

A Brother Jero Opera by Vesta Orchestra

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The immaculate Brother Jero, the velvet-hearted Brother Jero, the one and only articulate hero of Christ's crusade: I have seen many actors bring this suave prophet of Wole Soyinka in *The Trials of Brother Jero* to life on the stage, most notably Ropo Ewenla during his Ibadan PlayHouse run. So, from the moment I saw the trailer - snippets from rehearsals - of the Vesta Orchestra opera adaptation of the Soyinka play, Gbolabo 'Gibbs' Adebakin struck me as a perfect fit for the role of Brother Jero; I knew immediately that he would deliver, because he possesses all the right attributes to embody the character suavely. For one, he is husky, has a rotund belly that fits his role as a debonair prophet in the production, and his lush hair and neatly bearded face perfectly fit the character description Wole Soyinka created for Brother Jero. If anything, Adebakin is the beloved Brother Jero now.

The Trials of Brother Jero is a satirical play that has become a classic for its thematic concerns and production achievements; many generations of Nigerian students have studied it, and audiences have enjoyed it. Some of the themes the play espouses are religious fakery, cutthroat materialism, and pietistic hypocrisy plaguing the consciousness of a nation. *Brother Jero* was first produced in 1960 at Mellanby Hall, University of Ibadan, and published in 1964. This was around the time a particular Christian denomination - noted for sporting wild matted hair and beards, white soutanes, and other bright-coloured girdles, usually without footwear - had gained popularity in Nigeria, and opportunistic elements among them took the advantage offering false hope, and comfort to gullible people because of the economic woes and social disparity of a new nation that pauperised many and stripped them of their dignity.

We are now in the new millennium, more than 60 years after Independence, but the situation has hardly changed. If anything, in today's Nigeria, the middle class keeps shrinking, creating a sharp

binary between the upper and lower classes. Religion, it seems then, remains the cheap opium of the masses, for, as bandied by dubious religious leaders, it promises sudden wealth and higher economic status to anybody willing to believe. It doesn't matter the crooked way they would achieve this, of course. The goal, the Nigerian dream is: *I better pass my neighbour*; that is, to be better than their next-door neighbour.

This explains the proliferation of churches across Nigeria nowadays, and the double-tongued prophets and pastors operating in some of them. The location of the enterprise of these false clergymen is now no longer the beachfront as depicted in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, but mountains – Wole Soyinka has another more recent play partly criticising this in *Alápatà Àpáta* (2011), a proper 'play for Yorubafonia and class for xenophiles'. These false prophets have morphed into city centres, too. You can hardly go from one metre to the next in any Nigerian city without seeing large billboards of different pastors calling you to their various programs. You would think Christ, the divinity of humanity's salvation, is actually present in the mind of the masses; it would make you wonder, then, how come the corruption perceptions index places Nigeria so high. The illation leads to this conclusion: God is actually dead in the consciousness of many Nigerians.

And this, actually, is the absurdism that the Vesta Orchestra set out in a classical opera to mark the 10th anniversary of the ensemble. *The Trials of Brother Jero* is adapted into an opera by the librettist, Omokabiyesi Kehinde Oretimehin, with music composed by Dr Seun Owoaje, a very much renowned music instructor who lectured at the Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, and the director cum executive producer is Rosalyn Aninyei. The production premiered at the Banquet Hall of the newly-renovated National Theatre Lagos (now The Wole Soyinka Centre for Arts and Culture) on the 16th of May, 2026, having sold out the venue which was graced by Lagos's creme de la creme.

The opera is divided into two parts: Performance Act 1 and Performance Act 2, with a 20-minute intermission in between. It stars Gbolabo 'Gibbs' Adebakin as Brother Jero, John Paul Ochei as Chume, Ige as Amope, and V Abiola Lepe as Trader.

In Performance Act 1, there is first of all an overture, a fine medley of string instruments dominated by violins, which as the opera develops, assumes the role of scene-changer. The curtain then parts to reveal Chume and Amope – Chume fumbling with his bicycle and Amope's various loads – as the couple settles on the doorstep of Brother Jero's residence, mid-argument. Amope immediately establishes herself as the dominant figure in their relationship, wielding a sharp tongue and cutting remarks for every one of Chume's failings. She feeds him food and more insults at their new impromptu abode. Driven to the edge of his patience, Chume eventually leaves her to direct her insults at her true target: her debtor.

