

# MY LABAF STORY

*Reflections by the House-builders*

# A Metaphor *For* Nation Building

By Ayo Arigbabu

*If all my learnings and training gained through CORA, LABAF and by extension other workshops with the British Council and Goethe Institute could be condensed into structured course units, I would have an additional Master's degree at the very least, though it would be interesting figuring out what to call such a degree.*

**A**TTENDEE, volunteer, set designer, collaborator, graphic designer, vendor, exhibitor, author, publisher, set builder, co-organiser, festival director, content producer, workshop facilitator, co-conspirator, fan, addict, believer. It's not a comprehensive list and it's in no specific order, but that summarizes my involvement with the Lagos Book & Art Festival for most of the past 20 years.

Wow! LABAF at 20! It's like watching one of your favourite nieces or nephews morph from being a preteen, through teenage years, to adulthood before your very eyes. It leaves you with a queasy feeling all over inside and you're short of words, but full of smiles, and yes, full of wonder.

My first foray was in 2002 as a university student and president of the Pen Circle, a writers' group based in the University of Lagos. We had an annual event we usually held on campus which was a big deal to us because it had a town-and-gown theme to it and some big names in the world of literature would give us an ear and grace our occasion. That was a big deal. In fact, I first met Jahman Anikulapo and Toyin Akinosho when they honoured our invitations at different times to attend Pen Circle events. That year, I wondered if the Pen Circle Evening of Talks and Performances could happen within LABAF. The answer was yes, and we did have the event, but the real outcome was that I and, of course, 'Deji Toye who was president before me, became a part of the organising committee of LABAF and of the CORA extended family from then on, without ceremony, it just happened as a matter of course.

**A**TRIBUTE like this can easily run into a decent number of pages, so I'll (try to) restrict myself to a few salient reminiscences. I remember suggesting once to the LABAF working committee to suspend the festival for a year or two, in response to the challenges being faced with funding and our organizational capacity, so we could straighten those things out and come out stronger. Toyin Akinosho's response has never left my mind since then. "Once you stop, that would be the end." Whatever the issues were, we persevered, and the festival actually got better in the following years.

That lesson in perseverance goes beyond one man's passion, it speaks to the larger role and responsibility that LABAF, alongside CORA fills in the culture circuit in Nigeria, providing a rallying point of advocacy for the industry and all its sub sectors, providing a grand platform for books and their content to be discussed, and acting as convener, for a continuous stream of conversations bordering on the role of arts in nation building, (within the context of cultural production and consumption), almost like a parent anxiously monitoring the progress of its problematic child — that being the quarrelsome nation-state called Nigeria in this context.



**T**HE family theme goes even deeper, families have grown in, out of, and as a part of LABAF. I should know. I met Adenike for the first time at the festival. We had no inkling that we would eventually get up to hanky-panky, but that's how it panned out. Toyin Akinosho was fabulous as chairman at our wedding and the only reason Jahman Anikulapo was not in attendance was because he was perpetually tied to his desk in that bunker at The Guardian as Sunday Editor, but many other members of the CORA family made the trip to Ijebu-Ode to honour us. Oh, I forgot, immediately after the marriage registry event in Lagos, which preceded the family carnival that marked the wedding in Ijebu-Ode, we headed straight to the then CORA Secretarial in FESTAC Town to usurp the CORA end-of-year party (which happened every year back then), as our unofficial wedding reception. The sense of family, however, goes beyond individuals. Partners like Goethe Institut, British Council, Freedom Park and many more, have adopted LABAF like a child and contributed consistently to nurturing the festival by partnering in it's success.

**D**ID I just say Freedom Park? That in itself demands an aside. While working as an architect with Lawson+Odeinde Partnership, I negotiated to have two days off in the working week so I could give some time to other creative impulses of mine. Suffice to say a major preoccupation was with maintaining a weekly column in The GuardianLife, a lifestyle pull-out of the The Guardian on Sunday, which Jahman edited. He gave me the space to write on design and the environment (a stint I'm most proud of and grateful for) and the only inkling I had as to what journalism was all about was from the infamously rambunctious CORA/LABAF planning meetings, which indeed spent a little time addressing the primary cause for which the meetings were convened but in reality doubled as journalism training school, industry gossip hotspot, fun sandbox for intellectual, literary and artistic debate, and great outing for Sunday lunch and drinks with great company. If all my learnings and training gained through CORA, LABAF and by extension other workshops with the British Council and Goethe Institute could be condensed into structured course units, I would have an additional Master's degree at the very least, though it would be interesting figuring out what to call such a degree.

