloris and the people of Oyo to Alaafin Abipa and Alaafin Sango are associated with secular rituals of respect accorded to elders in Yoruba society. But because the Alaafin (king) is the ruler of the land, it implies that he is the most senior in the land irrespective of his age. Therefore, as part of everyday ritual in the palace, whenever he confronts or meets his chiefs, his wives or his subjects, they prostrate in gestures and address him as *kabiyesi* as a mark of respect. Elders and parents are also expected to be respected in a similar way without the use of *kabiyesi*, therefore the greetings will depend on the relationship of the younger person to the elder; children to parents and elders and family members to the family-heads (both immediate and



extended). In *Oba Waja*, Ladipo reflected another type of secular ritual as evident at the beginning of the second act, where market traders are calling on customers to buy their products. This is a tangible/secular ritual that is universal in essence; a reflex action that has become a type of conditioning that is triggered by the need to profit financially and gain materially, therefore the gestures applied and words used are repeated whenever they are in the situation of trading or selling and this becomes conditioned in their way of life as professional traders; Schechner classified 'professional activities' as part of a daily secular ritual. From this explanation, we see that the major difference between this type of ritual and the sacred rituals is that while this is linked to external physical needs, sacred rituals are associated with spiritual needs and worship that requires the co-operation of the agents of the cosmic, therefore metaphysical in nature.

The sacred rituals reflected in the three plays are of different dimensions. In *Oba Moro*, the ritual needed for the appeasement of the ancestors and the gods in order to relocate to Oyo-Ajaka, their ancestral land, is sacrificial in nature and related to the communal existence and well-being of the people of Oyo. The Alaafin ordered the ritual to be conducted in accordance to the religious and spiritual needs of the people, therefore consultation and communication with the cosmic forces of the land was essential in affecting the changes required. The ritual is aimed at effecting positive changes in the community and has been triggered as a result of their belief system in the same way that prayers or meditation can be triggered for the purpose of attaining harmony and peace or making a request for something from the divine - depending on one's religious, spiritual or philosophical orientation and affiliation. In accordance to the Yoruba belief and the

order that prevails when such rituals are being conducted, we see that those called upon to conduct such rituals are either priests or senior members of an esoteric body in the land. This implies that they have been through a spiritual individuation process that stands them in the position to conduct such rituals as evident in the Christian tradition where the reverend or pastor is in charge of the religious rituals. In this case, the Alaafin calls upon the Babalorisha and Iyalorisha as priests and custodians of Ifa and the Yoruba oral tradition. The ritual required divination and it is of a sacrificial nature. In conducting the ritual, we see that the process started in the palace where the priests were calling for their sacrifice to be accepted by the gods, their ancestors and the spirits. The atmosphere required for such a ritual is one of reverence and the ultimate goal is to receive blessings, protection and good favours from the gods and the ancestors. By virtue of the priests' roles as diviners and custodians of Ifa, they have reached a threshold in their spiritual journey that stands them in the position of mediums between the world of the living and the departed (the world of the ancestors; the dead); the world of the orisa (pantheon) and of the spirits. Therefore, for such spiritual and religious rituals, they are required to bridge this gap from time to time for both communal and individual reasons, in order to attain intangible values and also identify themselves with the archetypes.

In *Oba Koso*, one of the most moving rituals was performed by Gbonka when he went to consult and receive the blessings of the witches in the forest at night. His ultimate reason for embarking on the ritual was his desire to be empowered by the witches and the forces of the forest, so that he can defeat Timi in the second fight at Akesan market. He felt that he was being unjustly treated by Sango and the people of Oyo and wanted to be

victorious against them. Therefore, the reason for the ritual is for the attainment of metaphysical powers that can only be linked to intangible values. As a sacred ritual that required chants in form of incantations, Gbonka's status as a highly decorated Yoruba hunter and warrior who belongs to the cult of the Ogun worshipers and the hunters' guild, qualifies and places him in the position to perform such a ritual, in the same way that an Ifa priest or a religious leader will conduct a sacred ritual; his vast knowledge of the Ifa texts, herbs, charms and the forest comes to bear in his interaction with the witches because of the metaphysical depth of his incantations. Since incantations are believed to be potent as a genre of Ifa, Gbonka immerses himself into a poetic recitation that confronts a different realm of Yoruba spiritual consciousness, where he engages with the supernatural forces. It is also important to note that the time of the ritual is at night; a time and a place (the forest) conducive for the operations of the witches in accordance to the Yoruba belief, hence, important to the timing and space of the ritual. As evident in Schechner's chart of how performance spaces are defined by the very nature of the event concerned, Gbonka's ritual fits his criteria of the type of sacred rituals that are conducted in 'sacred spaces', 'found spaces' or 'outdoor spaces' (1990: 20).

In *Oba Waja*, Ladipo focuses on a type of sacred ritual that is only performed whenever a king dies in the Oyo Kingdom. As a rite of passage ritual that may take days to perform and requires the king's horseman to commit 'death', the purpose of the ritual is to maintain a communal socio-spiritual order and to ensure that the journey of the king to land of the ancestors was not a chaotic one as earlier indicated. Unlike Gbonka's incantation ritual which needed him alone to conduct, the funeral obsequies of the dead king required more people to be involved at different stages of the ritual, therefore the

roles of the Elders and the women for instance were paramount to the smooth running of the ritual. This type of ritual can only be classified as an intangible ritual because of its effects on the communal well being. The repercussions of violating the ritual is equally devastating for the communal well being; therefore the ritual has the tendency of generating both positive and negative outcomes. It is also important to note that unlike in Gbonka's ritual, where he uses the medium of ofo (incantations) in communicating with the supernatural forces, the ritual chants and songs here are dirges only applicable for mourning the dead.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Visual Languages of Ladipo's Theatre

#### Introduction

This chapter will bring to light Duro Ladipo's theatrical visual languages, and explores the visual integrity of *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*. The significance of the visual components will be examined in relation to their embodiment and philosophical importance in the Yoruba matrix and from a theatrical perspective. The effect of the stage and scenery will also be explored in bringing to light their wider implications. This is in terms of the performance environment and the spatial interpretation of the scenes. The effects generated and the thoughts evoked as a result of the synthesis of the actors' actions, space, costume, colour, backdrop and props will be examined in line with audience reception and reactions. Apart from this, some of the studies conducted by scenographers, performance theorists and scholars on space and scenography will be brought to bear. Some of these studies have been presented in (Payne, 1976), (Svoboda, 1993), (Howard, 2002), (Oddey and White, 2006), (McAuley, 1999), (McKinney and Butterworth, 2009) and (Collins and Nisbet, 2010).

Through Ladipo's dramaturgies and stage craft, the visual components are fused into his theatrical productions as a statement to highlight their importance and to form part of his dialogue with the audience. But we must first consider and define the term visual languages in relation to Ladipo's theatre.

*Se oju re o sono fun o ni?* (Are you not aware of the implications of what you are seeing?), is a Yoruba saying which directly refers to the importance of what the human eyes see and questions whether the viewer is aware of their implications in terms of meaning or what they represent: that is, the stories linked to them; what functions they perform and why they are displayed and why they are important. Fundamental questions must therefore be asked about the nature of Ladipo's visual composition and the messages conveyed as visual languages.

In bringing to light the components of Ladipo's visual languages, the first obvious reference point for examining how he used them is through a study of his trilogy, *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*. This is so that we can have an understanding of not only how they were presented directly as symbols to enhance the meaning of the plays, but also their wider theatrical implications and their meaning in the Yoruba matrix. It is however important to stress that our photographic evidence of the plays does not truly present us with the spectacular reality of the colour contrast and visual representation of Ladipo's theatre because the type of photographic technology in place at the time was black and white, but the evidence gathered from audience responses and some of Ladipo's collaborators, reveals to us the extent of the visual power of his theatre. For instance, this was Georgina Beier's recollection of Ladipo's theatre:

In 1993 I am trying to remember what Duro's theatre was like when I first saw it more than thirty years ago, before I made backdrops for the plays with the Oshogbo artists who were just beginning their careers. The image that leaps to mind is a blaze of colour, wild dancing, the excitement of a form of singing I'd never heard before and above all the complex orchestra of drums. Sounds that transported one into a

different kind of living (*sic*). But when I look at the photographs of scenes of *Oba Koso* in its formative years I am shocked to see that it looks bleak (1994: 113).

Beier's description of her recollection and experience of Ladipo's theatre not only highlights the effects of Ladipo's dramaturgy on the audience, it brings to bear the feeling that is generated by the visual power of his theatre. But it is important to question whether the audience can actually grasp the full meaning of Ladipo's visual languages; this is in relation to both Yoruba and international audiences. In the case of the Yoruba audience, this will depend on their level of understanding of the Yoruba world. For instance, they may recognise the costumes of the characters and not actually know the full implications of their meaning, especially in relation to the sacred regalia of Sango and the philosophies associated with it. It will also be difficult for a Yoruba person who has no knowledge of Ifa and the Sango cult to understand the implications of a prop like the *ose* (double edged axe), one of Sango's paraphernalia of power. But a Yoruba person who has the knowledge of Yoruba history, religion and cosmology will be able to comprehend their meaning.

For international audiences, the possibility of being able to read the meaning of Ladipo's visual compositions is indeed slim, unless they have resided among the Yoruba and have been involved in the study of Ifa or worship of the Yoruba deities. For instance, we cannot compare the experience of somebody like Susanne Wenger, the Austrian sculptor, who arrived in Nigeria in 1949<sup>53</sup> and decided to spend the rest of her life among the Yoruba people, with somebody without her experience and knowledge of the Yoruba world. She completely integrated herself into Yoruba traditional religion and culture and

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<sup>53</sup> See: <http://kowrykreationsmedia.blogspot.com/2012/01/susanne-wenger-foundation-in-krems.html>.

became an Osun priestess and guardian of the goddess's grove in Oshogbo until her death in 2009; sixty years after her arrival (see Wenger 1990). In fact, we are informed that 'Duro Ladipo's Mausoleum', his final resting place and former home of the Mbari Mbayo Club, 'which he inherited as the eldest surviving son' of his parents 'was developed by his ritual sister Susanne Wenger and her assistant Adebisi Akanji, into Igbomole'; that is, the wilderness of the gods (1990: 25). The philosophical implications of Ladipo's visual languages would not be strange to somebody like Wenger, in comparison to an international audience which has not been through her experience. She recalled her experience of going to see Ladipo's *Oba Koso* in her tribute to him:

I was then married to Ayansola, the traditional drummer and once we had to go to see Oba Ko So. Though it was a good showing, midway into the performance we had to leave because, steeped in ritual as it was, it came to us like a violation of taboo, a violation of privacy. The truth is Duro Ladipo was quite deep and more intense than Kola Ogunmola for instance (Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 41).

From this testimony, we see that Wenger was able to identify the ritual elements of Ladipo's theatre. This is not to say that if international audiences cannot understand the actual philosophical messages of Ladipo's visual languages, they will not perceive their theatrical effects or know that they are symbolic. Of course they will and it will be aesthetically pleasing to them, but only from a subjective perspective in line with the potential and universality of visual languages in being able to convey subjective meanings, irrespective of their actual meaning in terms of their symbolic representation or the motivation behind their creation. In Martin Banham's examination of Ladipo's



theatre, he highlighted the potential of the Yoruba opera in communicating through the visual:

For the Yoruba Opera communicates through so many facets and different languages, with the acting, dancing and music all making statements of importance and precision, so that the visual communication often breaks through the language barrier—a fact, it must be remembered, as vital within Nigeria, where Yoruba is only one of many languages, as it is outside (1976: 22).

