

**ANALYSIS AND METAPHORICAL  
INTERPRETATION OF TRADERS FUND  
DISTRIBUTION AND APPROPRIATION OF  
RELIEF MATERIALS IN DIPO KALEJAIYE'S  
ESSENTIAL COMMOTION.**

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**Abstract**

From the early days of colonialism to contemporary times, Nigerian theatre practitioners use their art to comment on and critique corruption, gender inequality, and human rights violations. This paper examines and metaphorically interprets Dipo Kalejaiye's *Essential Commotion* intellectualising the myth behind the misappropriation of traders' funds and the distribution of relief materials in its representative facts. Due to its sociocultural interactions and interpretations, the paper adopts Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser's Cultural Materialist theories as the framework to examine the themes of bad leadership cum bad followership; poverty, squalor, disease and underdevelopment. The discourse revealed that if Nigeria would get her elections right and put true leaders in place, there would be a multiplier effect on other sectors of the polity and the wellbeing of the citizenry would improve. The paper opines that the failure of Nigerian leaders to manage their affairs should not be blamed only on colonialism, both the leadership and followership have a duty not to fail. The paper

concludes that Nigerian theatre is more than just entertainment; it reflects a unique style deeply rooted in Nigerian culture and modern-day concerns relevant to global audiences.

**Keywords:** Essential commotion, Gender inequality, Human rights violations, Dipo Kalejaye

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### Introduction

Corruption, a significant issue in African literature, has been a topic of interest for literary scholars since the colonial era when traditional leaders enforced subservient intentions. Oha (2008) describes corruption as an act of exploiting society by taking undue advantage of political power to accumulate commonwealth as personal property. This form of corruption described by Oha is prevalent in contemporary Nigeria where political power holders misuse their office. The individuals in question are not acting in the public's best interests, instead violating residents' rights, stealing funds and supplies for relief efforts, and harassing the public. *Essential Commotion* therefore burlesques the government-imposed austerity measures and essential commodity schemes which forced people to queue outside designated ration centres for imported rice, milk, cooking oil, and soap. The text explores the psychological and cultural ramifications of misappropriating money, providing aid, and oppressing the populace.

Like cancer which eats away at the very fabric of communities leaving behind a trail of suffering and despair, the text highlights the catastrophic consequences of stealing and hoarding supplies for

disaster-stricken areas, resulting in thousands of people lacking essential amenities. It also reveals the tactics employed by military and civilian smugglers to steal national treasury funds, preventing the country's growth from being utilized effectively.

Cultural materialist concepts of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser are utilized in examining and interpreting how the military intimidated the populace. It also depicts the socio-political and economic milieu that informs the thematic and dramaturgical responses from the historical, physical, social-political, and economic locales in which the action takes place.

### **Dipo Kalejaiye's Essential Commotion: A Collection of Plays, (2012)**

#### **Author's Background**

Dipo Kalejaiye is a folklorist, traditionist and modernist in philosophical and technical aesthetic tastes. He approaches mythology and modernist tropes with combined interrogative, radical and conservative attitudinal modes. By deploying mythology in the challenge of modernity and modernity in the challenge of mythology, Kalejaiye successfully situates a salient cultural contract between the two existential systems across two worlds – Africa and America. A number of his plays such as *The Creator and the Disrupter*, *The Deer Woman of Owo*, *Convention and Conversion* are heavily folklore/oral tradition-inclined while the collections in *The Father of Secrets and Other Plays* are modernist in conceptualization and engagement. He won the Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize of the University of California in 1975 and the Phelan Literary Award in

### Playwriting in 1978.

Kaleyaye's writings are diverse, spanning Africanist and American polarities. He explores mythic and modernist memories on personal and collective levels. Balancing his homeland, Africa, and the diaspora, he explores his knowledge of his African world and his current position as a Nigerian in the American world. Accordingly, the text explores the psychological and cultural ramifications of misappropriating money, providing aid, and oppressing the populace.