"You were about to say something about Freedom Park," you say... ah yes. Freedom Park. I remember sort of introducing my boss Theo Lawson to the CORA fold in I-forget-what-year. He gave a presentation on something related to futurism at a CORA stampede, (I wonder if he remembers this). Theo Lawson's creative and professional journey would later lead to the creation of Freedom Park (which was opened in 2010) as an urban renewal intervention, and its evolution as a prime culture venue in Lagos today, hosting some of the major festivals and culture events that happen in the city.

**F**REEDOM Park, interestingly holds added relevance to me, being how we met in the first place. But that's a totally different story. Freedom Park in a manner akin to CORA's existence, emerged as an intervention to fill a gap through citizen participation in a sphere that ordinarily would be expected to be the responsibility of government. So, architecture, urbanism, literature, art, cultural programming. The trajectory for me came full circle with Freedom Park becoming host to LABAF, after the festival had spent several years, first at the National Museum Onikan, and then at the National Arts Theatre Iganmu, breathing life into those venues and being nurtured by them in return, till it became expedient to find a space like Freedom Park that encouraged the creative spirit without the challenges of government run institutions. Though Freedom Park is government owned, the fact that it's management has been allowed relative autonomy is central to its success and LABAF has been a big part of that success. Government makes the people only to the extent to which the people make the government. It is almost impossible to reminisce about LABAF without thinking about these venues and what their different fates and future prospects serve to tell us about the extent to which citizen led initiatives can make a difference, even in a difficult environment such as Nigeria. One lesson we can go away with, is not to sit down and wait for government to shape up and fix things, even while you advocate for exactly that. Citizen led efforts can fix things just as well and maybe even better, and they don't have to look fancy while at it.

**C**ORA has always had a bootstrap/informal or semi-formal outlook and modus operandi, and in hindsight, it probably shouldn't have been any other way. If it had succeeded in 'formalising' its operations beyond a certain point (with apologies to Deji Toye, in particular whose great advocacy and legal counsel helped the organisation evolve and adopt a more corporate outlook over time), it's operating system might have become too alien for its drivers to operate, it would have become a different organisation and LABAF would have become a different festival, maybe a different family and at some point the wisdom of a passionate custodian that: "Once you stop, that would be the end," would have stopped to make sense, especially in the formal world of spreadsheets and power-point presentations, which though immensely important, can also be stifling.

That sense of informality, however, is misleading, as the festival has survived on a deep-seated structure built on collaborations and embodied knowledge, which continues to evolve. Sola Alamutu's years of experience programming the Green Festival for children, Nike Arigbabu's interventions with volunteer management, long-

term partnerships with British Council for the BookTrek, Goethe Institut for the Publishers' Forum and Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo's The Edge Studio for the Art exhibitions, Jelili Atiku's consistent appearances to enact performance art right from a time when performance art was still much more of an oddity than it is today, book readings and reviews on the Knowledge Economy, Ayoola Shadare's Inspiro Productions' curation of the Jazz night, Efe Paul Azino and Samule Osaze's curation of the poetry night, Wole Oguntokun's Renegade Theatre and Segun Adefila's Crown Troupe's numerous theatre experiences delivered over the years, consistent celebration of veterans in the industry, such as Tunde Kelani and Kolade Osinowo whose works and achievements are being celebrated this year, the provision of platforms for young and not so young people to engage with and showcase literature, art, music and drama; these little interventions have been tweaked over many years and give LABAF it's unique community like/family ambience.

Without realizing it, CORA has tapped into what the world of management is slow to catch up on, but which the world of computing, with the open source culture that underpins its growth and continued existence, has now exposed to the rest of the world as it continues to disrupt different sectors of our everyday existence -- the power of distributed teams to collaboratively and effectively drive a common cause through voluntary contributions coordinated by a relatively flat structure driven by roles and participation, rather than hierarchical 'positions', and inspired by shared passion and the cross fertilization of informed self-interest. In the case of CORA and LABAF, it's also damned fun.

