

**POWER POLITICS AND THE QUESTION OF TYRANNY IN  
AFRICA: LESSONS FROM SANYA DOSUNMU'S *GOD'S DEPUTY***

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**Abstract**

The African continent has proven to be quite dynamic in the political space. Indeed, since the wave of colonial rule swept over the continent and with the eventual realization and acquisition of self governance across member states, Africa and her leaders have become major players in the scheme of things. Through an elongated period of experimentation plagued by military coups, corruption, underdevelopment, exploitation by foreign powers and so on, the continent has continued to evolve and has remained quite dominant on the world stage. The discourse of power politics and the concept of Tyranny in Africa form the Anchor hold for this study. Over time, African playwrights and indeed Theatre scholars have continued to replicate what could be termed as the "African situation" through literary works and plays and this has in no small measure aided in the reawakening of the average African to the reality of the power struggle in the African political arena as well as the dynamics or lack thereof of adequate leadership within the ruling class. The qualitative research method is adopted for this study. This includes in-depth content analysis and review of related literature for proper data evaluation and interpretation. Sanya Dosunmu's *God's Deputy* is utilized as the primary source of analysis. The study finds among others that more work should be done by Theatre practitioners in reevaluating systems of governance through their art as this would help in creating needed awareness and engender communal participation in the discourse of politics.

## Introduction

The concept of political power is one infused with a lot of history even from the Greco-Roman area indeed the intrigues that exemplified these periods, are still markers in the discourse of the notion of politics in Africa and around the world. Suffice it to say that the early stages of the Greek empire encountered notable changes over time and were also shaped by external events. The hereditary aristocracy held all political power earlier on and ruled as a group. With the mass of citizens excluded from political life. However, Tyranny evolved as a political alternative from the mid – 7<sup>th</sup> century to checkmate and ultimately wrestle power from aristocratic families in a bid to improve the wellbeing of the larger populace. The success of that experiment is still being questioned today.

Scholars have indeed put forward that political governance styles have in the past continued to undergo several modifications, from the brutish Hobbesian state of nature to communalism, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism to even the divine right of the King *vis a vis* monarchy; the instances are inexhaustible. Even within the African milieu, the political schools of thought such as the Divine Right of Kingship Theory is still holding sway as a dominant political governance styles in various countries as expressed through dictatorial and Tyrannical rule even within Africa. Umeagbalasi E. observes that;

In Africa, a continent of over a billion people, various scholarly studies have continued to show that dictatorship, Tyranny and their triggers are holding the continent to ransom to the extent that over half of its 53 member states are under the clutches of dictatorship and Tyranny. Dictatorship found their way into the continent immediately after the end of colonial rules on the continent. They were triggered off by neo-colonialism, one party rule, self succession, and attempts to eliminate ethnic and religious divisions and their replacement with Nationalism; inter member-states rivalries, cold war supremacy struggles between the USA and the defunct USSR as well as military take over. (2).

These factors, hence have institutionalized the crave for the absolute acquisition of political power and also the need to subdue and suppress any opposing group or groups by whatever means possible. The Divine Kingship Theory thus, asserts that a monarch or king is subject to no earthly authority and his right to rule is directly derived from the will of God. By this, the king

is not subject to the will of his people and as such does no wrong. It further holds that it is only God who can judge an unjust king. Any act to depose him or retract his powers was then regarded as sacrilege and punished by death.

This type of political ideology, thus, seems to have sunk deep into the structures of governance across African countries, Nigeria inclusive. As observed from Umeagbalasi's quote. It appears that Dictatorship and Tyranny in Africa can not only be classified as an effective form of governance but in most cases, has been allowed to thrive as can be seen in most African countries today. However, the components of this type of governance have remained the same; this includes among others that power is concentrated on a dictator or a small group in government; with maximum suppression of civil liberties and rule of law. Dictatorship is also commonly associated with sit tight rule or an elaborate effort to manipulate polls to ensure limitless tenure elongation.

