

Situating the Place of the Yoruba Woman in Nurturing Ethical Values By

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Abstract

The moral compass of the Nigerian nation is at a very low ebb; the country is almost a pariah state in the comity of nations. Men are generally held responsible for this impasse arising from male chauvinism. To the outside world Nigerian women are passive in the moral evolution of the nation. This paper aims to portray women in Yoruba land as pillars of strength in nurturing, sustaining and providing the requisite ethical values to the society. the process of imbuing the female sex on the sensibility and sanity of her role in both micro and macro dimensions among the Yoruba of South western, Nigeria, begins during the lithe period and span through her years in the husbands abode. An ontological and epistemological probing of the Yoruba world view yields an insight into the nurturing nature of their women. A variegation of approaches vis-à-vis historical, sociological, literary and internet-based research has been adopted to this paper. Findings show that apart from the home front, festivals provide women the opportunity to exorcise, satirize erring members and eulogize worthy deeds. Thus, the performance arts can be a pliable tool in the hand of women to reduce bad behavior in the society. The paper concludes that the society should encourage women participation in domestic, national and inter-national affairs so that their divine and nurturing responsibilities could be realized.

Keywords: Society, moral impasse, women, ethical values, social control.

Introduction

An attempt to situate the place of the traditional African woman accurately could not be found in Western cast of mind. An outsider's summation on the true position of a people's way of life is most often preposterous or pigeon-holed. Notwithstanding the universal male-chauvinistic disposition, the Yoruba traditional society gives a pride of place to women in all spheres of existence. The axiom that women are the weaker sex, probably physiologically, is usually oblivious of the comparative sense-degree of the adjective 'weak' that refers to men. One area of immense contribution of women to the society, the preservation of people's ethos and cultural identity where men depend on brawn to settle perceived injustice or to make non-conformists tractable, women are invaluable in the areas of conflict-resolution and sustenance of those virtues that define a people. The powerlessness of women without property to be fortuitously engaged to a man of means in the European world has no place in the Yoruba world-view. Gill (2006) in his observation on the true position of women in Europe asserts that women are often powerless, until the passing of the married woman's property Act in 1882, married women had legally speaking, no property.

In the novel titled Jane Eyre by Bronte (1963) the eponymous heroine was wealthy when she married Mr. Rochester, but by law all her wealth would have passed on to him. Another instance was Moll Flanders, another eponymous heroine, who could not get a respectable husband as a result of her indigent background. The book of St. Matthew in the Holy Bible records the feeding of 5,000 people, excluding women and children. This account would show the scant regard accorded the female gender in western traditional thinking.

The theatre tradition of the western world today originated from the classical era of the Athenian city state. Women were not allowed on the Athenian stage and the roles of women taken over by men. Case, (1993) in her book Feminism and Theatre commenting on the place of women during the 5th century B.C asserts that "The rights of women to own and exchange property were severely restricted. For example, women could not inherit in the absence of a male and were not allowed to barter for property over one 'medimnous' (Bushel). Within this new economy, women became a medium of exchange and marriage became an institution of ownership".

The scenario highlighted above culminated in the Woman's Property Act of 1882. The idea of feminism aptly described in the Collins Dictionary of English Language as "a doctrine or movement that advocates equal right for women" is better understood from this historical and cultural background.

The inappropriateness and adequacy of importing such slogans and doctrines into the African cultural milieu gave birth to another doctrine – Womanism – coined by the elite who felt feminism, though has its own merits and relevance, does not do justice to the African situation. According to Kolawole (1997), Womanism presents twelve codes for an African woman's self-definition. These are self-naming, family centeredness, submission, supportive of males in struggle, commitment to genuine sisterhood, strength of character, wholeness, authenticity, spirituality, respectfulness and respectability, mothering and nurturing. Ogundipe-leslie (1994) affirms that "Womanism as a gender theory is more accommodating and reflective of African woman's experience and role in the society."

In the Yoruba cosmic view 'iwa' denoting character, is the 'ewa' meaning beauty, that guarantees a woman good standing in the society. Thus,

Iwalewa is a concept that is appraised among the Yoruba people, a concept linked to character, personal virtues, attributes and grit.

