

**Historical Implications in the Plays of Ola Rotimi: A
Study of *Kurunmi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *the Gods
Are Not to Blame***

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Abstract

Drama and indeed all genres of literature throughout the continent of Africa have certain social functions to perform. Therefore, there is nothing like art for art's sake among the people. In view of this, the Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi in the three plays studied in this work has some lessons he wants to teach in view of many people who see the staging of his plays as being only for entertainment. For the two historical plays *Kurunmi* and *Ovonromwen Nogbaisi*, one can see that certain events of the past are being replicated in the present. If only the present generation can be attentive to past events and give them proper interpretations, some problems occurring today can be easily averted. For the adapted play, *The Gods are not to blame*, take it or leave it, there are some forces that control or influence man. The actions of such forces coupled with our personal disposition dictate what happens to us. In order to get these

conclusions, the present researchers had to study the texts concerned and compare their conclusions with both Internet and hard copy studies made on the works by other researchers.

Keywords: historical implications, wars, characters, gods, plays

Introduction

In Africa, the concept of art for art's sake is something unheard of in that any artistic production has underneath it some morals or corrections which the author has for his audience. This has been the case since the pre-literate era when our forefathers had their folktales, dirges, myths, etc to keep them company. Even in this modern age, every piece of production has behind it not only this purposeful heritage but the added desire of the creative artist to communicate through even his devices. Hence, no matter what we read today, be it drama, poetry or prose narratives, one can see beneath the lure of the stories, what the author is hinting at or suggesting, even if the author does not state it overtly.

This is how we are to look at some of the works of Ola Rotimi in this essay. Added to this, we have in two of the texts his stated background information to guide us. However, his information, in itself, is only just a guide in that it is not unheard of for an author not to realize fully his stated objective or to realize something in addition to his goal. This is how we are going to look at his text, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* which is a historical play he uses to correct the impression the whites have of the Benin monarch of 1888-1897.

Also in the nature of culling his inspirations from the past in order to give an explanation of present problems are the texts *Kurunmi* and *The God's Are Not to Blame*. But while the former was taken from the old Yoruba kingdom of the mid-

nineteenth century, the latter was taken from the classical writings of the Greek playwright, Sophocles. The play *Oedipus Rex* now forms the basis for the explication, not only of a Nigerian problem, but of any country which has passed through a colonial master.

These three texts have something in common: “the treatment of the immutability of man’s fate arising from a belief in predestination” (Obafemi 98). Two of them *Kurunmi* and *The Gods* are specifically on the Nigerian civil war. Furthermore, in exploring this theme, Rotimi delves into “the personal, psychological and emotional conflicts of these remarkable figures ... to bring to a head his dramatic vision of the tragic hero” (Obafemi 98).

Again, if we are to perceive modern African drama as an edifice whose foundations were laid in those days when Ogali’s *VeronicamyDaughter* and Henshaw’s *This is our Chance* came out, what can we say Rotimi contributed in the texts towards the elevation of this on-going edifice? The answer to this is what will prompt us into looking at his literary devices in our enquiry into historical implications in the three selected texts. This is why we have to look at his use of mime, proverbs, dance, language, etc. All these devices are artistically used to project themes and plots.

Also, “Ola Rotimi has an epic hand in the dispersal of characters, props and set on the stage. He could get a hundred things going on the stage without one duplicating another. He was meticulous in working out for each person on stage the particularity of his movement ...” (Lindfors 160).

Finally, what we have seen so far will serve us as a curtain raiser as we take the texts individually in our looking at our theme which is the historical undertone of what Rotimi says in them. Our first enquiry will be with the Ijaiye wars from the perspective of the hero, *Kurunmi*.

Kurunmi

Historically, Oba Alafin of Oyo fled his capital in 1840 due to pressures from the north in order to establish a new capital which he also named Oyo. On this new site, he tried to regain the awe and dignity of the monarchy which became almost eroded due to the relocation. In order to do this, he had to rest on the traditions and spiritual powers of his forebears since he had none of their physical and military might.

