

TRANSMUTING HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS FOR MASS  
REACTION IN OSOFISAN'S SELECTED PLAYS

\*Abdullahi S. ABUBAKAR

Abstract

The historicity of any event resides in the truthfulness, depth and critical conception of it. Incidentally, these three qualities formed the constituent parts of the working tools of the poets/bards/griots in pre-industrial societies; hence the confidence the society reposed in them. The modern African playwright presumably steps into the shoes of these traditional performers in terms of utility, inquisitiveness, information processing, critical perception of events and innovation. This article adopts the inflection device in fabulous theatre (Abubakar, 2006) to measure the efficacy or otherwise of the aforementioned qualities in Femi Osofisan's handling of three major historical events in *The Chattering and the Song* (Osofisan, 1977) and *Once Upon Four Robbers* (Osofisan, 1991). The antecedents are the reign of Alafin Abiodun of the then Oyo Empire, the Agbekoya crisis in the then Western Nigeria and the Armed Robbery Decree enacted during General Yakubu Gowon's military rule.

Keywords: Griot, Historical antecedents, Mass reaction, Femi Osofisan, Fabulous theatre, Nigeria

Introduction

The traditional West African griot could be described as a muse for the upcoming generation and an archive for the old. He or she transmuted for the young to serve as pedestal for a better and enduring future, while, for the old, he or she interrogated past actions which led to condemnable flaws that should not recur. This social function seems to be more on the modern literary artists, especially the playwright, to bridge the existing gulf between the generations, thereby making the past a necessary source for advancing into the future but ensuring the avoidance of the pitfalls that characterized previous actions and/

or reactions. Naine in Makward (1998) reports on a griot's pedigree thus:

I am a griot. I am Mamadou Kouyate, son of Bintou Kouyatu and Djeli Kedian Kouyate, master of the art of speech. ..The art of speech has no secret for us; without us the names of the kings would sink into oblivion. We give life to the present generation.. my word is pure and stripped of all untruths.

The modern African playwright in his or her striving to attain these utilitarian functions of the griot has to borrow the art of transmutation of historical antecedents to mediate the past and the current challenges for an enduring future and in the process provide an avenue for the generations to act in harmony. Olaniyan affirms that:

History, literature and art have their sources in the social life of man - the totality of how man produces and reproduces himself. The selection of materials of literature and art from the vast expanse of history is a significant process involving the artist 'digesting' his historical reality, processing this through his faculties and interpreting the same in concrete artistic images (1998).

It is in view of this that this article adopts the inflection device of fabulous theatre (Abubakar, 2006) to examine how Femi Osofisan mediates the past and the present in two of his plays, *The Chattering* and *the Song and Once Upon Four Robbers*. Fabulous theatre has four devices, namely: parallelism, juxtaposes the empyrean and the terrestrial; inferential, dwells on transposing traditional performance style to the stage; multi-media, addresses the communication domain; inflection is the fourth. This device centres mainly on transmuting historical events. Transmutation refers to the changes introduced into historical substance, structure or nature to dialectically navigate the present for a better future. This process includes a fusion of the past and the present in order to effectively forecast the future. The inversion of historical events to be relevant to contemporary situations in the inflection device enables a playwright to link up with categories of audience (old and young) for each to identify with the story. Having been brought to their levels, all categories of the audience are thus

motivated by it ( Abubakar , 2006). The recourse to history is believed to have two major purposes. The first is to de-mystify the powers of and mysteries surrounding the elite class, as engendered in its versions of history; the second is to enlighten the poor on past efforts by its members and encourage them to dislodge current oppressive forces.