### **Synopsis of the Text**

Essential Commotion is a play that criticizes the overthrow of civilian leadership and underscores the disillusionment and disaffection in many African countries in the post-independence period during military dictatorship. It also considers the subjugation of military rule in Nigeria and by extension, Africa in its burlesque of the government-imposed austerity measures and essential commodity schemes that forced people to queue outside designated ration centres for imported rice, milk, cooking oil, and soap. (Essential Commotion p.4)

A study of several linear events that strengthened conflicts in Essential Commotion reveals three different coups. The ouster by the Supreme Food Power Authority brought an end to Major Gagara's short-lived reign as the community leader. Major Gagara was overthrown as the community leader by the Supreme Food Power Authority in the first coup. A twist in the text occurs in the second coup as the same powers responsible for his entry into government toppled him in a new coup. He is replaced by General Musa Chukwu and Lieutenant Akowe, son of



Iyaloja and the Market Women's Association's former financial secretary. Iyaloja is the leader of the Messamban Market Women Association while De Alhaji, an alter ego of Iyaloja, is an illiterate millionaire and leader of market hoarders who thrives on hoarding essential commodities meant for the populace in their shops

De-Alhaji, alongside his four cohorts' hoarders, loses their fraudulently earned currency in a revolt orchestrated by Iyaloja and the market women. He is financially incapacitated while dozens of allegedly crooked market officials and individuals are thrown into prison. Iyaloja is deposed in the marketplace by her followers who accused her of embezzlement and witchcraft. She is arrested on the authority of His Excellency; General Musa Chukwu for treasonable offences.

The text concludes with a third coup organized by a different military regime and leadership that resolved to combat corruption and indiscipline. A New Messamban Market Women Association also emerged during this period. LT. Akowe exclusively pledged his commitment to the Supreme Food Power Authority's policies especially, The Essential Commodities. He also repaid the money he "borrowed" from the Women's Association's purse when he was the secretary. The play consequently foregrounds the story and the depravity that civilians were imperilled under Shagari's rationing program and his austerity-inflected economic policies, Buhari's heavy-handedness and the "War Against Indiscipline" era. It similarly alludes to the reign of Nigeria's self-styled military President Major General Babangida's "structural adjustment program" (SAP) and

General Sanni Abacha's military despotism in the themes of mass poverty, economic stagnation, widespread corruption, political instability, and bad governance.

### **Analysis of the Text**

The analysis of Dipo Kalejaiye's *Essential Commotion* reveals a drama that portrays the ongoing struggles and oppression faced by Nigerians and Africans at large through its plot structure, themes, characterization, and language. The text also validates how myth and culture intermingle to support contemporary socio-political consciousness by harmoniously drawing a connection between the past and the present. A tripartite plot structure that consists of three Acts and six Scenes in a parable on the ongoing oppression and struggles that Africans experience introduces the folklorist narrative conception. It similarly familiarizes the audience with the conflicts in the play in the themes of bad leadership cum bad followership, poverty, squalor, disease, and underdevelopment.

The locale of the play is the 20th century, Southwest Nigeria. The geographical, physical, social-political, and economic sites in which the activities in this text take place reflect the present socio-cultural events and adaptation of its folklore. It presents a dramatic universe in which events unfold logically within contexts that approximate individuals' shared reality in a dual setting that comprises the meeting place of the Supreme Food Authority in an Army Barracks and the Marketplace. The first act begins at the marketplace with the breaking of the fourth wall by the traders (characters) singing and dancing in a typical African festive setting (P.1-3).

An unexpected, loud, and deafening sound of martial music signifying a change in governmental control however drowns the traders' social music and dance. Major Gagara of the Supreme Food Power Authority toppled an elected civilian government in a non-violent coup. The traders celebrated the soldiers as messiahs and liberators of the people from corrupt politicians but, the Captain vehemently rejected public applause on his new post.

In his introductory speech, he reels out the rules of his governance. He continues with the ousted government rationing programs and austere economic policies. His administration empowers soldiers and a special paramilitary corps to seek out and punish "everyday manifestations of indiscipline which include minor infractions as "spitting on the ground" (p.74). This act responds to the interrelatedness of history and literature in its reference and historicisation of the 1982 overthrow of Shehu Shagari's government characterized by an austerity program and essential commodity scheme.

According to Hutchful (1998) cited in Ali-Abba's article titled Post Military Era and the Challenges of democratic governance in Nigeria, the military's constitutional responsibilities include protection of the territorial integrity of a nation against external aggression, assisting the police in the maintenance of internal security and suppression of the insurrection. Conversely, the military participated in the political process, rule of law devoid of respect for human rights and equality of access to all citizens and groups. The period was characterized by a failure in transparency, accountability, and good governance, underscoring the need for genuine good governance practices and a

culture of widespread participation to ensure democracy's success.

