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## Technologising Orality: A Reflection on Femi Lasode's 'Sango'

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### Abstract

Filmmakers have made recourse to traditional materials and oral aesthetics and blended them with technology in their narratives in order to achieve a unique film tradition. This paper assessed Lasode's deployment of oral and film aesthetics in reconstructing the story of the legendary hero-god, Sango. It focused on the narratology of the text, in its adaptation of oral materials. Relying on the concepts of adaptation and translation, the paper adopted character and thematic analytical approach. The paper established that, the film-text has combined technology with orality to present Sango, not only as a legendary figure who inundation his world with mystic grandeur but a tragic hero whose misfortune arises from the bitter politics of his time and whose moral lapses leave a pattern for the modern society to learn from. Technology is deployed to demonstrate the adaptability and continuous relevance of oral materials, (drum, songs, chant, gong, flute and myth) to achieve harmony between the past and the present. Furthermore, songs and drums become the non-human character, motivating, warning, instructing and informing humans in their interactions with one another. In all, Lasode used technology to demonstrate the adaptability and continual relevance of oral material in contemporary narratives.

**Key Words:** technologising, orality, narratology, aesthetics and reconstruct

## Introduction

African literature has demonstrated that traditional oral texts are not crude, meaningless or obsolete but relevant for the articulation of contemporary needs and goals. By ways of translation, adaptation, as well as exploitation, the oral texts, both in their contents and forms have come alive in written literature and much more vigorously in the contemporary texts (Okpewho, 2007). Specifically, African playwrights, such as Soyinka, Osofisan, Sowande, Ngugi, Obafemi, Yerima and a host of others, have deployed African oral materials in manners that reveal not only their latent meanings but much more their artistic possibilities, especially in capturing the oppressiveness of the Nigerian contemporary society.

Osofisan's (1982) *Morountodun*, for instance, re-enacted the myth of Moremi to reinforce the latent potentials of the masses at resisting oppression both physically and intellectually. Equally, the theatre and film experimentation of the likes of Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and few other have drawn extensively from the paraphernalia of orality with a high depth of intellectual adaptation of this rich artistic heritage. In the same vein, the contemporary Nigerian video practitioners, following the pioneering efforts of filmmakers and their literary counterparts, have borrowed extensively from traditional materials in order to impose an oral aesthetic stamp on their art. This recourse to oral materials is a way of ensuring the preservation and propagation of African traditions in so far as creative writers or filmmakers remain the gatekeepers and whistle-blowers for their society. Film as a technological art has developed not only into a revenue generating industry, but, much more, a means of exporting our traditional values and poetics on a grand-scale, much more than literary texts have done. This point is established in the fact that the audience limitedness of written texts is overcome by the near-audience limitlessness of the film text.

## Aim and Objectives of the Study

This paper assessed the use of oral materials in the contemporary Yoruba film drama. More specifically, it aims at examining how the director of the film, "Sango", has deployed oral materials, in this technological craft, to treat contemporary subjects. The issue that is given priorities here is how the director has blended oral materials (specifically, songs, drum, flute, gong and chants) with technology to produce a profound art that moralises and at the same time aesthetically satisfies the watchers.

While the choice of Yoruba video drama is premised on the researcher's familiarity with the culture it draws upon and the fact that oral materials still serve social and artistic functions in the contemporary time, the choice of Lasode's "Sango" is borne out of my veneration of Sango, the Yoruba thunder-god of light, fire and technology. For one, orality functions as a tool for revitalising and rejuvenating African cultural heritage that is fast receding into the abyss of western prejudice. Oral materials also serve psychotherapeutic purpose in that they remind us of a lost reciprocal world that kept our progenitors in sane conditions in the very face of mental, emotional and physical brutalisation occasioned by the senselessness of colonialism and imperialism.

The study adopted one of Okpewho's (2007) three stages of deploying oral materials in literature; that is, adaptation (Okpewho, 2007). Adaptation in this paper is defined as a process by which an existing material, text, character or situation is deployed artistically to generate and convey new meanings and fresh aesthetic experiences. It is

the process of situating an old material or idea into a new context in order to demonstrate and revitalise the ideals of the old, as well as projecting new ideals. Consequently, the materials that are adapted go through the process of rebirth, becoming 'new and old' one at the same time. The freshness that comes into the new creation, therefore, becomes both thematically profound and aesthetically satisfying, offering one the possibility of living the 'old' and the 'new' life simultaneously in the present.