### Transmuting Alafin Abiodun and Agbekoya's Historical Antecedents in *The Chattering and the Song*

The political theme in *The Chattering and the Song* is woven around an interlacing story of Alafin Abiodun, enacted by rival suitors, Mokan and Sontri, for a lady, Yanji, as she prepares for the controversial marriage with Sontri. Leje, the leader of the farmers' movement, gets involved, in his bid to scout for recruits into the banned movement. Osofisan's version of Abiodun's story in the play is an inflection from the existing version (Johnson, 1973). The historical records portray Abiodun's execution of Bashorun Gaha as panacea to political instability in the empire. The peace with which Abiodun's regime is identified after Gaha's death gives the impression of a progressive and just leadership. This assumption is premised on the respite enjoyed by Abiodun and members of the ruling class. However, the elimination of Gaha, among other things, paved the way for Abiodun to establish his autocracy. Under the guise of maintaining orderliness and the rule of law, Abiodun became tyrannical and intolerant of any form of opposition. He became high-handed, under the cloak of taking security measures against any insurgence by Gaha's sympathizers. All the family members of Gaha were killed, except Latoye. That only a few people could challenge Abiodun openly, due to fear of reprisals, does not imply fame; because the daring ones went underground to plot against him and many that were caught in the act were silenced. No doubt Abiodun's tyranny mostly affected the poor. This assumption becomes stronger, if one considers the fact that Gaha's policies were directed at the ruling houses and the privileged chiefs. The common people were partially affected by Gaha's policies and this was due to the excesses of his children and men. However, the masses became the victims of Abiodun's misrule.

Thus viewed from the inflection device, which we have explained, Osofisan creates another version of the account of Alafin Abiodun's reign, from the perspective of contemporary political experience. This version pays due attention to the excruciating policies of Abiodun, which ranged from a complete absence of freedom of speech to unorthodox quelling of insurgencies, etc., aspects that were hardly mentioned in existing historical accounts. Osofisan's version in *The Chattering and the Song* exposes the inadequacies and subjectivity

of the historical versions. Consider the example of Johnson, who hardly mentions the aspect of Abiodun's cruelty against his subjects:

With the death of Abiodun ended the universal and despotic rule of the Alafins of Oyo in the Yoruba country. He was the last of the kings that held the different parts of the kingdom together in one universal sway and with him ended the tranquillity and prosperity of the Yoruba country (1973).

The contradictions in the above quotation are glaring. Johnson's description of a despotic regime as peaceful and prosperous leaves many questions unanswered. His yardstick for measuring prosperity and peace is equally confusing. Obviously, the seeming peace in this circumstance gives a favourable impression of Abiodun as a ruler, whose political authority was not under serious threat. Only Abiodun could count his blessings, but surely not the masses, whose rights of speech and the freedom to protest (against mal-administration) were trampled upon (Osofisan, 1977).

Osofisan creates masses that can call Abiodun's bluff and challenge his despotic rule, instead of their passivity and fear in Johnson's version which the playwright transmutes. It is this progressive attitude that permeates the reconstructed story of Alafin Abiodun in *The Chattering and the Song*. In it, Latoye, the only survivor in Bashorun Gaha's family, mobilizes the masses to re-enact the feat that destroyed Gaha to end another chapter of unjust governance by the Alafin. The playwright also makes it clear that the people's support for Latoye is neither borne out of any form of sympathy for Gaha nor is Latoye's mission a vengeful one. Osofisan portrays the people's resolution as a type that is founded on the principles of justice and good governance. Latoye is brought before Abiodun:

Abiodun: What is his offence?

Aresa: He's an agitator, your majesty. For months he has been writing subversive articles, under a false name, of course. But we finally caught up with him yesterday as he was trying to incite the market people to riot over increased tariff on salt...

Latoye: My father was a plague, and you killed him. But you, Abiodun, you are the new plague: The new spot to be scrapped out! (Osofisan, 1977).

