

Evolving Representations of Sàngó: From Script to Screen in African Drama

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of Sango myth in drama. In an attempt to retain Sango myth in Nigerian drama; there have been several creative efforts that have successfully adapted Sango myth from script to stage performance and finally to screen production. In this respect, the paper through New Historicist, Archetypal and postmodernist orientations, discusses the manifestation of Sango in the contemporary medium of video film; with example of *Sango* (1998) written by Wale Ogunyemi and produced by Femi Lasode. Following the trend of event from historical account of Samuel Johnson to Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso (The King did not Hang)* (1972) down to Wale Ogunyemi and Femi Lasode's *Sango* (1998). Obviously, there are differences between the previous works which are scripts and stage performances, and media presentations. This is as a result of media opportunity, since film is always different from script and stage performance.

Keywords: Evolving representations, Script to screen, contemporary, stage performance, African Drama

INTRODUCTION

African dramatic genre, has no doubt, undergone tremendous changes- between the evolutionist and the relativist school espoused by Ola Rotimi, Michael Echeruo, Kalu Uka, Muri Ogunbiyi J.P Clark and the like. Arguments as to its beginning and, particularly its claim to a dramatic purity have generated heated arguments which once dominated African dramatic scholarships. While some scholars saw what appeared as African dramatic elements the other school theorised that these elements were themselves drama. Echeruo for example was very eloquent in his contention that dramatic features and not drama existed while Clark differs as he equates such dramatic features as universal patterns upon which drama are firmly anchored. From its sacred origin, it

has traversed modifications to take a more secular complexion. There were as observed by several critics that drama in Africa has moved through various stages. In noting the transformational capacity of drama, Ato Quayson cites Soyinka (2002, 421):

We discover, for instance, that under certain conditions some art forms are transformed into others—simply to ensure the survival of the threatened forms. Drama may give way to poetry and song in order to disseminate dangerous sentiments under the watchful eye of the oppressor, the latter forms being more easily communicable. On the other hand, drama may become more manifestly invigorated in order to counteract the effect of an alienating environment.

In many ways, archetypes and mythological figures have found resonating textuality and postmodern presence in dramatic platforms of the script and the screen. In an attempt to retain Sàngó myth in Nigerian Drama, there have been several creative efforts where successfully Sàngó have been adapted myth from script to stage performance and finally to screen production. In this respect this paper discusses the manifestation of Sàngó in contemporary medium of video film as a postmodernist rupture; with example of *Sàngó* (1998) written by Wale Ogunyemi and produced by Femi Lasode this is as attested to in the following trend of events from historical account of Samuel Johnson to DuroLadipo's *Oba Kò So (The King did Not Hang)* (1972) down to Wale Ogunyemi and Femi Lasode's *Sàngó* (1998). Obviously there are differences between the previous works, which are scripts and stage performance, and media presentation often showing signposts of its historicity and postmodern fervour. This is more obvious and lends credence to the multi-media dimensions since film is always different from script and stage performance.

Script to Screen: Multimedia Re-presentations and Postmodern Kinesis Construct in Sango Drama

The script is restricted to what has been written while stage performance follows the script closely and adds little or nothing to it. Contrary to this, the film tends to exhibit striking peculiarities things conspicuously missing in the script or stage. This perhaps, is owing to that which cannot be fully expressed through the use of words. The film adds flesh to skeletal work of script and stage performances, so as to make it better and well appreciated. This is possible because of media dynamism; while script is limited, film is unlimited especially with the use of newly developed technological materials in the industry. Though the three presentations: script, stage performance and film production share the basic story of Sàngó, the impossible issues in script and stage performance are made possible on the screen. The film goes deeper than the script and stage production, the film blows up the story. It goes further to provide an ethnographic fact of Nupe culture. It also provides a larger space, which gives enough latitude to accommodate those things that cannot be included in the script.

The use of visual-media technology differentiates video film from script and stage performance. The film allows the broader use of space and time; it gives room for addition and extension. The video version of Sàngó pays close attention to background issues at Oyo prior to the coronation of Sàngó. It narrates the relationship between Oyo and Owu, what brings the serious battle that claims several Oyo warriors and Ajaka's in castration by Olowu, his cousin. The issue of Ajaka and Olowu brings Sàngó to the scene, he rescues Oyo from being disgraced and he is later chosen as the fourth Aláàfin of Oyo. All these and other issues are made possible on screen because it can allow easier and more rapid changes of space and time than the stage. The techniques of writing film script are different from stage script. The presentation of the film script compared

to the stage performance shows some ample differences as space for extension is mad. What cannot be practised on stage is done in film, for example Sàngó's practical approach to test his magical power. With the use of Thunder bolt as well as the use of 'Ka'nako' when he was to travel to Owu we see him manifesting science. This explains Sàngó as an African scientist and brings reality to the film. Sàngó shorten the journey through a myth medium of 'Ka'nako'. The mode of presentation of film differentiates script and stage from video; the setting, that is the environmental factors and use of different costumes ensure the greatest reality effect at the expense of clarity and stylization.