The importance of theatrical visual languages as a vehicle for conveying messages to the audience comes to bear in Banham's assessment and substantiates the need to bring to light their actual philosophical implications, apart from their aesthetic qualities, so that they can become more accessible and comprehensible.

In the same way that it is important to bring to light the audience's reactions to the visual dimensions of Ladipo's theatre, it is also crucial to find out how Ladipo arrived at choosing the components of his visual languages and what he wanted to represent in the theatrical space. My assessment of how he chose the components of his visual representations in *Oba Koso*, for instance, is based on what we know about his driving force and what he wanted to achieve with the play.

Ladipo's intense personality and spirituality, his need to educate and portray the Yoruba world order played a major part in the decisions he made about his theatrical visual apparatus in *Oba Koso*. 'Oba Koso' was Ladipo's 'ritual Sango-name' as 'an initiated Sango priest' (1990: 25) and he was aware of how to visually convey the attributes of both the primordial and historical Sango to the audience. For instance, he knew the

colours associated with Sango and his favourite wife Oya, the type of garment he wears, the type of paraphernalia he holds, what his royal stool is made of, the type of musical instruments associated with him, how he styled his hair, the arrangement and order of his court, etc. Therefore, he was particular. We must also consider the fact that Oba Koso was his alter ego in the Sango cult. Therefore, he specifically selected the content of his visual components to represent the actual image of his alter ego. In the words of Chief Ifayemi Elebuibon, a famous Ifa priest and scholar and a one time member of Ladipo's theatre:

All the materials that were used for *Oba Koso* play are traditional. Duro Ladipo acquired the garment and the carved imitation of Sango hairstyle (*agogo*) from Pa Ayodeji, a Sango priest, because he was interested in using all the original materials and paraphernalia of Sango. As you know, in theatre, it is possible for the artist to design their own costumes, but for Duro Ladipo, it was different, he used all the materials associated with Sango. The double edged axe (*ose*) was acquired from Ila-Orangun. The type of wood used in carving the axe is known as *Igi Osun*. Even the mortar that was used is an original Sango mortar; it is not the type that is being carved nowadays or that has been designed by an artist. The *agogo* that Ladipo wore in his character as Sango is also that used by the Sango worshippers. The *laba* (skirt) that he wore and the *Wabi* were all original materials from Sango worshippers. They were all in agreement with Ladipo's use of these materials. This made it possible for the spirit of Sango to dwell in him. If you were close to Ladipo, you would notice that he had taken on the persona of Sango; he was already like Sango himself. For instance, if he were to come into this room and there were ten people sitting, they would all be shocked immediately, exactly the same way Sango would affect people. He had already

taken on the spiritual and physical characteristics of Sango, the deity (Interview with author, 2007).

This evidence gives us a clear understanding of how Ladipo composed his visual environment in *Oba Koso*. The testimonies gathered reveal that the components of Ladipo's visual languages were all carefully and specifically selected.

In bringing to light the importance of Ladipo's theatrical visual languages and their philosophical implications, my analysis of the visual components focus on the significance of the props, costumes and the scenery in relation to the three plays. For instance, since the costumes used in the three plays are generally similar, it will only make sense to discuss them together. So are the props, but distinction will be made in relation to props like the *ose* (double edged axe) which is one of Sango's paraphernalia. Since not all the props are reflected in all the plays, they will be discussed in relation to the particular plays they were reflected in. The costumes under discussion will include sacred regalia, royal garments, accessories like bead necklaces and bangles, stitched cowries, etc; and the props will comprise the paraphernalia, pot, bow and arrow, etc, while the backdrops will be discussed in relation to the scenery of the plays.

### **The Significance of the Props in Ladipo's Theatre**

In bringing to light the significance of Ladipo's props in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*, my evaluation explores the stories and philosophies associated with them, and their links to the socio-political, socio-spiritual and the general world-view of the Yoruba, especially in relation to the revelations of Ifa. As icons and symbols of communication,

when we explore some of the original reasons they were created and used, we are able to understand Ladipo's rationale for using them. In Jan Vansina's exploration of the interpretation of African icons, he stated that 'visual arts carry great weight in any culture' (1984: 102). For instance, in highlighting the importance of the visual implications of the impressions on the Yoruba Ifa divination board, he explained:

The Ardra board is not just a board: it is a board for Ifa divination. It has an effigy of Legba or Esu, the trickster god of Chance and Fate. It carries symbols of divination, and is used for divination. Most of the images around its rims refer to meanings now lost to us. We see only gesturing men and women, animals and a few objects such as tusks – the latter representing wealth – but we cannot make sense of the whole. The user in the seventeenth century could, and probably all these meanings are connected with Fate (101).

This implies that apart from the aesthetic quality of props, consideration should be given to what they may represent in terms of meaning and origin. According to Vansina, 'Icons make all sorts of statements. They can be narrative, signs of identification, comments. But all icons need not make statements. Some motifs do not. Moreover, icons always evoke emotional appeal. In narrative composition the motif becomes an element in telling a story' (1984: 110). He explained that in some cases, 'a narrative becomes mere anecdote' as evident in a 'Kuba cup portraying a man holding a cup which relates to an individual who was known for his propensity to imbibe' (110). In highlighting the differences between those that are making statements about narratives and those that are not, we see that the nature of the latter example is mainly associated with an amusing record of something that occurred, but has no connection whatsoever with socio-political dynamics, religion or spirituality. Therefore, it is representational, but no spiritual or

religious statement is being made as in the case of the Ifa divination board. As clarified by Vansina, ‘Statements indicated by signs, usually signs of identification, were by far the most common’ as evident in how the ‘attributes of the Christian saints identify them’ (1984: 110). In exploring the nature of the philosophies associated with the props in Ladipo’s theatre, it is important to stress that they are not mere representations, but deeply rooted in the Yoruba religious rituals and world view. The props used included hand props and stage props.

In *Oba Moro*, the props reflected in our photographic evidence comprise the *ikoko* (pot) placed in front of Babalorisha in the second scene, the bow and the *ose* (double edged axe) that are respectively held by Oluode and Alaafin in the fourth scene of the play. The use of the *ose* as already highlighted does not only feature in *Oba Moro*, it is one of the most important props in *Oba Koso*, hence in discussing it, my evaluation will identify how it was used in relation to the two plays and explore its significance in the same section.

In exploring the significance of the pot in *Oba Moro*, we are not just looking at an ordinary pot, but a powerful emblem of ritual appeasements, offerings and sacrifices in Yoruba religion and metaphysics (see Plate 6 and 7). For instance, during the annual festival of the goddess, Osun, in Oshogbo, a young virgin carries the deity’s pot of sacrifice from a special location in Oshogbo to the Osun River, where the pot is an essential part of the festival’s ritual in appeasing the goddess to grant her devotees and those seeking her blessing their heart’s desires. According to late Chief Bayo Ogundijo, a

former cultural officer of Obafemi Awolowo University, an Ifa priest, writer, translator and broadcaster, the virgin designated to carry Osun's ritual pot must remain a virgin throughout her seven years in office (interview with author, May 1999). This highlights the degree of self sacrifice involved in matters of rituals in Yoruba religion, as reflective of other religions and esoteric bodies of the world.



Plate 6 Rehearsal of *Oba Moro* in Oshogbo on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1963



Plate 7 A free open performance of Oba Moro in 1963

In line with the Alaafin's dream of fulfilling the wishes of his ancestors to return the people of Oyo to their ancient capital of Oyo Ajaka from Oyo Igboho, the pot is a sign for the ritual in appeasing them. The actions of the characters signify that the ritual is in progress. In Yoruba society, the type of sacrifice being offered will however depend on the nature of the reasons for the sacrifice and the prescription of the oracles. For instance, if one comes across a covered ceramic pot by the crossroads in the early hours of the morning in Yorubaland, the immediate thought that will come to the mind of a Yoruba person who is aware of the nature of Yoruba rituals is that the pot may be for a ritual offering to the gods or the ancestors. In *Oba Moro*, so that the people of Oyo can return safely to Oyo Ajaka with the blessing of the ancestors, the function of the pot is to contain the offerings being taken to their ancestral tombs of Oyo Ajaka.

The bow held by Oluode in *Oba Moro* and Timi's bow and arrows in *Oba Koso* respectively identify them as warriors, archers or hunters. This is because the bow is central to hunters in Yorubaland. By virtue of Oluode's status as a decorated warrior and head hunter, his bow may have been ritualised with powerful charms for different reasons; perhaps to ensure accuracy in his targeting of animals and enemies or so as to protect him from danger (see plate 8).

We see that in *Oba Koso*, the main emblem of Timi's power is his flying arrows of fire which he uses in killing his opponents on the battlefield. But when he turned them against his comrade, Gbonka, who had been on many battle fronts with him, as part of Sango's plot to separate them in the play, we see that it becomes impossible for him to hit his target because his opponent is also a highly decorated warrior whose metaphysical power and incantations protect him from such dangers. Therefore, the efficiency and power of the arrow to kill or inflict wound and pain will depend on the identity of the target and his/her ability as a metaphysician to withstand the arrow.

In relation to the use of the double edged axe (*ose*) in *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso*, the most important metaphor associated with it is that it is an emblem of Sango, his totem of identification, power and authority. By virtue of his position as the Yoruba demiurge of lightning and thunder, we are informed that the *ose* is the paraphernalia he uses in evoking thunder and lightning that produces the thunderbolts. As a warrior and metaphysician, he uses the *ose* both as a defence mechanism and as a weapon in sending havoc upon his enemies through the agency of lightning and thunder. The axe is carved



with wood and the figures drawn on either side are thunderbolt stones. Sometimes, a sculpted woman in prayer posture forms the base of the axe.



Plate 8 Duro Ladipo and Tijani Mayakiri in *Oba Moro*, 1962 (Photo: Nina Fischer)

In exploring the mythological story of how Sango acquired the paraphernalia, Elebuibon confirmed that the story is revealed in the Odu of Ifa Irosun Osa, where Sango is referred to as *oke para laja* (one who calls on thunder to settle disputes). According to the oracle, Sango was surrounded by enemies and in order to protect him from harm and empower

him, the oracle prescribed a ritual for him to perform; he was asked to make offerings of 11 cocks, 11 sacks of cowries<sup>54</sup> (*oke owo mokanla*) and some male stones (*ako okuta*). He was additionally instructed to always take a stone with him anywhere he went and that became a regular practice. Therefore, whenever he detected he was being discussed negatively or conspired against, he would take his stone and throw it in the direction of the culprits and fire would explode. But after a while, it became too burdensome for Sango to always throw stones, hence the stones were replaced with the double edged axe in accordance to the instructions of Ifa.

