

PERSPECTIVES ON ŞANGO: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DURO LADIPO'S *OBA KOSO*  
(THE KING DID NOT HANG) AND FEMI OSOFISAN'S *MANY COLOURS MAKE THE*  
*THUNDER KING*

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**Abstract**

*This article interrogates the writers' tendencies to represent and re-present history in order to break stereotypes, create new identities, map out a unique style of writing for themselves or try to create new identity for the historical personage. It examines the concept of Şango in Yorùbá cosmology and its manifestation in the opera of Duro Ladipo's *Oba ko so* (The King did not hang) and Femi Osofisan's *Many colours make the thunder king*, with a view to presenting the comparative analysis of the two texts. Various perspectives on Şango's personality are examined. Emphasis is placed on the re-presentation of the Sango myth in the marxist-humanistic world of Osofisan's theatre. The paper explains points of convergence and divergence noticed when two different dramatists present the same story.*

**Key words:** perspectives, comparative study, identities, historical personage, Şango's concept and cosmology.

**1. Introduction**

The ritual festivals come as occasions that bring humans and the spirit into interaction. This trend is visible in almost all traditional societies. Soyinka's dimension for the world of the living, unborn and death in his *Myth Literature and the African World* is a projection of this view. This is likely to be one of the pillars that make it difficult for traditional Africa practices or drama to be completely wiped off with the influence of western education, civilisation and modernization. Up till date, traditional festivals like egúngún, Orò, worship of Yemoja, Oşun Oşogbo, Obatálá. Şàngó and Yam festival are well celebrated in Yorùbá setting like Ibadan, Oyo, Ile, Ogbomoşo, Oşogbo, Ofa and Kabba.

It is pertinent to stress that early professional African theatre groups emerged from the traditional festival drama. A good example is the "Alárinjó – the Yorùbá traveling theatre". This drama troupe is part of traditional drama as well as folk drama and it is popularly known to have emerged from "egúngún festival". The aim of this theatre group is to sustain Africa culture. It is a continuation of the ritual practice and festival drama in Nigeria theatre, which is the combination of oral and written theatre (drama). They make use of few pieces of costume and performed on places like playgrounds market squares, large compounds, school compounds, public places and sometimes buildings without platform.

The same idea is mirrored in Karin Barber's view (1995) that the phenomenon of the Nigerian theatre in relation to Yorùbá traveling theatre can be said to represent the tendency in popular theatre more generally. Popular theatre is the same as traditional theatre. He explains:

*All addressed larger more anonymous and often dispersed publics than older genres such as masquerades festival drama and oral poetry. Circulating between live performance, electronic media and print, themes and motifs gained wide dissemination in multiple forms. The popular theatre is a central site in these fields of mutating discourse feeding on histories, novels, newspapers, street-talk, oral antidotes, sermons and tales for its sources and supplying magazines, Televisions, records, radio, films and video materials to recirculate. (42)*

It is obvious that the popular theatre (drama) is related to indigenous resources as well as it relates to contemporary works. It cuts across all African countries; (West, East, North and South African). African drama explains the difference between the indigenous and contemporary culture, that is, the cultural changes from orality (Unwritten) to literacy (Written) African drama is related to history. This is true for Nigeria drama too, it developed from traditional history.

Ato Quayson (1997) in "African Theatre and the Question of History" explains that: "African theatre creates an intermediary space by which audiences are drawn into an active process of meaning and making". This occurs even in instances where the plays seem to be merely celebrating indigenous culture'... African playwrights are producing theatre as an inter medium precisely as a conduit for meditation on historical process. (43)

Contemporary drama can therefore be described as a form of drama that originated from traditional theatre. It emerges as a result of the effect or influence of western education and civilisation on African. Though African dramatists make use of colonial languages in their writings, they explore the resources of African traditional festivals, rituals, folktales, myths and history to enhance their works. This is partly true for Yorùbá traveling theatre of Nigeria as well. They use traditional materials in their performances, and the Yorùbá language as a communicating medium in acting. They make use of idioms, music, dance mime and dialogue in their performance.