Amope confronts Brother Jero and demands her money. She sings in the soprano range, accompanied by strings, particularly violins, set against Brother Jero's baritone, creating a conversational texture between the two leads. The texture grows increasingly tense, with heightened rhythmic activity and dissonant sonorities. Brother Jero's vocal cadence then shifts into a more fervent, singalong rhythm. The music changes slightly when àgbámólè and şèkèrè enter the arrangement, revealing the ethno-African character of the opera.

A Trader enters, en route to the market, another soprano. While Amope haggles over her goods, the distraction provides Brother Jero the cover he needs to slip away to the beach, where his church-cum-business is located. Realising too late that she has allowed Brother Jero to escape, Amope curses the fakery of the prophet who appears to be without honour – which elicits laughter from the audience – and resolves to remain camped on his doorstep until he repays her for the fine velvet he now wears as his soutane. The percussion that also punctuates key dramatic moments throughout this scene heightens the rhythmic drive, and makes the audience chuckle effortlessly.

A Drummer then enters, and an altercation breaks out between him and Amope. She suspects the Drummer's cryptic tonal beats to be insults against her and attempts to seize his drum to rough him up. This is what actually the gangan says: *Epo ni mo rù/Epo ni mo rù/Oníyangí má bà tẹ̀mi jẹ́/Epo ni mo rù*. It's oil I bear on my head/It's oil I bear on my head/Be gone from me, the bearer of gravel/It's oil I bear on my head. There is a fine detail to be picked from this in the opera: the Drummer neither speaks nor sings with his voice in this scene; he communicates entirely through his *gangan*, a Yoruba talking drum. This is exactly how Soyinka writes the conflict in this scene in the original play, and just shows the operatic potential of the play all along. It makes the scene simple for the Vesta Orchestra. With that, the curtain closes again.

When it reopens, Brother Jero stands alone on the stage, regal in his *soutane*, extolling himself as a prophet of God in slow, rich, incantatory baritone, backed by wind and string instruments. Bemoaning his poverty, he beseeches God to open the windows of heaven and rain down money upon him, enough to escape his determined creditor. He laments his thorn in the flesh: women, whom he invariably finds irresistible. The solo is occasionally backed by soprano back-up singers representing his congregation. In a direct address to the audience, he openly confesses his tricks and the methods he uses to manipulate the gullible people who remain under his influence. Chief among these is his most loyal congregant, Chume. What keeps Chume faithfully returning to his church is, ironically, the very thing that torments him - his wife's sharp tongue. Chume itches to beat her as a way of putting her in place and reasserting his manliness. Brother Jero counsels against this, not out of any pastoral or moral principle, but due to calculated self-interest. He believes that without this thorn in Chume's flesh, Chume would have no reason to keep running to him. This situation is dramatic irony: the audience sees the deception clearly while his followers (his 'customers') remain entirely blind to his schemes, producing a knowing, superior humour.

The act closes with a confrontation. Brother Jero, who has spent the better part of it evading Amope, finds himself squarely in her path again, this time by his own doing. In attempting to shield the Drummer from Amope's wrath, he ends up redirecting the fury of Amope entirely onto himself. The ensemble's flourishes here, most notably, the double basses and the Drummer's mocking commentary tenor is just the perfect musical language fit for the tension.

Intermission.

The Performance Act 2 opens with Brother Jero still beset by his troubles, nursing the wounds from his encounter with Amope. He rails against women, the Daughters of Discord, whose threat to his downfall he claims to have foreseen that very morning. Chume enters and offers his own lament, unburdening himself to his prophet about the thorn in his own flesh, a wife so formidable she has taken up residence at a prophet's door to press a debt. The dramatic irony established in Act 1 deepens here; the audience watches Brother Jero connect the dots in real time, the dawning realisation that Amope, the creditor camped on his doorstep, is none other than Chume's wife. Chume remains oblivious to this fact. The comedy in this scene is subtle and the strings play into it, nudging the pitch and cadence of the exchange upward, tightening the screws on an already absurd situation. Chume's deeper baritone also carries its familiar servility as he pleads for permission to do the one thing he is eager about. Because it would now serve a double purpose for Brother Jero - remove the stubborn Amope from his doorstep and avenge him for the beating he had received from her - Brother Jero charges Chume to take his wife home and beat her, if only but gently. It is manipulation dressed as ministry, and the scene earns its laughter precisely because everyone in the auditorium sees it except the man it is being done to.