**S**O LABAF has spent the past 20 years building a large extended family around the concept of a big culture picnic, but more importantly, framing cultural production and consumption within the context of nation building, and inspiring and supporting other festivals, individuals, and institutions to do likewise while at it too. This has not come easy, there have been quarrels, falling out and falling back in (it's the funniest thing ever how Toyin Akinosho and Jahman Anikulapo always fall out almost every year on account of the festival, but like siblings pining for each other's' company and also sharing an undying passion for the festival, they always find their way to falling back in – that's some industry gossip there.... I was trained by the best!), disappointments (I remember those years Toyin Akinosho would say solemnly that he is not a church regular, but he went the other day to pray earnestly that the next LABAF would work out well) and missed opportunities, but one thing that has always stayed constant is the widespread goodwill that the festival enjoys, the communal sense of ownership/participation (anyone can join in and participate at whatever level they are comfortable with), the smiles festival attendees come with every year and its commitment to providing a robust platform for relevant cultural engagement on an annual basis.

*LABAF has delivered immensely, influenced so many individuals, and provided a launch-pad for so many ideas and platforms, that it's future is assured. CORA didn't just build a festival in LABAF, it has built people and those people have gone on to build a large extended family.*

## Roll on to the Future...

**W**HAT does the future hold? For how many more years will LABAF endure? Will those two battle-worn legends of LABAF -- Toyin Akinosho and Jahman Anikulapo finally succeed in implementing a succession plan that will help LABAF endure? Those questions are important, but at the same time, they are also not important. LABAF has delivered immensely, influenced so many individuals, and provided a launch-pad for so many

ideas and platforms, that it's future is assured. CORA didn't just build a festival in LABAF, it has built people and those people have gone on to build a large extended family. So while I've largely singled out Jahman and Toyin as figure heads for the movement, LABAF lives in all of us that have grown out of and as part of its existence. "Once you stop, that would be the end?" No we won't stop. That is the LABAF metaphor for building an extended family, and by extension, for building a nation.

Here is to many more years of the Lagos Book & Art Festival and hearty congratulations to all individuals, groups, and organizations that have contributed to the festival's existence through participation, partnerships and funding, for the past twenty years. May all our best dreams continue to come true.

**Ayodele Arigbabu, architect, design artist ad tech nerd, is founder DADA Agency**

# The god of small things

By Chris Ihidero

*This is what CORA is best at: connecting people, ideas, concerns and future considerations. Think of an Ayo Arigbabu or a Deji 'Toye and the role CORA has played in their development as artistes and opinion leaders in their fields. Think of Ayo's DADA Books and the design agency. Think of Deji's think pieces. Think of Segun Adefila and Crown Troupe of Africa. Think of how the many times CORA provided a platform for Crown Troupe to perform and engage audiences must have helped sharpen their creative and critical minds. Think of that simple essay competition that sent a teenage Onyeka Nwelu to Lagos from eastern Nigeria.*



**C**ORA has been around for a long time. It has held more conversations about the art space in Nigeria than any other organisation. CORA has stamped more government agencies and parastatals into action than even government itself. It has brought attention to long-forgotten issues and persons consistently.

When an organisation has done these things consistently for a long period and has become the leading platform for artistic and critical engagements, it is tempting to always measure it in large quantities. But what about the small things, the seemingly inconsequential acts that unknowingly lead to disruptions that then define individuals on their own paths?

## **I am one of the small things CORA made.**

**A** trip to Abuja, to host a colloquium on African Cinema at BoBTV 2006 led to a meeting with Amaka Igwe, which a year later led to an offer to work with her, which invariably kick-started my journey as a filmmaker. None of this was planned; it was just one more of those small things CORA sets a course for and the rest becomes history.

This is what CORA is best at: connecting people, ideas, concerns and future considerations. Think of an Ayo Arigbabu or a Deji 'Toye and the role CORA has played in their development as artistes and opinion leaders in their fields. Think of Ayo's DADA Books and the design agency. Think of Deji's think pieces. Think of Segun Adefila and Crown Troupe of Africa. Think of how the many times CORA provided a platform for Crown Troupe to perform and engage audiences must have helped sharpen their creative and critical minds. Think of that simple essay competition that sent a teenage Onyeka Nwelu to Lagos from eastern Nigeria.

