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## Strengths and Weaknesses of Ola Rotim's Adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* for the African Theatre in *The Gods Are Not To Blame*

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### Abstract

*The play, **The Gods Are Not to Blame** is quite a successful adaptation of the Theban play, King Dedipus. On the surface, it would look as if Rotimi tries to copy Sophocles play without changing much. But as this paper has been able to prove, Rotimi successfully adapts the play for the African theatre. First of all, **Oedipus Rex** is mainly concerned with increasing faith in the gods and with ensuring that people pay obeisance to the gods. Oedipus commits the sin of hubris by seeking human solutions to a divine problem, and so his suffering is justified. Rotimi is not interested in drawing his people nearer to God or to the gods. Rather, he wants to draw them away from their superstition and general lack of initiative and hard work. Besides using the play to address Nigeria's numerous problems at independence, Rotimi also brings in a lot of changes in the original Greek play. He dispenses with the chorus, in their place; he relies on the narrator and chiefs of Kutuje. He replaces Greek chants with African songs; he employs proverbs, riddles and other embellishments of language that are peculiar to the Yorubas. Besides, he introduces Yoruba incantations and black magic, especially in the mime where king Odewale kills his father, King Adetusa. All in all, it is a very successful adaptation.*

### Introduction

Many African writers and critics have often stressed the need for African drama to come away from the slavish imitation of foreign literary model and draw from its cultural and literary past to form a coatinium from traditional

drama to modern drama. They agree that the drama cannot be fully developed except draws from its cultural past. Ossie Onuora Enekeve states that the form of an African play must be authentically African for it to be called an African play. In his publication in *Nsukka Studies in African Literature* 1:1 Enekeve asserts that African drama fails to attract a large audience on this score.

Adeyinka Adedeji seems to accept this view when he says in *The Theatre in an African University: Appearance and Reality* that,

Theatre has come to stay in the African university. Let us use its resources to recreate an authentic self for our self; release our productive energies in creating a culture and can therefore germinate eternal seeds for universal consumption.

Also contributing to this on-going debate as to what should consist African art, Makouta-Mbougou says in *Black African Literature: What Tradition* that,

To develop while at the same time remaining itself, black art should reinvigorate itself through its own roots. But it also needs the help of other civilizations. Perhaps certain of their methods, when these are truly in the service of humanity, can help black art and culture find themselves again... But only these artists are in a position to choose the Western methods that are capable of helping our art to personalize itself again.

Many African writers and critics alike agree with this view that African art, 'whether in English or French, (should be directed) primarily to the African audience. The more radical critics like Chinweizu and his group will insist that we depend entirely on the African imagination, flora and fauna for the materials with which to work as African artists. All the same, Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie (1980:239) say that,

... Contemporary African culture is under foreign domination. Therefore, on the one hand, our culture has to destroy all encrustations of colonial mentality, and on the other hand, has to map out new foundations for an African modernity. This cultural task demands a deliberate and calculated process of syncretism: one which, above all, emphasizes valuable continues with our pre-colonial culture, welcomes vitalising contributions from other cultures, and exercises inventive

genius in making a healthy and distinguished synthesis from them all.

Ola Rotimi seems to answer this call on African artists to contribute to the growth of African art through synthesizing African traditional modes with the best and the most useful aspects of foreign literature. He is very familiar with his Nigerian environment, and although he writes essentially in the British tradition, his plays are full of nuances and usages from his traditional Yoruba culture. He makes copious use of proverbs and other traditional embellishments of language, dances and songs. In his adaptation of Sophocles *King Oedipus*, he goes beyond the intentions of the Theban playwright. In *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, Rotimi uses the fate of Oedipus (King Odewale) to make statements on the human condition based on the African world view.

