

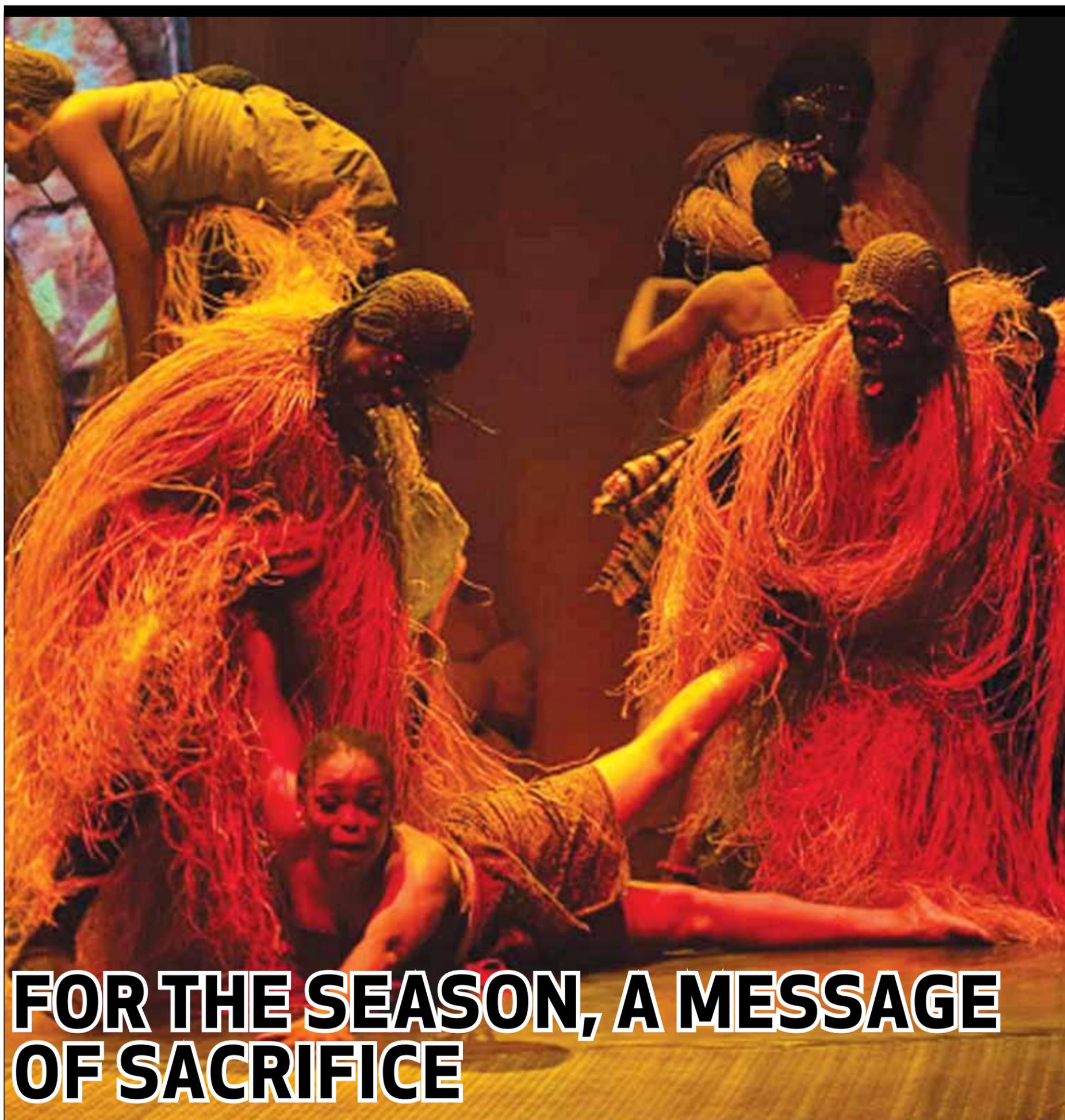
ARTS & REVIEW

READING CULTURE GOES
TO THE NEXT LEVEL
PAGE 69



A THIS  DAY PUBLICATION

28.04.2019



FOR THE SEASON, A MESSAGE OF SACRIFICE

EDITOR OKECHUKWU UWAEZUOKE/ okechukwu.uwaezuoke@thisdaylive.com

ARTS & REVIEW \\ MOREMI THE MUSICAL

FOR THE SEASON, A MESSAGE OF SACRIFICE

Months after its successful outing in December, *Moremi the Musical* graces the Terra Kulture Arena stage in Victoria Island, Lagos once more with its message that chimes with the spirit of the Easter season, **Okechukwu Uwaezuoke** reports

