



DRAMA, LEADERSHIP AND HISTORICAL INTERFACE: A DISCOURSE OF OLA ROTIMI'S *KURUNMI*.

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between drama and politics has been a recurrent theme in many plays over time. Ancient Greco-Roman plays presented the subject in many forms. This paper sets out to discuss the leadership question as raised in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. In examining the dramatist's view of leadership in Nigeria, the paper presents Rotimi's preoccupation in the reconstruction of Nigeria's political history. The paper discusses how the playwright created a theatrical interface between drama, leadership and history. It argues that drama like all the composite art is a product of history and presents the relationship between drama and history as contiguous in the distillation of the playwright's task towards the development of human societies. The paper uses plays, critical works and journals that treat the subject of drama and politics to present the opinion. Arguments are also drawn from other related plays by Ola Rotimi to portray the contention that the playwrights tended to track the dialogue between history and politics in the picturization of the Nigerian script. Ola Rotimi is presented in this paper as a writer in defense of the ruling class. In the view of the paper, Rotimi, being a product of an actual historical process, has consciously or unconsciously articulated drama as an iconic conception that tends to resolve the link between historical forces and social relations. The paper concludes that through the creative process the dramatist can be involved in the process of remaking and reconstruction of history.

Key words: Playwrights, history, drama, contiguity, poitics

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We playwrights ...aim to...democratize history; and demonstrate how participation is not only possible, but vital, at every level of society...

The urgency [is] to revise the prevailing historiography...to make visible those who have been kept conspiratorially in the margins of history. Too much of our attention has been given to warriors, to the sons and siblings of Ogun, as if they alone make history...Hence...we see only destroyers and tyrants.

(Femi Osofisan *Insidious Treason* 7).

INTRODUCTION

Drama is the artistic union of facts capable of deciphering the specifics of space and time. As it was in history so has it been with drama. Drama can be a reflection of history. The text is the dramatist mode of interpreting history. That is the historical episodes of yesterday form the epicenter of the theatrical scenarios of today. Apart from being a voice of vision, the dramatist is essentially a product of history. Drama is an intellectual and imaginative activity, which draws much succor from history as one of its major provider of sources and raw materials. In borrowing the allusion from Elechi Amadi, "to set up a shrine [a drama] the dibia must have a piece of the earth (history)" (5). It is to this extent that the dramatist needs history if he must appeal to his audience's sense of reasoning. To give voice to the audience is to activate the essence history. This gives meaning and relevance works of art. Even though the dramatist draws from other sources like myths, folklores, legends, oral tradition, culture, religion, etc., history provides the base and foundation for him. Like Elechi Amadi's explanation, the earth, or the platform on which the dramatist must stand to move his world is history. This analogy agrees with the thinking of the famous Greek mathematician, Archimedes in explaining the relationship between philosophy and matter, and between ideas and reality. To be able to affect the present and therefore avoid the mistakes of the past, a good knowledge of that past is necessary for the reconstruction of the future. In an attempt to do this, the dramatist resurrects the past (history) because,

Owing to the peculiar nature of our situation it would be futile to try to take off before we have repaired our foundations. We must first set the scene which is authentically African; then what follows will be meaningful and deep. This I think is what Aime Cesair mean when he said that the short cut to the future is via the present (Amadi 2).

The importance of linking social, political or even economic strategies is a fundamental basis of development. Playwrights like Ola Rotimi have resorted to the historical past as a way of doing a

total examination of the people represented in his play. Peoples past histories often times are reflected in the

Some Basic Clarifications

The relationship between drama and history is as original as it is organic. It is organic because the two disciplines have had an inseparable incipience; it is original because both drama and history are linked by their social and humanist content. This is without any attempt at pretentious deployment of historical actors. The universe of history and drama often times locate a target audience energized exclusively by a cast of healthy performers of the society of choice. These historical/dramatis personae are, in both disciplines, not presented as a mass of items without individuation and playing characters to passive and inanimate matter. Whether in history or in drama, the subject is always about people; life, breathing visionary men who are themselves protagonists and archetypes of the incidentals and vicissitudes of life. This, of course, is albeit the ideological dispositions of the author. The example of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* presented in this paper is a visible example of this position.