The orchestra signals what is coming before the curtain does. The music swells and runs for a few minutes unaccompanied by any vocals, the slow *àgbámólè* drumming building a tension that the audience feels before it sees. When the curtain rises, Amope resumes her familiar litany of assaults

on Chume, mocking his clumsiness, his forgetfulness, his poverty. But Chume is no longer the same man as before. His voice has acquired a new quality, full and booming, and when he rounds on her with 'You dare talk to a man like that,' it shakes Amope's confidence. He orders Amope to gather her belongings and return home with him at once. She refuses, as immovable as ever, insisting she will not stir until her debt is recovered. The situation quickly deteriorates into what one can only describe as *yam-pepper-scatter-scatter*. She runs helter-skelter across the stage - while Chume attempts to drag her home by force - knocking on doors along the way in search of refuge. Now, here is another irony. Amope finds herself screaming at Brother Jero's door to come rescue her from her menacing husband. She promises to write off Brother Jero's debt entirely if he gives her cover. She even beseeches him to pray for her soul, announcing, with effusive theatricality, that she is now facing a death threat. It is on the mention of Brother Jero's name everything clicks in Chume's head and stops his pursuit. He now realises he has been a fool all long. And with that, the scene closes.

Having granted Chume his permission, Brother Jero immediately recognises the problem it creates. A contented believer has no need of a prophet, has no need of God; desperation is the currency of his trade, and he has just spent some of it. He must find fresh ground. With the pragmatism of a man who has long treated the soul as a commodity, he sets about recruiting, prowling the beach for a replacement for the now-satisfied Chume. He finds his prospect in a man praying alone on the beach. Drawing closer, Brother Jero eavesdrops, and what he hears sharpens his instincts immediately: the man is a politician. Without wasting time, he fabricates a vision, announcing that he has seen the man ascend, to minister, of work and power. The politician initially bristles, making clear he is not to be mistaken for the simpletons, credulous masses who trail after beach prophets. But the specificity of the promise undoes his resistance, and he capitulates, kneeling before Brother Jero to pray for him.

It is a scene that cuts to the heart of what the opera is really about. Brother Jero succeeds not because his victims are foolish, but because he understands that hope and ambition are class-blind. The educated and powerful are no less susceptible to the right promise delivered at the right moment. Brother Jero may be a hack and fraud, but he is able to beguile people of different classes because he plays into their fear, hope and aspiration. I think the form of the production itself - a classical opera - closely associated with the upper class, is an indication that the class, much touted as the most educated and refined, is not exempt from the cunning and deceptions of ham actors, as Soyinka describes these false prophets.

This is the thesis that Ebenezer Obadare examines further with rigour in his monograph *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria*, how Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have cultivated influence over the political class, with some ministries developing relationships with heads of state, governors and senators that blur the boundary between spiritual counsel and political leverage. Obadare's argument is that this is not incidental but structural. The church fills the vacuum left by a failing state, offering networks of patronage and legitimacy that secular institutions no longer reliably provide. Brother Jero with his fabricated visions is the archetype from which the modern variant descends, the difference being one of scale and reach. Today's iteration may command stadium congregations, trade in viral declarations, and speak stupid grammar that courts mockery, yet draws, curiously, an ever-larger following.

