
Framing Female Leadership on Stage and Screen in Yorubaland: *Efunsetan Aniwura* Revisited

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The representation of women in film, television and stage drama in Africa has generated intense debate among feminist scholars since the 1970s. Among the concerns is how representations of women on stage and screen shape attitudes about women in society in problematic ways, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Many nineteenth-century male Yoruba heroes have been represented in films, including Lisabi of Egbaland, Bashorun Ogunmola of Ibadan, Balogun Ogedengbe of Ijeshaland and Aare Kurunmi of Ijaiye, but few women have been so commemorated.¹ However, one case stands out: Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan. A powerful nineteenth-century Iyalode, or female chief, Efunsetan was deeply involved in the politics of her time, until she was murdered on 30 June 1874. An influential play by Akinwumi Isola, *Efunsetan Aniwura: Iyalode Ibadan*, portrays her as excessive, power-drunk, wicked, high-handed and politically intemperate, her murder an act of justice served. Published in 1970, the play became prescribed reading in Yoruba literature for primary and secondary school pupils in western Nigeria (Yorubaland), influencing the popular perception of female power and leadership for decades to come.²

This paper revisits the representation of Efunsetan Aniwura in Isola's historical play and two successor films, both titled *Efunsetan Aniwura*, a 1981 version directed by Bankole Bello and a 2005 version directed by Tunde Kelani. The goal is not to evaluate whether representations of Efunsetan Aniwura on stage and screen are accurate, but rather to interrogate the political and cultural ideologies that frame and modify the representations of female leadership over time. What factors in 1960s Yoruba politics and culture informed playwright Isola's historical portrayal of an 1860s female leader? How does the portrayal of Efunsetan change in the subsequent films from 1981 and 2005, and what do these changes reveal about how female leadership and power is perceived in Yoruba culture? I argue that the prevailing gender ideologies and politics differently informing the play and films over time are consistent in one regard: they function to villainise Efunsetan and erode viewer sympathy for her. They engage the storytelling mode of melodrama to evoke audience antipathy against the female protagonist in a complex weave of emotions, pathos and sensationalism.³

This article is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the concept of the frame and considers whether producers of historical plays and films are credible as historians. The second section traces the construction of the heroine in Isola's play and surveys the history text that inspired the story as well as subsequent stage performances and television adaptations. The next part explores feminist reactions to the 1981 version of the film and their arguments for re-framing the heroine in a more positive light. The last section analyses the gender implications of a real-life historical tragedy that has been reframed as a melodrama to influence the emotions and attitudes of contemporary audiences regarding female leadership. The conclusion examines a number of issues arising from the negative portrayal of Iyalode Efunsetan in media and the disservice that these representations do to the cause of social integration and national development in Nigeria.

On the politics of framing and the historical film

The literature on framing is diverse, cutting across several disciplines in the social sciences. Robert Benford and David Snow apply the concept to the sociological study of social movements and collective action, while Dennis Chong and James Druckman deploy it in their analysis of political communication and public opinion.⁴ From these and similar studies, the point has been made that framing involves the construction of meaning in experience and action. Erving Goffman defines frames as 'schematas of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large'.⁵ Judith Butler describes frames as 'politically saturated' and 'operations of power', in that they 'produce and delimit the sphere of appearance through which we apprehend, or fail to apprehend, the lives of others'.⁶ Frames can be used to serve or resist the dominant ideologies of a culture, especially with respect to hierarchies of gender, race, class and sexuality. In Yorubaland, everyday norms were generated in a patriarchal society and propagated by oral traditions. These cultural constructions were reinforced by early historical writings authored by Christian men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and have been propagated in postcolonial productions of historical drama and film.⁷

The value of the historical film as a source of knowledge about the past has been underscored by Robert A. Rosenstone, who notes that films create a historical world with which the written word cannot compete, at least in terms of broad, popular appeal.⁸ In our 'post-literate' age, where people are literate but do not read, history on film is accessed more readily, by more people, than written history.⁹ Hayden White's concern is to determine how much of the critical thinking about the past in written history is also engaged in films.¹⁰ White agrees with Rosenstone that films ought to be approached on their own terms. This means historians should not unduly concern themselves with the historical (in)accuracy of films, as films are differently oriented than written history, more concerned with helping viewers sort through their feelings about their own historical moment than with the accuracy of historical facts. Rosenstone counsels that standards used by historians to judge written history should not be imposed on the historical film: 'This means that historians will have to reconsider the standards of history or learn to negotiate between our standards and those of filmmakers'.¹¹

In film, interpreting and making sense of the past for viewers is more important than historical accuracy. Filmmakers freely admit to poetic speculation and invention

when it comes to expressing the past.¹² The medium of film itself, its narrative conventions and styles, function to frame and express interpretations of the past.¹³ These remarks lead to Hayden White's concept of 'historiophoty', the representation of history in visual images and filmic discourse.¹⁴ Historiophoty underscores how 'readings' of history in historical films and visual texts have the potential to unearth new meanings about the past that may have eluded historiography, or written history. At the same time, to be considered 'historical', as Rosenstone notes, a film must necessarily engage directly or indirectly with the 'the ongoing discourse of history', and as such, will be judged in relation to historical knowledge 'situated outside the institutions of the cinema'.¹⁵ Filmmakers have a responsibility to respect the facts and not just treat history as little more than a 'good setting for a good story'.¹⁶

Within any particular film, there are multiple historical frames to consider: the history represented onscreen, the historical context within which the film is produced and the historical context within which the film is received. In the case of *Efunsetan Aniwura*, multiple frames are apposite, in multiple media. The nineteenth-century past is framed in a play written in 1963, in stage productions and television dramas performed in the 1970s and in films produced in 1981 and in 2005. I will focus my attention on the Isola play and the 1981 film in particular. Attending to how *Efunsetan Aniwura* is framed in these visual texts reveals the culture's changing attitudes regarding gendered leadership and power over time.