This futuristic approach to history is evident in the playwright's attempt to contextualize the events and make them fit into contemporary situations. Latoye, in the above quotation, uses the medium of modern information dissemination, newspaper, in addition to traditional

medium, for his propaganda against Abiodun. The newspaper medium is obviously for the elite among the possible recruits for the revolution while the market is the best avenue for reaching out to the masses. This spread indicates the importance Osofisan attaches to the involvement of all categories of people, with genuine commitment to justice, in the revolution. This assumption is germane to the socio-political context of Africa, as explicated in the playwright's version of Abiodun/Latoye's face-off.

The advocacy for an elite/peasant collaboration in the struggle for justice points to Osofisan's flexible stance on class dichotomy in attaining revolution. It is regrettably true that Alafin Abiodun, who rides on the back of the masses to oust Gaha in the play, betrays them. But it is also pertinent that Latoye, a royal blood, also spearheads a revolt against Abiodun. However, it suffices to add that Osofisan seems to have the confidence that with a committed group of the elite (such as Leje and Funlola) working with the masses, struggle for justice will succeed. Hence, he juxtaposes Abiodun with Latoye on the one hand and Sontri (another selfish, arrogant and repugnant member of the farmers' movement) with Leje, the level headed and wise leader of the movement, who disguises his identity, on the other hand. Abiodun and Sontri represent a pretentious group among the elite who will sacrifice the general interest for personal one. Sontri snatches Yanji from an intimate friend and a comrade in the struggle, Mokan, with impunity. Furthermore, Sontri has no respect for any of his comrades and their feelings. The first time he meets Funlola, he disgraces her over Weaverbirds. This disregard for the feelings of others sends wrong signals about what his attitude will be towards the masses. No doubt, his arrogance would put them off and if they condone him during the struggle, his excesses are likely to destroy the basis of his authority.

In summary, the history of Abiodun's reign, explored by Osofisan in *The Chattering and the Song*, has political and economic import. In consonance with the inflection device, the playwright amplifies the rebellion of Latoye against Abiodun. The instigation of the guards against their master is made through an explication of the subservient position of the guards. This brings guards to a realization that Abiodun has been using them as mere instrument to advance his cause of suppressing any insurgence against his authority and not the defence of the citizens. Through Latoye, the conditions of the suffering masses are exposed and this exposure nullifies the insinuation by Abiodun that Latoye wants to revenge his father's death. The successful mobilization of the guards de-mystifies Abiodun's authority as he becomes helpless without the guards. The vulnerability of Abiodun enables the guards to realize that after all his authority depends on the support they offer him.

In a similar vein, the interpolation of the Agbekoya's activities and the revolt against Abiodun in *The Chattering* and the Songs emphasizes the needed commitment of the masses to the struggle against oppression by eschewing sentiments and complexes such as gender and age. The Agbekoya movement was formed before the oil boom in Nigeria. Farm produce formed the bulk of revenues generated to the country from export then; hence, governments bought cash crops like cocoa, rubber, groundnut, etc., for export. For purposes of coordination, farmers were encouraged to form groups, which later metamorphosed into National Farmers' Union (NFU). In 1948, the union fought for an increase in the price of cocoa, the main cash crop in the then western region (Abaelu and Cook, 1975). However, the policy of hacking down infected cocoa trees created a gulf in the movement, and a group took to violence as against dialogue favoured by others. This prepared the grounds for a formidable farmer union. Thus, the 1968 announcement of a decline in cocoa price by the Nigerian government was met with a stiff resistance. The problem of price was compounded by a government policy that increased the head tax rate from one to three pounds. Under the insignia "Agbekoya", the farmers reacted violently to the insistence of the government to implement its tax policy, in spite of their predicaments (Ojedele, 2005). The violence became widespread as the conditions of farmers worsened with the inflationary trend, bad harvests, arrogance and corruption of government officials. History records that "the Agbekoya leaders were generally unknown farmers, Muslims and illiterates.... What was significant was that, in pressing for their demands, the Agbekoya used existing communal resources...." ([www.Yorubanation.org](http://www.Yorubanation.org)). The Agbekoya movement did not relent until it gained concession from government in 1970.