### ***King Oedipus and The Gods Are Not To Blame***

In the original, Sophocles is primarily concerned with justifying the ways of God to man. Like other Greek and Roman playwrights, he is interested in increasing religious faith and observance among his audience. We find that it is the sin of Hubris more than the prophecy that is responsible for King Oedipus' downfall. By running away to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother, the protagonist attempts to find human solutions to a divine problem. This precipitates the chain of events which culminates in his total destruction. He is strong, very intelligent and head-strong, and all three combine to catapult him to lofty heights as well as to destroy him completely in the end.

Sophocles uses the chorus both to provide for continuity and to stress this need for religious faith. In both songs and speech, the Chorus links up the various episodes of the play, emphasizes the need to be reverent to the gods and explains why Oedipus' fate is inevitable and of his own making. In the words of E.F. Watling (1947:11-12).

It is, then, in the chorus as persons, and in their more impersonal lyric interludes, that we shall chiefly observe that religious approach to the dramatic theme which... is an essential characteristic of Greek Tragedy. It remains to notice some further consequences of this religious approach.

The Greek dramatists could, no doubt, if they had been so minded, have constructed plays of 'Ordinary life' in

which the tragic aspects of man's ambition or perversity should be starkly depicted against a contemporary background. But dramatic convention grows and changes slowly and the fact remains that it was taken as axiomatic that the play should tell some already established story of the legendary and heroic past... And this was the most fitting condition for an art form which was to invite not a passing curiosity but profound contemplation of eternal truths.

Thus, the chorus makes the statements of the play which include the helplessness of man in the face of the gods; the absolute nature of the power of the deity over man; and the need for man to serve the gods faithfully. In one instance, he says that:

I only ask to live, with pure faith keeping in word and deed that law which keeps the sky, made of no mortal mould, undimmed, unsleeping whose living god head does not age or die.

Pride breeds the tyrant; swollen with ill-found booty, from castle height, pride tumbles to the pit, all footing lost. Zeal, stripped for civic duty, no law forbids; may God still prosper it.

At the fall of King Oedipus, the same chorus intones that:

All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing; show me the man whose happiness was anything more than illusion. Followed by disillusion. Here is the instance, here is Oedipus, here is the reason why I will call no mortal creature happy.

In places the Chorus also gives us the reasons why, in spite of Oedipus' fate, we must praise the gods.

If my prophetic eye fails not, tomorrow's moon makes known to all the earth, the secret of our master's birth. Cithaeron's name shall fill our song; his father, mother, nurse was she and for this boom, to our great king, praise shall Cithaeron be. Phoebus our Lord, be this according to thy will.

Everything that happens to Oedipus has the blessing of the gods. The gods have already judged and found him guilty for, although the hand of fate propels him to his downfall, he failed to seek divine intervention on hearing the prophecy. Oedipus himself reports that: "At this I fled away, putting the stars between me and Corinth, never to see home again, that no such horror should ever come to pass."

Ola Rotimi, on his part, places emphasis on the needs of his own society. In Nigeria the problem is not religious faith but lack of productivity, blind faith in the gods, superstition, inter-tribal distrust and even a civil war. He therefore directs his energies to highlighting these problems rather than restating those of ancient Thebes.

He dispenses with chorus. In his place, he plants the Narrator and chiefs. The narrator links the different scenes and rounds off incomplete stories with his narration. For instance, at the prologue, it is the narrator who gives us the background of King Odewale, Queen Ojuola and King Adetusa so that we are not at a loss when scene one opens. He tells us of the prophecy concerning the child born to King Adetusa for which it was thrown away.

In this prologue too, we learn from Odewale himself that it is not the sphynx's riddle that he solved to become king, unlike Oedipus. Rather, he led a near-defeated tribe to war and won the battle for them, sacking the enemy town. Rotimi even makes the first statement of the play in the prologue where Odewale asks the people of Kutuje to:

Get up,  
Get up..  
... Not to do something is to be crippled fast. Up, up, all of you  
to lie down resigned to fate is madness.  
Up, up, struggle: the world is struggle.