Framing *Efunsetan Aniwura* in drama and film

The Historical Play by Akinwumi Isola

Akinwumi Isola (b.1939) wrote the first play on *Efunsetan* in the early 1960s. It was titled *Efunsetan Aniwura: Iyalode Ibadan* and written in the Yoruba language. Isola commenced work on the manuscript in 1961 and completed it in 1963, during his student days in the University of Ibadan. His interest in *Efunsetan* developed after he read a one-page description of her life in Isaac Babalola Akinyele's *Iwe Itan Ibadan* (A History of Ibadan), first published in 1911 and revised a number of times before the death of the author in 1964.¹⁷ In the preface to his play, Isola writes that he 'was baffled by what I read about [Efunsetan's] behaviour' in Akinyele's history and that he 'decided to dramatise' the story of *Efunsetan* while adding 'details of my own'.¹⁸

Akinyele's documentation of Ibadan history, upon which Isola based his play, was part of a broader wave of cultural nationalism that started in the late nineteenth century in British colonial territories.¹⁹ Akinyele approached Ibadan history from a political perspective, highlighting the achievements of local leaders as well as their political challenges and crises. Women are seldom mentioned. His one-page account of Iyalode *Efunsetan* alludes to her ownership of numerous slaves as the basis of her wealth, and to the '*oniruru iwa buburu*' (various wicked acts), '*ti . . . ko se fi enu so*' (too numerous to recount), that she perpetrated against her slaves.²⁰ Thereafter, he briefly narrates the particular instance of 'wickedness' that got her into trouble with local Ibadan authorities and led to her tragic end.²¹

In his play, Isola explores the theme of female high-handedness and wickedness. *Efunsetan* is represented as a woman of great means and authority who also enjoys a high status. She is an '*obinrin bi okunrin*' (a man's equal). However, her barren

status makes her bitter, hardened and cantankerous. She is a slave-owner, normative for the time, but she treats her slaves with harshness, disdains the opinion and counsel of fellow chiefs, and has no regard for human life. A peasant farmer, Ogunjimi, who strays onto her farm, is battered to death by her slaves, on her order. Any female slave who gets pregnant risk instant death, on her order. The highlight of the story is the amorous relationship between two slaves, Itawuyi and Adetutu, which results in a pregnancy. In spite of pleas from various quarters that the pregnant slave be spared, Efunsetan still orders her death. Efunsetan is not only presented as cruel and intemperate, but also as a witch. Otherwise, how could she have known that her food was poisoned by Awero, another slave? How could she overpower Itawuyi, a male slave, if not by supernatural manipulations? Aare Latoosa, the head chief, intervenes to halt Efunsetan's excesses. He comes with a mob and sacks her compound. Her slaves are set free. The villainous Efunsetan is arrested and put in shackles. The closing scene presents her as a captive in tattered clothing, sweeping the Aare's compound, reduced to slavery. She reflects on her life, her ignominious condition and concludes that death is a better option. She commits suicide by ingesting poison. The epilogue admonishes the audience not to take the judgment of God (*Olorun*) for granted. There is always due punishment for villains. The remonstrance ends with an adjusted version of an old Oyo proverb – '*bo o laya o sika, bo o ranti iku Efunsetan, o s'oto*' (Those who have the heart for evil should reconsider their ways when they remember Efunsetan's tragic end).²² One wonders why Isola chose this negative and unsympathetic frame for Efunsetan Aniwura rather than the more sympathetic contemporary account by the Reverend Samuel Johnson, who lived in Ibadan in the days of Efunsetan. Johnson's account, published in 1921, was in the 1960s the most authoritative book on Yoruba history.²³

The period in which Isola wrote his play, the 1960s, coincided with the first years of Nigerian independence, when the question regarding how much political and professional space was to be made available to women in the new society was unresolved. Before independence, women endured inequality in the civil service. Matters of maternity leave, discriminatory pay between men and women on the same job and women's rights to continue in their jobs after marriage and motherhood were only advanced in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even when the government of the Western Region announced its decision to reserve secretarial and stenographic positions for women in 1960, a local newspaper published a public complaint that the proposed policy was unfair to young men who were already preparing to occupy such positions.²⁴ Very few women were visible at the national level, but not due to lack of interest. Commenting on the conduct of decolonisation politics in West Africa generally, LaRay Denzer notes:

Everywhere, women campaigned vigorously, developed a network for the distribution of propaganda, supported boycotts and strikes, and sometimes took part in running political parties when the male leaders were imprisoned. When it came time for the distribution of rewards for loyalty, sacrifice and hard work, however, women found their male colleagues surprisingly obdurate and chauvinistic.²⁵

Elite Ibadan women like Wuraola Esan, Janet Bolarinwa, Aduke Vaughan and Hunmoani Alaga were ready to contribute their share to the educational and political development of the newly independent nation.²⁶ But such women were very few.²⁷ While colonial bureaucrats and authorities expressed their willingness to groom junior

professional women from the bottom of the administrative ladder, their attitude toward elite women was ambivalent. Overall, men were uncertain about how much sociopolitical space they were willing to share with women in the new society. Meanwhile, women had begun to work together, as evidenced in the founding of the National Council of Women Societies in 1957.²⁸ This was the context within which Isola wrote his play. The play used a nineteenth-century story of a villainous female leader to address cultural anxieties about changing gender roles in the newly independent nation in the 1960s, especially regarding female leadership and power.