This, for me, is where CORA shines brightest. We are a nation of big dreamers and little doers. We speak in loud tones but say little. We are proponents of fire and fury that signify nothing. We need more quiet conductors like CORA who connect the dots and make continuous regeneration possible.

It is to my shame that I am no longer involved in many of the activities of CORA. Pulled here and there by the need to build a media business in a society that provides no safety nets, each edition LABAF passes by with me swearing to make the next one, to return to contributing to an organisation that has been integral to the person I'm becoming. I fail at every next one.

But what CORA has done can't be undone. This is my joyful take away. CORA is the god of small things that continues to birth jewels that galvanise the creative spaces of Nigeria.

**Ihidero, filmmaker, writer, thinker is the founder of The Nollywood Stories, TNS**

# A cut across Generations and Disciplines

By Wole Oguntokun

*There, really, is no other Festival like LABAF, one truly able to cut across generations and disciplines. Student-oriented drives, multi-disciplinary performances, workshops, talks, a veritable cultural market, and always those stands of books, new books with the fresh scent of ink, dusty old books with brittle pages, early editions in pristine condition... I have come across books at the Festival, which I am reluctant to lend out, even a decade after. That is how rare, they are.*

**T**HE Lagos Book and Arts Festival has been an important part of my journey through the International cultural landscape; a nugget, sometimes hidden among the hustle and bustle of the city life. It has been a treasure trove for me, full of discoveries and opportunities. I have watched performances, performed some of my own and skimmed through a thousand books at its stands. I have followed its metamorphosis and observed the struggles of its visionary founders from the grounds of the University of Lagos on to the National Museum and to the old colonial prison now known as Freedom Park.



The passion that set it up has not abated and continues to hold its moorings in place at each outing.

If LABAF had been established on a more forgiving economic terrain, it would have been one supported in its entirety by the authorities, with an assurance of its perpetuity.

Still, this permanent fixture on the continent's cultural calendar has not diminished in any way, bringing some of the best artistic minds from around the world together for, an often too brief, period of bliss.

There, really, is no other Festival like LABAF, one truly able to cut across generations and disciplines. Student-oriented drives, multi-disciplinary performances, workshops, talks, a veritable cultural market, and always those stands of books, new books with the fresh scent of ink, dusty old books with brittle pages, early editions in pristine condition... I have come across books at the Festival, which I am reluctant to lend out, even a decade after. That is how rare, they are.

It is an excellent place to be, one that brings us all closer to the humanity often buried deep and forgotten inside us, a place that reminds us of the magic and importance of preserving one's culture, and of the fact that the world is indeed one global village.

**GRADUATED** from being a curious observer to becoming a presenter of my stage plays at annual editions. Some of those performances were *The Rage of the Pentecost* now renamed *The Return of Sogidi*, presented at the National Museum, Onikan about 12 years ago, and *Anatomy of a Woman* at Freedom Park a few years after.

Some of the actors in those productions have dispersed around the world, been married, entered into other businesses, established families of their own, but yet the memories of LABAF remain poignant ones. They are reminders of a yearly outing when things are always simpler, when laughter and a feeling of ease is always in the air, where the promotion of the book and related cultures are the chief aim, and where people may let down their guards in an otherwise harsh world.

Every gathering of LABAF is a reminder that good times are possible in any community that actively cultivates and preserves a reading and artistic culture. It is a call to tolerate other views and even dissenting opinions, in open talks. It is a place for the abstract-minded and the linear thinker.

My life would have been a poorer place without LABAF.

**Wole Oguntokun, lawyer, playwright and theatre director is founder of Renegade Theatre**



*Every gathering of LABAF is a reminder that good times are possible in any community that actively cultivates and preserves a reading and artistic culture. It is a call to tolerate other views and even dissenting opinions, in open talks. It is a place for the abstract-minded and the linear thinker.*