Also, virtually all the characters are very fluent in handling their roles and mastering of their script. Language carries well on video better than stage or script since it can be modulated and transmitted 'off screen'. This explains the fact that video film gives room for correction while stage performance is an ongoing thing, it is live. *Sàngó* (1998) is closely related to Duro Ladipo's version than to Femi Osofisan's re-presentation. It is likely that Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* (1999) is a response to the film because the text was published a year after the film production. While the film pays close attention to historical details of what happened prior to Sàngó's reign especially what led to his coronation as the fourth Aláàfin of Oyo, *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* created a new myth entirely. The film does not only present the historical detail but also a cultural and historical drama concerning the way culture operates and influences Sàngó's consciousness and behaviour. It celebrates traditional (Yoruba) cultural heritage and its contribution to the upbringing of Sàngó as a cultured, respectful and responsible person. He is not comfortable seeing his people suffering or oppressed, he is a lover of people and peace. Who is ready to lose his life in the process, if only he can deliver his people.

The film as a historical construct agrees with myth and presents the beautiful ancient city of old Oyo. The outlook of the Ifá Priests both in Oyo and Nupe land reflect the way the ancient practice so also, the dictate of genuine ritual and sacrifices are carried out. This is noticeable in the specific instruction to sacrifice the whole basket of corn and the outcome of the sacrifices as well as the spirits that are evoked by Sàngó to bring Olowu's request and finally to free his brother from Olówu's slaver). There are sounds and chanting; the beat and sound of the drum to explain the result of the battle and to notify King Sàngó of strange visitors. There is also the use of calabash, clay pots and bowl to eat, all these portray the reality of olden days and emphasises its relevance. The Chiefs travel from one town to the other without wearing shoe(s) or entering vehicles. In fact, the warriors walk through the various thick forests with neither shoes nor vehicle, except when King Sàngó travels on boat to the battlefield with them. This is a symbol of honour and reverence for traditional ruler.

The film captures the beauty of African Markets, the buying and selling which involve men, women, young, old, ordinary and supernatural beings, at times the dead or the spirit join them in the process of buying and selling. It reveals the pre-colonial currency (cowry). Also an aspect of love expedition of Sàngó, his discovery of a strange lady, which explains his sensitivity, an eye for beautiful and powerful things and persons: 'whenever eyes see beauty it is expedient to greet such'. The film also captures the serenity of Núpé Kingdom, the idyllic pastoral setting of Tápà so as to picture the beautiful sight of the topography, landscape, hills, and peaceful waterfalls. Most significantly, the powerful lady who makes rain at will and stops it as she wishes also turns to a beautiful supernatural goat 'Àgbònrín' very beautiful from horn to legs. This explains Oya's unblemished beauty, both within and without. The picture of Sàngó's love life is contrary to his attitude as portrayed in *Many Colours Make the Thunder King*. He is still focused, determined in

the film; he did not leave all to pursue women. In fact, he is yet to be a king, he is just a warrior and prince.

The film presents a larger mythical world in a way that it portrays a powerful visual imagery in action especially the coronation ceremony of King Sàngó as the fourth Aláàfin Oyo. It captures the traditional coronation ceremony in Africa. Also it reveals how Sàngó revenge by killing Tamedu whom is sent to assassinate him on his coronation day. He demonstrates his first magical power in Oyo by using the handle of his Ìrùkèrè”; he points it towards his direction and he dies instantly. This magical power that produces fire seems to be very powerful, whatsoever he stretches at, burns alive and may dry up instantly, even if it is wood or trees. He uses the same power to roast Yarn, he spills the same fire angrily against his two senior wives; Oba and Osun, and send them out of the palace.

Contrary to the instruction given to Sàngó, he mistakenly used the same power on his own household and it was raised down to ashes. The same power helps him to disappear and reappear to kill Eliri. Most a times he holds it and points it at his victims and achieves instant result. At time he swallows it and at any slight provocation, he shouts and fire comes out. Any moment he is with this powerful charm, every part of his body is active even his fingers, he points at any object and receives positive result.

