



RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A STUDY OF D. OLU OLAGOKE'S *THE IROKO MAN AND THE WOOD-CARVER*

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Abstract

*This study examines the interconnected roles of responsible leadership and civic responsibility in Nigerian society through a literary analysis of D. Olu Olagoke's *The Iroko Man and the Wood-Carver*. Drawing on Moral Leadership theory and Social Contract theory, the paper explores how authority, morality, and communal values are represented in the text and how these representations reflect contemporary leadership and citizenship challenges in Nigeria. The Iroko Man is analyzed as a symbol of ethical authority and guardianship, while the wood carver represents the ordinary citizen whose actions have broader social consequences. The study argues that social harmony and sustainable development depend on the mutual accountability of leaders and citizens, rather than on leadership alone. By situating the narrative within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, the paper demonstrates that African folklore remains a relevant medium for moral instruction and civic education. The findings suggest that Nigeria's leadership crisis is deeply intertwined with citizens' neglect of civic duties, and that meaningful social transformation requires a collective commitment to ethical leadership and civic-responsible followership.*

Keywords: Leadership, Citizenship, Nigeria, Development, Commitment

Introduction

Leadership and citizenship are foundational to the stability and development of any society. Nigeria's political landscape over the last six decades has been marked by persistent debates on accountability, moral authority and civic engagement. Madumelu Chukwuemeka et al. (2019: 1460) argue that "responsibility in leadership is among the reasons organizations, institutions, and even nations succeed". Yet, in Nigeria, leadership often struggles to embody service-oriented governance, resulting in systemic inefficiency and corruption. Similarly, Nimi Wariboko (2017: 112) asserts that "ethical leadership is indispensable to the political evolution of Nigeria", highlighting the need for both leaders and citizens to uphold moral and civic values.

African folktales, as cultural artifacts, often reflect communal norms and offer critique on governance and social behaviour. D. Olu Olagoke's *The Iroko Man and the Wood-Carver* exemplifies this, portraying one Iroko spirit as an ethical guardian. The story illustrates the interdependence of leadership and followership; just as the Iroko-Man enforces moral order, citizens' respect for norms ensures societal harmony, a concept echoed in Nigerian socio-political realities. Tobi Ejumudo et al. (2021: 88) note that "the relationship between leadership and followership in Nigeria requires harmonization to enable the society or group to achieve set goals, reinforcing the mutual responsibility needed for development."



Moreover, studies on civic engagement suggest that when leaders model ethical behaviours, citizens are more likely to participate constructively in society. Research shows that citizenship and communal responsibility increase when leaders demonstrate commitment and communal welfare (Bolaji Akinyemi 2020: 54). This dynamic resonates with the folktale, where ethical guidance from the Iroko-Man leads the wood carver to recognize the consequences of his actions, underlining the reciprocity between leadership and civic duty. Citizenship education further plays a critical role in cultivating responsible citizenship and communal values (Chidi Okoro 2021: 33). Thus, by situating *The Iroko- Man and the Wood- Carver* within Nigeria's socio- political context, this study argues that leadership challenges cannot be disentangled from citizens' civic behaviour and must act responsibly to sustain social order and development.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of responsible leadership and civic responsibility in Nigerian Society in this study is anchored primarily in Moral Leadership Theory and Social Contract Theory, with insights from Civic Engagement theory providing a holistic perspective. Moral leadership theory posits that effective leaders act as ethical role models whose decisions and behaviours shape societal norms and inspire leadership (Joanne B. Ciulla 2014: 22). Leaders are not only custodians of authority but are responsible for promoting fairness, accountability and the collective good. The Iroko-Man showed moral leadership by enforcing societal norms while guiding the Wood-Carver toward ethical self-awareness. This demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is measured not by power alone but by the capacity to align actions with ethical principles (Peter Northouse 2019: 85).

Social Contract Theory complements this by emphasizing that societies function through mutual obligations between leaders and citizens (Jean-Jacques Rousseau 2004: 45). Leadership is legitimized when leaders fulfill their duties and citizens reciprocate with cooperation and civic responsibility. D. O. Olagoke's narrative illustrates a breach of this contract: the wood carver's disregard for the sacred iroko tree mirrors the real-world consequences of citizens or leaders ignoring societal norms. This reinforces the idea that the stability of Nigerian society depends on adherence to shared ethical expectations. (Harrison Christian Madubueze Madumelu 2025: 1463). The folklore thus becomes a metaphorical lens through which the dynamics of trust, accountability and reciprocity can be explored in contemporary governance.

