

The Dramaturgy of Femi Osofisan

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Acknowledgment

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Abstract

This thesis examines the development of Femi Osofisan as a dramatist and his contribution to world drama. I used his plays to explore how he exploits his Yoruba heritage by reading new meanings into myth and re-writing history to comment on social issues.

In Chapter One, I relate the influence of colonialism and Western drama on the drama of Femi Osofisan. Osofisan grew up under British colonial influence in Nigeria; his secondary and university education were during the early years of independence. He was also influenced by the cultures of Yoruba Travelling Theatre, storytelling, rituals and festivals among the Yoruba people. Chapter Two offers a comparative critique of the writing of Wole Soyinka, Osofisan's foremost dramatic influence, with that of our playwright. Chapter Three examines Osofisan plays of the 1970s but also includes two plays written in 1967 and 1968. Nigerians who became major writers in the 1970s were referred to by the Nigerian press, academics and critics as 'the angry young men of Nigerian literature' because of their Marxist orientation and because of their commitment to societal change. With University of Ibadan as their base, these writers sought to sensitise the societal psyche, or, in the English rendering of the name of the drama group formed by Osofisan during this period, Kakaun Sela Kompani, to produce his plays and sensitise the people to a radical political consciousness. Osofisan also experimented with many dramatic forms during the period.

By 1980s, Osofisan's drama began to challenge popular myths and historic facts along socialist maxims. Chapter Four will look at his work during this decade. In the 1990s, Osofisan embraced a pan-Africanist quest in his dramaturgy, writing plays like *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990), *Tegonni (An African Antigone)* (1994) and *Nkrumah ni!... Africa ni!* (1994). This chapter assesses these dramas and their contribution

to the debate on post-colonialism and pan-Africanism. In Chapter Six, the concluding chapter, I consider the direction of Osofisan's dramaturgy since the end of the 1990s until 2008 and assess the relative importance and relevance of his work to world literature.

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Introduction

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and the inauguration of colonial discourse analysis brought into theoretical focus the ways in which Europe has constructed other peoples and cultures as objects of knowledge to further the aims of imperial domination. What Said's analysis of Europe's construction of the Orient brought to the fore was that more than physical conquest, the more profound and lingering effects of colonialism were the *textual* conquest and subjugation by which Europe established a discursive hegemony over the 'other', the colonies and the various cultural manifestations present in the colonised spaces. While Said's work focused on the unmasking of the operations of the European agenda in the Orient, writers and artists from Africa and other parts of the colonised world have always consciously or unconsciously, openly or surreptitiously, challenged this discursive domination by contesting the myths and stereotypes and indeed the image of other peoples as authorised by Europe. Additionally, these African writers and artists also challenge the myths and socio-cultural practices of their own people. This challenge and contestation has always been part of the history of resistance to slavery, colonialism and domination, and the re-inscription or re-establishment of a collective identity. Beginning with the narratives of the freed slaves through to the counter-discursive manoeuvres of the *négritude* movement and lately to the issues surrounding cultural identities, writers from every part of the colonised world have evolved various strategies for countering European representation of the colonial subject. These counter-discursive gestures, which have been collectively classified under the rubric of the Empire writing back to the *Centre*, have become one of the major themes of post-colonial discourse. Bill Ashcroft *et al* (1989) and most post-colonial critics conceive of the centre as being located in Europe, in the metropolitan centres of power from which the 'Empire' was created and controlled. However, in the works of Nigerian playwright and dramatist Femi Osofisan, the idea of a metropolitan locus in which all power is

located is de-centred. While acknowledging the historical significance of this centre, Femi Osofisan sees pockets of power in various kinds of ‘Empire’ authorised spaces and the major impetus of his work has been to question and challenge these. For Osofisan, the Empire is not only the colonial legacy but also the cultural and political heritages inherited by his people. Beginning with *Oduduwa, Don’t Go!* (1968) through to *Isara: A Voyage Around Kongi* (2004) and grounding his vision of change in a dialectical reading and re-reading of history and political discourse, Osofisan manipulates the various heritages available to him as a post-colonial as well as post-négritude writer to speak to the challenges facing his society, and to scrutinise the practice of art in the post-colonial ‘Empire’.

I describe Osofisan as a post-colonial writer based on Gilbert and Tompkins definition, which argues that post-colonialism, rather than a naïve teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, is an engagement with, and contestation of colonialism’s discourses, power structures and social hierarchies (1996: 2). While this definition¹ reinforces the idea proposed by Ashcroft *et al* (1989) that African writers generally continue to privilege the ‘centre’ – the centre here being a former colonial country in Europe and more specifically Britain and France – by engaging in a kind of counter-discourse, albeit in a subaltern’s role, there is another agenda that African writers pursue and which the definition omits to explain. African writers attempt to confront the various problems of underdevelopment, the threat of alienation and, more importantly, the erosion of ethnic identity among the people. Therefore, the world of Osofisan also includes the oppressive segments of his society – the churches and mosques and other religious establishments, the schools, the multinational companies and the traditional institutions.

¹ My understanding of colonialism as basis for this study is not limited to the effect of European expansionism in Africa but also includes cultural colonisation by different ethnic groups within Africa. For instance, the Ifes, Oyos, Ibadans, Fulanis, etc have at one time or the other colonised other ethnic groups in present-day Yorubaland, in a process which involves subjugation of existing cultural practices and imposition of languages, customs, traditions and social practices.

More than being a post-colonial writer, Osofisan is a post-négritude dramatist whose work has proceeded beyond the rhetoric of Senghorian négritude which responds to the rhetoric of colonial discourse. Négritude was understood as a racist philosophy, or, as Sartre puts it in *Orphée Noire* (1948), an ‘anti-racist racism’. However, this is opposed to the idea of post-négritudism that seeks to identify with and promotes African cultures that are under the threat of erasure by colonialism, post-colonialism and non-African cultural incursions without conversely mystifying the African past. The focus, and the forte, of post-négritudism therefore is the identity problem among Africans who grew up under colonialism and who continue to live in a post-colonial society. Osofisan’s work, like post-négritude, critically examines Africa’s heritage as a dynamic process that needs to be re-appropriated and foregrounded for the benefit of Africans.

Most importantly, Femi Osofisan is a Nigerian writer who writes as a Nigerian, about issues affecting Nigerians. Thus, an understanding of the social and political dynamics in Nigeria is essential to appreciate the structure of Osofisan’s dramaturgy and his mythopoeic quest. The picture of chaos and disorder, of an anti-Ogunnian type, filled with images that could have come only from the brush of Sekoni, the engineer-turned-artist in the novel *The Interpreters* (Soyinka 1965) haunts the spectrum of Osofisan’s experiences, for, as he says of Nigeria, ‘this country fashioned me... I was bred and fed on its gangrenes and its fetid sores. I have grown old on its carrion’ (Osofisan 1975: 86). Essentially, Nigeria’s socio-political and cultural influences play a strong part in Osofisan’s dramaturgy, marking him as one of the most committed and relevant dramatists in Africa today, in the company of others such as Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong’o.

Political systems have proved to be the main source of social and economic anguish in Africa. As Chinua Achebe says, ‘our present leaders in Africa are in every sense late-flowering medieval monarchs’ (1987: 74) whose selfish interests inspire conflict between the individuals, communities and ethnic groups they lead. Such leadership adversely affects many countries in Africa. The demand for good governance has resulted in internal strife from the Sudan to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Namibia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Nigeria. The push by the generality of the people is for what Ufo Uzodike has identified as decentralisation, accountability, transparency and the rule of law (Uzodike 1999: 81), in short, for an enduring democracy.

However, political leadership is not solely responsible for the demand for democracy. With the leadership, in its quest for superficial hegemony, are the multinational companies, the world’s financial bodies, and the creditors whose major interests lie in the economic development of their own institutions, all of which help to retain unpopular African leaders in power. Thus, the tyranny of the multinationals occurs *pari passu* with political dictatorship, which, in time, erects mythologies of indispensability, of authenticity, of a fraudulent, self-invented immortality in the political psyche of many African leaders. In 1998, at least twenty-five African countries experienced violent domestic conflicts, primarily because of bad political and economic leadership. Several others were involved in serious disputes that have either resulted in violent interstate skirmishes or have the potential for doing so (Uzodike 1999). Most of these countries operate political systems that do not offer any regard for the existence and survival of the individual within the cultural environment. The drama of Osofisan challenges the tyranny of political dictatorship in Nigeria that subscribe to the agenda of these foreign interests at the expense of the people.

For more than thirty-five years, Osofisan as a committed Nigerian writer has devoted most of his dramaturgy in arguing for a just society. In plays such as *The Chattering and the Song* (1976) and *Morountodun* (1982), Osofisan challenges the recuperative bias of the négritude ideology that classified everything African as noble, and proposes the presence of tyranny as the dictating current behind popular African myths and traditional practices.

In *The Chattering and the Song*, Osofisan takes a story of power and ‘deliberately challenges a specific distortion of historical consciousness’ (Dunton 1992: 93). He uses the play-within-a-play technique to expose the fallacy of the received history of Alaafin Abiodun who reigned in the 19th century. Alaafin Abiodun is usually historically portrayed as a benevolent monarch who brought peace and prosperity to his kingdom but Osofisan re-interprets the history to show the despotic nature of Abiodun’s reign. Osofisan uses role playing to link the radicalism of Latoye, the son of the deposed ‘prime minister’ under Abiodun, with that of modern day revolutionaries fighting for better life for the majority of the people while asserting their identities, as typified by the Farmers’ Movement in the play. Again, in *Morountodun*, Osofisan adapts the myth of Queen Moremi of Ile-Ife who sacrificed her honour and freedom to save the city of Ile-Ife from the incessant raids of a neighbouring community. Osofisan, while acknowledging the sacrifice of Moremi, interprets her actions as that of a royal who did not want to lose her privileges and is therefore willing to do anything to maintain the status quo; even while depriving the public of their rights.

With the eighties, Osofisan started breaking the myths of colonialism and demystifying the canons of neo-colonialism in dramas such as *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1984), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1984) and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986). The first

two examples belong in the category that he terms the ‘magic boon’ plays where solutions to real life situations are devolved to the intervention of magical realism, or rather the Ifa² motif. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan centres the play around a debate on the public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria and the contributory role of the society in fostering the conditions to breed criminality. Osofisan advances the argument that it is really everybody who is criminal in intent and act and who therefore needs to be remembered to a society that is just. He contends that the root cause of the endemic criminality of the people lies in the three symbols of authority and influence in the society – school, church and the home.

Hasan: Teacher flogged us at the writing desk... Reverend flogged us with divine curses at the pulpit, the light glinting on his mango cheeks like Christmas lanterns... and poor Mama, she laid it into us routinely behind the locked door, her work-hardened palm stinging even sharper than whips... So that afterwards the grown man can crawl the street from month to month on his belly, begging for work, for a decent pay, for a roof, for a shelter from the pursuit of sirens? (1991: 90-91).

The main consequence of this three-pronged oppression is to defeat and permanently keep the people ‘colonised’, preventing them from gaining knowledge and power and ultimately pushing them to revolt. Osofisan’s suggestion in this play is that criminality, including armed robbery, is a form of rebellion against the colonising effect of the authority symbols. He proposes that there is no rationale behind executing armed robbers while neglecting fraudulent civil servants, corrupt law officers, politicians and profiteers. A social environment that will make criminality unattractive must be engendered.

² The Ifa divination system is important in the life of the Yoruba people. All ceremonies and ritual performances involve the consultation of Ifa. The Yoruba people believe that Orunmila, the divinity held as the one sent by the Almighty to guide human beings, established the system of divination. The Ifa system of divination is a corpus with sixteen main chapters. These are *Èji Ogbè*, *Oyèkú Méjì*, *Iwòrì Méjì*, *Edí Méjì*, *Obàrà Méjì*, *Okònròn Méjì*, *Iròsùn Méjì*, *Iwònrin Méjì*, *Ogúndá Méjì*, *Osá Méjì*, *Ologbón Méjì*, *Orètè Méjì*, *Otùrà Méjì*, *Osé Méjì*, *Oràngún Méjì*, and *Eká Méjì*. The different patterns these chapters form on a divination plate dictate the type of divination cast for the person seeking the assistance of Ifa. A *babalawo* is a person who is responsible for Ifa divination and rituals. For more information, see Daramola and Jeje 1975; and Adeoye 1979.

Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels is about a group of out of work minstrels who are offered assistance that will reverse their fortunes. The only clause is that they must use the power to help only the needy. Osofisan develops characters based on the politicians who were in power during the civilian regime that ruled in Nigeria between 1979 and 1983. As variously documented (see Falola 1985; Inamete 2001; Bah 2005), the politicians were notorious for the high level of corruption and forfeiture of the mandate they were elected to defend. *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* captures the panic that ensued in the country after the military *coup d'état* of December 1983. *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* on the other hand is a play specifically written to encourage reconciliation after the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970. Osofisan employs folktales and idioms to caution the country about the hegemony of colonial legacy. In one such tale, Simbi follows the Handsome Man until they reach a graveyard where the ‘tombstones’ should be conspicuously in the colours of the national flags of European countries that have held colonies in Africa, in particular Britain, France, and Belgium or Portugal’ (*Cannibal Rage*, 1986: 49). In these plays, and others written around that period, Osofisan attacks the neo-colonial and colonial attitudes of both the ruling and the ruled classes while at the same time advocating a revolutionary discourse stemming from the people.

In the nineties and on through to the end of the last century, plays like *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1992), *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993) and *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle* (1995) reappraise issues of post-colonial / post-négritude remembering. *Nkrumah-ni!... Africa-ni!* (1994), *Tegonni, An African Antigone* (1994), and *A Nightingale for Dr DuBois* (1998) situate the post-colonial and post-négritude discourses in the quest for a pan-Africanist nationalism that seeks to textually challenge and re-construct African neologism, tropes and the relationship of the ‘Empire’ to the

centre, while also re-membering the disjunction created by the binary division of ‘us’ and ‘others’.

In *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest*, Osofisan applies the theme of sufferings under ruthless tyrants to Africa’s long history of oppression. The popular demands for democracy on the continent are foregrounded in the agitation of a group of young girls for freedom of expression and choice. *Nkrumah-ni!... Africa-ni!* examines the dialectics of pan-Africanism as propounded by the late Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah. The actions of the play take place during Nkrumah’s exile years in the republic of Guinea and the play also involves the characters of Guinean president Sékou Touré and Amilcar Cabral of Guinea Conakry.

Methodology

This study has been carried out using several overlapping methods of research: literary, empirical and participant-observer. This methodology informs the scope and limitation of the dissertation. Thus, I have drawn upon published texts, an extensive personal research into the works of Femi Osofisan as well as various interviews, either conducted by me or conducted by others and published in books, monographs and essays. For more than thirty years now, in the particular space of Yorubaland where I hail from as well as in other parts of the Yoruba country and elsewhere in Nigeria, I have been involved in traditional and modern performances, in rituals as a participant or researcher, and as a contributor to analytical appraisals of these performances as a member of associations involved in either organising or assessing the performances and rituals. More importantly, for the purpose of this research, I have been actively involved in the theatre of Femi Osofisan as a performer, manager, director and scholar.

Consequently, I have not only consulted published materials, but I also include in this study unpublished materials and reviews of performances of Osofisan's drama that I have either watched or participated in.

I also include a critical appraisal of the works of some modern Yoruba dramatists who are contemporaries of Femi Osofisan, and whose works have engaged with those of Osofisan, especially playwrights who have made extensive use of the same raw materials or who have written and performed their plays under the same socio-political context. Most important among these playwrights is Wole Soyinka who has also, more than any other Nigerian playwright, engaged in a prolonged dramatic debate with Osofisan. Focusing on the works of these dramatists allows me to assess critically, in a comparative way, the influence or otherwise of their drama or their personal and professional associations with Osofisan, on his theatre. In this study, I include studies of the works of Wole Soyinka, Bode Sowande, Ola Rotimi and Kole Omotoso.

The major limitation to this study is the inaccessibility of certain resources that would have proved helpful in further clarifying dates and details of Femi Osofisan's early career as a writer. The resources include play scripts, reviews and production materials stored at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, which were destroyed in the fire that burnt the theatre archives in 1994. While I consulted editions of now-defunct journals like *Positive Review*, *Afriscopes*, *Horizon*, *The Horn* and *West Africa* magazine, for the purpose of this study, I choose not to quote directly or copiously from those sources as the materials most relevant to this study have been published in other forms. For example, some of Osofisan's essays in *Positive Review* and *New Theatre Review* are now collected in a book.

Definition of Terms

Definitions of terms can sometimes be misleading or may not really express the intention of the scholar. Nevertheless, I consider it necessary to propose some definitions of terms used in this study, all of which are based on extensive study and represent a synthesis of definitions and theories proposed by scholars and reviewed in the body of this study.

Myth

Myth is a basic constituent of human culture and informs a culture's behaviour and essence. Myths are stories, sometimes immemorially old, which tell not only man's relations with his kind, but also with his gods or the supernatural in whatever forms it may be represented (Highet 1957:540). Okpewho (1983) defines myth as an oral narrative derived from the creative or configurative powers of the human mind. He maintains that any narrative of the oral tradition can be called a myth if it gives due emphasis to 'fanciful play' (1983: 69). He explains that myth 'is the irreducible aesthetic substratum in all varieties of human cultural endeavour, from one generation to another' (1983: 70). Donna Rosenberg also suggests that myths symbolise human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture (1992: xiv). Myths are therefore beliefs that cover a range of meanings in the historical evolution of a people.

Myths are unique in that they are accounts with an absolute authority that is implied rather than stated; they relate or narrate events and states of affairs surpassing the ordinary human world, yet basic to that world; the time in which the related events take place is altogether different from the ordinary, historical time of human experience. The actors in the narrative are usually gods or other extraordinary beings who contributed in certain ways to changing human conditions. Such extraordinary beings among the Yoruba

include Ogun, Shango (Sango) and Osun, all deities who feature prominently in Femi Osofisan's drama.

The functions of myths include enlightenment, explanatory and narrative purposes. Myths explain natural, social, cultural and biological facts that may otherwise be 'unexplainable' or lost in abstractness from the understanding of ordinary man. One of the primary functions of myths is to explain the mystical.

Myths justify or validate customs. In this role, they answer questions about the nature and foundation of ritual and cultic customs. In Yorubaland, the ritual and customs associated with such traditional tropes as *egúngún*³, *Gèlèdè* and, ultimately, the founding of the Yoruba nation are justified by various myths. The descriptive function of myths is linked with the authoritative presentation of facts that transcend ordinary reason and observation.

Performance

Ola Rotimi posits a definition of performance within a cultural setting as an imitation of an action or of a person or persons in action, the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain, or to do both (1981:77). He singles out the ritual aspect of culture by stating that some African rituals reveal instances of imitation, either of an experience in life, or of the behavioural patterns of some power. Not all rituals however are performances, even though they may have elements like movement, rhythm and spectacle. This postulation of Rotimi premises that the act must go beyond the ordinary, that is, be removed from normal everyday activity and rise to the stature of a performance act – display evidences of imitation, enlightenment and/or entertainment – away from ordinary wedding dance procession or funeral rite. Rotimi's premise here is similar to Eugenio Barba's definition

³ A definition here: 'Masque' or 'Masquerade' refers both to a performance given by masked characters and to the masked performer (i.e. *egúngún*). 'Mask' refers to the face-covering; the human performer is the embodied spirit. *Egúngún* is used throughout to denote both the singular and plural forms.

of performance as ‘extra-daily’ activities ‘which do not respect the habitual conditionings of the use of the body’ (Barba 1995: 15-16). For Rotimi, there must be elements of plotting, including suspense and conflict, to create a performance; even though other elements of drama – audience, place of performance, performers – are present. It is on this note that Rotimi’s idea sharply departs from Milton Singer’s. When Singer introduced the term ‘cultural performance’ in 1959, he suggested that the cultural content of a tradition could be transmitted by specific cultural media as well as by human carriers. Singer’s key word, ‘transmission’, can be interpreted to mean performance. For Singer, performances include traditional theatre and dance, recitation, religious festivals, weddings, and other ceremonies that possess a definitely limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organised programme of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance (Singer 1959: xiii). This definition is based on the influence on performance of the cultural attributes of the people that make up the society, irrespective of whether there is mimesis.

Richard Schechner defines performance as a phenomenon which he terms ‘restored behaviour’ (1985: 35). Schechner emphasises that the process of repetition and the continued awareness of some ‘original’ behaviour, however distant or corrupted by myth or memory, serves as a kind of grounding for the restoration of that behaviour. The behaviour may not be involved with the display of special performance skills, but a certain distance between the ‘self’ that is performing and the performance that is similar to that between an actor and the role the actor plays on stage is discernible. Schechner compares a culture’s use of restored behaviour to a film director’s use of film footage, which, upon removal from the conditions of its origin, becomes raw material for a ‘new process, a new performance’ (1985: 35). The thesis expands human cultures to include a variety of organised sequences of events – ‘restored behaviors’ – that exist separately

from the performers who 'do' these events, thus creating a reality that exists outside everyday experience. He lists ritual, social dramas, psychodrama and guerrilla theatre, as well as other contemporary actions with a similar motive among performances that utilise restored behaviour (1970: 163; 1985: 35 – 116). Essentially, according to Schechner, performance involves an action that is repeated and restored, creating an awareness or consciousness of the performative act.

Performance, for the purpose of this study, is the act of doing and re-doing, of self-consciousness about doing and re-doing both by performers and spectators (Carlson 1996: 195). It involves a representation or exhibition of a dramatic act, either acted out on a stage-space or read by various voices in a dramatic setting.

Drama and Dramaturgy

For the purpose of this study, I have defined drama to mean a script or play, designed, suggested or written to be performed, acted or read before an audience. The place of performance may not necessarily be a designated stage; it could be an open arena, a market place, a lecture theatre, or any place where the act of dramatisation takes place. Many of Osofisan's drama are not written for a stage like Western drama; they are written for any open spaces and a few of the plays have been performed in schools and villages, and also in a classroom in Lesotho in 1994. I acted in *The Engagement* in a small corner of the Government College, Ibadan hall in 1991; and *The Oriki of a Grasshopper* was performed in classrooms and lecture theatres in Nigeria and the USA.

Dramaturgy is closely linked to the act of dramatic re-enactment. It is the composition and representation of elements of drama by the dramatist; the sum of both practical and scholarly research undertaken by a dramatist for a theatre production.

Theatre

Theatre is the ‘human and social act of a person or persons performing something before a group of other people’ (Southern 1968: 22). Theatre is the art of preparing an act or drama to be performed or ‘done’ before an audience; theatre is the combination of all elements of performance – actors, writers, performance space, drama and audience. While drama is what is performed, theatre is the performing act. In his study on Nigerian theatre, Victor Dugga defines theatre as an aggregation of:

performances and performance traditions from small village communities to formally scripted plays and other forms of performances that keep emerging from continuing social interactions (Dugga 2002: 18)

This definition is appropriate to my study of Osofisan’s work. The dramatist uses performance traditions from his Yoruba heritage and re-presents the traditions as an interaction with his society, history, myth as well as theatre traditions from outside his Yoruba culture. As Scott Kennedy writes:

African theatre is closely connected to the traditions in African culture and daily living, and [that] the theatre utilises any and all of the art forms for a unified whole called ‘theatre’ (Kennedy 1973: 42).

This connection differentiates the theatre of Osofisan; he uses the traditions that are familiar to his audience but, as I explain below, he subverts the traditions and history of the people to create a theatre that is radical.

Festivals

Festivals are communal activities performed in celebration, veneration or worship of a particular manifestation like the gods and ancestors, or to mark an occasion in human existence like the New Year and harvest celebrations, or as part of a ceremony. Festivals

are always celebrated with music, songs and dances and other forms of performance acts, and they involve a particular community. Examples of festivals also include the *egúngún* performances, marriage and funeral ceremonies.

Overview of the Dissertation

My thesis is that the works of the Nigerian playwright and dramatist Femi Osofisan de-centres the idea of a metropolitan locus in which the entire thrust of African studies is located. While acknowledging the historical significance of this centre, Femi Osofisan sees pockets of power in various kinds of ‘Empire’ authorised spaces and the major impetus of his work has been to question and challenge these. These ‘pockets of power’ include neo-colonialism, elitism, political machinations, economic manipulation by foreign powers, and superstitious belief in gods and myth. Using his drama, I intend to critically view, analyse and examine the manner in which Osofisan has highlighted the various ‘centres’ in African literary studies, in particular drama, and contextually after the political independence of Nigeria from the Great Britain.

In this research, I intend investigating the issues surrounding Osofisan’s vision of change in his dialectical reading of history and political discourse. Osofisan manipulates the various heritages available to him as a post-colonial writer to speak to the challenges facing his society and to scrutinise the practice of art in Africa. He also challenges the recuperative bias of the *négritude* ideology which classified everything African as noble, and proposes the presence of imperial or pseudo-imperial tyranny as the dictating current behind the popular African myths and traditional practices. He confronts the problem of authenticity and accessibility that has led to the creation of a hybrid kind of theatre in Nigeria through an amalgam of different Western and traditional modes, semiotics and uses of language. Further, Osofisan demythologises and demystifies the canons of neo-

colonialism in his dramas.

There are numerous works on African theatre, but few have been written on the drama of Femi Osofisan. Therefore, my theoretical position in conducting this thesis will be situated in African Studies, with special focus on studies already conducted on Nigerian drama. Femi Osofisan is the leading Nigerian dramatist of the generation immediately following Wole Soyinka (Olaniyan 1997: 87). In terms of prolificity and experimental attitude to received forms and theatrical traditions, Osofisan is arguably the third leading dramatist in Africa, after Soyinka and Athol Fugard, with 54 plays⁴. However, with regard to radical ideological attitude and a passionate commitment to a dialectical reading of the historical and political discourse in Africa, Osofisan is in the vanguard of dramatists and playwrights. Chris Dunton (1992), Muyiwa Awodiya (1993, 1995, 1996), Tejumola Olaniyan (1995, 1997, 2004) and Sandra Richards (1996) as well as others have studied the work of Osofisan, but none has critically appraised his work in relation to post-colonial African studies and the importance of his work in this area. It is thus in this debate that my research will prove original, even while eclectically relating to the earlier studies. Further, the critical writings of Wole Soyinka (1976), Yemi Ogunbiyi (1981) and Biodun Jeyifo (1984, 1985, 2006) will be consulted to ground the thesis in African Studies. My own work on Osofisan (1990 – present) will also prove valuable in defining my theoretical position about Osofisan's work as well as providing the literary and critical support for this dissertation.

In Chapter One, I intend to examine the socio-political context of Femi Osofisan's drama. I shall also relate the influence of colonialism and Western drama on his work. Most African countries obtained their independence from the colonial rulers around the year

⁴ May 2009. Note that Femi Osofisan is still a very active writer.

1960, making that year an appropriate juncture of literary development and history. This was the period after the domestic drama of James Ene Henshaw and the emergence of Wole Soyinka on Nigerian stage through the productions of Geoffrey Axworthy and Kenneth Post at University College, Ibadan. Mbari Club was founded in 1961 as a meeting place and a venue for performance of new drama, poetry and related genres by artists including Wole Soyinka (b. 1934), Christopher Okigbo (1932-1967) and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo (b. 1935). The 1960 Masks⁵ and Orisun Theatre Company, both formed by Wole Soyinka, played active roles in the development of theatre at this period and built on the foundation of theatre form established in the University College of Ibadan. I shall relate the events of that period on the development of Nigerian drama and the influence on the drama of Osofisan, in Chapter One. In Chapter Two, I will broadly examine the work of Osofisan in the light of conclusions drawn from the previous chapter. This chapter will also offer a comparative criticism of the works of Wole Soyinka, Osofisan's foremost dramatic influence, with that of our playwright. Chapter Three will examine the two plays that Osofisan wrote in 1967 and 1968 as well as the plays of the 1970s. Nigerians who became major writers in the 1970s were referred to as 'the angry young men of Nigerian literature' by the Nigerian press and critics because of their Marxist orientation and also because of their commitment to use theatre as a tool of societal change, and were so named after the British writers such as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter⁶, who emerged in the 1950s after the creative lull that followed the Second World War (1939 – 1945). Osborne and his fellow writers rebelled against the prevailing social mores, class distinction and political lethargy among the people. They adopted a critical attitude toward institutions of English society as well as displaying disillusionment with themselves and with their own achievements. The epithet 'angry young men of Nigerian literature' as used by the press and critics referred almost

⁵ '1960 Masks' was established by Wole Soyinka to produce the Nigerian independence play, *Dance of the Forest*, in 1960.

⁶ The term 'Angry Young Men' was taken from the title of Leslie Allen Paul's 1951 autobiography.

exclusively to Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotoso and Biodun Jeyifo. With the University of Ibadan as their base, these writers sought to sensitise the societal psyche, or, in the English rendering of the name of the drama group formed by Osofisan during this period, Kakaun Sela Kompani⁷, to heal the societal lethargy and awaken the people to a radical political consciousness. I shall relate the influence of Marxism to the work of Osofisan during this period.

By the 1980s, Osofisan was still an ‘angry young man’ but his drama had started discarding the tenets of Marxism and began to challenge popular myths and historic facts along socialist lines. Chapter Four will look at his work during this decade. In the 1990s, Osofisan seems to have embraced a pan-Africanist quest in his dramaturgy. This is evident in the writing and performance of plays like *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990), *Tegonni (An African Antigone)* (1994), *Nkrumah ni!... Africa ni!* (1994) and *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* (1997). This chapter will assess these dramas and their contribution to the debate on post-colonialism and pan-Africanism. Chapter Six, the concluding chapter, will consider the direction of Osofisan’s dramaturgy since the end of the 1990s until 2000⁸ and assess the relative importance and relevance of his work to world literature.

⁷ Literally means traders in a kind of sap used to staunch wounds when used, there is a sharp, lingering pain, not unlike after an application of an antiseptic to a fresh wound..

⁸ Femi Osofisan is a prolific dramatist who continues to write and produce plays. However, there must be a cut-off point in this research and I have fixed this point as 2000 for the main reason that it was the end of another decade and a shift in his writing style.

Chapter One

Background to Yoruba Theatre

Introduction

Dramatic performances among the Yoruba people of Nigeria make use of elements of myth and rituals. Most Yoruba performers, especially since the early twentieth century, and the performers of the Alarinjo⁹ tradition that dates back to the eighteenth century, have also employed extra-linguistic codes like dance forms, songs, poetry and other forms of narrative in their performances. Writers like Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan later developed their dramaturgy out of this tradition. In this section, I seek to establish this succession of performance tradition as a fact, tracing the influence of myths and rituals on the life of the Yoruba, from traditional performance cultures to the modern period.

I start by first defining who Yoruba people are, their system of organisation and their belief system. Yoruba religion is very important to the study, therefore, I have devoted a large part of this chapter to that aspect of the people; the belief in ancestral veneration as practised through the *egúngún* performance culture, ideologies and cultural performances that greatly influenced the theatre of Osofisan. Further, I discuss the Alarinjo tradition and its use of *egúngún* performance culture. I also examine briefly the influence of Christianity and Islam on Alarinjo tradition and the totality of Yoruba life. I discuss the influence of colonialism and the Western theatre on the development of the Alarinjo, and subsequently, the Yoruba Travelling Theatre which grew out of it. To highlight the influence of this popular tradition, I consider the performance culture of the pioneer Yoruba Travelling Theatre performers – Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and Moses Adejumo; how they have used elements of Yoruba tradition in ways that have influenced the literary drama of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and especially Femi Osofisan.

⁹ Alarinjo is a term that describes the band of strolling players and magicians who grew out of the masked court performers of the 15th century Yorubaland.

Further in this chapter, I discuss the re-introduction of Western forms of theatre into the popular culture over a period of years during which performances were limited to secondary schools and the academic environment. The contribution of the Dramatic Society at the University of Ibadan is also reviewed, as well as the activities of the English department, especially those of Geoffrey Axworthy, activities that contributed to the establishment of the School of Drama in the university in 1962. The development of modern Nigerian theatre is traced along this line, with the involvement of Wole Soyinka and his 1960 *Masks* and, later, *Orisun Theatre* as well as his theatre, placed in perspective. The role of the Mbari Club based in Ibadan city centre, where defining productions like JP Clark-Bekederemo's earlier plays were performed is also explained. These and the existence of other amateur theatre groups influenced the development of Femi Osofisan's theatre and played major roles in formulating the thematic considerations and the dramatic structure, form and language of modern Nigerian literary theatre. Osofisan also fostered a symbiotic relationship with these influences, professionally feeding on their ideas while projecting his ideology on the growth of subsequent theatre companies, especially the troupes that were established in the universities from 1970s onwards.

