

Two Tales Same Myth: Engaging Credible Leadership in Nigerian Drama

Ahmed Yerima, PhD
Department of Theatre Arts and Film Studies,
Redeemer's University, Ede

Terkimbi Adoka
Department of Theatre Arts,
Benue State University, Makurdi

Abstract

Quite remarkably, an assiduous survey of Nigerian drama reveals, among other things, the role drama has played in constructing and reflecting a dominant perception about leadership in Nigeria. Hinged on a critical evaluation of what drama has done politically in various parts of the world and at different times, this paper examines its current usage in Nigeria and the possibilities of its creative utilisation to instil desired leadership qualities in Nigeria's consciousness. Using Soyinka's *King Baabu* and Ahura's *Tor Yatar*, the paper argues that, the challenge of credible leadership remains a phantasm even to dramatists who are mystified by its perplexity. The paper concludes that Nigerian dramatists have championed a democratic space that becomes a brainstorming ground for Nigerians to become better informed and positioned to compel purposeful and effective leadership. The research recommends that to remain functional; drama must be made to spell out clearly, the democratic ideals, which are needed to inspire purposeful and responsive leadership in the society.

Key Words: Tale, Myth, Leadership and Drama

Introduction

From primordial times till date, the central interest of study in the humanities has been humanity itself. As such, every effort is made at drawing values which are beneficial to man and society in humanistic studies. Leadership, particularly political leadership, is crucial for the development of any nation and the progress, development and fortunes of any nation are tied to the type and quality of the political leadership it has had and continues to have. This makes leadership to be the fulcrum on which the development or under-development of global communities revolves.

In Nigeria, the major hindrances to national development are traced to bad leadership. Scholars and public analysts alike have decried the deficit of credible leadership in the nation. Augustine Dike articulates this when he posits that: "The problem which troubles Nigeria most is the failure of political leadership, in fact, failures in other domains are traceable to poor leadership; leadership selection in Nigeria takes imposition pattern, directly or indirectly", (132). Chinua Achebe buttresses the above submission when he opines that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character; there is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, water, air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership. (1)

It becomes trendy that wherever two or more Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national flaws. Indeed, there are many accusing fingers pointed to leadership failure, and the challenges of governance could be addressed by educating the Nigerian citizens on how to use power to avoid its abuse and misuse.

Various approaches have been explored and adopted, ranging from legal, conventional, traditional or even transcendental processes to arrest the debauched leadership system, without satisfactory results. Drama being but a branch of humanistic studies cannot but remain committed to recreating the events of the society to establish the facts and rebuild a harmonious society that is most desirable. What this portends is that drama as a theatrical genre, thus, becomes an opening through which societal interactions, contradictions and aspirations are depicted to reshape human actions, attitudes and practices that are detrimental to societal development. Therefore, the functionality of drama in any society cannot be over-emphasised.

The point to note here is that from the conception and inception of drama, dramatists have fancied themselves as objective transcribers and exponents of the social problems of their societies. And every dramatist is naturally drawn to the domineering socio-economic, cultural, ideological issues as well as political undertones of their time. For instance, the ardent and much celebrated English writer,

Shakespeare, presented various commentaries on the politics of England during his time. His works such as *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and others present a political tussle and quest for power; expressing the political upheavals surrounding the English monarch in his time.

Yemi Atanda identifies two basic tasks of the dramatist to his society. According to him, dramatists “should persistently question, and criticize the mores and attitudes, actions and inactions, myths and realities of his society; and exponent of the aspirations, expectations, dreams of his people”, (45). This creative and imaginative ingenuity is what makes some dramatists popular on the strength of the number of their readers consequent upon the topicality of their dramatic constructions and the objective portrayal of their societies. The implication of this is that dramatic reputation is often to a large extent, determined by the strength of audiences and readership. This has been central to the various dramatic traditions across the world.