In the reconstruction of the Agbekoya history, Osofisan's preoccupation is the organizational effectiveness of the illiterate group and its unity of purpose. Although there was a disagreement between Mokan and Sontri over Yanji, this personal interest is not allowed to jeopardize the general ambition. The handling of the disagreement emphasizes the tolerance that exists within the camp. In spite of the disagreement, no personal malice is obvious from Mokan, as he holds tenaciously to the eventual success of the group and pursues it till the end. In a similar vein, the intellectual dimension adopted by Ieje, the farmer's leader, is an inflection aimed at emphasizing the place of strategic approach to revolutionary struggle. The playwright distinguishes this from empty rhetoric, by juxtaposing the approaches of Sontri with that of Osangangan. The systematic mobilization and secret recruitment of members from all segments of the society are

aspects captured by Osofisan in his own version of the farmers' struggle. His transmutation of the two antecedents makes him assume the position of a think-tank, analyst and source of suppressed historical versions, in addition to the role of being a custodian of societal values in his community.

He imitates the conscientious duty of the griots, as he transmutes the elitist hegemonic historical versions of Alafin Abiodun and that of Agbekoya movement to suit contemporary situations in the play. The playwright's focus is the historical events that contain socio-political struggles against injustice or a display of the will to survive. He shows much interest in aspects of the historical events that are suppressed; incidentally, these aspects usually contain the woes and cries of the masses and their resolve to fight for survival. He bases his own historical restructuring on the survival struggles played down in the elitist historical accounts. With this, he creates an alternative to the widespread indoctrination and gradual deflection from the truth. His interest is not mainly in the historical events. He is more interested in amplifying the lessons applicable to contemporary challenges. He is not contented with merely setting the records straight; he perceives it as a task to reconstruct history in order to stimulate the masses for a re-enactment of the heroic feats of the past. He submits that:

... the art that stubbornly weaves around the old mythologies, unmediated, prolongs the enfeebled past and is anti-progress. Yet to shut the old world and its moral order completely out of the dramatic opus is to reflect only a partial truth, and partial truths are just inimical to art and life as total blindness (Osofisan, 2001).

In the above, Osofisan distinguishes between the romantic approach to history (Johnson, 1973) and the analytical perspective to capture the true situation of things (at present) as springboard to the future, because the task requires the old moral order to accomplish. The artistic concept of history by Osofisan, as explicated in *The Chattering and the Song*, lends credence to the existence of past and vibrant revolutionary experience that could be drawn from, to stimulate people to react to modern oppressive tendencies that have engendered poverty and diseases.

## The Military Policy of Public Execution of Armed Robbers in the 1970s in Nigeria

The spate of criminality after the Nigerian civil war was mainly the result of ex-militant's grapple for survival in addition to the millions of persons who suffered the effects of the war (the destitute, the drop outs, the orphans, etc.) and were still nursing their 'wounds'; they became more devastated and aggressive because there was nothing to start them off. Their only solace was the city where they had to sleep under bridges, in streets and sheds. In a sharp contrast was another group of emergent contractors, stooges of foreign firms, importers and exporters, beneficiaries from the war who switched over to importation of finished goods and services. With the oil money, they savoured their 'victory' and enjoyed the windfall from oil.

The scenario above presents two extreme divides of Nigerian citizens: one divide is left with the woes and the other with the oil wealth to 'manage'. In the games of survival, the city immigrants, mostly youths, joined by other city dwellers in search of opportunities, inclined towards armed robbery, swindling, thuggery and so on to make ends meet. In response to the challenges of these contrastive groups of Nigerians, the then military government adopted public execution of armed robbers to 'broker peace' through the special robbery and firearms provision in August 1970. It reads:

- (1) any person who commits the offence of Robbery shall upon trial and conviction under this Decree be liable to imprisonment for not less than twenty-one years.
- (2) If-
  - (a) any offender mentioned in subsection (1) above is armed with any firearms or any offensive weapon or is in company with any person so armed, or
  - (b) or immediately before or immediately after the time of the robbery the said offender wounds or uses any personal violence to any person, the offender shall be liable upon conviction under this Decree to sentence of death.
- (3) The sentence of death imposed under this section may be executed by hanging the defender by the neck till he be dead or the offender may suffer death by firing squad as the Military Governor may direct (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 1970: Decree No.47).