Another attribute expected of the citizenry in general is Omoluabi. In the 21st Convocation Lecture at the College of Education, Ikere Ekiti, Erelu Bisi described the notion of Omoluabi thus:

The Omoluabi is someone who is regarded as having an abundance of respect, humility, compassion, productivity, honesty, good manners and all things which make it possible to relate to various stakeholders in public, private and across divides. In Yoruba, we would describe these attributes as 'ofaya', 'iwapele', 'irele', 'iteriba', etc.

To prevent total collapse of moral values and virtues that define a people and check the state of anomie as witnessed today in homes and the society at large, it is not out of place to have a notion about the Yoruba cosmic view of women.

On the economic front, the Yoruba holds the idea of dignity in labour' dear, which accounts for the aphorism that "Ise loogun Ise" which translates as "dignifying labour is antidote to poverty". Traditionally, Yoruba women from part of the working-class population, though some works are exclusive to men. The traditional dignity attached to labour is antithetical to the later-day bastardization of the same concept. The concept in vogue now is "a kii sise ijoba ja laagun" meaning, it is out of place to sweat while one is engage in governments work. The traditional Yoruba woman was part of the economic team that prevented the family from going to seed.

In her observation Harison (1983) casts aspersions on women who doggedly put in their all to support the husband.

*They are flitting the insects in the bush,
walking bare foot through the land.
Women with tanks upon their backs.
Protects the rubber that brings the cash.
While in the compounds, their babies die of malaria.
Guinea worms make open sores,
Women die in childbirth.
Kwashiorkor stalks the land
But... they are flirting the insects in the bush.
To protect the rubber trees,
Because the men in the world exchange
Most squeeze every slow drop out of trees
and women
and babies and men
To keep their profits up pg 16*

The poem borne out of misconception about the active participation of women in the economic mainstay of the African society is laced with cultural bias. The poet feigns ignorance of the ignominy and humiliation suffered by Africans when they were drafted as chattels to labour in European farms and American plantations.

Mnthali (1999) "succinctly captures the deceit of the colonialist in his poem dedicated to molara Ogundipe-leslie

*Your elegance of deceit
Jane austen,
Culled the sons and daughters
of the dispossessed
into calf-love
with irony and satire
around imaginary people
when history went on mocking*

*the victims of branding irons
and sugar plantations that made
Jane Austen's people wealthy beyond compare.* Pg 16

The Yoruba Woman; A Traditional Ontological Perspective

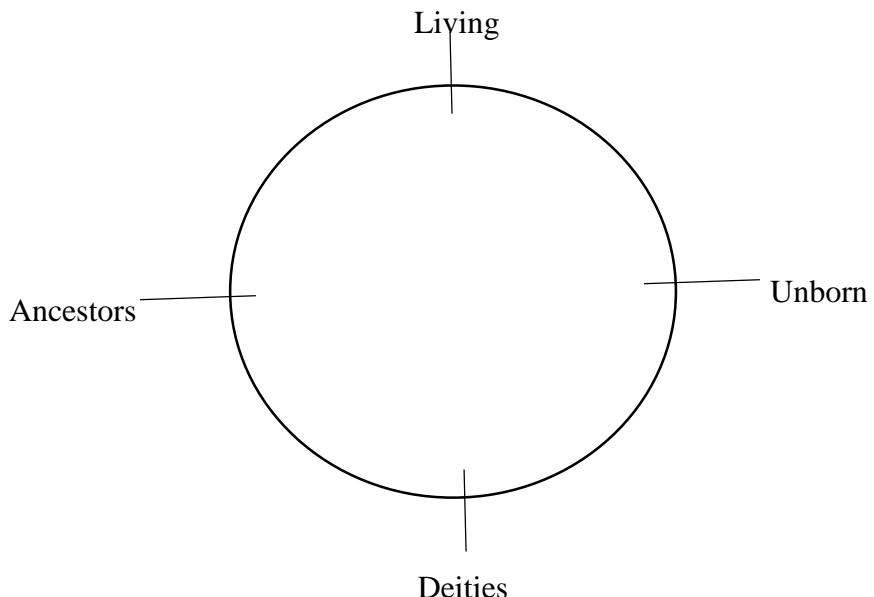
Psychologists, sociologist, philosophers, historians, artists and critics of variegated disciplines have offered perspectives from different angles about the role and place of the women in typical Yoruba cultural background. Surfeits to assert that many of such assertions are reliable while some others are actually suspect. Universally, it is acknowledged that women have a role to play in the nurturing of mother-nature, as the creator has endowed them with a physiology designed to give birth to new life. The adage that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” cuts across cultural boundaries. The ‘woman’ has been and remains a co-pilot with the ‘man’ in the developmental indices of nation building. The Yoruba traditional thought about – realms of existence are that of cyclic reality. The ontological explanation of being and beingness could be classified into four realms; namely; the world of the unborn, the world of the living, the world of the ancestors and the world of the deities.