However, the dramatic response to the leadership challenge most often appear to complicate and mystify the leadership problem the more. A myth, according to Orhero Iroro is; “traditional story about heroes or supernatural beings, often attempting to explain the origins of natural phenomena or aspects of human behavior”(3). This conception sees myth as a narrative that through many retellings has become an accepted tradition in a society. Thus, myths remain stories that have compelling drama and deals with essential elements and assumptions of a culture. Myths explain speculatively, for example, how the world began; how humans and animals came into being; how certain customs, gestures, or forms of human activity originated; and how the divine and human worlds interact. Many myths take place at a time before the world as human beings know it came into being. Because myth-making often involves gods, other supernatural beings, and processes beyond human understanding, some scholars have viewed it as a dimension of religion. However, many myths address topics that are not typically considered religious—for example, why features of the landscape take a certain shape.

The important thing to be deduced from this argument is that stories and deductions from phenomena that cannot be objectively and certainly explained remain tales of myth. And with due consideration, the challenge to leadership and governance in Nigeria and elsewhere around the world would forever remain mythical as long as societies battling with bad leadership continue to search for the ideals. This is

imperative because African myths, for instance, express values, identify moral standards and embody profound philosophical reflections. Although it is difficult to draw rigid distinctions among various types of mythical tales, people who study mythology find it useful to categorize the most common types which may include features of sagas, legends, and folktales. What makes one of these tales a myth is its serious purpose and its importance to the culture and society in which in this case, leadership finds expression.

Societal Values and Leadership Question in Nigeria

Every society has values which it holds dear. The Nigerian society, though plural in nature is never an exception to this truth. Egite, S. contends:

In order to appropriately suggest the values a good society be built upon, it would be necessary to identify what the particular society holds dear. Values are what the society care about as a group. They are what motivate people from within. Values can be good and bad. However, when a society adopts the bad values such as materialism, greed and nepotism, the resultant effect is the kind of political tragedy that has befallen Nigeria as a nation (14).

This position underscores the point that a sound value system ultimately produces ethical and sustainable societies, while a corrupt value system produces terrible, weak and unsustainable societies. Determining what essential values a good Nigerian society be built on would demand an examination of the values that had sustained the societies now constituting Nigeria centuries before the creation of the expression called Nigeria; and to explore what can be done to bring those values into the Nigerian concept and build on them in order to move the nation forward. Saburi Biobaku succinctly articulates this view:

A look at the traditions of most of the societies that now constitute Nigeria would reveal unsurprisingly that all of these societies were value based. Cutting across all these traditions are values such as high moral integrity, fair play, sense of social justice, honesty, concern for others, respect, social decorum, hospitality and patriotism expressed in loyalty to the family and group.

Most of the institutions that facilitated these values were local and built around kings, Chiefs, Emirs, clan system and the extended family system. (19)

These are not different from values that dominate in successful societies all around the world. The only difference is that these values were successfully infused into modern leadership styles in those other societies. For decades these values were central to both the society at large and societal cohesion in the various societies constituting Nigeria before the formation of Nigeria as a nation. However, at the attainment of independence, Nigeria had to adopt a new style of governance that recognises a central government alien to these societies. The parliamentary system of the early sixties was an attempt to adapt the British system of governance to the disparate Nigerian society. What is not clear is the extent to which the system could have succeeded in the infusion of the traditional values of various groups in Nigeria into leadership. This point underscores the poverty of leadership in Nigeria and the failure to tackle headstrong the major issues confronting the society. Some social commentators attribute this to why Nigeria has failed and is still failing today because leadership positions have gone to incompetents.

Besides, the concept of governance and emergent democracy in Nigeria complements the traditional African society, which is communal and collectivist. In the communal democracy, every adult citizen to an extent contributes in the governance and development of his society right from the family unit, thus making all adult Africans leaders at different levels and situations. Nevertheless, the present state of the Nigerian political system has fallen short of the average expectation of the citizenry. According to Toochukwu Okeke;

Leadership in today's Nigeria is such that has portrayed and presented a mockery of the widely acclaimed symptom of good governance and democracy... to the extent that citizens now experience despair instead of hope, insecurity instead of security, tragic and untimely death instead of long life and high life expectancy, illusion instead of expectation, deficits instead of dividends, militarization instead of civility, dictatorship

instead of rule of law, political selection instead of election, etc (34).

