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More Like Page and Stage: A Critique of Biyi Bandele's Film Adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Daha Ziyade Metin ve Sahne Gibi: Wole Soyinka'nın *Ölüm ve Kral'ın Atlısı* Adlı Eserinin Biyi Bandele Uyarlamasının Bir Eleştirisi

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ABSTRACT

Filmic adaptation of literary texts is usually likened to translation. This simile partly follows from the fact that, in translation – the same as in adaptation context –, the consumers of the target text differ from the public targeted by the source text. Indeed, in the same way the source and the target texts are destined to two linguistically different sets of receivers in translation, the filmic adaptation and its literary source are aimed at two different sets of consumers. The latter is destined to readers while the former is targeted at tele-viewers or cinema goers. Additionally, while the literary/source text seeks to tell, the filmic/target text aims at showing. The aforementioned truism therefore warrants that any plausible film adaptations conform mainly to the principles of cinematographic and audio-visual productions. In other words, a filmic adaptation should be more 'visually engaging' than 'imagination-provoking'; this is so, given the cinema medium's visuality and artistic function. Contrary to this theory, Biyi Bandele's adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* – titled *Elesin Oba* – happens to questionably be excessively faithful to its source text and to the stage. This paper seeks to illustrate this problematic faithfulness, as well as the possible raison d'être for the cineast's creative choices. Using a textual analysis of *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman*, critical observations and secondary sources, the paper specifically shows how Biyi Bandele's excessive fidelity to the source dramatic text affects the quality of its adaptation and the factors that could account for, or justify such an excessive fidelity to the source text.

Keywords: Film Adaptation, Translation, Elesin Oba, Death and the King's Horseman, Nollywood

ÖZ

Edebi metinlerin film uyarlamaları genellikle çeviri eylemine benzetilmektedir. Bu benzetme, kısmen, uyarlama bağlamında olduğu gibi çeviride de erek metin tüketici kitlesinin, kaynak metnin hedef kitlesinden farklı olması gerçeğinden ileri gelmektedir. Nitekim çeviride kaynak ve erek metinlerin dilsel açıdan farklı iki alıcı kitlesine hitap etmesine benzer şekilde, film uyarlaması ile onun edebi kaynağı da iki farklı tüketici kitlesini hedeflemektedir. Bunlardan ikincisi okurlara hitap ederken, ilki televizyon izleyicilerini veya sinema seyircilerini hedef almaktadır. Ayrıca edebi/kaynak metin anlatma arayışındayken, sinematografik/erek metin göstermeyi amaçlar. Dolayısıyla, bahsedilen bu genel geçer doğru, kabul edilebilir nitelikteki her film uyarlamasının temelde sinematografik ve görsel-işitsel üretim ilkelerine uygun olmasını gerektirmektedir. Başka bir deyişle, sinema mecrasının görselliği ve sanatsal işlevi göz önüne alındığında, bir film uyarlamasının 'hayal gücünü tetikleyici' olmaktan ziyade 'görsel açıdan etkileyici' olması beklenir. Bu kuramın aksine, Wole Soyinka'nın *Ölüm ve Kral'ın Atlısı* adlı eserinden Biyi Bandele'nin *Elesin Oba* adıyla uyarladığı film, tartışmaya açık bir biçimde kaynak metne ve sahneye aşırı bir sadakat göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, bu söz konusu sorunlu sadakati ve sinemacının yaratıcı tercihlerinin olası temel gerekçelerini (*raison d'être*) ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* filminin metin analizinden, eleştirel gözlemlerden ve ikincil kaynaklardan yararlanan bu makale; özel olarak Biyi Bandele'nin kaynak dramatik metne gösterdiği aşırı sadakatin uyarlamanın niteliğini nasıl etkilediğini ve kaynak metne duyulan bu aşırı sadakati açıklayabilecek veya gerekçelendirebilecek faktörleri incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Film Uyarlaması, Çeviri, *Elesin Oba, Ölüm ve Kral'ın Atlısı*, Nollywood

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Introduction

Audiences often have high expectations when they watch the filmic adaptation of a (classic) piece of literature. They usually watch this adaptation in the light of their own knowledge of the film's literary source. In line with this, these audiences usually have their personal ideas of what the characters should look like, how these characters should behave and what the setting should look like in the adaptation. Their preconceived thoughts about the contents of the adaptation most often cause them to not only be hyper-judgemental, but also to feel disappointed, particularly in cases where the film director chose to keep their adaptation separate or somehow different from the literary source. In view of this, Adams (2022) advises that critics should always seek to balance the reality of their own imagination against the film director's creative licence or philosophy of art.