The Yoruba – Socio-Cultural History, Myth and Belief System

The Yoruba are a nation of people who all claim a common ancestry from Oduduwa, the founder of the Yoruba nation, and who share the same language, history, traditions and customs, and religion. They number about 50 million in Nigeria, or about 40% of the Nigerian population, and are mostly situated in the south-western part of the country¹⁰. They are also found in the neighbouring republics of Benin, Togo and Sierra Leone and,

¹⁰ This figure is based on the 1992 census in Nigeria.

as a result of the trans-Atlantic slavery, in Brazil, Argentina, Cuba and the other Caribbean Islands, as well as in the USA.

Traditional Yoruba city-states were sub-divided into 25 complex, centralised kingdoms. The Yoruba are largely urbanised and live in close societies in densely populated cities. The sense of kinship is very strong and relationships are traced back to earliest remembered times. Each Yoruba town generally maintains its own local interpretation of the history, myth and the various religious traditions. Variances in the interpretations are due to, among other reasons, conflicts and results of internecine wars that were quite common among the Yoruba prior to the formation of Nigeria in the early 20th century.¹¹ Examples of these wars include the Ijaye war with Ibadan (1859 – 1861), Egab Remo war (1861 – 1865), Ijebu and Egba trade war (1877) and Kiriji War, the war between the Ekiti and Ijesa against Ibadan (1877 – 1886).

Other motifs that bind the Yoruba include the acknowledgement of the pantheon of Yoruba gods and divinities, a belief in pre-destination and a reverence for the ancestors particularly through their earthly representatives, the *Ifa* priest (*babalawo*) and other ancient institutions. Traditional Yoruba religion is centred on a pantheon of divinities collectively called *Orisa*. These Orisa direct the daily and other human affairs of the Yoruba person. For instance, when a child is born a *babalawo* is consulted to determine the destiny of the child and the path he will follow in life; adults regularly and periodically consult the *babalawo* on matters of spiritual and material welfare. All the Yoruba believe in one supreme deity, *Olorun*¹², and regard the gods and divinities as his representatives and assistants in the world. This supreme deity is never worshipped, and

¹¹ Nigeria came into existence as a country in 1914, on paper, when the British amalgamated the North and South Protectorates. The first Governor-General was Sir Frederick Lord Lugard.

¹² Also known as *Olodumare*, *Oluwa*, *Obangiji*, *Awimayehun*, etc. Most of the names are praise-names however, but the commonest in use is *Olorun*.

there is not a single shrine that is dedicated to him. The Yoruba never make sacrifices to him and he has no priests. The divinities under him are primarily of two types: the primordial ones whom God sent to form the world, and the deified human beings and natural phenomena like mountains, big rivers and hills. However, all the divinities are believed to have ambivalent powers: an ability to dispense evil or good blessings on human beings as they will.

The socio-cultural entity of the Yoruba is full of festivals and ceremonies all geared towards oneness with nature and the unity of all human beings (Daramola and Jeje 1967 rpt. 1975). The divinities and the ancestors are venerated because they are believed to hold the power to re-mould the world; additionally, the divinities are worshipped in order that they may continue dispensing their good wishes to the living. The beliefs of the Yoruba concerning these divinities vary significantly from one part of the region to another. They are also variously regarded, thus, a divinity that is a god in one community may be referred to as goddess in another community. In addition, the characteristics and attributes of the gods may be different from one area to the next.

Yoruba Mythology and Beliefs

It is almost impossible to discuss Yoruba traditional performance culture without reference to the religion, myths and rituals of the people. And it is difficult for a non-Yoruba or someone who is not very familiar with the Yoruba cultural practices to discuss the religion and link it with the performance culture (Götrick 1990). However, my origin as a Yoruba man brought up in close proximity and association to the general and specialised practice of all aspects of Yoruba cultural practices stands me in good stead to undertake this task; not only to provide a close insight into an understanding of the

traditional practice but also on how this culture influences Osofisan's work as a playwright of Yoruba heritage.

The faiths of the Yoruba people vary significantly from one part of the Yoruba area to another. These variations inevitably arose as the myths were passed orally from generation to generation and from one area to another, and mixed with the doctrinal values of imported religions, especially Christianity and Islam. The Supreme God is the creator of all the other gods and human beings. He is omnipotent, omnipresent, immortal and unchanging. His is the power to judge both gods and men for their deeds in the world and the lesser divinities are to administer the world in accordance with his commands. With all these powers, Olorun is not one of the gods in the Yoruba pantheon, and he is hardly referred to at all in daily life except in moments of dire crises. The leader of all the divinities is Obatala (Orisa-nla). He is the arch-divinity. He acts as the deputy of Olodumare on earth in his creative and executive functions.

The other gods who are either created out of Obatala, or who descended with Obatala to the world include Esu, the god of 'indeterminacy' who, as the messenger of the gods, interprets their will to man; other major gods include Orunmila, the keeper of knowledge and Olokun, the god of the sea. There are also gods who were human beings who became deified after their death. These include Shango, the fourth king of Oyo who is regarded as the god of thunder and lightning (and the subject of several Yoruba dramas, including *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* by Femi Osofisan), his wife, Oya, the goddess of the River Niger and Ogu, god of creativity and war. While Yoruba myth places Obatala as the deputy of Olodumare in creative and executive functions, Orunmila, the god of divination and oracles, is regarded as Olodumare's deputy in matters pertaining to omniscience and wisdom. Yoruba mythology states that Orunmila was assigned as a

companion and adviser to Obatala in the latter's mission to create human bodies. Orunmila myth places him at the point of creation as the diviner; he knows the predestination of all human beings and gods.

The myth surrounding the wisdom of Orunmila is shrouded in mystery but the most important part of the Orunmila cult is the system of divination based on sixteen basic and two hundred and fifty six derivative figures (*odu*) obtained either by the manipulation of sixteen palm nuts (*ikin*), or by the toss of a chain (*opele*) of eight half seed shells (Bascom 1991:3). Oral tradition has it that the Ifa system of divination was originated by Orunmila, though the term is sometimes used interchangeably with the god himself in everyday and even religious references.

The position of prominence in which the Yoruba place Ifa makes it usual for it to be consulted before any action is undertaken. The response is revealed through the Ifa corpus. The chapters of Ifa are relevant to human beings because they represent the sixteen components of human existence, according to Yoruba belief. The relevance of Orunmila in the Yoruba pantheon is such that he has two other gods who assist him in his functions. These are Osanyin and Esu. Osanyin is the herbalist who prepares the medicine recommended by Orunmila for any ailment. He has the knowledge of all the herbs and receives instructions from Orunmila. Esu on the other hand is one of the most feared divinities in Yorubaland. He is accorded great power and importance, and is reputed to cause great harm to those who get on the wrong side of him.

Esu is 'primarily a 'special relations officer' between heaven and earth, the inspector-general who reports regularly to Olodumare on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular' (Idowu 1962: 80). He acts to intervene in human affairs by

challenging the existing order in the society and suggesting a new order. 'Esu serves as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance' (Gates 1989: xxi). He is the trickster figure who forces choice in humans. Because of his importance as an interpreter, when humans consult Ifa for divination, Esu deciphers the metaphorical and sometimes ambiguous pronouncements of Orunmila and presents the available options. Although the relationship between Esu and Orunmila is ambiguous, Geoffrey Parrinder says Esu acts as Orunmila's messenger by taking his oracles to men and returning with sacrifices to heaven. He refers to him as a 'dangerous trickster' (1969: 63 - 64). While Orunmila gives advice and issues commands regarding sacrifices and other ritual activities, it is the duty of Esu to make sure that the advice is taken and that the orders are carried out satisfactorily (Idowu 1973: 57). It is interesting to note that Osofisan regards Esu and Orunmila as the spiritual influences on his theatre.

The other particularly significant divinities in the Yoruba pantheon include Ogun, god of creativity and destruction, of war and smithery, of relationships, and the patron deity (muse) of Wole Soyinka. When the gods were descending from heaven to the world, according to a version of oral history, they encountered an impenetrable forest and it was Ogun who cleared the way for other gods. This action is what Soyinka refers to in his essay, *The Fourth Stage* (1976), as battling the chthonic realm by bridging the gap between god and man, and renewing the bonds between the ancestors, the living and the unborn¹³. The other divinities, to show their gratitude, conferred on Ogun the leadership title. He rejected this honour, preferring instead to hunt and wage wars. There is a myth that he slaughtered some of his subjects in anger when he was a king at Ire and they could not find palmwine to offer him after returning from hunting, as sung in one of the praise-

¹³ see Gibbs & Lindfors (1993: 271); and Olaniyan (1995: 50)

poems of the god. He is a god who is respected and feared in Yorubaland as there is practically no aspect of human life that he does not affect.

The Yoruba believe that these divinities exist to serve as a link between the supreme god, Olorun, and human beings. Olorun can only be approached through these intermediaries. Even when his name is acknowledged or invoked, it is still believed that it is not Olorun who would answer the request of the supplicant but another god acting on his behalf. In order to connect with Olorun, the Yoruba people perform many elaborate rituals and festivals in honour of the gods during the process of worship. Apart from gods, the Yoruba people also perform rituals to *ori* (destiny) and the ancestors, represented by *egúngún*.

The Yoruba refer to *egúngún* as *Ara Orun* (the inhabitants of heaven). The belief is that those who are dead are still very close to the world of the living, particularly to their relatives whom they protect from evil and other vicissitudes of life. Special days are reserved for the veneration of these ancestors who are represented by masked humans in the form of *egúngún*. It is from these acts of religious worship that the Yoruba performance culture emerged.

I have dwelt at length on Yoruba deities and the relationships between them to provide a background for the study of Osofisan's dramaturgy. Osofisan's theatre draws its cultural relevance from the belief system of the Yoruba. The playwright places Ifa divination and Esu's characteristics at the centre of his drama. An understanding of the importance of the deities and Yoruba myths and culture is thus necessary to the understanding and proper appreciation of the theatre of Femi Osofisan.

Alarinjo Tradition and Yoruba Traditional Performances.

The first written accounts of the Alarinjo are found in the travel journals of Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander who stayed seven weeks at Katunga (Old Oyo; Oyo Ile), the capital of Oyo kingdom. The king invited his guests to watch a performance of an itinerant troupe in February 1826. The performance that Clapperton (1829: 53-56) and Lander (1830: 115-121) watched was already a tradition by then, having started in the late sixteenth century. To show the importance of Alarinjo to the development of Yoruba traditional performance, I am going to trace the origin and growth of the performance culture.

When Alaafin Ogbolu became the king of Oyo in 1590, the capital city had been removed from Katunga to Oyo Ighoho due to successful incessant attacks by some predatory warriors. The king planned to move the capital back to Katunga but his chiefs (Oyo Mesi) and advisers did not support the idea because they had been born in exile and had no recollection of the old capital city. Another reason why the people did not want to leave Ighoho, the new city, is that it was well settled and fortified. Moreover, it was near the River Niger and the people had developed good trading links with the Borgu and Nupe people on the other side.

The king sent emissaries to survey the old site. The Oyo Mesi however sent ghost-mummers ahead of the king's emissaries to frighten them off. They wanted to convince the king that the ancestors were against the relocation. The ghost-mummers were six in number: the albino (*Alapinni*); the leper (*Asipa*); the hunchback (*Basorun*); the prognathous (*Samu*); the cripple (*Akiniku*); and the dwarf (*Laguna*). These stock-characters are caricatures of humanity believed to have been created by Obatala under the influence of palm-wine and are also sometimes believed to be used by the gods to pass on

messages to normal human beings. They are collectively called *eni orisa* (people of the gods). The royal cymbalist, Ologbin Ologbojo, a leader of the *egúngún* cult, advised the king to send hunters who captured the ghost-mummers; they became a permanent entertainment feature in the royal palace.

Katunga was reoccupied in about 1610 and by the middle of the seventeenth century, the ghost-mummers had become well established at the king's court (Joel Adedeji 1973a, 1973b, 1981). The group also took part in the annual *egúngún* festival and became variously known as '*Oje*' or '*egúngún apidán*' (magic-performers). The metamorphoses to Alarinjo performers did not occur until Ologbin Ologbojo's son, who was born half-ape, half-human, sought to disguise his features. The son, Olugbere Agan, made a career as a costumed actor and a strolling player. His father 'himself served him as the masque-dramaturge or animator who handled the improvisations while Akunyungba, the palace rhapsodists, provided the choral chants' (Joel Adedeji 1981: 224). The nature of the performance gave rise to Alarinjo theatre.

Several troupes developed and by the first half of nineteenth century, there were such troupes as Aiyelabola, Agbegijo, Ajangila, and Ajofeebo¹⁴. By this time also, the repertoire of the troupes had increased and many of them had become professionals though they still participated in the annual *egúngún* festival. They started performing on non-festival days, particularly at secular ceremonies like child-naming, funerals and weddings. The performers became itinerant and began demanding gifts and other forms of patronage from those who watched their performances. With this development, Alarinjo became a theatrical art and the increased professionalism improved the troupes' performances.

¹⁴ The names are descriptive and literally mean: 'wealth is created', 'dance while carrying a tree', 'tall and supple', and 'dance for the white person'.

A performance usually started with songs and drumming which herald the troupe to a town. Drummers accompany the dancers round the town; they end up at the market square where performances are usually staged. The performances are full of spectacles, including magical displays, acrobatics, mime caricatures, trance, and word-play where two actors try to use chants and incantations to determine a ‘winner’. There are a few satirical sketches because the main intention of a troupe was to entertain first before making social or political comments.

There is an order of events for Alarinjo performance: ritualistic *Ijuba*¹⁵ or a sort of opening glee where the troupe recites its *oriki* (praise names) and which ‘apart from clarifying the role of the dramatist in society, reveals the relationship between the performer's art and the import of what he communicates’ (Adedeji 1969: 52). This is followed by the dance, which is divided into two parts – ritual dance to honour the notable deities and divinities worshipped in the town and social dance which invariably is the dance steps in current fashion; and lastly, the drama which consists of two genres – spectacle and revue. Adedeji, commenting on the genres, says that ‘[t]he dramatic spectacles are designed to meet religious objectives and are based on Yoruba myths and totems. The revues are sketched out as components on the state of, or happenings in Yoruba society. In both types satire is a theatrical element’ (Adedeji 1969: 52). The ending of the performance, the finale, consists of a valedictory song and dance.

Although the *egúngún* cult members and the masque-dramaturges are still bound together by ancestor veneration, their common root, the Alarinjo theatre guild, is a separate,

¹⁵ Acknowledgement of the ancestors’ influence and the presence of the audience.

independent organisation today. While *egúngún* is a communal celebration, the Alarinjo is a commercial venture, performing for remuneration from the courts and their audience.

Thus, a Yoruba performance culture that is different from the ritual performances emerged and proliferated until the early twentieth century when the efforts of missionaries to spread Christianity reduced the popularity of Alarinjo performances. Earlier on, in the nineteenth century, the Muslims had banned theatrical activities in the northern part of Yorubaland, which they controlled numerically, because they could not find support for them in either the Quran or the Hadith. With the coming of the missionaries, the Alarinjo found it hard to make a living by performing, as many of their patrons and members started converting to Christianity, which regarded the performances as unchristian. The final blow was the growing 'elite' class, the converted Yoruba who now maintained an attitude of indifference, at the least, and sometimes disdain, to Alarinjo, probably so that the colonial officers would not categorise them as barbaric and unenlightened. These elites started forming social clubs and organising balls and dramatic activities (Ogunbiyi 1981: 18).

Ironically, the popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre that rose from the Alarinjo tradition found initial expression in the Church, the same institution that had labelled Alarinjo heathen and barbaric.

The modern Alarinjo tradition, now popularly known as Yoruba Travelling Theatre (Biodun Jeyifo 1984) began in 1944 as a result of a fund raising activity by a church. The originator was Hubert Adedeji Ogunde, a one time teacher and policeman, who wrote and presented the concert *The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God* for the Church of the Lord at the Lagos Glover Hall. Kola Ogunmola started a form of the theatre in 1948

(Ogunbiyi 1981: 23), and Duro Ladipo formed the Duro Ladipo National Theatre in 1961 to begin his own secular folk opera, after years of producing church plays (Laurence 2001: 20). These three became the reference points of modern Yoruba Travelling Theatre, with the purpose of using Alarinjo theatre ‘as an artistic instrument to spread and strengthen the creed and ethics of staunch Christian members of indigenized churches’ (Fiebach, 1996: 52).

The Protestant and Roman Catholic Missions were strongly opposed to the travelling theatre tradition and considered the performances ‘sinful’. They were against the use of traditional drumming, dancing and singing, in particular, and did not want to integrate Yoruba cultural practices with mission drama. There was therefore no expression of any Nigerian cultural form in the churches, schools (which were mostly church-owned) and among the converts to Christianity. Yoruba music, drums and other accompaniments were totally prohibited and European music and accompaniments were encouraged.

The consequence of the disillusionment and alienation experienced by the people was an inevitable budding of a Yoruba cultural nationalist movement. Independent African Churches like the United Methodist Church and the Aladura Movement (a form of evangelical and spiritualist group, which includes the Cherubim and Seraphim church) that blended Yoruba music and language freely with European culture started emerging in the early 20th century. ‘[T]raditional masquerade songs were re-worked into church songs as a means of winning over converts from traditional religion’ (Ogunbiyi 1981: 19), but also because these songs were entertaining and expressive, and the church members could easily be accompanied by the traditional drumming and dance steps.

Ogunbiyi traces the advent of Nigerian indigenous drama to these African churches, citing the production of D. A. Oloyede's *King Elejigbo and Princess Abeje of Kotangora* in 1902 by the Bethel African Church and St. Jude's Church, both in Lagos (1981: 19). The plays had biblical themes but there were influences of Alarinjo theatre, such as the opening and closing glees, caricatures and acrobatics. Attempts were made by the educated elite who had become the main patrons of theatre to introduce western dramaturgy into these productions by scripting coherent plots instead of traditional loose improvisation based on an agreed storyline (Adedeji 1973b: 391). Lineage issue was not as important to the practitioners as it was to the Alarinjo practitioners, and most of the performers were church members who were members of one or another church society. The dramas did not become popular with the majority of the people since most of them were still excluded from watching them because of their lack of competence in English or because they did not belong to the same social class as the theatre practitioners. They therefore were not encouraged to attend the performances that were held in the exclusive areas of the city, particularly in Lagos. The plays were taken to these areas in a bid to cultivate the educated elite and also publicise the new message of cultural nationalism being promoted in the churches, but this still did not make the drama popular with the common people. Moreover, the average gate fee charged for a performance was equivalent to twenty-five percent of the monthly salary of an average worker (Ogunbiyi 1981: 21).

In effect, the theatre that grew out of the indigenous churches' direct effort was not popular and it died soon afterwards, particularly after the introduction of cinema. Common people who could not attend the dramatic productions but who desired entertainment found an outlet for their yearnings in the cheap and sometimes free propaganda government films.

In the 1930s, when the Aladura Movement was still growing, some members of the movement evolved a new kind of opera called Native Air Opera which utilised the ‘theatrical format in its propagation of its brand of the gospel’ (Ogunbiyi 1981: 22). The Movement employed music, dance and songs as ‘a means of impelling its members to express their religious experience’ (Adedeji 1973b: 390). These ‘split-away’ churches started to perform Biblical stories to instruct their members and raise funds. They treated Biblical texts quite freely; Ulli Beier describes a performance where ‘Adam and Eve, both dressed in black swimsuits, indulged in ribald remarks on discovering their nudity in Paradise’ (Beier 1979: 243-254). The churches were involved directly in the nationalist movement which rebelled against colonial influences and ‘stimulated intense exploration of African identity, history and culture’ (Adedokun 1981:18). Some of the choirmasters in these churches, after experiencing the popularity and success of this brand of entertainment as a theatrical art form, started organising their own drama groups outside the church (Adedeji 1969: 45).

In 1946, Hubert Ogunde resigned from the Police Force to become an actor-manager. He inaugurated the African Music Research Party and started producing plays that were not biblical; he secularised the theatre and incorporated the performance structure of the Alarinjo into his plays. He added ritual performances similar to those practised by member of *Osugbo*¹⁶ and *egúngún* cults, and well as Ifa rituals to his theatre. Ogunde changed the presentation style from theatre-in-the-round to a western style proscenium staging, though he sometimes used thrust staging techniques; he used modern theatre equipment such as lights, make up and elaborate scenery. Furthermore, he relied solely on public patronage. According to Egun Clark, ‘the greatness of Ogunde’s achievement, therefore, is that he changed the direction of Yoruba theatre and gave it new impetus and

¹⁶ A secret conclave of elders with a principle based on justice and the ways of the forefathers; not much different from the *Ogboni*.

dimension. Almost single-handed, he established what is now loosely termed “Contemporary Yoruba Theatre” (Clark 1980: 5). His theatre focused on ‘the tragedy, the hopes, dreams, triumphs of his time and age’ (Ogunbiyi 1981: 23). He brought back the term ‘travelling’ into Yoruba performance culture by organising extensive tours in Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Republic of Benin and Ivory Coast (Clark 1980: 147-153). These tours served three main purposes: they made his theatre popular with the people; they brought back the tradition of Alarinjo; and they served to influence other artists who started emulating his style. Other artists soon started their own groups (Lere Paimo, interview 1996). The Yoruba Travelling Theatre that arose out of the Ogunde initiatives has been described by Jeyifo as ‘one of the most vigorous, widely popular and thriving theatre traditions in modern Africa’ (Jeyifo 1984: 1).

Yoruba Modern Performance Culture

In describing the Yoruba Travelling Theatre as a popular cultural form, Jeyifo notes two features that are fundamental to its relevance:

1. The Travelling Theatre troupes have extensively and consciously drawn upon, and exploited traditional Yoruba folklore, performing arts and poetry, and the resources and properties of the Yoruba language. Furthermore, there is now a pervasive, articulated feeling that this Travelling Theatre movement is a contemporary expression of the collective identity of Yoruba society and as such should sustain and transmit the perceived traditional values of the Yoruba people.
2. There is a marked tendency among some of the troupes and individuals towards ‘conscious’ art and experimentation and the refinement of the technical and artistic equipment of the medium. (1984: 5).

These distinctive features are derived from the performance conventions of the Alarinjo tradition. Like the Alarinjo, the Yoruba Travelling Theatre entertainment begins hours before the actual performance on stage. These ‘pre-performance’ performances take place during the publicity period preceding the stage performances. Since the theatre depends

on the patronage of the people, the troupe utilises every possible means to entice the audience to the performances. These means include radio, television and newspaper advertisements, handbills, posters and banners. But the most effective method is the carnival-like procession around the town or village in the troupe's bus or 'mammy-wagon' with music blaring from loudspeakers and acrobats and drummers performing on the roof of the lorry. This publicity campaign, which is a carry-over from the Alarinjo tradition, is in fact the first phase of the night's performance by any troupe of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre (Jeyifo 1984: 9; see also Soyinka 1999: 11-12).

After this rousing beginning, the troupe moves to the performance space, the town's market, where they set up a stage. After the theatre tradition had become more established, the troupes began using town halls, enclosed courtyards in or near the centre of the town or directly in front of the palace gates. Singing and dancing to attract more audience, the troupe's actions gradually takes on some form of coherence, usually after enough members of the public have paid and sat down. Then, the troupe starts the performance with the Opening Glee¹⁷, a theatrical form which is an entrance song or chant and dance, and which is not unlike the *Ijuba* in the Alarinjo tradition. The opening glee is a 'theatrical device of social consequences' (Adedeji 1969: 52) and both in content and form, it presents evidence of relevance to the Yoruba ideational system. The performer and his troupe are aware of the universe of Yoruba cosmos which is sustained and animated by certain vital forces and therefore seek an identification with the people and the gods, and these other forces, through *Ijuba* (Adedeji 1969:52). And with the Travelling Theatre, 'the content and form of the entrance song show evidence of modifications which are the direct consequences of westernization in the Yoruba society' (Adedeji 1979:54) and the style reflects the culture of the people to whom it

¹⁷ The term 'Opening Glee' was first used in 1910 by the Lagos Glee Singers, an established group of Lagosians and veteran performers of European Operettas, to describe its entrance song. The term was later adopted and popularized by the Yoruba Travelling Theatre (See Joel Adedeji 1969: 41 – 56).

communicates. The Opening Glee serves as commentary on the action of the performance to be staged, and sometimes it tells the story of the play. It is also used to acknowledge God and the invited guests whose patronage and generous donation the troupe relies upon for existence. In short, the purpose 'is to serve as an appetiser and induct the audience into a magic space' (Soyinka 1999: 12) varying from the supernatural and extraordinary to the mundane and ordinary. Sometimes however, an improvised 'curtain-raiser' that has nothing to do with the performance is substituted. This may involve comic acts by comedians who are not even part of the troupe but who perform by arrangement to 'warm-up' the audience, or the exhibition of excerpts from the movies produced by the troupe featuring some interesting scenes, a style favoured by Moses Olaiya in the 1980s. With Ogunde it involved a set of vigorous dances and music that combined modernity with traditional idioms; he sang, acknowledging God, revealing the play and at the same time performing *Ijuba* for the forces of the gods so that the performance might be successful.

The next stage in the performance is the drama itself. Like the Alarinjo tradition, this may also contain the two genres – spectacle and sketches. The dramatic composition of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre is different from the norms applicable to the literary drama of Western tradition. The dramas of the Travelling Theatre are basically unscripted. Even when the story is straightforward and based on historical material or popular myth, the dramas are still largely improvised; the dialogue even more so. This is because plays are constructed and structured with the capabilities of the members of the troupe in mind and roles are 'carried' from one play into another so much that the actors 'become' their roles. For instance, Duro Ladipo was popularly known and called Shango after playing the role in *Oba Koso* and his wife is called Moremi after the protagonist in *Moremi*; Moses Olaiya Adejumo is known as Lamidi Sanni Oropo, alias Baba Sala, a role he created for himself

and which he has played consistently all through his dramatic career; and Ogunde himself became identified with the role of Osetura, the lead character in a number of his dramas, after playing it in many of his stage and film productions.

Structurally, the dramas, especially the spectacle aspect, are divided into the standard introduction-exposition-resolution plotting sequence. The plotting, as in most Travelling Theatre productions, is simple and always enriched with songs, dance, proverbs, folklore and eulogistic poems like *oríkì* (praise names), *ìwí* (*egúngún* poetry), *ìjálá*, (hunters' poetry) and *ewí* (poetry). In performance, before the dramatic spectacle, there are sketches that may or may not be related to the dramatic fare. These are usually to 'warm up' the audience for the main performance or serve as comic relief. The sketches always comment on contemporary issues in a satirical manner. The sketches are closely related to the opening glee in content and form but not in function.

The finale in Yoruba Travelling Theatre performances is typically composed of songs and dance to either comment on the performance or to serve as social commentaries as well as bidding the audience 'good-bye till the next performance'. Duro Ladipo however did not incorporate this form of closing glee to end his performances and indeed, he rarely used the opening glee. Writing about his style, Egun Clark says;

When the curtain opens, we are taken straight into the play. After the play, his cast line up to take their bow, by which time the auditorium is half empty and the ovation sparse (1980: 140).

The above statement does not mean that Duro Ladipo was unpopular and the second segment of Clark's statement above could have applied to few of his productions. On the contrary, his plays were among the most popular and successful in the Yoruba Travelling Theatre repertoire (Ogunbiyi 1981; Jeyifo 1984). I recollect an occasion when he came to perform in our town and my parents could not obtain tickets to watch his performance.

Throughout the four or five nights of performance, the town hall, venue of the performance that usually sat about one thousand spectators, was totally full. Ladipo's weekly television drama, *Bode Wasimi*, was very popular until his death in 1978, and his full-length television productions of popular Yoruba novels was still being screened on Nigerian television as recently as 1995.

The main reason why Ladipo's plays were structured in this way was that, even in the early days of his troupe, he was strongly influenced by the anthropologist Ulli Beier of the University of Ibadan Extra-Mural Studies Department. Beier introduced Ladipo to Western form of theatre production, with proper scripting and proscenium staging. When Beier, with some other academics, established the Mbari Club at Ibadan in 1961, Ladipo was one of the first set of performers to be involved. Not only was Ladipo involved with Beier, he was also at one time linked with the playwright Wole Soyinka. In essence, it is safe to assume that Ladipo's plays were structured without opening and closing gleees in the traditional way, but in the Western manner which incorporates the opening and closing segments into the main body of the drama.

By the 1980s, the Yoruba Travelling Theatre had become very popular and fully integrated into the society. Biodun Jeyifo found that there were 115 theatre troupes in 1981 (Jeyifo 1984: 200 – 203). Tickets for the more popular companies like Ogunde and Baba Sala theatres usually sold out within minutes of the box office opening. In 1981, as a measure of the popularity and relative importance of this tradition, the Ishola Ogunsola theatre's performance of *Efunsetan Aniwura* took place at the Ibadan Liberty Stadium before an audience of more than fourteen thousand (Jeyifo 1984: 79, 115)¹⁸. Gradually, as happened to its Alarinjo forebears, the activities of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre as

¹⁸ The production was commissioned by the broadcasting service of Oyo State, Nigeria.

described above died down. Many of the troupes disbanded because of growing opposition from imported Indian and Chinese cinemas, video machines and television. However, some transformed and adapted their forms to the television and the video technology so that, in Nigeria presently, the popularity of video productions is akin to the kind enjoyed by the Travelling Theatre at the height of its popularity in the 1970s.

The Birth of Nigerian Literary Drama in English

There is a strong link between the literary theatre of Osofisan and Yoruba travelling theatre. They both derive their materials from the same historical perspectives, myths and social observances. Perhaps the most important link is in the choice of themes. Many critics, including this writer, have tried to fix the starting point of serious contemporary drama in Nigeria in 1960, the year that Wole Soyinka arrived from England to start his 1960 Masks; but an acceptance of this date can only be for convenience. The origin of modern literary tradition started with the Onitsha Market popular literature, which flourished from the 1940s, immediately after the Second World War; to the start of the Nigerian civil war in 1967 when there was a paradigm shift owing to either the death of the writers during the war or to public reception of the themes. The literature comprised revues, plays, pamphlets, novelettes and letters. The themes range from religion to morality family, love, treachery, education and didactic pieces. Though influenced by Greek and Latin classic literature and the Bible in style, the plots in these plays are simple and predictable. During this period, James Ene Henshaw, a medical doctor, wrote what are now considered 'the first examples of conscious literary drama in Nigeria' (Adelugba et al, 2004).

In such plays as *This is Our Chance* (1956), *A Man of Character* (1956), *Children of the Goddess* (1964), *Medicine for Love* (1965) and *Jewels of the Shrine* (1965), Henshaw

‘explored topical, socially and political relevant and popular themes’ (Adelugba *et al*, 2004) within simple and non-complex plots. Henshaw’s plots are sometimes taken from English comedies which are transferred to African setting; his dramas stimulated more critical dramatisation of the same material by emerging writers at the dawn of Nigeria’s independence, who included Wole Soyinka, John Ekwerre and J.P. Clark (now Clark-Bekederemo). Around the time that Henshaw’s plays were being produced in Nigerian secondary schools, a new kind of dramatic activity was taken place in the University of Ibadan, then known as University College, an arm of the University of London. As a possible inspiration for the introduction of drama and theatre courses at the University, and as part of an Educational Theatre programme, Geoffrey Axworthy of the English department, a few other lecturers and some civil servants formed the Arts Theatre Production group in 1957 to produce plays by Western authors. Shortly afterwards, the students of the English Department formed the University College Ibadan Dramatic Society to produce plays. In 1959, civil servants living in Ibadan formed The Players of the Dawn, an amateur group. Most of the members of The Players later formed the nucleus of Soyinka’s 1960 *Masks*. Thus, there were many theatrical activities in the three years preceding the generally accepted 1960 seminal date for the literary theatre in Nigeria. The situation created a vibrant theatre culture in Ibadan.

However, the major stimulus to serious theatre came in 1959 with the Dramatic Society’s production of Wole Soyinka’s *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, directed by Geoffery Axworthy and Kenneth Post. These productions signalled a radical departure from the kind of theatrical fare that were presented by the various groups and introduced the era of serious literary theatre by Nigerian writers. This was at a period of renewed national consciousness, with the country’s independence from Britain imminent. Soyinka, ‘driven by that euphoria and by the desire to evolve an authentically Nigerian theatre to

express a new national consciousness' (Ogunbiyi, 1981: 28), formed the 1960 Masks. The first production of the group was the play commissioned for the independence celebration, *A Dance of the Forests* by Soyinka.

A Dance of the Forests, as Biodun Jeyifo posits, is one of the 'most ambitious and most memorable dramas' by Wole Soyinka. It captures the hopelessness of the emerging elite in being able to effectively manage the new country. Jeyifo considers the play:

appropriate to the historic task of forging a nation out of diverse peoples and communities that the celebrations symbolically entailed, the central action of the play revolves around a 'gathering of the tribes' at which the festivities intended to celebrate the glorious past and hopeful future of the assembled 'tribes' turn into an unanticipated encounter with monstrous evils in the past and present life of the community (Jeyifo, 2004: 120 – 121).