Okeke's rendition is very clear and succinctly captures the deficit of good governance in Nigeria, where leadership becomes an instrument of personal satisfaction than communal. The reason for this is not far removed from the sheer absence of purposeful and responsive leadership machinery in the political system.

The crux of the leadership problem in Nigeria lies not in the absence of political authority but in the existence of several legitimated authorities in the wider society which in various ways constrain the exercise of national political authority, as well as threaten the existence of the political community. Apparently, part of the leadership trouble in Nigeria lies in the uncertainties and contradictions in the evolving relationships between the leaders and the led. Victoria Odelami's position is very apt. She contends that "before we can clamour for a resurgence of positive leadership models, there is the need to agree on the presence of negative heroes in and on Nigerian stage".(126) Indeed, to seek for a responsive leadership, we must first and foremost admit that there exist negative leaders in the Nigerian political system, and those qualities that make them bad will lead us to seek alternatives and effective ways of curbing the leadership problem.

A recap of Nigeria's political leadership since independence reveals that almost all of Nigeria's past leaders were absolutely instrumental in their leadership styles. Sir Ahmadu Bello was seen to be representing more of a sectional interest than the interest of the country and thus would pass more for an instrumental leader. Aguyi Ironsi's emergence as military head of state through a coup saw him an instrumental leader based on how he evolved. Gowon's promise to return the nation to democracy, creation of states, his indigenisation decree, made him a charismatic and societal leader but those from the east saw him as an instrumental leader. Murtala Muhammed's desire to address the critical issues of development challenges in Nigeria at the time, in which hardly any section of the country complained qualifies him as a societal leader by all standards (Iyanya: 16). Obasanjo's implementation of Murtala's policies; Operation Feed the Nation, convening a national conference and the return of the country to democratic rule saw him a circumstantial societal leader. Shagari as an individual was widely believed to be ethically above board, but lacking in courage to assert his authority as required for an executive president, thus indicting him as an instrumental leader.

Gen. Mohammedu Buhari, citing series of excuses against Shagari's government took over on a 'change mission'. Though many people celebrated the change of government even on streets – which restored some public sanity, his policies were soon found to be too harsh, and people began to yearn for another change. This makes it difficult to qualify him as a societal leader. Babangida took over and swiftly rescinded some of Buhari's 'harsh policies'. But his postponement of promises, annulment of the 1993 presidential election saw him more as an instrumental leader. Shonekan ruled the interim government for barely three months, and it's difficult to gauge his leadership. Most devastating was Gen. Sani Abacha, whose regime was ruthless. It was bad that Nigeria was even suspended from the Commonwealth Nations. These qualify him certainly as an instrumental leader. Abacha died and was succeeded by Abdulsalam Abubakar, who was as unusual, selected through military leadership. He released political prisoners held by Abacha, ended military dictatorship through a genuine transition to civilian rule; which portrayed him as a societal leader. Obasanjo's promises to solve the country's basic problems gave much hope to the nation. Despite his ability to lead the country out of foreign debt loop, the statement about him which is the expression of opinion of many Nigerians, according Iyanya; "is based on the fact that, upon completion of his tenure the major problems of insecurity, unemployment, hunger, poverty, disease and corruption still persist" (117). This passes him for an instrumental leader as he used the instrument of power for his personal motives.