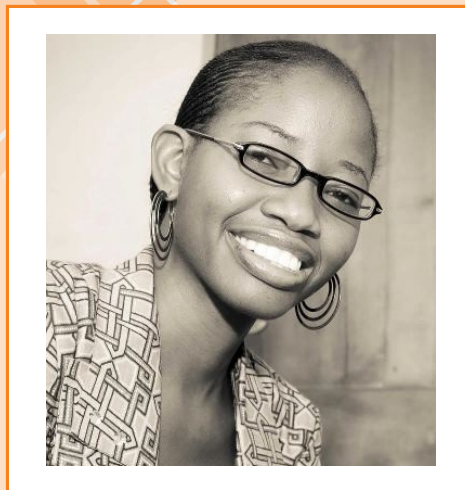


# ...The Incubator... An Ongoing Dream

By Jumoke Verissimo

## The Credit:

**J**AM one of many artists and scholars whose career found meaning through LABAF. And I know, many artists would attest that the intellectual discourse that the festival promotes, gave meaning to their art form, as it enabled them to visualize the possibilities that lie beyond their aesthetic creation. Today, I can confidently say that LABAF has played a significant part in the friendship I have formed as an artist, my career path and the mentorship that has shaped my art.



## In The Beginning...

**W**HEN I chanced upon LABAF, I was in my first year in the university and had all forms of aspirations and hope. LABAF would become the place where I would be assured that my art mattered, that I might be able to earn the name of a writer—and I have.

Since, that first time as a wide-eyed aspiring writer, I have read my poems to a wonderful audience, joined arms with those who wanted to change the landscape of art by becoming a member of the organizing committee of the festival for a while, and found opportunities to interact with some of Nigeria's most brilliant minds. To say it in fewer words: My artist lens matured, because there was LABAF.

## THE WORD

**T**O make the significance of LABAF in my life even clearer; it is where my first collection of poems, *I am memory* (DADA BOOKS, 2018) was launched. Even before the publication, I performed/read the poems at LABAF for many years. I will remember the day my book was launched at the National Theatre — the support, the cheers, and the unseen future. But there was hope in the air.

I must also mention that my publisher, Ayo Arigbabu and I met in LABAF, and struck up a friendship that would eventually see him publishing my work. We have since collaborated on more projects and worked together as a member of CORA. I also had opportunities to work with the wonderful Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo, whose idea on collaborative art is not only splendid, but needed.

## The Unending Story

**T**IMES are changing, and one fear is to think of what the future holds for an event that has shaped so many lives. I look forward to putting the event on an even bigger stage, to see it utilizing the internet as an extension of its possibilities.

Like we all are, LABAF is an ongoing dream. It is the mouth that tells the story of others. LABAF is my story.

*Verissimo is pursuing a doctorate programme in Canada*



# To Rewind the Clock, or to Re-engineer It

By Deji Toyé

*The significance of LABAF launching at the time it did cannot be overemphasised. Books may now be cool again, and stuff, but it should be recalled that at the time of CORA's founding some 27 years ago, and LABAF's first outing eight years after, it was a difficult period indeed for literature and the book; a period... when literature was a "Cinderella of some sort" amongst the disciplines of the arts.*



**M**y first LABAF must be one of the earliest editions. It was still held in September at the time, in the lawns of the National Museum, Onikan. A gaggle of canopies, books laid out on plastic tables as in a flea market, the musician and performance poet Beautiful Nubia on the band-stand and serving as some sort of compere for the whole day, occasional breaks from the live music to hold one or two discussions, or for a poet to perform: this is how I recall that event. That informal character – burnt inexorably into CORA's DNA, no doubt – still defines LABAF essentially, even if it has garnered more content, and shed some, over the years, witnessing periods of boom and bust in attendance and media or official reckoning the whole time.

I cannot recall clearly now, but I suspect that I came in company of a few members of our writers' group from the University of Lagos, Pen Circle. Jahman Anikulapo, then the Arts Editor of *The Guardian*, had been guest speaker at our own annual 'big fair', *The Evening of Talk and Performances*, earlier that year, or the previous one, and had invited us to attend CORA activities. Toyin Akinosho too had been a guest at one of our weekly reading meets, paired, if I recall correctly, with Kunle Tejuosho of the Glendora bookshop which also published the eponymous literary review.