Actually, each film director is guided by a specific artistic vision when they adapt a text from page/stage into a film. Adaptation usually compels them (the film directors) to navigate the thin line between fidelity and innovation (Dixit, 2025; Judy, 2017). While some struggle to keep their adaptation somewhat separate from the source text, others exhibit strong fidelity to their literary source. However, irrespective of this divergence of artistic visions, filmic adaptations always thrive to be worth their dramatic or literary sources. They do this particularly when they succeed to contain, retain or maintain the essence of their respective literary sources while respecting the cannons of filmic or audio-visual production (Fondevila-Gascon et al., 2023). In tandem with this, the filmic adaptation of a dramatic or literary text is usually likened to translation – the transcoding of a message from a source to a target language. The aforementioned simile partly follows from the fact that, the targeted public in translation – the same as in adaptation context – is totally different from the public targeted by the source text. Indeed, in the same way the source and the target texts are destined to two linguistically different sets of receivers in translation, the filmic adaptation and its source are aimed at two different sets of consumers. The latter is destined at readers while the former is received by tele-viewers or cinema goers.

This truism therefore warrants that any plausible film adaptation conforms mainly to the principles of cinematographic and audio-visual productions. In other words, a filmic adaptation should be more 'visually engaging' than 'imagination-provoking'; this is given the visuality of the cinema medium, its artistic function as well as the type of receivers that will consume its audio-visual contents. Contrary to this theory, Biyi Bandele's adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Death and*

the King's Horseman remains excessively faithful to its source text and the stage. This paper sets out to illustrate this problematic faithfulness in the light of relevant theories in film adaptation. The paper also explores the possible raison d'être for Bandele's creative choices in *Elesin Oba*. Thus, using a textual analysis of *Elesin Oba*, critical observations and secondary sources, the paper specifically attains two principal objectives. First, it shows how Biyi Bandele's excessive fidelity to the source dramatic text affects the quality of its adaptation; and second, examines factors that could account for, or justify such an excessive fidelity to the source text.

A Brief Incursion into the Principles of Filmic Adaptation

By definition, adaptation is a process whereby something is changed or adjusted for it to fit a new purpose, situation or medium. This process entails bringing something in correspondence with another. Additionally, it implies that necessary modifications are done – by the adapter – in accordance with the changing situations (Patel, 2019). In the domain of media and communication, adaptation specifically involves the modification of texts. In line with this, Parn (2008) defines adaptation as a form of intertextual activity involving the transposition of a story from one text to another, usually from one medium or signification system to another. In other words, text adaptation is the creative act of reinterpreting and transforming a source text – notably literary text – into an audiovisual or filmic one.

Most theorists associate adaptation in one way or the other with translation (Bora, 2024; Cahir, 2006; Cattrysse, 1992). Da Silva (2013) for instance uses the term "cinematographic translation" in reference to filmic adaptation. To him, adaptation calls to mind various aspects of translation such as notional and aesthetic loss, compensation and faithfulness to the original/source text. In the same line of thought, Patrick Cattrysse (1992) makes a parallel between filmic adaptation and translation on the ground that both practices are concerned with the "transformation of [some] source text[s] into target texts under some conditions of 'invariance', or equivalence" (p. 54). In the same line of thought, Khera and Bhatia (2024) observe that literature-based film makers always encounter the same challenges, dilemmas and interpretative choices, latitudes and responsibilities that translators face in their transcoding of literary texts.