Yar-Adua succeeded Obasanjo in 2007, and as Ohai, C. submits, "He never on his own bargained to rule Nigeria, but was rather handpicked and pushed into office by his predecessor" (47). Despite his seven-point agenda and respect for the rule of law, he died prematurely and could not deliver on his agenda. Jonathan succeeded Yar'Adua and suspended the 'seven-point agenda' on the claims that "all aspects of the economy needed attention" (119). His six-year presidential rule saw Nigeria scoring very high in corruption, insecurity, hunger, disease, terrorism, kidnapping, cultism and abuse of judicial processes. He thus falls in the class of instrumental leaders. In 2015, the return of Buhari to the presidency was received with high expectations by a nation full of hopes and aspirations; yearning for change, which Buhari had promised. Four years into governance, there are enough parameters to adjudge whether he is indeed providing the change the people

clamoured for. Of all Nigerian leaders since independence, it is acclaimed that only General Murtala Muhammed got a nationwide approval rating among other leaders in Nigeria's political history till date. According to Iyanya, "The very fact that he remains Nigerian military leader, whose image is printed on a currency note, is enough evidence of his outstanding leadership qualities" (111).

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that, from independence, two styles of leadership are inherent in Nigerian political landscape: the societal leader – who leads according to popular desires, goals and aspirations and the instrumental leader – who uses the instrument of power to pursue his selfish goals at the expense of public good. Even those that have proven to have good intentions, which were hardly implemented (as the case of Shagari) could not be adjudged societal leaders as it takes more than mere good intentions and sincerity of purpose for leadership to impact positively on a vast majority of the populace.

Apparently, there is a strong aversion to reconciling the high level of expectation and low level of result perception. The indices strongly attest that Nigeria will never know development until the present leadership arrangement, which is at best, retrogressive, is jettisoned for a more functional one; deriving its legitimacy from the genuine will of the people expressed in their coming together to dialogue their differences and configure it as a basis for unity and development.

Synopsis of the two Plays

A bloodless coup has taken place in Guatuna, and its ruler, General Uzi is, overthrown by Field-marshal Potipoo and his confidant, Chief of Staff, General Basha Bash. With Basha's promotion and a new appointment to head the Agricultural Ministry, Maariya, Basha's wife is unimpressed as she sees Basha better positioned to take headship of government. She sees Basha, who has been the major executor in nine serial coups that take place in the country as being ripe to take over leadership of Guatuna and enjoy the fruit of his 'hard work'. Basha soon takes over power through the coup against Potipoo and exchanges his military and personal identity of General Basha Bash, assuming a new identity of King Baabu as well as exchanging his military paraphernalia with a civilian robe and crown; representing the new democracy the people yearn for. He decrees the training of special military squad that would be ready to crush any opposition. He also grooms his son Biibabae who would succeed him.

In Geda village, Yatar, a pauper eventually rises to the exalted position of a Royal Chief. He becomes a perfect archetype of the lives of leaders in contemporary Nigerian society. Yatar had lost everything in the bargain through one Alhaj to whom he had entrusted his wealth but who perished in a plane disaster. Coincidentally, he also lost all his land to Atsaka, an honourable member representing the people of Aya in the House of Assembly. To crown his woes, Yatar lost his only son while his Ashitsugh died when she could no longer bear the pains of living. Before he could decide to end his life, concerned citizens who share his grief decided to immortalise his loving wife who died poor and heartbroken. They rekindle Yatar's hope and connive with him to assassinate the King whose reign has brought such untold hardship to the land. The deal is done; Yatar becomes a worthy candidate for the position. Despite all warnings from his accomplices, he insists and succeeds the assassinated king. Yatar's reign comes with a new dimension of rulership; his first mission is to regain all that he lost, never trust anyone and never takes chances. Stringent laws, while using the name of God to oppress the people, characterise Yatar's reign. He dispossessed citizens of their land and converted them to personal use. One of the heinous crimes is kidnapping people's babies for sacrifice. Finally, he instituted rules that make the royal household inaccessible to the people.

Leadership Question in the two plays

Soyinka and Ahura are influential voices and astute dramatists who are genuinely concerned and committed to rebuilding leadership ideals in Nigeria in which amongst other things; suppression, injustice, clientelism, violence, and a host of other challenges loom as effects of irresponsible and purposeless leadership. Figuratively, Soyinka and Ahura in their plays articulate the grim state of affairs in Nigeria in which leadership has become a cheap means of amassing wealth at the expense of the ruled.