Contemporary African dramatists have engaged in historical drama for several reasons. They use African historical experience as dramatic resources. The pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial experiences are adapted into dramatic and enactments for the purpose of re-orientation of African experiences. However, in the process of using African history as a form of drama to represent African realities, some degree of fictionalisation may have occurred. The question arising from this fact is whether this, historical representation or re-writing of historical facts or happenings is a true representation of African historical reality or whether they are subversions.

## **2. The Historicity of Şango Drama**

The attempt by African dramatists to retell or re-enact African history in the form of drama has differentiated them from mere historians. The historical dramatist is not just a historian that relays history, fact for fact. Rather he builds on history by co-opting characters in history, using



historical characters (personage) historical ideals and historical issues or happenings with a view of creating new identity for him, historical personage, using various dramatic devices in the realisation of his idea.

Since literature is the simulation of life, it focuses on life and society. Literature mirrors life and represents life generally. The main function of drama is to teach, inform and entertain people in the society. The historical dramatist works in line with the function of literature and specifically drama, is not only out to teach and inform like historians may do but he moves further to entertain his audience and correct the ills of the society through his enactment. As a result of these facts, history is therefore reproduced in dramatic works, in the likes of Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, and Lere Paimo.

The early dramatists in Africa are Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, Oyin Adejobi, Lere Paimo (Nigerians), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghanaian) and Colin Granderson (Senegalese). History as drama began with the early modern dramatist in Nigeria in early 1940s, Actor managers create successful companies. These managers include: Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Oyin Adejobi and Lere Paimo. They were all Yorùbá and they all started work as teachers and involved in acting Bible stories in African Christian churches. They also introduced folkloric music and other materials into their plays when (they moved "out of the church and mission schools" (Ogundeji, 1997:53).

Some of these dramatists shared similar background, especially their traditional and Christian backgrounds. Some of their grandparents were traditional worshippers while their parents had opportunity of working with missionaries. Ogunde was a son of a clergyman and he used to play organ in his church. Duro Ladipo's father was a catechist in the Anglican mission under the Late Reverend Mackay. Despite the involvement of Hubert Ogunde's father in Christianity as a clergyman, his son had a deeper love for the traditional Yorùbá cultural roots. He was initiated into the Oṣogbo and Egúngún cults and later into the Sàngó cult. Duro Ladipo, was compulsorily made to memorise several portions of the Bible and was also given Christian orientation.

In the case of Ghana, Charles Angmor gives the examples of the cantata, concert parties and folk opera that have an affinity with traditional Ghanaian drama (55). Also, the example of the Senegalese Ponty theatre whose performances, Colin Granderson says, have been based on information gathered from groins, old people and other custodians of African tradition". (73)

The beginning of the twentieth century marks the birth of contemporary drama in Africa, which developed alongside religious and ritual drama. It is also, the literary drama as against non-literary drama, which has been in existence since pre-literate era. This drama developed from folk drama, which is performative and becomes codified in Yorùbá traveling drama. The long existing oral tale, in addition to western form of drama metamorphosed into modern drama.

### 3. A Comparative Study of Şango Drama in the Select Plays

Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo's works laid a solid foundation for radical dramatists who are more learned and well exposed to western education; the radical dramatists whose works followed these early modern dramatists are the university-produced graduates. John pepper, Clark (Bekederemo), Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan.

Femi Osofisan is an outstanding modernist, who Olu Obafemi describes as a playwright who maintains an objective distance from the elements of myths, folktales, magic, music, dance and poetry so as to achieve a dialectical treatment of them. He uses them to convey his political viewpoint. According to Olu Obafemi (1988) Osofisan:

*Attempts to weld the historical and the unhistorical, the religious and the irreligious through the platform of Marxist polemics like Brecht's style.*  
(25)

Osofisan presents Şangó in *Many Colours Make the Thunder king* as contrary to the popular Şangó that people fear and tremble at his appearance. Rather, he portrays Şangó as a cheap and fearful king who depends on Igunnu and Aláğemọ for power. The story starts off on the premises of Şangó, making an enquiry from Ifa priest on how he can surpass his father; Oranmiyan. The response is that he should marry a river. Igunnu who claims to be a cobbler, dancer, a mender of people's dream and a storyteller advises Şangó that what Ifá priest has told him is too dangerous and that he should inquire further. Şangó is adamant and decides to do the impossible.

