

# AFRICAN THEATRE, HISTORY AND POSTCOLONIAL RESISTANCE: AN APPRAISAL OF OLA ROTIMI'S OVONRAMWENNOGBAISI

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## ABSTRACT

*The upward trend in African historical plays drew much attention of researchers to the relationship between history proper and the historical plays or imaginative reconstruction of history. The contention was that, although these plays were primarily regarded as fiction or imaginative reconstruction of the past based on the playwrights' interpretation of history, many theatre scholars argued that the value of these plays prevailed over history to the audience if there is a clash with history proper. This began with Aristotle's assertion that "poetry/literature is more philosophical and elevated than history", and that literary plot tends to be unabridged, corrective and therefore more permanent. Following on from that, this paper theorized, in this work, that historical plays resist and counteract imperial discourse, or jaundiced imperial historians in their biased history of their clash with African monarchs and heroes. Secondly, the paper argued that through the shades of Cultural Resistance that hybridize conventional theatre, postcolonial plays are central in the promulgation of anti-colonial resistance and therefore have the tendency to change a distorted history. Hence theatre, the most symbolic form of art, can be historically corrective and evocatively accurate. To illustrate this, the paper examined a postcolonial play; Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. The play reconstructs and corrects a badly damaged and awfully misrepresented African monarch; Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi of the old Benin Empire. The researchers examined the colonial resistance captured by the play, through postcolonial theory, and cast light on the attitudes the play reflects regarding the coloniser and the colonised, the extent to which the play helps in decolonisation process and how the play reconstructs the images of the damaged heroes, so as to restore national pride and integrity.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper studies an African historical play and critically uncovers its predisposition towards Postcolonial Resistance. Thus, it examines the role of theatre in Postcolonial Resistance. By the same token, the paper studies the dramatist's effort to reconstruct the image of the historical villain but legendary figure in Nigerian history, so as to restore national pride and integrity. In justification of this effort, the researchers survey the nature of modern theatre which gives template to theatrical resistance and the concepts concerned in order to conceptualise the topic.

To begin with, theatre has undergone a sort of complex revolutions in recent times. Technological innovations, said Downs, Wright and Ramsey (2013), and "new perspectives on the human experience led to avant-garde theatrical styles, each with its own systems and theories" (388). "The word avant-garde", Downs et al., continued:

Can describe any artist or work of art that is experimental, innovative, or unconventional. Symbolism, Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Absurdism are some of the avant-garde styles, or "isms" that playwrights, directors and designers created in order to rebel against Realism and Naturalism and draw audiences back to the live stage (388).

Furthermore, political developments, two World Wars, the attainment of independence of many countries especially in Africa from erstwhile colonial masters, the rise of feminism and so forth have all made a profound impact on theatre. Despite the complex nature of the Modern world, Dasyuva (2004) divided modern theatrical forms into three as follows;

(1) The Theatre of entertainment: melodrama, farce, romantic comedy and musical plays which are now common with our mass media drama productions... (2) The Theatre of Realism involves plays that give insight into the problems of real people. The playwrights, as well as those who patronize the production of such plays believe in man's ability to improve through rational and pragmatic understanding.... (3).. The theatre of disillusionment. It is generally informed by the post-world wars philosophy of Existentialism, which is foregrounded by despair, cruelty, and general absurdity. It has no faith in religion, conventional values or any rational ideas (97).

As Henrik Ibsen (1828- 1906) and Bertolt Brecht (1898- 1956) championed The Theatre of Realism, playwrights like Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Harold Pinter (1930-2008), and Edward Albee (1928-) were the promoters of The Theatre of Disillusionment. The Disillusioned playwrights, after seeing the devastation and genocide of World War II, concluded that the universe is cold, hostile and that our existence is futile. Hence, Absurdism, one of the "isms", was born. It is a philosophy that regards human condition as absurd because, humans continue to seek order and reason in a universe that is not built on these principles. Absurdist dramatists experimented with audience' expectations and also share a rejection of traditional, cause-and-effect realistic drama and created characters of unusual theatrical traits. The Absurdist's central idea was that "there are no fixed standards of conduct, no verifiable moral codes. Each person must choose his own set of values and live by it. To live by the conventions of others is the response of a robot, not the act of a human (Downs et al., 398)".

Furthermore, the famous German playwright and theatre practitioner, Bertolt Brecht (1898 - 1956), introduced what he called Epic theatre. In this theatre, Brecht rejected total immersion in a play, made his audience feel and think and finally forced them, during performance to reexamine their true condition. In other words, Brecht used theatre to arouse man's consciousness to the peril surrounding his existence. He began by attacking the ideological stance of bourgeoisie theatre of Aristotle which coaxed audience into sympathising with the tragic hero. To him, Aristotelian theatre reflected an ideological belief that portrayed both man and the world as static and unchangeable. He advocated that reality is a dynamic process produced by men and can be changed by men. Therefore, if theatre has to serve its function it must not reflect a static society and reality, but should instead provoke rational self-reflection and a critical view of the action on the stage. He wanted his audience to adopt a critical perspective in order to recognise social injustice and exploitation and to be moved to go forth from the theatre and effect change in the world outside. Brecht observed:

The audience in the Epic theatre says: "I wouldn't have thought that- people shouldn't do things like that- this person's suffering shocks me because there might be a way out for him.- This is a great art:nothing in it is self-evident. I laugh over the weeping, weep over the laughing (cited in Weiss, 1968:680).