The reality of the events of history provides complexities oftentimes enunciated by the dramatist. Every dramatic scenario presented in the text provides an opportunity for the dramatist to submit a commentary on the oftentimes variegated concurs of historical moments. Sometimes the dramatist may use an actual historical incident as in the case of *Kurunmi*. Other times he may decide to sojourn into the encyclopedia of expatriate history that bears some relevance to the situation the artist wants to situate. Wole Soyinka did this in *The Bacchae of Euripides*. Ola Rotimi played out the same corona in his *The gods are not to Blame*. In these cases, the dramatists chose the medium of adaptation. William Shakespeare, an English dramatist used the legendary historical Julius Caesar as the protagonist for his play *Julius Caesar*. Through these, the various playwrights added their voices to the historical situations of their times. While it is the duty of the historian to maintain the sanctity of historical data, the dramatists seek to re-interpret and re-create historical facts. Drama and history are

processes of intellectual communications that tend to articulate humanism through different perspectives. But most importantly, while history aggregates past event, drama envision historical truths and subject them to innovative imaginations for changing conditions.

The play *Kurunmi*:

Apparently, *Kurunmi* dramatizes the conflict between tradition and change. It demonstrates the need for change through the dramatic vehicle of confrontation. In this play, conflict is presented as the bedrock of change. The opening of the play leaves no one in doubt that the mother board of the drama is confrontation. *Kurunmi*, the titler hero has just arrived from a meeting in Oyo, the seat of the Alafin who is crown king of Oyo kingdom. He informs us that Alafin Atiba has decided to change tradition by appointing his son Adelu, the heir-apparent. This means that the incumbent king is to be succeeded by his son Adelu. Traditionally this was wrong since, "Whenever an Alafin dies, his first son that Alafin's first son, must also die with him" (*Kurunmi*, p.19). Unfortunately, to *Kurunmi*'s chagrin, the Alafin passes the unconstitutional verdict and by so doing, what is apparently anti tradition becomes lawfully binding. To oppose the legality is to confront legitimacy, to antagonize constituted authority. The choices for the people of Oyo kingdom were:

- i) to stick to tradition and risk confrontation with the Alafin; or
- ii) to ignore tradition and respect authority and allow peace to reign.

The camp divide was clear. *Kurunmi* chooses the part of antagonism. Soon we hear of the death of Alafin Atiba and the coronation of his son, Adelu as the new Alafin. *Kurunmi* refuses to pay homage to the new Alafin who later sends emissaries to inquire why *Kurunmi* refused to attend the ceremony of installation of the new monarch. As *Are Onakakanfor*, the generalissimo of the kingdom, this was out of place. *Kurunmi* replies with insult and contempt by sending a gift of soiled cloth to the Alafin. The battle line is drawn and the die is cast.

In spite of warnings and spirited protestations from *Kurunmi*'s lieutenants and chiefs, he declares war against the Alafin, indeed against

the very kingdom he was expected to protect. With this scenario, the stage is set for war. The unfolding consequence of bloodletting. Succeeding experiences are traumatic. The ensuing conflagrations proved to be one of the most horrendous tragic confrontations in the history of the Oyo Empire. The strength of the dissident warrior was too substandard for the superior firepower of the Empire. *Kurunmi* is overpowered. To make his defeat even more traumatic, his five sons die in the war. When *Kurunmi* learns of this, he commits suicide.

Discussions

Usually in human history wars are prompted by political and economic intolerance or rivalry. The history of any war therefore is usually an excursion into the politics and economic forces at play in the area (Ajayi and Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the 19th Century* (80).

The above statement is important to the understanding of the plot of *Kurunmi*. In this play, Ola Rotimi is involved in the re-interpretation of an actual historical incident. The play dramatizes the Ijaiye war in Yoruba land in the 19th century. The contextual issues raised in the drama encapsulate the conflict of power and contest for political and economic control over land and commerce. As enunciated in the pot, the key actors of the conflict are Dahomey, Ibadan and Oyo. In their struggle for control, each party saw the need for alliance with other states that have common interests within the region. This necessitated the pulling together of military resources for mutual understanding aimed at ensuring sovereignty and hegemony. The mechanism to dominate neighboring states and gain the economic muscle to further control territorial trade routes around the region became increasingly important. Naturally, the Egba who have a score to settle with the Ibadan allied with Ijaiye forces to fight against Ibadan hoping in the process to recapture their ancestral homeland. As evidenced from the source below,