Additionally, Civic Engagement Theory provides insight into how citizens actively contribute to social development through participation, ethical behaviour and community responsibility (Robert D. Putnam 2000: 66). The story reflects this principle, as the wood carver's eventual recognition of his wrongdoing symbolizes the potential for citizens to internalize social values and act responsibly. Applying this to Nigerian society, civic engagement is crucial to complement ethical leadership, foster social order and ensure sustainable development. Studies indicate that when leaders act morally, citizens demonstrate higher social trust and more sustainable development outcomes (Bolaji Akinyemi 2020: 54). By integrating these theories, the framework positions *The Iroko- Man and the Wood- Carver* as both a literary and analytical model for understanding the interplay between leadership, citizenship and societal progress in Nigeria.

In summary, this theoretical framework posits that responsible leadership and civic responsibility are mutually reinforcing moral and ethical leaders, foster conscientious citizens, while engaged citizens reinforce accountable leadership. By examining the symbolic interaction between the Iroko-Man and the Wood- Carver, the study draws parallels between folklore and contemporary Nigerian



society, highlighting the practical relevance of these narratives in informing governance, civic education and social ethics.

Literature Review

Literature on leadership and civic responsibility reveals a growing scholarly concern about the ethical dimensions of governance and the role of citizens in societal development, particularly in African contexts. Leadership studies have increasingly emphasized the moral obligations of leaders to act with integrity and in the public interest. For example, Peter G. Northouse affirms that ethical leadership extends beyond administrative competence to include a leader's commitment to values such as honesty, justice and community welfare, noting that ethical leaders respect the rights and dignity of others (2019: 102). This aligns with the argument that leadership must be grounded in morality if sustainable social progress is to be achieved.

In Nigerian studies, the connection between leadership ethics and societal outcomes has been widely debated. Research by Solomon O. Ogundiya highlights that leadership failures in Nigeria—manifested through corruption, nepotism and policy inconsistency—have hindered national development and eroded public trust (2018: 143). Similarly, Ime Akpan and Effiom Udosen emphasize that citizens' disengagement from civic duties exacerbates leadership challenges, arguing that “an apathetic citizenry often enables poor leadership by failing to exercise accountability mechanisms” (2021: 78). Their findings suggest that the problems of governance cannot be disentangled from the behaviour of the governed.

The theme of civic responsibility is further explored in the works of Bolaji Akinyemi, who examines how civic participation and community initiatives contribute to institutional development in Nigeria. Bolaji Akinyemi argues that when citizens take active roles—such as participating in local governance, advocating for transparency and engaging in social development activities—the quality of leadership and policy implementation improves (2020: 60). This supports the view that responsible citizenship is a necessary counterpart to ethical leadership.

Beyond empirical studies, scholars have also examined the use of literature, folklore and cultural narratives as tools for moral education and social criticism. Chinedu Okafor argues that African folktales encapsulate ethical principles and communal values that resonate with local audiences, functioning as informal but powerful mechanisms for teaching social responsibility (2017:29). Similarly, Anthony Nwoye suggests that folktales can serve as reflective mirrors for contemporary social issues, allowing readers to critically assess real-world political behaviours (2019: 15). These perspectives provide theoretical justification for using *The Iroko-Man and the Wood-Carver* as a literary case study in understanding leadership and civic roles in Nigerian society.

Despite the rich scholarship on leadership and civic engagement, there remains a relative gap in literature that directly integrates African folklore as an analytical framework in studies of political ethics. Most research tends to focus either on leadership theory or civic behaviour in isolation. By juxtaposing the moral symbolism in D. Olu Olagoke's narrative with empirical findings on Nigerian governance and citizenship, this study addresses that gap, offering an interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural narratives with social and political analysis.

Overall, previous literature underscores the importance of ethical leadership, active citizenship and culturally grounded moral frameworks. This review reveals that while ethical governance and civic responsibility have been extensively discussed, few studies employ literary texts like *The Iroko-*



Man and the Wood-Carver to bridge cultural values with contemporary governance challenges. Consequently, this study contributes to scholarly discourse by demonstrating how folklore can illuminate the moral and civic imperatives underlying leadership and societal accountability in Nigeria.