### **Dramatic conjectures and to concept of Dictatorship in Nigeria**

Nigeria occupies the position as the most populous black nation on earth. This position comes with a very rich history of political spectacles that has since her independence in 1960, continued to not just intrigue but provide heavy working materials for literary writers and Theatre practitioners. Indeed as Okoye citing Chinua Achebe observes thus;

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who lives to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames (276).

The calls from various scholars in this regard through their works for the need for African states like Nigeria to self reflect and chart new ways of leadership has become reoccurring arguments in the literary sphere. Indeed, as many scholars continue to point out, a huge chunk of the blame should be placed on the European powers and the unfortunate Berlin conference of 1885 that precipitated the 'scramble for Africa' thereby creating new structures and systems that may have actually compounded the problems of governance as we have them today. However, other scholars view this as a problem of introspection and lack of preparedness on the part of the political elite even at the dawn of independence to confidently and passionately take back power; staying true to the will of people, enshrining the place of cultural and traditional values and defending the sovereignty of the country against external influence Chinua Achebe opines that:

In Nigeria, in the years before we finally gained independence in 1960, we had no doubt about

where we were going: we were going to inherit freedom that was all that mattered. The possibilities for us were endless, or so it seemed. Nigeria was enveloped by a certain assurance of an unbridled destiny, by an overwhelming excitement about life's promise without any knowledge of providence's intended destination. While the much vaunted day of independence arrived to much fanfare, it rapidly became a faded memory. The years flew past and by 1966, Nigeria was called a cesspool of corruption and misrule (2).

Indeed, Nigeria has remained politically active in the wake of independence. Having endured the experimentation of civil rule, the machinations of coups and counter coups that plagued military regimes as well as ethnic rivalries that have filtered into the political sphere and this has evidently left the country at a crossroads in her political history. Presently, it could be observed that the anomalies created by inadequate or total lack of political stability in most African states, Nigeria inclusive, may have placed the continent in a current situation where Dictatorship has been institutionalized even in democratically elected governments. The result therefore, is an increase in intra-state conflicts, insurgencies, displacement of persons, mass poverty and illiteracy, malnutrition, unemployment and a huge decline in direct foreign investments.

Many African playwrights, dramatists and writers have also been quite radical in their approach to the political situations in their countries. Perhaps this is in a bid to voice out the need the government of the day to pay heed to a people who no more will be taken for granted. Scholars like Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Ngugi Wa Thiongo and many more fall into this category. Iyamah and Obire in a bid to relate Ola Rotimi's work to the failing structures of Democracy in Nigeria for example, observe that:

Rotimi's *if...* is a play that bothers on the need to promote national consciousness, identity, Unity self-determination, socio-political change and purposeful leadership taking into cognizance the hues and cries of the masses in a capitalist system. The play exposes the bad state of the Nation where the rulers oppress the ruled (412).

This same scenario thus appears to be replicated in many African countries where even under the garb of democratic rule, a notion of impunity and insensitivity on the part of the ruling class holds sway. This notion is further

strengthened by the spate of sit-tight rule which is quite prominent in Africa.. Paul Biya of the Republic of Cameroon, born on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1933 has held power since November, 1982. Gambia's Yahya Jammeh who was only two years ago, stripped off his presidency, came to power in July 1994 and held on to it for 22 years. Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, born on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1944 has held onto power since 1986. Before his demise in 2019, Robert Mugabe who was born in 1924 and had held power in the country of Zimbabwe from the year 1980 to 2018. Denis Sassou Nguesso at 74 years has ruled Congo Libreville from February 1979 to August 1992 as a military head of state; He then staged a comeback on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 1997 following the civil war and has remained in power since then. He enjoys a seven years limitless term. President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos of Angola is reported to be one of the longest serving presidents in Africa. He was born in August 1942 and has remained in power since the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1979. Having abolished the concept of direct election into the presidency, he literally made himself a life president. His eldest daughter Isabella Dos Santos is reportedly the richest woman in the continent with a net worth of \$3.7 Billion.