In highlighting the nature of the power associated with the *ose*, it is important to stress that no other divinity in Yoruba mythology has this type of power. According to Ayo Opefeyitimi, an expert in Ifa oral literature at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, ‘the *ose* is symbolic of power’ and ‘this power is unrivalled in the sense that it is unique to Sango’ (Interview with Author, 2007). The visual image of the *ose* is symbolic of penetration; it implies that Sango has the power to penetrate anywhere: including humans. Therefore, anytime it rains with heavy thunder and lightning in Yorubaland, some people will immediately refer to Sango, as it reminds them of his anger, power and attributes of being able to penetrate the most hidden of crevices. The fear associated with Sango is therefore called upon whenever there is thunder because it is believed that his anger manifests through this element, and this explains the type of awe associated with Sango.

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<sup>54</sup> Cowries were also used as legal tender for payments in those days in Yoruba society.

The use of *ose* in *Oba Koso* can be rationalised in the sense that the play is associated with both the mythological and historical Sango, but in *Oba Moro* where Alaafin is holding the *ose* during the first staging of the play in 1962, the only other reason one can give for its use apart from those already mentioned is that Ladipo played the character of Alaafin in the image of his alter ego, since his ritual name in the Sango cult was Oba Koso; it was a kind of preparation for his next task of actually taking on the character of Sango in *Oba Koso*.

Also included in the hand props used in *Oba Koso* are the gourd (*sere*), horsetails (*irukere*) and the *bata* drums. As one of Sango's paraphernalia, the gourd is known as *sere* and it is named after one of Sango's wives, whom he divorced because she forgot to reserve his part of a meat sacrifice that was brought as offering to his shrine by a barren woman. The woman had given birth after a consultation with Sango and had brought an offering to show her gratitude to him, but Sango was away from home at the time. Sere, his wife, was responsible for preparing and sharing the meat, but she forgot to reserve any for Sango. According to the myth, Sango in turn asked her whether the head, the shoulder, the leg or any part of the meat was reserved for him, but each time he did, Sere responded, *otan yanyan*, that is, it is completely finished. In the words of Elebuibon, the Ifa verse related to the incident states: '*Otan yanyan lodifa fun Sere ti nse igbaju Sango*' (The Ifa oracle reveals to Sere, the wife of Sango, that it is completely finished). Therefore, when their relationship ended, Sango not only named the gourd after Sere, it became one of his paraphernalia of power which he uses in hypnotising people to calm

down. *Sere* is a type of small gourd with an extended neck which is held as handle by Sango. It contains seeds that make sounds when they hit against its walls and it is this sound that hypnotises people whenever Sango shakes it. In my discussion with Opefeyitimi, he explained that the function performed by *sere* in producing sounds that actually hypnotise people can only be explained in ‘metaphysical’ terms, as ‘it disabuses any plan to harm Sango’, especially when on stage; ‘it works on the psychology of people’, he commented (Interview with author, 2007).

In relation to the horsetail (*irukere*), another of Sango’s hand props in *Oba Koso*, it also signifies power, authority and wealth and it is associated with kingship, royalty, chieftaincy and priesthood in Yorubaland. It is also sometimes held by the *egungun* masquerades. It makes a metaphoric statement, indicating the identity of an individual who is a king, a member of the royal family, a chief, a priest or a priestess. For example, in the second scene of *Oba Koso*, Timi is made the king of Ede and as reflected in the original Yoruba script of the play, we are informed:

*Awon ara Ede lo gbe Ewu Oye; Irukere ati fila ola ati ileke oye; nwon wo o fun Timi; nwon si fi je oba won. Eyi ya Timi lenu pupo nitoripe oun ko reti iru ola bayi lati odo awon ara Ede* (Ladipo, 1970: p. 19).

The people of Ede brought the garment of installation; the horsetail and hat of wealth and the installation bead; they dressed Timi with them; and they pronounced him their king. Timi was surprised about their gesture as he was not expecting such an honour from the people of Ede (my translation).

This is a demonstration of one of the rituals involved in the installation of kings and chiefs in Yorubaland. Hence the horsetail becomes one of the visual identifiers of status in the socio-political order of the people.

The use of the *bata* drums as one of the hand props and as the dominant musical instrument in *Oba Koso* is synonymous with Sango because of his reputation as a performing artist, his status as the patron saint of musicians in Yoruba mythology and being responsible for giving the drums the name *bata*. The drum is a double conical drum which makes thunderous sounds. It is made from the *Aayan* tree, the very type of tree which Sango was reported to have hung in. Therefore, in terms of the visual implications of the musical instrument in *Oba Koso*, we are not only being metaphorically directed by Ladipo to examine the link between the drum and the mythological Sango, but also in relation to the historical Sango. Since we are informed that the historical Sango was also a performing artist who danced to the tune of the *bata* drums, his suicide in a tree that is used in making the musical instrument he loved denotes a statement of immortality; his transformation in the tree triggers his memory in reverence whenever the drum, a product of the tree, is played or seen. Therefore, the thought of both the mythological and historical Sango is evoked in the drum on stage.

In exploring the mythological story of the drum, Elebuibon explained that Sango came to be associated with the *bata* drum because he had a friend who was a drum maker and a master drummer known as Bata. The story says that Bata married Molegbe, one of Sango's wives. After Bata's involvement with this particular wife of Sango, he became

afraid of the power and strength of Sango as a warrior and a king. He thought that Sango would be angry and kill him, so he decided to appease Sango by performing some rituals. But when Sango became aware of Bata's love for Molegbe, instead of being angry with Bata and Molegbe, he sanctioned their marriage and additionally gave his *Arugba* (the calabash carrier in his shrine) to him as a second wife. Bata used the story to compose a song which Sango loved and danced to when he heard it. This musical exploration brought them closer together as friends and made them both very happy. One of the lines of the song that was composed by Bata with the names of the wives, using the *bata* drum is as follows:

*Mogba Molegbe, mogba Arugba, mogba Molegbe, mogba Arugba*

I took over Molegbe and the calabash carrier (my translation).

Sango's relationship with his friend and his love for the drum inspired him to name the drum after him.

The mortar (*otita or odo*) used as Sango's royal stool in *Oba Koso* is both a stage property and a hand prop. As a hand prop, we see that at the beginning of the play, Sango's last wife is seen bringing it to the stage as a royal stool (see 1970: p. 6). Sango was the only king who was known to sit on a mortar, instead of a normal royal seat or chair. His mortar has been specially ritualised for him; it is symbolic of part of his metaphysical power. It is believed that when he sat on the mortar, he had the power to effect change and defeat his enemies. Therefore, it acts as a kind of protective shield. As a performing artist, he takes his mortar with him to all performances, in the same way the mortar is taken to the stage for Ladipo in his characterisation of Sango in *Oba Koso*. The

belief that whenever Sango sat on the mortar, he was completely free from negative forces was brought to light because of the ritualistic statement made with the mortar at the beginning of the play; the homage paid to him by his last wife and the palace poet, Iwarefa, after bringing the mortar to the stage and the thunderous sound of the *bata* drums which accompanied the ritual, along with the fact that Sango's own mortar was different from other mortars because of the distinctive facial representation of big eyes carved into it. Since Sango is also referred to as *oloju orogbo* (one with eyes like bitter kola-nut) and the colour of bitter kola-nut is white, can his mortar's eyes be representational of his metaphysical eyes? I believe this is related to an aspect of the ritual and function of the mortar.

Elebuibon explained that the revelation regarding the mortar is reflected in the Ifa Odu of Okanran Meji, where it was revealed to Sango that he had been on too many warring expeditions and needed to have a home base for settlement so that he could have a meaningful life. He was asked to perform the ritual of *ibudo* (a place of rest and comfort). The ritual included the offering of four fishes, four rats, four cocks and four pigeons. The ritual was performed and Ifa ordered an *otita* or *odo* (mortar) to be specially made for him. The mortar was made in accordance to Ifa's instruction to differentiate it from other mortars; he gave instructions for two eyes to be carved into the mortar and that is why Sango is always referred to as the one with the bitter-kola nut eyes (*oloju orogbo*). The personalisation of the mortar also symbolises that his wealth and riches will always come to him wherever he finds himself sitting.

It is however important to be curious as to the reasons why Sango's royal stool is a mortar which is associated with women. We know that the mortar is a tool used by women in Yorubaland and other parts of Africa for pounding and preparing their staple food, but why is it a paraphernalia of power for Sango? Is it because he has close metaphysical link with women? These questions are important because we also know that Sango plaits his hair and dresses in a woman's skirt. Is the mortar representational of his spiritual freedom and intimacy with women? Perhaps, as it was also a woman who must always bring the seat to his palace as evident in *Oba Koso*. So far, we know that his *ose*'s base is sculpted in the image of a woman in prayer position; we know that *sere*, his paraphernalia for hypnotising was named after his wife who was once in charge of certain rituals in his shrine; we are aware that instead of punishing Molegbe for being involved with Bata, he blessed their marriage and additionally gave Arugba (his calabash carrier) to Bata for a wife. Therefore, we see that Sango's attitude to women generally is one of caution; he avoids being violent towards them and tries to accommodate them, even by keeping their memory through the paraphernalia he holds. His closeness to women is clearly demonstrated in *Oba Koso*, through his relationship with his favourite wife, Oya. But when we examine his reactions in other instances, we see that contrary to this type of thoughtful behaviour, he reacts and destroys in anger. As reflected in one of the myths, which Timi refers to in his praise of Sango in the first scene of *Oba Koso*:

O ba baale jiyān gangan tan

O tun wa p omo re s iloro! (Ladipo 1970: p.5)

After a meal of pounded yam with the head of the family,

You killed his son on the porch! (1970: p. 72).



We can see from this latter example that compared to his relaxed attitude to women, he reacted instantly without even considering that he had just finished a meal with the boy's father. This is part of Sango's unpredictability. Destructive action is in line with his natural attribute of anger as a warrior and a god associated with immediate justice. But his deep love and connection with women somehow gives them a special place in his heart; so that even when you expect him to react negatively to them, he finds a way of not doing so.

In relation to the props used in *Oba Waja*, we are unable to locate any surviving visual record of the play, we do know that Ladipo was holding a British police officer's baton in his portrayal of the colonial British officer, but it is important to stress that as the prop itself is not of Yoruba origin, my assessment of its visual significance is limited to the psychological effect of what it represents as paraphernalia of law enforcers. For instance, in the same way that a hunter will be seen holding his bow and arrows which he uses for hunting and protecting himself from harm, the baton represents a weapon of defence for a police officer in case of an incident, but essentially it is one of his emblems of office, power and authority.

In bringing to light the importance of these props in Ladipo's theatre, it is crucial to examine the parts they played in enhancing his plays. Apart from adding to the overall dramatic effects of the plays, without the use of the props the dialogue may not have been as meaningful as it is. Ladipo's preoccupation with the re-enactment of rituals in his plays demands the use of these props because they are intricately connected with his

ritual displays and since some rituals are dramatic by nature because of the imitations involved, the props can only add to the dramatic effects of his plays.

In enhancing the dialogue and communication in the plays, we also see that the props played a major role; for example, in the first scene of *Oba Koso*, when Gbonka and Timi were preparing to go back to war, Timi refers to the power of his arrows when he says:

I am Timi with the flaming arrows.

No war can capture me

No war can injure me.

Anybody who ignores me

Is pulling disgrace by the leg!

When I shoot my arrow

It will set alight anything it hits.

Anybody who ignores me,

Is pulling disgrace by the leg!