Practically, filmic adaptation entails at least two tasks: a) scripting dialogue, and screenplay, strictly in the light of the source text and b) technical execution. The process unfailingly requires various sets of modifications, some of which include the restructuring of the plot, the omission of

some details and the addition or development of new characters. Often questioned by purist critics, these modifications ultimately aim at tailoring the final contents along cannons of cinematic production. Thus, filmic adaptation is characterized by various challenges. In line with this, Judy Sandra (2017) deploys architectural metaphor in her description of adaptation. She says adaptation is like "renovating a house: you [the adapter] will have to destroy it from the inside before you re-build it into something beautiful again" (p. 66). Some of the challenges of adaptation include:

i. Compressing the details embedded in the source text into the fixed runtime of a film,
ii. Preserving the core theme and the essence of the source text while making relevant modifications along the cannons of cinematic production,
iii. Translating internal monologues and the psychological depth into visual storytelling,
iv. Conveying internal emotions and psychological depth on screen

Overcoming or addressing these challenges implies applying some creative license and techniques. This creative license brings to the fore issues of originality, fidelity (to the source text), artistic ownership and audiences' expectations. Actually, similar to translation, filmic adaptation – as an artistic practice – has fueled a debate around the extent to which the resultant movie should be faithful to its literary roots. Two main opposing schools of thought have entered this debate. The first school is of the persuasion that a successful adaptation must strictly be identical to its literary roots in terms of plot, characters, core themes, setting and imagery. Such a school argues that strict fidelity to the literary root protects the integrity of the original story. This school is visibly over-conscious of the audiences' expectations. As Witomo and Rifai (2023) put it, audiences usually believe the success of an adaptation is determined by the degree to which it (the literature-based film) is faithful to its original literary source. In the same line of thought, Khera and Bhatia (2024) affirm that audiences and critics tend to accord utmost priority to the literary source. This attitude affects how they feel about a picture based on it (the literary root of the film). "Since literature normally still holds a [higher] position in the cultural hierarchy than movies [do,] they frequently express disappointment when the movie does not correspond to their perception of the book" (Khera & Bhatia, 2024, p. 157). The two scholars add that "the imaginary world of a book is visualized by readers using strong, personal, and frequently vivid impressions of how it appears and what it all means. The widespread perception is that movies are never as excellent as books since a movie is judged de facto defective and unsatisfactory when it does not match the reader's concepts, visions, or interpretations of the book" (Khera & Bhatia, 2024, p. 157).

The second school of thought begs to disagree. It contends that although filmic adaptation seeks to achieve fidelity to the message of its source text, it unfailingly creates room for repackaging and remodeling. Linda Hutcheon (2006) for instance defines filmic adaptation as "repetition, but repetition without replication" (p. 7). In the same line of thought, Brian McFarlane (1996) argues that adaptation implies "negotiation between the novel's narrative strategies and the cinematic possibilities" (p. 12). Just like in translation, the negotiation mentioned above is characterized by loss (stemming from relevant modifications and restructuring) and compensation. As Bluestone (1957) beautifully puts it, "what is lost in adaptation is compensated by what is gained—film's unique ability to capture movement, light, and immediacy". The concepts of loss and compensation mentioned above hint to the fact that fidelity in filmic adaptation is to be understood along the notions of equivalence and contexts. Cattrysse (1992) evokes these two notions when she affirms that filmic adaptation – the same as translation – follows the criteria of approximation and distance from the original source (p. 17). Cahir (2006) in turn, addresses these two notions (approximation and distance from the original source) through a theory that suggests three possible types of adaptation[1] namely:

> 1. Literal translation": An adaptation that is closely identical to its original literary source. In such an adaptation, the storyline, environment and other detailed aspects closely resemble the original text. No significant change is effected. No new sequences are added; and although rebuilt, issues such as characters, setting and plot are strikingly similar to the specifics given in the original text. A case in point is John Huston's (1956) *Moby Dick*, which is a "literary translation" of Melville's eponym novel.
> 2. Traditional translation: in this type of adaptation, the plot, locales and stylistic traditions of literature are retained but serious modifications are made to tailor the production in line with cinematic paradigms. Such modifications depend on the length and duration of the adaptation, film budget, audiences' preferences and interest and the filmmaker's interpretative insight and stylistic tastes. A case in point is William Wyle's *The Heiress* which is an adaptation of Henry James' novel *Washington Square*.
> 3. Radical translation: in this type of adaptation, the original text is reshaped in an extreme way and revolutionized. Here the adapter exploits the source text mainly as a source of inspiration and comes up with an original filmic production that is fully independent from the source text. A good example is the TV series titled *Lost in Austen* which is a modern twist of Jane Austen's novels. Radical translation favors multicultural and transcultural exploitation of the source text,