### **Sanya Dosunmu's *God's Deputy* and the Question of Tyranny in Africa**

The play *God's Deputy* centers on a King in west Nigeria who rules his people with an iron fist. He subjects his people to his whims and caprices by cunningly conjuring the fact he is the physical representative of the gods. His subjects are thus cowed by him and robbed of any form of expression even in the face of discomfort as this would be seen as acts of insubordination. This state of affairs is strengthened by the constant use of the chorus in the play; with each passing scene, the subjects are constantly reminded through the chanting and singing of the chorus of the King's supremacy and divinity. The tone of the play is then set when the king picks interest in Derin, the daughter of Bashorun, a chief in his palace. This however does not go down well with Bashorun as Derin is already betrothed to the son of his bossom friend. When he expresses his dilemma to the king, the king rebukes him and dares him to go against the wishes of the "gods". As the play progresses, we are eventually informed the mysterious death of Bashorun's friend and would be in-law; obviously as a warning to anyone who intends to go against the wishes of the king. The play ends with another twist when Bashorun and his wife Kori, are finally arm twisted and Cajoled into giving in to the king's demands. They in turn now convince Derin who reluctantly accepts the king's marriage proposal.

Dosunmu's approach to the concept of Tyranny in his play appears to leave more questions than answers. However, the researcher notes that there was appreciable attempt to mirror current trends in the political sphere of many African states. Prominent amongst others is the institutionalization of Tyranny as the divine will of supreme forces which the common man is expected to

revere. Dosunmu achieves this trend of thought through the adequate embellishment of rich cultural practices and use of language inherent in the Yoruba world view of West Africa. An excerpt reads thus:

**Chorus:** Kabiyesi our king, great son of Gah  
King who gives the order.  
For us all to obey.  
Next in rank to the God,  
Son of Gah respected king,  
Son of Gah, God's own deputy.

**Osi:** Our greatest symbol of authority,  
True to fact, you are God's deputy  
Son of Gah, God save you  
Long may you reign.  
Long on your head may the crown remain  
Long on your feet, the shoe.  
We are thankful to God for your life,  
May God accept our thanks. (34)

The playwright thus, creates a sense of acceptance which could be replicated in the various political structures that exist in Africa; that is the acceptance, endorsement and even the celebration of Tyranny as a norm. Dosunmu brings to bear the profound level of sycophancy that bedevils the political area where prospective beneficiaries of the ruling government embark on deliberate acts of praise singing in order to curry favour. It could then be deduced that these practices could increase the tendency for the tyrant to be more power-drunk, it also increases the tendency for a corrupt political structure to thrive. Nwankwo Lawrence agrees observing that:

Because of the enormous resources involved, capturing and retaining political power becomes a "do or die" affair. Being in charge of the distribution of the rent, the political office holder often supports interventions that do not maximize benefit for all but to themselves, their supporters and cronies. In a transliteration of the Igbo saying, the office holder is the one holding the yam and the knife and slices off and distributes to each as much as pleases him or her. (58)

Indeed, there is a deliberate attempt by the playwright to satirize the political situation in Africa especially as it concerns the concept of power intoxication by the political class and as fanned by the electorate who eventually suffer the adverse effects more. This is achieved this with the introduction of Derin as

the representative of the low class who despite her pledge of loyalty to the crown, pays a painful price in return. The following excerpt reveals thus;

- Derin:** Our great symbol of Authority  
True to fact you are God's Deputy;  
You wear a crown of gold,  
On your head.  
With your hand a beaded stick you hold  
We are your slaves  
We are your servants.  
May there be peace at your time  
May we be blessed at your time  
May we bear children male and female  
We wish you joy.  
Long may you reign.  
Long on thy head-
- King:** Bless you maiden .... It is our personal hope  
that all your wishes come true (sighs)  
sometimess we ...  
we feel, no, you make us feel as if the whole  
...  
the whole world is under our feet.
- Derin:** Son of Gah, not only the whole world,  
But all the people in it! Kabiyesi. (35).