We see that through the dialogue the function of the arrow is being highlighted to reinforce its visual presence as a prop, creating a better understanding of the play and the symbolic representation of the prop. In Gay McAuley's evaluation of the potentials of objects in a performance space, she explained:

A thing on the stage becomes an object if it is touched, manipulated, or even simply looked at or spoken about by an actor. This means that items that would normally be seen as part of the set (doors, furniture, pictures) can become objects, elements of costume can become objects if touched by someone other than the wearer, and the wearer, too, can transform an element of his or her own costume into an object by taking it off or using it in some way beyond its customary vestimentary role (200: 176).

Apart from highlighting how the functions of objects can change and how stage properties or set can be pushed to other boundaries in performance, to take on the role of objects or props as a result of just looking, touching or talking about them, the dimensionality of the functions of objects and their potential implications in a performance space comes to bear in McAuley's explanation and substantiates the reference made by Timi to his 'flaming arrows'.

Furthermore, in terms of the identity of the characters, the importance of using the prop is significant in highlighting their attributes. For instance, without Ladipo's use of the paraphernalia of Sango in his characterisation of the god, the impact of the play in relation to its visual power and dramatic effect would not have been so strong. The impact of visual communication is significant in the enhancement of an audience's understanding of a performance, particularly plays from other cultural traditions that carry emblems of their view of the world.

In addition to this, because of Ladipo's vision of keeping the historical, socio-political, the religious and spiritual narratives of the Yoruba alive through his theatre, his use of these props opens a new window into understanding the philosophies associated with the Yoruba matrix.

### **The Significance of the Costumes in Ladipo's Plays**

In highlighting the nature of costumes used in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*, and exploring their significance, it is important to stress that they are all Yoruba in origin,

except in *Oba Waja*, where Ladipo dresses in uniform in his portrayal of the British district officer. In Yoruba society, the type of garment a person wears, the colour, the design, the texture and type of fabric used in making the garment tells a story about the individual. The social class, wealth, position and profession of an individual can be determined by the way he/she dresses. For instance, if the fabric of the garment was a woven *aso oke* and the person was wearing bead necklaces and wrist bangles, he or she may be a member of a royal family or a chief. Ifa priests and devotees of Obatata, the Yoruba god of reason and the arch divinity of the Yoruba pantheon, are easily recognisable because they are known for dressing in white. So also are the Yoruba hunters who are distinguished for the type of hat they wear and the style of their costume. From a universal perspective, we can also determine the profession of an individual just by his/her way of dressing. For example, medical professionals, soldiers, policemen, etc; can be identified in their distinctive uniforms.

The Yoruba traditional costumes used in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja* can be categorised into different groups, the ordinary everyday garments that people would wear, the royal costumes and the ritualised sacred regalia. The ordinary costumes reflected in the plays are those worn by women and men in Yoruba society, but sometimes, ritualised regalia can be made in the style of everyday costumes.

Like most societies of the world, there is however a difference between the way women's garments are made, styled and worn, compared to those of the men. Therefore, they can be distinguished. The ordinary women's costumes in the plays are made up of *Iro*

(wrapper), *bubu* ( loose top with round neck and large sleeves) and *gele* (headtie), whereas the men's costumes include *buba* (men's loose top with sleeves), *sokoto* ( loose trouser with waist strings for adjustments), *dansiki* (sleeveless loose top, with length usually to the knee area) , *agbada* ( loose flowing top, with length usually below the knee area and sometimes around the ankles; it is sleeveless and designed to be manipulated for maximum comfort) and *fila* (hat). Some of the costumes are made with fabrics designed using the traditional textiles hand dyeing techniques and Yoruba woven textiles, while some are made with machine printed fabrics. These costumes reflect an aspect of the social characteristics of the Yoruba people.

The royal costumes used in Ladipo's plays are associated with Yoruba kings and members of their household. We are presented with a good description of some of these costumes in *Oba Koso* as reflected at the beginning of the original script of the play in relation to Sango's wives. We also have photographic evidence of some of the performances, although only in black and white. In describing the costumes, Ladipo explained:

Awon Iyawo nro aso pupa laisi ewu, nwon a si maa fi kele (Ileke) si orun (1970: p.1)

The wives are dressed in red wrappers without tops and their necks are adorned with bead necklaces (author's translation).

The costumes described here in relation to the wives of Sango are reflective of one of the ways in which royal wives are expected to dress in Yoruba society. But it is important to know that Sango's colour as a deity is red. Therefore the red costumes of Sango's wives

in Ladipo's *Oba Koso* are a reflection of Sango's personality as a deity, but are also an expression of their wealth and power as members of the royal family.

The wrappers are usually made with expensive *aso oke* (hand woven fabrics) which are sometimes specially woven for the royal household. As described above, the cloth is wrapped around their body with no top, but the wrapper is styled in such a way that their breasts are covered and their necks are adorned with the royal beads. They also wear beads around their waist as a symbol of beauty. This style of dressing is however not the only way that the royal wives dress. The type of costumes they wear, the colour and style of the garment would also depend on the occasion they were celebrating. Therefore, they can also be seen in elegant looking wrappers (*iro*) and tops (*buba*) with their hair tied with head-ties (*gele*) and their costumes accessorised with beads around their necks and waists. They sometimes also use lengths of cloth as accessories which they additionally wrap around their waist and may also be holding a horsetail. These wives are known as *Olori*, as reflected in Ladipo's *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso*, and they can be visually recognised by the way they dress. Hence, when they are seen, they command respect. Their hierarchy in the socio-political order of the Yoruba is reflected in their dressing as members of the King's family. This also applies to the heir to the throne and the other princes and princesses.

When we examine Oya's costume, as the only wife of Sango who is prominent in *Oba Koso*, we see that the colour is dominated by red like that of her husband and her neck is adorned with a variety of traditional royal beads. The *agogo* (helmet) she is wearing is

also the same as that of her husband (see Plate 1). Ladipo, as Sango, is wearing the sacred regalia of Sango which comprise the *gberi* (vest), the long red skirt (*laba* or *yeri*), which is attached with leather flaps known as *wabi*. His *gberi* is accessorised with cowries and across his chest from his neck, a girdle made with cowry shells hangs as part of his regalia's accessories.

In exploring the symbolic representations of these sacred costumes and accessories as visual languages and the messages being conveyed, the stories linked with them are intricately linked to the Yoruba mythology, religion, metaphysics and spirituality. When we examine the implications of the beads for example, we are not just looking at ordinary beautiful necklaces and they are not just worn because they are aesthetically pleasing to the eye. For instance, those worn by Ifa priests in Yorubaland can be distinguished by their distinctive green and red colour which identifies the individual as a priest; therefore even if the individual is a boy of 8 years old, he must still be given the respect and acknowledgement of a diviner and a messenger of Ifa.

The beads worn by kings and chiefs in Yorubaland are also not ordinary beads; they are generally called *akun*, but those worn by kings have a spiritual name known as *Ejila Asebor*. *Ejila* means twelve in Yoruba and the literal interpretation of *Ejila Asebor* is the twelve beads that produce deities. Hence, anyone seen wearing *Ejila Asebor*, is a personification of the deities because each of the colours associated with the beads is a representation of a deity. Therefore, this implies that the Yoruba kings are embodiments of the deities and this is why they are referred to as *alase ekeji orisa* (one next to the

deities). This also means that they have the command of deities in terms of the potency of their words since *ase* implies the ability to command at will. By virtue of this link, it means that they share from the power of primordial deities like Orunmila, Esu, Obatala, Ogun, Sango and Osun. In terms of knowing which of the colours represents a particular deity, we are informed by Olusola Ajibade that Ejila Asebora is made up of ‘five primary and seven secondary colours’ which respectively represent the minor and the major deities of Yorubaland (interview with author, 2007). This is not to say that there are only twelve deities in the Yoruba pantheon, as this is mainly in reference to their symbolic representations and the fact that some of these deities have more than one colour. According to Ajibade, all the colours associated with these deities can be physically seen on the beads (interview with author, 2007). For instance, Esu is associated with red and black, whereas the colour of Orunmila and Obatala is pure white. A colour like red is not just associated with one god; deities like Ogun and Sango are strongly associated with it. Therefore in Ladipo’s characterisation of King Sango, he brings to stage the visual representation of all these deities too, and so does Oya, his wife, because she is also a deified goddess, hence in Abiodun Ladipo’s characterisation of Oya in *Oba Koso*, she is not just representing a goddess, her beads are also a representation of these deities because we are informed that Sango shares everything with her as a wife, including charms and the colour of their make-up and costumes (see plate 9).





Plate 9 Chief Mrs Abiodun Duro-Ladipo as Oya in *Oba Koso*, during an American tour (photo: unknown)

Oral tradition revealed that Sango had seventeen wives, but Oya was the most fashionable and elegant of them. According to Elebuibon, the reason she became Sango's most popular wife was because of her sophistication and her ability to initiate 'romantic adventures'. For instance, in one of the myths she was sent by Sango to go and collect the secret medicine which he uses for emitting fire from his mouth from his source, but after she collected it, she decided to taste it because she thought it might be harmful to her husband. When she delivered it to him, he tasted it not knowing that Oya had already tasted it. Hence, in the process of telling Oya to relax and sit down (*Oya joko*), fire was

produced from his mouth. And when Oya replied to him, saying, “I don’t want to sit down Sango”, she also emitted fire from her mouth. This occurrence prompted an immediate question from Sango, how come you are also bringing fire from your mouth? And Oya replied, “I was afraid, I did not want you to be poisoned, so I tasted your medicine first”. We are informed that this was a common practice in those days; whenever a wife cooked for her husband, she would taste it first in front of her husband to prove that she had not poisoned the food. Therefore, as reflected in *Oba Koso*, we see that their relationship was very intimate, they shared certain things together both physically and metaphysically and Ladipo’s emission of fire in his characterisation of Sango is directly related to this attribute and his use of a particular type of traditional medicine. In the words of Elebuibon:

The fire that Sango produces from his mouth was made possible because of a type of traditional herb. This is what the Sango worshippers use and Ladipo also used it to perform when he was alive. When he appears on stage and opens his mouth, the fire comes out. Some people put something like spirit in their mouth which they spit out on a lighted match stick to produce fire, but there is a type of traditional medicine which can be concealed in the mouth to produce fire; something like *Ikobere* (a type of fire producing herb). Once it is in the mouth, it can be spitted out to produce real fire (interview with author, 2007).

The type of red associated with Sango and Oya is called *osun*, which is produced from a tree known as *igi osun* (the *osun* tree) As Sango’s closest wife, we are told that she assisted him in doing his chores and deputised for him during his performances. For instance, whenever Sango was performing and got shot in one of the scenes with a gun, a

particular large *osun* fabric (red cloth) was used in covering his body in order to resurrect him back to life. This also occurs whenever the Sango worshippers are performing; one of them performs the act of being physically cut into pieces and the same type of fabric is used in covering the individual, so as to bring the person back to life in one piece again. The cloth contains Sango's metaphysical power and that is why he becomes human again (interview with Elebuibon and Opefeyitimi). According to Elebuibon, when you examine Sango's shrine, apart from coming across all his paraphernalia and red costume, you will also see the red (*osun*) cloth; '*tori aso osun gan ni agbara ti Sango ma nlo*' (because Sango's power is actually contained in it).