Theatre and Film Adaptations

Local theatre artists were drawn to the Efunsetan story in the 1970s. The Isola Ogun-sola Theatre Group adapted it for the stage and performed it in various town and school halls across western Nigeria. The play was also performed in 1982 to mark the commissioning of the Television Service of Oyo State (TSOS), with the State Governor, Chief Bola Ige as guest of honour.²⁹ It was an electrifying performance watched live by over 40,000 spectators at the Liberty Stadium in Ibadan.³⁰ In 1981, Bankole Bello released a film based on Isola's play. The story was adapted as television drama and broadcast widely in western Nigeria. More than Isola's play, in circulation for eleven years, these visual media made the story of Iyalode Efunsetan extremely popular with audiences. Adeleke Adeeko attributes the popularity of the Iyalode Efunsetan story to a number of factors. The depiction of Efunsetan as a wealthy but childless and cantankerous woman makes for an intense and captivating drama, while the story revived a 'version of glorious local history in its effective use of oral traditions like *oriki* [praise poems], spell-binding incantations, and the spectacular presentation of Efunsetan's tradition-defying aggressive mien'.³¹ To these must be added a third factor; the accessibility and appeal of moving pictures to broad audiences. Stage performances as well as television broadcasts and films aroused interest in Efunsetan's story beyond Isola's play.

The culture in which these productions were viewed affected how the representation of a female leader was received by audiences. A significant impact in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the stage drama and film of *Efunsetan Aniwura* were presented was an increase in the fervour of religious proselytisation in Ibadan as in other parts of western Nigeria. This period has been identified by scholars as the second phase in the development of Nigerian Pentecostalism.³² The first phase, which spanned the 1920s to the 1960s, saw the rise of African Initiated Churches (AICs), locally called *aladura* (prayer practitioners). The second phase saw the rise of Interdenominational Campus Fellowship, in which students in tertiary educational institutions were actively mobilised to champion the Pentecostal message of holiness, biblical inerrancy and Holy Spirit baptism. This predominantly youth movement had no tolerance for whatever was considered traditional. Such practices were promptly denounced as idolatrous and sinful.³³

Outside the campuses massive open-air meetings were conducted by preachers like Evangelist Timothy Iyanda, Prophet T. O. Obadare and Revd Benson Idahosa. There were also female televangelists such as Lady Evangelist Bola Odeleke and Dorcas Siyanbola Olaniyi.

This religious awakening was not peculiar to Christians. On the Muslim side, the most popular Islamic preacher then was Sheikh Abdul Azeez Ajagbemokeferi,

originally from Esa Odo, who settled in Ibadan, where he had a very fiery practice. He openly challenged cultists, masquerades and traditionalists.³⁴ He regularly organised public lectures and fully exploited the electronic media to get his message across. Sheikh Ajagbemokeferi's style was militant. There were recorded instances when his followers unmasked egungun (masquerades) in broad daylight in Ibadan, in a bid to prove the superiority of Islam over the ancestral spirits represented by the latter.³⁵ Both Islam and Christianity made converts during this religious awakening. Many self-professed witches, secret cult members and traditional medicine men were said to have converted on both sides.

Politically, the period 1979–83 saw the return of democracy after more than a decade of military rule in Nigeria. Many people welcomed the Second Republic, with high expectations that the political space would expand to accommodate civilians sidelined by the previous military regime.³⁶ Educated women were eager to participate in the political arena. The mood in the early 1980s was more that of impatience rather than the uncertainties of the 1960s. The opportunities offered by the new regime could only be accessed within its four-year tenure. There was a sense of urgency in the air. Moral or ethical failures in leaders could not be countenanced or overlooked, even in media representations.

Audience reaction to the central character in *Efunsetan Aniwura*, the 1981 film, was not sympathetic. Newspaper reporters were quick to cite her as a negative example of female leadership. LaRay Denzer documents a case when two undergraduates attempted to interview a senior chief about Efunsetan's role, and the chief declined, saying he had no desire to discuss such an evil woman.³⁷ When a newspaper reporter interviewed a newly-installed Iyalode in 1994 about her opinion on Efunsetan, she said: 'Even though the Iyalode has the power to take initiatives, this did not imply that she should misbehave. In Efunsetan's case, that was what she wanted to do. And it was not that there was nobody to put her under control, she had made up her mind not to listen'.³⁸

English translations of the Isola play began to emerge in the 1990s. The first was by Niyi Oladeji (1992) and the second by Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith (2005).³⁹ Both were published outside Nigeria, making the story accessible to a wider readership, both within and outside the country. According to Adeeko, *Efunsetan Aniwura* is the only secular literary text translated twice from Yoruba to English.⁴⁰ Whatever the literary merits of these two translations, they both portray Iyalode Efunsetan in a negative light, further perpetuating the idea that female leaders are prone to excesses and abuse of office.