Most military governors chose the firing squad and public execution of the robbers, in a move that was believed would scare

people away from armed robbery. Ironically, government's brutality and the multitude of people that went to watch the 'Bar Beach Show', especially in Lagos (then the capital and commercial city) did not have much effect. The menace of the men and women of the underworld soared by each 'show'. It then became apparent that armed robbery was not born out of greed or crave for pleasure alone but it was a desperate means to survive in the face of deprivations, caused by the war and corrupt practices. It was a choice between living in the real sense of the word (no matter how short) and dying a fulfilled man or woman, no matter how soon. However, these difficult choices, which had to be made, were lost to the beguiled spectators, who still believed that the government decision was for their security.

The culprits were denied access to justice, by specially disallowing the right to appeal the tribunal's judgments. This sealed the hope of a possible objective view of their predicaments. Sections 8 (2), (3) and (4) of the Decree reads:

- (2) No right of appeal to any court in Nigeria granted by any enactment or law as aforesaid shall apply in respect of the conviction of an offender or in respect of any sentence imposed by a tribunal constituted under this Decree.
- (3) No civil proceedings shall lie or be instituted in any court for or on account of or in respect of any act, matter or thing done or purporting to be done under this Decree by the military governor of a state, or by any proceedings are instituted after the commencement of this Decree the proceedings shall abate, be discharged and made void.
- (4) The question whether any provision of chapter III of the constitution of the Federation has been, is being or would be contravened by anything done or proposed to be done in pursuance of this Decree shall not be enquired into in any court of law, and accordingly sections 32, 115 and 117 (2) (d) of that constitution shall not apply in relation to any such question (FRN, 1970:Decree No47).

Transmuting the Military Policy of Public Execution of Armed Robbers in the 1970s in Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers*

The lopsidedness in the government's response constitutes a major concern for Osofisan and, in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, he transmutes the existing version of the story when he creates avenues for the robbers through Aafa's magical song to air their views and equally expose the atrocities committed by office holders, who have kept the majority in sorry states of penury. The robbers are never

afforded the opportunity to air their own side of the story, which the playwright perceives as the reason for the general support enjoyed by the military highhandedness from a majority of the citizens, who double as victims and beneficiaries of the same corrupt system. The balanced information attained via the submissions of the accused persons, who have hitherto been kept silent provides a re-assessment of the earlier stand. This is made apt by adopting a spiritual option of adjudication rather than the 'blindfold legal' or the 'military dispatch' approach to righteousness. The choice is exigent to forestall the effects of indoctrination and regulated thinking imposed by colonization and neo-colonization, as represented by the legal system.

The magical approach which holds sway on the African mind is known for its efficacy and astuteness. As a common practice, Aafa lays conditions for the use of the magic, which guarantees the robbers hitch-free operations thrice. They are: sparing bloodshed, the poor and homesteads in the said operations. The conditions sound ironical because hardly would the rich be robbed in public places without gun threats; also the poor hardly have anything tangible to attract thievery while the homes of the rich that harbour such valuables are prohibited. Thus, Osofisan uses Aafa's magic as a torch for all and sundry to search their conscience. The pen robbers, as symbolized by the affluent contractors and government workers who alter figures on the one hand and the market women in their price manipulation gimmick on the other hand are full of condemnation for the robbers, while feigning ignorance of their neck deep involvement in popularizing armed robbery through their ineptitudes. The hypnotic effect of the magical portion removes the pretences and claims of innocence; and it makes a discovery of a very thin line between the armed robbers and those condemning them possible. The contractors, civil servants and traders are partners in the making of the robbers; therefore, the terror unleashed on them by the robbers is the consequence of their handiwork. He does not see them as victims but as pretenders who perpetrate corruption, exploitation and sabotage at the detriment of national development. Every group, including the military, is forced to own up to the negative consequences of its nefarious activities which breed the nuisance of armed robbery.