Ironically, the bone of contention with his army general, Kurunmi of Ijaiye, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo of the empire, emanated from a breach of a tradition which stated that on the death of the Alafin, his eldest son would also die. But in 1858, Alafin Atiba sensing that he was about to join his ancestors called together his deputies to announce to them that his eldest son Adelu would be Oba in the event of his death.

However, by Kurunmi opposing him, there then was another breach of tradition. Since the two positions had spiritual backings, what happened was that the tussle had to be removed from the physical in order to be given its proper spiritual interpretation. Here, Are-Ona-Kakanfo, as the general of the Yoruba Kingdom, was under the protection of Ogun, the god of iron, war, the road and so on. Alafin Adelu, though an Alafin through a wrong channel, was with his forebears, a descendant of Sango, the god of thunder. As Obafemi puts it, Kurunmi's rebellion against him "is a rebellion against the source of his own being" (99). So, like in the Trojan wars, the influence of these formidable forces was felt -- although in more subtle ways.

This is then the conflict and since we are all aware, where there is conflict there is certainly a germ of drama which is kicked off here by Kurunmi's aid-de-camp, Abogunrin when he starts eulogizing his master using proverbs. Also, the chief warrior of Ijaiye, Ogunkoraju adds to the dignity of the generalissimo whom we are yet to see. But who is this man who has so much respect? It is only on page 15 that we see the crowd chanting: "K-a-biyesi !" All along, suspense and tension have

been building up the dignity of this war veteran, and when he opens up to speak, what we can garner from the deluge of proverbs is the importance of tradition to the human society:

The day a people lose their tradition is the day
their death begins -- weeds, they become, climbers
... Doomed (16).

The proverbs and witticisms then give way to a narrative of what transpired during a meeting in Oyo where Alafin Atiba in opposition to tradition wanted them to swear using both Ogun and Sango that his son Adelu should be king after him. From his reaction, we see the Are as a hard core traditionalist who is rigidly against any change. This stance now sets him on a collision course against, not only the Alafin but against other notable pillars of the empire who are backing the Alafin.

As one of them Oluyole of Ibadan when he comes on a peace mission with Timi Ede says, "Tradition must change with man" (20). But Kurunmi not knowing the prophetic import of his words affirms that Adelu should be king over his dead body. Here can be seen a heroic character committing suicide through his actions.

Before their coming, Are has been molding an idol and as soon as their confrontational conversation ends, and the visitors leave in anger, the die is cast and so he flings the idol to spatter out of shape. This then is a symbol of the fragile peace, understanding and unity between them which then has distorted irremediably out of shape. From this point on, what follows is anarchy.

Therefore, when the Ibadan messengers arrive with two bowls -- one containing gun powder and bullets, and the other containing the sacred twins of the Ogboni cult -- it is with alacrity that the tragic hero, Kurunmi accepts the former signifying his willingness for war. The sacred twins of peace are nothing to him. To add insult to injury, he stains a white

cloth with okro soup and hands it over to the messengers for onward transmission to Alafin Adelu.

In this way, Rotimi has created his hero to have a sense of drama. Without words, he has told his visitors plainly that he is ready to meet the Alafin in any theatre of war by accepting both his gun powder and bullets. His staining a white cloth is another way of telling him also that the honour he has as an Alafin is soiled and so, he has no regard for him. What he says is “Go and do your worst” thereby showing his preparedness for war.

The picture that comes out is Rotimi’s casting his hero according to Aristotle’s idea. Firstly, he is of high social standing. Secondly, his language and bearing depict him as such. Thirdly, his fault which will also come out more in its stark enormity is not something criminal but just an error of judgment. This error starts showing when he sends emissaries to Ilorin, Abeokuta, etc. He also tells his chief warrior, Ogunkoroju to alert warriors so that they would go into shooting practice. No wonder then that he does no longer know his popularity rating in that his general refuses to obey him. Rather, they send young warriors to terrify and tell him that he should mind how he is piloting the affairs of the state. According to them, he is drunk with power. And in Ibadan, Osundina further sees him as trying to build a kingdom of his own. Those messengers he sent are waylaid en route and only one who is badly wounded escapes to tell the tale.