According to Soyinka (1976).

Traditional thought operates, not a liner conception by time but a cyclic reality. The world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world. We can insist that the world of the unborn is older than the world of the ancestor in the same breath as we declare that the deities preceded humanity into the universe.

A baby is presumably coming from the world of the unborn to have experience of the world of the living. After his/her sojourn in the world of the living, the next stage is the world of the ancestors and few are privileged

to move into the world of the deities. The whole movement is not linear in conception but cyclic; it is assumed an ancestor could cross to the world of unborn and from there to the world of the living. Since the focus of this paper is on the realm of the living, the place and phases of the existence of women will be discussed. Graphically, the realms of existence could be represented thus:



To fully appreciate the role of women in national growth with particular reference to nurturing, it is apposite to consider her input in political, social, technological, spiritual, educational and economic emancipation of nation building in times past.

Ajayi (2011) defines woman as

the feminine component of human species who apart from serving as a vehicle for nurturing human life, is also a producer, a consumer and an equally endowed agent for fostering a wholesome political, social and economic development in society. p.12

In the Yoruba approach to the epistemological identification and situation of the woman, four prominent stages come to view. "nurturing starts from infant when the girl-child is brought up to respect the norms, values and ethics of her immediate family, extended family and the society at large. It is a period when the French saying – 'savoir vivre' meaning good-breeding refines manner, holds true. During these lithe years, she is trained to appreciate the role of women as the custodian of both the domestic and larger societal responsibilities. The girl-child whose mind could be linked to a "tabular Rasa" grows through experience, apprenticeship and tutelage.

The journey to motherhood begins after proper betrothal of the female child to another family. A woman is never given in marriage to a man in isolation; the engagement is always an agreement between the families of the bride and bridegroom. A would-be bridegroom is cautioned in his search for a bride to be wary of the background of the intended bride. Traditionally, brides were given to husbands by the fathers, without much input from them. However, issues like patter familiar, honesty, nobility of though and hard-work were considered during courtship.

The training of female children is taken with all seriousness by the immediate and extended family members. Because virtue was highly rated in the society, the Latinate construction that "*Sola nobilitae virtus*", meaning virtue the only nobility aptly describes the situation.

In the Yoruba approach to the nomenclature of a woman in the 'Home', three stages are prominent. There is little cognizance for a spinster in a typical traditional set up; probably from perceive scant contribution to national growth and development. Thus, the journey to motherhood is deemed to begin after proper betrothal to another family. A woman is never given in marriage to a man in isolation, the engagement is always between the families of the bride and bridegroom who have agreed to come together through the sanctioning of the nuptial cord between the children. A would-

be bridegroom is always cautioned in his search for a bride particularly, the type of lineage to which she belongs. The training of female child is taken with all seriousness by the immediate and extended family members.

The reason being that a bride "who is not met at home" meaning who has been deflowered is a disgrace to her family. On the other hand, one who is 'met at home' that is one who maintains her virginity becomes a source of pride to her family. A girl is thus made to appreciate her position in maintenance of cultural virtues associated with chastity. On proceeding to her husband's home, after the mandatory rites, the bride experiences metamorphosis in another environment.

The early years of a woman in her husband's domain is a period marked studying, acclimatizing and antenatal exigencies as she occupies the position of a daughter in the home. Tutelage under the careful watch of elderly and experienced wives, she garners maternal responsibilities and becomes imbued with the set of ideas and ideals appreciated by her new kinsmen. During this period, she remains a daughter and treated in like manner. It is a period the woman needs to portray the type of upbringing, the ambassador of her own family and a hint-concerning the type of children she is likely to bring forth into the family.