It is commonplace in Nigerian society that leaders evolve either through selecting/imposing themselves and or influencing endorsement from the stakeholders either by coercive means or through the barrel of the gun. Thus, gauging from the sources of emergence, there is always the crises of interest – between public interest and that of the leader(s) in question. In the plays, Basha, later christened King Baabu imposes himself on the people of Guatuna

through a palace coup and makes every stratagem at sustaining his position as against the people's will. Yatar uses the slightest opportunity of being used as an instrument to assassinate the Geda despot and imposes himself as the people's Messiah. Basha's decision to topple the government of his predecessor is instigated by his wife, Maariya, who sees her husband worthy of the headship of the nation. Basha Bash comes to power under the pretext of saving the nation from the wicked hands of Potipoo who felt stirring trouble put the planned democracy under siege - a duty which he must offer to the nation. His wife asserts;

Maariya: The nation needs its redeemer. Is Potipoo a better man than you? ... It's not so long since you were their Sergeant-Major. You are what is called a soldier's soldier. Remember, this must be done in the name of democracy. We have to do something tinkering with your title (24).

Because there is already a yearning for a messiah, Basha claims to be the peoples' messiah, which only manifests in adapting his identity and professional regalia to suit the democratic government desired by the people. Whether a democratic leadership is known by nomenclature or policies is a question that continually begs for an answer but finding none in Nigeria's political landscape.

In Geda Village, Yatar assumes leadership as he sees this as an opportunity. According to him; "a messiah comes to a people only once. My name now rings far and wide; loud and clear. It is obvious that whatever I want now shall become mine if I ask for it. It will be foolish to allow the opportunity slip away" (29). This is usual of Nigerian leaders in which people aspiring for leadership positions make claims that they have been 'called upon', 'begged', 'demanded' to come and serve their people, as if they are of their own not willing to take such positions. However, the problem is that when they finally get a leadership position, they forget that they were 'called to serve' the people, thereby serving themselves and their immediate families. This calls to question the purpose and aspirations of leadership that does not derive its legitimacy from the people.

Because both Basha and Yatar's government do not derive mandate from the people, they invent various unconventional means of securing it, ranging from coercion, repression and buying of the

people's support. Potipoo incorporates civil groups in his council, which he craftily changed from the usual Supreme Military Council to Supreme Council for Advanced Reformation. The inclusion of civilian members drawn from religious groups, traditional institutions and organised trade unions is to use them to control and manipulate their members on matters of governance. For instance, when the Intelligence Report of mass uprising gets to the SCAR during their inaugural meeting, Dope is the first to rebuke them using all the spiritual powers known to him:

We see this as an attempt to derail the transition programme. The Almighty Allah, Almighty God, Orisanya, Ogun onire, Sango of the axe of thunder and all other deities and atavars, their holy prophets, messengers and angels shall take up arms against mutiny against constituted authority. I excommunicate them in advance and place all rebels under *fatwa*, *egun* and *epe* from this very moment (26).

This has been a common scenario of leadership in Nigeria. It could be recalled that during the reign of General Sani Abacha and the emergent mass uprising that sought for a democratic government in Nigeria, Abacha hired and heavily paid political, civil groups, trade associations and even religious groups who went on streets of Nigeria calling for 'Abacha must stay'. It does not require one to delve into serious research to determine whether such campaigns in support of Abacha's stay in power were genuine.

Yatar claims his leadership comes from god and thus he rules by divine injunction. Using the name of God, he induces fear in the people who must be submissive to the 'will of God', whatsoever. This is while his wife affirms; "It is good that citizens of this village show such unquestionable respect for God Almighty. A people without the fear of God are difficult to direct" (34). However, Yatar explains the rationale for leaders for evoking the name of God in leading the people, that; "It is an indispensable instrument in the hands of leaders who want to last" (34).