What weighed most heavily with them [Egba] was the 'intriguing correspondence' between Dahomey and Ibadan and Oyo, the possibility of a coalition between them,

perhaps with Ijebu assistance, to destroy Abeokuta. They were impressed by the Are's argument that the real objective of the Ibadan was probably Abeokuta, and they had attacked Ijaiye first only to clear the way. Or as it was expressed at Abeokuta, that Ogunmola the Olan of Ibadan had threatened to share the occupants once he had finished shaving the crown of the head. Besides this genuine fear, hatred of Ibadan lingered at Abeokuta. It was Ibadan that had taken the lead in destroying Egba towns and villages in the 1820s. The Egba had by no means forgotten their old home-stead where the ashes of their fathers lay in farms belonging to Ibadan...Alliance with Ijaiye might well prove the first step in the recovery of the old Egba country (82-83).

From what has been presented so far, one can say that two predominant issues are of paramount importance:

- 1] the issue of idealism which presents itself as centrifugal to the discord, and;
- 2] the question of existentialism which is occasioned by the social relations that offers explanation to the circumstances of history.

Idealism presents itself in defense of tradition. It is possible to say that this is Ola Rotimi's technique of re-interpreting history and contribution to the process of reconstruction. Past and contemporary imperialist history have presented Africa as a continent whose only social relations are limited to inter-tribal wars, political acrimonies and horrendous barbaric conflagrations. Through *Kurunmi*, Ola Rotimi presents a thesis of historical import. The thrust of this thesis is the creative fleshpot that expounds the conflict in *Kurunmi* as one spurred by deep nationalist interests. This methodology presents patriotism as a tragic flaw, which plays out well in *Kurunmi*'s characterization. The incidents of the drama take a heavy toll on the audience emotions and one is easily moved to sympathize with the tragic hero. History is portrayed as a dress rehearsal for convoluting discourse of

unending human denigration. In *Kurunmi* Ola Rotimi articulates his thesis that drama is an artistic process aimed at the sanctification of history. According to Rotimi,

We use drama to distil historical facts into historical truths...if we immerse historical facts in the liquid of imagination...[then] historical truth [becomes] a statement with contemporary applicability in the human context, [which] relate[s] facts to the specifics of space and time (Rotimi 41).

This provides the nucleus of the thesis. According to this view, drama is *a play of giants* (Soyinka 1982) where the conquistadors "fret and strut upon the stage" (Shakespeare), looking for whom to devour.

This brings to bear the issue of existentialism. From the foregoing, one can say that drama and indeed history are procedural disciplines that seek to interpret society from the context of economic discernments and the premise of social relations. For the historian and the dramatist, economics perceptiveness, social order, historical forces and pressures, all add up to provide the necessary inspirational memoirs. History, economics, politics and social forces to a great extent determine human actions. In this way, human actions are spurred by fundamental social and economic forces at play in their lives. These are also major forces that determine the course of history. Capital and material resources are principal agents that motivate actions. They determine the individual commitment to political beliefs, principles or views. State politics and economics are reactions to available capital. These also provide some of the vital instruments for assessment and interpretation of human activities. It is in line with this that the paper agrees with Achebe Chinua's view that "those who want to resurrect an illustrious ancestor ...may sometimes receive a great shock when the illustrious ancestors show up. But I think it is still necessary that he should appear (2).

From the topological characterization of the titular hero that Ola Rotimi portrayed in the play, one notes a consistency with Achebe's presentation of the entrance of one of Africa's "illustrious ancestors" in the appearance of *Kurunmi*. We see an ancestor, this time not as a masquerade, but in the

guise of a Generalissimo, *Are Onakakanfor* of Ijaye. Once again, a historical figure is portrayed on the dramatic landscape. The dramatist validated the course of history.

But whether the visibility of this historical pontification is done in the light of class rectitude or pasteurized in defense of status integrity is an issue worth examining. Drama caresses emotions as it employs virtuosity for the purpose of entertainment, pleasure by envisioning the sanctity and functionalization of the process. In the school of drama, imagination, creativity, vision and aesthetics are key resources. To validate the historical configuration Ola Rotimi put these resources to use.