The next level is the perception of the traditional woman as 'wife'. A wife is a woman trusted enough to handle the intricacies of daily matrimonial challenges. She is in a position to help the husband realize his potentialities. The status of a 'wife' is usually accompanied by a lot of responsibilities ranging from her being a participant in the economic emancipation of the immediate family, keen attention to the moral upbringing of the children, being alert to the social responsibilities of her family to the rest of the community and of course taking good care of her husband's extended family members. This period is very demanding and the woman needs to exert all her wits, wisdom and background-training to emerge successfully.

It beholds her to prevent her husband going to seed. She holds dearly the dictum, that, *valet anchora virtus*, that is, virtue serves as an anchor.

The final stage is the perception of the woman in the home as “mother”, having passed through the two stages of “daughter” in the home and “wife” respectively. It is assumed that at the stage, the woman has made significant contributions to the home. The task of making sure reversal of fortunes are not experienced, through lack of caution or outright carelessness, falls on her shoulders. She is more of an overseer with listening ears to grievances from members of her family and extended family members with enough experience to assuage such complaints.

A pillar of strength in the home, women have the onerous task of discouraging the excesses that usually accompany the mostly male-chauvinistic African society. Thus, the old adage that “Bi owo oko ba lo siwaju, beere lowo iyawo, bi owo oko ba lo si ehin, beere lowo ‘iyawo’ which translates to

“if there is progress in the life of the husband, the wife is in the know how. If the husband suffered reversed fortunes, the wife should be held accountable” holds true in situating the responsibilities of a wife in nurturing the home and directly or indirectly the society at large.

Ifa, the Yoruba Oracular System on Women

According to Ido (1962) Orunmila is the personification of divine omniscience and wisdom and of external cosmic order, he is the oracular deity and associated with him is Ifa, which is the oracular system.

In the Yoruba epistemology Ifa is essentially metaphysical and adherent revelationists. Philosophical thoughts that requires deep thinking and interpretation on different and various aspects of life to guide the Yoruba people are gained from its consultation. Ifa as the store house of the Yoruba

world view shed light on the economic, political, cultural, religion and social views, thus to the Yoruba, 'ko si okun ti ifa ko fa tan' meaning Ifa is all-knowing. It is worth while to consider some positions of Ifa about women in 'ese-ifá' that is literary verses

1. Women's enterprising image

Ajai (2011) in his seminal paper on the image of women asserts apart from their physical attraction women, according to Ifa perform certain function that make them complementary to men, they bear children, they take care of the home and economically they serve as helping hands to man because they sell what the man produced and provide the rescue when he is in financial difficulty.

2. Women's Indispensability

As a result of the indispensability of women at home, Orunmila, rushed to marry Aworan (picture) but when she could not function effectively at home, he sent her away.

3. Vessel of bringing children to the world

It is socially unacceptable for a woman not be married and a misfortune not to have children. Ifa instructed Yemese to travel out of her abode before she could get children. Malamala was instructed to offer sacrifices, get a Buffaloes horn painted with cam wood and mount it on her back life a baby and round the town all in a bid to get children.

The mutual interdependence between a man and his wife is vividly depicted in ese-ifá where the husband and wife are likened to the kolanut and the leaf. (some leaves are used to protect kolanut from the attack of worms in Yoruba land) in the story, the leaf is said to be the husband and the kolanut the wife. They separated after a quarrel, but after a while both of them started withering. On consulting Ifa, they were advised to re-marry and things started well for both of them thereafter.

4. Women's unpredictability

Women could be unpredictable, ese ifa explain how the cat wanted a wife and went to solicit for the hand of a woman, on getting to her, she promised to marry the cat if he could do something to reduce the size of his protruding mouth. Initially the cat had a mouth like that of a crocodile. Due to the urgency if the situation he had his mouth severed. On his return to the woman she complained of his rather flat mouth. Since the cat could not help the situation again, he went home a dejected man. After his experience, the cat made up his mind never to court openly again, that is why cats are never seen mating in public glare.

5. An Embodiment of Evil

A woman according to Ife could be an embodiment of evil, rivalry, jealousy, avarice and witchcraft. Ifa also argued that women could cunningly secure whatever they desire and if given the opportunity, will easily usurp a man's place and power. Oya,, wife of Sango (Sango is the Yoruba god of thunder) became more powerful than the husband.