This observation explains that the objective of any theatre is to stimulate the epic spectator into thinking through a process of questions and answers and by implication, stirring the desire and clamoring for change.

Downs et al., (2013), explained that:

Brecht eliminated the vicarious experience of theatre by using various staging techniques. Sometimes he would have the actors step out of character and address the audience directly, or he might exposes the theatrical lights and remove the curtains to remind the audience they are in theatre... Alienated from the play, the audience would then be motivated to intelligently and objectively reflect on the moral issues of the story rather than being lulled into the theatrical illusion that puts the audience into a non-thinking, trance-like state where they accept what they are told without serious contemplation (398).

Back in 19th century, the famous Norwegian playwright and theatre director, Henrik Ibsen (1828 - 1906), asserted that theatre "... should be a source of insight, a creator of discussion, a conveyor of ideas, something more than an entertainment... (1)." This statement gives the theatre practitioner a newer vision of his role rather than a mere clown of no ambition and purpose. He is expected to promote, revolutionise and facilitate change by unveiling the tyrannical antics of the oppressors. In essence, Boal (1979), asserted that theatre "classifies concepts, reveals truth, exposes contradiction

and proposes transformation... (61)." Hence, "theatre is used as a means of education, celebration, protest and discovery" (Banham, 1975:15).

Thus, Ola Rotimi's *OvonramwenNogbaisi*, a play that re-enacts the famous Benin Massacre, is studied here in order to examine the attitude the play reflects regarding the colonizer and the colonized, the extent to which it helps in Cultural Resistance and how it reconstructs the images of the historically misrepresented but great figures in Nigerian history, so as to restore national pride and integrity.

Conclusively, The above survey shows that theatre is used for different purposes and, therefore, there are different forms of theatre. Primarily, the forms include "conventional and non-conventional theatres" (Dasylyva, 2004:25). The conventional theatre involves "tragedy and other tragic forms and comedy and other comic forms" (Adelugba, 1990 in Dasylyva; 25). These are those theorised by Aristotle, the first theatre theorist. And, having been identified with better use of "theatricals, thespians or dramaturgicals, they are regarded as conventional. On the other hand, the non-conventional theatre consists of modern theatres such as Brecht's revolutionary epic theatre, theatre of the absurd, the avant-garde theatre, the neo-rationalist theatre, postcolonial theatre and so on. These are regarded by many critics as non-conventional because they are characterized by an unorthodox use of theatricals. They are theatres that jolt their audience "and by so doing stir it to action" (Dasylyva: 28). Ola Rotimi, the playwright under discussion, belongs to postcolonial theatre, a theatre that resists the power of colonial domination and comments on social and political situations of the country.

"**Can One Resist Without Violence?**", Ashcroft (2001). "Can one even resist without obviously opposing"? The answer to this these questions is obviously 'yes!' Ghandhi's 'passive resistance' to the British Raj is a famous and effective example" (20). Bearing this in mind, this paper examines such elements of **Passive Resistance** in the post-colonial play of Ola Rotimi (*OvonramwenNogbaisi*).

Furthermore, the paper explores the interpolation of language, dramaturgicals and how interpolating history disrupts and blurs the boundary between Literature and History. This is because, according to Ashcroft (2001);

the most fascinating feature of postcolonial societies is a 'resistance' that manifests itself as a refusal to be absorbed, a resistance which engages that which is resisted in a different way, taking the array of influences exerted by the dominating power, and altering them into tools for expressing a deeply held sense of identity and cultural being (20).

### **OLA ROTIMI (1938-2000)**

Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi, famously known as Ola Rotimi, was born on April 13, 1938, at Sapele, Nigeria. He had been a scholar, playwright, and director. Rotimi was one of

Nigeria's and Africa's finest dramatists. Two of his plays; *Kurunmi* and *OvonramwenNogbaisi*, are historical tragedies that re-enact the history of the Yoruba people and the glorious empire of Benin. Adding *The Gods Are not to Blame* to the collection, Rotimi became a notable playwright for the representation of monarchical tragedies in his dramatic work. By creating royal tragic heroes who fall as a result of particular personal flaws, scholars came to describe his style as "Aristotelian". *Kurunmi* (1971) and *OvonramwenNogbaisi* (1974) are Rotimi's original creations, while *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971), is an adaptation of the classical Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. His other plays like *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, *If*, and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, examine the themes of struggle and integrity of leadership. This eclectic approach made Adelugba (1978) described him as a playwright who;

achieved... a mastery of the theatrical medium and (that) his greatest strength as an artist seems to lie in directing... (His) proven excellence is in stage iconography (In Ogunba&Irele, 1978:217).