In spite of Igunnu's reluctant attitude he is forced to help Şangó out of his predicament. Igunnu's answer which is a fruit from 'ọdan' tree produces Aláğemọ, the human incarnation of the chameleon who is sent to fulfill all Şangó's wishes: three wishes to be precise.

Şangó who is out to do the impossible, marries Qya, the beautiful and very elegant queen. Qya is unable to give birth to children so Şangó calls on Aláğemọ to help him on how he can marry forest. Şangó marries Qşun and she is very fertile, she gives birth to so many children but Şangó is still out to marry mountain. Except that his wives, Qya and Qşun prevent him from doing so, they make plan with Şangó's powerful generals, Gbonka and Timi who make use of their servants, disguised like spirits. Şangó feels bad when he discovers the set up against him not to marry oba. Despite the fact that Qya and Qşun seem to prevail over Şangó not to marry Oba, Qya is not satisfied with her relationship with Şangó because of her inability to have children. She makes several attempts to lure Aláğemọ to bed but he refuses. She finally confides in Qşun who takes her to Yeye Iroko.

On getting there, she is very nervous and ready to give anything to whosoever gives her baby to the extent that she promises to give the child back to yeye Iroko. Qya finally becomes pregnant and purposes to have Şangó and the whole palace to herself. She sets up Osun and



Therefore, modern African drama is a blend of traditional and literary drama with the artists that are exposed to western education.

The traveling theatre is sometimes called Yorùbá folk opera of Western Nigerian as a result of song, dance, drumming, and mime, which illustrates the public dances, and ceremonious spirit of Yorùbá traditional festival drama. It was performative and was later translated into written form in Yorùbá language.

In early 1940s, Hubert Ogunde assumed the leadership of (his flourishing theatre troupe popularly called the Yorùbá traveling theatre (Alárinjò). They make use of drums, mouth organ, gourd, whistles, iron bells, voices and occasionally trumpet and saxophone in targeting places like markets, office blocks, motor parks, even hospitals to announce their presence and that the play is about to start. They moved from place to place, from town to town, from state to state and from country to country both within Africa and beyond.

Ogunde also started work with a group of African Music Research Party in 1945. In 1946, he started traveling with his theatre group giving it a matching name of traveling theatre. He initiated all his family into this troupe so as to give his full attention. His first production was "Garden of Eden and the throne of God" in 1944. This was staged in the church of the Lord, in Lagos.

Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo contributed greatly to the development of African theatre in Nigeria. Yorùbá opera nourished in the hands of these two distinguish men and they produced several actors who are now carrying on with the theatrical work. However, Ogunde did not put his works into written form unlike Duro Ladipo, poet and musician, who also drew more inspiration and materials from traditional Yorùbá resources like: praise poetry, hunter's songs and masquerades poetry.

Duro Ladipo, who was a primary school teacher like Ogunde staged several plays, the adaptation of Shakespeare *'As you like it* in 1955, *Oba morò* (1962), *Oba Kò So* (1963). He wrote these plays in Yorùbá Language and published all the Yorùbá plays in 1964 under Mbari Publication. Ulli Beier later translated all the three Yorùbá plays into English Language.

Duro Ladipo was an outstanding modern dramatist. He has recorded a brilliant performance in folk theatre, with his copious Yoruba folk operas and staged production. One of his outstanding works and classic of the Yorùbá drama is *Oba Kò So (The King did not Hang)*. In this re-worked material from the mythic-history, the drama is about Sàngó the historical king, of old Oyo. According to Samuel Johnson Sàngó committed suicide but Ladipo claims that the king did not hang. He stated in his stage performance that the king left the palace in annoyance and walked out of town. Some believe that he died a mysterious death while some said he sank into the ground. Hence there are several versions of this history.

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Aláḡeḡeḡe so that her son can be king after Sàngó. Oya's plan to send Osun and Aláḡeḡe out of the palace is successful. King Sàngó sends Osun and her children packing.