In Act Two, incidents of various magnitudes unfold with rapidity and bizarreness that one cannot but marvel at the disorder in contemporary Nigeria. Iyaloja nursed and wanted to effectively stay in office, but the market women frustrated her. Akowe, her son is equally indicted for misappropriating public funds meant for market development in the following excerpt:

1st Market Woman; Yes, our contributions as members of the Market

Women's Association

What about a record of it?

Our son keeps the record, right?

Well, he needs to give us an account

Of what is left in the bank as balance

We want to know where the money is going

We know that he doesn't work

A University graduate

As bright as he is

With no job

Will resort to embezzlement! (p.59)

According to the excerpt, to combat corruption, politicians in government should exhibit strong leadership, accountability, and transparency. If leaders want to reduce corruption and mismanagement in the nation and create a precedent for prosecuting dishonest public officials, they cannot afford to negotiate meaningful accountability and transparency.

Essential Commotion further illustrates the socio-political and economic milieu that informs its thematic



and dramaturgical responses to the themes of betrayal, bad governance and weak followership.

Misappropriation of public funds, another manifestation of corruption thematised in the text exposes Iyaloja's lip service to corruption. Kalejaiye explores the theme of betrayal of expectations and indirectly uses the character of the Market Woman to attack greedy, selfish, ideologically-retarded, avaricious leaders in society. The marketplace is characteristically a conservative institution set up to preserve establishment but; the reader (audience) is confronted through a constellation of allegories with betrayal of expectations. Akowe is equally indicted for misappropriating public funds meant for market development. These events highlight the historical, physical, social-political, and economic contexts of the action.

Despite the introduction of military democratic structures and new values, the play examines corrupt leadership, depraved followership, and soldier revolt, but it is unable to resolve the underlying conflicts. Iyaloja's insincerity and power abuse, along with the oppressive military regime, lead to a revolt against soldiers and her dethroning. Iyaloja is not only depicted as a powerful, crooked witch who must be overthrown at all costs, but she also has to deal with several military regime legacies, including the abuse of authority, poor management of the economy, and poverty.

Her advocacy for women's rights and corruption, along with her demand for import licenses and essential commodities, highlights the betrayal and failure of leaders in managing the nation's affairs and resources. When the third market woman asks her to present the association purse's account statement, she immediately

turns oppressive, brutal, and mystical in dealing with her rivals:

3rd Market Woman: We want our money!

Iyaloja: Are you accusing me...?

4th Woman: Yes, Iyaloja of embezzlement! (65)

Market women leaders prioritize authority and annexation of offices. Rather than addressing the issue of the lack of time to consolidate politics and economics, market women leaders prioritize authority and the annexation of offices.

3rd Market Woman: remember our plan? You were supposed to join her club of witches, gain the power of witchcraft so that we can overthrow her... (67)

1st Market Woman: Well I told her I wanted to be a witch! She looked at me in the strangest way and I felt goosebumps all over my arms. Then she asked me why I wanted to be a witch, (.68)

Trying to restructure civil rules provides new ways to tackle governance issues. The document includes vague, irregular and antagonistic economic and political reforms. Economic stagnation and increasing social tensions are thus characteristics that affirm the changes. Also, the continued control of some Generals in the ranks of the military and the ordinary people generates suspicion. Instead of federalism, the rulers abandon merits and embrace ethnicity.

Essential Commotion also delves into the psychological and cultural elements of legendary and modern remembrance. Recent trends indicate that the complexity of issues is more apparent than the likelihood of renewals given their opportunities and assets. It is important to note that, when relief materials meant for those in need are stolen or diverted, it deprives people of the necessities of life such as food, water, and shelter. This can lead to malnutrition, disease, and even death. And when citizens' hard-earned money is siphoned off by corrupt officials, it leaves them struggling to make ends meet, unable to afford basic services like healthcare and education.

One possible solution to combat the embezzlement of relief materials and the oppression of citizenry funds is to increase transparency in government spending. This can be achieved by implementing open data policies that require government agencies to publish their budgets, expenditures, and contracts online. By making this information easily accessible to the public, citizens can hold their elected officials accountable for how taxpayer dollars are being spent. Another solution is to establish independent oversight committees or anti-corruption agencies that have the power to investigate and prosecute corrupt officials. These entities should be given adequate resources and support to carry out their duties effectively. In addition, whistleblowers should be protected from retaliation and encouraged to report any instances of corruption they witness.