Sango Archetype

One of the major features of Sàngó is his temperament and capacity to carry out murder and revenge. The three presentations (Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Kò So (The King Did Not Hang)* Femi Osofisan’s *Many Colours Make The Thunder King* and Femi Lasode’s *Sàngó*) present the same temperamental virtue of Sàngó. His restlessness, fury and hot- temper, his reigns is characterised

with war, unrest, lack of peace, moving from one place to another unrest within, and without. Oya is seen as a positive influence in both Duro Ladipo and Lasode's *Sàngó* but Osofisan sees Oya as a negative influence, troublesome, jealous, wicked and evil. Osofisan lays much emphasis on women and their roles in rendering Sàngó as a tragic failure.

Contrary to Osofisan's presentation of Oya as a scheming selfish, self-centered and wicked wife (woman) Ogunyemi and Lasode's *Sàngó* portray Oya as a powerful, noble, loyal, and submissive woman. The film clearly differentiates Sàngó's Major wives; Oba and Osun as pretty women but Oya as a noble and Sàngó's favourite wife Osofisan's perspective is different from the reading of history and contemporary opinion and reality. Though, he emphasises the role of women in Sàngó's life, his weaknesses, not as a powerless King but a dependent King as against an independent warrior and King that the film reveal. Also, he relies on) the beauty, riches of his wives to be popular, fortify his domain, to stand out and surpass his ancestors. Unfortunately, he is eventually controlled by the same women that caused him great havoc.

Osofisan's presentation is not chronologically historical, rather a re-presentation and re-writing of history. He seems to assume an interrogative position, puzzling over what history has presented and throwing questions at it. The film, which is not against history, presents Sàngó as a powerful warlord, strong and a protector of towns and villages. He is not in search of power or fame but merely consolidating and defending his power. Kings are known to protect and guard their cities in case of any internal or external aggression or invasion. The film emphasises the visual imagery of how Sàngó conquered Òwu warriors through the help of his maternal warriors who he consults, empower him and give him Irari warriors to assist him in battle. Though he is cautioned not to misuse the power given to him to conquer his enemies but he wrongly uses the power on his own house. This later leads to his downfall and great tragedy. It is very clear that his

misuse of power on his own household hastens his destruction and he could not last on the throne. It also, brings disgrace, shame on him and he is left with no better option than to abdicate his throne. He is later taken as a result of hurt and spiritual injury. The film also reveals the significance of the relationship between humans and their gods. In the light of this, Sàngó appeases Ogun River to conquer for him; they travel on boat on the same river to Owu. He is a faithful worshipper who does not overlook the constituted authority. No wonder he is later honoured and deified.

The film captures the disappearance of Sàngó; it maintains the same supernatural Sàngó that Duro Ladipo presents as 'He who made a path to earth from heaven He who made a path to heaven from earth'. It also presents a graphic picture of a ruptured Sàngó ascending into the clouds. This is against the humanistic view of Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder King*. He sees Sàngó as the author of his own destruction who as a result of shame, disgrace and failure, hangs himself. Osofisan does not redeem Sàngó's Image as Duro Ladipo does in *ObaKò So*. This is to confirm his position, that he does not belief in gods, he sees them as powerless.

Meanwhile, Duro Ladipo and Lasode's *Sàngó* emphasise the reappearance of Sàngó as well as his promise to fight their battles, kill their enemies and prospers them abundantly. Osofisan on the other hand, creates myths out of myth by concluding that Sàngó's suicide makes Oya take her life too; she stabs herself and the water that gush out from her breast turns to a river that flows Osun's dead body, Oya's child and revives Aláḡemọ. Osofisan seems to be connecting god of thunder to the goddesses that is their death did not put an end to their relationship as husband and wives. Rather, it continues even in the spiritual realm. In mythological way, the water links them together forever and reconciles them to one another.

Contrary to this, the film does not acknowledge that Sàngó hanged himself but that he translates into the ancestral world. He starts operating with his people from his transcended position. The film is based on Duro Ladipo's presentation except the edition of hanging. It is a projection of Sàngó in contemporary way, not that he hangs himself, and he is greater than that. Thus, he disappears and ascends to heaven and is later seen descending (appear) to discuss with his worshippers.

“Hanging” is sacrilegious, highly undignified for a god. It is mythical that he disappears; Sàngó is like a normal human being that lives a distinguished super-human's life and is accorded a deified personality. Though, there have been several opinions, which have led to different arguments on how Sàngó ended, but the contemporary opinion is in line with modern writers' opinion (artists and dramatists) that there is no any other way for a hero- god to end than to ascend heaven from the earth. This is an indication that Sàngó is revered, honoured, adored, celebrated and dignified as one of the powerful and outstanding African gods. In spite of Sàngó's shortcomings, his flaws; hot temper, rashness, blinded anger, he remains a fearful and revered god in Africa.