Rotimi examined Nigeria's history and ethnic traditions in his works. Obafemi (2001), summarised his purpose of examining history as one that stems from his;

conviction that the Nigerian historical past is instrumental to the shaping of our contemporary experience"...and therefore his "purpose is to raise his audience's perception of these (historical) events in a way that makes the material relevant to the contemporary reality (33).

His plays include *To Stir the God of Iron* (1963), *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971), *Kurunmi* (1971), *OvonramwenNogbaisi* (1974), *Holding Talks* (1979), *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988).

## HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Although many scholars, ancient and modern, have discussed the relationship between history and literature, this part, with reference to Ola Rotimi's *OvonramwenNogbaisi*, adds a layer of discourse upon the existing data on the debate. Bhadmus (2006), for example, Observed that:

The conflictual, if not outrightly dubious relationship between history and literature, dates back to the antiquity. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who in their treatises such as *The Republic* and *Poetics* tested the boundaries and veracity of factuality (110).

Bhadmus argued, conclusively, that "neither History nor Literature has greater claim to truth...as they are both compromises of, and compromised by language (110-112)". However, this paper argues that, in situations where the veracity of a certain history is contentious, theatre, the most symbolic form of literature, can be historically corrective and evocatively accurate. As Poetics IX put it, literature generally or theatre, in particular, "is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry (literature) states more universal things whereas history states particular things" (Halliwell, 1995:5-9).

Victoria Adeniyi (2007), explained that;

History which is written in the form of drama is, on a higher plane, more intense, more universal, and more philosophical than history which is written in a chronological manner and is more particular. A historical drama (therefore) deals with a particular point in the history of the society. It gives insight into what life was like at the particular period chosen by the playwright as focus (In Adeoti (ed), 2007:97-8)

This view is definitely linked with another Aristotelian conception that the unity of plot in literature differs from that of history. While the former, being always chiselled after a long and hard thought, tends to be unabridged, corrective and therefore more permanent, the latter is automatically fragmentary, one-sided, and eternally boring. And, as a result, history always brings about discord, mistrust and conflicts. For example, Abdurrahman al-Jabarti's *History of French Occupation of Egypt*, exposes the falsehood of the ideological template upon which the French invasion of Egypt took place. And, antithetically, Napoleon Bonaparte's *Description of Egypt* seeks to portray the conquest as the best thing that could ever happened to Egypt. To that effect, Oladosu (2009), explained that:

The two works appear to be "monumentalistic" in nature. They call attention to the inner fissures, frictions, and contradictions in the historiography of domination and resistance in and on the (African) continent. For example, whereas Al-Jabartî details, in part, the inhumanity and violence that Napoleon's invasion eventuated in Egypt, the writers of the Napoleonic's version, on the other hand, chronicle the invasion as that of a benevolent conqueror who respects the culture of the dominated (186).

This explains why literary writers and historians are always at loggerheads over the veracity of African history. So, the question: Can there be an unbiased history that gives true accounts of pre-colonial Africa? This mind-boggling question gives intellectuals, in and outside Africa, a reason to

parade their theories, philosophies and their intellectual depths on the subject. But the answer remains hitherto elusive as African history is still seen as disputable and conflicting in nature. Oladosu (2009) continued:

The dissonance and lack of complementarity in versions of African history by the European historians (perpetrators) and that of African griots (victims), show...and awaken us to the fact that extant histories of domination and resistance written in/on Africa are patently and essentially human records, that are, according to Ibn Khaldun, "by their nature prone to error" (187).

May be this is the reason why Femi Osofisan (1977), when commenting on the relationship between the Dramatist and Historian, submitted that:

A similarity of purpose unites the playwright and the historiographer, both apparently feeding, as contemporaries fashioned by and responding to the same historical mutations, from essentially the same sources (cited in Adeoti (ed), 2007:97).

Following on from that, some scholars have interpreted the Africa of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a period of struggle between Imperialism and Resistance, (Bhabha; Chatterjee; Hasting; Sa,Id). Abu Alfa Umar Muhammad Shareef bin Farid (2005), noted two types of African Resistance to European Colonialism, namely; Primary Resistance and Secondary Resistance. Bin Farid defined Primary Resistance as "the type of resistance wherein there is a cohesive African belief system intact backed up by an African nation-state or polity and a continuous sense of historical conscience" (13).

There, he gives examples of this Resistance such as the Resistance of the Unitary State of Ethiopia to Italy, Asante against the British, The Resistance of SamoreTaore in Guinea, Muhammad Ahmad Al-mahdi in the Sudan, Abdalqadiri al-Jazairi in Algeria, Somalian Resistance against Britain, Italy and France led by Muhammad Abdalla Hassan, the undaunted Sokoto Resistance against the British hegemony in Northern Nigeria and a host of others. These victims intended to end what they perceived as unjust and inhumane occupation and control.