He also orders his generals to put Aláḡeḡe in one of the caves in the mountain. They give him food with the mind that when he exhausts all the food he would die eventually. Fortunately for Aláḡeḡe he meets with group of ants that promise to help him out of the cave as soon as he is able to solve seven riddles. He is able to solve all the riddles and the ants help him out of the cave.

Sàngó later feels insecure after he has carried out his judgement on Aláḡeḡe, he agrees that he has offended gods and that the revolt in town is a result of the punishment he gave to Aláḡeḡe. He orders his generals to open the cave and dig Aláḡeḡe out but it is a great surprise that Aláḡeḡe is no longer in the cave. This provokes king Sàngó the more and Oya reminds him that his two generals are the brain behind the town's revolt. She insists that it is Gbonka and Timi who instigate the army and town people against Sàngó. Oya supports her reason with the fact that the two generals have been agitating for war since all these years. Sàngó sum these two issues together; the town revolt and the disappearance of Aláḡeḡe and agrees with Oya's opinion that the two generals are the main cause of the whole problem. Gbonka and Timi are disappointed in Sàngó for such accusation, so they withdraw from the whole issue but Sàngó orders them to prepare for fight the next day against each other and whoever falls in battle will be the guilty person.

Simultaneously, Aláḡeḡe traces Oṣun's place, he unveils what is going to happen to Oṣun especially Sàngó's trip to her place to reconcile, Oṣun could not believe it. Meanwhile the news of Gbonka and Timi's fight gets to Sàngó that Gbonka prevails over Timi and he puts him in chain. Sàngó was not impressed and orders a re-fight in his presence the next day. Shortly after this Oya is visited by Yeye Iroko and her tree spirits to claim their child from Oya who has been overwhelmed with the joy of motherhood. She entreats Yeye iroko to give her more time but she refuses and snatches the baby. Oya breaks down in tears and shouts for her husband to save her but Sàngó has enough in his mouth to chew than to have time for Oya's trouble. He is looking forward to the fight between his two generals that turns out to be what he least expected. Gbonka conquered Timi, cuts off his head and throws it on Sàngó's lap rudely.

This indicates a challenge to battle, Gbonka emphasises that Sàngó's reign is over and that he should vacate the throne for him within seven days. Having heard this Sàngó breaks down in tears while Oya enter to narrate her ordeal regarding her encounter with Yeye Iroko, how she got the child through the help of Oṣun from her how she would finally lose the child. Sàngó and Oya decide to trace Oṣun to her abode. Oṣun welcomes them cheerfully and forgives them all their misdeeds against her. Likewise Aláḡeḡe promises to serve Sàngó once more, he asks him to request for one thing, either the recovery of his kingdom or Oya's son. Sàngó eventually opts for the recovery of Oya's son because he can no longer rule effectively again.

Şàngó learns his lessons, though in a very hard way that compassion is the only weapon one needs to be greater than one's father! Wisdom and humility, these are the steps and way to greatness. Aláğemọ agrees to rescue Oya's son but it all results in calamity and more tragedy. The baby is lost to the fire, Oşun gets burnt in the process of alerting Aláğemọ to leave the bathtub and Aláğemọ sustains injury. Şàngó is frustrated with all these failures; he concludes his life by hanging and informs Oya to continue with her battle. Şàngó hangs on one of the burnt trees; Oya clings to his dangling body and stabs herself while mourning Şàngó. The water from Oya's breast starts gushing out and later turn to a river that flows from Oşun's dead body, Oya's child and to Aláğemọ's bathtub and receives his body. Aláğemọ stands in the water, looking at the corpses and makes a proclamation that Şàngó and his two wives will be in remembrance forever.

Looking closely into the two dramatic presentations by these renowned dramatists and playwrights, it is obvious that there are several areas of divergence even though some areas of presentation seem to agree to a certain extent. Without gainsaying the fact is Duro Ladipo *Oba Kò So* is very close to historical account. Comparing Duro Ladipo's *Oba Kò So* with Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder King*. It is obvious that Osofisan presents Şàngó as an ordinary being who is just like any body. This opinion is contrary to Ladipo's claim. He sees him as a deified god who is capable of doing the impossible.