The extent of his usurpation of power which these people are complaining about can be better understood if we look at it historically:

Kurunmi ... was judge, king, general entertainer sometimes also executioner. He was shrewd, cheerful, cynical, authoritarian, casual, generous to his friends but implacably unscrupulous where his enemies are concerned. He bolstered up his power not only by judicious feasting of the masses every fifth day but

also by usurping the headship of the cults, particularly that of Sango. In short, he was said to have been feared more than the gods (Obafemi 100).

However, in the play, Rotimi simply glides through these and leaves the issues where they can hardly attract attention.

But to his favour, the people of Ijaiye are all hard-core traditionalists and so are easily made to be in support of their leader when he gives them gifts. As one of the notable warriors Akiola says of the people: “We are all against what happened in Oyo and on that point shall we die defending our soil against attacks by Oyo and Ibadan” (41).

This stance concerning tradition can also explain why the gospel does not take root in the land despite all the efforts of the missionaries. Kurunmi himself supports the people against the white man’s religion but since he is out of touch with reality, he fails to consult his own gods before embarking in the war. He only prays but does not offer the right sacrifices like the Ibadan side. Therefore, when the two ways of life -- modernism and traditionalism -- are considered, Kurunmi and his subjects are neither here nor there.

From Act 3, scene 2, we start seeing short scenes which Rotimi uses to depict cinematographically the disorderly scenes of war. The situation has started getting topsy-turvy. A situation like this is used by William Shakespeare in *Macbeth* when the English forces are about to descend on Scotland and the villain is preparing for the confrontation. The shortest of these scenes is scene 3 with just four lines which are given to the Manns for them to comment on the swiftness of events. In all, the progress of the war is rendered only through the reports of the eye witnesses.

Artistically, Rotimi uses the technique of the split stage to save time for scene changes. On the stage are the Manns reporting from their dairies the woes befalling Ijaiye from Ibadan warriors. Oladele Taiwo sees this method as Rotimi’s

stylistic attempt not to record everything so as to leave his readers to fill the necessary details. In this way, “He excludes materials which may easily become boring” (130).

When the light shifts to a darkened side of the stage, the Egba soldiers are revealed as if to embolden us against the statement of Mrs. Mann which is “The death of Ijaiye is any time now” (66).

The atmosphere thus engendered is similar to that which the Israelite ark of covenant created on them when it was brought out after a long tussle with the Philistines. In that biblical episode, when Hophni and Phinehas carried the ark to the battle field, the Israelites with renewed morale, raised a loud shout the reverberations of which reached as far as the Philistine camp (1 Samuel 4:5). But while the Philistines were afraid of a god coming into the Hebrew camp, the men of Ibadan who know of the coming of the Egbas are afraid because their defeat is imminent or so it seems to them.

Contrarily, although the Ibadan people are professing modernism, they unlike the Ijaiyes who are professing traditionalism have to consult an oracle. Like King Odewale, they know that the battle is only won from the spiritual realm. So, they have to consult the gods. Their war general, Balogun Ibikunle not only consults Kujenyo, an aged witch doctor but also offers a costly sacrifice in order to cast a spell on the Ijaiyes.

But whether the spell works or whether the Egbas actually want to finish the battle quickly in order to run back home for fear of their enemies from Dahomey, the whole army in spite of Kurunmi’s initial resistance, crosses the Ose River as the witch doctor predicted. Historically, the implication is that without their crossing this river, the Ijaiyes would have their forces under the protection of their battlement and so, it would have been impossible for the Ibadan warriors to go in and defeat them.

Furthermore, we now see a tussle where the Ijaiyes are losing and this tussle is one between the forces of modernism (although using elements of traditionalism) and those of traditionalism with a splashing of modernism. In the latter, we see some whites on the side of Kurunmi. This does in no way exculpate him from his traditional stance if we assess him from the cause he is fighting for.

