

Text of the Speech Delivered by Prof. Siyan Oyeweso, Executive Director, Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding at the National Colloquium on the Enduring Legacies of Duro Ladipo (1931-1978) on Tuesday, March 13, 2018.

It is my pleasure to welcome everyone to the Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding, Abeere, Osun State. The Purpose of our coming to this Centre today is not far-fetched, it is to celebrate and commemorate the 41st anniversary of a man of Courage, virtue, and cultural icon, Duro Ladipo. Permit me to say that one of the mandates of this Center is to seek for the Preservation and promotion of African Culture and Traditions. Since the inception of the centre in 2009, it has steadily continued to promote Black Culture and Tradition across the world.

In specific term, the essence of today's programme is to remember Duro Ladipo, an iconic play writer, and actor who belonged to the pioneer generation of Nigerian theatre art practitioners such as, Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Oyin Adejobi, Wole Soyinka, Segun Olusola. Indeed, those of us who grew up in the 60s, and the 70s can testify to the fact that Duro Ladipo was first among equals. He was a first class actor whose reach was national and global.

No doubt, Duro Ladipo was one of the prominent purveyors of Yoruba culture and traditions. This he did in some major plays such as **Oba koso**, **Obamoro**, and **Oba Waja** among others. For Duro Ladipo, the best way to preserve one's culture and tradition is through language. It is important to remark that Duro Ladipo was a very close associate of Ulli Beier and Susan Wenger, the two great lovers of African culture and traditions.

For Duro Ladipo, entrenching and preserving Yoruba culture and traditions for the future generation was task that must be taken seriously if at all Yoruba Culture and tradition will survive centuries. With Mbari Mbayo group, Duro Ladipo trained a number of young men and women whom he considered worthy purveyors of Yoruba cultural arts and values. In spite of the challenges confronting his aspirations, he remained undaunted to the ideals of sustainability of Yoruba culture and traditions. In recent times, there had been clamor about children who could neither speak their indigenous languages nor the foreign language fluently and effortlessly. There is therefore an urgent need for all stakeholders and policy makers to realize the need to preserve our culture and traditions because; it is the only solution to myriad of challenges confronting our society.

We must also place on record that throughout his career, Duro Ladipo wrote ten Yoruba folk operas combining dance, music, mime, proverbs, drumming and praise songs.

His popularity as a folk opera group rests on his three plays: Obamoro in 1962, Oba ko so and Oba Waja in 1964. (Oba Waja - "The King is Dead" - is based on The same historical event that inspired fellow Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman).

Duro Ladipo wrote quite a number of plays, such as Suru Baba Iwa" and "Tanimowo Iku." Some of his plays were also produced for television. In fact, he created Bode Wasinimi for Nigerian Television Authority, Ibadan.

According to Bruce Onokpraya, late Duro Ladipo co-founded the Mbari-Mbayo Artists and Writers Club together with Beier. He became influenced by Beier and later replicated that club in Osogbo, Osun State to the extent that it became the foremost group for promoting upcoming artists in Osogbo. According to Onokpraya, "As time went on, Ladipo changed the name to Mbari Mbayo (If you see, you will be happy) in Oshogbo where it was modified to have Mbayo in it so that it would be accepted by the Yoruba. It became a cultural centre, an arts gallery and a meeting point for young artists who wanted to develop their talents. So Mbari travelled from Imo State to Ibadan and Osogbo."

Having launched the centre with his first musical play Oba Moro in 1962, Ladipo celebrated Mbari-Mbayo's first and second anniversaries with the production of Oba Koso and Oba Waja respectively. Of the trilogy of the Oyo Empire, Oba Koso is best known, having been performed more than 2,000 times in at least fifteen countries before Ladipo's death in 1978. Oba Koso won the first prize at the 1964 Berlin Theatre Festival and was enthusiastically received in Britain the following year at the Commonwealth Arts Festival. Also that same year, 1965, Ladipo himself was made a member of the order of the Niger by his country's Government, in recognition of his impressive contribution of some twenty full-length plays and over fifty sketches to the Nigerian theatre. The Oba Koso, Oba Waja and Oba Moro trilogy has become classics of the Nigerian traditional theatre, expounding Yoruba dramatic ideas and rituals to an increasing international audience through worldwide productions and literary criticism.

On March 2, 1962, Ladipo founded in Osogbo the Mbari-Mbayo Cultural Centre, emulating the example of the Ibadan intellectuals and artists who had opened the Mbari Club. Soon his Mbari-Mbayo, meaning in Yoruba "when we see it, we shall be happy", became the home based for his company as well as the vocal point of a new artistic expression- the Osogbo

School- exemplified by Muraina Oyelami, Jimoh Buraimoh, Twin Seven-Seven and other Yoruba painters.

The artists combined traditional subject matter and stories with Western artistic media and techniques. Many had been involved in dance, theater and music as members of Duro Ladipo's theatre company and remained creatively linked. Their works were characterized as trans-genre and retained the performative momentum of Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork). The artists, among them Jacob Afolabi, Rufus Ogundele, Jimoh Buraimoh, Adebisi Fabunmi, Taiwo Olaniyi (Twins Seven-Seven), Muraina Oyelami, Adebisi Akanji, Buraimoh Gbadosi and Nike Okundaye, gained international fame and patronage, continuing with their work even after the Beiers left Nigeria.

In Beier's documentation of Ladipo's initial preparation for the staging of *Oba Koso*, he revealed that he, Beier, had "introduced him to Sango priests in Oshogbo, Ede and Otan Aiyegbaju." Beier's review of the performance confirmed that the explosive nature of the play was unusual for the audience, who were amazed and overpowered by what they had witnessed; they had never seen such a performance in Yorubaland. They were completely captivated by Ladipo's breathtaking characterization of Sango and Ademola Onibonokuta's incantations in his role as Gbonka.