As Sango's most intimate wife, Oya is reported to have based her vocation on the preparation of the red colour and trading in kolanut, as evident in one of the songs dedicated to her:

Mo wo Oya de iso osun, mi o bo Oya

Mo wo Oya de iso Obi, mi o bo Oya

Nigbga ti mo wo Oya de iso bata, mo bo Oya niso bata, nibi tin gbe lajo mora

I went looking for Oya in her red colour shop, she was not there

I went looking for Oya in her kola-nut shop, she was not there

But when I got to the *bata* shop, I saw Oya dancing intensely to the tune of the *bata* drum.

In this song, we see that Oya is not only referred to in relation to red *osun* colour and her sales of kolanut, but also in relation to *bata* which her husband loves. Therefore, Oya also shares the love of dancing and the *bata* music with Sango as part of their intimacy. In *Oba*

*Koso*, after the death of Sango, contrary to her usual brightly coloured red garment, Oya is seen in a black wrapper cloth in one of the performances (see plate 10). This is symbolic of mourning; an expression of grief and sorrow. In Yoruba society, whenever a man dies, his widow is expected to dress in a black garment for forty days as part of the tradition of mourning her dead husband.



Plate 10 Abiodun Ladipo in her portrayal of Oya; mourning for her husband's death, Berlin Festival, 1964.

(Photo: Berlin Festival)



Plate 11 Duro Ladipo as Sango, wearing the *agogo* headgear at the Mbari Mbayo Club, Oshogbo, 1963

The headgear that is worn in *Oba Koso* by Sango and Oya is known as *agogo* and it is a reflection of what they also shared together as an intimate couple. The helmet (*agogo*) represents Sango's hairstyle. According to the Yoruba oral tradition and mythology, both the primordial and historical Sango were known for plaiting their hair and dressing like women. Therefore, whenever Sango wanted to dress up, Oya would plait his hair like hers and assist him in rubbing the red *osun* powder on his face.

The vest worn by Ladipo in *Oba Koso* is representational of Sango's ritualised vest known as *gberi*. His skirt represents Sango's *laba*, which is also known as *yeri*; and attached to his *yeri* are leather flaps known as *wabi*. Hence, his costume is representational of Sango's sacred regalia. The dominant red in the costume is associated with Sango's power as a deity. Therefore when Sango is seen, the first message that comes across is one of awe and beauty. In addition to this, his appearance in a woman's costume and plaited hair suggests the message of femininity. As earlier indicated, the mortar he uses is associated with women, but we also know that he was the only deity and king who plaited his hair and dressed like a woman. According to another explanation of the significance of a man dressing like a woman, some custodians of the Yoruba tradition believe that whenever a male devotee of a particular deity plaits his hair, he automatically becomes the spiritual partner of that deity just like a husband and a wife.

In Ladipo's visual representation of Sango, we see that his costume and general visual appearance is an embodiment of the deity as revealed in Yoruba mythology and this brings to bear the consciousness of the deity in Ladipo. Apart from his costume representing the sacred regalia of Sango, he also performed certain rituals with them to appease the spirit of Sango. From a visual perspective, his *gberi* is accessorised with cowries and powerful charms. His skirt (*yeri* or *laba*) represents that of Sango which we are told is made up of 201 pieces of strips taken from the skirt of women belonging to the cooperation of *awon iya mi* (our mothers or the witches); this confirms his deep metaphysical link with women and the reasons for his close association with them. In one

of Sango's praises, he is referred to as *akata yeri yeri, oko Oya* (the husband of Oya, one that wears the flowing skirt).

According to Opefeyitimi, *Erindinlogun*, a particular type of divination paraphernalia associated with Sango worshippers is also linked to women; that is, to *awon iya mi, aje* (our mothers, the witches). He explained that Sango worshipers are the owners of *Erindinlogun* and the paraphernalia can not be used or understood unless the user has some element of witchcraft because the interpretation is so deep that the individual needs to be a little extraordinary. Furthermore, we are also informed that Sango's skirt requires blood from time to time, therefore, during Ladipo's tour of Brazil in 1975, 'a sheep was slaughtered from time to time and the blood splattered on the wabi attached to his skirt'.

In Elebuibon's words:

When we went to Brazil, the governor of Sao Paulo always sent a sheep every Saturday. This was in 1975. He always sent it to be sacrificed for Sango. It was on Ladipo's Sango costume that the blood was splattered. This ritual contributed to bringing the consciousness of Sango into Ladipo. He used the original costume of Sango; there is no doubt about that (interview with author, 2007).

In relation to the costumes of Oluode in *Oba Moro* and Timi and Gbonka, the warlords in *Oba Koso*, they are representational of the ritualised regalia of the Yoruba renowned hunters and warriors. In Yorubaland, whenever a warrior or a hunter was going to war or to the forest to hunt animals, he would be expected to wear this type of ritualised garment which had been infused with traditional charms to protect him from the enemy or the dangers of the forest; these garments are stitched with cowry shells and other adornments

which perform metaphysical functions. As part of the functions of the charms, a warrior may become invisible to his enemies or even disappear in times of danger. For instance, in relation to Gbonka's costume in *Oba Koso*, Georgina Beier explained:

This costume was not designed in the abstract, it grew from one performance to the next because as the actor lived his part more intensely he needed more and more magical charms to protect him which he sewed onto his danshiki. The garment was no longer a theatre prop but a marvellous embodiment of Gbonka himself as 'played' by Ademola Onibonokuta (1994: 113).

Other actors' costumes were also revealed in Beier's recollection. The actor who succeeded Onibonokuta, for instance, 'would not dare' use his 'costume' because of the power of the costume (1994:113). She explained that the 'giant' that *Oba Koso* became was not planned or anticipated and if plans had been put in place, 'it would have stunted the growth of the theatre', therefore, sensitivity came to play in how they embraced 'little innovations an actor might introduce on the spur of the moment, an impromptu detail which would become responsible for deepening the meaning of that particular moment of a scene' (Beier, 1994: 113-4).

## **The Significance and Effects of Stage and Scenery in Ladipo's Plays**

### **Early Scenery in Ladipo's Plays**

In exploring the importance of scenery in Ladipo's trilogy, my analysis focuses on *Oba Moro* and *Oba Koso* since we have no record of the scenery in *Oba Waja*. It is also important to stress that the visual evidence we have of *Oba Koso* is much stronger than that of *Oba Moro*, therefore, in relation to the scenery in *Oba Moro*, my visual



exploration is limited to the available photographic evidence we have of the scenes. We are aware that Ladipo's main performance space at the Mbari Mbayo in Oshogbo was not a purpose built traditional theatre space with all the modern theatre facilities and equipments, but what can be regarded as a found space which he creatively adapted to suit his performance needs and that of his audience. We also know that he toured extensively, performing nationally and internationally to audiences in other types of spaces, including outside spaces to passing audience.

According to Alison Oddey and Christine White, 'found space directly involves Scenography and Performance', hence, 'the skills of the theatre artists are provoked to envisage what is possible' (2006:14). Oddey and White's assertion directly highlights the importance of scenography in a found space like that of Ladipo, where the artists involved worked together to create the backdrops, but unlike the proscenium theatres, where light sometimes plays a major role as part of the visual interpretations of the scenes, Ladipo's performance space at the Mbari Mbayo club was not equipped with this type of lighting facility and the lighting of the space did not form part of the visual interpretation of the play. But we know that 'a few' lighting 'spots' were mounted to provide the space with basic light (1994: 15). Therefore my visual interpretation of the scenery excludes the effect of light on the scenes, but focuses mainly on the effects of the backdrops.

The stage built by Ladipo behind the compound of the Mbari Mbayo was constructed with mud and cement and this was where Ladipo's *Oba Moro* was first staged in 1962 for

the opening of the centre. When the play was staged, the idea of specially designing backdrops for his plays had not been conceived, but he improvised, using a starch-resist indigo dyed backdrop. The only photographic evidence we have of the performance at the Mbari Mbayo club is that of the fourth scene as shown in plate 8; the Alaafin and Oluode are presented against a backdrop, where the right vertical half of the two dimensional representation as reflected in the photographic evidence, is made with *adire eleko* cloth, while the left vertical half is black and looks blank because of the image of a pole like object that is visible from above, in the middle part of the dark side.

The effect generated by the contrast created between the combination of the black area and the *adire* fabric section, resembles that of a painting which tells two different stories; the black area discharges the felling of the unknown; in terms of the unknown darkness, surrounding, habitat, forces, the dark forest or a kind of cosmic essence, whereas, the *adire* section is registered with motifs that are representational. This type of cloth is called *adire eleko* (starch resistant cloth) because of the technique involved in designing, printing and dyeing the fabric. The geometric random arrangement of the registered motifs, horizontal and vertical lines etc. is symbolic of different aspects of the Yoruba tradition and life that have inspired the artisans. In John Picton and John Mack's exploration of the Yoruba stencilled pattern cloth, they explained:

Many of the patterns are geometric, although some portray such varied subjects as chicken wire, matches, crocodiles, birds, scorpions, fish, spinning tops, scissors, four-legged stools and chieftaincy leaves (1993: 157).

When we examine Picton and Mack's explanation, the geometric nature of the patterns visible in Ladipo's backdrop clarifies their description of the technique and the varied nature of the subjects or themes explored as reflected in the backdrop. Therefore, we see that through Ladipo's theatrical scenery, the cultural and artistic tradition of the Yoruba people is being visually reflected alongside the philosophies that govern them in terms of meaning.

This type of Yoruba traditional printed textile is produced with an ancient technique that was first executed with the use of feathers as the tool for registering the designs with starch. But like any process that takes time to complete and requires more development, flat stencil screen-like sheets made from 'thin corrugated roofing sheets' (1993:155) became another way of registering the designs. We have no exact date for when the process began, but we know that the technique is Yoruba in origin and the process involves dyeing with indigo dye which comes from a plant known as '*Indigo-fera Tinctoria*' (Thurstan, 1967: 32). The most established centre for the production of *adire eleko* in Yorubaland is Abeokuta (see 1993: 155) and the fabric is used for making costumes, furnishings and wall hangings.

The use of motifs is not restricted to *adire eleko* only; it is also a reflection of the importance of the motifs used in printing fabrics in other parts of West Africa. For instance, in Ghana, a group of symbolic patterns known as the *adinkra* motifs form the basis for designing a type of popular printed textiles. According to Claire Polakoff,

‘Adinkra designs are closely associated with daily activities, incorporating, for instance, commonly used tools as well as symbolic representations of religious and social concepts’ (1982: 94). She explained that ‘the names given the motifs reflect their meaning’ and ‘If a man wished to convey a number of messages on one cloth’ for instance, ‘he used a selection of appropriate designs but the common practice was one design on one cloth’. Hence, a motif like the Gye Nyame may be used in designing a king’s costume to convey the message that he was not afraid of anyone, but ‘God’ (94). When *Oba Moro* was subsequently staged in 1963 to a passing audience, the photographic evidence of the public rehearsal and performance of the play presents us with completely different scenery, where the characters in action are presented against a plain grey wall in the second scene of the play (see plate 6 and 7).