#### **Storyline: Femi Lasode's 'Sango' (1998)**

The film, 'Sango', narrates the infamous ascendance and the tragic exit of the legendary Yoruba god-hero, Sango, to his fathers' throne as the Alaafin of Oyo. His reign is marred by the greed of his general as well as his own lack of tolerance for oppositions irrespective of the intensions of such oppositions. His predecessor brother, Ajaka, is ousted from the throne by their cousin who is the Olowu of Owu kingdom as a result of the former's inability to protect and defend the integrity of the palace, as well as the sovereignty of the kingdom. The ensued war between Owu and Oyo reduces the Yoruba Kingdom to a relic of its old. The filmmaker combines both history and myth to paint the picture of a kingdom brought economically and politically on its knees by the lust and greed of its leaders.

#### **Orality in Technology**

The Nigerian video drama has adapted the resourcefulness of orality and transformed it into deliberate aesthetic elements in this technological art. By means of adaptation, oral materials have become a deliberate aesthetic tool in the video drama with specific intent of re-enacting the mythic, legendary and folkloric past with a view to re-ordering the present towards a deliberate reshaping of the future. What Okpewho, (2007) posited about literary texts is true of the Nigerian video drama. According to him, "...translating the old texts in stylized techniques is one way of adapting to the changed outlook; finding new subjects and new context for the old forms is another... (Okpewho, 2007, p. 86). Operating from the awareness that some of the outlooks revealed by the oral text no longer prevail, the video practitioners present these oral materials, to borrow Okpewho's words, in such a way that reflects the changed styles of living and perception in contemporary society (Okpewho, 2007, p. 86).

Femi Lasode's "Sango" (1998) is a good illustration here. "Sango" portrayed the legendary of the Yoruba thunder-god, not primarily as a mythic figure that inundates his world with an unwavering and unbiased mysticism, in spite of his obvious frailty, but a tragic personality whose misfortune arises from the bitter politics of his time and whose moral lapses and weaknesses leave a pattern for the modern society to learn from. Sango's arrogant and despotic nature is fore grounded in the manner he out-steps the king of Oyinkoro and his subsequent take-over of the latter's palace. In the manner of Nigerian contemporary politicians, Sango tricks the king of Oyinkoro in accepting circumcision of all adult males in his kingdom as a means of truce.

The Director does not inundate his watchers with the mystic grandeur of his hero-god; rather he presents him in a manner that reflects the changed styles of perception in contemporary society. Drawing his materials from the historic 15th-century feud between Olowu of Owu and Ajaka, the Alaafin of Oyo, which resulted into complete breakdown of law and order in the old Oyo Empire, Lasode, the Director, presents

Sango, the hero-god, and the younger brother of Ajaka, as a man whose tragic end is partly as a result of his insensitivity to the bitter politics of his time, especially as personified in the characters of Eliri and Oluode, his army generals, as well as in the manipulative love of his goddess-wife, Oya.

In the treatment of his subject, Lasode used technology to demonstrate the adaptability and the continual relevance of oral materials as would soon be illustrated. History and myth combined as potent instruments to assess and reassess the contemporary political situation in Nigeria. He treated the twin issues of imperialism and neo-colonialism which are modern subjects through the eyes of orality. In his plot development, he projected the mythic image of Sango in the manner of the oral artist who uses his images to blend the present with the past in order to reconstruct the future.

In the opening episode, he blended his narrative mode with various shots to paint a picture of anomie. The interpolation of the picture on narration is more like the performance of the oral artist who is conscious of the inclusiveness of his audience. As the narrative oscillates between the war front and the palace in Oyo, the pictures, shots, cuts and camera movements, as well as the drum messages, combined to create a folkloric atmosphere that produces an aesthetic satisfaction in the watchers.

Beyond this, the choice of the narrative mode of “Sango” is to create an oral context typical of the classical chorus and the African traditional bard. The narrator in “Sango” is not just a “recountner” of history, but a man who understands his traditional role as the custodian of cultural materials whose principal responsibility is to guide the society’s footsteps. He commented, passes judgements on unfolding events and makes moral pronouncement where necessary. For instance, the narrator condemned the bestial manner in which Sango out-steads the king of Oyinkoro, whose village is a typical example of the defenceless modern state.