Exploring Ethical Leadership and Citizen Accountability through Folktale Narratives

D. Olu Olagoke's play *The Iroko-Man and the Wood Carver* presents a dramatized folktale that interrogates the moral foundations of leadership and the responsibilities of individuals within a community. Through symbolic characters and conflict rooted in Yoruba cosmology, the play demonstrates that social order depends on both ethical authority and responsible citizenship:

AWORO: Another thing is the state drum we shall use on the occasion. The one we have been using is getting old and may break with further beating. Ogun certainly deserves the greatest honour we can show him. Great would be the disgrace and dishonour if the drum were suddenly to break during the festival. Can't we prevent this, Your Highness? Is it possible to get someone to carve a new one before the festival comes? (17).

ONISHOFIN: Yes, it is quite possible. I agree with you that these little drums scattered here and there (*pointing at them*) won't do. It is altogether unheard-of in the long history of this illustrious town that a drum breaks during the celebration of the Ogun festival, and it shall not happen in my reign. Indeed, we want a new big and impressive drum. We still have a month to go, and one can easily be carved during that time. I had better send at once for the best wood-carver in the town. By the way, who is the best wood carver in town? (17).

Using the lens of ethical leadership and citizen accountability, the play can be read as a moral commentary on governance and civic duty in Nigerian society.

The Iroko-Man as a Symbol of Ethical Leadership

The character of the Iroko-Man represents authority rooted in moral obligation rather than arbitrary power. As the spirit guardian of the Iroko tree, he embodies leadership that exists to protect communal values and enforce ethical conduct. In the opening sections of the play, Onishofin exhibits leadership traits:

ONISHOFIN: Look at it well. You see it is getting old and worn. You probably heard the town crier when he was going round this morning. We shall celebrate the Ogun festival a moon from today, and I want you to carve me a new state-drum before then. I give you only two weeks to finish the job. Do you think you can do it? (20).

AGBEGILODO: (*without a moment's hesitation*): Yes, my lord. I do not have much work in hand at present. Even if I had, it would have been my duty to set it aside and give my immediate attention to the state business (21).

ONISHOFIN: Good. If you finish it on time, I shall give you your due reward (21).

This early declaration mirrors the function of leadership in society.

Unlike tyrannical rulers, Onishofin does not act impulsively. His actions are guided by purposeful leadership, justice and the need to uphold the rights and privileges of the people. When promises made to him are broken, his response serves as a corrective measure rather than mere punishment:

ONISHOFIN: (*in a deep, rich, commanding tone*): Go to Agbegilodo. You know his house, don't you? Tell him to come here now, bringing with him the state-drum we



asked him to carve. We gave him three weeks and it is three weeks today. If he has not finished, let him come all the same and explain himself and tell us why he has not finished, and say when he hopes to finish (39).

This aligns with the idea of ethical leadership, which emphasizes accountability, moral clarity and the protection of collective interests. In Nigerian society, where leadership is often criticized for corruption and self-interest, Onishofin represents an idealized model of authority that prioritizes communal welfare over personal gain.

The Wood-Carver as a Representation of Citizen Responsibility

The wood-carver functions as a symbolic figure of the ordinary citizen whose actions directly affect the moral and social fabric of the community. As a skilled artisan, he contributes positively to society:

AGBEGILODO: Yes, after I had spent a lot of time roaming about the bush, I hit on one at last. It was a tall iroko tree, straight as an arrow, lofty as a mountain, and every inch the right tree from which to carve a state-drum. Apart from this, there are wooden plates, stools and countless other small carvings to be turned out of the giant tree (25).

Yet, he becomes implicated in moral conflict through his interaction with the Iroko-man:

IROKO-MAN: Agbegilodo, Agbegilodo, do you really mean to cut down the tree you were working at today? (26)

AGBEGILODO: *(Thoroughly frightened, answers)* Of course, I really mean to cut it down. The Head Chief has asked me to carve a state-drum for the next Ogun festival and has promised me a big reward if I finish it in time. I want to use this tree for the work (26).

This episode illustrates a critical aspect of civic responsibility: commitments made to society, whether moral, cultural or legal, must be honoured. The wood-carver's household benefits from uprightness. Suffice to say that if the agreed obligation between Onishofin and the wood-carver is ignored, disorder might likely follow. This reflects the Nigerian civic experience, where citizens often demand benefits from the state while neglecting duties such as obeying laws, paying taxes or protecting public property.

Importantly, the wood carver does not reject responsibility when consequences arise. Instead, he performs a noble duty that restores honour to Ogun, the King and the people. His decision to carve a new state-drum to fulfil the obligation demonstrates creative accountability and moral agency:

AGBEGILODO: Oh, stay at home, Kunle. The place I am going is very far away. You cannot walk so far. The bush is also thick and damp. You cannot go. You will easily catch a cold there. There are many thorns there too, which can easily prick your tender feet. In any case, I shall soon be back. Go home and keep your mother company till I come back. I won't be long *(Goes away)* (24).