Similarly, Bin Farid (2005) defined the Secondary Resistance as;

The type of resistance which emerges after the loss of national sovereignty and the destruction of the collective historical conscience, which then forces the people to adopt the ideals of the colonizers to liberate themselves from colonization (13).

At this juncture, anti-colonial writers like Franz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Amilcar Cabral, Ali Mazrui, Cheikh Anta Diop, Aime Cessaire, Julius Nyerere and a host of others, appear on the scene. These writers develop the ideas of Liberation, Identity and Independence. They write to encounter the historiography of European domination which, prejudicially, portrays Africans as primordially inferior, brutish and backward.

In the light of that, historical drama, or, in a more general sense, postcolonial theatre, comes to reclaim the precolonial forms of history and culture, and to re-construct national identity based on specific local knowledge and histories. By enacting oral traditions and surviving national myths of the indigenous cultures, theatrical performances allow those who fight against the colonial power to rediscover their ancestors, histories and their identity in creative ways.

Furthermore, re-enacting the life of heroes and heroic episodes in the precolonial history becomes a significant means of developing the fervour of national revolution in the postcolonial context. Thus, post-colonial dramatists seek to revise their history while simultaneously celebrating their precolonial heritage and traditions. A number of playwrights explore history in their dramatic works, echoing Fredric Jameson (1981), who believed that "the literary text must be seen as the re-writing or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological sub-text" (81-2). Also, Ola Rotimi in his play; *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, re-writes, re-constructs and re-enacts the contentious reign of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi and the subsequent Benin Massacre of 1897. Many scholars have studied both the play and the history and thereafter discovered some chasms and lacunas in the historical versions of the happenings which, accidentally, influence the play. But, this paper examines the playwright's effort in counteracting the history.

## REVIEW

To begin with, Rotimi's literary popularity comes from his historical recreation and interpretation. In an interview with Kunle Ajibade of the *African Concord* (1991), Rotimi said;

I'm concerned with history first of all because of its pedagogic motivation. Most of us Africans are ignorant of our history. When I was in secondary school, we learnt tangentially African History and usually **from a myopic, jaundiced perspective of Western scholars**.... My second mission is, of course, to see whether we could emulate some heroic figures in history (7).

On the play *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Uwatt (2002), quotes Rotimi affirming that: "I set out to write a drama of resistance. Resistance to imperialist incursion on a people united in espousal of the cause of the land and king" (28). This declaration can testify the claim that the playwright is correcting a crooked history.

In an attempt to capture the substance of the play, Adeniyi, (In Adeoti; 2007) makes a comparative study of Rotimi's *OvonramwenNogbaisi* and Yerima's *Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. Both plays re-interpret the historical materials on the same historical figure in order to correct some misrepresentations of African history. The plays, Adeniyi asserts;

...assess the past, comment on the present and warn about the future. It is noteworthy that the plays end tragically with the looting of the Benin Kingdom, the massive massacre of Benin people, and the deposition and exile of Oba Ovonramwen. Although they are produced to unravel the inhumanity and cruelty associated with the era of colonialism in African history, they provide insights into the disposition of the imperial West towards Africa. They equally provide warnings against neocolonialism, which is colonialism in native apparel (109).

Nevertheless, Ola Rotimi's characterization of Ovonramwen in the play causes dissatisfaction among critics like Michael Etherton (1982) and Chris Dunton (1992). Etherton reveals some gaps in the characterization of the Oba that should have been filled by the playwright. After exposing the lacunas, Etherton's study shows that Rotimi's play signifies that 'Ovonramwen was the victim of fate (155).' The conclusion is that "Ola Rotimi would appear to be fatalistic, therefore, in his view of history. The colonial biases of history have been replaced by a fatalistic bias: 'this was the way it was bound to happen (155)."

On the other hand, Chris Dunton (1992) describes Rotimi's *Ovonramwen* as "a totally inflexible entity,.. neurasthenic.. and a statuesque figure" (21/22). Because Rotimi presents him as weak and slow all round; failure among his people and coward in confronting external aggressors, Dunton observes that Ovonramwen's characterization is a faulty depiction of Tragic Hero who suppose to be noble by birth and by conduct; passionate, committed and strong; good-natured but with a flaw that ruins him and causes his downfall at the end. But, Rotimi's *Ovonramwen* lacks these traits and he is beset by more than one flaw. These are indeed excellent explorations that help students understand and appreciate the play much better. Nonetheless, this Work pays attention to resistant markers of the play.

Obafemi (2001) explores Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *OvonramwenNogbaisi*. He examines the playwrights's recourse to Nigerian pre-colonial and colonial history, his dramatic vision of the tragic hero and, finally, his creative vision of the protagonist's fate in society. Obafemi maintains that;

Rotimi succeeds in appropriating the theatrical and dramatic potential of history to project a tragic vision: the tragic heroism of grand historical figures whose inevitable fall is a result of the flaws in their own character combined with unforeseen external forces. The relevance of the struggles of

these individuals to our contemporary existence is that their struggles lend insight to our own present struggles (107).

