

The Theatre Production *Fúnmiláyò Ransome Kúti*: A critique of performative Activism in Nollywood

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Abstract

*The theater production *Fúnmiláyò Ransome Kúti* captured the voice of marginalised individual or group of people who crave for liberation from a particular social abuse or Ifè struggle. Humans irrespective of gender from history are subject to one form of abuse or the other by the power that be, the colonial power and the imposition of unfriendly taxation in this regard. Humanity goes against subjecting man to pressure or abuse and therefore, advocate for justice, equity and fairness. The study is an exploration of Yorùbá women protest and quest for manumission looking at the activism and the heroic prowess of *Fúnmiláyò Ransome Kúti* as a successful protest leader who led the Ègbá women out of the quagmire of the then Aláké of Ègbáland, Oba Sir Ládàpò Adémólá II and the abolition of the tax regime by the colonial government. The paper appraised performativity of woke-culture as voice of the marginalised in the work of Bolanle Austen Peters' *Fúnmiláyò Ransome Kúti* which is a conscious and lawful attempt in the demand for justice either as individual or as a group.*

Keywords: *Fúnmiláyò Ransome Kúti*, Nollywood, Performative Activism, Nollywood

Word count: 176

Introduction

Yorùbá Protest Literature is a serious documentary of Yorùbá wars and conquests within, and near boundaries of the South-west Nigeria. The Oni of Ifè, *Àfònjá*, *Alààfin of Òyó*, *Aláké of Ègbáland*, *Àwùjálé of Ìjèbú Land* remain key players in the protest against taxation or payment of *Ìsákólè* or *Owó-Orí* to whoever the deities of the Yorùbá has chosen to be the paramount ruler or the most superior ruler and collector of tax from other subordinate kings. Noncompliance is always treated as insubordination and could result to wars among the descendants of *Odùduwà*. There is hierarchy in the collection of tax and payment of tax. There is also the question of *who pays who? And who collect what?*

Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kúti is a 2022 movie about the Ifè and times of *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kúti*, a renowned Nigerian activist and mother of Afro-beat legend, Fela Kúti. The film was directed by Tunde Babalola and Bolanle Austen-Peters and features movie stars like Joke Silva, Kehinde Bankole, Ibrahim Suleiman, Jide Kosoko and Dele Odule. The movie follows *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kúti*'s Ifè, from her early years to her fight against colonial rule and patriarchy. The film won prizes for Best Overall Feature Film and Best Screenplay at the 12th Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF) and was submitted for consideration as the Nigerian entry for the Foreign Feature Film category at the 96th Academy Awards.

Theoretical Framework

Kebaya et.al (2019), documented Aristotle's principle of 'ethos' 'pathos' and 'logos' where ethos means morals, formal, or ethics; pathos as pity, sympathy or empathy and 'logos' as reasoned discourse, logic or logicality which he recommended *for* or *as* an art of public speaking is

considered as the theoretical framework for this study. Leaders with foresight who recognises the power inherent in the principle of public speaking recommended by Aristotle will either retain the power through a more careful and systematic public speaking or loses the power to an opposition or to a potential protest leader like Bolanle Austen Peters in *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kútì* who uses the Aristotle principle to wield the sword of justice against the oppressors to bring about a socio-political change.

The Aristotle's principle is what is deficient in the duo of Mr Dundee and the then Aláké of Ègbáland Oba Sir, Ládàpò Adémólá II. The failed option of dialogue offered by *Fúnmiláyò* to both Mr Dundee who prefers his *tea* to *peace* and Aláké who rather prefers to bond the women and tripled their plight to granting them a penny reduction in the series of taxes levied the women ; also fires the ember of the imminent protest.

The myopic nature and lack of foresight of the king made him underestimated *Fúnmiláyò* and the power of women to stage a protest. The complacency of Mr Dundee and a show of support for Aláké in the demand of outrageous taxes from the Ègbá Market Women is a revelation of the evil of colonialism and imperialism. The fact that Mr Dundee could not stand for the oppressed women gave *Fúnmiláyò* the idea that the women who are being oppressed by the *Pàràkòyís* are defenseless. She wished for a Deus ex machina on behalf of the women. The dramatic irony here is that *Fúnmiláyò* herself is the Deus ex machine and she was emotionally and spiritually strengthened to carry out the emancipation.

Analysis/Discussion

Protests are public expressions of disapproval or dissent, often takes the form of demonstrations, marches, sit-ins and acts of civil disobedience. Protests can be organised for a variety of reasons, including political, social, economic and environmental causes. The right to protest is recognised by international human rights law, including the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Protests can be peaceful or violent, and may be met with resistance or repression from authorities. Protests have been instrumental in bringing about social and political change throughout history, from the Civil Rights Movement to the Arab Spring.

Amnesty international has launched a global campaign to protect the right to protest and support movements in their demands for accountability. The ability to protest safely is an issue that intersects with the right to be free from discrimination, and people who face inequality and discrimination may face additional dangers when exercising their right to protest.