Femi Oyebo, the distinguished psychiatrist and critic, writing in his book *Madness at the Theatre*, offers a perspective that interrogates this even further. He argues that where Western modernity responded to disillusionment with secularism, existential drift and the loosening of communal bonds, the African experience has taken a markedly different turn:

'However, in Africa the overt societal response has not been necessarily to reject religion, to become immersed in ennui or anomie, or to become dislocated both psychologically and culturally. Rather,

there is ample evidence of deepening and strident religiosity, strengthened affiliation to ethnic groupings, and an optimism that is belied by the facts of everyday life. Yet, the dispossession, human wretchedness and the innumerable wars are tractable to the failure of politics.' (pg. 74)

This is precisely the soil in which Brother Jero flourishes. His congregation is not gullible by nature; they are just desperate by circumstance. The politician on the beach who succumbs to a fabricated vision of ministerial power is not simply vain; he is a man operating in a system where legitimate routes to advancement are unreliable, where the transactional relationship between faith and fortune has been normalised to the point of expectation. Brother Jero does not create this hunger; he merely feeds it, and charges accordingly. This is why in a society where the state consistently fails its people, the prophet or pastor, however fraudulent, will never be short of a congregation.

The compositional style of *The Trials of Brother Jero Opera* blends elements of the European orchestral tradition with indigenous Nigerian orchestral instruments like gangan and şèkèrè, incorporating Nigerian melody, rhythm, and harmony into the musical language. Some of the string instruments are: violins, violas, cellos, bass, which form the harmonic and textural foundation. The noticeable wind instruments are: trumpets, clarinets, tuba and trombone, which provide melodic support. The opera adaptation follows the plot in the original play closely. Gbolabo 'Gibbs' Adebakin, especially delivered a virtuosic performance, without overshadowing other roles, and not unnecessarily excessive in his own delivery.

Now, there are dramaturgical concerns that must be pointed out. If the Orchestra group can take the trouble to print a programme card, which lists the names of the cast, librettist, composer and director/executive producer, there is no reason why the full ensemble members should not be included alongside the costumer, set designer and choreographer, etc. The omission is compounded by the fact that not even all cast are credited: the Drummer and the Politician both play significant roles in the opera, yet neither is credited in the programme card. Nor is any of this information available on the company's website. It is, at best, an oversight, but one that effectively erases the work and expertise of several contributors.

There are also production errors worth addressing. A smart wristwatch on Chume is an odd, jarring detail that sits uneasily against the period setting, maybe even the poverty his character is meant to embody. More broadly, having all the actors in footwear is a mistake and not in fidelity to the hack beach prophets Soyinka had in mind. And the set design itself exposes this further. The production opts for a minimalist aesthetic: a long horizontal banner depicting a beach settlement, with two small huts at either end of the stage. If the intention is to evoke a beach setting, pouring beach sand across the stage floorboards would have lent the environment both visual and realistic conviction, blended effortlessly the beach in the banner, and would have rendered the footwear question moot by making bare feet the natural and logical choice.

There is also an unverified claim by the director that calls for correction. In promoting the show on Instagram, a white member of the ensemble claimed she was proud to be making history by being part of the first opera in Nigeria. At first, I thought it was a slip; I thought, well, it could be excused but not necessarily forgivable because she may not know Nigeria's music history. But when I heard the director again reiterate their accomplishment as 'the first opera in Nigeria' at the end of the show, I was bewildered by such a claim. Bewildered now because I thought maybe it was my misophony playing tricks on my hearing that I hadn't heard correctly. Indeed. For clarification, there have been many folk operas - most notably by the likes of Herbert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola - and which toured Europe, actually. Which is in no way inferior to European opera. Long before this time, 'the European opera tradition' had been brought to Nigeria during the colonial era by European missionaries and settlers. It was initially an entertainment for foreigners and educated Nigerian elites in Lagos, and featured in mission schools, churches, and social clubs. So, it is

definitely not a new musical form in Nigeria. And there is also MUSON Centre which occasionally produces musicals, chamber music and operas; likewise, there are a number of music departments in federal universities across Nigeria. So, it can't be possible that they have never performed 'European opera' before. So, there is no such thing as 'the first opera in Nigeria'. Maybe Nigeria's first opera adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*. Just maybe.

What all these lapses suggest is that the production lacks a dramaturg, or if one was involved, the role goes uncredited, much like several others. A dramaturg's eye might well have caught and addressed these issues, including the play's socio-historical context, before opening night.

But at the end, this much was clear: the audience enjoyed the show with occasional bouts of laughter; likewise this reviewer, to which he gave a solid applause. The show will have another run in October, 2026. It might be another good opportunity to see it for those who missed the premiere.

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