There is also another dimension in which bad leadership may take in Nigeria. Spiritual powers are used as a bid to have powers to lead the people against their desires. Various (though unconfirmed)

reports abound of leaders who have at different times travelled to countries like India, Germany and other places for spiritual powers to deal with opposing forces from the masses. In his palace, Baabu invites a bunch of traditional medicine men, marabouts, assorted cult priests, crystal-ball gazers and oriental mystics. Yatar taxes the people to contribute money, materials and labour for the immediate building of a tall, reinforced security fence around the Royal palace to fortify it against all risks.

The two dramatists (Soyinka and Ahura) share certain qualities as evident in the portrayal of their discontentment about socio-political realities, as well as their concern for the oppressed, the less privileged, the marginalised, the pauperised and the brutalised of the society. Their plays also reveal a strong belief in the power of drama that is in alliance with the people which enlightens and spurs the people/masses to take decisive actions in combating and changing plaguing and oppressive system which does not favour them. The picture they present of the Nigerian society undoubtedly portrays the duo as a dramatist with a sensitive eye for the problems of their society. These problems are socio-political and economic in nature, and in their multiplicity, analyze the repeated betrayal of the society by the individuals. The response left them with the need to redeem their sense of failure and thereby document the dynamics of people thwarted in attaining their dreams of good life.

However, the fundamental issue here is the sense of obligation and commitment to the cause of which the dramatist puts himself up to become the society's sense of right and wrong, whereby his dramaturgy preaches transformation.

Indeed, the two dramatists have used their plays to provide a means of probing honestly and fearlessly into leadership issues in Nigeria. What remains is whether they have been able to chart a course that could tenaciously tame the leadership mystery. In other words, have they been able to set an agenda that could produce the desired leadership for the nation via military take-over or violent revolution? The point is that rather than provide a blue print of what leadership ought to be in Nigeria, Soyinka and Ahura in the plays independently but coincidentally present negative innovativeness that characterises governance in Nigeria. Indeed, by presenting only the bad both in terms of class and individual abilities, there is evidently no hope for Nigeria. In Soyinka's *King Baabu*, Potipoo returns to power when it becomes apparent that Baabu is not the democratic leader the people desire. In Ahura's *Tor Yatar*, though Bonji assumes leadership through

a democratic process, what moral basis clears him worthy of leadership, being a partaker in the violent assassinations of Yatar and his predecessor? How does this assure the populace that his leadership could be different?

Going by the dictum 'experience is the best teacher' Soyinka and Ahura have in their dramatic expositions held a strong argument that is very philosophical. The style of leadership that could be expected from someone that has had the worst of life experience through rejection, and absolute dehumanisation as an effect of bad governance applies to Basha and Yatar who come from the lower class to become leaders. Such conditions can no longer be determinants to good leaders in Nigeria. Ordinarily, one could think that Yatar who had desired to rise by legitimate means would make a good leader, but perhaps changed by the hard lessons of life, he remains an epitome of the worst leadership ever in Aya community.

Conclusion

No matter how pleasing a dramatic composition may be, the overriding responsibility is to inject moralistic and didactic concerns to educate the audience. The negative influence of leadership deficiencies engulfing the Nigerian political system is dramatically explicit in the selected works. The threat of what society stands to become if the trend continues is also clear. To curb the menace of bad leadership in Nigeria, dramatists must direct their searchlight towards taming the troll of bad governance. They should endeavour to create a balance in their character construction in which each would embody the proscription of leadership qualities that should be the sine qua non for future leaders of Nigeria. As cultural indices attest, Nigerian societies hold values such as high moral integrity, fair play, sense of social justice, honesty, concern for others, integrity, social decorum, hospitality and patriotism expressed in loyalty to the family and group in very high esteem. These values should be infused into Nigerian modern leadership style rather than the imperial values such as selfishness, greed, sectionalism, nepotism, and despotic tendencies that are alien to our core values; and which taint our national image. Besides, violent revolution is not a solution to Nigeria's leadership problem, since violence in the 21st century is fast becoming a barbaric approach to issues bothering human existence. The leadership and followership must be cordial and should uphold justice instead of

instinct as the rule of conduct while the attachment of moral values to dialogue can prove the most viable approach in settling societal differences.

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