[1] Note that Cahir prefers the term "translation" to adaptation. According to her to adapt implies altering, which already suggests some level of deformation. In view of this, she thinks "translation" – which consists of moving a text from one language to another – could be used as a more working analogy, to describe the process of film adaptation.

> given that a text originating from a culture may be adapted to suit values and realities/specificities of an entirely different culture. A case in point is *Apocalypse Now*, an adaptation of the book *Heart of Darkness*. While story in *Heart of Darkness* takes place in Africa, the one in its film adaptation takes place in Vietnam.

Thus, according to many adaptation theorists, the principle of fidelity to the source text, should not hinder the adapter from coming up with an original film which is a new version of its source and which sufficiently bears the essence and spirit of the original story. In line with this notion, adaptation is construed as the act of producing a film which has a certain relationship with its literary source but is, paradoxically, fully independent from this source. This definition implies that the adapter must delicately strike the balance between preserving the original story and producing a visually engaging experience for audiences. Such an adapter must capture and translate the essential details embedded in the source text, but exhibit their own artistic touch and independent identity. As Witomo and Rifai (2023) put it, "the heart of the adaptive act is a question of essence: how to create a second version of a first thing, such as a book, a film, a poem, or yourself, that is successfully its own, new thing while retaining the essence, spirit, and soul of the first thing" (p. 1).

The imperative of producing a visually engaging story (mentioned above) is even key to adaptation. In effect, any adapter must be mindful of the production context in which they create. As contended by Dixit (2025), novels tell stories through literary devices – notably metaphors, tone, hyperboles – while films mainly show concepts using cinematic techniques. In other words, while novels *tell* stories, film adaptations *show* stories. The adapter should therefore place emphasis on the showing more than the telling. While their literary counterparts make their reader see through the mind's eye, they (the adapters) should do better by letting viewers see and imagine through engaging pictures. Through a blend of words, sound and images, the tactful adapters enable the viewers to effortlessly delve into their imaginations. In tandem with this, Witomo and Rifai (2023) argue that "films show, whereas novels tell; in fact, films must show to keep the audience invested in the characters and the story" (p. 3). The two scholars add that adaptation must show rather than telling, because audience's intelligence and ability to pick up on subtler story cues is important. Beside the necessity to fully conform to the visuality of the cinema medium, the adaptive acts must consider the social and cultural contexts in which the film adaptation will be consumed. Da Silva (2013) highlights this principle when she submits that "linguistic or literary translation and film adaptation are distinguished under the perspective of the process of production, because

the filmic process of creation occurs in social contexts different from those of reception process since the social context of reception of a literary text is different from that of a cinematographic one" (p. 270). Thus, the process of film adaptation is determined by a complex web of principles.

Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* as Page or Stage

This part of the paper mainly examines the extent to which, Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba* is questionably too faithful to its literary roots. The section also discusses how such a faithfulness negatively affects the aesthetics and technical quality of the adaptation. Of course, discussion in this section is guided by Cahir's (2006) contention that the effectiveness of filmic adaptation is determined not by how much the audiences agree with the filmmakers' interpretations of the primary source material, but rather by how well the adapter is able to convey the essence and spirit of the source text to the audience.