This act suggests that responsible citizenship involves not only obedience but also initiative and ethical problem solving.



Promise, Obligation and the Social Contract

A central moral issue in the play is that Onishofin functions as a symbolic social contract between authority and the people. When the promise is fulfilled, the resulting benefit to the wood-carver dramatizes his responsive leadership traits. This reinforces the idea that societies operate on mutual obligations: leaders must protect and provide, while citizens must uphold shared values. Chukwuka Eugene Ofie states, “These issues, often embedded in the very fabric of governance, have been the subject of extensive scholarly discourse and creative representation. Nigerian literature has served as a powerful medium for interrogating these failures and offering critical reflection on the nation’s trajectory” (2025: 22).

The transformation that follows the fulfilled promise reaffirms how individual moral uprightness can result in social transformation. D. Olu Olagoke uses this play to stress that accountability is not selective; both leaders and citizens are bound by ethical expectations. In Nigerian society, where social contacts between government and citizens are frequently strained, this theme remains deeply relevant.

Folktale as a Medium for Civic Education

D. Olu Olagoke's use of the folktale drama elevates *The Iroko-Man and the Wood-Carver* beyond entertainment, positioning it as a tool for civic and moral education. Folktales traditionally function as communal classrooms, transmitting values across generations:

AGBEGILODO: (*boldly*): Yes I did. I have been wondering who could have put those things there. Was it really you? (31).

IROKO-MAN: Yes, they were meant for you. They are your reward. Will you now give up the tree? (31)

AGBEGILODO: Ah! But the state-drum! What of the state-drum the Head Chief has asked me to carve for the festival next moon? I still have to do that. Or don't you realize what will happen to me if I do not finish it in time? The Chief will certainly be very angry with me. He might punish me heavily and imprison me. What are your gifts compared with all this? Or what use would they be to me spending my life in prison? (31 – 32).

By dramatizing ethical leadership and citizen responsibility, the play reinforces social norms in a culturally resonant manner.

D. Olu Olagoke's *The Iroko-Man and the Wood-Carver* accentuates that societal progress is achievable when leaders and citizens fulfil their respective duties. This draws attention to the subtitle's focus on “ethical leadership and citizen accountability”, demonstrating that African folktale narratives remain relevant frameworks for understanding modern governance challenges in Nigeria.

Relevance to Contemporary Nigerian Society

The play consequently suggests that Nigeria's leadership challenges cannot be resolved by focusing solely on rulers or institutions. Just as disorder arises from broken promises and moral negligence, societal instability in Nigeria often stems from the combined failure of leaders and citizens to act responsibly. D. Olu Olagoke's drama therefore advocates accountability as the foundation of social order.



Conclusion

This study has examined the interconnected themes of responsible leadership and civic responsibility in Nigeria through a critical analysis of D. O. Olagoke's *The Iroko-Man and the Wood-Carver*. By exploring the play through the lens of ethical leadership and citizen accountability, the research brings to light that social harmony and development are not solely dependent on leaders but on the moral conduct of both rulers and the ruled. The symbolic relationship between Onishofin and the wood-carver substantiates the idea that authority carries ethical obligations, while citizenship demands responsibility, integrity, and respect for communal values.

The analysis reveals that Onishofin functions as a model of moral authority whose role is to preserve social order and enforce accountability, while the wood-carver represents the ordinary citizen whose actions significantly influence societal stability. The play clarifies that when moral agreements are violated, disorder follows, but when accountability is acknowledged and corrective actions are taken, harmony can be restored. This dynamic reflects contemporary Nigerian realities where leadership failures and civic irresponsibility often coexist and reinforce one another.

Furthermore, the study affirms the relevance of African folktale drama as a medium for moral instruction and civic education. D. O. Olagoke's adaptation points up that indigenous narratives remain effective tools for interrogating modern governance issues and promoting ethical awareness. By embedding leadership and citizenship lessons within culturally familiar frameworks, the play encourages reflection on collective responsibility as a pathway to national development.

In conclusion, *The Iroko-Man and the Wood-Carver* offers enduring insights into the ethical foundations of leadership and the critical role of citizens in sustaining a just and functional society. The study therefore advocates a renewed commitment to moral leadership and responsible citizenship in Nigeria, showing that meaningful social transformation can only occur when both leaders and citizens act with integrity, accountability, and a shared sense of purpose.

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