In this adaptation, “Sango” deployed the aesthetic resourcefulness of drum, song, gong and flute, among others, to achieve harmony between the past and the present. The Director has shown his closeness to and his understanding of his Yoruba tradition in his deliberate choice of song and his language of praise not only to reveal his disappointment in the contemporary power play, but his disillusionment in the Nigerian democratic system. The praise chant below succinctly revealed this point:

Sango ooo!	Sango!
Oloju orogbo	warrior with unpredictable countenance
Eleke obi o	The king whose mouth spits bitterness
Egun nla tin yo’no l’enu	The masquerade that condemns both the innocent and the guilty
Orisa tin bara re l’eru	The brave and coward thunder god
okun bi Adeda orun	The creator of both darkness and light (falsehood and truth)
Oloju orogbo	The warrior with unpredictable countenance
Eleke obi o,ooo!	The king whose mouth spit bitterness

The point being made here is only clearer in the English translation or in the interpretation of the chant. Suffice to say that this translation has taken into account the context and my understanding of the director's treatment of his subject. The innuendo or pun contained in the duo of sweetness/ bitterness, falsehood/truth and bravery/cowardice which is typical of the contemporary Nigerian power-play is an indictment on the democratic process through which political leaders in our society emerge. Sango, for instance, thoughtlessly accepts to be crowned as the Alaafin of Oyo, while his brother, Ajaka, still lives. This is not only a breach of tradition but a sacrilege in the traditional Yoruba nation.

Furthermore, his acceptance of Oya's suggestion to eliminate his two war generals, Eliri and Oluode, is an attempt not only to eliminate all forms of oppositions, but all institutions of checks and balances, thereby becoming the absolute ruler, not only of Oyo empire but of the entire Yoruba race.

Another praise chant that exposes the aggression of Sango is the one below:

Oloju Orogbo	The possessor of colourless but bitter eye balls
Eleke obi oo	The one with most desirable voice
Ina loju	Fire-emitting mouth
Ina lenu	Fire-emitting eyes
Oba bale ile sere osan	Bosom friend of the household-head
Koto paya re sojude	Yet, his bitterest enemy
Sango ni ngo sin	I will serve Sango
Ngo s'oba	Not the king
Sango ni ngo sin	I will serve Sango
Ngo sin' joye	Not the chiefs
Sango ma pa mi o	Sango, don't vex your venom on me
T'oba ba pa mi	If the king kills me
Sango osi p'oba san	Sango will avenge my death
Eniti o pa Sango la timo	But, who will dare kill Sango!

The above chant reveals Sango's no-rival approach to governance especially, in,

Sango ni ngo sin	I will worship/ serve Sango
Ngo S'oba	Not the king
Sango ni ngo sin	I will worship/serve Sango
Ngo sin' joye	Not the chiefs

The existence of any rival to Sango is a sacrilegious and abominable act considered as treasonable offence punishable by death. No neighbouring king, however powerful or peace-loving, is equal to Sango. He is a mere subject that must reverence and worship Sango not with a negotiated but imposed tribute. In a tale-like manner, the above chant further reveals Sango's political trickery and mischief especially in

oba bale ile sere Osan	bosom friend of the household head
koto p'aya res'ojude	yet his bitterest enemy

Sango's intolerance for all forms of oppositions is a major character weakness. He, for instance, invites a domestic war on himself through his desire to get his two generals eliminated; first, through a kind of exile by asking them to become gate keepers in Ede, and when that failed, by masterminding and stage-managing a battle between two loyal

and faithful friends to eliminate each other. This case in point reminds us of the President Olusegun Obasanjo's third term agenda of the 2003-2007 political dispensation which brought about bitter feud in the National Assembly whose effects have negatively affected the polity till date.

His intolerance for criticism is also exposed in the episode in which the Oyo people staged an uprising against the palace in order to put an end to incessant wars waged by Sango. His disregard for the people he serves is demonstrated when he arrives to meet the people in the palace chanting 'A wa o fo gun mo!/ No more wars!, in their bid to display their disapproval of the avoidable war Sango is waging with the Olowu of Owu. He merely casts a disparaging look at them and without a word, stormed into his palace. The manner with which the crowd disperse is a proof of Sango's disrespect for people's opinions.

It is important to note that the chants and songs above heighten the mysticism and the awe with which his subjects regard him.

The songs in "Sango" are sung with different shades of mood and tone, signifying the character traits of Sango, Oya, his wife, and other characters. Some of the songs, in tale-like manner, pronounce on the unfolding events as much as some celebrate, idolise, mystify and deify Sango and his wife, Oya. The charm, wealth, influence and power of Sango while in *Nupe* land together with the magical beauty and prowess of his goddess-wife, Oya, are vividly captured in the following songs:

Sango o!	Sango o!
Olureku areku jaye	The masquerade that feds from his snare
Aje lile	The wealth commander
Abu weri	The flowing unending riches
Arin giya giya w'oja	The glory of the market place
Olowo ori Oya,	Husband of Oya
Oba k'oso	The immortal king
Olowo ori Oya,	Husband of Oya
Oba k'oso	The immortal king
Sango l'oko Oya	Sango, the ignitable husband of Oya
Sango l'oko Oya	Sango, the ignitable husband of Oya
Agbe'na gege	The no-nonsense husband
Sango de o	Sango is here
Eyin aya Sango	The incomparable wives of Sango
Ekuewa, ewa	We adore your beauty
Eye okin de	The garrulous peacock is here
Aji yobi ojo obirin	The un-ignorable women
Eye okin de	The garrulous peacock is here
Odede t'eru, t'eru	
Eye okin de	The garrulous peacock is here