A Brief Presentation of Biyi Bandele's Oeuvre

The name "Biyi Bandele" has come to evoke different things to different authors. But most Nigerian literary and film critics – who carefully studied Biyi Bandele's oeuvre – will agree that this name calls to mind serial storytelling and artistic versatility (Ezinne, 2022; Paper, 2022). In effect, the Yoruba man who bore this name and died on August, 2022 in Lagos, has before his demise, been a "bridge between generations of Nigerian writing, literary genres and arts" (BBC, 2022). Actually, Bandele has, before his death, illustrated his brilliance and fine hand not only in the art of writing stimulating novels and plays (notably *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond, The Sympathetic Undertaker*, *The Street* and *Burna Boy*) but also in the adaptation of some of Nigeria's most evocative historical literature. He has for instance adapted such fascinating classics of the Nigerian literature as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. According to Nigerian writer Temi (his daughter), Bandele was "a storyteller to his bones, with an unblinking perspective, singular voice and wisdom, which spoke boldly through all of his art" (p. 5).

Indeed, Bandele's approach to artistic creativity is singular. In many of his works, he thrives to be a storyteller who explores the human interest angle to Nigerian stories and proffers a journalistic and poetic take on historical issues. This aspect of his style is revealed in his coming-of-age war novel *Burma Boy* (2007). In this novel in particular, the author taps into some interesting historical events: the war experiences of his father and his father's friend in the town of Burma.

Talking about this novel, Craig Jessica (as cited in BBC, 2022) confides that "I was fascinated by the historical importance and authenticity, having never before known about Nigerian soldiers fighting in WWII for the British army". Similarly, Bandele's 2013 adaptation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award winning novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* establishes his obsession with the screening of Nigeria history. Indeed, the adapter's version of *Half of a Yellow Sun* actually shows his historian gaze and his nose for good research. This obviously accounts for scenic details and clarity of actors' conversation in his film(s). It therefore appears that Bandele's 2022 adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* into a largely Yoruba speaking movie titled *Elesin Oba* is simply indexical of his sustained penchant for the reinterpretation and representation of his country of origin's history.

A Brief Presentation of *Elesin Oba*

As a historical film, *Elesin Oba* is based on Soyinka's 1975 play titled *Death and the King's Horseman.* This play in turn feeds on some real life events that happened in Oyo, a Yoruba city in 1946. Bandele's filmic adaptation recounts the story of a man, Elesin Oba (played by Adunlade Adekola), who, in his capacity of king's horseman in a Yoruba community, must commit ritual suicide to join and serve his just-deceased king in the afterlife. According to the community's cosmology, this ritual suicide is imperative as it will ultimately enable the spirit of the deceased king to smoothly ascend to the world of the ancestors. Failure to practice the ritual will cause a cosmic disorder: the king's spirit will roam and haunt the community, wreaking havoc therein. The villagers' cosmology is characterized by three planes of existence namely the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn. Elesin's ritual suicide will enable these three worlds to work in harmony. His reluctance to perform the ritual will, on the contrary, cause the unborn and the living to seriously suffer as the deceased king wouldn't have ascended to the world of the ancestors. Unfortunately for the collectivity, Elesin suddenly refuses to die and is rather preoccupied with taking pleasure on his last night on earth. He develops sexual appetite and embarks on marrying a new bride that will enable him leave a child. This child will bear his name and legacy.

Thus, Elesin reverses himself on his traditional duty to his community. This new development complicates the transitioning process until a British District Colonial Officer, Simon Pilkings (played by Mark Elderkin) intervenes to stop and proscribe the rite on the basis that it is

'barbaric' and illegal. Pilkings orders the arrest and jailing of Elesin. This is intended to prevent the sacrifice. The British authority's muscular intervention puts the locals in a serious trouble. The community reads the proscription of the ritual as a terrible disruption of the cosmic order of the universe. Such a development is, according to the locals, bound to have disastrous consequences on the collectivity. The community censures not only Pilkings but also Elesin over the situation. The king's horseman is blamed for being too entangled with earthly things to fulfil his traditional obligation. Events take a tragic turn when Olunde (played Deyemi Okanlawon), Elesin's son who has just returned from studying medicine in Europe, seeks to redeem his father by committing ritual suicide in the place of the latter. Olunde also hopes to restore the traditional order of the universe through his sacrificial act.