To celebrate the gathering of the tribes, a reference to the independence celebrations, Soyinka invites the gods of the Yoruba pantheon and the re-incarnated spirits of the dead and the unborn to the dramatic space. These then turn the festivities into a questing court where the machinations of the living are examined against a backdrop of past malevolent plots by both the ancestors and the gods. What is celebratory at this juncture about Soyinka's drama is the form and subject matter of the play, and the style of presentation which was unique to the Nigerian stage at that period. *A Dance of the Forests* is thus distinct for its dramaturgic innovation and boldness, with the total dramatic action constructed around a cleansing ritual. Soyinka deployed this mode in his later plays like *The Road* (1965) where the *egúngún* festival was invoked.

A Dance of the Forests is important because it celebrates the synthesis of modern drama, myths and traditional forms, and signals, despite the successes of Soyinka's three earlier plays – *The Swamp Dwellers*, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Trials of Brother Jero* – the beginning of serious literary tradition in Nigeria. *A Dance of the Forests* is Soyinka's first

major play and ‘should be regarded as his thesis play in terms of his aesthetics of the theatre’ (Adedeji, 1987: 108). In the drama, Soyinka stretches the boundaries of rituals beyond antecedent forms employed by Hubert Ogunde or Duro Ladipo in the Yoruba Travelling Theatre; beyond even the rituals’ normative forms and conventions. For Soyinka, ritual is only one among a wide variety of performance modes with a possibility of justifiable appropriation, but not without deconstruction designed to extract the dramatic essence. Biodun Jeyifo suggests that Soyinka’s interest in ritual forms and idioms is with ‘a view of the ‘ritual matrix’ as not only universal but inherently emancipatory and even revolutionary’ (2004: 125). When Jeyifo talks about ‘ritual matrix’ here, he means the prism through which Soyinka sometimes views and presents his creative materials. Soyinka deconstructs Yoruba rituals and extracts the dramatic essence for his theatre.

In spite of later attempts by Soyinka to translate Yoruba rituals onto the stage in, for instance, *Bacchae of Euripides*, the ritual construction is never precise. There are disjunctions in the acts and gestures due to disparity in time and space. Yoruba cultural performances are so diverse that it is difficult to ascribe a standard to the performance of Yoruba rituals, and by derivation to an artist’s theatrical reconstruction. Thus, ritual matrix is essentially a perceptual map to relate the theatrical representation to the acts of the original ritual and not necessarily to present the act theatrically. This is expressed in Soyinka’s essay on the drama of Osofisan in ‘The External Encounter: Ambivalence in African Arts and Literature’ (in Soyinka, *Arts, Dialogue and Outrage*). The process of re-interpretation and representation, and ‘juxtaposition of ritual elements’ (Ricard 1983: 158) makes the drama of Wole Soyinka uniquely different from prevailing theatrical modes.

Jeyifo argues that the implication of unambiguous or a critical mode of recuperating rituals, or myths, can be less potent than using drama as a ‘cultural medium able to respond to the great crises and contradictions of the present age’ by ‘recombining fusion with ritual’ (Jeyifo, 2004: 125). However, this clearly is not the intention of Soyinka, whose drama distils dramatic essence from the rituals. Soyinka, unlike Ogunde, synthesises rituals and presents his dramatic work, from *A Dance of the Forests*, with layers of ‘formalistic and thematic reconfigurations’ which ‘interrogate the legitimacy and value of the pristine ritual traditions’ that he deploys in his plays. This recuperating essence marks the introduction of Soyinka on the Nigerian stage as the beginning of a serious literary drama in the country. It also establishes a tradition that other dramatists have, not only emulated to a great degree, but re-examined and re-presented in various forms.

After the 1960 performance of *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka started the Orisun Theatre group with a more semi-professional format, and within the next four years, had produced fifteen full-length plays (Ogunbiyi, 1981: 29). Orisun Theatre’s performances were aired on the radio and transmitted over the television as much as they were presented on the stage. Soyinka’s idea was to move the theatre away from the elitist environment of the University into the cultural setting of the community. The Mbari Club, which was formed in 1961 by teachers and artists in Ibadan, including Ulli Beier, designer Demas Nwoko, writer Daniel Fagunwa, poet Christopher Okigbo, poet / dramatist John Pepper Clark (now Bekederemo-Clark) and South African Ez’kia Mphahlele, provided this setting. As Orisun Theatre did not only produce Soyinka’s play, but dramas by other Mbari artists, the move to the Mbari Club house in the centre of the Ibadan city was significant. Between the club and the University of Ibadan, which had enhanced its dramatic heritage through the establishment of a School of Drama in 1962 and the employment of an Artist-

in-Residence in the person of Kola Ogunmola and his troupe, Ibadan presented a lively nurturing environment for the development of modern Nigerian theatre and dramatists like Osofisan.

The University also started a 'Travelling Theatre' to introduce the emerging Nigerian theatre to the Nigerian public. The School of Drama, which launched this initiative, produced mainly student-developed plays, like adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* by Ernest Ekom and *That Scoundrel Suberu* by Dapo Adelugba. The troupe toured every year to 'anywhere their performance could be adapted to the audience and the conditions of performance' (Ogunbiyi, 1981: 30). Gradually, out of these experiments, a truly Nigerian theatre began to emerge with the creative contribution of other writers like Ola Rotimi, who established the Ori Olokun theatre at Ile-Ife in 1968, Zulu Sofola and Wale Ogunyemi.

Thematic Considerations of Early Literary Drama

The 1960s was a period of cultural renaissance and national consciousness in Nigeria. The country had just obtained its political independence from Great Britain and was still in that numinous period of defining a socio-political agenda and cultural identity to move the new country forward. Though there was a country, there were no unified intentions for the country, and certainly there was no nation. The whole political elite was in a dilemma finding a unifying theme for the more than four hundred different nations that made up the country. This is one of the moods that Soyinka's independence play captured. The political situation, especially in the Western Region, was precarious, bordering on civil insurrection and near-anarchy, nevertheless the socio-economic condition was favourable for the development of a vibrant literary and popular theatre culture.

Broadly, the major concerns for the dramatists included developing a theatre that would pose moral problems for the citizenry and sensitize the country towards a project of cultural revival after the colonial assault of more than a century. They were also faced with the predicament of developing a dramatic language that would be accepted by all. Most of the plays at this time concentrated on themes around these concerns, following the example of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. On the subject of language, Soyinka introduced 'pidgin' English, Yoruba, Igbo and other linguistic codes into his drama, a radical departure from the practice of James Henshaw and the writers of the Onitsha Market literature who depicted non-literates in English by making the character speak 'bad English'. Because of the colonial heritage, the writers knew they had to write in English but 'an English locally fabricated and locally flavored' (Osofisan 2001a: 178). The new dramatists also embarked on satirising the new institutions set up by the political dispensation, especially if the institutions were not compatible with what the writers considered Nigerian culture. 'Death Before Dishonour' by Wole Soyinka satirised the new political elite whose sense of patriotism was misplaced and his *Childe Internationale* depicted a family who totally misunderstood the etiquette of the social class to which they were aspiring.

In conclusion, the dramatists tried to integrate Nigeria's cultural essence with the traditions of Western theatre to create a distinctly Nigerian theatre, with songs, dance and linguistic codes that shift as frequently as the audience change.

Chapter 2

Femi Osofisan: A [Revolutionary] Nigerian Playwright

Introduction

In this chapter I conduct an exploratory introduction to the ideologies, concepts, beliefs and the social and political circumstances that have influenced the drama of Femi Osofisan. I discuss the influence of traditional beliefs, myths and legends, European colonisation and the development of literature in Nigeria, the concept of *négritude* and the nationalist movements before political independence from Europe, and the dialectical approach that Osofisan has adopted in his writing. I also consider the works of his contemporaries and other literary influences that have shaped his dramaturgy and literary worldview. Further, I relate the influence of colonial politics and literature, particularly after 1960 when most African countries obtained their independence from the colonial masters, on his work. Finally, I try to provide underlying premises for his dramaturgy.

Critics have describes Femi Osofisan as ‘revolutionary’, ‘Marxist’, ‘socialist’, leftist’ and other terms that suggest non-conformism among traditionally conservative Yoruba people (Amuta 1989; Awodiya 1993). The playwright however rejects these terminologies and argues that such terms ‘breed specific attitudes’ that prejudice peoples’ reception of a writer. As such, in spite of his outwardly socialist lifestyle, Osofisan refuses to identify with any ideology publicly, particularly in Nigeria, where his drama is most popular. In an interview in 1993, the playwright defended his position:

We categorise, it’s neat, and we file away. Very convenient for some critics.... in our country, I have come to realise that the word “socialism” is a convenient password for scoundrels. We are a nation famous for misusing and misapplying words (Awodiya 1993: 37).

He explains that a few academics display socialist radicalism to gain the attention of the authorities with the ultimate intention of enriching themselves. There are also those who ‘believe passionately, but only in theories which they have read up in some book, and not in human beings. Some are quixotes (sic), but most are nihilists, anarchists. Their dream is to create in Nigeria the exact replica of the revolution which happened in Russia decades ago’ (Awodiya 1993: 37). These socialists invoke a negative perception in the people. They, as Soyinka asserts, ‘ignore or deny the actual stage of socio-political evolution of their audiences and/or readers of [these] dramas’ (Soyinka 1988: 120). In addition, Osofisan rejects being described as a revolutionary writer, stating that ‘no writer should strive to be seen as a revolutionary writer. That is fake. Every writer must write about what touches him genuinely’ (Awodiya 1993: 119). The term ‘revolutionary’ in this instance denotes the act of using drama to foment political trouble or instigate a change in the political system of the country, a mission the playwright repudiates; societal problems instigate his dramatic impulse and he writes to highlight these problems rather than seeking an alternative government by violent means.

In spite of his reluctance to associate with any ideology, Osofisan’s drama articulates the historical and cultural processes in the society from a class perspective (Awodiya 1993: 77). He reveals his socialist bias in a statement he made in a 1978 interview:

You may say we are leftists... without being dogmatic about Marxism. But our essentially socialist leanings and convictions separate us from the older writers by a wide margin (Awodiya 1993: 19).

Apart from his socialist credentials, Osofisan is also a Yoruba man with deeply held traditional beliefs, a post-negritudist thinker and a pragmatic writer brought up under a strong colonial, Christian influence. His father, for instance, was a church lay reader and organist. Going to church every Sunday and on other Christian festivals was obligatory in

Osofisan's youth (personal interview, 1996). Nevertheless, he is a materialist whose study of other cultures helped to define his attitude to religion.

Osofisan is an eclectic playwright who adapts the ideas of other writers such as Wole Soyinka, Jean Genet, William Shakespeare, Nikolai Gogol, Anton Chekhov, Max Frisch, and Bertolt Brecht (Awodiya 1993: 120). Critics Chris Dunton (1992) and Sandra Richards (1996) have shown that Bertolt Brecht is a major influence on his drama. In his plays, he has engaged with some of these writers, and has even adapted the works of some of them. He states: 'They teach me to write well. And many times I steal their ideas' (Awodiya 1993: 120). For instance, *Wèsòò Hamlet! or, The Resurrection of Hamlet* (2003) is re-reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and *The Midnight Hotel* (1982) is an adaptation of Feydeau's *L'Hôtel du libre échange*. *One Legend, Many Seasons* (1996) is a dramatised adaptation of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Osofisan has adapted Chekhov's shorter plays for his audience; one of the most produced Osofisan plays is *The Engagement*, which is an adaptation of Chekhov's *The Proposal*. He also adapted the Russian writer's *The Anniversary* and *The Reluctant Tragedian*. Among African writers, Osofisan has responded to the works of Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *No More the Wasted Breed*, *Another Raft* (1986), *Morountodun* (1979), and *Oriki of a Grasshopper* (1982) which also has as subtext, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Apart from Soyinka, perhaps the other major Nigerian influence on the writing of Osofisan is the poet Christopher Okigbo (1932 – 1967). In a personal interview with Osofisan in 2004, he confirmed giving some of his earliest writings, including play scripts, to Okigbo for editorial suggestions. Okigbo was the Nigerian representative for Cambridge University Press in the mid-1960s. Unfortunately, the 1967 – 1970 Nigeria civil war, and Okigbo's direct involvement,

suggests that these plays are now lost. On his dramaturgy's indebtedness to Soyinka, Osofisan states that:

I have been influenced by him [Soyinka] and I have been inspired by his work and I continue to be inspired by such works as his... I think we were fortunate to have somebody like Soyinka in our cultural life and to have had the kind of influence that he continues to exert. (Aire & Ugbabe 2006: 64).

Martin Banham (2006) highlights that Osofisan's dramatic aim is to expose the conscience of his audience by making spectators reflect on the performance and thus wake from their lethargy about societal issues. Using comic effects, metaphor, myth and historical precedence, Osofisan's drama, as he explains in the programme note to the 1979 production of *Once Upon Four Robbers* at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre, seeks to shock the audience into a new awareness of their collective predicament. I have identified four factors to the understanding of Osofisan's dramatic oeuvre:

- a. He employs techniques that prod his characters, and subsequently the audience, out of inertia into action, whether reflective or physical. Plays like *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* often generate debates, with the audience drawing on real life examples to determine the course of the dramatic dénouement. In the National Theatre of Lagos production of *Birthdays Are Not for Dying* in 1980, the audience debated for more than three hours, with some engaging in intense arguments, about the resolution of the play. The play itself lasted only forty-five minutes.
- b. His drama encourages the possibility of individual and collective security through self-study and self-exploration. The audience identifies with the characters' pursuits and understands the choices they make.
- c. Hopefully, like the characters, the audience will become more revolutionary by starting to challenge the status quo.

- d. Society can then change or be changed along socialist lines that are defined and determined by the people.

Osofisan tries to respond to the phenomenon of subjective response to socially engineered chaos in his drama. Because of the unpredictability of these upheavals in the society, his pronouncements and dramatic intentions are, consequently, at times contradictory and even compromising, but never tentative.

I have conducted this study within the cultural understanding of Femi Osofisan's world – the Yoruba ethnic group and the myths, rituals and legends that inform and define the peoples' beliefs and cultural performances. I have also considered the socio-political structure of Nigeria as a country; the literary influence of *négritude*; Marxism and the literary influence of Western theatre; and the writings as well as personal and professional influence of Osofisan's Nigerian contemporaries, including in particular Wole Soyinka, John Pepper-Clark Bekederemo, Ola Rotimi, Kole Omotoso and Bode Sowande.

Osofisan's Traditional and Childhood Influences

Born Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan on 16 June 1946 in Erunwon, a little village in the western part of Nigeria, Osofisan's life became embroiled in myth and drama shortly after birth. His father, Philip Biobaku, who was a teacher, church organist and lay reader, died when his son was very young. His mother, Phebean Olufunke, brought him up, with the help of various relatives. This resulted in an itinerant existence during his primary school years, as Osofisan had to move from one relative to the other for tuition, lodging and general welfare. The experience exposed him at an early age to the religious and non-religious ceremonies, festivals and rituals performed in the different homes where he lodged. While many children in Yorubaland grew up with an intimate knowledge of a form of performance, Osofisan was nurtured in the practice of many of the performances

common to the different towns around Ijebu-Ode and elsewhere in Yorubaland where his relatives lived, and where his mother taught as a schoolmistress. These festivals and ceremonies included the Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter, Islamic Eids, as well as Yoruba festivals and rituals like Egungun, Agemo, Ogun, Osun, Obatala, Oro and others. His childhood also exposed him to the performances of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre as these troupes moved from town to village on their continuous performance cycles.

Osofisan gained admission to the Government College in Ibadan for his secondary education. His attendance at this school is significant to his career for two main reasons: in 1960, a year after he started at the school, Derek Bullock became the principal. Bullock's love of theatre and his production of annual stage plays encouraged the young pupil to develop an interest in theatre even though his major subjects were sciences. Bullock motivated him to study the arts rather than engineering; his initial area of interest. He edited the school magazine and in 1965, he won the first Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service (WNBS) Independence Anniversary prize with the essay, 'Five Years Ago'. The following year, he won the first T. M. Aluko Prize for Literature. The second reason involves Wole Soyinka: the elder playwright attended Government College between 1946 and 1950. When Osofisan started at the school, the Nigerian audience already knew Soyinka as a successful playwright and a theatre director with his companies, 1960 Masks and Orisun Theatre. Soyinka was also a celebrity at the school as an 'old boy' who had become a well-known writer. This shared school experience and Osofisan's later membership of Orisun Theatre created a bond between the two writers.

Osofisan continued on a government scholarship to the University of Ibadan, where he wrote scripts for various student events and twice served as the president of the students'

Dramatic Society. He passed his first degree in French in 1969, after a further year's study at the University of Dakar, Senegal. While in Senegal, he trained with the Daniel Serrano Theatre Company under the directorship of Maurice Senghor. Senghor was also the director of the National Dance Theatre of Senegal at this time. Osofisan confirmed to me that it was during his period with this theatre that he learnt the connected relationship between script writing, play rehearsal and actor training, a skill he has successfully used in many of his plays (personal interview 1995). For example, his draft scripts lack stage directions as these are worked out during rehearsals and the play 'shells' are only fleshed out after days of rehearsals. During the 1995 production of *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle* when there were two casts performing on alternate nights, lines and scenes were re-written such that different casts had practically different scripts to work with. Osofisan gained additional experience in acting and directing for both theatre and television through his affiliation with the Orisun Theatre, a professional company established by Wole Soyinka as an offshoot of the 1960 Masks. He was able to study the directorial style of Wole Soyinka as well as that of Dapo Adelugba, a Nigerian theatre director who was in charge of the troupe while Soyinka was in prison between 1967 and 1969; and music and theatre décor from Tunji Oyelana and Demas Nwoko respectively. He took part in various workshops organised by the company and played a major role (Blindman) in the second production of Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* in 1971 at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan.

Osofisan started his postgraduate studies at the Nouvelle Sorbonne in Paris (Université de Paris III), and when his thesis on Aimé Césaire was rejected by his supervisor who refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of African drama (personal interview 1995), he transferred his research to the University of Ibadan. During his period of studies in Paris, he attended the rehearsals of Jean-Marie Serreau when Serreau's work consisted of

advancing black consciousness by producing the drama of Césaire. Serreau was a major French director who was experimenting at this time with minimal sets and forms capable of making theatrical activity more widely available (Robert Livingston, in J. Ellen Gainor 1995: 179-193). His repertory also included many productions of Bertolt Brecht's plays, a point that may have informed the later argument of some critics regarding Brecht's influence on Osofisan's dramaturgy and style of presentation. Lanrele Bamidele for example argues that Osofisan's drama is strongly influenced by [Peter Shaffer and] 'Brechtian idiom' (Bamidele 1990: 89).

In 1974, Osofisan obtained his doctorate on 'The Origin of Drama in West Africa: A Study of the Development of Drama from the Traditional Forms to the Modern Theatre in English and French'. In the study, he compared the roles of Yoruba gods and myths and their relationship to performance, to their Greek counterparts and their influence on the development of Western theatre. He also wrote on the drama of J. P. Clark, Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi, comparing their drama with those of dramatists in Francophone West African countries. After his doctorate, he took up an appointment as a lecturer at the University of Ibadan where he was able to conduct more research into Yoruba history, the pantheon of gods and their relationship to the everyday life of the people and, in particular, the qualities of Orunmila and Esu.

Yoruba Influence: the Orunmila and Esu Factors

In an essay entitled 'Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos', Femi Osofisan (2001a: 92) observes that:

The dramatic heritage available to us has simply proved to be inadequate. And it is not only that the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect, it is also that the very metaphysical *raison d'être* of that machinery has been eroded with the advent of a new socio-political philosophy.

In this piece in which Femi Osofisan meditates on the role of myth and ritual in Nigerian theatre and the guiding principles of his own work, he identifies the idealising and mystifying qualities of myth as one of the problems that the contemporary playwright concerned with the dynamics of history has to confront. He argues that since myths and rituals were used in traditional societies as tools for 'communal retrieval' and survive into the present as paradigms that transcend their historical origins, writers continually reproduce and represent them in their works, thereby according these tales a hegemonic power borne of insistent repetition. However, these myths, Osofisan insists, have lost their efficacy in the face of the social transformation brought about by a new socio-political reality; colonisation, western education and the introduction of new philosophical and scientific concepts. In his plays, Osofisan seeks to break this hegemonic hold by using the myths and rituals only as metaphors, as paradigmatic sites from which to conduct an interrogation of contemporary cultural and political issues. However, he still recognises the importance of the corpus of traditional philosophy and knowledge; hence his adoption of Orunmila and Esu as patron muses because of Orunmila's role as the repository of wisdom and Esu's role as the link between the gods.

Osofisan puts forward in plays such as *Morountodun*, *Many Colours make the Thunder-King* and *Tegonni, An African Antigone* that, through the ages and in various cultural settings, political hegemonies have the same root in tyranny, and that myths are employed to inscribe this tyranny into the life of the people. Osofisan subverts the Yoruba myth and tales of Moremi, the legendary princess of Ile-Ife, and Shango, the deified king of Oyo kingdom, to examine the effect of tyranny on our perception of history. The tales, for him, become raw materials to be interrogated and appropriated into the corpus of non-African performance traditions, conventions and cultural styles. What Osofisan is saying when he

states that ‘the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect’ (2001a: 92), is that the old rituals have proved inadequate to contend with modern realities. In play after play, he has attempted deliberate revisions of Yoruba mythologies. Traditionally, individuals or families, known as ‘carriers’, symbolically took away sin and disease, leaving the community purged until the following season. Wole Soyinka in *The Strong Breed* put forward the idea that this is a means of the society re-generating itself. However, in *No More the Wasted Breed*, Osofisan is saying that all these apparatus of myth and ritual can no longer, in the modern times, bring newness or revolution, or change society. He argues that the validity of sacrificing to the gods or goddesses is questionable because the deities, instead of blessing their supplicants, disrupt their lives by giving them false hopes. Instead of relying on mysticism and superstition, Osofisan advocates that his audience use common sense and collective endeavour to free themselves from dependence on gods. *No More the Wasted Breed* challenges Soyinka’s trope of renewal through sacrifice. Introducing class and gender arguments, Osofisan questions the validity of societal rebirth through sacrifice prescribed by the privileged elite who are always male and wealthy, never the poor and downtrodden, even if the victim is from the latter group. So, the mask is revealed: Osofisan’s ideology is not a position against myth, rituals, history or socialism in whatever form, but clarity of intention based on choices that are not predetermined by any kind of hegemony; a re-assessment of past methods with a view to making them relevant for the present, using materialist principles.

The Orunmila factor is always present in Osofisan’s plays, in one form or another, either as the source of the plot or in the characterisation. The use of the Orunmila motif in Osofisan’s plays is partly a reaction to Soyinka’s use of Ogun imagery in his dramaturgy and partly a reflection of the Nigerian social setting of his plays. Soyinka celebrates

warrior-types and what Awodiya has termed ‘the myth of violence’ (1993: 141) in his plays, provoking in Osofisan a rebellion against the older writer. In an interview, he explains the reason for using the Ifa motif in his work:

I got fed up with this Ogun image which concentrates all the time on the power of lust, on the adventures of warriors, how heroic it is to slaughter people. But it teaches nothing about the explorations of knowledge. So I had to look elsewhere and I found out all these were already in the Ifa cult... The Ogun image is the one that builds false heroes... The Ogun image is the more romantic, the more dramatic image, but it is not the most progressive one that we need at this point of history. (Awodiya 1993: 70).

Osofisan’s recourse to Ifa as a metaphor for societal rebirth is in direct contrast to the celebration of Ogunnian archetypes in Soyinka’s plays like *Kongi’s Harvest* (Kongi) or *Death and the King’s Horseman* (Elesin-Oba). History, as the plays show, is the record of achievements of heroes; contributions of common people are rarely recognised or acknowledged. In contrast, Osofisan’s commitment is to the common people and their struggles. His drama privileges and extols the achievements of these people. Rather than prescribing life-choices for his characters by requiring them to accept the social and religious contexts presented by an archetypal hero, Osofisan imposes upon his characters a dialectical dilemma: they have to choose their destiny. While Elesin-Oba in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* has no choice but to continue along the path of tradition and ‘commit death’ to accompany his king to the realm of the dead, characters in Osofisan’s drama constantly assess their situations and are encouraged to make rational decisions, or decisions which are within their control. In *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1984), for instance, the minstrels, granted magical powers, individually have to decide on how they want to use the power, as their choice determines the kind of reward they obtain. Drama becomes a ‘dynamic process wherein men and women make and remake their worlds’ (Richards 1996: 79).

Osofisan's choice of Esu as an inspirational patron emphasises the objective level he demands of his characters to determine their destinies. Because of this, the dramatic interpretation is always subject to change or reversal and the paradigm of his plays is always dialectical. Moreover, as Osofisan states, 'revolts must come in order to have progress' (Awodiya 1993: 81); Esu represents the principle of constantly questioning orthodoxy and advocating revolt. Henry Louis Gates Jr. provides further explanation for the relationship between Orunmila and Esu:

Ifa is the god of determinate meanings, but his meaning must be rendered by analogy. Esu, god of indeterminacy, rules this interpretive process... For Ifa, one's sought meaning is patently obvious; it need only be read. Esu decodes the figures (1989: 21).

This is what Richards explains as 'Orunmila speaks the secrets of the future, and Esu happily generates contradiction' (Richards 1996: 122). Osofisan mostly chooses this 'interpretive process' as a way out of conflicts and dilemmas created in his drama. He finds similarities and parallels between Yoruba mythology and folklore with modern conflicts, which he exploits in his dramaturgy. In *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle* (1988), for instance, to solve the riddle of which is a better choice for a community between war and peace, Osofisan uses an Ifa oracle to plot the adventures of twin sons of contrasting natures to determine the solution. When the sons grow up, they each choose their paths. This leads to a bigger conflict when the sons decide whose choice is better, and which way will advance their cause to the next level. This allegorical drama portrays the ideological struggles, conflicting identities and unrealised hopes of many African countries after independence from their colonial masters. Richards conclusion that 'meaning or truth is always multiple and dependent on one's vantage point and mode of apprehension' (Richards 1996: 123) explains the paradox in the drama. Esu acts as the agent of metamorphosis. The presence of Esu is constant through the intervention of the *babalawo*, Ifa's agent of divination. In all Osofisan's drama, the Esu persona provides the

choices for both characters and audience. In *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1979), for example, the robbers choose how they use the powers given them by an Esu figure, the Aafaa, a Muslim griot who also doubles as an Ifa priest; the playwright also gives the audience the choice of how they want the play to conclude. The Esu persona or ‘type’, which includes Leje (*The Chattering and the Song*), Titubi (*Morountodun*), Igunnun (*Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*) and Tegonni (*Tegonni: An African Antigone*) provides the revolutionary ethos in his writing; they not only establish the dramatic action and influence other characters but act as narrators who determine the mood of the performance.

Socialism and Femi Osofisan

The period of Osofisan’s study in Paris, and his research into the writing of Césaire, introduced the dramatist to a new understanding and interpretation of Marxism, socialism and the political concept of *négritude*. These concepts were not new to him; as a student at the University of Ibadan, Osofisan had been part of the intellectual group of artists who frequented the Mbari Club¹⁹ in Ibadan in the late 1960s. Further, in 1968, the cultural revolution popularly known as ‘French May’ started at the university he later attended in Paris, leading to its closure, and a total shut-down of the French government. What the scholar was introduced to on his arrival at Paris in 1970 was the ethos behind the revolution. Paris also introduced him to French racism; on his arrival in Paris, Osofisan found there was no accommodation for him at the university. He tried to spend the night in a hotel but none of the seventeen he approached ‘had a space available’, even when he offered to pay to stay in the lobby. Osofisan spent his first nights in Paris on a park bench with other black migrants to France from North Africa and Francophone African countries.

¹⁹ For more information on the Mbari Club, see Chapter 1.

Socialism is an important influence on Osofisan's dramaturgy, but it is socialism integrated into the specific circumstances of our dramatist's worldview. His view of socialism is indigenised to embrace the social and political contexts of Nigeria. Karl Marx's historical materialism influenced many writers in the 19th and 20th centuries to analyse reality and history dialectically, and to scrutinise class struggles in societies. Socialism and Marxism, as opposed to capitalism, became popular in Africa as ideological weapons that some political leaders used in the fight for political independence. Leaders like Patrice Lumumba of Congo and Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau advocated socialism as a means of attaining freedom from the capitalist West. Some of Africa's nationalist leaders aligned with the then Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s; an association which became popular among their followers and supporters, especially among Nigerian University students, journalists and trade unionists. These educated elites held the belief that socialism and, in certain cases, Soviet-type communism, could save Nigeria from political and social mismanagement. Socialism became popular with this group of people but many of them viewed identification with socialism as a way of enriching themselves by fraudulently converting public resources to their own use. They became establishment token-Marxists who wore ideological disguises to mask their real identity as opportunists. By 1982, Osofisan had become so disillusioned with his socialist associates and colleagues in the University system that he wrote *The Oriki of A Grasshopper* to expose their fraudulence. The drama, staged at the annual African literature conference in Ibadan in 1982, reflected 'on the moral basis and practical implications of the ideological positions of the radical intellectual' (Irele 1995: xvii).

In the 1960s, when most Africa countries became independent, University of Ibadan introduced Marxism and Hegelian theories into the humanities curricula and this provided

one of the influences on Osofisan while he was an undergraduate student. Osofisan was also influenced by the views of dramatists who were socialist; he studied and directed plays by Bertolt Brecht and Irish nationalist writer Sean O'Casey, such as *The Informer* (1965) and *A Pound on Demand* (1951). 'The influence of these figures on his work, in terms both of world outlook and of dramatic style, is palpable in many of his plays' (Irele 1995: xiv) and he gained more insight through the productions into European dramatic aesthetics. Apart from the dramatic values, the plays helped him understand of the political struggles these writers faced in their societies.

The dramatic methods and production techniques of French theatre director Jean-Marie Serreau also influenced Osofisan; the French director experimented with the drama of avant-garde playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. Osofisan attended rehearsals in the Paris theatres between 1971 and 1973, when he was studying in France; Serreau was working on the plays of Césaire and his working methods, in particular, his eclectic way of borrowing ideas from different plays to enhance his productions²⁰, influenced Osofisan's dramaturgy (personal interview, 2004). When Osofisan went back to Nigeria, he renewed his friendship with avowed Marxists Kole Omotoso, Bade Onimode and Ola Oni who were already well known on the Nigerian labour union scene. Indeed, he lived in the same apartment as Omotoso during his first year back home. Materialist ideas started to influence his writing around this time.

In Paris, Osofisan wrote *The Chattering and the Song*, premiered at Ibadan in 1976. The play is a radical departure from the earlier plays he wrote during the 1960s, dramas which were influenced by the drama of Soyinka and the dramatic productions at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre. *The Chattering and the Song* demonstrates the influence of the

²⁰ See Osofisan's obituary for Jean-Marie Serreau in *The Benin Review*, 1,1 (June 1974)

playwright's French experience, as I explain below. In addition, there is artistic disjunction between *The Cooling Spring* and *Restless Run of Locusts* written in the 1960s, and *The Chattering and the Songs*, *Oriki of a Grasshopper* and *Altine's Wrath*, for example, which were written after Osofisan came back from France and when he was involved with the socialist movements in Nigeria. It is my opinion that this disjunction is caused by the experience of Western production methods, especially the minimalist approach to play production employed by Serreau in the production of plays by Brecht and Aime Cesaire.

The Influence of Western Theatrical Forms on Osofisan's Dramaturgy

The most important Western theatrical form that critics have remarked in relation to Osofisan's work is the Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, and the realist movement in Europe in the 19th century (see Richards 1987, 1996; Awodiya 1995, 1996; Obafemi 1996). There is also a parallel between Osofisan's life and development as an artist with that of the Irish nationalist writer, Sean O'Casey. Both O'Casey and Osofisan are idealists with a strong sense of social justice that marks their life and work. O'Casey experienced the miseries of the Irish working class during his childhood, an experience similar to Osofisan's itinerant upbringing in Nigeria. They both write sympathetically of female characters, the underprivileged and have expressed anti-war sentiments in their drama. O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) deals with the impact of the Irish civil war (1922 – 1923) on the working class poor of Dublin while the Nigerian civil war provides material for Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* and, largely, *The Chattering and the Song*. In the programme note of the production of O'Casey's *A Pound on Demand* in 1968 by University of Ibadan Dramatic Society, Osofisan comments: 'Sean O'Casey is well known'. This indicates more than a casual acquaintance with his work and, in 1969, during the Nigerian civil war, Osofisan draws on O'Casey drama to produce

his anti-war play, 'You Have Lost Your Fine Face', later published as *Red is the Freedom Road*. Nevertheless, Osofisan's drama is closer to that of Bertolt Brecht.