Hence, the play is on the path of the African society developing gradually on its own using forces evolving naturally and not external ones artificially grafted to it. It is therefore note worthy to report Rev. Mann saying:

Our prayers have failed.

Sweat has failed;

Blood and only blood now stands to triumph

Blood ... only blood (78).

Therefore, western medicine provided by Rev. and Mrs. Mann and American riflemen in the service of the Ijaiyes and Egba infantry -- ephemeral grafts on a hard and decadent traditionalism -- cannot help Ijaiye in the face of such potent sacrifices made by the Ibadan warriors. In other words, the new wine poured into old wine skin can only result into losing both when the old skin bursts to spill the wine and destroy itself. No wonder Captain Dolbein gives up and quits and Mrs. Mann is carried away in a stretcher for the exodus of the whole white community. Or what can we say? Is this the case of the proverbial rats escaping from a sinking and wave-battered ship before the final catastrophe?

Thus deserted even by the Egbas and receiving the report of the death of this five sons, the old general has no alternative, and being a hero in the form of all the Are-Ona-Kakanfo before and after him (who have never been known to die naturally), he takes poison to die honourably telling his wife and aid-de-camp where to bury his body.

But he does not die until he comes into self-discovery like all Aristotelian tragic heroes. This realization which starts

with “the internal wrangling between himself and his deputies arising from his domineering disposition” (Obafemi 101) must also include his refusal “to believe the toll age is taking on him” and that “the gods are not with him” (Obafemi 102).

Finally, when we look at the history of Ijaiye what can we get from this tragic story? Is it not the history of how one man brings ruin to a whole town since whatever happens there is what he wants to happen?

Therefore, the contradictions seen in her are the contradictions in the Are’s mind. It is because of him that we can rightly conclude that the society is one of innate contradictions: rejecting the white man’s religion but accepting his medicine; rejecting the call to invite the British consul in Lagos and accepting both the British and American military aid; touting traditionalism and harbouring the white man; professing traditional religion and not enquiring and sacrificing to the gods.

But since we know that these are the contradictions in the Area, we can exculpate the town. No wonder then that are and his five sons have to give way at the end, for the town to follow a better charted course.

Further on the historical implication of *Kurunmi*, one can see cyclical pattern in the affairs of men for what happened in the past may have certain resemblance with current happenings. That can explain why Rotimi discloses the ease with which the audience of a performance of *Kurunmi* perceives the similarity of the Ijaiye wars with the civil war going on at that time. According to him: “I did not however studiously relate the play to it. But to my surprise, when audiences watch the production of *Kurunmi*, they nicknamed characters in the play judging from their actions and utterances after some prominent Nigerian war lords” (Obafemi 98).

What this audience perceived as an underlying intention of the playwright is what can be perceived in the other

chosen texts since Rotimi's usage of historical tales is an idiom for the explication of certain social conditions.

In addition, one can see that changes whether positive or negative must occur. When they do, the stubborn person who is out of touch with reality will have to reposition his stand. In other words, with passage of time, irksome traditions must change so as to adapt to current happenings. Any person who resists this change can be crushed to death depending on the enormity of this change. This is graphically stated in the view of Affiah Uwem:

He [Kurunmi] is jingoistic, rigid and proud. He is monolineal in fixation and averse to dialogue, consultation and discussion. He is contentious of the people and opposes their collective wish, and to crown it all, he is reckless with the use of power. The end can only be tragic for him, his people and mankind in general (54).

It is here that we draw the curtain in order to prepare for the entrance of a less heroic leader and a pacifist, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi of the Benin kingdom.

OvonramwenNogbaisi

Historically, Ovonramwen came to the throne at a time fraught with problems. Vassal states like those of Akure, Ekpoma, Itskeiri were hankering for independence. Also internally, the kingdom was one of unrest even from some chiefs who were against the high handedness of the King. But the mother of all threats came from Britain which was in search of trade and colonialism. Such was the historical predicament of Ovonramwen.