A Problematic Faithfulness to the Source Text and Theatrical Language

Bandele's *Elesin Oba* is excessively faithful to its source material, Soyinka's *Death*. This is evident in the flowery speeches and arguments that are replete in the film as well as the dialogues which, in many cases, represent direct rendition of Soyinka's play. A telling example is where Elesin addresses Olohun Iyo (Alawode Brymo) using poetic and sophisticated language. This address takes place in the scene shown in the Figure 1.

Figure 1

The image shows a scene in Elesin Oba. In this scene, Olohun Iyo (Alawode Brymo) eulogizes Elesin using very sophisticated language. Retrieved from https://thelagosreview.ng/elesin-oba-the-kings-horseman-gallops-into-pedestrianism-micheal-kolawole/ Under Creative Commons License (CC BY 4.0)

In this instance, Olohun Iyo says: “a tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment”. This language is typical of the stage and not cinema. Like many other actors in the film, Elesin cited above speaks verbatim the words in Soyinka’s play. His speeches are usually dense, declarative, ceremonial and stylized, like in theatre. Indeed, dialogues in the film are glaringly and boringly poetic, cryptic and periphrastic as in a theatrical production. Additionally, *Elesin Oba* regularly transposes the call-and-response found in the dialogues of its source material. The film also, evasively replicates the plot structure of *Death*.

All the aforementioned flaws somewhat point to the fact that Bandele’s *Elesin Oba* is a copy-and-paste kind of production. In other words, the flaws mentioned above suggest there is very little adaptation in the strict sense of the word. Actually, Bandele appears more interested in preserving Soyinka’s play than re-interpreting it for the screen. A viewer who is familiar with Soyinka’s *Death* will therefore, likely find no suspense in Bandele’s film. On the other hand, a viewer who has no knowledge of *Death* will hardly understand Pilkings’ muscular intervention against Elesin’s ritual sacrifice. This follows from the fact that no context is provided at the beginning of the film. Thus, Bandele tells the story sensibly in the same order as in *Death*.

Many other directional choices make *Elesin Oba* strictly loyal to its stage origin. Actually, the film’s theatricalities are heightened by actors’ constant burst into folkloric songs in the film. Additionally, screen manifestation is diluted by the film director’s tendency to rush everything in many of the film’s key scenes. This observation is true to Bandele’s portrayal of the peril that is, in theory, occasioned by Elesin’s reluctance to sacrifice his life. Visibly, no significant repercussion follows from the King’s Horseman’s hesitations. This is indisputably paradoxical, and outside logical expectations. Things are also rushed through the film director’s handling of crucial scenes such as the arrest of Elesin, Olunde’s confrontation with his father and Olunde’s ritual suicide. It is actually surprising that the scene of Elesin’s arrest is not given elaborate attention, in spite of the fact it is the heart of the story as it marks the cause of the community’s peril. This key sequence of the film’s plot is portrayed like mere historical reenactment. No sense of urgency is conveyed through the cinematography.

Similarly, Olunde’s ritual suicide is treated as in a stage play. Actually, Bandele executes violence in this very important scene, in a way that is reminiscent of the stage: Elesin’s son kills himself behind the scene. Here, the viewer is left to merely visualize and not see Olunde’s suicide,

in the same way the reader of Soyinka's *Death* will do. The lack of relevant visual representations in this violence scene – like in many other similar instances in the film – is arguably reminiscent of stage situations. Thus, Bandele's *Elesin Oba* tends to have more theatrical than cinematic accents. This is contrary to the principle of 'show-not-tell' popularly prescribed in filmic adaptation. As Witomo and Rifai (2023) put it, "films show, whereas novels tell; in fact, films must show to keep the audience invested in the characters and the story" (p. 1). Similarly, Da Silva (2013) argues that when adapting a literary text into a film, a director has to provide the readers of the novels […] with 'plausible' images of the literary universe of the texts and, at the same time, create images for new spectators" (p. 272). Thus, the use of stage play techniques in an adaptation is bound to be questionable.