The aim of Brecht in his theatre was to stimulate and provoke his audience out of a state of fatalism and restore their faith in human agency for change. This is similar to the agenda of Osofisan's dramaturgy, as I show below.

The political leadership after independence in Nigeria turned out to be corrupt and their actions continue to influence the current chaos in the country's political system. Some groups of writers who grew up in the years immediately before and after independence argue that the political problems are mainly due to unsuitability of the political system to the people's culture. They produce dramas and literature that advocate a sense of confidence in indigenous political systems and sensibility. Nonetheless, many of these dramas are based on existing Western drama and ideas; and some are adaptations of European or Greek classical drama, with the plots transplanted to African settings. Examples of these plays include Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are not to Blame* (1968; from Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*), and Dapo Adelugba's *That Scoundrel Suberu* (1967; from Moliere's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*). But some, like the works of Osofisan, radically revises Western dramaturgy and introduce a blend of indigenous and Western dramatic narrative. Unlike other writers, Osofisan's dramatic structure exploits realism of characters, scenery and contemporary events in a manner similar to Brecht's epic theatre technique.

Most critics of Osofisan tend to argue that his drama is based on Brecht's technique, especially in the use of episodic structure as in *Twingle-Twangle*, *A Twynning Tayle*, multiple identities (*Morountodun*) and role-playing (*Chattering and the Song*). Lanre

Bamidele goes as far as stating that Osofisan and Brecht are ‘birds of the same feather, in terms of dramaturgical concern’ (1990: 88). Bamidele argues that Osofisan’s style is influenced by Brecht’s ‘idiom’ and the ‘intensity and devotion’ with which he teaches Brecht to his students reflects ‘an inspiration he has found [there] for his own creative efforts’ (1990: 88). This argument is tenuous and is not supported by evidence other works by Osofisan. Richards accuses such critics of ignorance of indigenous aesthetic practices (1996: 72). Opinions like Bamidele’s perpetuate the racist assumption that culture originates in Europe, a view that négritude not only discounts but which thinkers like Edward Said (1978) have roundly condemned as unreasonable and unacceptable. It also reduces African drama to a simple form that needs ‘foreign’ injection of ideas to be meaningful.

Osofisan no doubt was exposed to Brecht as he was to other Western writers, and there is documentary evidence that he produced a few of Brecht’s plays such as *The Informer* at the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan in 1968, but the importance of their relationship is Osofisan’s penchant for engaging in dialectical debates with other writers. He ‘steals’ (Awodiya 1993: 120) or ‘borrows’ (personal interview, 1995) their ideas and he then employs these to expose the socio-economic dimensions of his people. For instance, he combines George Feydeau’s technique of exploiting farcical possibilities with Brecht’s epic theatre in the Midnight²¹ series of plays. Like Brecht who focuses on the political narrative of the lyrics as well as distinctive melody, Osofisan makes his music appealing. This encourages the audience to repeat the songs, thereby integrating the perspectives of the plays into their reasoning. For Brecht, ‘as far as music was concerned there was an [equally] appreciable move towards jazz’ (Ritchie 1982: 162), a style very close to the West African highlife that Osofisan favours. To realise the musical ambition

²¹ The Midnight plays are *Midnight Hotel*, *Midnight Blackout* and *Fiddlers on a Midnight Lark*.

for his drama, Brecht collaborated with the German-American music composer Kurt Weill whose ‘reinterpretation of the conventions of operatic music are as important as Brecht’s text’ (Davies 1982: 120) in *The Threepenny Opera*. In the same vein, Osofisan has collaborated for many years with the professional musician, actor and bandleader Tunji Oyelana²² for the music composition in his plays. Their first collaboration was during the production of *Once Upon Four Robbers* in 1978, in which Oyelana also acted a major role. With the exception of *Nkrumah Ni!... Africa Ni!* (1994), Oyelana has always written the music in Osofisan’s drama, and in most instances, like the latest scripts of *The Fabulous Visit of the Sugarcane-Man* (2009), a stage adaptation in English of Daniel Fagunwa’s novel, *Ireke Onibudo* (1949), he adds texts such as ‘For Tunji: the songs will come in the places where you find ***’ (Osofisan, working script 2009). To encourage audience sing-along, Osofisan sometimes projects the lyrics on screens around the theatre or printed in production notes. He also writes lyrics to popular tunes to focus the concentration of the audience on the message in the lyrics. He adopted this technique to make music and song fundamental elements in his drama.

Brecht tried to persuade his audience to view the stage as a performing area and the actors as individuals who are acting out a role, which was against the traditional, naturalist idea of theatre popular before he introduced *verfremdungseffekt*. Osofisan too adopted this approach in his drama (*Morountodun, Farewell to A Cannibal Rage*), but unlike Brecht who recommended that his actors remained detached from the actions of the play, Osofisan encourages realistic representation and total involvement of the actor in the action of the play. This is to assist the audience’s understanding and contemplation of the play’s version of history and myth. While Brecht’s theatre ‘proposed an anti-illusionist, epic theatre that dramatizes identity as a social construct, susceptible to change’ (Richards

²² Tunji Oyelana is a professional highlife musician and bandleader of The Benders, and was a music instructor at the University of Ibadan for many years.

1996: 66), Osofisan's focus is on the narrative of the drama and the effect he wants the audience to absorb from the drama.

Osofisan consciously alienates his audience from theatrical illusion in plays like *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1986), *Morountodun* (1979) and *Tegonni* (1998). The principles in his drama are the same as the principles behind Brecht's alienation effect; breaking down theatrical illusion to remind the audience that they are watching an enactment or re-enactment of reality. Nevertheless, I maintain that any comparison of Osofisan's dramaturgy to that of Brecht or any other Western writer is only significant to point out the intertextual debates he has with these writers. Western dramatic forms have influenced his writing because of the major factor of education and the fact that he admits to eclecticism (personal interview 1995; 2005), but there is an equally key factor of his Yoruba background and the influence of Yoruba worldview and indigenous theatrical performances on his drama. For instance, the Yoruba storytelling form shares an insistence, with Brechtian theory, on the social character of the narrator, 'articulated through an episodic structure, fluidity of actor identity, and audience objectivity' (Richards 1996: 89). Yet, while Brecht's theories predicated on rupturing the existing bourgeois order and insisting on a materialist, dialectical perspective, Osofisan's narration is subsumed within the existing storytelling format of the Yoruba culture. Osofisan's drama first has to be identifiable in its context by its audience, many of whom have never heard of Brecht or any of the Western dramatists, thus excluding a total Brechtian influence. Admittedly, Osofisan is based in a university and many of his plays are produced on the university stage, but the plays are also produced outside the university campuses, in secondary schools and elsewhere in Nigeria, West Africa and the rest of the world, many of whom are not familiar with Brecht. To state that their response to Osofisan's drama is because of Brechtian influence would be misleading. My view is that

Osofisan's writing is eclectic in intertextual relationship with Yoruba indigenous tradition and philosophy, African literary theatre, Western theatre forms and principles of dialectical materialism. This makes his drama popular with a wide variety of people.

The Concept of Négritude and the Drama of Osofisan.

One of the influences on the development of modern African literature is *négritude*. Various terms have been used to describe it: 'cultural conviction' (Soyinka 1999: 95), 'an ideology', 'a philosophy', 'a concept' (Irele 1981: 73) and 'a movement of protest' (Sartre 1976: xix) among other definitions. *Négritude* explores the identity and political agitation of the black people under French policy of assimilation in the years immediately preceding and following the Second World War. The propagators of *négritude* were mostly writers from the African diaspora who were living in Paris. As a rejection of French colonial racism, they established solidarity based on a common black identity. They used their shared black heritage to fight against French political and intellectual hegemony and domination. 'The concept', states Abiola Irele, 'explores the inner state of black men, their identity' and offers a 'synthetic vision' and 'personal interpretation of African values' (1981: 73).

With *négritude*, the African could appropriate the colonisers' languages to interpret African values and represent themselves. Language, used by the colonising West to pacify the mind of the Africans, became in the hands of the latter tools to challenge the hegemonies and the hierarchies that exist between the West and its Others, ushering the end of conquest and the beginning of political emancipation and cultural decolonisation (Manthia Diawara 1990: 87). But perhaps the more important relevance of the concept is its challenge of the predominant Western hegemony and the foregrounding of the identity question, preparing the ground for the drama of playwrights like Femi Osofisan in their quest to re-identify with African heritage and re-write Africa's social and political history.

Osofisan's dramaturgy goes beyond the rhetoric of *négritude* discourses; while the target of *négritude* was the West, our dramatist's gaze locates the centre of discourse in Africa; specifically Nigeria. His drama attempts to re-inscribe African history into world's main discourses. Osofisan uses the *négritude* concept to re-appropriate Africa's history without mystifying the past, but with the notion of re-configuring it and re-orientating the past.

The Drama of Osofisan's Contemporaries

The plays of Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimi and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, who are contemporaries of Osofisan, generally record, recreate or reconstruct historical events, rituals and myths; Osofisan however instils a revolutionary ethos into these forms by re-interpreting and re-presenting familiar events in new ways. He is not simply recreating them in repeated unchanging forms; he is breaking the cultural and political hegemony that these forms impose. Other contemporaries of Osofisan's such as Bode Sowande and Kole Omotoso share the same concerns for the society and use the same dramatic materials as our dramatist, but Osofisan is unique in the way he uses them.

A reading of Rotimi's plays suggests that he is the main link between the older writers represented by Soyinka, whose plays mythologize the past, and the younger writers whose drama is influenced by socialist thoughts and materialist conventions. When Rotimi takes a popular subject, his dramatic focus is on aesthetics and the presentation of the issues on stage. However, unlike Rotimi or Ogunyemi, or even Clark-Bekederemo whose *The Raft* (1964) Osofisan responds to in *Another Raft* (1986), when Osofisan uses the history of royalty or the privileged in the society, as in *The Chattering and the Song*, he re-interprets that story; he is not retelling the story in the manner of a chronicle. He deliberately 'challenges a specific distortion of historical consciousness' (Dunton 1992: 93). These received tales of power, by their repetition, create a kind of hegemony that Osofisan

breaks through subversion. Nonetheless, his ideological stance concerning cultural and political hegemony in Nigerian literature is identical to Soyinka's (in particular in *Kongi's Harvest* and *Madmen and Specialists*, more of which, below) and Rotimi's positions.

Osofisan's perspective is different from that of his contemporaries. In contrast to Osofisan's dramaturgy, for instance, in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), the king's character dominates the drama, and his subjects are little more than invisible participants in Ovonramwen's failure to defend his kingdom. Rotimi is concerned 'with the role of the individual leader' (Dunton 1992: 15) and he limits the effect of his stagecraft by refusing 'to undertake a more radical inquiry into the political structures' (1992: 21) or social circumstances of Ovonramwen's regime. The drama shows Rotimi's concern with chronicling the tragedy of the Benin kingdom and sustaining the hegemony of cultural and political hold of the king on the people. Rotimi's perspective is historical but he neither questions nor challenges the bias of history in his reconstruction of this play as Osofisan does in *The Chattering and the Song* where, in the play-within-play, he questions the power and authority of the Alaafin, the ruler of Yoruba Kingdom.

Biodun Jeyifo remarks that, in Nigeria, 'only Osofisan, Sowande and Omotoso... have dared to believe in, and represent revolutionary alternatives to the alienations and contradictions of the semi-colonial and neo-colonial societies of black Africa' (1985: 62). This statement is valid if you examine the treatments of social subjects in the plays of these three dramatists. In the section below, I discuss the dramaturgy of Kole Omotoso and Bode Sowande in a bid to highlight the relationship between their drama and that of Osofisan, and the commitment of these contemporary playwrights to social justice and cultural revolution.

Omotoso is more popular as a novelist than as a playwright. He has written only two drama, *The Curse* (1976) and *Shadows in the Horizon* (1977). His plays examine the socio-political structures of Nigeria, especially the structure of the dialectics of power. The main concern of Omotoso's theatre, demonstrated by *Shadows in the Horizon*, is class struggle. The characters represent, and promote, the interests of two of the main classes in Nigeria – the propertied ruling elite and the exploited working class. Subtitled 'A Play on the Combustibility of Private Property', 'the fundamental ambience is one of starkness, perpetual motion and vertiginous action and reaction' (Jeyifo 1985: 49). The setting of the play is a lay-by on a motorway. The symbolism of this setting is significant; it is an anonymous public space. Furthermore, it draws attention to the similarity of Omotoso's theatre to that of Osofisan who also favours public spaces like market squares and crossroads as settings. Moreover, the choice underscores the strong influence of Yoruba mythology on the group of writers. Yoruba people believe that public arena like the market or crossroads are significant to the resolution of cases; Esu, the messenger of the gods, is believed to reside at the crossroads and all sacrifices are placed at junctions for whichever god. Osofisan *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* is situated at the crossroads while *Once Upon Four Robbers* is set at the market place, 'whose function as both economic space and social space has made it a prominent reference of the African imagination' (Irele 1995: xxv)²³.

Famous icons of the elite class – a businessman/contractor, a retired soldier and a university professor – enter the stage, carrying models of their property. The workers' strike has forced them out of their houses. Dispossessed of their temporal power as the ruling elite, they remain united in their fear of the people and have a resolute desire to

²³ The setting of a number of Osofisan's dramas is the market place, crossroads or similar communal spaces. The plays also include *Twingle-Twangle*, *A Twynning Tayle*, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contests*, *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, *Morountodun* and *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*.

guard their property. Meanwhile, the workers are not united and have misunderstood the implication of the victory they have won over their erstwhile exploiters. Later, they set up an inquiry into the sources of the businessman's wealth and they shoot him for corruption. The retired soldier installs himself as leader and nationalises all private property. Nonetheless, he soon turns despotic and the play ends with a successful uprising by the workers who set fire to his throne and who respond to his protest of 'You cannot build from ashes', with 'Yes we have to build' (p. 44). The play ends with the possibility of a successful revolution in Nigeria. Omotoso places the consciousness of personal moral responsibility for social determinism in the dialectic between the individual and the society. When Osofisan however treats the same subject in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, his approach dictates that, though the workers have to build, they cannot build 'from ashes'; revolution may be desirable but revolutionaries not only have to unite, they have to be realistic about their capabilities to change society.

In terms of revolutionary perspective, Bode Sowande's dramaturgy is close to that of Osofisan. Chris Dunton however holds the view that Osofisan develops his themes more effectively while Sowande 'tends to scrutinize the betrayal of commitment at the level of an individual's failure to satisfy his own best potential' (Dunton 1992: 68). Sowande has written twenty full-length dramas and a television series, *Acada Campus; Farewell to Babylon* is the closest to Osofisan's drama and treats the same subject as *Morountodun*, the farmers' revolt (Agbekoya) in Western Nigeria in the late 1960s. Indeed, the play begins with a scene similar to an important episode in *Morountodun*; as Moniran and Kaago rehearse Jolomi in her impersonation of a peasant woman, devised to infiltrate her into the farmers' camp and discover the identity of the farmers' leader. There is a similar scene in *Morountodun*. While Osofisan could have seen a performance of Sowande's play, which was produced on the Arts Theatre stage of the University of Ibadan a few

months before he wrote *Morountodun*, I am of the opinion that the similarity between the two plays has a longer and deeper root in the relationship between the two playwrights that led to the formation of a theatre company in the 1960s²⁴. It is instructive to note that the plays were written within a few months of each other, after the two writers had teamed up with Kole Omotoso in 1967 to establish Komfess Artistes to ‘discuss and produce’ their plays (Osofisan, personal interview 2004). The farmers’ revolt took place in 1969 and it is likely that the members of Komfess Artistes discussed or debated the subject.

While he shares similar ideological commitments with Sowande and Omotoso, Osofisan’s principles are intrinsically entrenched in the belief that Nigeria’s present cultural and socio-political realities are formed from the morality of the rich and the powerful, which are sometimes fraudulent and self-serving, and that salvation lies in re-gingering the conscious awareness of the people and motivating them for revolution. Omotoso actualises the people’s revolution on stage; the nature of Sowande’s collective action remains unexplored and his drama seems to explain theories about social justice rather than call for action or revolution²⁵. In the two playwrights’ work, ‘the experience of the oppressed and their possibilities for combating oppression are conveyed less effectively than the brutality and venality of the governing elite’ (Dunton 1992: 54). Jeyifo again: ‘Osofisan’s gaze is steadier [than the other two dramatists], his weapons more varied, his perspectives more optimistic’ (1985: 51). If Omotoso’s plays dramatise the unavoidable revolution, and Sowande’s its uncertainty, Osofisan dramatises the link between the cause and effect of the social conditions and revolution. The reason for this accomplishment in

²⁴ I also believe that the similarity between the two plays can be attributed to Osofisan’s penchant for eclecticism and ‘borrowing’ from other writers, as Plastow has demonstrated with the similarities between *Morountodun* and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. See Sola Adeyemi, ed., *Portraits for an Eagle* (2006), pp. 193-203.

²⁵ Elsewhere, I have referred to Sowande’s theatre as ‘the theatre of polemics.’ See Sola Adeyemi (1992), ‘Bode Sowande and the Theatre of Polemics,’ *The Masque*, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

Osofisan is a more open approach to socialism, other writers and the relationship of theatre to life.

In the next chapter, I will discuss Femi Osofisan's early work, the plays he wrote and produced in the 1970s when his political views were close to that of the Marxist movement in Nigeria. I will also compare these plays to the few he wrote in the 1960s. Further, I will discuss how he expresses his ideas and conveys the message in his work with music, song, mime, narration, visual elements and form. I will conclude by determining how and why he chooses a particular language and other codes to write for different audiences.

Chapter 3

Rhetoric and Songs of the Weaverbird: The Early Plays

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the plays Femi Osofisan wrote in the 1970s, when he had just begun writing plays. I include two of the dramas produced between 1967 and 1969 – ‘You Have Lost Your Fine Face’ (which was later published, ‘minimally retouched’ [Osofisan Morountodun 1982: 115] as *Red is the Freedom Road*) and *The Cooling Spring* in my discussion. This is because those plays provide an insight into the direction of Osofisan’s dramaturgy at that period.

To understand the dramas that Osofisan wrote in the 1970s, it is important to appreciate the impact of critics and writers such as Biodun Jeyifo and Kole Omotoso on his ideological development. In informal academic circles and in newspaper reviews²⁶, Omotoso, Jeyifo and our playwright were referred to as ‘the angry young men of Nigerian literature’ because of their socialist orientation and impatience with changes in Nigeria’s political system; for their commitment to social justice, many critics described them as Marxists (Chidi Amuta 1989). Though Osofisan has refused to identify with any ideology in his writing, I will examine the influence of Marxism on the work of Osofisan during this period.

Of particular importance to my analysis in this chapter is *The Chattering and the Song*, written in 1970 – 71, when Osofisan was studying in France (Osofisan, personal interview, 2004). The themes addressed in the play strongly reflect the socialist agenda of the post-independence Nigerian university scholars, a group with Osofisan in the vanguard. I propose that *Chattering* laid the foundation for such other later works as

²⁶ See *Daily Times of Nigeria* newspapers ‘In The Nation’ series, 1979

Another Raft and *Oriki of a Grasshopper* as well as some of the dramatic pieces produced in the 1990s, including *Tegonni*, *An African Antigone*. It marks a stylistic and dramatic departure from such earlier plays as *Restless Run of Locusts* and *The Cooling Spring*, as I show below. Further, I discuss how he expresses his ideas and conveys messages in his work using music, songs, mime, narration, visual elements and form. I conclude by examining how he chooses particular language and other codes to write for different audiences.

The Early Plays

Osofisan's earliest surviving plays followed the pattern of Yoruba Travelling Theatre, with references to gods, good versus evil and a traditional Yoruba setting. He was also influenced by Wole Soyinka at this time. Osofisan has acknowledged Soyinka's influence on his dramaturgy in many ways: by reacting antithetically to Soyinka's drama; by criticising Soyinka's dramaturgy in numerous essays and commentaries; and by performing in Soyinka's plays – acting as Blindman in *Madmen and Specialists*; and directing *The Road* and *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*.

Osofisan's earliest extant play, *The Cooling Spring*, displays strong elements of the mystical while concerning itself with the political and social issues of post-independent Nigeria. The play deals with the general issue of neo-colonialism and suspicion of ideas proposed by the educated elite whom the rest of the people considered inadequately equipped to manage the affairs of the country. The new leaders wanted to re-shape the destiny of the nation along the lines of socialism, which they saw as a way out of gaining total independence from the capitalist West. The introduction of ideas that the majority of the people regarded as foreign to traditional customs, or that transform traditional materials from the norm, is what Funso Aiyejina (1988) refers to as 'alter-native'. The

leaders, whom I describe as ‘native others’ because of their insistence on imposing non-traditional ideas on the people, included local indigenes who had travelled out of the community, and who had become exposed to new, untested ideas through education, the media and choice of lifestyle. In most instances, they were university lecturers, civil servants and other members of the professional class.

Osofisan’s intention as a dramatist in writing *The Cooling Spring* was to review the political structure of the country. His dramatic structure was closely related to that of Wole Soyinka’s drama, particularly *The Strong Breed*. The basis of *The Cooling Spring* is in a ritualistic society where mysticism overrides logic and social responsibility. The play explores aspects of the social and political problems of the newly independent post-colonial state in a form that could be studied. There is a shift from his earlier plays, *Behind the Ballot Box* and *Oduduwa Don’t Go!*²⁷, performed in 1967 and 1968 respectively by the Unibadan Dramatic Society. *Oduduwa* is a political play that seeks the intervention of the gods to resolve the political problem in Nigeria. *Behind the Ballot Box* is a commentary on the 1964 general elections in the country. I have not seen these two plays although some of the plotlines and dialogue were later incorporated into *A Restless Run of Locusts* (1969) and, to some extent, *The Chattering and the Song* (1976) [personal interview with Osofisan, 2004].

The plot of *Oduduwa Don’t Go!* is simple, according to information about the play from a discussion with Osofisan in 2007. The year is 1964; the Yoruba world is in turmoil and there is disorder in the land. Political leaders cannot agree on a solution; the two

²⁷ I have not been able to trace any existing copy of these plays in more than twenty years of research. However, there were scanty reports of the play as well as programme notes in the archive of the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, which I have seen but which are now lost due to the fire which destroyed the department in 1994. I am not able to discuss these plays fully because I have not read them.

recognised leaders²⁸ of the people are in disagreement and their supporters are fighting, causing damage to life and property. The people call on Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba people, to come down and resolve the problem; he is the only ancestor to whom any of the warring parties would listen. However, the gods cannot agree whether Oduduwa should come to the aid of the Yoruba or not. In a narrative that involves the Yoruba gods Obatala and Shango, and goddess Moremi, Jesus Christ and two former kings of Lagos who were bitter rivals (Dosunmu and Kosoko), the gods invite Oduduwa to resolve the political impasse from heaven, without physically visiting earth.

This play took its plot from the political problems in the Western Region of Nigeria in the early 1960s. A brief look at the events of that period provides a background to my discussion of the play. Obafemi Awolowo, who campaigned to be the national president in the 1959 elections, led the ruling Action Group party in the region. He lost and chose to be the leader of opposition, leaving his charismatic deputy, Samuel Ladoke Akintola, as the premier of Western Region. During the general elections of 1964, Awolowo wanted the regional premiership back but Akintola resisted. The erstwhile deputy resigned from the Action Group, formed his own party and allegedly rigged the elections against the popular will of the people. The people's discontent at corruption grew into resentment at the leadership of Akintola and his party loyalists. Chaos ensued and many lives were lost. Some university lecturers and students were involved in revealing the level of corruption during the elections and their aftermath.²⁹

The major impetus for writing *Oduduwa* was Osofisan's 'anger about people calling helplessly for a messiah to come and correct the situation that was all going wrong in

²⁸ The two leaders are Obafemi Awolowo and Samuel Ladoke Akintola.

²⁹ One of the more famous events during this period was the Masked Gunman incident when Wole Soyinka disguised himself, held up the broadcasting studio and substituted his recorded voice for that of Premier Akintola. He was later tried and acquitted (on a technicality) for the offence of treasonable felony. See Wole Soyinka, *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir 1946-65*, pp. 361 – 362.

those early years of Independence' (Osofisan, personal interview 2007). In the drama, the people want Oduduwa's intervention but an argument arises among the gods whether he should respond to the call of the humans or let them confront their own problems and solve them. Osofisan used the play to comment on the general cowardice and complacency of the people, which he saw as the major cause of their refusal to take matters into their hands.

The two plays, *Oduduwa Don't Go!* and *Cooling Spring*, present the same argument but *Cooling Spring* has a much broader association; it takes its theme from the perspectives of modern Nigeria's history as a political entity after independence from Britain in 1960. Chronologically, it predates *Oduduwa* by two years; written in May 1966, it was first performed in 1967 at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan.

The Cooling Spring: Dramatic Foundation

Though the setting and location of the play is non-descriptive, the cultural perspective is that of a Yoruba community in the south-western part of Nigeria, albeit a composite community with cultural attributes from many other areas of the country. This community is in transition, evolving from an agrarian to an industrial one.

The dramatic situation is complex compared with more recent plays by the playwright, in particular with the plays written around the same time such as *Restless Run of Locusts* and *Red is the Freedom Road*. The structure is linear, lending a deceptive simplicity to the play; for an early play, it is an accomplished drama. The community in the drama, which remains nameless, had fought and won a war with their northern neighbour. A few years after the war, the council of elders, the ruling group in the community, decides to send Wole, the son of one of the war's heroes (and victims), to a foreign country for studies.

Upon his return, they confer on him the honour of being the community's representative and liaison officer (*Akoda*) with the outside world. This is against the pronouncement of the community's oracle but the chief priest, an old friend of Wole's father, manipulates the initiation and confirms Wole's role. Almost immediately after the investiture, some representatives of a 'foreign country', the Strange Ones, bring a business proposal to establish a sugar factory in the community. Wary of their intentions, Wole cautions against welcoming them;

I learnt their ways, and I also read reports of what they did in other lands where the men were ignorant of their capabilities. In places where the inhabitants have been too trusting, they lost no time in making themselves masters, and the unfortunate folks who opened their arms to them have helplessly found themselves slaves in their own lands (*The Cooling Spring*, unpub script, no pagination)³⁰.

Wole reminds the townspeople of the role of the Strange Ones in the war with the northern neighbours, but the council of elders accepts material inducement and invites the Strange Ones to build the factory. The elders even promise free labour and other resources.

Wole was engaged to Moni before he went abroad for studies. In his absence, she began an affair with Bayo, the community's pharmacist and Wole's intimate friend. When Wole comes back, she terminates the affair; Bayo tries to poison Wole in order to win back the affection of Moni, an offence for which he is banished from the community.

Meanwhile, the Strange Ones recruit two local layabouts, Rogue and Baba Ade, to kidnap Wole's younger brother in an attempt to pressurise Wole to support their venture; they accidentally kill the boy. Here the plot gets more complicated. Wole's mother wants her son dead because she thinks he has become power-drunk as the *Akoda* and his actions are

³⁰ All references to *The Cooling Spring* are from the unpublished copy from May 1966 in my possession, made available by the author, Femi Osofisan.

the cause of his junior brother's death. She employs the same unsavoury characters, Rogue and Baba Ade, and promises them all her wealth if they succeed.

Mother: [...] Well I want a job done urgently. In fact now. If you can do it I will give you all my house, all my jewels... all I have, if you can just do it well.

Baba Ade: All your house, madam?

Rogue: All your jewels?

Mother: Anything you want.

Rogue: All your house madam?

Baba Ade: All your jewels?

Rogue: How will people know we didn't steal them?

Baba Ade: And where you yourself live... what will be left for you to live on...?

Mother: That is my own business, isn't it? And I'll give you all you want publicly, and in the presence of the Elders.

[...]

Mother: You know my son, the Akoda?

Rogue: Oh, yes yes, madam. He is a good-

Mother: Kill him.

Rogue: Pardon, madam?

Mother: I say kill him. Tonight. And then you can come for your reward (*The Cooling Spring*, unpub script, no pagination).

The idea of a mother seeking the death of her son is foreign to Yoruba culture, but we have to remember that Osofisan at this period had just started questioning his Yoruba heritage and devising ways to shock his growing audience into a debate with his drama. Moni also wants to kill Wole for banishing Bayo from the community because she has suddenly realised that it is Bayo she loves; Wole decides he has had enough of the treachery and double-dealing in the community and wants to leave, but only after leading a party of hunters to find and rescue his brother. The two hired killers stab Wole. Seriously wounded, he collapses near the body of his junior brother where the hunters find him, just as Moni is about to deal him a fatal blow. Wole is arraigned before the council of elders and sentenced to death for killing his brother. Moni kills Wole's mother before committing suicide and the chief priest receives the punishment of leprosy from the gods for refusing to prevent the situation. In the ensuing chaos, the Strange Ones return to install a military garrison to protect their business interests; they sack the council

of elders, declare the community a territorial dependency of their country. Because he reveals the secrets of the elders and the community to the Strange Ones, they appoint the banished pharmacist Bayo as the ruler.

Wole's agenda in the drama is to be a hero who saves his community but he remains misunderstood by a people who have been disappointed by prophets and are in need of a strong leader. Wole could have been that leader but his method of not involving the whole community in his plans and his high handedness, in particular in the banishment of his friend, does not endear him to the people in spite of their sacrifice in training him and making him the Akoda.

The Cooling Spring is an ambitious and pessimistic metaphor about the political situation in Nigeria in the 1960s. It establishes the agenda that Osofisan later follows in almost all his plays – concern for issues that engage the political consciousness of his constituency. This constituency has expanded over the years from educated Nigerians in universities to all people who are concerned about the political future of the nation.

In this early play, Osofisan considers the role of the new Nigerians in the development of their country. These 'new' Nigerians are those I referred to in the last chapter as revolutionary socialists. Their main responsibility was to change the system inherited from, or developed by, the nationalists who became the political leaders and rulers of the country after independence. The system had become corrupt and some of the leaders displayed incompetence in public affairs. These new Nigerians wanted a more egalitarian society based on good governance (see Uzodike 1999: 81).

Osofisan explores themes of imperialism and neo-colonialism as well as corruption among the people. The characters keep referring to the ‘rotten old dogmas’ and elders who do not want to change a failing system because of the fear of the unknown:

Moni: This town is rotten, believe me, and is decaying. Perhaps your brother will succeed in changing it but at present it is stuck by all its feet in the dirty mud of old dogmas ruled by bluing (sic), selfish men who are determined that nothing shall change. All they’re concerned about are their traditional rights (*The Cooling Spring*, unpub script, no pagination).

In this speech by Moni to Tunde, Wole’s brother, she explains the crux of Wole’s problem as the community’s Akoda and his plan to reform the society against opposition. The elders in charge of the town are interested only in maintaining their traditional patronage, and feeding fat on the community’s resources. Wole’s mother opposes his reforms and queries whether progress can only come at the cost of losing the cherished traditions of the people: ‘If we shall not acquire progress unless we surrender our customs and our laws, then we shall remain as we are’ (*Cooling Spring*). For the elders, Wole has no ‘genuine reason’ for reform and his excuse of stopping corrupt practices as well as questioning the motives behind the investment plans by the foreigners only serve to expose his treasonable intentions and lack of respect for the history and tradition of the community. After all, the foreigners had performed the traditional act of presenting gifts to the elders. The battle is then pitched between the progressives (Wole, who is in the minority) and the traditionalists (the rest of the community). This setting mirrors the political situation in Nigeria in the 1960s between the progressives, consisting of the trade unionists, a section of the journalists, university teachers and ordinary people who had no political power; and the politicians who wanted to maintain the status quo.

Wole is fatalistic in his approach to changing his society, preferring the destruction of the community to occupation by a foreign power, a second slavery (sc. 15). This was an echo

of an unwritten manifesto of the angry young men of Nigerian literature, an informal group of writers and activists of which Òsófisan was in the vanguard, and who would have preferred the break up of Nigeria as a country rather than experiencing a second wave of colonisation. In the end, Wole, like the revolutionary socialists in Nigeria, fails and his community enters another stage of foreign rule leading to the destruction of traditions that the elders want to keep. The colonisers impose new rules and a new representative to enforce the cultural and economic subjugation of the community.

The response to *The Cooling Spring* was enthusiastic but many members of the university community who made up the audience considered it too wordy and lacking in dramatic action. Osofisan's primary audience since then has remained largely the same: University undergraduates and lecturers (see Awodiya 1992, 1993, 1995). Unlike later plays by Osofisan, *Cooling Spring* has few songs and the setting, from the script, must have been a hindrance. For instance, actions move from Wole's house to the council of elders' meeting, which occupies the whole stage, to two different areas of the forest with simultaneous actions and back immediately to the priest's house. Regarding language, Dapo Adelugba opines that, like many budding playwrights of the period, Osofisan was imitating the dramaturgical style of Wole Soyinka whose *Kongi's Harvest* had just been produced at the University of Ibadan's Arts Theatre (personal interview, 1994). As in *Kongi's Harvest*, Osofisan's language in *Cooling Spring* was not clear; his use of proverbs, idioms and metaphors, while largely appropriate, was not necessary and did not advance dramatic action with which the audience could associate. Rather, they served to clutter understanding of the play. For example:

Did I not taste pepper and honey before your eyes ever saw the Living Light? How can you be wiser than those whose memories hold greater experience? Can you be stubborn with Fate, whose voice speaks out of the Orisha, and has done ever since lizards rose with the vegetation? (*Cooling Spring*).