Thus, all the citizens, except a very negligible few, are guilty of being tied to the stake, having taken the advantage of the civil war to abuse others' rights, waste precious lives and siphon public funds in their various capacities. The criminal tendency in each is captured thus in one of the 'bar beach shows', where a leader of a robbery gang is killed by soldiers:

Hasan: It was disgusting. Five o'clock in the morning, as cold as in hamattan, yet they all came out to watch, to gloat over his death.

Angola: And their faces, do you see them?  
None of them flinched even once at the crack of the guns. They were so eager to devour him.

Hasan: Like vultures.

Angola: Like hounds (2001).

The ambivalence in the disposition of the victims of armed robbery above, namely, the rich, civil servants, market women, etc., and their personal activities amplifies greed and criminality as general tendencies among the citizens, the sides of the story which are often covered. Thus, the driving spirit of individualism wipes out all forms of humanity, even among the poor. The rat race has blindfolded all segments of the society, with each finding an excuse to prey on the weaker ones.

Mama Alice: So who will pay the bill, if the market doesn't?

Bintu: Where shall we turn, if not to our stalls?

Mama Toun: How can we live, if profits lower or cease?

Mama Alice: How shall we survive, if the Price Control Officer refuses to be bribed?

Sergeant: You hear that, you've been robbing from victims!

Mama Alice: The market is our sanctuary.

Hasan: A slaughterhouse. Each hacks off the other's limbs. Kill quick or be eaten (2001).

It is deducible from the above that in the ineptness of the weakest group, which is borne out of a process of indoctrination via the societal structures of the home, religious centres and the schools, the strong has the opportunity to turn the weak against itself. Inadvertently, anyone who refuses the indoctrination of dormancy by being aggressive, like the robbers, is singled out for punishment. The 'sacred cows' can put up with other cheats, as far as the security of their members is assured; but they are wary of any form of activity which threatens their lives, hence, the promulgation of the decree to deal with armed robbers only, the economic threats posed by others, notwithstanding.

Osofisan's bone of contention is: which of the two groups poses more danger to the society in the long run, bearing in mind the

magnitude and general effects of each? In weighing the options he calls for the intellectual involvement of the integrated theatre audience (Abubakar, 2009) as to which of the two groups (abusers of the state trust as civil servants, contractors, security agents and traders on the one hand or the robbers on the other hand) should be supported. However, the view in this paper is that supporting either of the options above would surely not redeem the gloomy future portended by the activities of all the groups, since none is free from guilt. Thus, a third option of condemning both but prescribing varied punishments would have been better. This would exonerate the audience from supporting the criminal activities of any of the groups and would portray the audience as just and unbiased jury.

### Conclusion

The article's focus has been on Osofisan's transmutation of historical events, with emphasis on their political and economic import. It is argued that in line with the inflection device of Fabulous theatre, the playwright re-writes existing versions of history by restructuring and restocking to expound on contemporary socio-political and economic challenges with the aim of rejuvenating mass struggle against social injustice. His handling of the activities of the Alafin Abiodun, Agbekoya Movement and the open execution policy of the military displays the playwright's interrogation of the existing historical versions to re-evaluate past and current societal values in his community. His inventiveness in the use of history (to discuss contemporary issues) deviates from the nostalgic eulogy of the past or the reactionary attitude to change. He is futuristic in his handling of history with a focus on the opposing perspective to the elitist versions and emphasis on enduring indigenous struggle for justice.

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