The significance of LABAF launching at the time it did cannot be overemphasised. Books may now be cool again, and stuff, but it should be recalled that at the time of CORA's founding some 27 years ago, and LABAF's first outing eight years after, it was a difficult period indeed for literature and the book; a period, as I put it in an article for *Chimuranga* a few years ago, when literature was a "Cinderella of some sort" amongst the disciplines of the arts. Describing that period in that magazine, I had this to say:

*"In the [1980s and 1990s] ... literature was the scotched patch. That was the beggarly period when Nigerian writers, through the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), awarded themselves what passed for the only respectable set of prizes at the time. The collapse of the book industry chain meant that most of the benefits of a reward system were absent. Prize moneys often went unredeemed, even where prizes had been named after sponsor corporations. And while resort was often had to awarding prizes to unpublished manuscripts, these still went unpublished for years thereafter. Also, with the absence of the agency role of strong local publishers, a whole generation of Nigerian writers, what has been called the third generation, almost passed without disturbance on the international radar. That was until Helon Habila's winning of the second Caine Prize in 2001 marked a symbolic return."*

Going further, I therefore praised "the roles of citizens' initiatives such as that of CORA, organisers of the Lagos Book and Art Festival [which were] highly instrumental in placing literacy and literature in the centre of national discourse even through the difficult periods."

For full disclosure, the foregoing assessment should be read with the understanding that even I became an active CORA-ite shortly after my first LABAF and was active in the festival's organising for some years.

I recall that the mid-2000s was a period of extraordinary vigour in CORA, with multiple events holding across the year. LABAF, the flagship programme, began to host events in multiple venues across the city. International guests, rather than merely wander into the grounds, were now officially invited as resources or booked their own flights to see "Africa's largest culture picnic". This was also the time that important components of the festival such as the Book Trek and the Green Festival were launched. The former is, as Akinosho loves to call it, 'an extension service' which promoted reading culture in under-served communities through a reading tour. This particular event has been sustained through collaboration with the indefatigable schoolteacher and poet, A.J. Dagga Tolar, a major cultural force in the Ajegunle zone of the city where he has also raised one of the most influential phalanxes of the now thriving spoken words poetry movement in Lagos. Green Festival, for its part, is the ubiquitous children/youth's area of the festival, an initiative of the dogged writer/environmentalist, Sola Alamu and her Children and the Environment (CATE) initiative. Alamu is a reputable manager of men and a volunteers' magnet. Over the years, she has managed to retain the support of key resource persons like the performance poet and crafter, Iquo Eke, and the art teacher Wale Asubiojo.

The environment of the book has changed since that time. Books have become fashionable again, as evidenced in the rise in the number of independent publishers, literary prizes and book-related events in the last few years. In the area of the big fair, not just does the publishing industry now hold its official Nigerian International Book Fair, independent initiatives have been established and tried out, with varying degrees of success, in cities as disparate as Port Harcourt, Abeokuta, Abuja, Kaduna, Awka and Yenagoa, some of these no doubt drawing inspiration from the example of LABAF.

## ...Memo to the future

**A**S LABAF prepares to round off its second decade, and in light of the new environment, the question "what does the future look like?" is certainly top of mind amongst the organisers and admirers of LABAF. Since we are capable of shaping the future, I will recast that question "what should the future look like?" That is a question that must now be answered without much further delay. Without prejudice to how other past and present CORA-ites might see the issues, I would propose the following two important issues for consideration:

The question of identity: LABAF needs to now redefine itself in light of current realities. In the past, it has been dubbed 'Africa's largest culture picnic', 'a culture picnic with a high book content' and so forth. That speaks not just to the laissez-faire realities of LABAF and most things CORA, but also an aspiration to be a big tent under which all of the arts come to manifest. That kind of self-identifying was justified when LABAF was a three-day affair of big-band music, multiple arts exhibition, theatre, and then the diverse literary conversations (drawing the committed participation of artists like the Afrobeat musician Seyi Solagbade, Jojo Bodybeats, Ato Arinze and his artist collective, Nkechi Edochie, the theatre directors Wole Oguntokun and Segun Adefila, etc, over the years). In the last few years, LABAF has inadvertently shaped up into a series of high-level, concentrated public intellection built around a set of books with incisive themes. That, still with a side of the ever-thriving children's arena and some exhibition of books. Perhaps this is the future of LABAF (I suspect this informs one of the many definitions I recently saw on the LABAF website "feast of ideas and life"). In that case, it needs focus on these and cut out the clutter.

