Chapter 4

Ṣaworoidẹ: A Depiction and Analysis of the Political and Socio–Cultural Characteristics of the Yorùbá Talking Drum

Rhoda Titilopemi Inioluwa Abiolu
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Ruth E. Teer-Tomaselli
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Ṣaworoidẹ is a Nigerian film about the Yorùbá people in Nigeria. It accentuates the socio-cultural and political activities and nuances in Jogbo, representational of the “old Nigeria.” Ṣaworoidẹ itself is a “talking drum” laced with brass bells along its beatable surface. The “talking drum” is an indigenous musical instrument in West Africa, whose functionalities are those of communication and entertainment. But enshrined in this unique instrument are political and socio-cultural characteristics as represented in Ṣaworoidẹ. This chapter identifies those characteristics and their prominence in present-day Nigeria, particularly among the Yorùbá people. The authors unravel the notable and multifaceted use of the “talking drum” for political, religious, traditional, and mass mobilization activities. They suggest that cultural heritage policies of Nigeria, including curricula that facilitate indigenous knowledge, should provide support for this rich drumming tradition, especially in educational institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The drum is an important musical instrument within different aspects of human life in the African context. Meaning is attached to every drumming outing. “for in Africa, we drum for a purpose” (Nketia, 1968, p. 4). It consequently becomes an artistic and humanistic expression of the need for socialisation and communication among people. Such expressions alongside other characteristics of the “talking drum” emphasised in the film Ṣaworoidẹ will be expounded using “language in representation”, and semiotics,
to explain some of the symbolic representations within the film to the Nigerian “reality,” that is, the present-day situation of the country.

Ṣaworoidè highlights the responsibilities of officeholders in service to the country, the invasion of the democratic period of Nigeria by the military, trampling of human rights, and the greed that abounds among officeholders who sway from one political party and affiliation to the other to benefit themselves. There is no gainsaying that some of the features of Jogbo – the town and setting for the film, representational of the “old” Nigeria – in Ṣaworoidè are still evident in present-day Nigeria. Adedina and Taiwo (2015) supported this when they concluded that Ṣaworoidè reflects that which was witnessed (even up until now) in the political terrain of Nigeria.

The careful consideration and thought-flow of this film is an indication of the aim to project and represent the aesthetics of the Yorùbá culture (Adedina & Taiwo, 2015). This is represented throughout the film and especially about the “talking drum,” which is the focus of this discourse. In all, the central idea of the film is a call on Nigerians – its primary audience and target - and Africans in general, to revisit the cultural heritage within this milieu, and determine who Nigerians and indeed Africans are as social, cultural, religious and political beings, so that their lives can be less oppressive and more meaningful. The expectation is that if people truly love and care for one another, there will be no room for greed and injustice which are the bane of Nigerian, and African politics.

Synopsis of Ṣaworoidè (Brass Bells)

This is the parable of the Drum as the voice of the people. It is the story of the pact between an ancient community and the kings that ruled over it. (Kelani, 1999a)

Ṣaworoidè is a film adaptation of Akinwunmi Ishola’s novel entitled Ṣaworoidè. In the introduction of the film by the producer of Ṣaworoidè – Tunde Kelani’s Mainframe Film and Television Productions (Opomulero) – a “talking drum” beats some words before these are vocalised by accompanying voices. These opening frames introduce the viewer to what the film is about and are already an indication of the “voice” of the drum. The Dùndún is the prominent drum that links the storyline and the message of the film.

The first scene in the film starts with the Àyàn (the chief drummer) playing this tune with the drum:

Yorùbá [English Translation]
Aṣọ funfun ní nsunkūn aró [White cloth longs for the indigo dye]
Ìpìlè ọrọ ní nsunkūn èkejì tantantan [The first part of a statement yearns for the second part.]

Within the political terrain of the town of Jogbo, those who aspire to be kings must have the mindset to serve the people and not the other way around, which is in tandem with the democratic principles of the current Nigerian Constitution. The founding fathers of the town inculcated this mindset into three elements: (i) Adéidè – the brass crown; (ii) Ṣaworo etí ilù – brass bells attached to the “talking drum,” Ṣaworoide; and (iii) Àdóidè – a small brass container.

These objects symbolise power and authority, and are reminders to the king who has to perform his role in office through oath-taking and incisions. The brass bells around the surface of the drum are also for adornment and special sound effects (Dietz & Olatunji, 1965, p. 37). The three elements can be compared with political symbols such as the Mace of the National Assembly of Nigeria which represents the power that is vested in parliament that must be treated with the utmost respect.