These sayings are awkwardly put together and bear no relation to Yoruba proverbs. Adelugba, who watched the play, said the tedious language contributed to the length of the play, which ran for more than three hours in production. The political message was lost in the cultural re-enactment of priestly rituals and hunters' performances. Osofisan later admits that the songs were:

probably not appropriate. Remember, I had not started writing songs for my plays at that time. I had to rely on other cast members to suggest songs, provide music, bring their costumes, and so on (personal interview, 2004).

The playwright relied on amateur actors, most of whom were also his senior colleagues in the Unibadan Dramatic Society. Production was a collaborative effort and many of the actors provided songs, costume and props. When Osofisan produced his next major play a couple of years later, it was with a clear understanding of what the audience wanted; and above all, what he wanted as a dramatist. *You Have Lost Your Fine Face*, published as *Red is the Freedom Road*, was a much slimmer, less dialectical and more technically accomplished play. The playwright may want to galvanise the audience into action, but that audience also want entertainment and spectacle. 'The political message has to be couched in spectacle, in riddles, in forms that are not easily accessible as propaganda' (Osofisan, personal interview, 2004). This was a strategy that Osofisan later defined as surreptitious insurrection (Osofisan 1997: 29), 'a concept that retains the dramatist's subversive agenda as well as its stealthy coding but is more descriptive, more accessible, less evaluative' (Olaniyan 1999:77).

In *Red is the Freedom Road*, the situation of the coloniser and the colonised is transposed. While Wole in *The Cooling Spring* is trying to prevent strangers from taking over his community, Akanji in *Freedom Road* acts to free his people from enslavement by a superior force.

Red is the Freedom Road: War and Its Aftermath

When *Freedom Road* was written and performed, the Nigeria civil war was raging in the east; in the north of the country, there had just been a genocidal insurrection against the Igbos who originate from the east. The killing took on a semblance of an organised attack on the easterners – whole train carriages full of people were derailed and set on fire; churches and private houses were burned; shops were looted³¹. In the western part of the country, there was a farmers’ revolt over excessive taxation. The military head of State, Yakubu Gowon, who came to power through a *coup d'état* in July 1966, had become autocratic in a bid to prevent the collapse of his government. The eastern part of the country seceded from Nigeria and the leader, Odumegwu Ojukwu, named the new state Biafra. The northern part of the country was in economic meltdown because of the insurrection and more importantly, because the economic structures were maintained by the southerners and easterners who had fled the pogrom. The country was in a crisis of definition; the citizens were trying to define an identity that would be acceptable to all and the keep the country together, an identity hinged on loyalty to a common cause. Abiola Irele has suggested that two factors of Nigeria’s history, socio-political and literary, are fundamental impulses behind Osofisan’s work (Irele 1995: xi). The socio-political factor has to do with the civil war, fought during Osofisan’s formative years as a writer. Osofisan had started his undergraduate programme at Ibadan in 1966, the year the pogrom that initiated the war began. Throughout the war years, he was in the university where the general sense of insecurity provided cause for wide ranging debates about the future of the country. Within the university and in the media, arguments for and against the war were mooted and defended by lecturers, trade unionists and students, particularly on the economics of the war and the cost to the taxpayers. The general position was that the government was using resources that should be earmarked for educational development,

³¹For details of these attacks, see *Daily Times (of Nigeria)* March – June 1966 and December 1966 – January 1967 editions, and *New Nigerian Newspaper* June 1966 editions.

health and welfare to prosecute an unpopular war. The furore was such that the Vice Chairman of the Executive Council and Federal Commissioner for Finance, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, went to the University of Ibadan in May 1970 to defend the financing of the war. During the war, Christopher Okigbo, the poet and one of Osofisan's literary friends and mentors, died while fighting for Biafra.

Red is the Freedom Road is set during the Yoruba internecine wars of the nineteenth century, the last of which was fought between 1877 and 1886. Akanji, the protagonist, and his close relations, including his wife and mother, as well as warriors and people from other regions are captured by a more powerful foe who enslaves them to aid his expansionist agenda. To prove himself to his new master and be made the Basorun, the commander of the conquering army, Akanji has to show his loyalty to the king. This is a decision that alienates him from his people as not only does it lead directly to the death of his mother and loss of his wife's pregnancy, it also confers on him the trust of the king who honoured him with the title of Basorun and put the slaves under his charge, to fight his wars for him.

The plot of *Freedom Road* centres on the true loyalties of the central character and the extent to which he will go to define these loyalties in order to free his people from slavery. He has to make his people not only believe him but also support his cause and join him in the revolt he has planned. However, this cause initially appears to the people as a betrayal, the ending later reveals this as a ruse, a grand deception elaborately acted out on their behalf.

The enslaved soldiers have a very good reason for not wanting to follow Akanji's leadership; they see Akanji as another defeated soldier, a slave who could not defend himself from the army of the king who enslaved them:

Sokunbi: [...] You too, you're slave with us. What have you done, except become the head slave? (p. 131)³²

They do not trust Akanji as someone worthy of their trust; the enemies call him 'the notorious confuser' (p. 121). Indeed, all the various parties, including his wife Ibidun, have a poor opinion of Akanji. The character confesses to owe no allegiance to anybody, not even to his wife and his unborn children:

Ibidun: [...] You were my husband, and I followed you into slavery. I swore to stand by you. And you promised...

Akanji: A promise! There have been other promises... other vows to keep.

[...]

Ibidun: [*bitterly*] You're no longer my husband. I could kill myself! You're no longer the father of my child!

Akanji: Child!

Ibidun: Yes, my child! He's lived in me now two months. [*She makes one last effort*] Akanji, he will need a father, our son. He will need you, to lighten this burden of slavery. Akanji, please, don't abandon him!

Akanji: Take her away! (pp. 119 – 120)

Even Akanji's mother curses him:

Mother: Is this my son? With my last breath, I curse you! [*She falls down, dead.*] (p. 122).

Osofisan shows him as unfeeling and ambitious to be the king's Basorun. He lives for the moment, by present loyalty. Jumoke, one of Ibidun's friends, compares him to the lion who cut his mane out of cowardice, suggesting that Akanji's behaviour has to do with survival; he wants to survive slavery, irrespective of the fortunes of his fellow countrymen:

³² All page citations are from *Red is the Freedom Road in Morountodun and other plays*, Ikeja: Longman Nigeria, 1999, pp. 115-138.

Jumoke: [...] One day the lion was found without his mane. All the animals asked: 'But why? What for?' Later they heard the rumour of incursion, and how the one with the mane was doomed, being king. It was easy to see why the lion cut his mane.

Yetunde: But Akanji has never been a coward. No challenger ever reached his house to find it deserted.

Ibidun: No coward, but traitor! Afonja's offspring!

Doyin: But suppose we're wrong, Ibidun? Suppose he acts on purpose? Suppose it's only pose? (pp. 125 – 126).

Ibidun further calls him a 'commoner' whom she 'raised from the dust' and married, against the wishes of her royal family. This hatred and revealing comments about Akanji by his fellow soldiers (slaves), his wife, his mother and his enemies serve to convince us that he is a leader who places personal interests above the interests of his men. We are therefore shocked and surprised to find that it is all a ruse to achieve freedom for his people. Even when he rallies them to fight for their freedom, we feel a certain sense of foreboding, that he is going to lead them on the road to treachery. During the fight for freedom, two soldiers who remain behind and refuse to take part continue to remark on the futility of war and rebellion, and the unending pattern of peace and war:

2nd Soldier: As long as men expect peace from soldiers...

1st Soldier: ...as long will they be disappointed. For soldiers will shed blood, plant corpses....

2nd Soldier: Where no yams can sprout. Neither yam nor cassava.

1st Soldier: For history is a pathway of ants.

2nd Soldier: Leading to a meager anthill.

1st Soldier: And strewn along the path are ant-men: events all in the same pattern.

2nd Soldier: Always the same pattern.

1st Soldier: The ever seeking.

2nd Soldier: Always the same pattern.

[*Shouts outside.*]

1st Soldier: First you have the revolution, the revolt, or the coup detat. The killing to end all killing. Oppression to punish oppressors. Detention to banish detention. And every one prepares for peace.

2nd Soldier: But peace never comes. For peace never comes.

1st Soldier: Neither peace nor prosperity. Not even freedom. For new tyrants mount again.

2nd Soldier: Rapidly, rapidly.

1st Soldier: And red runs the freedom road.

2nd Soldier: Rapidly, rapidly (pp. 132-133)

This reinforces our expectation that Akanji is probably going to betray the others, possibly to win his freedom. But Akanji proves everybody wrong; he prods the soldiers, now slaves, and tells them to renew confidence and hope in themselves:

Akanji: [...] Tall, tall men you were. Men with the gait of panthers, all handsome in their splendour. Ah, how pardon me now if my voice breaks. Looking at you all, former heroes, I cannot hold my manhood. Pardon, if tears flood my eyes like a woman's.

[...]

Yet you were not all born slaves. Some of you were born princes. O Kabiyesi, all! What about the kingdoms you left behind, the thrones awaiting you? Or have you forgotten? And the wives bewailing your absence? People call them widows now, and send them yams at night. And their husbands, poor husbands, they sit content here, slaves to a foreign king! O what do you remember? All the children who ask of you, and are silenced nightly with falsehood! And the friends, the faithful friends whose eyes keep watch on the road of your welcome (p. 129)

At Akanji's insistence, the enslaved soldiers attack and defeat the conquering army. However, he loses his life in the course of achieving freedom for his people. At last, Ibidun and the women, as well as the other soldiers, realise the sacrifice he has made for their survival:

Yetunde: At the forefront of the fighting, there he stood. Where the heroes were falling. He has fallen too.

Bolaji: And all along we misunderstood him. We would not fight with him.

Doyin: I know now why he could not tell. Words fly in the air. He would have been betrayed (pp. 137-138)

A tragedy; the people obtain their freedom but the leader dies; the leader's wife, mother and unborn child are also lost. Technically, *Red is the Freedom Road* is different from *Cooling Spring*. It is a dance-drama – the only example Osofisan has written – rather than a conventional dramatic piece. In a sense, *Freedom Road* is a dramatic experiment that

succeeded because the director, Femi Adelana³³, introduced the dance elements that Osofisan was not competent to initiate. When Osofisan directed the play at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, Nigeria in March and April 1989, he relied on another choreographer, Stella Iwueke, and musician Tunji Oyelana to supply the dance and music elements respectively. While he is an accomplished playwright, and his song writing is now more competent than it was during the time he wrote *Freedom Road*, Osofisan is lacking in dance skills of ability to incorporate dance movements in his work. My view is that this is probably the reason he has not written another dance-drama since this first attempt.

Freedom Road belongs in what Sandra Richards identifies as African realism, that is, European realism modified to reflect African concepts (Richards 1996: 6). African realism, as explained by Richards, means that the play:

largely present[s] a dramatic universe in which events unfold logically within a context that approximates spectators' shared reality... For the duration of the performance, audience members accept dramatized events as real and independent of their possible intervention; given the subordination of minor themes to major ones and the resolution of conflict, they enjoy a dramaturgic experience that is whole or complete and unalterable (Richards 1996: 1).

The drama subverts the history of Afonja³⁴ who, as the generalissimo of the Yoruba army, rebelled against the Alaafin of Oyo; to encourage rebellion in a season of uncertainty (Adeyemi 2004: 25) that was the Nigerian civil war. In using the term 'realism', Richards contends that it 'describes a representation, perceived to be photographically accurate or objective, of a shared social reality that includes music and dance' (1996: 11). She explains further that the play's concept is within the definitive parameters prescribed by realism even though it incorporates transcendent elements. In my view, the only realistic

³³ Adelana directed the first production in 1969.

³⁴ Afonja of Ilorin was the Are-Ona Kakanfo - the Head of the Army of the Oyo Empire – in the early 19th century, who rebelled against Alaafin Aole in 1817.

aspect of the drama is that it uses a detailed commentary by the two soldiers to reveal the inner turmoil and anger of the dramatist who lost his friend and mentor to the Civil War. Osofisan believes that Christopher Okigbo died through treachery at the war front (Osofisan, personal interview, 2004).

Richards states further that *Freedom Road* as a protest drama was designed to ventilate a shared sense of outrage over a pressing societal issue (Richards 1996: 6), that is, the Nigerian civil war. While Richards' classification may appear to be closer to the intention of the drama, to reveal the anger of Osofisan and the other young intellectuals, the bottom line is that Osofisan's style at this period – and in later plays – is very hard to define. Osofisan's drama at this time reveals experimentation with various forms; it is a *pot-pourri* of dramatic styles, aesthetics and traditional Yoruba dramatic elements. He incorporates the latest style or theatrical intervention that attracts his attention. The form and structure of the drama show a lack of concern with what the play represents; there is more focus on what Osofisan wants to present before the audience – a revolutionary concept that he wants the audience to identify with and support. The playwright did not project any particular dramatic style at this time, rather, he 'borrowed' from the aesthetics of Yoruba traditional drama and ceremonies and Western theatrical techniques. In addition, he 'borrowed' from different historical heritages belonging to the Yoruba, classical Greek and Shakespearian theatre. For instance, there are echoes of Coriolanus in the character of Akanji. Osofisan seemed to have wanted his drama to organise a revolt, a rebellion, rather than a revolution (Fatoba 1988:12), which is a gradual process, especially given the social and political context of the play. Afonja revolted against the rule of the Alaafin but his action was to secure independence from the feudal authority of the king, not to depose him and seize power; in the same way, Akanji's action is to free his people

from the yoke of slavery so they can go back to their homes, and not to impose a new autocratic regime to replace the one he has removed.

Freedom Road may exhibit some features of a realistic play, in conception, format and realisation on stage, it is a dance-drama modelled after Yoruba traditional performances. In production, the play uses a mixture of *egungun* performance and hunters' ritual dances with re-enactments associated with funeral performances. In the 1989 production at Ibadan, in which I played the multiple roles of Slave, Dancer, Warrior and 1st Soldier, the music and dance elements occupied more than half of the play. Although twenty-two short pages in print, the performances lasted more than two hours each night. While the play used realistic Yoruba traditional music and dance movements, there was nothing realistic about the staging. Apart from a small platform upstage centre, the stage was bare, creating space for the dance movements and other actions of the play. The platform served as a pedestal for Akanji, the hero of the play, to rally his people to war. It also served as part of the dance area as well as the riverbank.

Chris Dunton states that the play questions the loyalties of the main character, Akanji, and based on traditional Yoruba aesthetics and history that resonate in the immediate memory of the audience. Dunton equates Basorun, the title given to the hero Akanji, to the Oyomesi title of the same name in Oyo, indirectly translating the locale to Oyo, a major Yoruba city and the capital city of the Yoruba kingdom until the collapse of the kingdom after British occupation and colonisation in the nineteenth century (Dunton 1992: 71-72). Dunton may have wanted to ground the play in a recognisable historical format, at least for his readers, but the result is an ambiguity that inscribes *Freedom Road* as a historical play based on Yoruba history. The reality is that the history of Yoruba and other cultures is replete with characters who sacrificed their lives and filial affiliations at the altar of

freedom. In the eras of slavery and *iwofa*³⁵, people who were subjected to oppression and suppression always tried to revolt, and sometimes succeeded in staging a revolution. A closer reading of the play, and of other dramas by Osofisan, would have revealed to Dunton that the playwright is presenting a ‘type’, a composite character to represent an aspiration, especially during the Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970, when *Freedom Road* was written and performed. Osofisan at this time had started raiding Yoruba history to define his theatre. Moreover, as I have discussed, Osofisan subtextually uses the figure of Afonja of Ilorin, the Aare-Ona Kakanfo (head of the army) of the Oyo kingdom, to highlight the issue of betrayal. This issue of betrayal is also a focus of his next major drama, *The Chattering and the Song*.

The Chattering and the Song: The Riddle of War’s Aftermath

More than three years after coming back to Nigeria from his graduate studies in France, Osofisan produced the drama that many critics have described as central to his dramaturgical thesis. While in Paris, he wrote *The Chattering and the Song* as a call to the common man to unite and fight for his rights. I describe the play as a ‘treatise for revolution’, rather than a revolutionary play. The main theme is the clamour for a new social order based on justice and fairness. This is indicated by the *Iwori Otura* motif that runs through the play and in the message of the play-within-the-play about the historic clash between Alaafin Abiodun of Oyo and Latoye, the son of his former adversary. It is also portrayed in the hope expressed in the Farmers’ Anthem and the expected success of the farmers’ revolution. It is a play of protest as the title suggests. Weaverbirds are always chattering and clamouring even while they are pursuing purposeful activities. Osofisan uses the weaverbirds as a symbol of expression in the clamouring for social justice.

³⁵ The closest word to describe ‘*iwofa*’ is bondage. It can be voluntary – as in satisfying a debt or learning a trade or skill – or involuntary – as in serving as war spoil or becoming a ‘trusted slave’.

Iwori Otura is one of the more complicated of the 256 verses of Ifa. The Ifa denotes temporary success and relates to people gifted with the ability to see things in true perspective. They suffer initial confusion and doubt, followed by clarity and abundance. The verse talks about treachery, dissension and loss; things get worse before they get better. When this *odu* is divined for anyone, it allows the person to have a cognitive knowledge of whatever he wants to do and motivates him to purposeful activity in that regard. However, the Ifa verse has a contradictory nature and, like human destiny, forces the person to make a choice: temporary success following a hasty and impetuous action or a less direct success after a period of suffering and confusion. The second part of the verse grants victory over enemies but warns that patience and magnanimity bring great rewards, and peace only comes from inner knowledge, a kind of knowledge that allows a person to use an opponent's strength against him, often surreptitiously. The verse casts riddles for both the diviner and the subject, forcing them to initiate a course of action that can unintentionally go against plans. This is evident in the songs with which Osofisan starts and ends the drama:

Sontri: Ah, maiden, *didun nile olyn:*

I am the promise left in the trap!

In the forest

Yajin: *Didun nile oloyin!*

Yajin: (*remonstrating*) But your eyes? Their colour of blood?

Sontri: Is the strangled scream of the people;

Is the shout suppressed by power...

Yajin: (*persistent*) In your eyes, the lust for war

Sontri: Only the echo of a call within

Didun nile oloyin

I am the carrier: I'll steal your pains

And put good luck in their place...

[...]

Funlola: *Iwori Otura:* be gentle with me,

I'm famished and weak, I'm just like a thread...

Leje: A thread in a loom? The loom of the state?

Say I am a shuttle...

Funlola: And I the thread?

Leje: *Iwori Otura:* across the loom

If we dance as one,

I the shuttle and you the weft...

Funlola: Dancing together,

In the loom of the state: Iwori Otura...
Leje: We'll weave new patterns out of our world
 And make of our dance a journey of hope... (pp. 4, 55)

This is a complex riddle that sums up the meaning of the drama, based on a rough dramatic interpretation of the Ifa verse. Though I mentioned above that critics describe the play as central to Osofisan's dramaturgy, it is however another experimental piece that explores the use of Yoruba tradition, history and culture to interpret modern Nigerian social and political circumstances.

In defining his vision for this play, Osofisan's gaze is fixed on the possibilities suggested by the Ifa philosophy but as he has pointed out, it is not the thematic content of the Ifa verses that interests him. Osofisan's concern lay in the dramatic apparatus in the verses that he could appropriate by an act of mediation and re-interpretation, to re-invent the dramatic heritage which he believes is no longer adequate to confront the new revolutionary challenges (Osofisan 2001b: 94):

For it is obvious that we shall never have the truth completely within our grasp, but only as an inspiration. Art after all is a wager on the capacity of human beings to invent new relationships and to experience hitherto unknown emotions... for we are as much what we have been and what we are able to imagine. It is why Orunmila continuously enters my work, why he is the presiding spirit of my play, *The Chattering and the Song* (Osofisan 2001b: 99)

The message in Ifa verses is never plain or clear to the uninitiated; it needs deciphering by experts who then interprets the riddle for the person the verse is divined for. In the same way, Osofisan appropriates the form for dramatic purpose; to expose the corruption in Nigeria in the aftermath of the civil war, in a way that protects him from censorship. It is a risk that his audience would understand the drama but the play-within-the-play section clarifies some ambiguity in the riddling process that is *Chattering and the Song*.

In the prologue to the drama, Osofisan, in reference to the codec provided by Ifa for this riddle, pronounces “The bigger riddle begins...”, immediately signalling that the play is a set of riddles or *odu* that are interlocked and interwoven in such a way as to be indecipherable even by the participants. The plot of the play supports this. The play is divided into two: the chattering, which is the main riddle, the main play involving all the intrigues, the betrayal and the renewal of cause; and the song which is the play-within-the-play: delightful, sensual, able to lull into a false sense of security, gripping and devastating in its effect. The ultimate goal is to resolve not just the riddle, but the riddling process and, in the end, present a drama that sensitizes and contributes to revolutionary discourse.

Structurally, *The Chattering and the Song* is divided into two parts plus a prologue and epilogue. It starts with a flashback to the aftermath of a party organised by Sontri, a disaffected character whose experience at the war front changed his political outlook and forced him to join a banned militant association. Through the use of metaphors and unfolding of riddles based on the *Iwori Otura* verse, a game of courtship begins between Sontri and Yajin, who is engaged to Moka, Sontri’s friend and former schoolmate. This is evidently a few years before the play opens, and in the historical context, a period before the civil war when many Nigerians were still idealistic. The prologue, and subsequently the whole play, appears at first to be a series of humorous games and riddles designed to elicit laughter from the audience. Gradually however, it dawns on the unsuspecting audience that the game and riddles are a medium of exploration and not just dramatic metaphor, opinion shared by Harry Garuba in an essay he wrote on the play.

The entire play is built around a series of games and through the games the past is re-enacted and re-created, the tensions of the present are explored and the future is hinted at. The jokes and games are the means through which in one day in lives of the characters a whole historical canvas is created with antennae that stretch into the future. The games seems to lead to the original

conception of the play as *play*, and as the *play* progresses it begins to take on oracular resonances that indicate the seriousness of the events dramatised (Garuba, in Adeyemi 2006: 221).

Using a series of interlinked riddles and a re-enactment through formalised dance of betrayal (of Moka) and courtship (between Yajin and Sontri), the prologue outlines the main event of the play, which is the preparation for the wedding ceremony between Yajin and Sontri. The setting inscribes the prologue into memory by the playwright's description:

*Many years ago. Lights should suggest this.
Dawn breaking.
Garden, back of house.
Near disaster area: signs of the aftermath of a wild party.
Yajin, standing to one corner, barely visible (p. 1³⁶).*

Everything in the above paints the picture of the past, a past that bears direct relevance to the present. 'Many years ago', as I have stated above, refers to the period before the war, when life was still gay and the characters had minimal interest in revolutionary ideals, preferring instead to indulge in 'wild parties'. Another reference to the past is 'back of house', signifying the not-so-visible part of the people's space, an out of sight, secluded space, but still an indication of a love scenario. Gardens are usual spaces for trysts and indulgences. Yajin's positioning reinforces the distant, near-invisibility of the scenes we are witness to; a past in the dim memory but still clearly remembered by Yajin. It is a past that is also the harbinger of the present, as implied by the line 'dawn breaking'.

Sontri introduces the first riddle by drunkenly falling down and adopting the pose of a frog. Yajin teases him, he responds and the first dance begins:

Sontri: Great idea! We'll play a game
Iwori Otura
Say I am a frog...
Yajin: And I?
Sontri: A fish: Iwori Otura!

³⁶ All page references are from *The Chattering and the Song* 1977 Ibadan University Press edition.

Yajin: Say I am a fish: Iwori Otura!
Sontri: Then swim for your life:
 I leap, I leap,
 I'm coming after you...
Yajin: Buuuh buuu-oooh, buuuh buuu-oooh!
 Please Mister Frog, spare me yet:
 Iwori Otura:
 My life I'll buy with a riddle... (p. 2)

After this dance of frog and fish, there follows in quick succession that of a hawk and hen, a stag and doe, taking on more romantic nuances with each progression in the dance. This first game, conceived and choreographed as a predator-prey dance, assumes more significance within the context of the play. Each dance is bridged by a riddle; the two riddles revealing more of Sontri's complex character. First, he is compared to the ripe palmfruit which, like a flaming ember, maintains its fiery look even after being doused in water. Then, after his dishonourable intention to take his friend's fiancée, despite Yajin's resistance, his action is compared to that of an egoistic horse which, corralled, still exhibits his mane for the world to see; a shameless philanderer without any regard for honour or friendship:

Yajin: A bad conscience does wear a mane:
 Iwori Otura:
 Above the roof of dark pretence,
 It wags its mane so restlessly... (p. 3)

To which Sontri replies: 'Iwori otura: / I'll get you yet' (p. 3). He defends his action, after winning the heart of Yajin, by saying that he has bought his life with a little riddle, implying that, in the general scheme of things, winning Yajin is worth the loss of Moka's friendship. After this, the game changes to a dance of courtship during which Moka enters and remains in the shadows.

One of the dramatic devices that Osofisan uses to great effect in this drama is shadows; the leadership and organisation of the Farmers' Movement is shadowy and many of the

characters lead undecipherable lives. For instance, apart from Funlola the artist, we are not certain of the occupation of the rest of the characters. Using ‘shadows’ or concealment is a common device among traditional Yoruba dramatists however, most dramatists would present the obvious image of the masquerade physically on stage. Osofisan’s use of the mask as a metaphor in *Chattering* is in ‘pursuit of various roles and games whose surface partially conceals another more problematic reality’ (Richards 1996: 97). Osofisan creates *Chattering* as a masquerade with a many-layered robe which, when a layer is peeled, reveals another layer that is more complex and more dazzling and, all the time, the masquerade is not stationary but dancing and whirling around, presenting only a brief glimpse of the layer to the audience. This is why some critics³⁷ consider this play Osofisan’s most complex drama, with its riddling, games, play-within-a-play technique and the subversive use of Ifa (*Iwori Otura*).

When Yajin rejected Mokan and broke off her engagement to him, Mokan remained in the shadows, occupying the periphery of the Yajin-Sontri existence. He also joined the shadowy secret arm of the government.

Gradually, the dance takes on the theme of the engagement in marital ritual, at which point Mokan realises he has lost Yajin to his best friend. The bigger riddle begins and we are transported into the present. The bigger riddle, which always begins after the *babalawo* (the Ifa priest) has chanted the relevant Ifa verse during divination, is what follows. In this case, it is the possibility of building and sustaining a union of opposites in an environment of hate, fear and uncertainty.

³⁷ See especially Olu Obafemi 1979: 178-190 and Femi Fatoba’s PhD thesis, University of Ibadan, 1988..

Before analysing the rest of the play, it is pertinent to explain the meanings of the characters' names and their relevance to the drama. In my reading of the play, I have taken into consideration the historical context and I have used semantic/symbolic ramifications to decode the meanings and relevance of some of the characters' names, to get an insight into the intentions of the playwright in writing the play. I have analysed the names of the five main characters to reveal the nature of their relationship. My analysis is based on my knowledge of the Yoruba, the language used to name the characters and the predominant language spoken in Ibadan where the play had its premiere. It is also the first language of the playwright. I also take into consideration the popular codes used within the university by students, codes that the playwright would have been familiar with, and, when used, would have been immediately recognised by the university audience as well as members of the audience who were not university students or lecturers but who spoke Yoruba. In a conversation I had with Kunle Famoriyo³⁸ who was a musician in the first production, much slang popular among university students used during the performances was omitted from the published version; this slang was immediately recognised by the audience who applauded the actors. The characters are Sontri, Mokan, Yajin, Leje and Funlola. Yajin paints a revealing picture of her betrothed, Sontri:

Yajin: [...] He could not settle anywhere. He joined the army and left. He tried politics and was imprisoned. Then the first coup came, and his old officers brought him out of prison. When the civil war started, Sontri kissed me one evening – and disappeared!
(p. 13)

Coming back from the war Sontri joined the Farmers' Movement, an association that the government labelled 'subversive', and wrote their anthem. The clue to his restless nature and his name is an incessant search for a cause. Before joining the Farmers' Movement, Sontri was a renegade without a cause, flitting from one form of existence to the other,

³⁸ Famoriyo was my acting coach in 1987-1989; he also directed me in two productions – Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and his own *Waiting for Anini*. It was during the production of *Anini* in 1990 that he encouraged us to use slang and other codes popular among university students, as they did during the production of *Chattering and the Song*.

searching for that elusive cause that would make meaning of his life. He was always making, in military terms, ‘about turns’ each time he realised he did not fit in to the setting. The name ‘Sontri’ is itself a philological corruption of the military term ‘two-three’, usually uttered in-between carrying out orders. Fundamentally, Sontri is an ‘in-between’ character, positioned between beginning a purposeful act and impetuously abandoning the act, like the warning clause in the Ifa verse of Iwori-Otura. His ‘in-betweenness’ makes him hard to define; while Yajin equates his physical posture to that of Orunmila, the deity in charge of Ifa and wisdom, in her description to Funlola, her bridesmaid, the first utterance we hear from Sontri is ‘Soponno’, a reference to the Yoruba god of smallpox. Accompanying the shout of ‘Soponno-o’ is a tempestuous behaviour, as fiery as the temper of Shango, the god of thunder. In *Sontri*, our playwright has created one of the most complex and difficult characters to classify in his dramaturgy.

Meanwhile, Mokan has a contradictory personality, much like Esu in Yoruba mythology. ‘Mokan’ denotes someone who has accepted his fate, as indeed Mokan has apparently done after losing Yajin to his friend Sontri. Literally, ‘mokan’ means ‘take heart’. The contradiction in his nature is hidden behind a veil of humour and love of beer drinking, and it is not obvious to casual scrutiny. For instance, his first appearance is as a comic: ‘crouching and doing a comic ‘walk’ (p. 11).

Mokan: (*doing another walk*) I have a broken heart, huh! huh! (*To Funlola*) One kobo for the broken heart, ma’am!

Funlola: (*playing up*) Not until I see it. I like to see what I am paying for.

Mokan: But you are seeing it! I am the broken heart.

Funlola: You don’t look broken to me.

Mokan: Appearances, lady. They’re always deceptive. (p. 11)

This short extract reveals a lot about Mokan. He is able to poke fun at his misfortune, displaying the comical side of his nature while underlying that is a serious, persevering personality, the type that, as in the second part of the Iwori Otura verse, uses an

opponent's strength against him deceptively. Later, he says to Leje: 'The monkey sweats [...] Sometimes you're so blind you'll miss things even under your nose' (p. 28). Under the pretext of maintaining his friendship with Sontri, he is plotting to take revenge, believing inaccurately that Sontri is the leader of the Farmers' Movement.

Yajin on the other hand means 'following the deep path'; in the context of the play, the name denotes someone who chooses complex situations instead of a straightforward scenario. The name explains Yajin's choice of Sontri instead of Mokan: Sontri 'was the wild, untamed one, running with street brats, garage touts, and the like, and only just managing to scale through exams' (p. 13) while Mokan was the level-headed, stable fellow who excelled in everything at school, but as Mokan says, 'appearances are always deceptive'. Yajin is well educated, the daughter of a judge but for all the play's roundedness, we never get to find out the reason for her attraction to Sontri. The playwright never fully explores her name as part of defining her character. Indeed, in the drama, and the play-within-the-play section, Osofisan's treatment of the women is superficial; he does not regard their capability for solving political problems and the dramatist does not accord women major roles until plays like *Morountodun* and *Once Upon Four Robbers*. He does not give them any major role other than to serve as catalyst to the action of the male characters; Moni in *Cooling Spring* and Ibidun in *Freedom Road* are also women whose 'existence' extends the roles of Wole and Akanji respectively.

Throughout the play, Leje's identity is shrouded in mystery; we can not quite work out his role until the final few minutes of the play when he is revealed as the main leader of the Farmers' Movement. He is an inscrutable loner who, according to Mokan, 'when he was born they couldn't decide who his father was. Whether it was the parish priest or the carpenter next door. So they named him Bastard' (p. 11). His name is from a Yoruba

children's playground game, a pointer to the fact that he is the main riddler. He is enigmatic, obscure and inclined to cheating to get his way. This he does repeatedly, again, using Moka's strength against him, deceiving him and using their friendship to gather intelligence about the government's plans concerning the Farmers' Movement. As his name suggests, if you drop your guard with him, he is going to take advantage of the situation, even in such an insignificant diversion as a game of cards.