Thus, the axiomatic relationship between Theatre/Drama and History is accentuated in this historical play to the extent that their seemingness blurs the boundary between reality and fiction. One important thing about the play is that it resists colonial domination in the language used, the culture portrayed and the theatricals. Therefore, this paper explores these elements as forms of Cultural Resistance put up by Rotimi in his Postcolonial, historical play.

In a nutshell, Postcolonial writers and theorists redefine and restructure politics, identity, gender, history, ethnicity, culture, literature, education and psychology of the former European colonies. This urge begins in the wake of political independence sought by third world countries in Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, etc), Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) and the Caribbean (Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana, etc). The Postcolonial theorists include big names like Frantz Fanon (1925 - 1961), Edward Said (1935 - 2003), Homi K. Bhabha (1949 - ), GayatriCharkravathySpivak (1942 - ), AimeCesaire and so on.

Furthermore, African Nationalists, prose writers, poets and playwrights all engage in the same struggle. The list of such prose writers include. Thomas Mofolo, Chinua Achebe, Mungo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, CamaraLaye and so on. Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima and a host of others populate the list of the playwrights. These intellectuals engage in unearthing the rich history, culture, philosophy, poetry and dignity of Africa that the colonialists had wantonly entombed and destroyed.

Hence, exploring history in African dramatic works is seen by David Kerr, ‘as a means of asserting the African identity and legitimating African nationalism’. Similarly, Umokoro(1995), opined that “Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* and *OvonramwenNogbaisi* are devoted to the examination of our pre-colonial and colonial past as a way of reclaiming indigenous histories and cultures” (9). *Kurunmi* recreates the intense struggles and power politics of the second half of the nineteenth century which culminated in the Ijaye war of 1860’s. Also, In *OvonramwenNogbaisi*, he narrates the story of European scramble for Africa, based on the British expedition which brought about the Benin massacre in 1897. Hence, as Knipp(1980) put it, the playwrights “write to create a useable past, to relate and interpret their culture and its past in their own subjective confession, and define their own relationship to it” (42).

Arguably, the play, *OvonramwenNogbaisi*, is a very much frontal attack on colonialism. It is indeed a great example of how theatre rehabilitates historical figures through post-colonial reconstruction of history and critical efforts to encounter the Eurocentric images and impressions of Benin Kingdom.

## CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Stephen Duncombe observes (in his *Cultural Resistance Reader*, 2002) that "Cultural Resistance is used to describe culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure" (5). Hence, Cultural Resistance offers a sort of "free space" for developing ideas and practices. The freedom from the limits and constraints of the dominant Western culture gives ample scope for experiments with new ways that help in developing tools and resources for resistance. Transforming or decolonizing the imperial culture itself is a source of Cultural Resistance or is an attempt to subvert the Colonial strategies that try to erase the native culture.

In Postcolonial Theory, therefore, Cultural Resistance is affected by the process of Hybridization. The Colonized carefully reshape and adapt the tools of the masters to dismantle the master's own voice or power. Because of its potential to actively involve a wide range of physical, emotional and imaginative resources, Theatre is one such powerful cultural tool of the master. It brings together many facets of cultural creativity; socio-political, religious, ritualistic, mythological and storytelling; dance, music, satire, mimicry, role-playing and the festive celebration of a community.

In other words, Cultural Resistance can be expressed through narrative discourses like myths and tales, rituals and ceremonies. Therefore, Resistance can be demystified as a practice of everyday life. Dramatization of these cultural practices of everyday life finds expression in Postcolonial Theatre. In their method, the Postcolonial dramatists domesticate the techniques of Western dramaturgy. Their incorporation of native forms is in fact a part of this resistance to dominant forms. The by-product of this incorporation is a syncretic Theatre which can be defined as those theatrical products which result from the interplay between the Western theatrico-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms of Postcolonial culture. Finally, the narratives of Postcolonial playwrights are strongly anchored in the native culture.

Similarly, Cultural Resistance to Western tradition can be observed in the choice of language. The choice is often a political one. As Gilbert and Tompkins observe in their *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice and Politics*; "when a playwright chooses an indigenous language over English, s/he refuses to submit to the dominance of the imposed standard language and to subscribe to the 'realty' it sustains" (169).

## OVONRAMWENNOGBAISI: PLOT SUMMARY

*OvonramwenNogbaisi* by Ola Rotimi, the other primary text of this study, is also a historical play about the historically damaged Oba of Benin Empire who reigned between 1888 and 1897. The play, in precision, centres on the political tension, after the death of Oba Adolo, that surrounds the ascension of his son OvonramwenNogbaisi and his hubris on the one hand, and the colonialist

pressure on the other. The play is opened with the Oba Ovonramwen sentencing some prisoners to death. These people happened to be Oba's chiefs before they connived in killing his Chief Adviser who killed their dissenting brothers on Oba's ascension. Therefore, the Oba turns deaf ears to the plea for mercy of other chiefs in the palace and executes the prisoners. This gesture explains part of the tension within the Empire.