In the play, Rotimi has it that his aim is to recreate the picture of the King, "a man long portrayed by the basis of colonial history in the mien of the most abominable sadist but

in actuality “a man more sinned against than he ever sinned” (xi).

The opening scene can make an unwary reader agree with the British that actually, this King can be a sadist. This is where he condemns two Benin chiefs, Obarudugbon and Sasoyen to death. But a shift in opinion can come when one gets to know them further in that they killed the King’s chief adviser. But according to them, this act was in retaliation to the King’s killing of their brother who tried to obstruct his rise to the throne.

But apart from showing the King as being ruthless and fearless, this scene brings out one of the conditions that help to transform the behaviour of this monarch. It is here that one of the condemned men, Essasoyen prophetically utters:

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

This statement not only foreshadows the imminent descent of the whites into the kingdom but also the terror they are to strike into the King. As he kills the chiefs, so will he be killed by the whites.

From passages such as this, Ovonramwen is said to have:

An undaunted confidence in his own powers and ability, so much so that he deals with his own chiefs with levity and impunity. He sees himself as the moon and his chiefs as tiny stars. And these chiefs’ attempts, he sees as tiny stars crisis-crossing, out-shining each other to rival the moon itself (Obafemi 105).

All along, there is musical rendition of the Oba’s power being compared with that of the chiefs he condemns. Ovonramwen is eulogized: he is chosen by the gods as the bulwark of the land; he is an elephant which cannot tumble at a push, and so on.

Artistically, music is now an integral part of the dramatic rendition of the grandeur of the court, of assessing the

dramatic activities, and of commenting on both actions and characters.

His military alertness shows also in the solution he gives to the following issues: rebellion brewing in Akure where the Udezi has fashioned two swords for himself, the greedy judgment given to the Ijekiri people over a trade imbalance with Benin traders, the establishment of the heir apparent to the throne of Ekpoma. In all this, he is being hailed as the home leopard. The impression one gets of him is that he is nothing short of an epic hero.

But such a posture is soon undercut when an Ifa priest divines for him the future. According to him, the future only holds death: “bodies of men ... fire ... and blood -- bodies floating” (15). The hollowness in him reveals itself when he immediately reads the meaning of the statement: his chiefs plotting to kill him as they killed Uwangu Egiebo. When that is laid aside, his mind turns to the event of civil war. In other words, this epic man is not the home leopard he is said to be but a man looking for protection and is inwardly terrified.

Like such men, he seeks solution to this portentous anarchy only to be told by the priest “caution ... that is the word-caution” (15). From here proceed his future dealings with all. So, when the white traders arrive, he is “cautious” enough to refuse them ingress. When his messengers want to get the white men’s gifts (a bicycle tube and a photograph of Queen Victoria), he is cautious enough to warn them not to.

It is after this episode that his manhood starts shattering into pieces and when those white men depart, the next stage direction reads: “Ovonramwen paces about in deep thoughts as the chanting of the Ifa priest echoes over loudspeakers on to the stage, indicating the focus of those thoughts” (20). This is an artistic method of taking us into his mind: “a crucial phrase used by the Ifa priest echoes over the amplifiers in the theatre. This stage direction indicates Ovonramwen’s reaction” (Etherton 150).

But his fears are justified in that the British are hell bent on entering into Benin. As one of them Philips says, the entry is necessary since “I also get the blame from London for every blasted minute that passes without an effective enforcement of the 1892 trade treaty with Benin” (31).

Therefore, if it were not for this epoch-making treaty which Ovonramwen is too cautious to uphold, the whites would not have forced their way into Benin after they have been told that during the Ague festival, it is against tradition for strangers to enter into the city and for even the Oba to be seen. In a chain of events, Ovonramwen would have been safe in his kingdom.