Bandele's commitment to the theatrical form over the cinematic function is also seen in his poor character development of some key figures as well as the lack of cinema tension in his film. In effect, the development and acting style of tutelary and fascinating characters such as Elesin and Olunde are to some extent, insufficient and unconvincing for cinema. Elesin's inner world all through the film is rarely conveyed on screen. We are told (only through dialogues) in the film that his duty to commit ritual suicide makes him to be torn, restless and afraid. In some sequences, Elesin verbally claims to be proud and ready for the ritual. At some point he hesitates, says he is ashamed, uncertain and even weak. But we never really see the expression of these various sentiments and states of mind in his acting. In effect, Elesin mostly just talks of his state of mind. Never does he express his emotion through facial expression or any other non-verbal cue. We hardly see the camera linger on Elesin's silences, his hesitant speeches or other gestures that could indicate his fear and uncertainty. Even his hesitation to fulfill his ritual duty occurs only incidentally. Much of the film feels aimed at only stimulating the imagination of the audience; that is, making these audiences see with their mind's eye, as in theatre. These directorial choices and acting style are questionable when one takes into account the truism that camera can whisper and silences can be sufficiently expressive in cinema. Bandele basically makes his actors – notably Elesin – *tell*, instead of *showing* what happens in their internal world. This may work in theatre, and not so much in cinema. As explained by Deren et al., "Cinema is a unique medium for the study of emotion since it can capture the human face in moving close-up. It offers an infinite set of possibilities for studying character in various situations involving human interaction" (as cited in Dixit, 2025, p. 2).

In spite of Bandele's imperfect directional choices, *Elesin Oba* admirably carries the traditionalist spirit and philosophical glow of *Death*. Yoruba rejuvenation and Soyinka's dramatic theory are at the center of the film. It even goes without saying that a good knowledge of this dramatic theory is key to understanding the film. Elesin's and Olunde's ritual sacrifices are a re-enactment of the self-sacrifice of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and artistic creativity. This re-enactment enables the exploration of many humanist(ic) attitudes towards death as well as theories of life/death that are not necessarily connectable to the Yoruba worldview. One of these is the myth of the messiah which is very popular in storytelling across the world. Elesin's instinctive hesitation to fulfil his ritual obligation – and act as a messiah – is a strategic tool used by both the film and the play to portray the life-mongering spirit of man in the face of death. Thus, one of the obvious philosophical dimensions of the film is that it relays the popular myth which stipulates that it is in the face of death that man tends to lucidly measure the contours of life. It is in the face of death that Elesin realizes his non-readiness to die in spite of his supposedly sacred obligation to accept his fate with good humor. Thus, *Elesin Oba* – just like its source material – is a subtle humanistic reflection on death and life after death.

Understanding Bandele's Creative Choices

Understandably, many justifications may surely be given for the directional choices mentioned above. One such justifications may be that Bandele must have seen many productions of *Death* (see Figure 2 and 3), which had defined how he envisaged the next productions or representations of the play. In effect, *Death and the King's Horseman* is considered as Soyinka's most performed play on the Nigerian stage (Adesokan 2024). The techniques and aesthetic choices made by the various stage directors who interpreted the play have definitely inspired Bandele's creative choices to some remarkable extent. Figure 2 and 3 vividly illustrate the aforementioned plurality and diversity of stage interpretations of *Death*. The former (Figure 2) for instance, shows a sprawling, playful multimedia performance while Figure 3 illustrates a rather traditionalist interpretation of Soyinka's *Death*. All these multiple representations of the play definitely defined Bandele's creative choices.

Figure 2

The image shows a stage production of "Death and the King's Horseman" at TerraKulture. This stage production is visibly a sprawling, playful and multimedia-assisted performance. Retrieved from https://bookartville.com/adapting-soyinkas-death-into-elesin-was-not-about-yoruba-nationalism-biyi-bandele/ under Creative Common License (CC BY 4:0)

Another justification may be that the film director sought, by his filmic adaptation, to invite viewers to (re)visit the source play. In an interview granted art critic Akinosho in 2022, Bandele actually confided that "My idea of the film's success is that those who see it are compelled to go and see the play". He however added that "But this [*Elesin Oba*] is not the play. This is a film" (as cited in Akinosho, 2024, para. 5). Bandele's apparent invitation mentioned above may not outright be regarded as being totally out of place, if one considers popular beliefs and theories arguing that there is a symbiotic link between the source text and the adaptation. Such theories claim that an adaptation indirectly projects or is reminiscent of the original source (Dixit, 2025). However, it must be emphasized that a successful adaptation should sufficiently be independent to the source text. As noted by Grewell, "a quality adaptation stands on its own. The film must depend on the book enough to claim the status of 'adaptation', while the director takes creative liberties to make his mark in the world of film" (as cited in Adams, 2022).