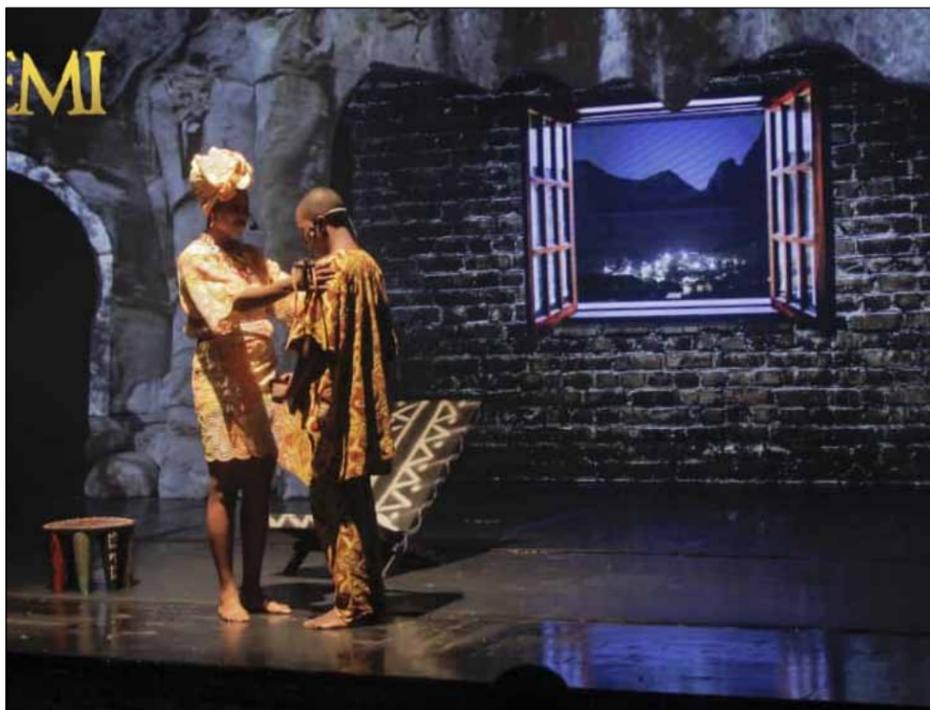
Curiously, the *Moremi* legend resonates with the ecclesiastical notions of the Easter season. For isn't this a season the faithful strangely glosses over an obvious travesty of justice, preferring instead to see it as a Divine sacrifice? Perhaps, it is a mere coincidence that the musical, which romanticises the 12th century queen of the Yoruba town of Ile-Ife, returned to the Terra Kulture Arena on Thursday, April 18, just in time for an uninterrupted Easter weekend run.

The treat, which continued this weekend, is expected to subsequently spill over into the next public holiday and weekend to conclude on Sunday, May 5.

Like most legends, this awe-inspiring tale of womanly dignity and courage is replete with its own fair share of heart-breaks. No doubt, the memories of its successful last December outing at this Victoria Island, Lagos-based 400-seater performance space remains fresh in many aficionados' memories. Indeed, as the latest production of the Bolanle Austen-Peters Production (a. k. a. BAP), *Moremi the Musical* is a stunner just like the legendary figure on which it is based is believed to be. It chimes with the standards of the Lagos-based playhouse, whose track record flaunts such first-rate productions as *Saro the Musical*, *Wakaa the Musical*, *Fela & the Kalakuta Queens*, *93 Days* movie, *Full Circle*, *Rhythm of the Times*, *Lagos Style and Music of Africa*, among others.

For this musical, the Nigerian theatre amazon, Mrs Austen-Peters, as the director, had collaborated with Princess Ronke Ademiluyi, who created the storyline, and the wife of the Ogun State governor, Chief Olufunsho Amosun, who is the executive producer.

Though not quite another Jeanne D'Arc story with an African setting, culture buffs revel in the fact that the historical female figure also sacrificed for her people. It is one reason why many in the audience at the production's last Monday's matinee session would have anticipated the opening scene with bated breath.



Another scene from the play

A male voice over wrenches the audience back to the present. This is after a lengthy instrumental musical prelude. Then, a solo female crooner dramatically introduces *Moremi* (Tosin Adeyemi). Now, the show has begun...

From the fogginess of the neatly choreographed dances, songs and dialogues, the storyline gradually resolves itself into some form of coherence. A people, the ancient people of Ile-Ife, are under a siege, the viewer gathers. They are terrorised by a war-like neighbouring tribe, known as the Igbo who are said to be no relations to the present-day Igbo ethnic group.

Turned into bogeymen by their apparent invincibility and their ferocious masks, the rampaging Igbo warriors ride roughshod over their helpless victims. Unease reigns over the land and even the Ife monarch, the Ooni Obawinrin (Bimbo Manuel), admits how hopeless the situation has become, as he represents each of his subjects captured or killed with carved images. He refuses to be heartened by the encouraging words of *Moremi*, into whose intimate home the

audience has been permitted a quite revealing glimpse.