Besides introducing the prologue, Rotimi also divides *The Gods Are not to blame* into three Acts. In Act one, the playwright introduces the action of the play which is in the form of a search – the search for the killer of King Adetusa. The first scene presents the supplication of the townspeople to the king over the sickness and mass death that has overwhelmed the citizens. In scene two, King Odewale promises 'before Ogun, the god of iron, to trace the murderer of the deceased monarch and bring him to book.

Act two begins the main action of the play, the search for the murderer of King Adetusa and the identity of King Odewale. There are four scenes in this act which unfold the complications to be unrevell'd in Act three. King Odewale suspects the chiefs and Aderopo of plotting to overthrow him because he is a 'foreigner.' This suspicion results in verbal war between the king and Aderopo, after Baba Fakunle has named the monarch a the murderer of his predecessor.

Act three is also divided into four scenes which gradually yield solutions to the riddles until they culminate in the final catastrophe. Both the initial prophecy and that of Baba Fakunle are proved to be true, leading to the final fall of the king. Unlike in *King Oedipus*, King Odewale's fall adversely affects the townspeople. According to Rotimi in his final production notes, Odewale and his ill begotten children '...start on their journey, passing through a mass of Kutuje townspeople who kneel or crouch in final deference to the man whose tragedy is also their tragedy'.

The success of this play lies in the total replacement of Greek chants with African songs; in the employment of proverbs, riddles and other embellishments of language peculiar to the Yorubas; and in Rotimi using the play to express the concerns of Nigeria faced with civil strife. Some of the proverbs are used as extended images. He also introduces Yoruba incantations and black magic, especially in the mime where King Odewale kills his father.

In Act three scene one, Odewale 'pulls out his tortoise-shall talisman pendant, holds it towards his assailants, and mesmerizes them.' Here is his incantation during this encounter:

What are these before my eyes?  
... They are human beings and not trees  
They are human being and not mountains  
For trees have no eyes;  
And mountains have no eyes  
Then let these eyes around me close  
Close, close in sleep, close in sleep.

The effect of these parallel structures is to transfer the eyelessness of the trees and mountains to the people being hypnotized so that they will actually fall asleep. It is a common practice in Yoruba-land, as in many other African communities.

There is transliteration of the words of these proverbs, incantations and chants, giving us the feel of its being an African enactment. These proverbs are also wisely employed to heighten the language, especially of the king and chiefs when a serious subject matter is on the floor. During the supplication in act one, second citizen says that:

When the head of a household dies,  
the house becomes an empty shell.

Third citizen also notes that:

When the chameleon brings forth a  
child, is not that child expected to  
dance? As we have made you king,  
act as king.

To these and other requests, the king replies:

... Sickness is like rain. Does the rain fall  
on one roof alone? No. Does it fall on one  
body and not another? No. Whoever the  
rain sees, on him it rains.

Rotimi also uses these proverbs, incantations and chants to create heightened language that is indigenous. This language helps him to delineate some characters. When Baba Fakunle speaks, there is no doubt that he is a soothsayer and a messenger of the gods. Proverbs and riddles used by Alaka also help to present him as an old man. Both King Odewale and Queen Ojuola also use this heightened language often, as a mark of their class.

Of course, less important characters also use proverbs since it is an African manner of speech, but the more important characters use them more often. Situations and events also determine when proverbs should be used in this play.

Rotimi extends the business of collecting herbs to emphasize the need for positive and practical action during a crisis and de-emphasize dependence on superstition and the gods during an emergency. This collection of herbs, the use of town crier and minor chiefs also help to maintain verisimilitude and graft the play firmly on the African soil. The oracle of Ifa is at Ile-Ife, the traditional birth place of the Yorubas.