Subsequently, Ola Rotimi presents us with the other tension which the Oba faces on inside by introducing the traders from Ijekiri and the elders of Ekpoma. The Ijekiris have cheated, traded with the whiteman and wanted to break away from Benin. Therefore the Oba warns them. The Ekpomas rebel against the Oba's choice of a leader. He warns them too and enforces them. Throughout these judgements, Uzazakpo, the court jester, is telling the Oba that "that is not the way to go about it... the way you talked to the chiefs was not the right way". There after, comes the Ifa Priest who foretells the doom of Benin.

The tension on the outside comes from the Whiteman. The white imperialists bring with them a tricky trade treaty to the Oba, persuading him to sign, so that they 'buy the rubber trees from him'. But, the Oba refuses to sign. Like in *Attahiru*, the whiteman, being in a mysterious haste to trade or rather siphon off Benin, the unwelcome Phillips and his company enter Benin, calamitously, during Ague Festival. According to Bini tradition, it is a taboo for the Oba to receive strangers during Ague Festival. Therefore, when Consul Phillips and his party enter the city, Benin warriors kill them and subsequently, the British launches a punitive expedition, sacks Benin City, sends the Oba on exile to Calabar, and takes over the area in order to establish the British colony.

However, the European historians portray Oba Ovonramwen as the "most abominable sadist", "a fetish priest-king" and "murderous monarch". Hence, they launched war against him in order to free his people from his tyranny. This study, proves that the play counteracts all these biased versions by, verisimilarly or authentically, providing a template for African version of the history. Using Postcolonial Theatre, the playwright (Ola Rotimi) dramatizes political, literary, linguistic and historical resistance. In the play, Rotimi adopts a common strategy of Post-colonial self assertion by rediscovering some authentic pre-colonial cultural practices in order to redress the impact of the destructive colonial Imperialism.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY**

The struggle between the Imperial power and Post-colonial identity in this play is so far captured in the highly interpolated language and dramaturgicals of the play that finally give birth to a hybrid mode of representation. Rotimi blends the traditional indigenous performance arts, which need to be rediscovered and reinvented, with the sophisticated western theatrical techniques. Analysing this practice in Postcolonial Theatre, Crow (1996) commented that:

In contrast with the Western tradition of realist drama and acting, these traditional modes of performance are usually stylized, often incorporate dance, music and song and operate from an oral rather than a literary base (12).

The playwright, from the beginning, opens with a certain traditional song sung by *female voices, punctuating drumbeats; rhythmic clatter of gourd-rattles, as the Isikhien (members of the royal women's cult) enter and take position*. Since, "indigenous song/music recalls pre-contact methods of communication, affirms the continued validity of oral traditions, and helps to break the bonds of conventional (western) representation" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 2002: 78), Rotimi resists the dominant western forms here. While other dramatists infuse the indigenous music with western to create a hybrid version, Rotimi uses indigenous songs/music in its pure form. This is a considerable act of resistance. Such a thing is repeated everywhere in the play as in the following examples:

*O-o-o-o-o- Evbavba!*

*Obugie O! Evbavba!*

*Obugie O! Evbavba!*

*Ugiegha do re ofurhufurhu*

*Oba gha to o kpere!*

*The crowd, excepting the prisoners, thunder:*

I-s-e ! (4).

Omi, Omi- Omi-o!

O-omi-o!

Omi, Omi-o!...(5).

Osa wo-o-o, Iwori wo-wo-wo-o-o! (16). E .T. C.

This is indeed a stylistic device of Postcolonial Theatre. "It highlights the fact that colonialism has not destroyed local pre-contact customs or traditions" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 67). The music/songs, dance and traditional musical instruments used bring in some indigenous moods and enhance the overall effect of the play. Furthermore, In place of using lighting to signify change of scene, music, drumming and songs are used as the theatrical device. Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) observed that:

When music is combined with Theatre, its signifying power inevitably multiplies: in addition to its own signification, music contributes to the *mise-en-scene* to, for instance, enhance a mood, or effect an atmosphere. Moreover, if Post-colonial Theatre provides an occasion for a vocal expression of solidarity, resistance, or even presence, song can intensify the reactions of both the actors and the audience (194).

Rotimi uses native language in order to invoke the gods, to ceremonially bless the king and, accordingly, challenge western tradition. Gilbert and Tomkins (1996) observed; "when a playwright chooses an indigenous language over English, s/he refuses to submit to the dominance of the imposed standard language and to subscribe to the 'reality' it sustains" (169).

The play addresses the story of Ovonramwen in a wider scope. It includes "Ovonramwen's tasks of controlling a growing rebellion within and outside his kingdom". He confronts and executes some of his rebellious chiefs and, at the same time, stands up to the British who are searching for economic domination over the rest of the world. This historical play is divided into three Acts, with a prologue at the beginning and an Epilogue at the end. Act One establishes Ovonramwen's revenge judgment on his two chiefs (Obaruduagbon and Esasoyen) that both of them must die for killing UwanguEgiebo, Ovonramwen's Chief Adviser, after the Oba had executed their own brothers, who opposed his enthronement. This is captured in:

Ovonramwen: ...This night, you all die...I have spoken.