Altogether, the many books and films on Iyalode Efunsetan foster a negative image of female leaders in the popular imagination. The Ibadan community and Yoruba society have been denied a female role model whose industry and boldness could serve as a source of inspiration to generations of women. Worst hit were Efunsetan's descendants, who endured years of disdain and discrimination in Ibadan. In 1991, they prepared their own 'Authentic History of Efunsetan Aniwura', coordinated by Raji Oyebanji, their family head. This was published in 2000 as an appendix to a larger collection on Ibadan history. Isola read it, and after meeting with the family, decided to salvage the situation by producing the 2005 film directed by Tunde Kelani. In a 2013 media interview, Isola reflected on his role in the Efunsetan saga:



Figure 1: Akinwumi Isola as Etiyeri, the commentator (*Efunsetan Aniwura*, Tunde Kelani, 2005). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

I was very young with little education when I wrote the book. If I were to write it today, it would be different. Efunsetan can be described as a woman fighting for the rights of womenfolk. She could be described as a woman rights activist. She is not as tough as I portrayed her. I have met the head of her lineage and we have discussed about it. The new Efunsetan Aniwura film I produced was done with adjustments that portrayed the woman in her real self.⁴¹

The 2005 film retains most of the old cast. Additionally, Isola plays the role of Etiyeri, a commentator who in an opening act eulogises Efunsetan as among prominent leaders of Yorubaland worthy of emulation and celebration. The plot is far more sympathetic to Efunsetan than Isola's play or the 1981 film. She starts out as a very benign character; generous to people, both freeborn and slaves and extremely supportive of the Ibadan army. A dramatic twist is introduced when she loses her only daughter, who dies at childbirth. Inconsolable, Efunsetan transforms into a ruthless matriarch who takes out her frustrations on her slaves. Her high-handedness provides an excuse for other male chiefs to raid her compound. She commits suicide rather than allow herself to be captured and ridiculed. Although this new version of the story attempts to recover Efunsetan's honour and reputation for a new generation, the damage done by previous versions could not be easily reversed.

Feminist reactions: Re-framing the heroine

The first major published feminist reaction to Isola's play came from Bolanle Awe, a professor of History and well-known feminist. By the time her rebuttal was published in 1992, she had served as pioneer Coordinator of the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) established in 1987 at the University of Ibadan. This Centre was saddled with the responsibility of moderating and facilitating the production of knowledge on Nigerian women. By this time too, the academic wing of the feminist movement in Nigeria had coalesced. Outside academia, Awe was an ardent advocate on women's issues. She had equally served as the pioneer Chairperson of the National Women's Commission from 1990–2. In 1992 she took it upon herself to set right what she deemed as historical inaccuracies in Isola's play.



Figure 2: Convivial Efunsetan (in coral beads) with her chiefs (*Efunsetan Aniwura*, Tunde Kelani, 2005). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Figure 3: Efunsetan Grieving the death of her only child (*Efunsetan Aniwura*, Tunde Kelani, 2005). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

‘Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold)’, a chapter contributed by Awe to a collection on Nigerian women, which she edited, is a robust biography of Iyalode Efunsetan in which Awe also responds to traditions ‘reinforced in a Yoruba play . . . that Efunsetan was unpopular because she was cruel to her slaves’. Awe constructs a positive image of Iyalode Efunsetan, challenging Isola’s portrayal.⁴² First, she notes that Efunsetan was not as high-handed as she was made to appear in the play. Second, that Efunsetan was attacked by Aare Latoosa and his chiefs for reasons other than her cruel treatment of slaves: she was too ‘independent-minded’ and outspoken in her criticism of the Aare; many of the chiefs were indebted to her; and she eventually withheld her support for Latoosa’s constant wars. Awe also proposes that Efunsetan did not commit suicide but was murdered.

Foluke Ogunleye’s response to Isola’s play is more vitriolic. In ‘A Male-Centric Modification of History: *Efunsetan Aniwura* Revisited’, she challenges Isola’s disregard for the historicity of the events he wrote about, and his sexism.⁴³ In her ‘womanist’ reading of the play, Ogunleye concludes that Isola’s ‘male-centric’ ideology makes him demonise Efunsetan. She denounces his portrayal of Efunsetan as counter-productive,

nationally, because it erodes self-confidence in women: 'Gynecophobia of this type does not encourage young females of the species to have a sense of self-worth, nor does it provide positive models for emulation'.⁴⁴ Ogunleye's 'womanist' perspective is derived from radical Black Feminism popularised in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. It seeks, among other things, a fair representation of black womanhood. Ogunleye invokes this feminist framework and other sources of Yoruba history to denounce Isola's negative portrayal of Efunsetan.⁴⁵

Another notable response to Isola's play is Adeleke Adeeko's sociolinguistic analysis of the two English translations of the Yoruba play. Adeeko's interest is not in the historicity of the texts but rather in the linguistic, cultural and philosophical framings of gender. His main argument is that 'translations . . . transport unintended ideological male dominance into situations that do not indicate them'.⁴⁶ This, he attributes to the tendency (by translators and other scholars) to 'associate universality and generalisations with the masculine'. The unintended effect is to generate doubts about the 'truth value' of the 'knowledge that English-speaking scholars produce about their society'.⁴⁷ His main inference is that the gender framework of the play, which casts a negative light on female leadership, has more to do with hierarchies in twentieth-century gender relations than with the nineteenth-century history it represents.

The three scholars discussed above are by no means the only ones who reacted to the popular misrepresentation of Iyalode Efunsetan; others include LaRay Denzer (1998) and Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997, 2016).⁴⁸ But while these authors attribute the misrepresentation of Efunsetan to the way prevailing gender relations and social conditions are projected onto the historical past, neither explores how this is manifested in particular texts.

Beyond these feminist rebuttals to the negative portrayal of Iyalode Efunsetan, the literature on Yoruba women in the nineteenth century emphasises their roles in economic and political spheres. Scholars such as Awe, Denzer and Falola demonstrate how indefatigable female entrepreneurs not only invested in crafts and manufacturing in which they employed slaves and freeborn, but also participated actively in both local and long-distance trade.⁴⁹ From these economic activities, many of the women amassed considerable wealth, which they translated into political power and influence. Most Yoruba kingdoms had a hierarchy of female chiefs headed by the Iyalode, also known as *Olobun* in Ondo and *Arise* in Ijeshaland. In Ibadan and Abeokuta, with relatively young political institutions and ample opportunity for social mobility, the Iyalode possessed greater authority than in other highly centralised and older kingdoms. This milieu produced women such as Efunsetan Aniwura, but also Efunroye Tinubu, who became Iyalode in Abeokuta. The Iyalode sat in the *Oba's* Council or military council (as was the case in Ibadan); took part in decision making at all levels; contributed food, arms and ammunition during wars; controlled local markets and adjudicated in cases involving women.