*Şàngó was the person whose head was cut off in the house. And who then re-appeared in the middle of the king's market... Şàngó is the banana tree on bank of the river which was cut down and which sprang up again! The thing that happened to the vulture that made the vulture bald is what made the ground hornbill use rags for clothes fiery eyes! (1972:141)*

Ladipo backs up the powerful description of Şàngó with great thunder and lightning and emphasises the fact that the ground shakes violently. This explains the point that Şàngó is not an ordinary person. Duro Ladipo seems to agree that Şàngó marries many wives but choose Oya as his favourite who is loyal submissive, advises Şàngó when necessary and above all stand with Şàngó at all times even when it is difficult. Though Osofisan agrees with this to some extent but adds some negative qualities to distinguish his own Oya. Osofisan starts up his story with Şàngó's planning to marry Oya, Oşun and Oba though his marriage with Oba could not be actualized.

Osofisan sees Oya as a negative influence on Şàngó and his reigns as Aláàfin of Oyo. Though one can assume that Osofisan presents women especially Şàngó's wives as part of the colours, that is, their honour, beauty, wealthy background, their power and affluence that make Şàngó a thunder king. This implies that Osofisan pays part of his attention to women and their roles in making Şàngó what he really is, with those women he becomes powerful honoured and respected both within and outside his domains. Şàngó's wives made him and at the same time



caused him great trouble. The rivalry of those women caused several problems and led Şàngó into crisis.

Though both presentations reveal Şàngó as war general but Ladipo seems to dwell much on Şàngó as a warlord who fights wars greatly and has the love of his people at heart.

Osofisan portrays Şàngó as a ruthless, hardhearted and stubborn king who is set out to achieve anything even the impossible. It is not surprising that Osofisan presents him as a 'lover boy'; he is always on love expedition, marrying different women at the expense of his kingdom. He neglects the affairs of the land and is busy running after women and marrying them one after the other. This same idea is mirrored in Lanrele Bamidele's Şàngó myth (2000) as he asserts:

*Femi Osofisan's Many Colours Make The Thunder King is perhaps interested in the stories of Şàngó as a lover boy. It is not so much on the bitterness, tyranny and intrigues that DuroLadipo's play is played. Rather we see a wonder-worker who is equal to the task of winning all his heartthrobs for wives. All the tales about Şàngó's courtship and marriage to oba, Oşun and Oya (all river goddesses) and his eventual cleaving forever to Oya, become stories on how to conquer any obstacle through strong will and courage. (184)*

This explains the fact that several people have been celebrating bitterness, tyranny, in Şàngó but that Osofisan sees Şàngó myth from another perspective, which is his relationship with women and how it has contributed both positively and negatively to his reign. Also how these women are colours who make him king.

Ladipo portrays Şàngó as a great and independent warrior who does not depend on anybody for power or strength while Osofisan depicts Şàngó as a weakling who relies on Aláğemọ for instruction. Aláğemọ starts with violence and ends in violence. Both Ladipo and Osofisan present Şàngó as a restless king but Şàngó's temperament especially his hot temper is more revealed in *Oba Kò So* compared to Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder king*. The dependency of Şàngó on accumulation of power so as to be great and surpass his predecessor makes him to fall greatly and tragically. He died a common man and criminal's death 'Hanging'; it is a way of reducing him to nothing.

Duro Ladipo's presentation agrees with historical account that Şàngó is a son of Oranmiyan and daughter of Elempe; Nupe king but Osofisan present Şàngó as son of Oranmiyan and Yemoja this implies that he is trying to sever that link that Yoruba has with Nupe kingdom.