Obaruduagbon: Today is your day: Tomorrow belongs to another!

Esasoyen: Indeed: the white man who is stronger than you, will soon come! (6)

At the same time, the Oba places a ban on trading with the Ijekiris and also imposes on them some drastic conditions that they must meet so he may lift the ban. He sends messengers and soldiers to warn and recapture the loyalty of neighbouring towns and tribes, whom his forefathers had ruled, but are now signalling or hoping for freedom: Ijekiriland, Ekpoma, Akure, Ife, Agbor, et cetera. This is captured in:

Ovonramwen: ...if you want the ban on trade removed, your chiefs must meet my terms: first, Ijekiriland is still part of the Benin Empire. In matters of trade, you listen to me and not to the Whiteman. Secondly, no more cheating (8-9).

Furthermore, the Ifa Priest enters. He comes to tell the Oba that his oracle sees death coming to Benin, "not the death of one man. Bodies of men...fire...and blood bodies floating " and warns that all that can be done to avoid this fire is "Caution" (15). There, enter two white men, Gallwey and Hutton, bringing him gifts and greeting from Queen Victoria as well as a trade treaty, which Her Majesty requires him to sign. The Oba rejects the gifts and the treaty as he has some qualms about making business with the Queen. In fact, the Oba interprets the white men's visit as a bad omen for the empire.

This casts fear in the Oba's mind and therefore becomes doubtful of everybody including his chiefs. Hence, on the advice of the aged court jester, Uzazakpo, who admonishes the King to beware of people, especially his chiefs, and to also seek the loyalty of Ologbosere, the third in command, against the growing hypocrisy of his Chiefs, the Oba secures the loyalty by giving Ologbosere his

eldest daughter, Evbakhobokun, as wife. The Oba confides and warns his new son-in-law: “Disaster threatens the empire, Ologbosere. Even the oracle of Oghenen'Uhe has seen its face: heavy, dark, closing upon the land” (23).

Act II begins with a dramatic celebration of a Benin’s traditional festival, the Ague festival, and the irreverent intrusion into the Kingdom by the white men under the command of Acting Consul-General Phillips. Now Ague Festival, being a traditional enactment in form of ritual, contributes to the hybrid nature of the play. It also serves as a form of resistance to dominant European traditions. In this context, Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) asserted that;

Rooted in folk culture, these enactments are not only mnemonic devices that assist in the preservation of history but are also effective strategies for maintaining cultural differences through specific systems of communication- aural, visual, and kinetic- and through specific values related to local customs (54).

This cultural event asserts and maintains the precolonial structure of the community. As a ritual of a kind, it subsumes a non-european element into Theatre, so that the playwright indigenizes theatrical practice. In the same context, Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) discuss how Postcolonial playwrights use Ritual to provide the context of their plays. Thus:

Rather than being the central thematic and/ or structural focus, ritual supports the action in such a play and tends to be used as part of a larger recuperation of tradition/history, as an expression of hybridization, as a device to establish settings/context, or as a performative model for various sections of the action/dialogue (73).

Furthermore, employing rituals in Postcolonial plays, according to Gilbert and Tompkins (1996), can be a subversive political act that resists the colonial ban of rituals. Therefore, the Ague Festival in this play is a subversive act. It revives the community and encourages the people to return to their root and defend the honour of what they are. The aforementioned critics observe that:

...many rituals were officially banned by imperial agents. Such forbidden events became subversive activities under colonial rule and can now function as symbols of liberty for an independent post-colonial system, especially when ritual is contextualized by- and/or located in a particular community (76).

Back to the play, Okavbiogbe, the Chief Policeman of the Kingdom, stops and warns the white men against seeing the Oba during the Ague festival and this encounter with Phillips sets the conflict of this play. Still, Phillips insists on entering Benin and the Oba together with his people hold this in

contempt. The spiritual nature of the ritual emphasises the profanity of Philip's act. For Phillips, that is necessary: it is the first crucial step in the implementation of his decision "to deal with Benin". This encounter runs as follows:

Okavbiogbe: you cannot see the Oba...

Phillips: I am sorry, but we've come a long way and we have been sent by the queen of-

Okavbiogbe: I said go--you!

Etherton (1982), summarized the tragic conflict that ensues this argument as follows:

They arrogantly decide to press on into Benin City despite being warned by one of the Benin war lords that the Ague Festival is in progress which debars foreigners from entering the city during its seven days duration. The whites are massacred. This action has been taken by the Benin war lords against the advice and instruction of Ovonramwen.... They go out and ambush the whites who ignorantly insist on entering the city, and decapitate them (149).

After a while, the Benin people celebrate the death of Phillips and his party through a dance drama ritual where the '*warriors re-appear, dancing wildly, but the chiefs among them are carrying decapitated heads of white men*'. This shocks the Oba as he says: Ovonramwen: Children of our fathers, Benin, I fear, has this day swallowed a long pestle: now we shall have to sleep standing upright (37).