A major allegation against Efunsetan in Isola's play and subsequent visual representations is that she mistreated her slaves, in violation of acceptable cultural practice. Adeleke Adeeko argues that the 'material excuse for the political conflict that destroys Efunsetan is [that she defies] the culturally acceptable treatment of slaves'.⁵⁰ Adeeko presupposes that Efunsetan was harsher than other slave owners toward her slaves. Toyin Falola's discussion regarding the transformation in the treatment of slaves in



Figure 4: Resolute Efunsetan refusing pleas for Adetutu's life (*Efunsetan Aniwura*, Tunde Kelani, 2005). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Figure 5: Adetutu in stocks before her execution (*Efunsetan Aniwura*, Tunde Kelani, 2005). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

post-1850 Ibadan also implies that Efunsetan's defiance of cultural codes is truly her undoing.⁵¹

Despite the use of slaves as domestic producers, traders and soldiers, and the relative favour enjoyed by some, what ultimately determined the treatment meted out to slaves was individual merit. A lot also depended on the political clout of their owners. In the 1830s and 1840s, Bashorun Oluyole sacrificed slaves with absolute impunity to ensure bountiful yields in his kolanut groves. In 1869, when Bashorun Ogunmola was critically sick with smallpox, Revd Daniel Olubi, a contemporary observer, recorded in his journal that two slaves (a male and a female) were sacrificed, ostensibly to propitiate *Sonponna*, the local deity of smallpox. When the chief eventually died of the sickness on 29 March 1869, seven female slaves, a 'boy slave' and a horse were killed to accompany him in his afterlife.⁵² This happened only five years before the Efunsetan crisis. There is no evidence to suggest that, by 1874, when Efunsetan was murdered, big chiefs had stopped sacrificing slaves to local gods and killing them as part of their rites of passage. It would thus seem that other reasons precipitated the fall of Efunsetan. The 'mistreatment of slaves' theory is just a convenient alibi.

Gender politics and the melodramatic frame

Tzvi Tal, in a study of the various films produced to commemorate General San Martín, regarded in popular imagination as Argentina's liberator in the nineteenth century, remarks on the purpose of such productions. According to him, 'narrative films with historical themes disseminated basic myths of national identity and presented versions of the past reflecting the history produced by the oligarchical-liberal rulers of the country'.⁵³ Such films contain various frames within which the life of the central character is made intelligible. Perhaps we should ask, whose version of the past does the 1981 film *Efunsetan Aniwura* present? As a historical narrative, this film disseminates prevailing patriarchal attitudes on gender, especially the deep-seated mistrust of female leadership in political and economic realms, past and present. Efunsetan's commercial success and far-flung economic activities are only marginally acknowledged in the narrative. Her political career and financial support for the Ibadan military establishment are glossed over. This is in spite of Samuel Johnson's account of her as the most distinguished female chief in nineteenth-century Ibadan.⁵⁴ Instead, her moral lapses are magnified as proof that women cannot be trusted in leadership roles.

In the Argentine example cited above, historical texts are points of reference for the construction of film images constituting the collective imaginary, even when the film refrains from quoting those texts directly.⁵⁵ Similarly, Akinyele's history text is the reference for the negative frame employed to represent Efunsetan, openly acknowledged by Isola, the playwright. The problem is with Akinyele's gender bias. As a Christian elder, he belonged to the generation that embraced the British Victorian ideal of the domesticated wife with no access to public life. Little wonder that he chose to demonise Efunsetan in his book. The Reverend Samuel Johnson, a contemporary of Efunsetan's, did not paint Efunsetan as a melodramatic villain, but instead attempted to explain her actions based on personal trauma, on the loss of a child in childbirth. It would thus appear that Akinyele's negative frame for Efunsetan better suited the purposes of Isola for getting at cultural anxieties about changing gender roles in 1960s Yorubaland.

The real-life tragedy of Efunsetan was reframed in popular stage and screen media as a melodrama, which strives to create 'moral legibility' for mass audiences by clearly delineating the moral polarity of virtue versus villainy, good versus evil.⁵⁶ Its aesthetic form is to reward virtue and punish vice in its characters.⁵⁷ Its overall impact is the evocation of deep emotions in the audience. Scenes of pathos, like the beheading of Adetutu, the innocent pregnant slave, on Efunsetan's orders, evoke emotions of deep sorrow and indignation. The build-up of antipathy against Efunsetan the villain is so great that when she dies at the end of the story, there is no sympathy for her. Her death is carefully orchestrated to heighten the emotional intensity of the melodrama, the righteous feeling that justice has been served. Historical accounts by Samuel Johnson and I. B. Akinyele both indicate that Efunsetan was assassinated by her slaves. However, in the play by Isola and the ensuing films, she is presented as committing suicide. Both assassination and suicide fit the melodramatic frame, but in the Ibadan cultural environment of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suicide was more honourable than assassination.