The issue of elimination of the two generals is peculiar to the two presentations but the presentation differs. In *Oba Kò So* the issue is a major issue that stands before king Şàngó from the beginning of the play. As a result of Şàngó's attempt to satisfy his people and allow peace to reign in Oyo. Contrary to this, is Osofisan presentation where he uses Oya to cause trouble between the two generals and king Şàngó she insist that the generals are responsible for revolt and unrest in the land as well as stealing of Aláğemọ. It is this confusion that lead to the fight

between Gbõnka and Timi. Also, the presentation of Gbõnka's throwing Timi's head on Alááfin Sàngó's lap is missing in *Oba Kò So*. It is after Gbõnka comes out of fire unhurt that he challenges Sàngó to vacate the throne and go back to Nupe, his mother's town within five days. Gbõnka's command is re-echoed by towns' people in *Oba Kò So* which implies that Oyo town people desert Sàngó and join Gbõnka's camp. This brings great insult and disgrace on Sàngó.

Sàngó in both enactments is presented as having hung himself inspite of Oya's attitude. She tries to prevent him but he finally hangs himself. 'Oya' in Ladipo's *Oba Kò So* only mourned her husband and her lamentation alerts people especially the Mogba; Sàngó's friends who come to redeem Sàngó's image, Oya in *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* could not watch her husband hang and die alone; she clings to Sàngó and stabs herself, laments greatly and water gushing out from her breast. This water turns to a mighty river that carries her husband's body, Oşun's dead body her son's body, and herself away. Also, the same river revives Aláğemó and he pronounces King Sàngó and his two wives as great and powerful heroes whose act and might will always be remembered in Yorùbá tradition.

Looking at the 'mode of dying', Sàngó committed suicide by hanging himself. From sociological perspective, suicide is an act that demands for explanation, it quaries or questions the victim's action. Why did he do it?

According to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim's classics of suicide, he identifies four types of suicide: *Excessive individualism*, *Excessive attachment*, *Anomic suicide*, *Fatalistic suicide*. The third type, which is: Anomic suicide occurs. Under conditions of anomic or "lawlessness" in the broad sense especially, when traditional values and guidelines for, behaviour have broken down. From sociological point of view Sango's death by hanging can be referred to as anomic suicide under sociological suicide. He feels he can no longer rule successfully especially in the midst of disgrace, rudeness of Gbonka even shame of burning his own house.

This also leads to condemnation, Sango sees himself as no longer useful to human race as king of Oyo, and he condemns himself to death of hanging which is a way of putting an end to shame. Also, one can say that Sango's mode of dying is his veneration, an apotheosis of greatness and mark of heroism. It is believed that great people do not die a mere or cheap death. Comparable with Biblical reference, Elijah's rapture in second Kings chapter two, verse eleven and Enoch's disappearance in Genesis chapter five, verse twenty-one to twenty-four (Genesis 5: 21-24).

He enjoyed a close relationship with God throughout his life. Then suddenly he disappeared because God took him (*New Living Bible: Genesis 5: 24*)

This is as a result of Enoch's obedience, close fellowship with God, righteousness companionship, holiness and Godliness with God. This gives him opportunity not to experience death but God took him.



In the case of Elijah in second kings' chapter two, verse eleven:

*As they were walking along and talking suddenly a chariot of fire appeared drawn by horses of fire. It drove between them, separating them, and Elijah was carried by a whirlwind into heaven. (New Living Bible: 2 Kings Chapter 2 verse. 24)*

Elijah who is God's prophet, also had the same privilege to escape death, he was carried into heaven.

Therefore, Şàngó who is god of lightning and thunder, a deified hero could not have died a natural death but disappeared and reappeared in his translation position to deal with his enemies and promise his full support to his subjects. Şàngó 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 identifies to Şàngó myth. The myth is still in constant use by artists for the many faces of heroism it presents. For instance, Şàngó myth is so fascinating that it has attracted the attention of historians like Samuel Johnson.

#### 4. Conclusion

Osofisan in his presentation makes great attempt to create myth out of myth. He adapts history so as to subvert history. His works reveal his experimental and dialectical use of poetry, history and magic by demystifying and adapting for progressive, artistic and ideological effects. His treatment of his major character, "Şàngó" in *Many Colours Make the Thunder king* is an example of his humanistic feeling. He does not believe totally in the past story of Şàngó, so he creates his own story in order to suit his style, for the purpose of his own objective aesthetic. Therefore, Osofisan has subverted history to suite his purpose.

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