In Act III, two Benin chiefs, Obaseki and Osodin, meet Acting Resident Roupell and they promise to find Ovonramwen and give him up. The King, however, gives himself up and Roupell demands that he surrenders to the British Authority and after serious persuasion from his Chiefs, Ovonramwen removes his crown from his head and surrenders to the British Monarch; an act which Roupell confidently and heroically celebrates: Roupell: (*himself perturbed, but...her imperial Majesty's task must be done.*) From this day, this land of Benin belongs to her Royal Majesty Queen Victoria! (54).

The chiefs are tried and seven of them are to die for killing seven white men. Obayuwana (a Benin Chief), however, refuses to be shot, instead he heroically stabs himself and Ovonramwen leaves for Obaseki's house to re-strategise for the continuation of the war against the white imperialists. Ovanramwen hides and sleeps in the bush with Uzazakpo, the Court Jester who makes things easy for him on their way to Okemue to meet Ologbosere. Before they reach Okemue, Roupell and his soldiers apprehend Ovonramwen and he paradoxically rejoices with the white men on their success

in capturing Benin: Not much. Tell Queen Victoria that at last the big pot of corn has been toppled; now mother hen and her children may rejoice! (78).

In order to have a distinct voice and to return to his indigenous culture and traditions, Rotimi uses proverbs of cultural tastes and a hybrid narrative language as in:

- Obaruduagbon: If a provoked houseboy can not match his wicked master strength with strength, he maims the master's favourite goat! (5)
- Ologbogsere:.. Our brothers, a man does not test the depth of a river with both feet together (5).
- Ifa Priest: ..when the little child boasts that he can kill a riddle, he lies: he can only solve a riddle. When the elder swears he is about to kill a riddle, he too lies, for he will only solve a riddle (15).
- Ovonramwen: children of our fathers, Benin, I fear, has this day swallowed a long pestle; now we shall have to sleep standing upright (37).

These are but few of the instances of the use of proverbs In the play for cultural resistance. It also takes a gut to claim that the post-colonial theatre of this play resists the dominating tendencies of western forms as native narrative structures are used. A new theatrical form is then born through the traditional contamination of Standard English and the hybridization of the theatricals. Therefore, the playwright now has a voice, after being subjected to mere mimicry or even silenced by the western dominance, to reach the common people and to appeal to their sensibility. In other words, this is a quest for Identity in the Postcolonial scene. Crow (1996), describes this movement as "return to roots" (9).

On the other hand, many scholars and literary writers concur that Rotimi has flawed the characterization of Ovonramwen. The fact that Oba Ovonramwen surrenders at the end, without rebelling to death against the tyrannical power of the imperialists, that is an unfortunate lacuna that modern African playwrights avoid. But, why has Rotimi focused solely on Ovonramwen as an individual? The answer to this may be that Rotimi's intention was to correct "the biases of colonial History", which painted the Oba "in the mien of the most abominable sadist" ("Background" to OvonramwenNogbaisi xi). Also, Rotimi intended this to be a response to EvbinmaOgie's play; *Oba Ovonramwen* (first performed 1965 and published 1977), that characterised the Oba as "bland, unable to engage in the defence of the empire" (152). However, as Etheron rightly observed, "his hero seems to end up more deeply indicted than before" (146).

In response to Rotimi's play, Ahmed Yerima's play under the title of *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, comes on stage. Jegede (2007), after a rather comparative analysis of both plays, noted that Yerima's version;

Pays particular attention to the gaps, omissions, silences and absences in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, especially those that have to do with portraying the king in the right light. Rotimi portrays the king as weakling who is troubled within by political unrest and without by British attack. In the face of attack, he goes into hiding and later comes begging to surrender to British supremacy. In Yerima's portrait, the king is a more courageous character who, despite all the wrangling within and without, could still face the challenge without subjecting his position to ridicule (85).

This disclosure may damage or spoil the joyful flow of this important history in some ways, but the major imperial distortions in the history are successfully corrected by both plays. These include; the objective of Phillips' visit to Benin, exonerating African kings from being allegedly fetish and murderously ritualistic, and finally, exposing the hideous issues in the 1892 Treaty.

Through their theatrical performances, the plays have successfully achieved their goal. This is because, as Brown (1980), claimed, Theatre:

Would seem to be the better bet as a medium for protest. Of its very nature, it is a communal experience and has to do with a corporate rather than an individual response. It will move more people more quickly (50).

Undoubtedly, Theatre achieves this, as Nasidi (2003) put it, through an "integrated manipulation of various forms of art such as music, mime, poetry, dance, painting and symbols which are directed either at our auditory or visual senses". And therefore, it inevitably "engages and appeals to all the senses at the same time (Vincent, 1980). Hence, national consciousness and development can possibly be achieved through any enactment that engages us in learning about some ethics, customs, true identity and history of our nation.

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