Figure 6: Efunsetan, the suicide (*Efunsetan Aniwura*, Tunde Kelani, 2005).
[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The significance of suicide in Ibadan can be traced to nineteenth-century military politics and ideas of heroism. Victims of high-powered political intrigues were subjected to *esin* (a situation of ignominy).⁵⁸ Ignominious conditions could also be created by military defeat. While junior war chiefs could be pardoned, senior chiefs were not expected to survive military defeats. The few who returned home with serious injuries were promptly deposed, and openly disgraced. Political defeat was more complicated. It could arise as a result of failure in major power tussles involving peers or superiors; or from loss of confidence or support of colleagues. In either case, political defeat was taken not just as a personal slight, but also as a threat to the integrity of the *ile* (compound) of the leader concerned. Three options were open to fallen chiefs. One was the plunder of their compounds (*ile-bibo*) by the slaves and war boys of the other chiefs. This was meant to reduce them to nonentities. The second option was exile. If chiefs chose exile, they could not take away more than one piece of all items they possessed. The third option was suicide. This actually had redeeming qualities, for their *ile* would still be intact, their descendants would continue life unhindered and ascend the chieftaincy ladder on personal merit. They would be given a hero's burial. They could also look forward to becoming ancestors, for they had paid the supreme price to preserve the integrity of their *ile* and thus of their posterity. It is therefore not surprising that most of the chiefs who lost out in political tussles in the nineteenth century chose suicide. These included Chief Lakanle, Otun Aare in the early 1830s, Chief Aiyenku, a war veteran in 1877, and Seriki Iyapo, also in 1877.⁵⁹ However, in cases where embattled chiefs refused to flee or commit suicide, they were murdered, as was the case of Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura.

High profile suicides were celebrated and honoured in Ibadan, not only in the nineteenth century but also in the early twentieth century. The choice of suicide and not assassination by Isola and the filmmakers as the melodramatic frame for Efunsetan could appear to be an indirect way of honouring her, especially as her posterity remained a part of the Ibadan political terrain. Thus, even though the female villain is subject to a melodramatic demise in the film, she is still clothed with dignity and ascribed cultural agency, as she ends her life rather than waits to be assassinated. But the question is: how many cinema viewers in 1981 and 2005 appreciated the cultural significance of

politically-motivated suicide in Ibadan, given that the last celebrated case was that of Balogun Ola in 1917?⁶⁰

Efunsetan's melodramatic villainy is not only associated with her mistreatment of slaves. She is also stereotyped as a witch. In traditional Yoruba culture, childless old women were most likely to be accused of witchcraft and held responsible for others' misfortunes such as impotence, infertility, complications in pregnancy and at childbirth, and the death of babies.⁶¹ To avoid this type of accusation, childless women, particularly affluent ones, usually took several children of relations under their charge and groomed them as if they were their own. Such women were also expected to be amiable and tolerant, lest they be charged with witchcraft at the slightest provocation. The witch trope thus became a tool in the hands of the playwright and film producer to mobilise public opprobrium against powerful female leaders, past and present. In the 1981 film, Efunsetan's tradition-defying aggression and cantankerous disposition provided captivating entertainment, while her wickedness and alleged witchcraft made her morally repulsive and villainous. Despite her tragic end in life, the public had no sympathy for her. That the viewing public failed to separate historical tragedy from melodramatic entertainment is evident in the disdain with which anything that had to do with Efunsetan Aniwura was received.

The *Efunsetan Aniwura* play and ensuing films thus present a paradox, engaging a nineteenth-century storytelling frame, that of old-fashioned melodrama, to generate mistrust of female leadership in twentieth-century postcolonial Nigeria. The dominant meaning expressed by the various versions of *Efunsetan Aniwura* not only challenged female leadership, but also discounted it. For a newly independent nation seeking to mobilise women and men to cooperate in its development efforts, such representations were counter-productive, especially when extant historical data suggests that the disparaged Efunsetan Aniwura was actually an enterprising and economically-successful female leader.

Conclusion

The last two decades of the twentieth century harboured developments that had implications for gender dispositions within and outside Ibadan. First was the growth of feminist scholarship in Nigeria. Within this movement, an agenda was set for Gender and Women's Studies, which, apart from its institutional and theory-building responsibilities, also sought the deconstruction of negative images of the African woman. A corollary was the task of generating objective knowledge on the subject, which led to the researching and writing of revisionist histories, especially regarding women's participation and leadership in nation-building.⁶² Second, educated elite groups began to concern themselves with the production of knowledge. A case in point is the Oluyole Club in Lagos of Ibadan 'sons'. Founded in 1968, the group decided in the late 1990s that it needed to do more to 'educate' people on Ibadan city. On 13–14 February 1997, it hosted a special seminar on Ibadan to which various scholars were invited to make presentations on aspects of Ibadan life. The result of these deliberations is a 539-page edited book on Ibadan. In this book, the *Authentic History of Efunsetan Aniwura* has been published as an appendix.

This study has shown that the political and cultural ideologies that frame representations of gendered leadership in Yorubaland over the last one and half centuries

have contributed to deep-seated mistrust of female leadership. The generation that watched media representations of Efunsetan Aniwura in the 1970s and 1980s continue to be wary of female leadership. This is a partial reflection of the affective impact of the melodramatic frame and its ideological impact on the attitudes of viewers. The lingering implication is that the villainisation of Efunsetan has denied Ibadan a prominent female leader as a role model. Artistic frames, though inherently creative, also mirror extant cultural and political ideologies. Ultimately, all these prove that gender, particularly in the case of Efunsetan Aniwura, is epistemic, historical and malleable, as noted by Adeeko, and if I may also add, deeply contextual.⁶³