This perhaps, is what makes us to juxtapose the historical Kurunmi with the legendary hero in the drama. What we read in history is the story of a man interested in power, capital, investment and possessions. In history we read about kurunmi who was prejudiced by power tussle. Authority, power supremacy, control of economic resources were the driving forces of the "illustrious ancestor" presented in history. This scenario is different from that of the play. In history we read about the the inherent social and economic interface that arose as a result of the attitudes of the emergent comprador bourgeoisies which provided the stage for the 19th century Ijaye war. This was characterized by inter and intra – class political power struggles. In the ensuing contradictions, European merchants backed by the Queen of England, capitalized and further aggravated the warfare in the 19th century Oyo kingdom. Kurunmi in history was a classical example of the situation in the dependent feudal economy in Africa in the 19th century.

It will be necessary to mention that prior to the coming of colonialism, trade and commerce flourished in several parts of the African continent. This necessitated certain levels of commercial links within and outside the continent. The commercial relationships further strengthened economic and political institutions especially in the West African sub region (Ajayi and Smith 83). This was not favorable to the structures of colonialism, which sort new political formations to protect the new power block and colonial interests. Since the new interests

drew new allies, it was easy to play one State against another.

In addition, the strategic position occupied by the old Oyo with particular references to the trade routes, which linked the sub - region directly to the Atlantic Ocean, made the struggle for ownership and control of the region very fierce. Whoever controlled the routes also controlled the economic activities of the region (Ajayi and Smith 84). These economic and political factors were fundamental and, to a great extent, dictated the causes of the wars in the 19th century Oyo kingdom.

Therefore, the central question of tradition and change enunciated by Ola Rotimi in the drama is a falsification of history in the light of the playwright's interest. The playwright has used his artistic license to re-construct history by arguing another case of tragedy in favor of the titler hero, Kurunmi. The subject of "change" and "tradition" as articulated in the play obscures an essentially obvious ideological leaning. Again, even in drama, history is presented as the product of an individual. By falsifying historical antecedents, and creating a tragic hero out of a monarch, the playwright has subjected the cause of humanity to the glorification of the ruling class. It is the deification of tyranny. A legendary character may not always be an illustrious ancestor.

For us in theatre history, writing historical plays is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's analogy in *A Dance of the Forest*, a play that he submitted as his contribution to the celebration of Nigeria's independence in October 1 1960. Note that the major characters that generated the force of movement in *A Dance of the Forest* were artists and historians. 1st October 1960 was a dramatic and historical time both for the play and for Nigeria. Eleven years after Soyinka's play, Ola Rotimi emerged with *Kurunmi*, illustrating a similar scenario. Fifty-two years after, the same situation persists with playwrights articulating the cause of the ruling class. The air of the dependence continues to hang in the air. It is the duty of the dramatist and historians to demonstrate that the discipline of history, like life is a continuous process. History is not a finished product and should not be depicted as a dead end. Our depiction of reality is ensure the

democratization of history. Historical truth is the demonstration of democratic knowledge. Wars are fought not only by Army Generals most of who command their forces through communication gargets from the rear. The 'other ranks' that are usually in the front line must also occupy important positions when the histories of the wars they fight are written in plays.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the relationship between drama and politics, particularly within the context of a specific historical instance. In doing this we used the example of how a prominent Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi drew his dramaturgy from the 19th century Yoruba warfare in southwestern Nigeria. The playwright immersed historical facts in the fluidity of imagination and the mixture produced the dramatic analogy, which tended to reinterpret history in the light of the playwright's view. He has used the specifics of legendary artefacts to relate with the phenomenal prodigies space and time.

We have also noted that the playwright's attitude to history will determine his approach, methodology and ideological position. Being a product of an actual social process, the playwright's imagination and approach to creativity are informed by his reflection of the reality of his class. This means that dramatic perspectives are intellectual projections of ideological reflections.

This has shown that history can be a good resource for dramatic engagements. It has also shown that the dramatist can reconstruct history, thereby contributing interactive frameworks to the many needs for social cohesion in Nigeria. Drawing from the social, economic and political convolutions in Nigeria since 1960, nothing can be more relevant than the move for cohesion.

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