Osofisan has a penchant for taking advantage of the plenitude of the tonal possibilities of Yoruba language, and the multiple meanings carried by even the most subtle changes in inflection. Funlola is one of the Yoruba names that have more than one meaning. Funlola means 'endow me with wealth' but it can also imply 'give me tomorrow' or 'accord him the future'. In the first production, the second meaning was used, according to Kunle Famoriyo (conversation, 1990). The playwright introduces Funlola as a painter who has recently come back to the country from abroad and is still ignorant of the socio-political cesspit that the country had become after the civil war. In her innocence therefore lies the future, not only of the Farmers' Movement, but also of the country. Her 'purity', as Sontri avers, attracts her to the recruiting machinery of Leje. In a discussion on this play with Muyiwa Awodiya (1996), Osofisan confirms that, in his production of *Chattering and the Song*, the actors playing the roles used codes to symbolise the names. For instance, Sontri wore military fatigues and marched about the stage while Moka shrugged at every opportunity, displaying an indifferent attitude to mask his agenda.

Part One of the play starts on the eve of the wedding between Yajin and Sontri, sometime after the war. Funlola is plaiting Yajin's hair for the wedding while she relates the story of her meeting Sontri to Funlola in the flashback. The discussion around Sontri however reveals no fresh insight or understanding of the man: he is identified as a complex

personality, an artist, a poet and ‘the incarnation of Orunmila himself’ (p.10), but nothing is said about his fiery nature and the anger that fuels his ambition to rid the society of ‘social epidemics’ (p.19). The introduction of the bridegroom, when we finally meet him, is dramatic: he storms in with a shout of “SOPONNO-O!”, and in production reports of the 1976 performance, with eyes blazing and hair dishevelled.

Sontri’s enters, protesting the pulling down of the nests of his weaverbirds by Funlola, revealing in the process the reasons for and the extent of his anger against rich oppressors, politicians and corrupt judiciary. It is instructive that though contrary to Yajin’s description of Sontri as the ‘incarnation of Orunmila’, the Yoruba god of wisdom, Sontri’s first utterance is Soponno, another name for Obaluaye, the Yoruba deity for small-pox. He is also one of the anti-wickedness divinities³⁹ who maintain order by punishing deviants in the Yoruba society.

Sontri’s anger had earlier made him join the Farmers’ Movement after his return from the war. The movement helps the oppressed poor but the government has branded it subversive. The reasons for Sontri’s anger include disregard for the poor by the rich, torture, censorship, profiteering, red-tapism, heavy taxation, corruption and religious exploitation of the masses. These reasons echo the speech by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu after the coup against the Nigerian state and the killing of many political leaders in January 1965, the coup that was responsible for the pogrom that led to the Nigerian civil war⁴⁰.

³⁹ See J Omosade Awolalu, ‘Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1976 XLIV(2): 275-287

⁴⁰ The relevant text of Nzeogwu’s speech: Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10 percent; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers or VIPs at least, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles, those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds (<http://www.dawodu.com/nzeogwu2.htm> - accessed on 24 February 2008).

The second part of *Chattering* begins with the festivities on the eve of the wedding. Most of this part involves the play-within-a-play sequence revising the life of Alaafin Abiodun, the king of Oyo between 1774 and 1789, and using it to assess the importance of that period against the plan of Mokan to justify arresting his friend for being an enemy of the state. Leje hints at the political undertone of the play when he tells Mokan that their hiding place away from the party, a store room filled with drinks, is the ‘promised land’ for the ‘pure in heart. But the road is still long’ (p.27). The ‘road’ refers to the process that Mokan still has to go through before realising that his best friend, Leje, is the leader of the ‘terrorist group’ he is trying to dismantle, and not Sontri. Leje suspects that Mokan’s heart is not ‘pure’ because he has some plans to disrupt Sontri’s wedding but he is unaware of that plan. He teases Mokan as a means of finding out about his intentions, using *double entendres*. For instance, he says, ‘Let them dance their fill out there. We’ve got more serious things on our hands’ (p. 28), implying both the drink they have in abundance, the card game of ‘whot’⁴¹ they are able to play while duelling with words, as well as Mokan’s plan which involves betrayal. However, the ‘more serious things’ is to tease Mokan to reveal the real reason for his presence at the wedding party. Leje reinforces this by taunting Mokan further: ‘It’s your girl committing matrimony tomorrow... with another man’ (p. 28), as if the wedding is a grievous crime that Mokan needs to prevent, as a member of the elite squad. Mokan rises to Leje’s baiting by stating the closest revelation to his intentions:

Mokan: (*quietly*) The monkey sweats, Leje
 [...]
 It’s only the hair on its back. Sometimes you’re so blind
 that you’ll miss things even under your nose. (p.28).

⁴¹ This is a card game in which players try to be the first to get rid of their cards by following number or suit – circles, triangles, crosses, squares, stars, whot – on the card

Though he feels anger and resentment at having to pretend to be happy at the wedding, the desperation to seek revenge fuels his ambition. Yajin's idea to stage a play provides the opportunity he needs.

The play is based on the confrontation between Alaaḡin Abiodun and Latoye, the son of the king's late prime minister. Mokan plays Aresa, the leader of the King's Guard, while Sontri and Leje play Abiodun and Latoye respectively. The two women, Funlola and Yajin, play the king's wives and the musicians (who are Mokan's operatives) play the guards.

Latoye is brought before the Alaaḡin for trying to incite the market-people to riot, but he tries to start an insurrection against the Alaaḡin by appealing to the guards. He points out that the Alaaḡin is a symbol of power and corruption who robs the common man of his wealth and makes the rich and powerful wealthier. At the end of this play-within-the-play sequence, Mokan steps in as an officer of the Police Special Squad after he arrests Sontri and Yajin for plotting to seize power for the farmers, as members of the Farmer's Movement. He believes that Sontri is the leader of the Movement and all his pretence at playing the clown and being happy for Yajin is a ruse to remain close to the couple.

The epilogue however exposes Mokan's error, as Leje reveals to Funlola that he is the 'Osongongon', the leader of the Farmer's Movement, in his attempt to recruit her to the cause. Though the arrest of the Sontri and Yajin temporarily prevents the wedding, the marriage of revolutionary ideas, which is the focus of the play, takes place and is consummated between Leje and Funlola. This underlines Leje's statements during the card game with Mokan that, 'You know I don't know how to lose' (p.30 & p. 31). The ending of the play – 'the play does NOT end' (p. 56) – buttresses Mokan's response.

Mokan: [...] those who cheat
 don't really know anything about the game.
 [...]
 I mean that they always forget that there will be a second game.
 However long it takes (p.31)

Leje may not know how to lose, devising various ways to carry on his revolutionary ideals and always 'testing' the power of the state, there will always be two sides to the argument of social justice – those who wish to have it and those who benefit from the lack of justice.

Chattering tries to examine the effect of corruption and dictatorship on the Nigerian polity during the military regime of General Gowon (1967 – 1975). The play is about questioning history and people in authority; the son of the disgraced Basorun questions the authority of the Alaafin, in the same way that the Farmers' Movement questions the legitimacy of some of the actions of the Nigerian government. In a sense, *Chattering* as a drama is a propaganda; it highlights 'the positions of Sontri and Leje in the logistics of revolution' (Awodiya 1993: 40), using slogans and typecasting, especially in naming, as I explained above. Osofisan re-interprets history, which is the reflection of the desires and the aspirations of the ruling class.

Chattering is significant to Osofisan's development as a dramatist because it was the first production that he solely directed and it established his stature as a serious playwright and director. It also encouraged him to consider the possibility of transferring from the French Department in the university to Theatre Arts. Osofisan commented on the experience of that first production in a 1986 interview:

I was in the Unibadan Masques, the Acting Company of the Department of Theatre Arts, and used to act for Dexter Lyndersay, who was the Director. I was one of his principal actors and to my shock, Dexter asked me to come and direct my own play when it was scheduled. This was the experience that finally brought me

into the theatre... This was my first experience of directing a full-length play. I was so scared! I had never directed a major play, not to say a play of my own... Dexter himself was scared. He didn't think it could work for instance, for me to have the drummers simultaneously on the stage. Two days to the production it didn't seem as if anything was working. Since I was still re-writing the play even on the eve of the production, we hadn't got the epilogue ready (Awodiya 1993: 50-51).

After that experience, he gained the confidence to begin a career in theatre: 'and now I could write songs, direct a company. I just knew the stage, the career of writing for the stage began from there... (Awodiya 1993: 52). So, *Chattering* is crucial to the development of Osofisan as a dramatist; the success of the play persuaded Osofisan to start interpreting contemporary social issues using Yoruba history and myth.

For Osofisan, the second production a few months later, which was staged without the elaborate setting used for the 1976 premiere, established the 'format to all plays henceforth' (Awodiya 1993: 52); that is, a drama suited to the peculiar context of Nigerian theatre companies where limited financial resources prescribes an austere production. After the experiment with staging, Osofisan built upon the experience of *Chattering* and began experimenting:

[with] words, gestures and areas of laughter when we couldn't have music. Sometimes later on, I began to explore small casts rather than a large one... the experience of doing *Chattering* gave me the confidence to begin my explorations. Especially this problem of writing plays intended for even people who have no previous experience of the stage (Awodiya 1993: 53, 54).

Chattering had an impact on the dramaturgy of Osofisan, but it had an even greater impact on the reception of his plays by the university audience; the audience started going to his productions for the spectacle as well as the message of his drama, a development the dramatist capitalised upon in his next major play, *Morountodun*.

Morountodun: Launching the ‘Sweet Trap’

Morountodun was commissioned by an association of women and first produced at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan in 1979. The play explores the relevance of women as agents of change in society. The protagonist, Titubi, who is the daughter of the market women starts out as a strong defender of middle class sensibilities but changes to become an agent for the emancipation of the peasants. The background to the play is the farmers’ uprising (Agbekoya war) against unfair taxation in the western part of Nigeria during the Nigerian civil war. In the play, Titubi, after a confrontation with a police superintendent, volunteers to go as a spy among the rebellious farmers, to help arrest their leader. However, her experience of life among the farmers changes her; her political allegiances shift to the side of the farmers and she ends up serving as their agent against the state.

Morountodun establishes women in the role of fighters against oppression and injustice in a campaign to end societal terror. Women face persecution and carry placards of anguish alongside men, in wilful actions to deny all hegemonic tyrannies and reinforce the collective aspiration of the people in protests and demonstrations; during the historical events that influenced *Morountodun*, both men and women were involved in the revolt against the police and other government forces. Nevertheless, *Morountodun* is not about support for the feminist agenda. Rather, it is an experimental approach to and a reviewing of the role that women perform in African societies. Osofisan’s belief is hinged on the essence of community which feeds on a series of mutual dependence – both men and women are necessary at any point in history and the success of an integrated community depends as much on the people as on the ideas that direct their lives. Indeed, as Awodiya offers, women ‘assume central roles in the plays of Osofisan. They lead or join other people in the quest for revolutionary change in the society’ (1993: 14) and can instigate ideas that have direct impact on people’s lives.

The driving forces behind *Morountodun* are the myth of Moremi and the Agbekoya farmers rising in the Western part of Nigeria in 1968-69. The myth of Moremi is very popular among the Ile-Ife (Yoruba) people and the brief summary I give below is from the oral tradition, a published account of the seven-day festival that celebrates the sacrifice of Moremi and the people's indebtedness to her, and my observance of the festival over a period of four years.

Moremi was the wife and queen of Oranmiyan, the Ooni (king) of Ile-Ife⁴². She had only one son, Oluorogbo. The city of Ife was frequently and repeatedly being terrorised and raided by the Igbo⁴³ people. Whenever the Igbos raided Ife, they dressed as masquerades, with masks made from grasses and raffia leaves, giving the Ife people the impression that they were alien beings. After many raiding parties, Moremi offered to infiltrate the Igbo community to learn their secret. She made a vow to the deity of River Esinmirin to offer any sacrifice if she was able to successfully learn the secrets of the Igbos and come back safely. During the next raid, she allowed herself to be captured and, because of her beauty, became a wife of the Igbo king. At the palace, Moremi learnt the secret, escaped and taught the Ife people how to defeat the Igbos. The next time the Igbos came to raid, the Ife people were ready with firebrands to set fire to the raffia costume of the Igbos. With the raiders defeated, the Esinmirin deity demands the only son of Moremi as reward for her successful venture. In return, Moremi demands a seven-day annual remembrance from the Ife people to celebrate her courage and sacrifice.

⁴² According to Yoruba oral history, Oranmiyan was the third ruler on Ile-Ife, a long time ago. Yoruba orature informs us that Oduduwa founded Ile-Ife in pre-historic times.

⁴³ No reference or linkage to the Igbo people who presently occupy the eastern part of modern day Nigeria. In fact, oral history claims that the present day Modakeke people were the Igbos (Ugbos) referred to in the myth. What gives credence to this claim is that the people of Modakeke and Ife are always feuding despite the fact that the two towns are interconnected. The recent major incident was in July 1998.

The Moremi myth is told either to celebrate the legendary woman or to teach courage, patriotism and forbearance during story-telling sessions. That was my first encounter with the myth, in tales learnt at my grandmother's feet. Apart from the annual Edi Festival at Ile-Ife and the Moremi Festival at Offa, another Yoruba town, the myth has influenced many modern Nigerian dramatists, including two of the more famous Yoruba Travelling Theatre directors, Duro Ladipo and Oyin Adejobi, as well as Femi Osofisan. Though based on the popular myth, Duro Ladipo introduced the element of the supernatural into his play, making the invincibility of the Igbos a result of ancestral patronage and magic instead of an intelligent application of natural resources.

Osofisan's treatment in *Morountodun* is significant in his use of the myth as a metaphor and a symbol of defiance, of subterfuge, of collective heroism. He turns the image of the Moremi dagger necklace into a symbol of a dagger in the metaphorical heart of the society, probing, penetrating 'very close and intimate, like a knife in the ribs... [washing him] inside out, in the naked truth' (Awodiya 1993: 18) so that the society can collectively attain a new and positive awareness.

The Agbekoya Farmers' revolt is a more recent occurrence. It is a historical fact that has not transposed into the realm of myths and legends. Agbekoya literally means 'farmers reject oppression'. The revolt was because of unnecessary taxation and corruption by the Nigerian government. Tax has always led to one agitation or the other since the colonial era in Nigeria.

Farmers by their nature are peaceful people. They are law abiding and less radical than other professions, and for farmers to engage in armed conflict with constituted authorities was unheard of in the history of Nigeria – until 1968. Nigeria was in the midst of a very

expensive war; the federal soldiers were fighting to keep Nigeria undivided while the Biafran break-away region wanted to establish a republic. The Nigerian government, needing to raise funds to prosecute the war, imposed an annual tax of £3:5/-⁴⁴ on every adult male in the Western Region. This was more than a 300% increase on the previous tax of less than £1:0:0 a year. In a lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan on 16 May 1970, four months after the end of the war, the Vice-Chairman of the Federal Executive Council and Federal Commissioner for Finance, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, stated, *inter alia*:

the rebellion must be decisively crushed, and the unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria preserved. It was an overriding policy of government that nothing should be spared to attain this objective. Accordingly, in the first year of war up to the end of 1967, we spent £33.5 million to provide armaments, food, uniforms, transportation, and other necessities of war. And in the second and third years up to the end of January 1970, we spent £98 million and £170 million respectively, for the same purposes. (1970: 5-6).

The government was prepared to raise the money by what the farmers saw as punitive taxation, especially after the 14% devaluation of British Sterling by the Harold Wilson government in 1967 reduced the foreign exchange available to Nigeria at the height of the civil war. Like any form of oppression bordering on tax matters and other forms of human degradation, the farmers formed themselves into a collective – ‘*Egbe Agbekoya*’ – to defend their rights against the military rulers. Over a period of several months, while tax collectors terrorised every adult male, the farmers planned their revolt. Police arrested those who could not pay and detained them in prisons. The farmers elected leaders to coordinate resistance throughout the region. The farmers drew up a list of their demands, which included reduction of the tax payable and cessation of tax raids, which the government refused to accept.

⁴⁴ Based on inflationary trends, this would be about N5000 today; subsistence farmers can be expected to make an average of about N50,000 per annum; in 1968 it was equivalent to asking the farmers to contribute a huge percentage of their earnings. For comparison, a motor car (Austin Mini Moke) was around £400 in Nigeria in the late 1960s; an equivalent vehicle costs about N3 million today (2008).

The main cause of the revolt was the unfair taxation and the lack of provision of essential social amenities by the government for the tax payers. Instead, all the tax revenue was diverted towards the war effort and the satisfaction of the corrupt tendencies of government functionaries and contractors. There are also other reasons given by the farmers, like betrayal, treachery and exploitation of the illiteracy of the farmers by their trusted representatives from the educated class – the lawyers, trade representatives and non-elected government officials. Lawyer Isaac and Alhaji Buraimoh, the two ‘trusted’ representatives of the farmers in *Morountodun*, are examples. Mama Kayode lists the catalogue of oppression:

... Our roads have been so bad for years now that we can no longer reach the markets to sell our crops. Even your excellency had to make your trip here by helicopter. Your council officials and the *akodas* harass us minute to minute and collect bribes from us. Then they go and build mansions in the city. Sanitary inspectors like Mister Bamsun are bloodsuckers. Your Marketing Board seizes our cocoa, and pays us only one third of what it sells it to the *oyinbo*. We have no electric and we still drink *tanwiji* from the stream. Many of our children are in jail for what your people call smuggling. We protested and your police mounted expeditions to maim us and reduce our houses to ashes... (p. 65⁴⁵).

Interestingly, Mama Kayode has no separate identity of her own. She is named after her child, Kayode, and the experiences she relates are her husband’s and those of the men folk. The women play a supporting role, cooking and cleaning for the warring ‘soldiers’ and nursing their injuries. When the women insist, however, on asserting their equality during the trial of lawyer Isaac and Alhaji Buraimoh for betraying the peasants, the men depict them as vulnerable people who need to be protected by the superior men from the responsibility of ‘manly’ action. The women protest:

Mosun: [...] Didn’t you say oppression and injustice know no frontier of blood or decency? That treachery is a poison which

⁴⁵ All page references to *Morountodun and other plays*, Nigeria: Longman, 1999.

must be burnt out wherever found? A viper! So why are you all trying to make exceptions of me?

Marshal: [*after a silence*] The women and the children will be evacuated, to stay with relatives and friends or in-laws in the city. That will save them from the continuous panic of our movements each time the government forces attack (p. 46)

The women seize the initiative by starting the trial:

Wura: Your life is filled with uncountable sordid actions, Alhaji. But you are merely wasting time. We are not here for private squabbles. Tell us why you turned traitor. Defend yourself (p. 51)

Morountodun is set in September 1969, 10 months after the actual revolt started and a month before the successful negotiation to end it. The plot of the play is complex compared to earlier plays by Osofisan. The police have exhausted their resources and have failed to quell the farmers' revolt; they do not have any information about the farmers, exposing the socio-economic divide that exists between the rich and their agents and the poor farmers. It also reveals the lack of information on the government's side about the dichotomy between what the farmers contribute to the society and what they get in return; there is no parameter to measure their taxable wealth.

The farmers' revolt has been going on for some months in the villages but city dwellers seem unaffected or unconcerned by the tax war happening a few miles away in the nearby villages. The bigger war between the federal soldiers and the Biafran secessionists occupies the headlines and the people's consciousness. A band of players decides to stage a play to sensitise the city dwellers about the plight of the farmers. In a technique that Osofisan has since used in other plays (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, for example), *Morountodun* begins with the actors demystifying the staging process. Because the play was not ready on the opening night for performance, *Morountodun* opened on the 'Dressing Area' with the actors seemingly preparing for the performance. Some actors had not learnt their lines, costumes and props were not ready,

and the set was half-completed but Osofisan insisted that the ‘show must go on!’ This opening lends a post-modern construct to the drama.

A flurry of activity: actors making up, trying costumes, reading script, rehearsing gestures, miming some of the latter actions in the play.

Enter the DIRECTOR, rubbing his hands. (p. 5)

The opening sequence confirms Chris Dunton’s opinion that Osofisan has, more than other Nigerian dramatist, developed a range of techniques and formal characteristics like ‘the deliberate introduction [...] of disjunctions in style, tone, narrative flow; or the ‘exposure’ by the cast of their status as actors’ (Dunton 1992: 69).

Protesters who see the actors as troublemakers, and who feel no affinity to the cause they preach, have disrupted all their previous performances. Fearing the usual disturbance, the Director addresses the audience, relating the Agbekoya fight and the government’s refusal to negotiate or reduce the farmers’ tax burden. In the middle of his speech, despite his assurance that ‘there’ll be no disturbance tonight’ because ‘this time I’ve sent for the police’ (p. 5), a group of market women led by Titubi enters the theatre to protest against the staging of the play. *Morountodun* describes Titubi as the ‘spoilt’ daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, the leader of the market women. Here, Osofisan is using ‘inverse revolt’ to establish the available choices before the audience: support the Agbekoya cause or rise to the defence of the rich city dwellers. Titubi is launching a revolt against the farmers’ rejection of what they view as imposition of illegal taxation by the ruling regime. At this time, she is ignorant of the farmers’ dilemma and is only concerned about her own welfare and security. The women show this lack of understanding by carrying placards bearing such legends as ‘DEATH TO THE JOBLESS’ and ‘NO FOREIGN IDEOLOGIES’. The farmers are not jobless and the ‘foreign’ and their agitation is that they are in the villages, deprived of the ‘luxuries’ of modern existence such as electricity,

pipe borne water, good roads, modern communication systems and other infrastructure common to modern living. The irony of this situation was not lost on the audience who coined the term ‘deportation’ for students who left the campus on weekend visits to their villages (Emmanuel Oga, personal interview, 2001).

The police arrive and arrest Titubi, the leader of the rioters, and convince her to help the state end the Agbekoya threat by infiltrating the movement and identifying the leader of the farmers. In a twist, ‘farmers’ hijack the performance from the Play Director, setting the revolutionary tone of the play and bringing the subject back into focus. In disguise, they distribute arms and plan to raid the prison and release the detained farmers. However, the police, aware of the farmers’ plan to break into the prison, rehearse Titubi in her role as a former nurse who murdered her children and who is now awaiting trial in the prison. The police believe that the farmers will sympathise with her plight and will want to employ her expertise as a nurse. The police think she will be able to use her position to identify the leader of the farmers, known only as Marshal. Titubi finds a parallel between her life and that of Moremi, the legendary Ile-Ife heroine; she dreams of being another Moremi. The rehearsal creates a major disjunction in the narrative flow of the play; Titubi touches her Moremi necklace and is immediately transported to a flashback scene involving Oranmiyan trying to implore his wife Moremi not to allow herself to be captured by the Igbos. This scene brings to the fore the similarity between the two conflicts – the Igbos sought freedom from the Ife kingdom by organising regular raids the same way as the farmers are doing to the state government. In addition, the similarity of purpose between the characters of Titubi and Moremi as devoted citizens intent on saving their society and perpetuating the class structure is enhanced. This provides the clearest meaning of the name Titubi, as ‘born again’, in reference to a reincarnated Moremi.

However, while acting as the agent of the state, Titubi participates in the daily experiences of the farmers and comes to realise their shared humanity and the struggle the farmers face in their quest for survival. As a play, *Morountodun* is a contrast between idealism and realism. Titubi changes from a woman who is obsessed by power and the myth of Moremi to a woman who realises importance of social justice. She also questions the myth of Moremi and the role of the goddess in perpetuating oppression. This ideological conversion takes place in three processes:

- a) first feeling contempt and hatred for the farmers who are threatening her way of life by refusing to pay tax;
- b) living with the farmers, acting as nurse and helping the people in return for their protection, for sharing their dreams, suffering and pain, and recognising their humanity, humility and humour; and then
- c) realising that the rich and powerful are not always right in their perception of the common people.

These steps are valid in the conversion of Titubi as champion of the peasants, but there is also an emotional factor; she falls in love with Marshal, the farmer's tactical leader. The shock and revolt that Titubi feels, and the attachment she develops for Marshal, converts her to the farmers' cause and she realises that she could not be Moremi; she needs to be 're-born' as Morountodun, 'post-Moremi' entity whose reaffirmation is required to bridge the injustice gap between the peasants and the rich:

Titubi: That was when I began to ask questions [...] farmers cannot eat their own products, for they need the money from the market. They tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise chickens, but must be content with wind in their stomachs. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting for his bill... It could not be just... In our house, mama, we wake to chorus of jingling coins [...] But I have lived in the forest among simple folk, sharing their pain and anguish... and I chose... (p. 66).

In that transformation, she realises the true nature of Moremi as an agent of the state who saw only one side of the argument and refused to acknowledge the right of the Igbos to existence. Moremi's model breeds heroes and promotes solitary individuals whereas history convinces us that courageous people who have imbibed progressive ideas drive successful revolutions as a collective endeavour. To banish this notion of individualism and prevent making Titubi a different kind of heroine, Osofisan forcefully establishes Titubi's choice:

Titubi: [... I] knew I had to kill the ghost of Moremi in my belly. I am not Moremi! Moremi served the State, *was* the State, was the spirit of the ruling class... But it is not true that the State is always right... (p. 70).

Heroism is a focal point of *Morountodun*, but not that of an individual. Rather than focusing on the individual, like Akanji in *Red is the Freedom Road*, or on a group of intellectuals as in *Chattering and Song*, Osofisan confers the heroic act on a community pursuing the same course of action against oppression and subjugation. Osofisan, referring to *Morountodun*, 'rejects the idea that heroism, wisdom, self-sacrifice, have any validity so long as they refer to the role of an individual working within the structures of an oppressive hierarchy' (Dunton 1992: 79).

The canvas of Moremi's heroic initiative has to be painted over to satisfy the playwright's revolutionary motive: the myth has served its purpose and provided Titubi with a model of courage but that model is not relevant for the present, as the Police Superintendent states:

Superintendent: A myth. We're dealing with reality here. And reality is a far more cruel thing (p. 26)

In fact, the peasants compare the modern representative symbol of Moremi, the dagger necklace, to ‘madness’, a passing fad that bears no relevance to reality, conversely defaming the achievement of the mythical Moremi:

Mosun: Her fancy necklace.

Kokondi: Better put it on her. I hear it’s their latest madness in the city.

Wura: Yes. They call it Moremi.

Kokondi: Indeed! Last year they were wearing a blade. Now it’s dagger. Soon it will be an axe (p. 43).

Osofisan uses *Morountodun* to re-define and re-configure history and to elicit a post-modern interpretation from the achievements of mythical and legendary heroes.

The play ends with the farmers leading a final attack on the Central police station, to strike at the power base of the ‘enemy’, from which they do not return, as the Director announces at the end of the performance. Osofisan implies by this ending that the attack must fail, that the revolt will not succeed. When the play was first performed at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, in April 1979, each night’s performance lasted from between four and five hours and the performances never ended. Each night, the play’s director / playwright (Osofisan) went on stage around midnight to announce the end of the play, citing various excuses. The main reason for this was that the production script was still a roughly combined script of two earlier plays on Moremi and the Agbekoya farmers’ uprising. In the second production on 28 and 29 October the same year, at the same venue, most of the references to Moremi and the Moremi scenes were removed while the Agbekoya factor was enhanced. This second production was to mark the tenth anniversary of the end of the farmers’ uprising and there were more people from outside the university community for the two performances. Emmanuel Oga, who played the Deputy Superintendent of Police in the production, told me (in 2001) that many of the people in the audience, the majority of whom were elderly men, could not speak or understand

English. After the performance they thanked the cast for remembering the Agbekoya but told them that ‘that is not the way it happened’. They agreed there were infiltrators in their group, some of whom were punished or killed, but there was no record of any of their leaders marrying any stranger at that time. They saw the play as a fictional representation of their struggle, and unlike in the play, they regarded their victory over the government on the tax issue enduring.

Osofisan considers the Agbekoya revolt important at this time because he has always been on the side of the poor oppressed. Ideologically, the playwright supports the farmers’ right to protest unjust taxation. It is also valid to wonder if Osofisan perhaps feels a kind of affinity or identification with the farmers because of his background.

In December 1980, the playwright re-wrote *Morountodun* for the convocation ceremony at the then University of Ife. Because of the factor of the university’s location, Osofisan re-introduced the Moremi legend, reduced the prominence of the Agbekoya uprising and enhanced the role of Titubi and her relationship to Marshal. Later, this script was edited for publication as the final text but it is by no means the script that captures the production essence of the performances. When I was writing my long essay for the University of Ibadan, Osofisan loaned me the handwritten scripts and notes of both the Ibadan and Ife productions for comparison with the published text; the Ibadan script read like two distinct plays, with the Agbekoya scenes taking more than three-quarters of the play. The Ife script was different, with various new Moremi scenes written in different ink inserted in the folder. Both scripts were different from the version published three years after the premiere.

In *Morountodun*, Osofisan challenges the received readings of history, as he did in the earlier play, *Chattering and the Song*. He imposes a subversive perspective to subject ‘tradition to scrutiny and reinterpretation’ (Richards 1987: 288) in a radical treatment of the circumstances surrounding both the Moremi myth and the Agbekoya Farmers’ insurrection of 1968-69 in the Western part of Nigeria. The farmers’ rising provided the canvas in *Chattering and the Song* for intellectuals to paint their ideas and ideals of a better society; the farmers or their plight do not actually feature as a dramatic representation in *Chattering*. However, this rising, ‘a coordinated effort by farmers to restructure and improve rural conditions’ (Beer 1976: 163) by making the government accountable, is treated in *Morountodun*. This combination of two different ideas – Moremi’s courage and patriotism, buried deep in orature and legend, and a very recent protest action – is ‘Osofisan’s [most] ambitious attempt to stimulate radicalization of the *sense* of history’ (Dunton 1992:79).

Coupled with those two critical readings, there is a third pertinent interpretation of the play, which Jane Plastow (2006) has drawn out: Osofisan’s penchant for ‘borrowing’ from other writers and sources, in particular, the Kenyan writers Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Mugo. In response to a question about authorial influences on his writing, Osofisan once told an interviewer that he steals the ideas of writers including Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, William Shakespeare, Amiri Baraka, Anton Chekhov and George B Shaw (Awodiya 1993: 120). Crucially, the only African writers mentioned are the Nigerians; however, Osofisan joked in 1995 that he is an ‘incorrigible plagiarist’, especially of classic writing, myths and ideas⁴⁶. Plastow points out that Osofisan fails to acknowledge his indebtedness to Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* as a resource and a source of Osofisan’s re-examination of his ideological posturing. Osofisan,

⁴⁶ See Biodun Jeyifo, ‘Interview with Femi Osofisan’, in *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, No 43, 1995, pp. 120-132.

according to Plastow, must have seen or heard about the Kenyan play, which was one of Kenya's two drama contributions to the Second Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos in 1977. Osofisan was a drama consultant to the festival as well as assistant director to Nigeria's drama entry, Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*, directed by Dapo Adelugba. In a personal conversation (2004), Osofisan admitted to me that he saw a version of *Dedan Kimathi* at the festival, as he did other productions by various other troupes, but did not agree to any direct influence on his dramaturgy by the play. The playwright claimed to have written the first versions of two shorter plays in the early 1970s, which he later combined as *Morountodun* in 1976 at the instigation of the then Director of the Unibadan Masques, Dexter Lyndersay, who had scheduled the play for the 1977 season. However, the schedule was changed to accommodate the fringe productions of FESTAC, and the play was not produced until 1979.

Plastow's argument is very convincing, given Osofisan's predilection for 'borrowing without acknowledgement'. Plastow views *Morountodun* as a re-examination of the Agbekoya uprising to redress the theatrical paradox of *Chattering* where a play about peasants does not feature any peasant or their direct dilemmas. She sees the re-examination as drawing a parallel to the Kenyan Mau Mau experience and 'as a vehicle for discussing whether such mass revolts could ever lead to effective social transformation' (2006: 194). Plastow points out certain similarities in the two plays to evoke the influence of the Kenyan play and the writers on Osofisan, for instance:

- Interpolating scene three in *Morountodun* where Marshal and Bogunde pose as market sellers as a 'direct lift from the plotting-in-the-market scene in the second movement of *Dedan Kimathi*';
- The third movement in *Dedan Kimathi* is comparable to scene nine in *Morountodun*; and

- The ending of the two plays – the storming of the Central Police Station in *Morountodun* and the smuggling of a gun into the court to cause confusion, thereby allowing Kimathi to escape – are similar.