Then, the playwright artistically allows the voice of the Ifa priest to echo through loudspeakers in order “to shroud the somber reality of Ovonramwen’s decision making” (34). So, when it is clear that the tradition of the Ague ceremony must be desecrated, he accepts to welcome the white visitors. As he sees it, it is safer to annoy the gods than the white man. Due to his harping on the word “caution,” his aides are undecided as to the correct meaning of his stand -- whether to kill the whites or not.

But in actual fact, he is not for a confrontational stance against the whites. This stance irks them since they are not privy to the knowledge of the Ifa oracle. It can then be understood when some of them without his knowledge attack and kill seven white men bringing him their heads as a trophy.

Concerning the death of these seven white men in spite of their superior firearms, one can see that no matter highly placed one is, one can still be confronted by unexpected misfortune. To the whites, the Benin people are there to be defeated easily. What they fail to understand is the import of the proverb that when one overlooks the midget pot, it can boil over and quench the fire. As Samuel O. Chukwu-Okoronkwo puts it: “That arrogant defiance and stubborn insistence exhibited by Consul Philips, the leader of the British team in entering Benin during the Ague festival despite all warnings

cost them seven lives” (21). These lives would have been spared if not because of their “arrogant defiance and stubborn insistence.”

Another point worth noting is what happens when the chiefs are discussing whether to go to war or not. After one of them Obayuwana wants to know whether they are to be ready for war or for the white man’s inroad into Benin despite warning, there is immediately a blackout. What follows is the roar of war chants. Artistic excellence such as this cannot be expected in the earlier phase of African literary drama -- using light to talk copiously on the state of the nation. This darkness is none other than the darkness and cataclysm which are about to engulf the state.

Next to come up is a device already noted -- the split stage technique. On the stage are both the whites planning their attack and the Binis, their defence. These two areas are alternately lit up by a pool of light -- one fading to blackness as the other brightens. Etherton has observed that the effect of this device is to convey the urgency of the operation (51).

Finally, Consul General Moor and Ologbosere bearing the British flag and the Benin ‘Ada’ respectively represent their armies. This symbolic illustration of war though space and time saving has a negative effect of dousing our emotion. Our expectation of seeing bullets and cannon shots, wounded warriors wailing, the heroism and cowardice associated with war, and so on is simply stifled. But no matter the effect on us, the artistic impression of the defeat of the great Benin kingdom by the small Anglo-Saxon island has been effectively conveyed.

Synchronizing with the progress of the war is the British martial music which swells forth and drowns the already dying beats of Benin war drums. Therefore, even the blind that cannot see the “Ada” falling can interpret what has happened. Hence, Rotimi can tell his tales in more ways than one.

Also, we can further see another implication here: whenever a people have been defeated, everything belonging to them is defeated and goes under. Here, the “Ada” which is their national symbol has fallen under, the war drums also have emitted their last beats, and even the Oba has taken to his heels thereby giving the white looter ingress to prowl around and pillage not only the king’s palace but the shrines. Greedily, they remove elephant tusks, carvings and bronze works. Who knows whether that was the time when they took away the carving which was later bought back by the country for Festac 77?

It is here that we look at Rotimi’s assertion that Ovonramwen is “a man more sinned against than he ever sinned.” In his attempt to clear him, he falls into another trap in that the picture of the man that comes out is that of a weakling who has to be reminded by Roupell of the role expected of him: “Tell him that a big man must behave like a big man” (49).

This is a man terribly afraid of death and so on his way back to his kingdom after three months in hiding in order to surrender, has to run back. According to him, “But ... warning reached me that you [Roupell] and your soldiers were all over in the bushes waiting to kill me” (52). This makes him to scamper back to hide in the bush for another three months.

Therefore, the casting of his new image is the casting of a weakling. We have seen other historical heroes choosing to drink hemlock in order to assert their manliness and convictions. They refuse to escape even when friends try to offer them assistance. If Macbeth were to compare his action and the cognomens surrounding him earlier, he would automatically dub these cognomens as “a giant robe upon a dwarfish thief.”