### **Early Scenery in *Oba Koso***

As Ladipo’s most popular and most staged play, the visual evidence we have about *Oba Koso* paints a good picture of the chronological changes in the visual composition of the play. Because of the vital role of the visual composition of *Oba Koso*, it is plausible to say that the play could not have been presented in a better way for the time it was staged and also for attention to be drawn to the importance of the visual languages; the originality of the presentation is crucial to highlighting the meanings of the visual embodiment of his theatre, but as earlier indicated, the photographic and audio visual evidence we have of the performances are in black and white colour as also noted by Georgina Beier:

*Oba Koso* was so full of passion and energy even in its embryo stage that it seemed full of colour, it seemed to be on fire visually but the photos tell another story (1994: 113).

In a photographic documentation of the first staging of the play in 1963, no backdrop was used. Hence, in terms of the scenery, the characters are presented against a plain grey wall which blends with the colour of their costumes because of the photographic effect (see plate 12, 13 and 14). In Ulli Beier's recollection and assessment of the early photographs of the performances, he confirmed that 'The costumes were still rather simple, there were no painted backdrops' (1994: 26).



Plate 12 Duro Ladipo, as Sango with Rufus Ogundele in front of him, production of *Oba Koso* 1963



Plate 13 On the extreme left is Tijani Mayakiri as Timi and dancing on the right is Ademola Onibonokuta as Gbonka in the presence of Sango during the performance in 1963



Plate 14 Tijani Mayakiri as Timi in *Oba Koso*, 1963.

### The Development of Backdrops for Scenery in Ladipo's Plays

The idea of specifically producing backdrops for Ladipo's scenery started in 1964. But in one of the stagings of *Oba Koso* at the Mbari Mbayo club in the same year, *adire eleko* was also used as backdrop, although the patterns registered on the cloth are different from the one used in 1962 for *Oba Moro*. Unlike in 1963, when *Oba Koso* was staged against a plain backdrop, Ladipo's visual composition had become more intensified by the time the play was staged in Nigeria and Berlin in 1964. In the photograph of a scene that captures Sango, Oya, and his praise singer in a performance at the Mbari Mbayo Club in 1964, they are presented against the *adire* backdrop (see plate 15). The proportional geometric arrangement of the designs registered on the cloth presents us with a sense of order and



Plate 15 Duro Ladipo as Shango, Abiodun Ladipo as Oya and Bakare Gbadamosi as praise singer in a performance of *Oba Koso* at the Mbari Mbayo Club in 1964 (Photo: Nina Fischer)

the contrast created by the images of the characters against the sharpness and brightness of the printed motifs registered on the backdrop are characteristics of a balanced painted picture, whose messages and philosophical meanings are coded in the motifs; for instance, the configuration of the motifs registered on the backdrop belongs to a group of patterns known as Olokun (see 1993: 156), the Yoruba ‘goddess of the sea and of wealth’ (157). The moody nature of the indigo background colour of the backdrop evokes the feelings of transformations in terms of the characteristics of the colour in being able to change into different shades of violets and blues. In terms of the name given to this particular design, it also triggers the thought of the moody nature of the sea and its transformational qualities.

In developing backdrops, costumes and the overall performance environment for Ladipo’s plays, we are aware that the responsibility of designing them was not restricted to Ladipo. Georgina and Ulli Beier and some of the actors played significant roles in contributing to the overall spatial image of the stage in line with Ladipo’s vision. As clarified by Georgina Beier:

It was only after the art workshop I conducted in 1964 which discovered considerable visual talent among the actors that the development of backdrops became a possibility. During those years all of us, the actors, the artists, the musicians, Duro, myself and Ulli had the greatest gift life can offer; we had time. *Oba Koso* grew organically over a period of five years. We developed backdrops in response to the opera. The actors would then naturally react to these new inventions and the musicians would also



increase their input. The production became more and more intense, more powerful, rather like Gbonka's costume (1994:113).

In bringing to light some of the processes and techniques involved in Ladipo's visual composition, Beier explained: 'We painted the backdrops at night, when it was quiet and cool. We usually worked from 11 p.m. to 2 or 3 a.m. These hours are special, it is not only the lack of noise but the dark, the presence of the moon and stars are more soothing than the force of the sun and the night smells different too, one can concentrate more' (114). Her description of the night in relation to the condition of creativity can be compared to Ben Okri's description of the poet's experience of the night:

The poet needs to be up at night, when the world sleeps; needs to be up at dawn, before the world wakes; needs to dwell in odd corners, where Tao is said to reside; needs to exist in dark places, where spiders forge their webs in silence; near the gutters, where the underside of our dreams fester (1997:1).

Okri's description parallels Beier's preferred moments of creativity and it is a testimony to the working conditions an artist journeys through before his work of art becomes fully matured or ready to be seen by the world.

Apart from the working conditions described by Beier, she further disclosed that:

The backdrops measured 6.5 m. by 2.7 m., a large area to tackle particularly for artists with very little experience but they worked silently and seriously, bursting with confidence and enthusiasm. Fabric dyes were used for they are luminous, the only other paint available in Oshogbo was flat emulsion house paint which is very dead. The

completed canvas was an extravagant impression of the forest, sky, sun and city gates.

It was to be used in the scene where Gbonka defeats Timi (1994: 114).

The scenery in question is shown in plates 18 and 19.

As noted in the play's later staging and during the Berlin festival, the backdrop that was used was different from the *adire eleko* type that was described earlier. In plate 16 for instance, the design is more abstract than geometric; rather like a simple abstract painting in style and the lines are bold, black, irregular, horizontal and vertical in execution. Squares, semi-circles and triangular shapes that seem to be the result of serendipity and mark-making are imposed on the substrate to create space and movement that forms a marriage with the characters and evokes a sense of ritual and spirituality on a canvas. The dramatic image of Sango, flanked by Oya and Iwarefa, the palace poet, centrally against the backdrop, suggests a feeling of harmony. The spatial image of the scene is an orchestration of the order that prevails in the court of the Yoruba kings. The awe associated with Sango is reflected through the scenery and his position in the socio-political order of the kingdom comes to bear. The scenery reminds me of Wassily Kandinsky's words in his exploration of spiritual arts:

The tendency of a work of art may be very simple, but provided it is not dictated by any external motive and provided it is not working to any material end, the harmony will be pure. The most ordinary action—for example, preparation for lifting a heavy weight—becomes mysterious and dramatic, when its actual purpose is not revealed. We stand and gaze fascinated, till of a sudden the explanation bursts suddenly upon us. It is

the conviction that nothing mysterious can ever happen in our everyday life that has destroyed the joy of abstract thought (1977: 50).

When the spatial image of the scenery is considered in relation to Kandinsky's words, we see that it is like a canvas that demands the attention of the soul to contemplate and I believe this is what Kandinsky meant in referring to the purpose of the work not being for the attainment of material goal.



Plate 16 From left: Abiodun Ladipo as Oya, Duro Ladipo as Sango and Ojениyi Amoo as Iwarefa in later staging, but the location is unspecified in this photographic evidence.



Plate 17 Duro Ladipo and Abiodun Ladipo in *Oba Koso*, Berlin Festival 1964 (photo: Berlin Festival 1964).

As part of the seventh scene of *Oba Koso*, showing Timi in preparation for a fight with Gbonka in the presence of Sango, the Elders are presented against a painted backdrop (see plate 18). The backdrop is busier in terms of design than the one described earlier, but the technique used in designing it is the batik wax resisting process. The batik process involves the use of tools like *tjanting* (a special batik registration device with a wooden handle and a metal end that has a hose from where wax is applied on cloth), carved wooden motif stencils and brushes for printing and registering wax onto the cloth being printed. Paraffin or bees wax can be used for printing in batik, but the wax must be melted to an appropriate temperature before it can be applied onto the fabric. After the process of registering the designs, the fabric is then immersed into the desired colour. When the result of the finished product is finally revealed, all the areas registered with wax would resist the dye. Hence, the patterns on the cloth are created in this way.

In examining the scenery in plate 18, the dotted marks on the batik backdrop resemble the type of white ritual marks sometimes dotted on the bodies of initiation candidates during ceremonial rituals in Yorubaland. The intensity of the scenery is a reflection of the situation that is developing in the play in relation to the fight between the two generals, Gbonka and Timi and the intense state of Oyo's political affairs during the reign of Alaafin Sango.

In the scene where Gbonka requested to be tied up and placed in a pyre of fire in scene seven (see plate 19), the harmony of the backdrop with the characters paints a balanced picture, defined by the boldness of lines, design and form. The faces of the characters seemed to have been superimposed on the substrate to depict the emotion of man being the architect of his own misfortunes in relation to Gbonka's request. But when Gbonka comes out of the fire alive to challenge Sango as evident in plate 20, a clearer image of the backdrop reveals that of a moody cloud, where the bold marks of the registered abstract lines are symbolic of the attribute of Sango's element of lightning; the flow of the lines are orchestrated like the flashing of lightning and in terms of the cosmic wholeness of space, a powerful statement is being made with the imagery of the backdrop. The images of the characters against the scenery harmoniously and gracefully fuses together to create a large motif that also resembles the flashing of lightning, particularly when we focus on the spatial contrast of the colour of the photograph of the scenery (plate 20).



Plate 18 Tijani Mayakiri as Timi, left, gets ready to fight Gbonnka. *Oba Koso*, Berlin Festival, 1964.



Plate 19 the tied body of Gbonka is ready to be thrown into fire after he defeated Timi in the seventh scene. He is being carried from left to right by Jacob Afolabi, Bisi Fabunmi, Yinka Adeyem and Lewis during the performance of *Oba Koso* at the Berlin Festival in 1964. (Photo: Berlin Festival)



Plate 20 Gbonka challenging Sango after his exit from the fire in scene seven, right. Second and third from right are: Bisi Fabunmi and Yinka Adeyemi as court attendants: *Oba Koso*, Berlin Festival, 1964. (Photo: Berlin Festival)



In summarising the impact of Ladipo's visual languages on the audience and substantiating the evidence of the progression noted in the intensity of the visual components of his theatre, Ogundeji, in a discussion exploring Sango's image in some of Ladipo's plays stated:

In earlier performances, the *gberi* used was simple, having only a few cowry shells scattered over it with amulets. Later performances witnessed the *gberi* becoming an *ewu owo* (money-laden clothing), a vest on which cowry shells are closely knitted all over, leaving little or no space on the clothing. Later performances also witnessed the use of cowry shell girdle as *oja Sango* (Sango's girdle), which is strung across the chest. There is also the long red skirt (*yeri Sango*) on which flaps of leather (*wabi*) are attached (1998: 61).

In reference to other physical iconographies that reveal the identity of Sango in Ladipo's theatre, he explained:

The sacred braided hairdo called *osu Sango* is also iconized in the carved headgear worn by the performer. The *ose* dancing wand (double-edged wooden ax) and *seere* (gourd rattle with long handle) all serve as hand props for the Sango character. The emission of fire from the mouth is another such identificatory feature (61).

As a testimony to the dramatic reality and spectacle of *Oba Koso*, Ogunbiyi writes:

The sight of Sango actually spitting fire, prancing about unpredictably on stage in the manner of the legendary king, must be understood within the framework of psychological realism where the performer plays his part convincingly even though the entire production is partially stylised (1981: 348).