At the end of the film Oya is left alone, Sàngó refuses to look back. What happened to Oya after Sàngó's departure? It is like a great disappointment, having taken her from her root, just like plucking a flower from its base, and later dropping it on the ground. Sàngó takes Oya from her abode and leaves her at the crossroads; she is not quite sure of what next, having destroyed her skin, what would become of Oya? These are questions, which the film refuses to answer, probably because it does not want to go beyond history or leave the audience or viewers puzzling over some questions or likely to leave us to provide answer(s). It is an open discussion, which may accommodate other scholars' opinions.

To this end it is necessary to emphasise that Ogunyemi and Lasode present a contemporary Sàngó in the image of a popular hero of scientific Warlord and also maintain as it were the status quo of an eerie, fearless and magical king as drawn by Duro Ladipo. Osofisan's impression of Sàngó as hero can only be sustained from the perspective of an all-conquering man who can defy all odds to achieve his goal. He also emphasises the fact that this defiant posture has its own consequences, which may be fatal.

Sàngó myth has given birth to different dramatic representations and re-presentation or re-writing. There are various creative efforts that have attempted to give new identities to Sàngó myth. The myth is still in constant use by artists for the many faces of heroism it presents. For instance, Sàngó myth is so fascinating that it has attracted the attention of historians like Samuel Johnson, dramatists like Duro Ladipo who created a poetic drama with copious praise songs and heavy extra verbal, "bàtá" drum performance. Ladipo's work is a great success as it vividly brings alive the character of Sàngó on the stage. It is possible that Ladipo's has been aided in this achievement by his involvement in the Sàngó's cult His dramatic performance (stage performance) is a portrayal of African theatre with the emphasis on Nigerian drama, presenting Sàngó as a fearful warlord. The study of Duro Ladipo's classic opera; *Oba Kò So (The king Did Not Hang)* (1972). Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* (1999), a re-working of Sàngó myth and Wale Ogunyemi – Femi Lasode's video and film *of Sàngó* (1998) provide various media of presenting Sàngó from script to stage performance and finally to film production.

This has thrown light to many writers and artists who are drawing inspiration from oral sources like poetry, music, dance to create and recreate different stories of Sàngó's life which ranges from birth, childhood, warring, and achievement and adapting them into drama, script, stage performance, dance sequences, video film. Also, it arrests the attention of a marxist-humanist like

Femi Osofisan who makes use of Sàngó myth to recreate another myth from an already existing one. Wale Ogunyemi is one of the most important Yoruba playwrights who have written and dramatised several historical drama texts. He was also attracted to the Sàngó myth; he wrote the script and it was produced by Femi Lasode. The film presents a much larger story of Sàngó from childhood to hero-god. It has been considered as one of the best film productions in recent times.

From the study of three different media of presentation of Sàngó myth, it is a fact that the myth of Sàngó will continue to attract the attention of writers and artists because of its relevance to African societies. The myth lives on and it will still live on though recent documentation have reconstructed the Sàngó myth to suite different styles of presentation; creative writers and artists are still writing and producing works on Sàngó myth. From 1998 till date, there have been several write-ups, articles, journals, books, stage performance as well as video film. In fact there is a film titled *Igbá Sàngó*(a new film that is yet to be released to the public at the time of writing this work). The new film centres on how Sàngó gives children to barren women in the society. This is an avenue to build on Sàngó's character, attribute and power to bless his worshippers. Also, this portrays people's belief in Sàngó as a god who hears people's cries, identifies with their needs and provides solutions to all their problems.

Conclusion

The Sàngó myth stands as a testament to the dynamic nature of cultural narratives and their adaptations across different artistic mediums. This paper has delved into the evolution of Sàngó's representation, shifting from ancient oral traditions to modern script, stage performances, and the medium of film. The transformations experienced by this myth, as well as the way it has been

presented by various artists and writers, reflect a multifaceted narrative that adapts to different social, cultural, and artistic contexts. From the historical accounts of Samuel Johnson to the artistic expressions of Duro Ladipo and the quite modern reimagining of Wale Ogunyemi and Femi Lasode, Sàngó has been portrayed as a dynamic character. The myths surrounding Sàngó are living stories that continue to captivate audiences and inspire artists, both as a reflection of its historical significance and as a means of conveying contemporary themes.

This research paper demonstrates the enduring relevance of the Sàngó myth in African societies and the ongoing creative efforts to reinterpret and adapt this rich cultural narrative to address modern concerns and needs. The myth continues to thrive, not as a relic of the past but as a living and evolving story. It has become a symbol of strength, resilience, and cultural identity. The study of Sàngó's transformations in various media reaffirms the importance of cultural narratives and the artistic interpretations that keep them alive. Sàngó serves as a reminder of the enduring power of myth and storytelling, as well as the capacity of art to evolve and respond to changing contexts. As long as there are artists and storytellers, the Sàngó myth will continue to adapt, thrive, and inspire.

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