Succession and transition: Or perhaps what LABAF needs is a shot in the arm. The long-term sustainability of LABAF is closely bound to that of CORA itself, as an institution. Stability in leadership, while it is a good quality of strong institutions, could also be a liability when not consciously energised with a dynamic leadership pipeline. How could CORA attract the next generation of leaders to refresh and bolster the doggedness we have witnessed in the last 27 years? In my view, CORA must ask itself what has worked for it in the past, especially in its high moments. For my generation, one high moment was the period already recounted above (I have also heard about the ferment at the period of the founding of CORA, when dynamos like Chika Okeke-Agulu, Yomi Layinka, Tunde Lanipekun, etc, working along with Toyin Akinosho). At about the early to mid-2000s, CORA attracted a cache of young, vibrant art enthusiasts into the ranks of its organisers. The coincidence of factors that led to that convergence happened cannot be taken for granted. For example, the charismatic Ropo Ewenla had attracted a number of protégés – Chris Ihidero, Jumoke Verissimo, Wale Omotoye, etc – from Lagos State University where he was running a theatrical programme with his partner Tunji Azeez. For my part, as well as Ayodele Arigbabu's and Dapo Ogundipe's, having taken up Jahman's invitation to attend CORA events, it was clear that CORA offered the best opportunity to continue what we were doing on the Akoka campus at a time when Association of Nigerian Authors (into which campus writers naturally graduated) was riven by tribal and other colourations of divisive politics. And then, Jahman Anikulapo's strategic position as Editor of the country's most reputable Arts pages, as well as his natural avuncular disposition, attracted many others, such as the journalist Chuks Nwanne as well as the young bohemian artists Onyeka Nwelue and Aderemi Adegbite. There were others like the artists/designers Lanre Gbenle, Sewedo Nupowaku and Lanre Lawal, as well as the organiser Nike Fagade (now Mrs. Arigbabu).



*LABAF remains like the grandfather clock in the family house. You grew to meet it. You would most certainly leave it behind. But you would always return to meet it – its tick-tock occasionally calling attention to it over hubbubs at family reunions – an object of nostalgia. If someone remembers to wind it and grease its wheels, its cranky pendulum could even chime, now and then, at the top of the hour. Looking into the future, the question for CORA is whether to keep rewinding this clock or to reengineer it completely as a timepiece fit for the now and the future. This will require embracing new visions as well as broadening – and dare I say, even freshening – the leadership.*

Although these folks are now mostly dispersed, the lasting impact of their generation is still there. For example, I recall that Ewenla's role as an unofficial 'full time' worker for CORA was largely responsible for a radical expansion of LABAF programming in 2004 – 2005, including in the launch of the first Book Trek. Nupowaku completely change the brand visualisation of CORA and LABAF. Arigbabu, the man, explored his interest in independent publishing to manage the 'Publishers' Forum', an industry capacity building programme (which enjoyed the collaboration of Bibi Bakare-Wheate for a period). Then Ms. Fagade facilitated CORA's first formal training in volunteer management, attracting an international faculty for that purpose.

How has CORA not been able to retain a core of that generation in the ranks of its leadership? There would be diverse explanations for that, but in my view, a key factor is the absence of consciousness that it was necessary. Many of these young people came into CORA as young graduates, or in some cases as students, and often started out as journeymen to the core leadership. However, as they found firm career paths and grew in those careers, there was typically increasingly less space for them in CORA although this was the time that their contributions should become more strategic – bolstering leadership, helping to set new visions and providing mentorships to much younger folks coming in through the volunteering pipeline. The long drawn-out point is, therefore, that deliberate efforts need to be made to attract and develop the next generation of leaders as LABAF prepares to enter into its third decade.

LABAF remains like the grandfather clock in the family house. You grew to meet it. You would most certainly leave it behind. But you would always return to meet it – its tick-tock occasionally calling attention to it over hubbubs at family reunions – an object of nostalgia. If someone remembers to wind it and grease its wheels, its cranky pendulum could even chime, now and then, at the top of the hour. Looking into the future, the question for CORA is whether to keep rewinding this clock or to reengineer it completely as a timepiece fit for the now and the future. This will require embracing new visions as well as broadening – and dare I say, even freshening – the leadership.

Having done the heavy talk, let me salute the courage, commitment and sacrifice of all the labourers in the LABAF field these last circa 20years. Kudos!

***Deji is a Lawyer, Playwright, & Partner at The LoDt***