It is obvious that the monarch has run out of ideas. For the hunters, sent into the forest at the behest of the Ifa oracle on a mission to capture a live elephant, a live tiger (who has really seen a live tiger anywhere in Africa?) and a live leopard, have returned empty-handed to the consternation of the people.

Enter *Moremi* to the rescue. The dramatic highpoint, which italicises her sacrifice, revolves around her willingness to leave her comfort zone for the common good. Indeed, there is something heart-rending about her having to leave a husband, who never seems to have enough of her, and her son, Ela Oluorogbo (Moshood Fattah), for whom she seems ready give her own life.

Seeking the help of the river goddess *Esinmirin* (Kemi Lala Akindoju), she learns later, comes at a price. She is promised the help she requested for

on the condition that she would make a sacrifice on her return. Thus, the legendary heroine of the Yoruba race turns herself into a Trojan horse when she lets herself be captured by Igbo warriors.

One thing leads to another and she eventually ends up becoming the consort of the king of the Igbo, Olu-Igbo (Femi Branch), a position that stands her in good stead to discover the secrets of the invading warriors.

Her escape and triumphant return to Ile-Ife coincides with the time of the recall of Oranmiyan (Rotimi Adelegan) from Benin after the former Ooni's death. With the return of peace soon to the besieged people, the time to thank the river goddess for her help has come. The river goddess demands that *Moremi* sacrifices her only son. Not even her pleas and lamentations fazes the deity, who remains adamant.

The impasse is soon resolved when Ela Oluorogbo willingly accepts to be sacrificed and rebukes his mother for grieving.

Even so, *Moremi's* sudden self-possessed acceptance of her fate so soon after her pathos-inducing wails is confounding. Seamlessly stepping into her new supra-human status seems rather hyperbolised.

As for the production, it hopes to elicit the interest of the younger generation in their culture and tradition. It also projects the Yoruba legendary heroine as the precursor of modern-day feminism.

Yet, it seems to be drawn between the adherence to the canons of Broadway-style musicals and the effort to achieve a historical Vraisemblance. Could that why some of the dialogues, which could easily have been sung in Yoruba, were rendered in English? Wouldn't spoken dialogues in English alone have sufficed to help the audience understand the storyline?

Granted, *Moremi the Musical* targets a global audience. This, nonetheless, does not excuse some of its needless concessions to the whims of modernity – as evidenced by the use of modern music instruments and rendition of songs in English – which dilutes its aesthetic integrity. Also, a few of the dialogues in the musical are spiced with double entendres, which are obviously insensitive – if not indifferent – to the presence of minors in the audience.

EXHIBITION

WITH ITAN PLAY, THESPIAN FAMILY THEATRE RAISES OWN BAR

Yinka Olatunbosun

The crowd went wild with the appearance of two robots on stage, receiving instructions from an aged man. *Itan*, a theatre production by the Thespian Family Theatre was one of the highlights of Lagos theatre during the last Easter holidays, thanks to its contemporary tilt to a morality play. Morality plays were popular in the 15th and early 16th centuries, typically having characters named after virtues. In *Itan*, the producer-director, Ayo Jaiyesinmi broke some conventions. Instead of directing one of the classics or its look-alike as she had done in the past

productions, she worked on an original contemporary play, which was performed at the Agip Hall, MUSON Centre, Onikan, Lagos.

The story revolves around *Diekola* (Thin-Tall Tony), a popular Lagos big boy otherwise known as "DK" whose grandfather just arrives in Lagos in search of him. He is completely rude to and unwelcoming to the old man, who has been humiliated on his way by street urchins, skaters and street dancers. Being a first-time visitor in Lagos, he is appalled by the city's temperament, especially the attitude of young people towards the elderly.

In a swift effort to intervene in the brewing turmoil on earth between the old and young as well as the custodians of African tradition and young ones who are largely influenced by post-colonial culture, *Asiko* (Time) embarks on a journey to the earth. He finds *Diekola* and his

grandfather and quickly separates them in a fight that has ensued. Through a series of flashbacks, *Asiko* tells the story of how *Diekola's* grandfather single-handedly raised *Diekola's* mother in the village after his wife died shortly after childbirth. But *Diekola's* mother loves the city life. As soon as she met a lover from Lagos, she left the village for Lagos where *Diekola* is born.

As *Diekola* continues to talk in a condescending tone to his grandfather, *Asiko* decides to show him his future. In this fore-gleam, he impregnates the love of his life but the parents of the young lady refused to let him marry her. He watches the scene of her marriage to someone else in sheer bitterness. *Diekola* sees himself as an old man, stuck with two robots and a mobile device in his home. His frustration is unmistakable as the robots sometimes

misinterpreted the information that they received from him.