Use of Satirical Song

Women make use of satirical songs during festivals Yoruba land to make erring members tractable. Festival according to Olaleye (2004)

is a term used to define the various traditional period of celebration sacred or secular, on days specially appointed. It is a periodically reoccurring days and seasons set aside for rest from labour from the observance of such celebrations and religious solemnities

Satirical songs play a major role in the maintenance of law and order in the traditional African society. Women in Yoruba land depend to a great extent on the use of satirical songs to check the excesses of the citizenry. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) defines satire as "a

way of criticizing something such as a group of people or a system in which you deliberately make them seem funny so that people will see their faults".

Satire in the hand of women serves as a means of nurturing nature in different ways. It serves as a means of connecting people's ideas, belief, behavior and opinion through holding up short-comings to ridicule. Adegboyega (2009) asserts. "In satirical comedies, the society is mirrored, this is achieved by bringing societal foibles and values before the audience. Spore (1993) also describes satire as "use of wit to attack folly or wickedness". In his contributions. Akpabot (1975) notes that "among the rural folks, there is a strong concern for good morals, social justice and respect for the norms and taboos of the society".

One unique feature about the use of satirical songs in the hand of women in Yoruba land is the level of poetic license the occasion affords them. The songs are no respecter of persons or office. Just as the peasant could be a target of attack, the same holds for kings. Actions that women guilds or age grade dare not openly debate as the upper-class might be involved, are succinctly embedded in songs notwithstanding whose ox is gored. Mothers intimidate their children and wards on the sacrosanct of societal values so as to avoid being the target of satirical songs daring festivals. Daughters are particularly enjoined to value chastity so as to avoid being satirized.

Satirical songs couched in derisive wit form part of the musical repertoire available to women through the length and breath of the Yoruba land.

Few examples suffice

In Ayedun – Ekiti, a town in Yoruba land, satirical songs are usually prominent in its use to expose attitudes the society considers morally wrong. On a particular instance, a man who made away with another man's sheep was ridiculed through a song that was rendered in a question-answer form fist group.

U wo ni gba gutan?

Retrain – E e see mi o

Translates as

1st Group *You are the culprit, who store the sheep was*

Refrain *I am not the person*

In another instance, a woman who was seduced by the meat vendor suffered the same fate on one of such revelries. The song went thus:

Olori bo ni se pere

Laya bo ni la kuta

Jade si a

Ui ja re du'le inamon

Translates to

Heard that resembles boiled snail

Chest like a split-stone

Show your visage

Your humiliation awaits you at the

Meat-vendor's

During Ogoye festival in Ikere Ekiti, satirical songs are prominent and easily adopted by women to attack extra-marital affairs.

For instance

Beatrice, Oluya Obunrin

So raye re o, raye re loke loke

O bo han gi o

Translates to:

Beatrice worthless, worthless woman

view your wife

asset your life

poor you.

However, it should be noted that songs that celebrate worthy individuals could also be rendered in recognition of the contributions of the feats of such individuals.

Edi Festival

Myths and legends serve as repertoire and fertile cultural humus of society. The life story of legendary figures help to identify with glorious past enviable feats, patriotic zeal and thereby reclaim a heritage.

The story of Moremi is repeatedly emphasized in Yoruba cosmology. Moremi, a heroine once lived in Ile Ife in the distance past. During her time, the town of Ife was constantly attacked by the Igbo, another ethnic group not the current Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. During such attacks, the Igbo people plundered Ile-Ife, took some into slavery and made a spoil of the whole town. The people of Ile-Ife were clueless as the Igbo were always putting on masquerades which portrayed them as people from another world. It was during this period that Moremi who was a young lady put on an exceptional display of intellect, wisdom and supreme patriotism. She deliberately allowed herself to be whisked away by the marauders as a war victim. On getting to the king of the Igbo people, her beauty endeared her to the king who took her unto matrimony. She married the king to be able to know the secret of the enemy that has tormented her people for so long. On learning the secret she escaped to her native country and made a revelation of her encounter to her people. From her story Ife people were able to discover the secret of the enemy and made preparation to counter their offensive. When the Igbo came back, they were repelled by the Ife people which put an end to the incessant attack that has ravaged their country. Another lesson to learn from the story of Moremi is the unalloyed sacrifice she made: During her preparation to go into the abode of the Igbo people, she made a vow to Esinminrin, a rive deity in Ife, to the effect that if she returns successfully she would offer her only son, Oluorogbo to the river deity. She did not hesitate to do this on her return from Igbo land.