Notes

1. *Agbongbo Akala*, parts 1 & 2 (Yemi Adegunju, 2015), *Bashorun Ogunmola* (Laide Olasunkanmi, 2011), *Balogun Ogedengbe* (Shonde Afolabi, 2013), and *Are Ona Kakanfo* (Abiodun Olanrewaju, 2003).
2. Akinwumi Isola, *Efunsetan Aniwura: Iyalode Ibadan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
3. The affective impact of melodrama in global mass cultures is explored in a recent edited collection by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
4. Robert D. Benford and David Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), pp. 611–39; Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, 'Framing Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007), pp. 103–26.
5. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of the Experience* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974), p. 21, cited in Benford and Snow, 'Framing Processes 4a', p. 614.
6. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 1 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. xii.
7. Examples of such writings include: I. B. Akinyele, *Iwe Itan Ibadan* [A History of Ibadan], 4th edn. (1911: Ibadan: Board Publications, 1981); M. C. Adeyemi, *Iwe Itan Oyo Ile ati Oyo Isisiyi abi Ago-D'Oyo* [A History of Old and New Oyo] (Ibadan: Egbe Agba O Tan, 1914); D. A. Obasa, *Iwe ti Awon Akewi* [A Book of Poetry], vol.1 (Ibadan: Ilare Press, 1927), vol. 2 (Ibadan: Ilare Press, 1934).
8. Robert A. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film as Real History', *Film Historia* 4 (1995), pp. 5–23.
9. Robert A. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Post-literate Age', in Marcia Landy (ed.), *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (London: Athlone Press, 2001), pp. 50–66.
10. Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', *American Historical Review* 93 (1988), pp. 1193–9.
11. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film', p. 60.
12. Rasmus Falbe-Hause, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', *P.O.V: A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 16 (2003), pp. 108–17, here p. 109.
13. Falbe-Hause, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', p. 116.
14. White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty'.
15. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film', p. 62; Falbe-Hause, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', p. 110.
16. Falbe-Hause, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', p. 117.
17. I. B. Akinyele was a part of the Christian elite in Ibadan. In 1914, he was a founding member of the *Egbe Agba 'O Tan* (Elders-Still-Exist Society), a sociocultural group of educated patriarchs concerned with the preservation of Yoruba culture. He eventually became the *Olubadan* (traditional ruler) of Ibadan. O. A. Adeboye, "'Elders-Still-Exist": Socio-Cultural Groups and Political Participation in Colonial Ibadan', in Olufemi Vaughan (ed.), *Indigenous Political Structures and Governance in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Bookcraft Publishers, 2004), pp. 195–230. Akinwumi Isola's use of I. B. Akinyele's *Iwe Itan Ibadan* was acknowledged in the former's Preface to *Efunsetan Aniwura: Iyalode Ibadan* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. i–v; and also in a press interview in 2013. See Olufemi Atoyebi, 'Interview With Professor Akinwumi Isola', *The Punch* (Lagos), 16 November 2013.
18. Isola, 'Preface', *Efunsetan Aniwura*, p. v. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
19. Isola, 'Preface', *Efunsetan Aniwura*; Toyin Falola, *Yoruba Gurus: Indigenous Production of Knowledge in Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000).
20. Akinyele, *Iwe Itan Ibadan*, p. 100.
21. Akinyele, *Iwe Itan Ibadan*, p. 101.

22. The original proverb was 'b'ò o laya o sika, b'ò ranti iku Gaa, o s'oto'. (Those who have the heart for evil should reconsider their ways when they remember Gaa's tragic end). Bashorun Gaa was the power-drunk prime minister of the old Oyo empire who had been implicated in the death of several Alafin in quick succession before he met his own inglorious death in the hands of the people. Samuel Johnson translates the proverb as 'if you have the heart of a cruel man, take note of Gaha's death and be true'. See Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba* (Lagos: CSS, 1921), p. 185.
23. The Reverend Samuel Johnson describes Efunsetan as a kind, generous and industrious woman who became inconsolable after the death of her only daughter during childbirth. This loss hardened her heart and she began to mistreat her slaves. See Abimbola Adelokun's reading of Samuel Johnson's account in 'The Ghosts of Performance Past: Theatre, Gender, Religion and Cultural Memory', *Religion and Gender 7* (2017), pp. 147–63, here p. 149.
24. *Nigeria Tribune* (Ibadan), 15 September 1960, p. 3. Cited in Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work and Social Change* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 174.
25. LaRay Denzer, 'Gender and Decolonization: A Study of Three Women in West African Public Life', in J. F. Ade Ajayi and J. D. Y. Peels (eds), *People and Empires in African History: Essays in Memory of Michael Crowder* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 217–23, here p. 217.
26. J. O. Akande, *Saturday's Child: Profile of Chief Wuraola Adepeju Esan* (Lagos: Wurakay Prints, 2006); Lere Fagbola, *Gladys Aduke Vaughan and Omolewa Nursery and Primary School: A Cherished Educational Legacy* (Ibadan: Wol-Von Books, 2002); McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, pp. 73, 164, 235, 238.
27. By 1957, of the 514 students in the University of Ibadan, the premier University in Nigeria, only 31 were females. Tekena N. Tamuno, 'The Formative Years, 1947–1956', J. F. Ade-Ajayi and Tekena N. Tamuno (eds), *The University of Ibadan 1948–1973: A History of the First Twenty-Five Years* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973), pp. 22–48, here pp. 37–8.
28. Hajo Sani, *Women and National Development: The Way Forward* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2001), pp. 34–43.
29. Adelokun, 'The Ghosts of Performance Past', p. 150; Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State (BCOS), 'Our History', www.bcos.tv/about/history.
30. Akinwumi Isola, 'The African Writer's Tongue', *Research in African Literatures* 23 (1992), pp. 17–26, here p. 22.
31. Adeleke Adeeko, *The Slave's Rebellion: Literature, History, Orature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 147.
32. Matthews A. Ojo, *The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006); Olufunke Adeboye, "'Arrowhead" of Nigerian Pentecostalism: The Redeemed Christian Church of God, 1952–2005', *Pneuma: Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 29 (2007), pp. 24–58.
33. Ojo, *The End-Time Army*; Olufunke Adeboye, "'A Church in a Cinema Hall?" Pentecostal Appropriation of Public Space in Nigeria', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 (2012), pp. 145–71.
34. H. O. Danmole, 'Religious Encounter in Southwestern Nigeria: The Domestication of Islam among the Yoruba', in J. K. Olupona and Terry Rey (eds), *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), pp. 202–21.
35. M. O. Muritala, 'Sheikh Abdul-Azeez Ajagbemokeferi: The Making of a Muslim Evangelist and Nationalist', in Siyan Oyeweso (ed.), *Ijesa Icons and the Making of Modern Nigeria* (Oshogbo: Osun State University, 2011), pp. 622–31.
36. Toyin Falola and Julius Ihonvbere, *The Rise and Fall of Nigeria's Second Republic, 1979–84* (London: Zed Books, 1985); R. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
37. LaRay Denzer, *The Iyalode in Ibadan Politics and Society*, vol. 7, African Humanities Monographs (Ibadan: Humanities Research Centre, 1998), p. 209.
38. Denzer, 'The Iyalode in Ibadan Politics and Society', p. 209.
39. Akinwumi Isola, *Two Contemporary African Plays*, tr. Niyi Oladeji (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1992); Akinwumi Isola, *Efunsetan Aniwura, Iyalode Ibadan and Tinubu, Iyalode Egba: Two Yoruba Historical Dramas*, tr. Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2005).
40. Adeleke Adeeko, 'Gender in Translation: Efunsetan Aniwura', in Oyeronke Oyewumi (ed.), *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, Spaces, Social Institutions and Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 35–62, here p. 39.
41. Olufemi Atoyebi, 'Interview with Professor Akinwumi Isola', *The Punch*, 16 November 2013.