Hence, Rotimi has succeeded to tell us that this is a life loving and weak King whose glory is simply a product of what his ancestors built over the years. So, when he is told to surrender, he is temporarily held back by shame. His chiefs prodding him to do so for the sake of Benin is just a façade. He

would have done so all the same because inwardly “the home leopard” is just a fearful lamb that is out to save his life.

Therefore, the current researchers’ interpretation of this historical figure judging from all his actions is that Rotimi in his attempt to correct history only succeeds in portraying the Oba as a shy dog with its tail between its legs who scurries away out of harm’s way as soon as there is an inkling of danger. His desire to fight as soon as he rejoins Ologbosere is just the case of this shy and timid dog explicating its un-heroic behaviour by blurting out one or two half hearted barks from its protective enclave.

Obayuwana would not have done like him. As for Ologbosere, he has disappeared into the forest from where he has been giving the intruders sleepless nights. Not only is the former of these two warriors not submissive, he gallantly takes his own life which the weak King unashamedly claims as an honour done to him. Furthermore, Obayuwana would not have gone on placating the white man by telling him reasons for killing the seven white people. The mother of all desecrations comes after pointing out what was done to King Jaja and Chief Nana, he goes on to say:

If the fire can consume the tortoise with the iron coat,
why

not the fowl with the feathered gown (60).

In other words, this weakling is telling a total stranger that Opobo and Ashanti are stronger than Benin -- the fabled great kingdom of Idu and Oba.

On further being told that he is to be taken to Calabar and Yoruba towns, he scampers into the bush in order to hide. The fear-ruptured King reiterates that his journey is to be in the night “in the secrecy of darkness” (64). The fear-tormented King also reiterates the need for secrecy: “Secrecy. Keep the plans hushed, pray you” (64).

Then, we are told that “Absently Ovonramwen descends the dais and follows Uzazakpo” – a King on and out

of the throne following the ideas and promptings of a court jester. It is worthy of note that Lear out of the throne had the jester or fool trailing behind him and not the other way round. But here Ovonramwen even on the throne is following the ideas of the jester and when out of it, he is being led and protected by him.

It is not surprising that while they are in the bush, the anti-hero has to take turns with his jester in sleeping and keeping watch. Therefore, it is actually a truth that there is no difference between a king and a commoner. It is just a matter of condition. As Uzazakpo crudely puts it, "Tiredness comes to the poor man too as it does to the Oba, you know" (68).

When he is finally inside the hut is when the final sinning against him is done by his chiefs. They betray him. We see Uzaazakpo playing his thumb piano and singing a song the theme of which is security. The playwright in a stage direction writes that the light is of medium intensity. Later, when the hut where the Oba is hiding is surrounded by soldiers, we are told that the light is full. The light is being used to tell us that the Oba's presence has turned from half secrecy to an open secret. The full impact can be seen when the hut crashes to the ground to expose the fugitive to the full glare of the light and the soldiers who have come to arrest him.

Etherton in assessing the Oba has a long list of mistakes awaiting his correction:

Trusting Uzuzakpo who advised him to make Ologbosere his favoured general; despairing of the oracle's prophecy; not placing his generals specifically under his orders when the crisis first loomed; not disciplining them after they had decapitated the seven white men; surrendering himself; not committing suicide (154).

Another mistake he makes which serves as a historical implication of the play is his high handedness and his not delegating some duties to his subordinates. Has he learnt this,

he would not have been directly involved with the execution of Obaruduagbon and Esaseyen for this “meets with disdain from most of the Benin chiefs whose loyalties to the Oba begin to wane” (Chukwu-Okonkwo 21).

The culmination of this ruptured relationship between the Oba and his chiefs is further looked into by Smauel O. Chukwu-Okoronkwo. According to him:

At the fall of Benin, these are the very ones who persuaded him to forget his status and self and submit to the British force by paying homage to Captain Roupel. These are also the very ones who in order to save themselves, betray him when he tries to hide from the white man, the second time, at the fall of Benin (21).