In relation to the visual languages, contrast was drawn between the stillness of the colourful stage backdrops and the continuous theatrical components of the play in Thomas Willis's 1975 review of the play in America (see 2003: 84-5). In relation to scenography, this brings to light how the audience see the synthesis of the still images and the movement of the performers for instance and substantiates Howard's assertion that:

Scenography – the creation of the stage space – does not exist as a self contained art work. Even though the scenographer may have studied fine art and be by instinct a painter or a sculptor, scenography is much more than a background painting for the performers, as has often been used in dance. Scenography is always incomplete until the performer steps into the playing space and engages with the audience. Moreover, scenography is the joint statement of the director and the visual artist of their view of a play, opera or dance that is being presented to the audience as a united piece of work (2002: xix).

According to Willis, the way an indigenous language like Yoruba was also used in the presentation of the elements of the play, evokes the remembrance of anthropological studies (see 2003: 84-5). This is interesting in reinforcing what has been highlighted in Didier Delaunoy's review of Ladipo's tour of America, where we are informed that audiences were able to identify with the characters of the play through the play's dramaturgy and the presentation style adapted. She stated that 'Though performed entirely in Yoruba, the show is easily understandable, thanks in large part to the informative synopsis distributed to the audience, and thanks to the fact that it is basically, a very visual spectacle' (2003: 90). Apart from these reviews, the following are also

extracts from other reviews of the play that reflect how the audience perceived the visual components during Ladipo's tour of America:

The backdrop is vibrant African artwork that looks like Picasso. (Actually, of course, it is vice versa.) (Garrett 2003: 85).

The costumes were colorfully imaginative, traditional in style, and symbolic sets were supplied by stunning abstract panels of cloth. The musical accompaniment was played by seven drummers (Samachson 2003: 87).

Vibrant costuming makes the production a living painting in shapes, textures and color (Pearce 2003: 87).

Several performers did solo dances as the hand painted geometric patterned backdrops were changed between acts (Delacoma 2003: 88).

The scenery is provided by vibrantly painted panels of cloth, abstract in design and the cast is traditionally costumed in bold fabrics that look as if they were created in an exploding paint box, and then further adorned with shells and beads (Richards 2003: 91).

Visual arts play an important part in the production. Pieces of African sculpture strategically placed become a watchful chorus. Sango stalks onto stage carrying two figures (one appears to be an axe), presumably the badges of his high office. A tall totem of a cylinder, with an unseen man inside, snake back and forth, up and down. There is considerable use of masks and ceremonial robes. Picasso-like curtains brightly signify changes of scene (Gussow 2003: 94).

As evident in these statements, the visual components are recognised as being symbolic from their subjective understanding, but what is not clear to the audiences is what they actually epitomise; their implications as visual languages; the unspoken dialogue that exists in form of the costumes, Sango's sacred regalia, paraphernalia and musical instruments (*bata* drum), backdrop motifs, colours, accessories etc; that cannot be comprehended without a deep knowledge of their symbolic representation, the cultural traditions and cosmology of the Yoruba world. The strong evidence we have of the performance of *Oba Koso* is reflected in photographs displayed below; they are reflections of the record of the visual power of his theatre as presented in theatres spaces and open spaces.



Plate 21 *Oba Koso*, Berlin Festival, 1964



Plate 22 the orchestra in *Oba Koso*. Front row from right: Lasisi Gbadamosi, Muraina Oyelami, Rufus Ogundele, 1964. (photo: Berlin Festival) (see Beier 1994:36).



Plate 23 Gbonka brings back Timi from Ede to Oyo after the first fight (Ladipo, 1970: p.33)



Plate 24 Gbonka and Timi are meeting for the second fight at Akesan market (p.47)



Plate 25 Sango in rage as he descended upon his people in anger, killing many of them (p. 55)



Plate 26 Sango, Oya, Olori, Timi and Gbonka in Sango's palace



Plate 27 *Oba Koso* during one of Ladipo's international tours: photograph provided by Chief Mrs Abiodun Duro-Ladipo (2007).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

Duro Ladipo was one of the greatest African dramatists of the twentieth century. He was born in Oshogbo in the South Western part of Nigeria in 1926. Born into a Yoruba family and the metaphysical matrix of the Yoruba being the background of his theatrical preoccupation as already explored, through his plays, he brought to light the context of the Yoruba history, their socio-political and socio-spiritual dynamics, their rituals, their world view and general milieu. The intensity of his creativity is evident in the nature of the theatrical subjects he explored, the language used in his plays, the implication of his visual languages and how scholars, actors, audiences, and his collaborators and friends and family have responded to his work as a dramatist. For example, in evaluating some of the findings we have examined about Ladipo and his theatre in some of the studies conducted by scholars and writers in Raji-Oyelade, Olorunyomi and Duro-Ladipo 2003; Ogundele 2003; Ogundeji, 2003; Ogundele, Obafemi and Abodunrin 2001; Beier 1994; Ogunbiyi 1981; Banham 1976; Soyinka, 1976 and Ladipo 1970, his importance as a unique dramatist and individual becomes clearer.

As the first Nigerian dramatist to stage historical plays, his unique creative approach of synthesising the languages of the Yoruba drums, their indigenous dance styles, their poetic genres of *oriki*, *ijala* and *ofò* with the Western conventional theatrical structural approach which presents us with a hybrid theatre or a total theatre because of the elements of the plays, was fundamental in distinguishing him as a pioneer of this Yoruba theatrical



operatic style. He engaged the audience with not only the historical narratives of Oyo Yoruba kings, but also the context of their metaphysical matrix through the Yoruba dialogue and the visual implications of his plays. For instance, in relation to his audience responses to *Oba Koso* during his international tour of America in 1975, David Richards explained that in spite of the performance being ‘entirely in Yoruba tongue’, the audience were able to understand the story as result of the ‘synopsis’ of the play they were ‘armed with’ (Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 91). Furthermore, we are told that ‘for Western audiences’, they were delighted with ‘the contagious pulsations that emanate from the stage’, confirming that ‘Seven musicians set the pace with drums of assorted shapes and tones, to which the performers add their ritual chants, producing a mixture of sounds not unlike an atonal version of contemporary African Highlife music’ (91). Richards’ testimony reveals that the music generated as a result of Ladipo’s fusion of the Yoruba poetic genres with the drum languages, produced a type a music that could be compared to a version of the Highlife music which is yet to be established. This confirms the unique nature of Ladipo’s theatrical composition and the structural approach he employed in presenting his plays. But what is not clear to the audience is the message being conveyed with the language of the drums and the implication of musical instruments as unspoken dialogue, hence, bringing to bear the importance of exploring their philosophical implications in this study.

Ladipo led the way with this approach as a playwright, actor, composer and cultural ambassador, in reflecting not only the Yoruba mythology and legendary stories through his theatre, but also their language. According to Phillip Ogundeji, ‘Nobody that we know

of today has surpassed Duro Ladipo in the exportation of Nigerian indigenous drama to the outside world' (2003: 66). In his assessment, he stated:

There is no doubt that Ladipo lived a life totally dedicated to the dramatic and theatrical arts in particular and to the Yoruba and African culture in general. His marks on the dramatic map of Nigeria no doubt remain indelible (66-7).

In relation to the visual languages of Ladipo's theatre, the evidence we have gathered about the significance of his props, costumes and the spatial image of his performance environment in *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*, highlights the importance of his visual composition in narrating the complex nature of the Yoruba matrix; their history, their metaphysical dimensions, belief system and their socio-political dynamics. In preserving the Yoruba culture and philosophies through his visual narratives and the context of his productions, he expressed his understanding of the Yoruba world and the need to keep them alive for future generations as reflected in the statements made with the iconography of his theatre and their effects on the audience.

He used his theatrical subjects in addressing the problems associated with the imperial governance of West Africa, their missionary education and religious influences on the natural dynamics of the culture. Therefore, he pioneered a type of post-colonial theatrical genre which highlighted the importance of the Yoruba history and culture, and the role played by the imperial power in devaluing them through their missionary and religious education.

In addressing the questions raised in relation to the subjective nature of Ladipo's visual languages and their real philosophical meaning in the Yoruba matrix, I have been able to demonstrate their link to the narratives of their history, mythology, legends, social characteristics, socio-political structures and metaphysical dimensions in this study, therefore, creating a reference point for exploring the implications of the visual languages of Ladipo's theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In bringing to light the factors responsible for theatrical explorations, we have seen how his background, his experiences and the nature of his being contributed to his inspirations as an artist. His determination to use his creative talents was responsible for his growth and theatrical developments; he explored the Yoruba oral tradition and conducted researches into Ifa, the Yoruba history and Yoruba metaphysics in order to convey them through the dramaturgy he employed and visual languages of his theatre. As reflected in this study, his professional direction was guided by the nature of his being, his experiences and his environment. Ladipo's father, Reverend Joseph Oni Ladipo, was an Anglican Church missionary who had 'studied missionary work under a white man' known as 'Archdeacon' Mackay 'around 1897' in Oshogbo (Raji-Oyelade *et al* 2003: 35 and Ladipo, 1970: xi), and his mother was Madam Dorcas Towobola Ajike Ladipo, a native of Ilesha. Ladipo's grandfather was a traditional Yoruba drummer and a devotee of Sango and Oya, the deities his family have been devoted to for many generations.

Ladipo's nature as an *abiku* child, his family background and his upbringing greatly contributed to shaping his life and his theatrical career. He was a very active member of

All Saints Church in Oshogbo, the Anglican Church where his father was a catechist, and where he ‘read the lesson every Sunday’ (1994: 13). According to Ulli Beier, he was well suited for taking on the role, ‘for he spoke Yoruba with a rich, resounding voice that needed no amplifier even in large hall’ (13). Therefore as a young man, Ladipo commanded the respect of the community for his active role in the functions of the church (see 13), but he was also deeply interested in different aspects of the Yoruba arts and cultural tradition that surrounded him. Despite the fact that Ladipo’s father was born into the Yoruba religion before becoming a Christian, he was shocked to realise that his son was taking interest in the Yoruba festivals, customs and traditional art forms (see Ladipo. 1970: xii). Ladipo spent considerable time with his grandfather, the drummer, and was a regular spectator during the festivals of deities and the *egungun* performances in Yorubaland; he was particularly interested in the Ila-Orangun festivals of the *egungun* and Ose and the Otin, Sango and Obatala festivals in Otan Aiyegbaju.

Ladipo had started his career as a teacher. He taught in different schools from 1943 to 1961 and it was during this period that he developed his interest in theatre and music. In St. Philips Primary School, Otan-Aiyegbaju, where he began his teaching career in 1943, he took part in *Suuru Baba Iwa*, a play written by his then headmaster, Mr A.T.O. Odunsi and his performance was well received by the audience. His participation encouraged and inspired him to further develop his creativity, therefore in 1947, when he saw the theatrical production of Mr Alex Peters’ theatre group in Ilesa, he decided to join the group. His passion for the theatre led him to leave Otan-Aiyegbaju for Ilesa to take on the role of ‘a pupil teacher’ at ‘Holy Trinity School, Omofe, Ilesa’ where Mr Alex Peters was

headmaster at the time. At Ilesa, Ladipo engaged more in his theatrical and musical ambitions and was responsible for 'leading the school choir to several remarkable outings' (2003: 4). But between 1948 and 1949, Ladipo left Ilesa for Kaduna with Alex Peters to continue his teaching career at the United Native African church (UNA), where he taught, composed music, 'directed' their school's 'drama group' and took active part in leading the choir of the Church (4). His reputation as a playwright and composer became more recognised in 1955 when he adapted William Shakespeare's, *As You Like It*. In 1956, Ladipo left Kaduna and 'returned to Oshogbo' (4) where he continued his theatrical career.