42. Bolanle Awe, 'Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold)', in Bolanle Awe (ed.), *Nigerian Women: A Historical Perspective* (Lagos & Ibadan: Bookcraft Ltd and Sankore Publishers, 1992), pp. 63–82, here p. 79.
43. Foluke Ogunleye, 'A Male-Centric Modification of History: *Efunsetan Aniwura* Revisited', *History in Africa* 31 (2004), pp. 303–18.
44. Ogunleye, 'A Male-Centric Modification of History', p. 318.
45. Ogunleye, 'A Male-Centric Modification of History', p. 305.
46. Adeeko, 'Gender in Translation', p. 50.
47. Adeeko, 'Gender in Translation', p. 50.
48. Denzer, *The Iyalode in Yoruba Politics and Society*; Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Oyeronke Oyewumi, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
49. Bolanle Awe, 'The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System', in Alice Schlegel (ed.), *Sexual Stratification: A Cross-Cultural View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 144–60; Bolanle Awe, 'Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold)'; LaRay Denzer, 'Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27 (1994), pp. 1–39; LaRay Denzer, 'The Iyalode in Ibadan Politics and Society: A Preliminary Study 1' in G. O. Ogunremi (ed.), *Ibadan: A Historical, Cultural and Socio-Economic Study of an African City* (Lagos: Modelor Press, 2000); Toyin Falola, 'The Yoruba Caravan System in the Nineteenth Century', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24 (1991), pp. 111–32.
50. Adeeko, *The Slave's Rebellion*, p. 147.
51. Toyin Falola, *The Political Economy of a Pre-Colonial African State; Ibadan, 1830–1900* (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1984), pp. 142–4.
52. Church Missionary Society (CMS) Archives (University of Birmingham, United Kingdom), CA2/075 Journal of Revd Daniel Olubi, 29 March 1869.
53. Tzvi Tal, 'San Martin, From Bronze to Celluloid: Argentina's Liberator as Film Character', *Film and History* 34 (2004), pp. 21–30, here p. 21.
54. Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba*, pp. 391–4.
55. Tal, 'San Martin, From Bronze to Celluloid', p. 21.
56. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 14; Jeffrey Taylor Pusch, 'Moral Performances: Melodrama and Nineteenth-Century American Literature' (PhD Dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 2011), p. 8.
57. Linda Williams, 'Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama', *Cinema Journal* 24 (1984), pp. 2–27, here p. 4.
58. Olufunke Adeboye, 'Iku ya J'Esin: Politically Motivated Suicide, Social Honour and Chieftaincy Politics in Early Colonial Ibadan', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 41 (2007), pp. 189–225.
59. Adeboye, 'Iku ya J'Esin'.
60. Adeboye, 'Iku ya J'Esin'.
61. In theory, the general Yoruba belief was that witchcraft could be used for both good and evil. But in practice, people feared witches because of their potential for destruction. Henry J. Drewal and Margaret T. Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 74; Oyeronke Olajubu, 'Seeing Through a Woman's Eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (2004), pp. 41–60, here pp. 56–7; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, p. 194.
62. For example, Bolanle Awe in 2016 published a collection of abridged biographies of thirty-four women who had distinguished themselves in various fields – to serve as role models to 'young Nigerian women, particularly in secondary schools, as they prepare to embark on their professional careers, and challenge them to also make "positive and lasting contributions to the development of the country"' (publisher's blurb). Bolanle Awe, *Nigerian Women Pioneers and Icons* (Ibadan: Childsplay Books Limited, 2016).
63. Adeeko, 'Gender in Translation', p. 60.