Characters created in the play are historical and illustrative from the outset. Symbolism and realism of

governance come into play through the characters of Major Gagara, General Nwachukwu and Lieutenant Akowe. The playwright also exploits the characters of De-Alhaji and the hoarders to illustrate human greed and avarice in a verified and representational form. De Alhaji and the hoarders represent government officials who are unable to provide stable, economic control, logic, and effective legitimate rule for the public. The characters bring to mind, concrete memories of people in situations and settings that are synonymous with military domination in their approaches to corruption. Kalejaiye references Shagari's lip service to corruption in the character of Iyalaja the same way past millennial leaders (Abacha, Jonathan and Buhari) did. Buhari's rationing program and his austerity-inflected economic policies, decrease in importations and government expenditures are epitomized in Major Gagara's character. Lieutenant Akowe exemplifies Ibrahim Babangida, a major general and Buhari's army chief of staff whose sanguinity presented the perfect counterpoint to Buhari's firmness.

Language is not used in this text as a mere functional tool but, it is informational and important to the dramatic action. Kalejaiye as a folklorist, traditionist and modernist with strong moral and practical artistic perceptions capitalizes on the strength of culture which is a product of history and a reflection of communal life. He uses simple and accessible prose vernacular of daily life in verses that are reciprocally comical and condemnatory in his visualization and performance. De Alhaji's words are made to be humorous and amusing by the playwright with a deep exposition of the die-hard mentality of an African (Yoruba) businessman, an average working-class illiterate who pretends to be



literate. Despite his inadequacy, his choice of words and connotative speech make the play mentally attractive and enjoyable. In this skillfully crafted play, for example De Alhaji expresses courageously the rich Yoruba language, moving from verse to prose. However what is being said and what is being inferred may develop into flaws in the text. An instance is when De Alhaji uses proverbs and then resorts to incantation to ward off Iyaloja's spell incantations (ofo). Arguably, the style is meant for aesthetics but, oftentimes, it lessens the play's imaginings for a non-speaking Yoruba person.

Dialogue in *Essential Commotion* is akin to Moliere's free-flowing *The Misanthrope*. Entrenched in the dialogues are excellent examples of dramatic language in short and fairly long sentences. The Free verse adopted by Kalejaiye may pose a great challenge to the actress playing the part of Iyaloja. More worrisome, of course are instances where the end lines do not rhyme properly especially in proverbs and metaphors. In essence, Kalejaiye employs a range of literary devices such as proverbs derived from African oral tradition that influenced "folkism" wherein only the bone structure of a tale is taken from the collective memory. Traditional storytelling techniques, humour, irony, song and folktales assist his enactments and sustain his audience/readers' attention as participants in a sequel of linear narrations that foregrounds a powerful metaphor of the military junta's administration in Nigeria.

Other techniques employed by the playwright in this text are song, music and dance. Although some elements of

humour and cheerily fictive enactment are injected into the play by the market women in 'ijo eleya' (p.21) some of the music, song and dance do not match the dramatic content and stagecraft. Instead of enhancing enactments, the songs are long, monotonous and not too appropriate for some scenes. For instance, the opening dance at the market at the start of the play, and the welcome dance for the Soldiers and Iyaloja's cognomen are long and windy. It tilts towards obsolete traditional folk songs. It is possible that a blend of traditional and modern songs and dance, a shorter version of Iyalode's cognomen will boost authorial technique and performance.

Essential Commotion not only educates audiences about past corrupt/ fraudulent activities of the military and political classes but also outlines the severity of embezzlement of relief materials, oppression of citizenry funds and the negative impacts in and on the society, particularly vulnerable communities. One should not sit idly while fellow citizens suffer. One can conclude that action against the embezzlement of relief materials and oppression of citizenry funds can start by holding leaders accountable and demanding transparency in how funds are allocated and distributed.

It is also possible to volunteer time and resources to help those in need and support organizations that are working towards positive change. As responsible members of society, one should stand up for what is right and just. The play reveals that office-bearers can provide an enabling environment for present and future generations to thrive by demonstrating strong

leadership accountability, and transparency and correspondingly set the precedent in prosecuting corrupt public officials that pose a threat to the overall well-being of our nation.

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