Bringing such futuristic theme to a play heightened its comical elements. With subject matters of culture clash, generational gap, man and robots, technology, *Itan* could have got a more compelling title. The production of *Itan* is heavy on spectacle, rich in individual characterisation and certainly a great family entertainment piece. However, reducing the length of the play by 15 minutes would have made a significant impact on its pace, which seemed to drag towards the resolution.

Starring the comedian Broda Shaggi, *Itan* is a family must-watch and could have been a sold-out production if the organisers were all about the hype. It should return to the theatre for the sake of those who missed it.

ARTS & REVIEW \ LITERARY CAFÉ

READING CULTURE GOES TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Yinka Olatunbosun

A few years ago, Mrs. Farida Ladipo-Ajayi took a very important decision. She quit a lucrative career in an energy firm in Lagos to concentrate on a social enterprise that unite people with books.

Called The Bookworm Cafe, this literary initiative has grown big in the mega city with its diverse programmes that promote reading. In commemoration of the World Book Day, Ladipo-Ajayi spoke with THISDAY on what the day means to her.

"World book day is a day set aside to celebrate the love of reading, to celebrate books and the people who make it possible for us to read books from the authors, to publishers, to book sellers, everyone in that chain," she said. "There are so many ways to celebrate. Older people can read stories to young ones, children can read to the peers, people can gift books to their loved ones, children can dress up in costumes related to characters in their favourite books, and people can donate books."

To celebrate the World Book Day, the Bookworm Cafe paid a visit to the children's ward at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH). The children on treatment for a variety of ailments are stuck in the ward, out of school, and away from friends. It made complete sense to reconnect them with the world through books.

"We took books donated by friends of The Bookworm Café to the ward," she continued. "We restocked their children's library and also gave each child a book. We read stories and did other related activities with the children."

Interestingly, the Bookworm was established to get Nigerian children to read. It has been reported that many schools in Nigeria do not have libraries. The public libraries are also few, with none available to the public on weekends. Worse still, many school children are bombarded by time-consuming school assignments that leave little or no time for reading before bed-time.

Then, there is the poor power supply situation, which is another huge obstacle to healthy reading habit. The founder of Bookworm Cafe sees the great potential in reading good books in spite of the raft of challenges.

"As cliché as it sounds, readers are truly leaders and we want to change the narrative for children from Nigerians who never read to Nigerians who read," she said. "We've seen how good reading habits have helped children become better in other subjects in school; a good reading habit has also helped them become creative problem solvers and children of character. This makes it really important for children to develop a habit of reading from a very early age. Due to the scarcity of good libraries and relevant library programmes for children, we are trying to fill the gap created by this void because for children to read, they must have access to good books. We are filling this gap through our reading hubs in various communities in Lagos and through a small book store where we sell only books that children love."

The mileage that Bookworm Cafe had covered in three years had been impressive. With clients nationwide and beyond, the literary hub had made reading a glamorous experience. Buoyed by the 2016 Tony Elumelu Foundation Grant, (Ladipo-Ajayi) is a product of the one-year mentoring/programme was able to transform the Bookworm Cafe from a business idea to a start-up.

A major influence in this passion-turned-portfolio was her childhood. Her father was an avid reader and she was also weaned on books. Her home was equipped with a library with encyclopaedia of various versions. Her mother was



Reading culture



Reading culture

also a book fan. She insists that parents too have a major role to play in a child's reading habit.

Although there are over 10 public libraries in Lagos, the figure is a far cry from the required. Mrs. Ladipo-Ajayi recommended that there should be more advocacy on the use of public libraries and reading in addition to the on-going renovation exercises.

"Our library boards should have departments with people who focus strictly on advocacy, sensitising the public about reading.

"Our library programmes need to be

relevant; our libraries need to solve problems for people. Apart from reading there are other adhoc programs libraries run to lure people to use the library. If my library organizes training about how to use excel for instance, I might be interested in that programme visit the library for the first time."

She added that public libraries should be open on weekends so that persons, who desire to read in quiet places without distractions can do so. She argued that other institutions such as churches should promote the reading culture.

The surge of electronic books have culti-

vated a new breed of readership as many download and read books online. Still, Ladipo-Ajayi insisted that hard copies of books should be promoted.

"I am an advocate for hard copy books for children; there is that discipline that comes with holding an actual book," she explained. "However, eBooks serve a purpose and should be promoted as well. For one thing eBooks are cheaper and more accessible. Everyone has a mobile phone these days especially for people living in remote communities. Every child has a right to read no matter where they come from or their financial status."