Moremi sacrificed herself for the survival of her people. The whole episode occurred at her prime of youth, with an only child; all of which she sacrificed. This is a supreme example of nurturing nature. This is a supreme example of nurturing existence of one's country. In recognition of these noble, patriotic and selfless service, Edi festival is celebrated in honour of Moremi. The aim is to encourage women, even all and sundry, to emulate the deeds of Moremi.

The patriotic zeal of Moremi is of utmost relevance to the Nigerian situation of today which is under attack from mercenaries of various sorts trying to devour the common wealth. The story of Moremi is a challenge, call to patriotism, a noble heritage and source of nurture to our willing society.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to situate the place of women in the Yoruba traditional society with particular reference to ontological and epistemological postulations. The contributions of women to nurturing of family life in traditional Yoruba society at different stages are itemized.

Women are imbued with ethical and moral ethos that are quintessentially Yoruba from infant. On being engaged, the Yoruba woman has the onerous duty of exemplifying and emphasizing those attributes and mores that reflect her position in the home as "co-pilot to the husband."

Festivals in Yoruba land usually take place annually. It is during these festivals that women are at liberty to deploy satirical songs to bring behavior that are inimical to societal survival to ridicule. Miscreants are ridiculed and because the occasion protected women from any form of retaliation, members of the society were constantly enjoined to be of good behavior.

It was also an occasion to reward noble deeds; such as would encourage patriotism, chastity and uncompromising dedication to virtuous behavior.

Some festivals are even celebrated to bring good deeds of some ancestors and legendary figures to remembrance. The Edi-festival in Ile-Ife is a good example of such festivals. The courage and patriotic zeal of Moremi are highlighted and used to serve as an example for the current and coming generations of not only women but also the generality of the people.

The Ifa corpus, the Yoruba approach to knowledge, though mostly revelatory, gives the Yoruba variegated world view about women. Expectedly, women have both positive and negative qualities, Ifa's position is that women remain sine-qua-non in the successful life of a man.

To the outside world, especially of Western cast of mind, African women are mostly chattels who are not better than slaves; this paper however shows that the Yoruba woman holds an enviable position in the family life of the Yoruba people. They have the opportunity to aspire to greater heights and could even be deified as the case of Moremi in Ile-Ife who though lived during the pristine life of Ile-Ife, is now recognized annually during the Edi festival, celebrated in her honour.

Recommendations

To bid farewell to ignorance and poverty, factors that inhibit development, the position of women as part of the needed development-indices has to be appreciated. This process of development can be enhanced when annexed within African cultural atmosphere, taking into consideration traditional virtues dear to the African mind.

There is need for the entertainment industry to have a rethink and re-focus about its role in the society. The required *amour proper* which is regrettably

lacking in popular music should now be emphasized. For, According to Osofisan (1973).

The verbal arts – ‘proverbs, riddles, folktales, epigrams etc). the fine arts (curving, painting etc) the performing arts (dancing, singing, drumming and dramatizing) are the basis of socialization and social control. But the theatre utilizes all the three categories in synthesis.

The era of social control through festivals is fast receding, urbanization and modernization having diminished the import of such festivals. Products that encourage sound deductive reasoning, critical observation and incisive analysis should be carefully guided to bring about social responsibility.

There is urgent need to revisit the international treaties signed in the past to discourage all forms of oppression against women and domesticate such agreements. Such treaties include the 1979 convention on the elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1993 Vienna Human Rights Conference etc.

Women's right and gender equity must be respected, to activate this, legal policy and constitutional framework should be put in place.

Powerful women's organizations should be put in place imbued with the task of shaping and training inspiring young and upcoming women. The lives and contributions of women who made positive impacts in time past should be taught in schools to serve as role-models. Such women in Yorubaland include Moremi from Ile-Ife, Madam Funmilayo Kuti from Abeokuta and the likes of the Late Professor Zulu Sofola and those still living in the likes of Professor Mabel I.E. Enwierhoma, Professor Francisca Aladejana etc.

In view of the fact that modernity has reshaped and is reshaping our cultural and demotic set-up, other means of rewarding virtuous deeds should be devised. Special days are now set aside to honor dignitaries and those who have contributed positively towards the progress of the community. Awards should not be given to exemplary characters on such days and satirical songs could still be deployed to discourage anti-social behaviours in the society.

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