Dosunmu burrows even deeper into the characterization of the Tyrant's persona which eventually emboldens him to have anything he wants at whatever cost. He exemplifies this in the character of the king who having been told of Derin's Betrothal to another, insists on having her and uses every form of oppression he could muster including the issuing of threats to have his way. In a conversation between Derin and the King, the following ensues:

- Derin:** If that soothes your highness  
If it suits you better!  
But I cannot see a marriage yet.  
My father's consent has not been given
- King:** Come. (*holds her hands*) If your father  
gives his blessing... will you marry us?
- Derin;** Oh King, he has already given his  
blessing, And as you will agree, this he can



do only but once! (*withdraws her hands from his and moves down stage*).  
**King:** (*Contemplating, then suddenly*) Well Maiden, we have chosen you for our wife and though there may be need to behead your father, our wife you shall remain! (43)

Another close observation would reveal the deliberate use of the second pronoun, “we” in each and every dialogue of the king. The playwright attempts to situate this aspect of the characterization of the king as evidenced in the crop of political rulers in Africa today. Over the years, for instance, Nigerians have grown used to the phrase, “fellow Nigerians” made popular by a former Head of state, Murtala Mohammed and has been used by almost all other head of state, military and civilian. The question therefore whether such phrases have engendered or fostered communal engagement in governance is there for all to see. Dosunmu deftly employs this trait in the king’s conversations across the play. In another exchange between the king and Bashorun, the following ensues.

**Bashorun:** Great king you are indeed a symbol of authority, next in rank to the God. But I do not approve of my daughter being under your feet ... my daughter is already my lord, she has been promised in marriage to the son of my fellow chief.

**King:** You may well cancel your allegiance to this fellow chief of yours – because **we** intend to make her **oureyes**. She will know **our** every movement; she will know **our** coming in and **our** going out. She will bear **us** princes and princesses. **We** decide to place her under **our** feet and hereby declare. (*Researchers’ emphasis*) (35 – 36).

Worthy of note also, is the playwright insistence on leaving things the way they are. In the play, Dosunmu portrays the stark reality of how politics is played on this part of the world. Steeling himself against the temptation of introducing a would be “Hero” character where good eventually conquers evil creating a Grand finale where the oppressor and oppressed are engulfed in a stalemate, the playwright exposes this harsh reality and leaves his audience with more questions. Thus, in the end, the king has his way and the led exemplified by Derin are cowed into submission.



## Conclusion

The call for a change in the approach to governance and leadership in most African countries is clearly a need for the hour. The trend where the political arena is only restricted and accessed by a select few could indeed be an enabler of dictatorial rule as we see them today. Presently in countries like Nigeria, the system being run is such that only those individuals who can afford high fees and almost independently finance political campaigns can vie for office. This in turn breeds a situation where some wealthy but poorly educated individuals assume positions as godfathers and then use the 'weapons' of affluence and intimidation to impose their stooges on the masses there by creating the cycle for Tyranny to thrive. In more recent developments, these political godfathers have themselves begin to vie for office.

Sanya Dosunmu's *God's Deputy*, thus affords us the opportunity to X-ray the play of politics in African countries and how the people can be the better for it. In countries like Nigeria where the democratic system of government is being practiced, the question whether this has had any direct impact on the common man is still very much being asked. Observations would reveal that power is concentrated at the centre and this tends to starve other arms and tiers of government of the will to be productive. Achebe suggests that:

We must also remember that restoring democratic systems alone will not overnight make the country a success. Let me borrow from the history of the Igbo ethnic group. The Igbo have long been a very democratic people. They express a strong antimonarchy sentiment with the common name *Ezebuilo*, which translates to "a king is an enemy"(3).

Ultimately, the down trodden should realize that power rests with them. They hold the mandate and must use every opportunity to make their voice heard and elect responsible individuals who would represent them efficiently and not usurp power for selfish gains; indeed as some schools of thought propose, a people eventually get the leadership they deserve. Nwosu Steve insists that "there is no denying the fact: Nigeria is presently in the vice grip of monsters. Monsters we created. Instead of electing leaders, we elect gods- albeit clay footed deities. But we nevertheless worship and revere them as almighty and omnipotent, even as the powers they wield are powers we are supposed to have given them" (48). It is thus expected that Playwrights and Dramatists should also keep the pressure of the pen and the stage alive in addressing these anomalies caused by the inadequacies of bad governance and dictatorial tendencies of the political elite. The Theatre should indeed take its rightful place as a watch dog and social critic.

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