As the songs above are being sung, the director's chosen images (the peacock, the ostrich, the hare, the goat and the moon) are manipulated and blended with the songs in ways that bring to life the theme of the songs, as well as the awesomeness and

mysticism of Sango and his wife, Oya. The shots, the camera angle and the light combine to fabricate meanings beyond the ordinary and literal wordings of the songs.

### **The Drum**

The use of drum message in “Sango” was for multiple aesthetic and functional effects. The drum, here, becomes the non-human character projecting the thoughts, values and creeds of the society throughout the movie. Drum, especially the bata-drum, is not just a musical accompaniment that gives greater completeness to the unfolding events for the mere purpose of ornamentation or symmetry, but much more, a magical tool in the hands of extra-celestial beings (the drummers) connecting the soul of the society to the ancestors. In this sense, the drum becomes or rather assumes the voice of the gods, speaking in a manner that only the initiates can decode or/and sometimes communicating with such clarity that even the non-initiates would understand.

Lasode’s drums and sometimes gongs speak with such clarity and profundity as they warn, inform, caution and sometimes lament human senselessness in the face of socio-political trajectories. In a manner of speaking, his drums serve as the voice of the gods guiding and guarding Sango, the hero-god, through the complexity of politics of his era. Ajaka, Sango’s brother and the Alaaḡin of Oyo, prior to his exile, received the message of the loss of the war he orders through the palace drummers. The warnings from the drums, if ignored, had terrible consequences. When Sango, the character, began to ignore the warnings of the drums, his tragic end became inevitable. As the story unfolds, the combination of the sound effect and the bata-drum with a deliberate atmospheric ululation effected by the camera heighten the tension between Olowu of Owu and Sango as the latter battles to ransom his brother, Alaaḡin Ajaka, from the death claws of Olowu.

The cultic, horrendous and horrific fast-paced sound of the bata-drum in the face of hostility between Olowu and Sango, as the latter requests for the head of former, is the filmmaker’s way of spelling out the Olowu’s doom. Olowu, mentally paralysed by his greed and inordinate ambition, becomes so much insensitive to the warnings of the drums that he thoughtlessly orders his warriors to bring Sango to him dead or alive.

Even in the face of outright war, drums and songs, as two invisible non-human warriors, motivate, encourage, and even sometimes provide relaxation and entertainment to the human warriors. The magical predictiveness of the drum (sometimes the gong or/and flute) is profoundly dramatised in “Sango”. A particular instance is when Sango becomes engrossed with the disobedience of his two war generals, Eliri and Oluode, who, in deviance to Sango’s order, choose to lead other warriors to ravage Owu rather than return with Sango to Oyo. The mournful beats of the bata-drum combined with the elegiac sounds of the flutes and gongs predict the tragic outcome of such disobedience which is the death of the trio of Sango, Eliri and Oluode.

Furthermore, drums create the mystic environment required for the interactions between the terrestrial and celestial. The magical atmosphere created or generated in “Sango” by the combined effect of drums, flutes and gongs allows for easy access of man into celestial realms. An example is when Sango, on the instruction of the spirit of his great grandfather, Oronmiyon, under the watchful eye of Ifa oracle, visits *Nupe*, his mother’s town, in order to receive *Ose Sango*, (Sango’s magic wand), to assist him in winning the war with Owu. The Director achieves this cultic atmosphere through sound

effects, colour balancing, as well as a combination of long and short-range shots with a final sudden cut of the camera.

### Conclusion

In all, oral materials have been deployed in ‘Sango’ in ensuring the preservation and propagation of African tradition in so far as creative writers or filmmakers remain the gatekeepers and whistle-blowers for their society. In the treatment of his subject, Lasode uses technology to demonstrate the adaptability and the continual relevance of oral material. The manners the director combined oral materials with film aesthetics, such as shots, cuts, camera angles, as well as the interpolation of nature on his materials, impose a certain freshness that brings the film alive. His chanters and drummers do not merely strike us as masters of their crafts, but much more blend with their material so much so that the oral materials they are interrogating offer the audience an aesthetic satisfaction. In this regard, the director has demonstrated the continuance relevance of oral material in interpreting and interrogating contemporary topical issues, much more in films.

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