In Bolanle Austen Peters' *Fúnmiláyò-Kútì*, the Abeokuta women protested against an unfair tax regime which led to the abdication of the then Aláké of Ègbáland, Oba Sir, Ládàpò Adémólá II and the abolition of the tax regime by the colonial government. The era of Colonialism, Totalitarianism, Despotism and Autocratic rulership is facing away. We are now in an era where people question, probe and query almost everything. Children and youths are becoming more inquisitive and curious as the day goes by and would love to know about everything and this they do fearlessly and passionately, even the adults.

The reason stated above can account for the audacious steps taken by Bolanle Austen Peters who acted the role of *Fúnmiláyò* in *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kútì* to challenge the power of the Then

Aláké Oba Sir, Ládàpò Adémólá II and the then colonial representative Mr Dundee stationed in Abeokuta. The level of 'wokeness' is not upcoming but growing innately and intrinsically in people in an alarming speed.

One may be quick to judge Bolanle Austen Peters (Fúnmiláyò) as being audacious or 'troublesome' the same way Mr Dundee felt she was, but the truth of the matter is that there is the trait of woke culture which is connected *with* and ignorantly operating *in* her. There was even a time in the movie when she felt she was in trouble with the King after losing her case during her first appearance in Aláké's palace. Much later, she paused to have a rethink on misleading the Abeokuta Market Women by adding or compounding to their troubles.

Then, she believed that she was being performative. Mering, (2021) sees performativity as a negative effect of woke culture which fosters a culture of outrage and mob mentality, prioritises individual guilt over collective action and that woke culture can be performative and superficial. The extension of false consciousness theory will evaluate the performative nature of woke culture in films revealing how protest leaders like Bolanle Austen Peters may be judgemental, holding firmly her own beliefs and never succumbing.

Eve, (2022) also argues that 'woke culture' or protest as seen in *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kútì* could be a form of 'performative activism' that prioritises appearance over substance and has the nature of attention seeking from an ostentatious character. Let us consider these lines picked from the character-Fúnmiláyò in the movie:

Film time 1:10:03 – Maybe I should just stop.
 I think I should just stop
 Maybe I am misleading these women
 Fúnmiláyò, just stop!

Her thought about misleading the Abeokuta Market Women is a revelation of her performative tendency. But we later come to understand her seriousness and selflessness as she summoned courage again with the soothing words of her father, husband and sister. Then she was able to stand again, forge ahead, for a fight to the finish with the imperial ruler with no power of her own except for the *voice of the women*.

What become more catchy and attractive which call for the attention of a woke person or individual like Bolanle Austen Peters in *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kútì* exemplified in the way she could not control her 'awe' as she witnessed the *Pàràkòyís*' inhumane treatment of the Abeokuta Market Women when the latter was innocently out in the market to encourage market women send their kids to school and also to ask *Ìya Sùpò* reason her son was absent from school for days are issues relating to social injustice, police brutality, oppression of the masses, taxation, geographical marginalisation, racism, family and marital crises, among numerous other socio-cultural issues.

Where socio-political and cultural matters are not handled diplomatically by political leaders like Mr Dundee or people at the corridors of power, be it monarchs such as Oba Sir, Ládàpò Adémólá II the then Aláké of Ègbáland, or 'popes', chiefs, clerics, or Ustadhs, social unrest like protest such as it happens in *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kútì* Nollywood movie cannot be helped.

Characterisation

Character development or creation is known as characterisation. This section will be describing major characters and their significances to the development of the plot of the movie *Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kúti*:

Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kúti (Bolanle Austen Peters): She is a woke character, a woman of valour who considered the payment of humongous tax and the forceful demand of such from the Abeokuta Market Women by the Pàràkòyís the King's vassals - evil and abhorrent. Considering the payment of tax disgusting and the situation of the women helpless and defenseless, she decided to volunteer herself as a *Deus ex machina* that resolves the conflict and settles the women's problem by ousting the King and suspending the presence and existence of the colonial influence through a massive women protest.

Oba Sir, Ládàpò Adémólá II: He is the myopic and short-sighted king, who belittled and underestimated the power of women and could not see the looming danger from his demand of excessive taxes from the Abeokuta Market Women until the latter sieged the palace, overpowered and consequently overthrown him. He eventually absconded from palace and scampered for safety in a far distant-town.

Mr Dundee: His presence in the movie represented the colonial rule and the investiture of imperialism in Nigeria. He is a white man and an officer of the British colonial council representing them in Abeokuta. As a direct beneficiary of the payment of tax, he believed that *Fúnmiláyò* is being performative; fighting the battle she is less concerned. He could not see anything wrong in the payment of tax and does not wish that the Abeokuta Market Women is free from the bondage of Aláké or the brutality of the Pàràkòyís.

He does not believe in diplomacy, evidence in the way he later declined to treat *Fúnmiláyò* to a cup of tea he ordered for the latter initially before the start of their conversation. He later fled and his whereabouts remained unknown when the women shocked the king with a massive protest which is simultaneously going on elsewhere in the eastern part of the country on similar tax issue.