A third but not least justification for *Elesin Oba*'s excessive fidelity to *Death*, its theatrical root, may be that Bandele tactfully bowed to Soyinka's philosophy of art, particularly his

conception of theatrical adaptation: it is alleged that the Nobel Laureate loves adaptations of his plays to stick to the original source (Adesokan, 2024; Uzoatu, 2022). As Kolawole (2022) puts it "Soyinka prefers the representation of his play to stay true to the original material".

Figure 3

The image shows another stage production of "Death and the King's Horseman". This production is done by Nigeria's National Troupe. Retrieved from https://bookartville.com/how-will-netflix-produce-death-and-the-kings-horseman-2/ under Creative Common License (CC BY 4:0)

However, it must be argued that a good adapter is, in theory, driven by some independent spirit that pushes them to pre-conceive their adaptation as a film that will be understood on their own terms. An adapter is supposed to have their own independent identity. Adams (2022) highlights this truism when she explains how the imaginative reality (the reality the imagination constructs based on what the mind's eye sees) varies from the author to the adapter of the source text. She writes that:

> When an author is writing a story and hits the backspace button saying, "No, that character wouldn't do that," he encounters such [imaginative] reality. How does the author know what the character which he created, would or would not do? With the physical manifestation of the character on each page comes an assumption of the general

> path the character would take. This concept in literature applies to film. Each person who plays a part in the production of a film has his own imaginative reality. It's like having "more cooks involved in the soup," […] Now, instead of having a writer, editor, publisher, and reader, there are actors, directors, screenplay writers, costume designers, and more, not including the viewer. In other words, it's a transaction between parties, and sometimes the transaction on paper does not look the same in digital form. (Adams, 2022, p. 18)

Thus, Soyinka and Bandele's imaginative realities should, in principle, be different. Bandele should have been mindful of these differences in imaginative realities. He should also have considered the fact that audiences are more interested in seeing his marks and not those of Soyinka. Besides this, his job was to make a filmic and not a theatrical statement; meanwhile, successful adaptations are always conscious of the visuality of the cinema medium. In other words, a good adapter is conscious of the fact that cinema is not the stage. Going by this maxim, scenes – notably of violence in his adaptation – should have creatively been conceived for a credible screen manifestation to be attained.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine the ways in which Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* is excessively faithful to its literary roots and how such a faithfulness affects the technical quality and aesthetics of its film. The paper argued that Bandele persistently replicates, the dialogue, speech style found in the source text, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. His transposition of Soyinka's words and style makes his adaptation to excessively have theatrical characteristics. These theatrical accents are intensified by Bandele's technical choice of diluting screen manifestation. He actually choses to over-rush things and deploy ellipses that eliminate key action scenes such as the suicide of Elesin's son.

The paper furthermore examined possible justifications for Bandele's technical choices. It pointed out that *Elesin Oba* may be Bandele's indirect invitation addressed to the audiences to revisit Soyinka's dramatic text, *Death*. It may also be the evidence of Bandele's bowing to Soyinka's theory of filmic adaptation. However, in spite of Bandele's imperfect directional choices, *Elesin Oba* admirably carries the traditionalist spirit and philosophical glow of *Death*. Yoruba rejuvenation and Soyinka's dramatic theory are at the center of the film. This paper focused essentially on Bandele's creative choices in *Elesin Oba*. Further research may interestingly delve into how the Nigerian and non-Nigerian audiences received the cineast's adaptation of Soyinka's

drama, *Death*. Further research may also focus on comparing Bandele's aesthetic choices in *Elesin Oba* with those in his other adaptations, notably *Half of a Yellow sun* (2014).

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