Rotimi is a populist playwright. In fact, he is sometimes accused of sacrificing commitment for appeal to a wider audience since the laughter and hilarity that his plays generate tend to submerge the important themes they embody as in *Our husband has Gone Mad Again*. *The Gods Are not To Blame* is a serious tragedy which discusses the human predicament. But the playwright brings in lighthearted episodes to lighten the gloom. Aderopo's aversion in reporting the pronouncements of the Ifa oracle causes belly laughs. Odewale asks him to give us details and he says:

"Very well, then. The oracle at the shrine of Orummila sends you all greetings."

To this, First chief replies: We sent you all the way to Ile-Ife to bring us greetings from Ifa. All right, we greet Ifa too. Thank you.

Even part of the encounter between King Odewale and Baba Fakunle causes laughter, serious as it is. There is the scene where the king orders his bodyguards to block the door when baba Frakunle refuses to talk. The action and dialogue that follow are light-hearted; so is the first entry of Alaka.

Rotimi attempts to introduce the problem of tribalism in the play, but this constitutes a central weakness in the play. None of the characters deride King Odewale on grounds of tribe. As V.U. Ola demonstrates in an article in *Okike* 22 (1982:18),

...The idea of ethnic distrust simply hangs in the play and is not successfully woven into the fabric of the work.

It is significant that all references to tribalism or ethnic hostility in the play emanate from Odewale himself, except in one instance in which the second chief wishes to reassure the King of their total loyalty. V.U. (pg. 29), quotes these lines from the play:

We would ask the Queen to help us tell  
the king that as the gods bear us  
witness, his tribe does not harm us.

Ola goes on to say that:

Those speeches where the author emphasizes the theme of tribalism read as intrusions into the normal flow of the events



of the drama, and their language lacks the usual intensity spontaneity the power and concentration which characterize most of Odewale's speeches.

Odewale speaks with Majesty and grace, but these sections on tribalism are limp and banal. They seem forced, mainly because in this action-packed drama, events are mostly dramatized; but in these sections on tribalism Rotimi relies on suspicion, arguments, unsubstantiated charges, all of which appear as figments of the king's imagination.

Rotimi's adaptation also differs from *Oedipus Rex* in the absence of the riddle and the Sphinx. According to Robert Plant Armstrong: in his contribution in *Research in African Literature* pp. 26 – 27, it is,

... the myth of consciousness which enacts itself in the *Oedipus*. A horrible incest has produced, in dreadful synthesis, the Sphinx, offspring of Echidna and her own offspring, Orthus, the day; The deformity which is the sphinx, issuing from this heneous union, expresses nonetheless the integration of this dam and sire. Mankind can be safe only if the Sphinx is destroyed, and so Oedipus, who because of his own deformity of the foot is ritually appropriate for it, undertakes this task on behalf of mankind...

Oedipus slays the Sphinx because he has rendered it powerless, having resolved the paradox of its riddle, and so he must go the rest of the way in the unraveling of this monstrosity of integration by also engaging in the same kind of union which produced the Sphinx. Through this inevitable sacrifice of himself and his king... 'Thebes is purged and mankind is released to its natural destiny of utter selfhood.'

Because King Odewale is not made to solve this riddle, Rotimi detracts from the full meaning and significance of this myth. The positive effect of this deviation is that the playwright avoids emphasizing beliefs which are alien to Black culture, concentrating on the problems of his society. Both plays, however, dramatise "Sophocles" overriding cultural purpose in writing this play", which is to show the horror resulting from a morally repugnant ... state of affairs.

As Drama, *King Oedipus* is however more tightly knith than *The Gods Are Not to blame.*\_ This results from Sophocles' belief in the three Unities. While Sophocles adheres to these Unities, Rotimi offends the unity of time

in the Prologue, and the Unity of place in the mime on the encounter between King Adetusa and King Odewale. There is also this diversion on the collection of herbs.

It is not that Rotimi's adaptation is faulted by these deviations. Rather they make it more lively and complete. But its structure does not acquire the exact strength of *Oedipus Rex* which Armstrong reports as moving 'almost compulsively from beginning to end'.