Plastow may indeed have a valid point in stating that *Dedan Kimathi* is one of the mentioned influences of *Morountodun* but it is a minor influence, in my understanding of the shared history and experience of Nigeria and Kenya. While the nationalist movement in Nigeria was not as violent as it was in Kenya, there were pockets of insurrection in Nigeria similarly designed (though not in scale), like the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, as a revolt against the British colonial experience. Insurrections like the Aba market riot of 1929 against taxation of women and the standoff that followed the shooting of coal miners at Enugu in 1949 as well as Women's riot over taxation in Abeokuta in 1949 were all aimed at weakening the colonial regime. Albeit, these were not on the scale of the Mau Mau in terms of organisation and bloody outcome, reports point at the levels of organisation and coordination for these riots. On a closer scale, as I related above, the organisation of the Agbekoya Farmers' revolt was sophisticated enough to create a disruption of the Nigerian Civil War. The three writers – Osofisan, Ngugi and Micere Mugo – lived through histories, myths and legends associated with insurrections, fights for independence from British colonial rule and nationalist aspirations. On reflection and re-appraisal of historical precedence, the influence of *Dedan Kimathi* may not be as significant as Plastow argues though there is not denying that Osofisan did 'experience' *Dedan Kimathi* in 1977 during FESTAC, when he was actively revising the script of *Morountodun*; there is also the strong evidence and admission of our playwright for 'borrowing' from other writers.

Plastow's argument about the socialist intentions of *Morountodun* however underpins my understanding of the play, in spite of my association with the play in various forms. I have directed parts of the play, acted in it, watched it performed on several occasions before fee-paying audience and for students acting and directing examinations, and I wrote a thesis on its portrayal of societal anguish for my undergraduate degree. Yet, Plastow's argument has encouraged me to re-examine the play's dynamics and I have come to realise the many debts that *Morountodun* owes not just to Yoruba myths and legends, Nigeria's political history, Mau Mau history and the history of collective resistance to the British colonial rule, but to the present socio-political dilemma in Nigeria and elsewhere. We have to realise that, as Abiola Irele states, 'myth functions in Osofisan's work primarily as an anchor in the communal sensibility for the thematic unfolding of the action and symbolic schemes of the plays rather than as substantial reference' (Irele 1995: xxxiii). I see *Morountodun* as another major experimentation by a budding playwright in search of dramatic form and language, much like *Chattering* and *Red is the Freedom Road*. This experimentation with forms and language continues in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, the play that Osofisan wrote after *Morountodun*.

Once Upon Four Robbers: The Magic of Subversion

Once Upon Four Robbers is the first in the series of dramas that Osofisan refers to as the 'magic boon' plays. The dramatist planned ten magic boon plays but only two have been written, or produced. In interviews (1996; 2004; 2005) with Osofisan, he variously states that the eight other plays are not yet written, have been written, are being revised or are probably never going to be written; it is difficult to know what the dramatist wants us to believe. He confesses however to be fascinated by the possibilities that magic presents in dramatising societal issues that may otherwise prove difficult to discuss, 'especially when you are criticising the government' (personal interview, 2004). The other play in the

series is *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, which I examine in the next chapter. The central motif of the magic boon plays is borrowed or adapted from the world of folklore. A group of persons in anguish or dilemma suddenly obtain a magical power from a mysterious agent. The power is capable of changing their circumstances as long as they adhere strictly to expressed injunctions.

Written between 1976 and 1978, the play was premiered at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan in March 1979. *Four Robbers* is popular with students because of the topicality of the theme of armed robbery and the ability to be produced on a bare stage, without a cumbersome setting. The play is also adaptable; the prescribed setting is market place, but producers have sometimes changed that setting to a bank, a beach or casino. I acted the role of Hasan in January 1991 at a University of Ibadan production but subsequently directed the play on the same stage and at the University of Lagos, Nigeria auditorium in July of the same year.

Four Robbers is set in a market square, which is a symbolic location in Yoruba worldview. Osofisan wrote the play to contribute to the debate on public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria; the play examines the moral and legal definitions of ‘robbery’ in the wider sense, and the implications of the Armed Robbery and Firearms Decree 47 of 1970⁴⁷ on the public psyche. As usual with Osofisan’s drama, the sub-texts to *Four Robbers* are based on Yoruba culture and Nigerian political situation. The dramatist uses the Yoruba storytelling tradition; he also responds to the contemporary social problem of armed robbery and the inability of the government to provide a credible solution. Before examining the play, I am going to review these two frames of reference to suggest how they provide the background to the drama.

⁴⁷ This decree replaced Chapter 36 of the 1958 Criminal Code which dealt with robbery in Nigeria.

Yoruba storytelling tradition features Ijapa, the tortoise, as a trickster in many stories. The particular story that Osofisan derives his play from involves the tortoise stealing from his fellow animals. Once, there was famine and drought in the land. All the animals decided to dig a well to provide water but the tortoise refused to join them. For his attitude, the animals banned him from using water from the well and when they finished digging, they posted a guard to secure the area. At night, the tortoise, in disguise, came singing and dancing; the guard fled and the tortoise drew as much water as he could. He continued stealing water from the well until the animals constructed a wooden figure and coated it with gum paste, which, of course, could not run away from the tortoise. Surprised at the insolence of the 'gum-man', the tortoise slapped and kicked the figure and became stuck. In the morning, the other animals saw that the monster was none other than the tortoise and dealt with him.

The other factor that contributed to the drama was the incidence of public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria in the 1970s. One of the major consequences of the Nigerian civil war was armed robbery, which became widespread and violent. Emmanuel Igbo (2001) identifies two factors for increase in armed robbery: 'the civil war and the socioeconomic condition of the post-civil war years' (p. 173).

In the 1970s, convicted armed robbers were executed by a military firing squad and members of the public were invited to witness the event at the Lagos Bar Beach and other public places, such as the central market or the army firing range. These regular occurrences at the Lagos Bar Beach became known as the 'Bar Beach Show'. There was public condemnation of the executions, and Osofisan responded by presenting a moral argument against the practice.

Traditional Yoruba practices like storytelling and theatre have the capacity to produce social change. For instance, stories are told to teach morals or caution against certain anti-social acts. By combining political theatre with the art of storytelling, *Four Robbers* alters the frame through which audiences watch staged history; Osofisan turns his audience into participants in a debate on their view about armed robbery. In the programme notes to the first production, the dramatist highlighted the contradictions in the society and stated that ‘armed robberies, on the scale we are witnessing, are the products of our unjust society’ (p. viii). He wrote to:

shock us into a new awareness. I hope it helps to change our attitude from passive acceptance or sterile indignation into a more dynamic, more enraged determination to confront ourselves and our lives (p. ix).

The play starts with a storyteller singing a traditional song that accompanies the tortoise story told above. Instead of tortoise, his song is about four robbers whose leader has been executed and whom he is planning to assist. The storyteller serves as the narrator of the play, until in an opening similar to that of *Morountodun*, the other actors take the narrative authority away from the narrator. They determine the course of the play by choosing who they want him to be – a Muslim priest – and clothing him in appropriate costume, complete with props such as praying mat, beads and a kettle of water. Soon, the priest, Aafa, will adopt the cloak of a *babalawo*, to reveal the many layers of societal influence that Osofisan wants to focus on in the play. The religious significance of his mat and kettle underline piety, meaning that the narrator will not only be truthful but will remain impartial throughout the narration.

Four Robbers features a closely knit group of individuals bound together by the shared occupation of armed robbery. It is early morning in the market and the soldiers have just

executed the leader of the robbers in the presence of the whole community. The other robbers – Angola, Major, Hasan and Alhaja – ponder a future without their leader, with most of their colleagues killed and the armed robbery decree restricting their livelihood. The fraternity quickly disintegrates with that death and those of the other nine members of the gang, and as Major confirms:

Major: [...] The party's over and it's going to be every man for himself from now on (p. 8⁴⁸)

In the ensuing debate, the problem of distinguishing who is the victim becomes complicated. Osofisan introduces doubt in the audience's mind and forces them to show compassion for the robbers because of what they have suffered. The audience is compelled to wonder whether the robbers steal because 'it's hunger that drives' (p. 20) them or whether 'they are honest' as 'they only steal from the rich' (p. 21), or indeed whether they have been punished enough for their crimes by the death of their friends. Aafa enters at this point and promises to give the robbers a magic formula, which they can only use three times to rob without weapons. The narrative with Aafa reveals that the robbers are all by-products of the civil war; the three male robbers are ex-soldiers and Alhaja was an 'attack trader'⁴⁹ during the war. To acquire the magic, the robbers must promise not to rob the poor, not to kill and to rob only the public places, injunctions to which the robbers object. Angola, who seems to be most hot-headed of the robbers, says:

Angola: No, Aafa, too many objections. First, one sergeant owes us a debt. Then there are many citizens who must be made to account for their wealth, and the poverty of their workers (p. 29).

Angola's position seems ambiguous because the robbers have been targeting the victims of the same political decadence and the planned attack on 'the sergeant' is not only misplaced, but reveals the ignorance under which the robbers operate. The sergeant leads

⁴⁸ All page references to *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991.

⁴⁹ During the war, women who engaged in business by crossing the frontlines, buying and selling to both sides of the conflict, were known as 'attack traders'.

the company of soldiers who execute the robbers; he gave the command for the leader of the robbers to be shot. However, the sergeant is performing his duty and has no obvious personal grudge against the robbers; there is no indication that the Sergeant is a member of the ruling cabal who promulgated the decree. Osofisan later reveals that the sergeant and his soldiers are as guilty of robbery as the real robbers; further, he is related by birth to one of the robbers.

Osofisan, as I established while discussing *Morountodun*, is adept at borrowing without acknowledgment; during the height of public trials and executions of armed robbers in Nigeria, there were instances when robbers were shown not only to be related to police officers or military men, but to have weapons ‘borrowed’ from government stores. A 1980s case involved Lawrence Anini⁵⁰ who became notorious for killing nine policemen in revenge for the betrayal of his gang by certain policemen who were members of his armed robbery gang in Benin City, Nigeria.

To reinforce the subtleties in the play, the Aafa, a Muslim Imam, brings out the paraphernalia of Ifa and divines for the robbers before teaching them the formula that will make them rich. Like the tortoise in Yoruba folktales, or like Esu the messenger god who appears everywhere and makes the market his home, Aafa embodies different and differing personas: he is a Muslim preacher, a *babalawo* and a law abiding, honest man. Yet, he condones robbery and encourages it; he dismisses the ambiguity of his character with a proverb – ‘if only one way led to the stream, how many women would fill their pots?’ (p. 30). In essence, this character symbolises a typical Nigerian in the face of adversity who would try any means to become wealthy. In religion, most Yoruba people are either Christians or Muslims but they also worship Yoruba deities. In Aafa, Osofisan

⁵⁰ In 1986, Anini robbed and killed in Benin City. He was arrested in December 1986 and executed in March 1987 with some members of his gang, including a police superintendent.

underscores the extent to which the characters, who are representatives of the larger society, will go to achieve their goal.

The robbers decide to use the magic formula to rob market women of their goods. They say a few words of incantation, start singing and the women all dance away, leaving their goods, which the robbers promptly appropriate. This causes an economic disaster that closes the market for two weeks. It also creates a dilemma for the robbers of how to dispose of the goods. The next time, they decide to wait until the end of the market day and rob the women of money. The women, who have sought the protection of the soldiers, fall under the spell of the magic again. As Major tries to double cross the other robbers, the soldiers, who danced away with the women, come back. In the shootout, the soldiers wound Major before arresting him; the other robbers escape. Osofisan exposes the corruption in the society in the way the soldiers deal with the situation. They recover the stolen money but keep it for themselves, with the Sergeant taking charge of the distribution:

Sergeant: As far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money!... We found nothing... Let us meet later tonight, at my brother's house' (p. 55).

The 'brother' that the sergeant refers to is Hasan, one of the robbers. This also shows the interconnectedness of perpetrators of corruption in the society.

Part three of the play starts with soldiers constructing a platform on which the convicted robber will be executed. Alhaja entices the soldiers away with corn, illicit gin and the promise of sexual favours to release Major from prison. The attempt is unsuccessful. The robbers then use the remaining magic to create a stalemate, but not before raising the moral question about public execution. Everybody on stage freezes when the robbers start singing. The audience, who have been encouraged to be full participants to the unfolding

drama by singing along with the narrator and responding to his questions, have to decide the outcome of the play. The robber is either freed or executed according to an audience vote. Aafa, as the narrator, moderates the debate ‘making sure there is a full discussion, not just a gimmick’ (p.96). If the house decides for the robbers:

The robbers come out of their freeze and sing their song. Hasan frees Major. The robbers rob the dancers, stripping them of shirts, *bubas*, *geles*, even trousers, Alhaja fondles the Sergeant’s stomach. Then the robbers start on the audience... who hurriedly begin to leave, as lights rise in the auditorium.)

(But in case the audience decides against the robbers, then the end is different. The robbers are all seized and tied up, in a scene of pantomime as in the PROLOGUE. Major, at the stage is blindfolded. Meanwhile, the lights slowly fade to dawn light, as martial music begins... The martial tune rises to an intolerable pitch, and then abruptly cuts off exactly at the same moment as the lights are blacked out (pp. 96 – 97).

Whichever decision the audience reaches, the ending is pessimistic. If the robbers win, lawlessness and anarchy reign, while victory for the soldiers points to an unending darkness and the terror of military rule. The audience during the productions at Ibadan and Lagos voted for the robbers to be freed. In about twelve performances, the audience voted for the robbers to be executed only two times, at Ibadan and in Lagos. When this happened, instead of the martial tune rising to a crescendo and then cut off with a sharp blackout, the soldiers killed the robbers and then turned their guns on the audience, with a slow fade out. As director, I found this ending more satisfying as the audience debated the play for more than two hours after the performance with actors. On other occasions, the robbers sang their song among the audience and attempted to ‘rob’ them; the theatre quickly cleared and we had no opportunity of having a formal debate with the audience.

The questions raised in *Four Robbers* include how long a person can suffer trauma before it affects his humanity, or before they adapt to the suffering. There are also questions about the responsibility of government in turning people in to victims, in creating the

social conditions that make armed robbery possible, and in being the most accomplished armed robbers. The causes of anguish in *Four Robbers* are multifarious, ranging from economic exploitation, to social deprivation, social injustice, gross poverty and ignorance. The robbers feel deprived by the lack of opportunities available to them, or that the society expects them to take advantage of in making a livelihood. For instance, when Aafa queries the robbers about their choice of where they could look for honest employment, the robbers expose the exploitative factors in the market:

Alhaja: (*reading off Aafa's bald head*) 'vacancy. Fast-growing company. Excellent opportunities for ambitious young men willing to work with their hands. Position –
Angola: 'Cleaner!'
Hasan: 'Cook!'
Alhaja: 'Housemaid, part-time mistress!
Major: 'Washerman!'
Angola: Like dogs. To lap up the excrement (pp. 22-23)

Why would they do such menial jobs when they could rob and plunder, even if they risk execution at the Bar Beach?:

Angola: Right, Aafa, so the journey ends. At the Bar Beach, in some market place, at the outskirts of town. What does it matter? For those not in the privileged position to steal government files, award contracts –
Hasan: Alter accounts –
Angola: Swear affidavits –
Alhaja: Grant sick leaves –
Hasan: Sell contraband –
Major: Collude with aliens⁵¹ –
Angola: And buy chieftaincy titles as life insurance! No, let our obituaries litter the public places ... (p. 24)

They view lowly paid jobs with derision and mockingly sing to Aafa that they are not stupid enough to be exploited when those who are privileged use their positions to benefit through corruption.

⁵¹ [Author's note: In production, the list should be made to include the most recent public scandals.]

Osofisan teases out the corruption prevalent in the society. The market women sing to expose their own corruptibility and to express the fact that they are in business to make profit, by any means necessary, greedily cheating and hoarding, for:

the lure of profit
has conquered our souls
and changed us into cannibals (p. 46)

Hasan buttresses the idea of cannibalism:

The world is a market, we come to slaughter one another and sell the parts... [...] Ask these women. They'll chop each other to bits at the jingle of coins (p.91)

This 'lure of profit' ('the dream of riches' in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*) causes great anguish for the market women, the robbers and the other members of the society. It led the four robbers to robbery, to be like the corrupt politicians they envy:

Major: [...] No more scurrying in the smell of back streets. A house the size of palace! The law, tamed with my bank account! And children! ... I'll own the main streets, six, no,... ten Mercedes, the neon lights, the supermarkets... (p. 52)

Osofisan poses a critique of materialism common among most Nigerians with this speech. The robbers want to be masters; they do not want to serve under anyone or have social responsibility. The market women list a catalogue of causes and reasons to justify their lust for profit, including the incessant harassment from robbers, excessive taxation, school fees, family responsibility and bribes for the Price Control Officer and the soldiers, for protection. But the truth is that they also seek to be rich themselves; for only then will they be able to buy privileges and change laws as they wish. Even when Major double crosses the robbers, Alhaja believes that the action makes him more valuable because his riches will make him accepted at the 'other side', with the rich and influential people, where he will be in a position to help the rest of the robbers.

Osofisan lists these points of debate to underline the erosion of moral ambience in the society. The complacent view of life, the unquestioning acceptance of authoritarian rule and the loyalty to riches instead of ideas creates social injustice as people are flogged in school, brainwashed in the church and spanked at home to build docile human beings who recognise injustice but is incapable of challenging it. They spend their days hiding from the sirens, according to Osofisan, a reference to the military practice of driving recklessly on public roads. In their search for justice, they are likely to meet the Aafa type who doubles as a *babalawo* and commits, in both garbs, spiritual exploitation. The harsh depiction of Aafa in *Four Robbers* is to emphasise the inadequacy of religion in confronting the contemporary anomie caused by neo-colonialism and technological development (Richards 1996: 118) in the same way public executions have proved inadequate to reduce armed robbery:

Over two decades since the introduction of this [Robbery and Firearms] Decree and the strict enforcement of the provisions, particularly the death penalty, armed robbery does not appear to have declined. Rather, the indications are that it has increased significantly, with the robbers becoming more vicious, “believing that it is either their victims’ lives or theirs” (Igbo 2001: 183)

Osofisan also raises the issue of betrayal and corruption among the oppressed; Major betrays the others and wants the loot for himself, yet the robbers still attempt to rescue him from the firing squad. The major paradox lies in the relationship between Hasan and Ahmed, the sergeant; they are brothers who have chosen opposite spheres of existence – one, armed robbery and the other, law enforcement – but they remain practically the same. Ahmed shares the loot left behind by the robbers with his subordinates, in his brother’s house. Despite the attempts of Hasan and Ahmed, or the market women, to humanise themselves and justify their actions by blaming the rulers, the overarching argument is that greed seems to be the the dehumanising factor.

Four Robbers is the play in which Osofisan comes closest to displaying his ideological position as commentator whose main interest is not to indoctrinate the people or represent history, but as one who wants to probe his audience and make them uncomfortable (Awodiya 1993: 18). He presents choices and encourages his audience to commit themselves to an ideological perspective: 'If we sit on the fence, life is bound to pass us by, on both sides (p.96).

The final play I examine in this chapter extends my discussion about Osofisan's preference for experimentation during the 1970s. It is the most notable of the few short plays he wrote in this period, with a cast of only three characters, is *Oriki of a Grasshopper*.

Oriki of a Grasshopper: End of Experimentation?

Osofisan wrote *Oriki of a Grasshopper* around the same time as *Four Robbers*, between 1976-1977; the drama unveils the ideological state of mind of the dramatist, when some of the university lecturers who were his friends and colleagues, and who belonged to the same academic circles, refused to participate in the debate on public execution of armed robbers or showed any compassion for human life with regards to the plight of the robbers; in the performance of *Four Robbers*. The ending that worked best in performance and which allowed the audience to debate the issue of armed robbery, public execution and corruption of the military government, was always when the audience chose to execute the robbers. Yet the university lecturers, who were among the audience, did not publicly contribute to the debate. This was a disturbing development for the dramatist, and as he revealed in an interview, asking the audience to decide was an 'accident' and not a 'choice' as he could not decide how the play should end (personal interview, 1996). Despite this, every member of the audience enthusiastically participated in the debate but,

afterwards, the lecturers adopted the attitude that the drama was ‘just an entertainment without any bearing to real life (personal interview, 1996). This ambivalence points to a dramatist who was at an ideological crossroads, and who was questioning his own beliefs. My examination of this play is linked to *Four Robbers*, and it tries to assess the mind of the dramatist during the performances of the play.

Oriki of a Grasshopper is about three friends: Imaro, a socialist and university lecturer, his capitalist friend, Claudius, and Imaro’s girlfriend, Moni. The scene is a day after a violent students’ riot on a university campus. The university authorities, suspecting that certain lecturers instigated the students to riot, invite the police to arrest them. The police arrest Imaro’s friends, including Moni’s brother, but because Claudius used his influence to remove Imaro’s name from the list of the agitators, he was untouched. Knowing that his other friends will think he has betrayed them, Imaro gives up on socialism; he asks Claudius to employ him. Claudius however restores his faith in both himself and socialism.

Osofisan presented *The Oriki of a Grasshopper* in 1982 at the African Literature Conference at the University of Ibadan, as an examination of the intellectual’s relationship to society. Because of an evocation of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* as its sub-text – the characters are rehearsing the play – Sandra Richards (1996: 31) is of the opinion that *Oriki* is based on the absurdist drama by Beckett. Abiola Irele suggests an association with the tradition of French classical drama. Irele writes that the structure of *Oriki* is indebted to the ‘convention of modern ‘absurdist’ drama in French, though the texture of Osofisan’s play recalls more strongly Sartre’s *Huis Clos*, whose rhetoric, focused as it is on moral dilemma, is rooted in the tradition of French classical drama’ (1995: xix). This may be relevant to the understanding of the play’s structure; we should

not forget that Osofisan studied French at the University and did graduate work in Paris – we should also bear in mind that Irele is a French classical scholar; and that Osofisan ‘borrows’ from many writers and cultures. My view however, in particular from the references in the play, is that *Waiting for Godot* greatly influences *Oriki* although the attitude of the intellectuals to the problem of armed robbery in Nigeria seems to have suggested the plot of the play. The argument for *Godot* influence includes:

*Conspicuous: a copy of Becketts’ Waiting for Godot on the table
(p. 36⁵²)*

Claudius: Life goes on, my friend. As Pozzo will say!

Imaro: Yes, I suppose so. Pozzo will say that. Life goes on, except that you’re playing Vladimir, not Pozzo. And he wants to hang.

Claudius: Don’t you believe it. I’ve studied that character thoroughly. He talks and talks about hanging himself, but come tomorrow, he’ll still be there waiting. For Godot (p. 38)

There are more examples in the text. Right from the outset, it is obvious that Osofisan is criticising his fellow intellectuals, comparing them to Pozzo who ‘talks and talks about hanging himself’ (p. 38) but refuses to commit to a decision. The academics hide their inaction behind debates in the theatre about the scourge of armed robbery but refuse to do anything about pressurising the government to stop the public execution of robbers.

The failure of the established conventions of academic scholarship to engage in the relationship between academic debate and drama on the one hand, and society on the other, was the preoccupation of the educated class; composed of university teachers, students and trade unionists; of which Osofisan was in the vanguard. This was the subject of Osofisan’s 1981 Faculty of Arts Lecture at the University of Ibadan, ‘Do the Humanities Humanize?’ He accused intellectuals of opportunism at the expense of the social needs of the common people. Before that criticism, Osofisan had dismissed the lack

⁵² All reference to *The Oriki of a Grasshopper in Restless Breed: 4 Short Plays*, Nigeria: Opon Ifa Readers, 2002.

of vision and commitment in the writing and literary outlook of the intellectual class in another essay, ‘Anubis Resurgent: Chaos and Political Vision in Recent Literature’, published in September 1975. Osofisan maintains that the writers, who include Wole Soyinka and some of his contemporaries, lack a lucid awareness of the socio-political problem in the country.

Osofisan became identified with those Irele describes as ‘an eclectic group of radical university teachers and intellectuals that came to be known as the Ibadan-Ife axis’ (Irele 1995: xv). The group was distinguished by its criticism of the power structure in Nigeria and its obsession with re-ordering and re-configuring the society along socialist and classless lines. The group founded the journal *Positive Review* to publicise their intellectual debates and initiate critical evaluation of the socio-political problem in the country. Irele summarises their agenda:

The group’s adversarial posture toward the ruling class may be considered their way of resisting co-optation into this class, to which they were bound by many ties, notably those of common Western education and sometimes even of economic interests (1995: xvi).

While this may have been the position of the majority of the group, Jeyifo testifies that Osofisan ironically and ambivalently, in spite of sharp criticisms of vacillating writers and academics in published papers:

consistently articulated a deep and fervent interrogation of the moral implications and practical ramifications of cutting off ties with middle class professionals as a group, especially in light of the fact that individuals within this group were people you worked and lived with, people you’d been to school with and whose spouses and children your spouse and children knew and related to on often intimate terms (2006: 30).

Irele however disputes that this socialist position informs *Oriki* directly as Lanrele Bamidele (2002) and Richards (1996) advance. He proposes that the play’s theme is a ‘reflection on the moral basis and the practical implications of the ideological options of

the radical intellectual' (1995: xvii); 'practical implications' which include fostering a general preparedness for the revolutionary process of changing society. Therefore, when Irele asserts that Osofisan models Imaro, one of the three characters in *Oriki*, on a kind of individual he was acquainted with in his intellectual circle, this is to underscore the crux of Osofisan's drama. Osofisan's characters are 'types', composite characters that sway between ideological positions like the twins in *Twingle-Twangle* or the Yemosa in *Another Raft* (see chapter four). Imaro, like Osofisan, is an ambivalent character who presents different attitudes and whom Jeyifo reveals is 'based on a deliberate, canny fusion of aspects of his [Osofisan] public persona and mine [Jeyifo] at that moment in time' (2006:32).

Imaro believes in the revolutionary re-ordering of his corrupt society, yet his friends are the same corrupt businessmen and politicians he attacks in his arguments. Imaro is a university lecturer and revolutionary socialist whose best friend, Claudius, is a successful businessman and whose outward social lifestyle betrays the cause in which he believes. He, as Moni, his girlfriend says, runs with the hare in the morning and hunts with the hounds at noon (p. 55). Moni's criticism of Imaro on the morning after all the other comrades had been arrested by the police; leaving Imaro to agonise over his fate, unaware that Claudius has used his influence to prevent his arrest; forces Imaro to rethink his ideological position. He questions his inadequacy as a socialist and renounces his beliefs. This ritual of abasement requires Imaro to beg Claudius for employment, in a series of role plays that echo earlier plays, particularly *Four Robbers* and *Chattering*:

Claudius: [*Takes a sitting position, pretends to be writing. His tone is hostile. Exaggeratedly so of course. Greater effect is obtained by playing in one of the heavily-accented local dictions*].

Yes, what do you want?

Imaro: [*His most polite tone*]. Can I see the Minister, please?

Claudius: Which Minister?

Imaro: Or isn't this the office of the Minister?

Claudius: Are you deaf, Mr. Man? I said, which Minister?

Imaro: Are there two Ministers here?

[...]

Claudius: Look here Mr Man! I'm busy!

Imaro: The Minister –

Claudius: Is busy! Engaged! Or do you have an appointment?

Imaro: No, but –

Claudius: But what! I say he's busy. Come another day. Stop wasting my time... [Turns his back resolutely] (pp. 60-61)

Imaro gives up, knowing he will not be able to engage successfully in the process of bribery and corruption that defines the capitalist world. Claudius implores Imaro not to forsake his egalitarian dream for the society, for to do so:

would be to accept that the cynical, dystopian logic of the dramatic action of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has overtaken and subsumed every other aspiration and yearning on the political horizon of their unhappy land (Jeyifo 2006: 33).

Paradoxically, the three characters – the socialist; his student and girlfriend; and his capitalist friend – have gathered in the first place to rehearse Beckett's play. Imaro feels Claudius has restored his faith in himself and not in socialism (p. 66), an indicator of the composite nature of the character.

Looking at the play on another level, the faith of Osofisan as Imaro is not restored in the ideas of socialism as practiced by his Ibadan-Ife friends; it is his faith in the revolutionary ethos of socialism that is renewed. The fact that Osofisan focuses on the leader / intellectual in *Oriki* rather than on the common people whose experience is the reference point, is a clue to the message of the play. It is my view that Osofisan, realising the difficulty of synthesising a treatise from *Four Robbers* or *Chattering*, presents *Oriki* as a seminal text informed by the ambivalent nature of Esu, the Yoruba 'trickster' god. *Oriki* reinforces the dramatic experiment he began with *Morountodun* to challenge popular myths and re-write history, and to incorporate 'alter/native'⁵³ ideas into his writing.

⁵³ A term used by the poet Funso Ayejina to describe the second generation of Nigerian writers whose writings use traditional materials in a new form as to appear revolutionarily transformed and 'foreign'.

Chapter 4

Challenging Myths and Re-writing History: Plays of the Eighties

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how Osofisan began an experiment with challenging myth and re-writing not only Yoruba history but also the history of modern Nigeria from a materialist perspective. He started this experiment because the dramatic heritage he inherited from the older generation of writers and the Yoruba traditional theatre proved inadequate in the face of the social transformation brought about by a new socio-political reality (Osofisan 2001b: 92). I will examine how his socialist positioning influenced his reading and interpretation of historical antecedents. I am also going to look at how he uses language in the process of re-writing the myths and history of the Yoruba to popularise and make his drama accessible to the Nigerian public as well as to foreigners. I will be analysing four plays produced at this period. My analyses will be based on a close reading of the plays but I will also be referring to performances that I have been involved in, either as actor or director, or that have been produced on stage. The plays are *No More the Wasted Breed* (1982) *Another Raft* (1987), *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1984) and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1985).

Background

In 1980s, Osofisan wrote and produced about a dozen plays, most of which challenged popular myths and presented a radical reading of received *histories* and practices. He used his drama as an extension of his critical work, to question established conventions and history. The dramatist began to radically experiment with language; he borrowed from the popular tradition of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, traditional storytelling forms as well some conventions of the Western theatre. One theatrical form that he borrowed from the Travelling Theatre and used in many of the plays is the ‘opening glee’, the chorus, ‘a

selection of songs that serves as a kind of introduction or prelude to [each] performance and that reflects the larger moral paradigm from which the individual plays are derived' (Adrienne MacLain 2007: 11). Osofisan radicalised the use of opening glee by including it as part of the storytelling-opening format and as continuous interjections through the performance. Theatre companies before Osofisan performed opening glees, which were comments on social events, as separate from the drama to 'settle' the audience. The first use of a form of opening glee was in *Midnight Hotel* (1982), an adaptation of Georges Feydeau's *L'Hôtel du libre échange*, produced to satirise the openly corrupt civilian government in Nigeria between 1979 and 1983. He has continued to use the format in the Midnight series of plays: *The Album of Midnight Blackout* (1994) and *Fiddlers on the Midnight Lark* (2003).

Always conscious of audience reception and participation, Osofisan started experimenting with longer performance runs. In 1986, he staged *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*⁵⁴ at the Pit Theatre of the University of Ife for three weeks instead of the usual two to five days on the university campus. Osofisan produced *Esu* to prove that plays written in English could have popular audience reception in comparison with other forms of artistic productions, including cinema and musical concerts. In a 2006 interview, Osofisan revealed that the challenge was to make a play in English popular, using accessible language, taking 'language' to include other linguistic codes like music, costume and spectacle.

The prevailing gospel was that our plays in English were not as popular as the Yoruba plays simply because of language. I've always argued against that. It's not the language – I am talking here specifically of the language employed for the dialogues –that makes a play popular or otherwise; it is, rather, the kind of play that you write (Osofisan interviewed by Modupe Olaogun, 2006⁵⁵).

⁵⁴ The play was premiered at the University of Benin in 1984.

⁵⁵ <http://www.africantheatre.org/interviewof.html> accessed 26 October 2006.

Later in this chapter, I discuss the politics surrounding the popularity of this play as well as the theatrical innovations that Osofisan used to make the performance accessible to the Ile-Ife audience, both from inside and outside the university campus, against opposition from religious groups.

After the production of *Esu* in 1986, Osofisan's plays became more controversial and more popular, as the dramatist started imposing new meanings on common signifiers. For instance, he began using his plays to debate the issue of the popularity of literary drama with university audiences who have literary competence and are able to identify the academic importance of his subject. He was also trying to attract audience outside the university community who are interested in traditional Yoruba performances. In a way, he was bridging the gap between the Yoruba traditional performance culture, the plays of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, and the dramas of writers such as Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka. Osofisan placed his drama between the traditional and modern drama of his contemporaries at a crossroads of theatre production in Nigeria, if we define 'crossroads' using the Yoruba metaphorical expression as a popular point of convergence and divergence. He reinforced aspects of western theatrical production while radically shifting his production methods along the lines of Yoruba Travelling Theatre. Writing in English for an educated audience, he incorporated elements of Yoruba Travelling Theatre. For instance, he started to dispense with the constraints of proscenium theatre by adapting the university theatres, which are built with proscenium walls, to theatres-in-the-round. In the Ife production of *Esu*, he collaborated with the university's Music Department to produce the music, which was a mix of highlife and juju, popular with the Nigerian audience.