True to his dedication to growth and promotion of the traditional theatre Ladipo, in the later part of his life, took up a research appointment with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, where he engaged in research work on mythologies. He was doing this, in conjunction with running the Ladipo theatre company, when he died on 11 March, 1978. The company continues to exist and perform Ladipo's work under the headship of his wife, Abiodun Ladipo, also a renowned artist in her own right.

It is not all the time that great personalities are remembered 40 years after their death. For many in this part of the world and in recent times, the passing of a family member is almost lost in consciousness and memory few years after. Perhaps, given that life is ephemeral and because the dead cannot be returned in its physical form, we tend to relegate the dead to where it truly belongs - the great beyond. Yet, the fact that our dead are far within our reach do not translate to a lost or forgotten personality. There are individuals who lived a life worth remembering, their actions, deeds and sayings remain evergreen and have become legacies for many they had in one way or the other impacted while alive. The late Duro Ladipo is one shining example. He was so many things to many people. For us as Nigerians, he was not only a pioneer but one of the greatest dramatists and composers of all times. He was indeed our cultural Yoruba people, he was more than an embodiment of culture and tradition. At a

time the Yoruba were being threatened by modernity, westernization and religious monotheism, Duro Ladipo reinforced our understanding of Yoruba worldview through innovative folk dramas which encompassed ritual poetry and traditional rhythms performed on local materials. That Duro Ladipo played the personage of Sango and did it so excellently - a rare feat at the time - positioned him as Nigeria's finest cultural ambassador. He was second to none and as eulogies continue to pour in across the world; we in our own little way have chosen to reincarnate Duro Ladipo by remembering him today through a number of support and goodwill from the Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding.

As you are aware, Duro Ladipo died on March 11, 1978 at 46, yet his brief sojourn on earth was spent in the service of the arts, culture and tradition of his Yoruba people. At a tender age, he was enthralled by the richness of the Yoruba culture and this showed in 1960 when he included *bata* drums as part of the Easter cantata in church. Scandalized by this somewhat 'ignoble' act, Duro Ladipo was forced to leave the church to seek secular channels to freely express his talents. With the strong support of Ulli Beier, a mentor and culture icon, Duro Ladipo went on to found the Mbari Mbayo Club in 1962, where his new theatre company performed his first opera, *Oba Moro* (Ghost Catcher King). To mark the first anniversary of Mbari Mbayo, Ladipo's theatre performed *Oba Koso* (The King did not Hand) and *Oba Waja* (The King is Dead) a year after. Interestingly, Ladipo drew inspiration for these plays from the historical experiences of the Old Oyo Kingdom.

What made Ladipo's plays exceptional and unique was their departure from the norm. While operas before him hinged on morals drawn from Biblical stories, he drew much of his plays from Yoruba cultural and historical occurrences. For many who had watched him on stage, his interpretations of these occurrences was unequivocal. He paid strict attention to details and was often keen on authenticity. It is, therefore, no wonder he was popularly referred to as Sango of his generation.

As many are aware, the late Ladipo wrote more than 20 plays, many of which are yet to be scripted. I am aware that one of his unscripted collections, *Ajagun-Nla* has been revived and will be staged during the week-long anniversary. I also understand that the play has been upgraded to meet up with current realities.

For us at the CBCIU, we are not only captivated by Duro Ladipo's ingenuity but that 40 years after, his legacies would come to align with our mission and vision at this great Centre, particularly in the area of Black cultural renaissance, innovation and reinvention. The CBCIU was, therefore, encouraged to partner with the Duro Ladipo family to immortalize for posterity this outstanding culture icon and playwright and preserve his legacies which

protected and greatly impacted the promotion and value of Yoruba culture. As part of our efforts at the CBCIU, we have donated a significant sum for the renovation of the Duro Ladipo mausoleum to draw more people to the area, particularly those who wish to learn a thing or two about the late dramatist. It was also a pleasure to have hosted here at the Ulli Bier Hall yesterday select secondary schools in our dear State for the Duro Ladipo Memorial Inter Schools Theatre Competition and Art Exhibition which was adequately funded by the CBCIU. We are also here today, beyond the realm of physical engagements, to discuss the man behind the mask through this colloquium. I am overjoyed by the number of intellectuals present here today to discuss Duro Ladipo and I am hopeful that insights from today's colloquium will be produced in readable formats for the next generation.

I must make it clear that our modest offer towards this anniversary remembrance does not end here. We are willing to collaborate further with the Duro Ladipo family in other areas of interest. Our doors are always open for further discussions.

I wish to use this opportunity to invite both the Osun State Government and Federal Government of Nigeria to immortalise the late Duro Ladipo by naming streets and monuments after him. In the same vein, we implore government to include the Duro Ladipo mausoleum as part of the cultural heritage list for preservation. The late icon's energies were dispensed towards exposing Nigeria's rich heritage and culture not only within the country but across the world. Hence, we owe his memory and legacy due recompense.

Let me use this opportunity to thank the organizing committee for initiating this event to honour the memory of our own Duro Ladipo. I also wish to warmly appreciate all guests who have come from far and near to grace this anniversary today. I must mention the radiant Mama Moremi who remains an exemplary personage of the Duro Ladipo family. May you continue to bubble with life. The CBCIU is open to all stakeholders interested in contributing their goodwill towards the promotion and sustenance of this notable institution. I thank you all for listening.