There is no fat – not one diversionary action, nor one speech in useless delivery. The way is a continuum of serious events, each causally (synthetically) related to its predecessor. *Oedipus Rex* is an elegant dynamic of consequentiality rather than sequentially such as that which characterizes.

*The Palm-Wine Drunkard*. It is powerful to us because of the fact that there is nothing at all to adulterate its power. All parts - theme, rhetoric, morality, the unities, the mythoform – work together at their most intense to produce a consummate work. Not least of these is the inexorable forward movement of the right presentation of the mythoform enacting itself not only among the relationships among the characters but also among the constituent actions and dynamics of the diachronic fabric.

Both playwrights sympathetically portray their tragic heroes. They are both benevolent leaders who are very sympathetic with their subjects in their suffering. Rotimi goes a step further by attempting to rescue Odewale from any charge of hubris. He makes the king admonish his subjects in these words:

If you need help, search for it first among yourselves. Do not open your noses, I cannot help. Why? Because I, Odewale, son of Ogundele, I am only a person, human: like you, and you, and ... you.

He offers to bear the expenses of curing the mad woman of her insanity, and look after her child. Even at that, Odewale's downfall is caused by his insistent search for the truth of his birth. His intelligence and prowess also aid him to lead the people in battle, while he killed his father as a result of his hot temper. V.U. Ola correctly asserts that:

The central tragic mistake of killing his own father is understandable in these terms, that is as a result of Odewale's

uncontrollable temper; for he is portrayed as a man prone to violence throughout the play, and furnishes a sharp contrast to his patient wife. That Odewale should lose his temper over the issue of land is convincing enough, because land continues to be not just a very valuable asset in the African culture, but touches on the question of one's roots and identity.

Ola goes on to say that:

The central irony of the tragedy of Odewale is that he killed for double illusion, suspicion of tribalism, and for a tribe which he did not in reality belong to. His salvation comes when he admits to loss of reason, for that has all the time been his tragic flaw. The gods found it easy to use him because of that central weakness.

This tragic trait also makes him to disregard the advise of the voice when he goes to consult the oracle. Quite true, the voice says that there is nothing he can do to avoid the curse; but the same voice tells him: "To run away would be foolish. The snail may try but it cannot cast off its shell. Just stay where you are. Stay where you are... stay where you are..."

Unlike Soyinka in his serious plays, Rotimi does not bring cumbersome materials and stage directions into his plays. In *The Gods Are Not To Blame* as in *Our Husband Has Gone mad Again*, Rotimi uses simple props, clear stage directions and simple language to facilitate their realization on stage. Even without his clear and detailed stage directions, any experienced producer can cast and produce them on stage. His simple diction and generous use of dialogues help to simplify their staging. Coupled with his eye for the funny side of life, these features make *The Gods Are Not To Blame* to be very popular in Nigerian Universities and secondary Schools. It drew crowds for three consecutive days at Ife when the playwright staged it sometime in 1976.

It looks real to the audience because the playwright has carefully brought in the features, actions, speech, and people we are familiar with. Besides the main characters, we have the children of the marriage, townspeople, drummers, royal, chiefs, soothsayer, Ogun priest among others.

Rotimi comes down to the common people in their own language and actions. He tells them what they would want to hear, and creates situations which the audience is not only familiar with but would want to see enacted

on stage. Above all, he avoids high sounding vocabulary, while using elevated speech. He makes us see that:

The ultimate lesson of this tragedy is that even we the readers can easily fall into Odewale's error. His tragedy was not only that he suffered the improbabilities of murdering his father and marrying his mother – though both were serious mistakes; the tragedy was that having murdered his father and married his mother he made the fully responsible mistake of finding it out. He was an upright and self-confident man, but proud; and the gods punished him for that.

### **Conclusion**

Although this is an adaptation, someone watching the play, even after having watched *King Oedipus* has no doubt that it is an African play. This ability to transform the Greek play into an African drama marks Rotimi out as a conscious, painstaking and accomplished craftsman.

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