In 1958, Ladipo met Ulli Beier in Oshogbo and they became friends, but little did he know that Beier would later become instrumental in his life and theatrical career. In 1961, when Ladipo staged his Easter Cantata at the All Saints Church, his father's church, where he remained active on his return from Kaduna, he invited Beier to the performance. According to Beier, Ladipo's production was an 'exciting' musical piece, 'but the performance was marred by the restrictions placed upon him by the elders of the Church who, having anticipated the usual bongos and tambourines that make up a mission school band, had agreed happily enough to the introduction of drums. Their tolerance did not extend, however, to *dundun* and *bata* drums associated with idol worshipping' (1994: 13). In tolerating the use of what the elders regarded as 'pagan' musical instruments, they not only instructed that the cantata was interjected with the singing of the Church hymns and the organ music (see 14), they also insisted 'they were played discreetly, respectably and in a subdued fashion' (13).

The restrictions imposed by the elders of the Church on how Ladipo's Easter Cantata was presented did not go unnoticed; Beier, who was present during the performance, was so 'outraged by' the behaviour of the Church towards Ladipo and the way they received his performance that he took it upon himself to write a belligerent 'letter to the Daily Times' Newspaper about the elders' insensitive treatment of Ladipo's creative work. When the elders of the Church became aware of Beier's action, they banned Ladipo from his duty of 'reading' bible lessons in the Church and threatened him with excommunication. Even the good Reverend, Ladipo's father, was so disgusted that he considered 'disowning' his son because of the issue (1994: 14).

This experience did not discourage Ladipo from pursuing his theatrical ambitions. In fact, instead of being disappointed, he was only worried 'that he had lost his performance venue' (14). But with the encouragement of Beier who advised him that his performances should not have to be restricted to the church as a venue and can be extended to audiences in other venues in the same way 'that most performances of great European Church music took place in concert halls' (14), he persevered and focused on consolidating his creative talents. Therefore, this experience was significant to Ladipo's theatrical development, the choices he made and his determination to excel as a dramatist.

From this moment, things took a different turning for Ladipo. He extended his theatrical activities to other venues like Oshogbo Teachers College where his next performance,

*Ore Kofero*, was staged. This was shortly followed by the staging of his Christmas Cantata at the same college in December of 1961. Ladipo's use of the *bata* and *dundun* drums in his musical composition of the Christmas Cantata greatly reflected his talent as a unique composer. Beier confirmed that the performance was well 'received' by the audience, as it 'established' the 'reputation' of Ladipo 'as a composer' (14). This performance success gave Beier the courage to organise more performances for Ladipo in other venues; the Christmas Cantata was staged in Ibadan at the Mbari Club and the Western Nigeria Television studio, where Ladipo developed an artistic relationship with Segun Olusola, the prominent television producer, who later produced his plays for television. Ladipo's performance at the Mbari club had coincided with a visual art 'exhibition of Igbo art' which formed a great marriage with Ladipo's musical presentation and created an exciting experience for the audience (14).

Ladipo's performance experience at Ibadan and his exposure to a new environment where he became aware of the activities of other prominent Nigerian artists and writers like Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka had inspired him; apart from the reputation of the University of Ibadan as a place of academic excellence in the world, these artists were already well known for their intellectual activities in the international literary community. Furthermore, their involvement as founding members of the Mbari Club, Ibadan, had been significant in promoting the international reputation of the venue as not only a centre dedicated to the exhibition of African visual arts and the staging of theatrical performances, but also for their publication of 'Black Orpheus' literary journal.

Therefore, Ladipo's introduction to an environment that was saturated with 'intense cultural activity' (1994: 15), became a vital motivational force for his artistic decisions, his theatrical career, the projects he embarked upon and how they were implemented. As a result of his performance at the Mbari Club, he saw the artistic and creative potential of the venue and the importance of a space like that in promoting the arts, hence, he sought to emulate the artistic practice of the Mbari Club, Ibadan, as a model for establishing a similar centre in Oshogbo, his home town.

These new waves of thought ignited Ladipo's creative juices in embarking on the immediate necessary actions of bringing his plans to fruition. He discussed his plans with Beier, who was at first apprehensive about the idea of creating an 'Mbari Club in Oshogbo' because in comparison to Ibadan, he felt that Oshogbo was not a suitable location for such a venture and was not convinced that the project would attract funding from the international community, since Oshogbo had no higher institutions or industry like Ibadan. But Ladipo was not prepared to see the obstacles, instead, he convinced Beier to support his plans. He decided to convert his family compound which was also the venue of his bar into what became the Mbari Mbayo Club in Oshogbo. With the support of Beier who was able to secure international funding for the project, Ladipo's dream became a reality and the centre was launched 'on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1962' with the staging of *Oba Moro*, his first historical play, and the exhibition of Susanne Wenger's visual arts (17).



As already discussed, the centre was not restricted to its performance space only, it also had a visual exhibition and a poetry recital section. Hence, the centre became instrumental in the practice of different art forms in Oshogbo and Ladipo was able to explore all his creative potentials. He went on to write 'over 36 plays' (50) and the centre became a pillar for arts education; artistic developments were enhanced through the master classes and workshops conducted by resident and visiting artists. We have evidence that the centre also 'published' books, 'arranged' festivals and 'organised' arts competitions (Ogunbiyi, 1981: 337). According to Beier, 'the first' workshop in visual arts was conducted in the centre by Denis Williams 'in August' of 1962 (1994: 20). Therefore, the impact of Ladipo's establishment of the Mbari Mbayo arts centre in Oshogbo was immense as a valuable contribution for the development, exposition and propagation of African arts and culture. Beier confirmed that the centre 'seemed' to be 'the ideal venue' where 'a crowd of youngsters who had had the courage to give up relatively safe jobs – as petrol attendants, shop keepers or pool managers – to work for even less money to become actors' (1994: 20-21). The visual arts workshops conducted by Georgina Beier and Susanne Wenger led to the discovery of professional talented artists like Muraina Oyelami, Rufus Ogundele, Twin Seven-Seven, Jimoh Buraimoh and Asiru Olatunde. The section dedicated to Yoruba oral poetry was also active with the input of artists and actors like Yemi Elebuibon, Demola Onibonokuta and Lere Paimo who were interested in resuscitating Yoruba poetic genres like Odu Ifa, oriki, ijala and rara; the Oba of Oshogbo (the Ataoja) and the Timi of Ede were also reported to be 'active in this section' (2003: 3). In 1966, 'eight' theatre companies of young people were

reported to have ‘performed fortnightly on the *Mbari-Mbayo* stage’, and around the same time, ‘well over 1,000 visitors came on “pilgrimage” to this shrine’ (1981: 338).

Ladipo’s practice as a playwright, actor and composer remains unique among contemporary Yoruba dramatists. As a practitioner, his exposition of the Yoruba historical narratives, the themes of his plays and the integrity of his visual languages remains a lasting legacy of his theatrical repository. In assessing Ladipo’s theatrical motivations, philosophies, background and experiences, we see that he was a man who was deeply engaged with his art form. His visionary thoughts, talents and hard work combined with his mysterious nature were brought to bear in all aspects of his theatrical life.

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### Interviews with Author

Abobarin, Adewale (actor and graduate of performing arts from the University of Ilorin). He was interviewed because of his knowledge of Duro Ladipo's theatre and as an actor who had on many occasions performed in his University's staging of Duro Ladipo's plays. (Oshogbo, 23 January 2007).

Afolabi, J. A. (a scholar and lecturer of theatre arts at Obafemi Awolowo University). He was interviewed because of his knowledge of the Yoruba professional travelling theatre. (Ile-Ife, 26 January 2007).

Ajangila, Ojeleke (Chief) (a mask performing artist and the King of all the *Egungun* masquerades in Yorubaland). He was interviewed because of his family roots in the practice of the *Eegun Alare* performance tradition and his wealth of knowledge about the practice. (Iragberi, 2 February 2007).

Ajibade, Sola (a lecturer in Yoruba language and literature at Obafemi Awolowo University). He was interviewed because of his knowledge of the Yoruba language, culture and literature. (Ile-Ife, 25 January 2007).

Duro-Ladipo, Abiodun (Chief) (wife of the late Duro Ladipo and the lead actress in his company). She was interviewed because of her knowledge of the history of Duro Ladipo's theatre, her close relationship with him as a wife and a very important member of his theatre. (Ibadan, 31 January 2007).

Elebuibon, Yemi (Chief) (a renowned Ifa high priest and a one time member of Duro Ladipo's theatre; he is also the *awise* of Oshogbo; one whose words are potent). He was interviewed because of his in-depth knowledge of the Yoruba history, theatre, religion and cosmology and his close association with Duro Ladipo and his theatre.

(Oshogbo, 24 January 2007).

Faleti, Adebayo (Pa) (actor, playwright, broadcaster, film producer and a descendant of the Oyo royal family). He was interviewed because of his wealth of knowledge about the Yoruba history, the *Eegun Alare* performance tradition, the Yoruba operatic theatre tradition and Duro Ladipo's theatre. (Ibadan, 31 January 2007).

Faleye, Adeola (poet, singer and lecturer in Yoruba oral literature at the Department of African Languages and Literatures, Obafemi Awolowo University). She was interviewed because of her knowledge of *oriki* praise poetry, *iyere ifa*, *rara*, *esa*, *ijala*, the art of chanting and the Yoruba oral tradition. (Ile-Ife, 6 February 2007).

Fatomilola, Peter (actor, Ifa priest and staff of the Department of Theatre, Obafemi Awolowo University). He was interviewed because of his knowledge of the Yoruba theatre, culture and religion. (Ile-Ife, 5 February 2007).

Ogundeji, Philip Adedotun (a specialist in Duro Ladipo's plays and head of Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan). He was interviewed because of his expert knowledge of Duro Ladipo's theatre, the Yoruba language and theatre. (Ibadan, 29 January 2007).

Ogundele, Wole (an expert in modern African poetry with interest in the Yoruba theatre and cultural studies). He was interviewed because of his general interest in Yoruba theatre and cultural studies, particularly the *Eegun Alare* performing tradition and the theatre of Duro Ladipo. (Ile-Ife, 5 February 2007).

Ojeyemi, Tunji (actor, dance choreographer and a dance teacher at the Department of Theatre, Obafemi Awolowo University.). He was interviewed because of his knowledge of Yoruba traditional dances and drum languages and being from the lineage of the Yoruba *Eegun Alare* performing artists. (Ile-Ife, 3 February 2007)

Opefeyitimi, Ayo (an expert in Yoruba oral literature at Obafemi Awolowo University). He was interviewed because of his in-depth knowledge of the Ifa texts and the Yoruba oral literature. (Ile-Ife, 25 January 2007).

Osofisan, Femi (a renowned playwright and Professor of Drama at the University of Ibadan). He was interviewed because of the wealth of his knowledge as a writer, dramatist and literary critic. (Ibadan, 28 January 2007).

Oyewo, G. A. (actor, scholar and lecturer of theatre arts at Obafemi Awolowo University). He was interviewed because of his knowledge of the Yoruba theatre and his wealth of experience as an actor. (Ile-Ife, 26 January 2007).