The historical implication is that no matter your social status, condescend to understand those who are under you or when you need them most, they will fail and betray you. This is a warning to present and future leaders.

Again, let us draw the curtain in order to look at a Greek hero whom Rotimi invited to our shores to help him interpret a Nigerian political and historical event -- King Odewale of Kutuje.

The God's are not to Blame

Before we go forward, let it be made clear that the extensive treatment given to the other texts will be lacking. This is due to the pages already taken up. Let it also be known that the adaptation or the Africanization given to Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex* is not Rotimi's attempt “at rewriting the Oedipus legend in Yoruba but a very successful recreation” (Dathorne 317). It is a recreation that turns out to explain our existential predicament as having come to us through our colonial master who should not blame us for any anomaly as the narrator tells us: “The land of Kutuje/had known peace and seen quiet/for some time/until/the people of Ikolu/taking advantage of death in the palace/attacked Kutuje” (15).

What we can understand from the shift in confrontation from the sphinx of Sophocles' original work to real attack from human neighbours is to bring to the fore the ethnic confrontation in our country. This can be better understood when we know that the first dramatization of the play was in 1968, at the heat of the Nigerian civil war. Therefore, this play is an extension of *Kurunmi* but seen from another perspective and so it requires our attention even if for a moment. This is more so when "Rotimi suggested in a published interview that the play was an allegory on the civil war in Nigeria ... Odewale represents tribalism in Nigeria ..." (Etherton 127).

Furthermore, "Rotimi ... warns the developing African nations not to put the blame for their shortcomings on the former colonial masters. The title implies that these political gods -- France, America, Russia, Britain, etc. shouldn't be blamed or held responsible for our national failings" (Ogunbesan 25).

However, the statement is to be the other way round: the colonial master should not blame the colonies since their actions seem to predestinate their misdemeanor in the same way that the god's prophecies have been hounding Odewale even from childhood. Firstly, he would have grown up as Adetusa's son if not for the oracle. Secondly, he would have been persistently haunted to patricide and incest. Finally, it is them that turn round to spread death in the land of Kutuje and when called upon, they turn round to reveal Odewale's complicity.

No wonder then that Etherton states that:

The gods are indeed the cause of Odewale's downfall for his particular crimes would not have been committed if there had been no prophecy. He would have grown up in his family, hot tempered perhaps but there is nothing in his character to suggest that he could ever commit patricide and incest (127).

Finally, some of the stylistic devices in the former plays are here. These are images and idioms of speech, foreshadowing, flashback, etc. As was also noted earlier, all these devices are used in the extension not only of the plot but of the theme. But an illustration will suffice.

Here, we take the flashback dramatization of the killing of King Adetusa. As it is in *African Literature Today vol. 11*, this scene “besides amplifying the action of the play ... makes possible a delayed dramatic climax ...” (Jones 181).

But to our understanding, it shows how the events of yester years crop up to disquiet the life of today, and as we stated earlier, the gods of our former existence should not blame us since they forcibly yoked together disparate entitles in order to bring about the tribalism and death of today.

In his study of the play, Sola Balogun elicits some lessons worth noting. According to this analyst, “In the drama, the audience is sensitized on the need for humanity to imbibe universal virtues of love, tolerance, patience and peace” (473). These are lacking in Odewale and as such, he has gone to the full extent of what the gods predestined for him. Definitely, the lack of these in him, helps in his killing his biological father.

Conclusion

Before we draw the curtain, what we have done so far is to look at two historical plays of Ola Rotimi and give the implications of the episodes related therein as they appear to us. As we have seen, some of these episodes are commentaries which he made on certain issues in society.

As for *Kurunmi*, not being fully aware of what he has done, he was x-raying the Nigeria civil war. This is what brought us to *The Gods* which Rotimi himself said is his allegory on the same topic. As for *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, his attempt to rewrite the protagonist’s history and clear his name

of such indictments like sadism and cruelty, though successful, has ended up in a mockery.

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