Chief I & II: They are sycophants who will always deceive the kings by hiding the truth away from him. This is because they want to remain as chiefs and keep their precious seats in the palace. They deliberately closed their eyes to the plight of the Abeokuta market women and pretended not to know that they are suffering until the women revolted, encroached and invaded the palace and the 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane Hill'. They too eventually vacated their precious seats and fled with their king to a place unknown.

Right Reverend Israel Ransome-Kúti: He is a husband figure representing hope for the downtrodden, oppressed and the broken in the movie.

Major Events and Significances

Few events in the play and their significances will be discussed in this section.

- i. The incessant invasion of the market to demand for tax by the Pàràkòyís from the Ègbá

market women and the unlawful arrest of the defaulters together with the plundering of the women's merchandise: The significance of this showcases the plight of the women and also support the fact that the women are truly suffering from the hands of the then Aláké. The fact that no one is left to fight the course and on behalf of the women, justifies the angle from which Fúnmiláyò enters the scene.

ii. The eventful protest of the Abeokuta Market Women and the siege of Aláké's palace together with the seizing of *Òpá-Àse* (king's staff): The significance of this remains that the women won the battle against their oppressors; The Aláké, Mr Dundee and the Pàràkòyís and abolished the reign of terror and payment of exorbitant taxes. It is a moment of freedom, emancipation and manumission for the women, a joyous moment and an era of great jubilation.

History of Protest in Nigeria

Protest in Nigeria so far has taken the sight of petals of bloodshed. The causes of protest in Nigeria are numerous; meanwhile few reasons could still be enumerated. The multi-ethnic group which resulted in different and diverse language and culture is first a unique factor that polarised Nigeria into different geographical location and political zones.

Another reason also is that some geographical locations in the country are more endowed with mineral resources than the others. Quoting Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru* the Northern region of Nigeria also first came in contact with colonial rulers and has established and maintained a serious and solid relationship with the whites which made them belief that they are born to rule. In this lofty pride, they fought bravely for resistance and freedom from the imperial ruling of the British colonial master. Gaining independence and sovereignty, the Northerners belief that it is their birth right to rule the nation. This gave rise to so many issues arising from nepotism, favouritism, ethnic and tribal struggles, gerrymandering, amidst numerous unfair advantages that the Northerners have over other regions.

Against the backdrops, the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) from the Eastern part of the country sought for the creation of their own country too where their own voice too will be heard because no one wish to play a second fiddle. Then, we have Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People Ijaw Youth Coucil in South South, Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) with Dokubo Tompolo, Henry Okah Asari, Ebikabowei Victor, John Togo, Godswill Tamuno as Leaders , Odua People's Congress (OPC) in South-West which led to multiple security threats in Nigeria till the present day of the Boko-haramist and Fulani Herdsmen which ushered in Bombing and Kidnapping respectively.

Our own home base story of bloody struggles, skirmishes, major and minor fracas formulate and culminate into the concept of what we can describe as indigenous woke culture taking similarities from America woke culture that human rights fighters over there used and key into, in demanding for justice.

Some protests in Nigeria

Year	Day	Name	People	Location	Notes
1929	6 December	Aba Women's Riot	Igbo women	Eastern Nigeria	The women protested against tax levies imposed by the colonial government. It led to the death of many of the women.
1947	27 November	Abeokuta Women's Revolt	Abeokuta Women's Union Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kúti	Aláké's Palace, Abeokuta	The women protested against an unfair tax regime which led to the abdication of the then Aláké of Ègbáland, Oba Sir Ládàpò Adémólá II and the abolition of the tax regime by the colonial government.
1978	17 April	Ali Must Go	Segun Okeowo Ahmadu Ali	Universities nationwide	A 50 kobo increase in student fees sparked the protests.
1989	24 May-June	Anti-SAP riots	National Union of Nigerian Students	Universities nationwide	The protests occurred as a result of the effects of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) introduced by the Ibrahim Babangida-led government.

1993		June 12 protest	Nigerians	South West Nigeria	The protests occurred as an aftermath of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections by Ibrahim Babangida.
2012	2-14 January	Occupy Nigeria	Nigerians	Nigeria (including the diaspora)	Nigerians protested against the removal of fuel subsidies and eventual price hikes by the Goodluck Jonathan government. It led to the reinstatement of the subsidy and a review of the Federal Government spending.
2020	20 October	End SARS	Nigerians	Nigeria (including the diaspora)	The protests are against police brutality meted out by a now -defunct specialized police unit known as the Special Anti - Robbery Squad (SARS). A memorial protest was held on 20 October 2021 to mark the first anniversary of the October 2020 Lekki toll gate shooting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper appraised the voice given to Abeokuta Market Women which eventually gave them freedom from the hands of their oppressors through the characterisation of Fúnmiláyò, a powerful protest leader as the representation of woke culture in Nollywood movies. Woke culture is the representation of the voice of the masses, a form of protest and a tool for social reawakening.

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