After *Esu*, Osofisan's dramas continued to focus on themes like war/peace (*Twingle Twangle, A Twynning Tayle*), love (*Cannibal Rage*) and unity (*Another Raft*), in a radical

way that involves the use of traditional characters and types like *babalawo*, incantations, religion, and the traditional poetry of *Ewì*, *Ìjálá* (hunter's chant), *Ìwí* (masquerades' chants) – all elements incorporated in the Yoruba Travelling Theatre performances but hitherto lacking in Nigerian English theatre except in a few plays by Wole Soyinka and Wale Ogunyemi, or when being ridiculed. This approach makes his drama the most popular and the most performed⁵⁶ in secondary schools, universities and among amateur groups in Nigeria.

For instance, in the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, I recorded four Osofisan plays out of 30 productions between 14 November 1990 and 30 June 1991⁵⁷. During that time, seven of his plays were produced as part of Workshop classes. In contrast, only two Soyinka dramas, including *The Road*, directed by Osofisan, and two Sowande dramas were produced during the same period. Many Nigerians find Osofisan easy to understand and to engage with because of the simple language in his drama and the relevance of the plays to their experience and social circumstances. This explains the regularity at which his drama is staged all over Nigeria by amateur, semi-professional and professional groups, as I have highlighted above, and also judging by the resurgence in a Nigerian newspaper of the debate about the accessibility of his plays vis-à-vis those of Wole Soyinka⁵⁸. The summary of the debate is that, while many people flock to the occasional production of a Soyinka play because of the playwright's political personality and visibility, Osofisan remains the most performed dramatist because of the balance between entertainment and depth in his work.

⁵⁶ See Stephen Inegbe, 'Drama and theatre in Nigeria after Soyinka: Trend, Focus and Development', *Africa e Mediterraneo* n. 4/03 (46).

⁵⁷ The plays are *The Engagement* (December 1990); *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* (January 1991); *Once Upon Four Robbers* (January 1991); *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (June 1991).

⁵⁸ See Toyin Tejuosho, 'Artsville', *The Guardian (Nigeria) Newspapers*, Sunday, 1 February 2009 (<http://odili.net/news/source/2009/feb/1/4.html>; accessed on 2 February 2009).

The plays written in the 1980s, apart from *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* and *Midnight Hotel*, include *No More the Wasted Breed*, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, *Another Raft*, *Birthdays Are Not for Dying*, *Twingle-Twangle*, *A Twynning Tayle* and *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*. I have included *Cannibal Rage* in this list for reasons of dramaturgical convenience because, though premiered in 1986, it was written in the early 1970s, not long after the end of the Nigerian civil war. In terms of thematic considerations and composition, *Cannibal Rage* is the closest to Osofisan's early drama, *A Restless Run of Locusts* (premiered 1972), and it is one of the first intertextual plays written at this period.

Adapting Myths and Re-Writing History

Before discussing the plays that Osofisan wrote in the 1980s, I am going to consider briefly the reasons for his interest in re-writing history and myth at this period; and why he adapted the work of many other dramatists for the Nigerian stage.

First, I want to establish that the main significance of the plays that Osofisan produced at this period is that they are almost all adaptations; and they almost all challenge popular myths and received history. In a discussion with me in 2002, he explained in detail why he chose to adapt some of the plays. He stated that:

For me, it's always easier to adapt other plays or stories than to write a fresh one, and when your plan is to respond to some argument or debate some problems in the argument of other writers, it's easier for me to work with an existing text, a familiar one, preferably by that writer, and present a fresh argument on the basis of what I think is wrong with the play (interview with Sola Adeyemi, 2002).

Osofisan admits that he wants to re-address previous discourses in a more rational way, particularly discourses that advance his materialistic position. He deploys arguments about justice, fairness, economic independence and transparency in the political system, using materials that are already in the public consciousness. *No More the Wasted Breed*

responds to a ritual practice which is the subject of Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* while *Another Raft* uses Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* (1963) to discuss the issues of the unity and corruption in Nigeria. Osofisan experimented with confining all dramatic actions to a raft on a bare stage, and insulating his characters from influences other than their immediate dramatic environment. This is to emphasise the conflict between characters in the play. *Midnight Hotel* (Georges Feydeau's *L'Hôtel du libre échange*), *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* (Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*) and *The Engagement* (Anton Chekhov's *The Proposal*) are direct adaptations of European texts produced to debate certain aspects of the Nigerian socio-political issues. *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* is particularly remarkable for its boldness in the treatment of the theme of corruption and the intolerance of the political elite to criticism, transparency and probity in public service. *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* choose folktales or other texts to promote the dramatist's employment of various registers to challenge myths and re-write history. His shift towards an engagement with folktales relates battling societal ills by appealing to people's morality.

The original scripts that Osofisan engaged with at this time would have been familiar to Osofisan's primary audience in the Nigerian university system. Aesthetics of European, American and World drama are taught as courses in departments of Theatre Arts, Drama and Performing Arts in Nigeria and students are encouraged to study plays from these regions and produce them in part to satisfy the assessment criteria for courses in addition to showing them to the paying public.

The plays that serve as pre-texts to Osofisan's theatrical experiments in the 1980s are familiar to his primary audience, university students. This makes it straightforward to engage with the issues he raises without the audience struggling to understand the

narrative. The subject matter is also recognisable and common to the experience of the audience, as Osofisan explains:

You talk of love and reconciliation, there is *Romeo and Juliet*, you talk about the Nigerian dilemma of being yoked together with our cultural differences, in the same boat, there's J. P. Clark; many European writers have written on what we are going through as a young nation and I find their experience useful. How did they cope? How did they go through fights for freedom, corruption, etc? (interview with Sola Adeyemi, 2002).

The socio-political issues that Osofisan writes about are of interest to his audience. Starting from such a position of familiarity engages the audience. For instance, it was easy for the audience at the production of *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* to identify the play with social crusader Tai Solarin, who was appointed Public Complaints Commissioner in Nigeria; knowledge of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, which Osofisan adapted, was helpful in understanding the context but not important to understand Osofisan's play. It was more important for the audience to recognise the situations of widespread corruption and fraud, which were common in the Nigerian public service. Osofisan states further:

Take Feydeau's *L'Hôtel du libre échange* and compare that to the buying and selling that was going on during the second republic (1979 – 1983). I find that most of our problems have been addressed through these plays and through our folktales, the tales of Ijapa, the morality tales. So, it wasn't necessary for me to write new plots; I realised all I needed was to re-write those plays and ideas, using our familiar symbols, our imagery (interview with Sola Adeyemi, 2002).

The process of rewriting and reshaping the plays to suit his local audience is predicated upon the way he uses language and combines metaphors of Yoruba traditional theatre with those of the European theatre. A familiarity with this process is useful in understanding the plays that I analyse in this chapter.

Language and Accessibility

Osofisan's use of language is central to the popularity and accessibility of his dramas. There are two definitions of language in the dramas of Osofisan: language as a mode of expression; and language as a medium. In Osofisan's work, the language of expression is English. He writes in English, which is the national language; understood by the majority of his primary audience; educated Nigerians. The other language type present in his dramatic creations is the codes or signs that his audience is familiar with, and that are derived from the traditions and customs of the Yoruba. These codes are not always written into his drama; they are implied, making the meaning dependent on the interpretation of the director. For instance, without a knowledge or understanding of such codes, the significance of a simple greeting like '*Kabiyesi!*' will be lost to the audience, whereas, to Osofisan's audience, or an audience familiar with the lore of the Yoruba, uttering that word without the attendant rituals of greeting a king would be unthinkable. Yet, Osofisan relies on his audience to be competent in the languages and symbols that he uses in order to make his subversion of those elements significant. I expatiate on this point below.

Many African writers are educated in English or French to the disadvantage of the indigenous languages. Osofisan, notwithstanding his poor economic background, went to elitist schools where 'only English was allowed' (Awodiya 1993: 127). Although Yoruba language was rendered into written forms in the 19th century, the educational system of pre-independence and post-independence Nigeria privileged the use of English in schools. In a country as large and diverse as Nigeria with more than two hundred and fifty languages, having a national language promotes better communication and the most convenient language is English. The use of English as a medium of communication in

Nigeria is an advantage, despite perpetuating the ‘neo-colonial structures’⁵⁹ that Obi Wali and Ngugi wa Thiong’o want demolished. Ngugi’s argument for the use of African languages – what Chidi Amuta calls a ‘class partisan position’ – centres on the romantic view that majority of Africans live in rural areas, speak their languages and not English (Amuta 1989: 99-100). Although it was Ngugi’s practical embrace of the use of Gikuyu in his writing that brought the debate to the forefront of African literary criticism, the controversy was started by Obi Wali at the 1962 African Writers’ Conference in Kampala, Uganda with his paper, ‘The Dead End of African Literature’⁶⁰ in which he argued for African literature to be written in African languages to prevent the death of indigenous languages. The language debate has remained a main discourse in African literature and theatre, with writers Masizi Kunene, Okot p’Bitek as well as Obi Wali and Ngugi insisting on linguistic indigenisation as part of true independence. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka maintain that the use of European languages to ‘communicate African experiences enriches both the languages in question and the literature’ (Amuta 1989: 112). Achebe’s argument for the domestication of English to accommodate African thought-patterns⁶¹ influenced Osofisan’s use of Yoruba extra-linguistic features to make his work more accessible, as he told me in 2002. The dramatist admitted in another interview that he ‘think[s] most of the time in Yoruba’ (Awodiya 1993: 126) and that the characters in his dramas are situated outside the urban area where English is predominant spoken. His middle class existence on the university campus, and his experience in secondary school, where speaking Yoruba was banned, prevented him from having the same mastery over Yoruba as he does with English:

But I’m mindful of the need to write in Yoruba. For a long time this didn’t bother me at all. And it still doesn’t bother me, to some

⁵⁹ See Ngugi wa Thiong’o, ‘The Language of African Literature’, *New Left Review*, no. 1/150 (March/April), 1985, p. 109 - 127; also *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.

⁶⁰ Published in *Transition IV*: 10 (1963)

⁶¹ See Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann Educational, 1975, pp. 77-78.

extent, because you'll find that Yoruba is one language in which people write anyway. It is a literary language...Other people are doing it much better than I can (Awodiya 1993: 127).

Osofisan is fascinated by the rich linguistic heritage and metaphors in Yoruba poetry and he tries to communicate these in his dramas. To convey the thought patterns and linguistic variations of Yoruba, he renders English in registers that combine the experience of the writer with the worldview of his primary audience. Osofisan argues that a percentage of his primary audience cannot read or understand Yoruba and the main medium of communication on the university campuses is usually English. In contrast, a number of his audience cannot understand or read English as spoken on the campuses. Making his plays accessible in the way that Dapo Adelugba refers to as 'Yorubanglish'⁶², a transliterative deployment of Yoruba language into English by 'Englishing' Yoruba expressions, parables and proverbs, as represented in the works of Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi, will, according to Osofisan:

only alienate the audience. Such an exercise can make the language sound contrived and difficult to follow, especially when you are writing for a varied audience. So, I developed the third way: write in proper English, but make the symbols familiar to the audience in a way that they understand what is happening on stage, and are able to follow the debate; even participating (interview with Sola Adeyemi, 2002).

Osofisan writes in 'several registers' (Awodiya 1993: 58) of English, using words that are easy to understand for most of his audience, so this audience would understand and be in a position to challenge his presentation. Usually, these are people who have not received university education or who are not 'petty bourgeoisie' (Awodiya 1993: 59).

The second category of people that our dramatist writes for includes policy makers; those who went to the university and are in influential government posts. Osofisan wants these

⁶² See Dapo Adelugba, 'Language Use in African Theatre', paper presented at the Conference of the Language Association of Nigeria, 1985.

people to understand the codes he uses in his drama, hence the additional references to literary and popular materials that are familiar to sets of audience.

As the dramatist affirms in an interview given around the time he began to seriously experiment with language in his work, he wants his theatre to be understood by all and not be an obscure or an esoteric piece ‘which people must become initiated into’ (Awodiya 1993: 26). His intention as a dramatist is not to make staging a play the justification for his theatre but to sensitise the people about socio-political issues in society; to engage them in a debate about the interpretation and re-interpretation of the people’s collective history and consequence of the mythological beliefs:

If you see Art not as an end in itself but as a means to something, then of course, your attitude will be different. If you really want to get through to the audience, to convince them about certain issues, then the way of obscurity cannot work. You’ve got to break things down into recognizable symbols. You’ve got to use language that is immediately accessible (Awodiya 1993: 26).

To ‘get through to the audience’, he writes Yoruba songs, or English songs accompanied by African music; and add visual aesthetics that will suggest recognisable meanings to his audience. The songs comment on the drama or respond to the argument being presented. In order to carry out the experiment successfully and accomplish his intention to be ‘accessible’ to his audience, Osofisan did not allow other directors to premiere his plays during this period, a position he held until 1988, when he allowed Sunmbo Marinho to direct *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*.

As a director, he encourages his actors to understand the meaning of the expressions in the play before the beginning of rehearsals; though he suggests movements and gestures, his approach is dependent on the actor recognising the importance of his character and interpreting his role appropriately. During rehearsals, he may suggest movements that are

more elaborate but they will be movements based on the interpretation of the actor. In 1996, during the rehearsals of *Fiddlers on the Midnight Lark*, he took the cast in small groups to certain nightclubs and pointed out individuals whose characteristics the actors could combine to create a composite figure in the realisation of their roles. His style of making the actors create the character before they interpret it is successful in his Nigerian productions; this sometimes makes his productions ready for performance after a week. With his directorial approach is the fact that he writes (and re-writes) characters for individuals. For instance, Sontri (*The Chattering and the Song*) and Wale (*The Cooling Spring*) were written for Jimi Solanke, while the roles of Mokan (*The Chattering and the Song*) and Imaro (*The Oriki of a Grasshopper*) were written for the playwright to act. Often, Osofisan re-writes his plays when the original actors are no longer available to play the roles, or when he casts other people in those roles, even after the plays have been published as printed text. Sometimes, he changes the characteristic of the role to suit the new actor. In *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1988), he wrote the role of Yobioyin for Sola Duro-Ladipo, the daughter of the Duro Ladipo, one of the leaders of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, because of her singing abilities and acting capabilities. During the next production of the play, he re-wrote the character to reflect the abilities of the new actress who had different talents. He also changed the solo songs to songs involving all the cast.

During the premiere of *Aringindin* directed by Sunmbo Marinho, Osofisan was part of the production team and continued working on the script until a few days before the opening night; to suit the words and actions to the capabilities of the artistes with whom he was not familiar. A few years later, he wrote a different ending to the play to reflect the changing political structure in Nigeria. This exercise of writing and re-writing scripts,

changing lines and visual representation, and using codes to create new meanings is carried out so that Osofisan's theatre can be one which:

the students, the workers, and the porter can relate to and take something out of. Not necessarily take out the idea I want, but take out an attitude of questioning; where they can, at least, challenge certain things, in fact, challenge me too, because that is an active relationship, where people take what you try to say and question it, and question society (Awodiya 1993: 26).

In essence, Osofisan experimented with language during the period to produce plays that are socially relevant and have some theatrical depth. The plays are mostly written in Standard English, leaving the acting and directorial interpretations to the producers. This is one of the reasons why his plays are accessible to various production teams, because they can be easily adapted to the local understanding. Although, written in Standard English, the texts display a variety of writing styles and varied language registers, taking into consideration the different shades of English spoken in Nigeria, in particular the Pidgin range that differs according to the area in which it is spoken as well as the level of education of the speaker. Unlike Tunde Fatunde⁶³ who writes in Pidgin but whose characters all speak the same variety that is close to Standard English, Osofisan's use of Pidgin is differentiated; there is a marked difference between the way a policeman and a university lecturer use the language, or even between two policemen of different ranks. For instance, in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, the townspeople demonstrate the futility of seeking protection from the police to combat the regular burglary in the town. Osofisan mixes 'educated' Pidgin (Police Sergeant) with 'uneducated' Pidgin (Police Corporal) to differentiate between the characters and to establish the relationship between them:

Joko: (*playing the part*) 'Na here be de place, idiot driver! How many time I mus' tell you to press brake small small? But no, efry time na gbagam gbagam like porson wey dey kill cockroach!

Labo: She notices the surrounding—

⁶³ Fatunde's pidgin plays include *No Food, No Country* (1985) and *Oga Na Tief Man* (1986)

Joko: (*sneezes*) Aaaaatchoooo! Ah dis dus' self! Not one kobo respect for authority of uniform! Corple!

Labo: Now the corporal leaps down— (*Gbada 'leaps down'*)

Gbada: Begging to reportu for diyuti ma!

Joko: 'My handkerchief!

Gbada: (*saluting*) 'Kai, Godu bless madam!' (From now on, as soon as he salutes, the crowd joins in this ritual response)

Joko: 'Keep your eye open well well! No miss anyt'ing at all!'

Gbada: 'Kai, Godu bless madam!' (*notices a man passing*) 'You! Come here!'

Kuku: (*playing up*) 'Me'

Joko: 'At once! Advance at alacrity!'

Kuku: 'But what have I—?'

Joko: 'Surrender!'

Kuku: 'Beg your pardon, madam?'

Joko: 'Whetin! You big like dis, And you no know say person no dey beg de law, but must to bribe am! Now make you no waste time you hear? Jus' surrender quick!

Kuku: 'But what do you mean—?'

Gbada: 'Madam say make you show your particulars! Give us your identity!'

Kuku: 'Oh I see'

Joko: 'Shurru! Na de law dey see, when dem bribe am! And as I look you so, I see say you get eye like native of Kirikiri or Anini him brodder! Shurru! Show me your habituation!'

Kuku: 'My habitua—?'

Joko: 'Corple!'

Gbada: 'Kai, Godu Bless madam!'

Joko: 'Write am down— Suspect admit say him no get fixed habituation!'

Gbada: (*writing with difficulty*): No...fick...ficksy...habitate! Kai, Godu bless madam!

Kuku: 'But I am not'

Joko: 'Shurru!' De law dey sneeze! (*Sneezes*) Now, tell me, Na why you do am? Confess now-now! And I promise say your sentence no go hard pass! At least I nefer break promise. When dem pay me well! Abi no be so, Corple?'

Gbada: 'Kai, Godu bless madam!'

Kuku: 'Excuse me madam— If you're talking about the robbery here—

Joko: 'Write am quick, Corple! Your future stripe, nahim you dey look so! Oga sah, go on, confess everyt'ing! How many of you do am? Who side una carry de loot? And de others, na where dem dey?...

Kuku: 'Madam— with all due respect— Your head is not correct!'

Joko: 'Whetin! I don die! Na me you dey curse so!

Kuku: 'Ehn, how can I be a robber when I was one of those robbed?'

Joko: 'So why you no talk dat one before? You are a bush people, your very self! Wasting gofment time like dis! Corple, arrest am! Capital punishment!

Labo: (*intervening*) ‘Quick, Kuku, the usual!’

Kuku: (*conciliating*) ‘Alright, Serge! You self, you can vex too easily! Come, let us go and talk it over Ehn? In that bar over there!’

Joko: ‘And who go pay?’

Kuku: ‘Ah-ha, do you still ask? I am a law-abiding citizen, and one of my principles is never to leave the law thirsty!’

Joko: ‘Ehn-hen! Na dat one better! Corple, dismiss! Case of wrongful arrest! As sneezed!’ (*Aringindin* 2003: 129 – 131)

Apart from satirising the corruption and incompetence in the Nigerian police, this role-play makes use of a blend of Pidgin with non-Standard English, spoken by ‘Kuku’ to establish the division between his role as a citizen and the roles of the policemen who are generally regarded as illiterate. Although not easily discernible, the Pidgin spoken by the police sergeant is more fluent, more elevated than the Pidgin of the corporal. Osofisan, writing for a Nigeria audience, would have been aware that a Nigerian producer would pick on the codes in the words to appropriately characterise the role. The playwright’s portrayal of the town’s resident, ‘Kuku’, shows a character educated in Yoruba, and though Osofisan wrote his speech in a form close to Standard English, the audience would have picked the codes that he is speaking in Yoruba, especially with such phrases as ‘If you’re talking about the robbery here’ and ‘Your head is not correct!’⁶⁴ These phrases are direct translations from Yoruba.

The language use quoted above is not related to the type of language used in the rest of *Aringindin*. The characters speak Standard English, which emulates the speech patterns of a cultured Yoruba variety, as one of the speeches of the town’s ruler demonstrates:

Baale: Freedom, Gbadegesin, and you others! Freedom is a precarious thing. Think of this town as a body with arms and feet, a marrow of inherited customs, the law, her flesh. Orchestrated, she runs like a song, harmoniously and our lives are the oil in her wheel of motion. Stretch your arms. Drop them. Freedom is that ease of decision. But in a moment of stress we think only of our fear. We shout, we stamp our feet we are prepared to shed our

⁶⁴ ‘You’re insane!’

precious freedom to feed our fear! But this freedom is most fragile thing! Once you agree to ration it, once it tears, even a little, a whole generation, or perhaps more, may need to spill its blood to sew it together again. You elders sit on our Council, you should know the terrible price that freedom exerts! (*Aringindin* 2003: 138 – 139)

Osofisan pays close attention to language structure, proverbs and local flavour to reveal class attitude in his plays. In most of the plays, servants (Polycarp in *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*; Bicycle in *Midnight Hotel*; Kadara in *Fiddlers on a Midnight Lark*) speak and respond in Pidgin or heavily accented and simple English, even when other characters speak English:

Jimoh: Yes, I did. You didn't remember to knock?

Bicycle: Kon kon, I knock. I wait small. No answer. Bicycle, I say, dey no hear you. So, kon kon kon, I knock again, harder. I wait. Then, "come in!" I hear de voice say. So wetin I go do? Bicycle, go on! So I stretch my han', I open de door, and... and... Jimoh!... er, chief Jimoh...

Jimoh: And what, you idiot?

Bicycle: A woman! Jimoh... er, chief, a woman! Naked! As naked as *kere* fish! From here to dere! (*Indicates from head to toe*)

Jimoh: (*Bursts out laughing*). And is that all? Ha ha! Is that all you saw, bush man? (*Midnight Hotel* 2003: 12)

Kadara: Some woman sir, asking for you.

Laoye: Me? Who's she?

Kadara: She wouldn't tell sir. She's never been here before.

Laoye: Must be one of my clients.

Tinuke: Yes no doubt. Is she good looking?

Kadara: Oh, I don't know. She didn't tell me (*Fiddlers* 2006: 45-46)

Contrasting the use of Pidgin by Bicycle with the way Joko speaks as police sergeant in *Aringindin*, it is clear that the playwright is emphasising the regional identity of the characters. Bicycle's spoken language is closer to the South-Eastern Nigerian variety, with the lack of 'h' in 'wetin' and the nasalised 'kon' of the knocking sound instead of the more Yoruba sounding 'ko', whereas Joko speaks the aspirated Pidgin, as in 'whetin' and 'oga sah'. A Nigerian director would easily have recognised the codes; and the audience would know the linguistic extraction of the character. With Kadara, it is clear that

Osofisan is stereotyping the character, in this instance, for comic effect. Nevertheless, this attention to language registers is not reflected in all of Osofisan's plays and the playwright displays a lack of understanding of speech patterns when he is writing about characters from less familiar areas of Nigeria. In *Altine's Wrath*, a play set in the northern part of Nigeria, with recognisably northern names, the characters all speak Standard English, with occasional northern or Islamic expressions like 'Wallahi!', 'Kai!' and 'Allah!' to identify the characters as 'northern Nigerian'.

History and Myth

During the 1980s, Osofisan started writing plays that directly challenge accepted history and popular interpretations of Yoruba myths. His earlier plays were ambivalent in terms of their criticism of popular beliefs. For instance, *Oduduwa Don't Go!* (1967) promoted the relevance of gods to the people while advocating political change; *Morountodun* (1979) used the traditional Moremi legend to debate nationalism and patriotism after the cultural revival triggered by the Second World Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977. His position about deities was ambiguous; he neither accorded them any importance nor reduced them to insignificant symbols. In 1980s, Osofisan began to re-interpret Yoruba political history and myths, taking the position that 'all history is a matter of interpretation... so there is no true history or false history. Every history is a mediated one' (Awodiya 1993: 46). He advocated questioning received history in light of modern understanding. 'Culture is a growing thing. We must question history, question environment and question people in authority' (Awodiya 1993: 28) for society to survive and develop.

In questioning history, he reduces gods to metaphors; or entities whose actions can be reviewed and judged by human beings, and who have to justify their right to be

worshipped or venerated. While his theatre delves into the past for materials, it is for an effect that questions and re-examines that past, which has been rendered from the perspective of the ruling class rather than from the viewpoint of the majority of the people. His theatre proposes a lack of sentimental attachment to recorded achievements of past rulers or deified leaders. This is contrary to the position of Soyinka who is unambiguous in promoting or dramatising the accomplishment of major figures in history. Osofisan questions mythology with a sympathetic view of the existence of gods in his Yoruba heritage and as part of the belief system of his audience but to him, gods and myth are ‘metaphors of some of the enduring qualities of society’ (Awodiya 1993: 48) which survive because they are considered relevant to the existence of the people.

From a dialectical perspective, Osofisan reads socio-political and economic meanings into the roles of gods in Yoruba mythology; by subjecting their actions to the scrutiny of human worshippers. Traditional rulers regard gods and myth essential to maintain their political hold on the rest of the people. In Yoruba culture, superstition is woven into customary ideals to either suppress or influence people whereas, for Osofisan, gods serve the purpose of perpetuating hegemony; the myths around the belief in gods ought to be questioned and reviewed according to modern and logical reasons. It is my view that, in *No More the Wasted Breed*, for example, Osofisan constructs a debate between gods and human beings to draw attention to the unnecessarily high cost of human sacrifices in comparison to whatever advantage humans get from worshipping gods.

In the rest of this chapter, I am going to show Osofisan’s experimentation with language, character development, theatricality and dramatic intention as well as his re-interpretation of the Yoruba myth and history.

Soyinka's Ritual Matrix: *No More the Wasted Breed*.

Osofisan's writing became more distinct from the drama of other Nigerians writing at the same time as his plays began to assume a separate identity of their own. The significance of his plays however continued to be measured against those of the older generation, in particular the dramas of Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi. My reading of Osofisan's drama convinces me that there is a conscious effort by the dramatist to maintain this dichotomy as he sought to highlight the major differences between his plays and those of Soyinka and the older dramatists. His writing became an elevated, elaborate debate with those other plays, and he occasionally challenged the older writers by responding directly to their drama through adaptations or by using their plays as frameworks for his own dramas. His major responses include *Another Raft* (1987), to Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* (1963) and *No More the Wasted Breed* (1982), a response and a challenge to the ritual vision of Wole Soyinka in *The Strong Breed* (1963).

Critics⁶⁵ of Wole Soyinka have used the term 'ritual vision' to describe his theatre. This interpretation of the vision of Soyinka's drama incorporates traditional Yoruba ritual elements into such texts as *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the Kings Horseman*. When Soyinka dramatises ritual, it is ritual that is ancient and autochthonous, ritual that is no longer practised in its pure form but which has survived in the community's memory 'under the combined weight of repressive Christian proselytization, the rise of secular, rational worldviews, and the material forces of technology and economic production' (Jeyifo 2004: 124). It is interpreted, re-defined ritual, as envisioned in the collective recollection of the people. In a process that Jeyifo terms 'anti-ritual', Soyinka reconfigures the ritual to interrogate the legitimacy and value of the ritual tradition that he

⁶⁵ See especially Biodun Jeyifo 1988: 104-127; Gibbs and Lindfors 1993: 281-282; Crow and Banfield 1996: 78-85; and Biodun Jeyifo 2004: 124-125.

has inherited from his Yoruba culture. This paradigm of 'ritual matrix' or metaphysical template upon which he re-creates informs such plays as *Dance of the Forest* (1963), *The Strong Breed* (1963), *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and *The Strong Breed*. Soyinka investigates the mythology of being, death and the world of the unborn to create a secular social vision which draws on the metaphysical experience of his worldview. *Death and the King's Horseman*, a direct event-specific play⁶⁶ by the dramatist, carries this investigation further than any of the other plays, not as a metaphysical explanation of the differences between African culture and tradition and Western conventions and sensibilities, but as a drama that scrutinises loyalty to tradition, the relationship between life and death and the understanding of fate as specific to different cultures. *Death and the Kings Horseman* 'is meant to probe deeper into the metaphysical traumas of a society in transition, as well as the role of the committed individual in such rites of passage' (Osofisan 1994:56). But Wole Soyinka's focus is on the role of the exceptional individual in the community whereas Osofisan takes a different line and focuses on the community. *The Strong Breed* formalises the ritual aspect of the carrier tradition, makes the survival of a community the responsibility of one person; and in doing so, totally neglects the interest of that individual. It is expected that the carrier cleanses the community; that is what he exists for, according to Soyinka, and his interests or needs are secondary to the interests of the community. If he does his job properly and the community survives, that will lead to his own survival, either physically or in the communal memory.

Earlier in his career, Soyinka had written *The Strong Breed* (1963) to render the importance of Yoruba rites of passage more accessible to the wider world, using the matrix of the Yoruba traditional ritual of annual cleansing in which certain designated

⁶⁶ *Death and the Kings Horseman* dramatises the 1946 incident when the British colonial authority prevented the ritual death of an important chief at the end of funerary period for the Alaafin of Oyo.

individuals or families known as ‘carriers’ play the role of purifying and renewing the society. Let us be clear about this: Soyinka’s presentation of the communal act of cleansing is slanted for dramatic effect; I have not come across an example – or read an account – of the kind of scenario that Soyinka paints in *The Strong Breed*; where an individual will consciously allow himself to be selected in a community where strangers are preferred for ritual purposes. In certain instances, the function of the carrier is symbolic and the individual voluntarily performs his responsibility yearly until he dies or retires, as does for instance the priest at Edi festival at Ile Ife⁶⁷; sometimes the carrier is an unsuspecting stranger who is compelled to perform the duty on behalf of the community, for example, in certain villages and towns in Ijebu area of Yorubaland.

Eman, in *The Strong Breed*, flees from his original community because he does not want to inherit the responsibility of being a carrier. His new community chooses him for the same role because he is a stranger. *The Strong Breed* counters the colonial text of barbarism and savagery in traditional African culture by humanising the ritual practice and portraying the carriers as heroic people struggling with metaphysical situations. The circumstances where a heroic figure ends his life supposedly to save his community, and which I also refer to as the ‘Elesin Oba’ syndrome, after the main character in *Death and King’s Horseman*, pervades some of Soyinka’s work.

Osofisan’s position regarding the issue of the carrier in Yoruba culture is partial towards communal responsibility. While the culture needs to be renewed and re-articulated after colonial subjugation, the recuperation exercise suggested by Osofisan’s writing should affirm the progressive aspects of the culture, not the features that expose the people’s ignorance, or subject a section of the people to oppression by the privileged few. He

⁶⁷ The festival to venerate the memory of Moremi and her son, Oluorogbo.

responded to Soyinka with *No More the Wasted Breed* because the ‘strong breeds’ only help to delay the advent of justice. By voluntarily sacrificing themselves ‘when they themselves have not been the agents of the crime in our societies, they turn themselves into... a *Wasted Breed*’ (Osofisan 1992: 71). Osofisan wrote *Wasted Breed* to shift the accent of his community away from violent ideals, the ‘Ogunnian⁶⁸ ideals’ of Soyinka that justifies self destruction for the crimes of the few; to that of reflection and societal healing.

In *No More the Wasted Breed*, Osofisan’s argument against this metaphor of waste is from the perspective of social justice (1992: 71). While Soyinka’s dramas create iconic tropes in his pre-occupation with cultural retrieval and renewal, Osofisan’s theatre goes beyond heroic gestures to seeking a revision of culture and history. Osofisan advances a dialectical approach to understanding the fallacy that underpins the heroism of Soyinka’s carriers. His point of view is hinged on the nature of society and the responsibility of individuals within that society. Carriers are needed at a critical point when the world of the gods intersects with the human realm to invoke the celebration of ritual, as Sandra Richards (1996) and Sola Adeyemi (1999) have explained. The prevailing condition of the rituals, the ritual matrix, is deconstructed by Osofisan to establish the winners and losers in the exercise of purifying the society. For Osofisan, carriers are victims who shoulder responsibility for the profligacy of the few wealthy individuals. Bringing a class perspective into the debate, the ‘strong breed’ in the society is, in other words, the ‘weak’ whose labours and actions are exploited to support the perpetuation of anguish, and whose efforts are continually ‘wasted’ by the ‘strong’ minority.

⁶⁸ Ogun is the Yoruba god of war and creativity; he is Soyinka’s patron god.

By using *No More the Wasted Breed* as a counter-text to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, to provoke debate on the role and nature of sacrifices in the society, Osofisan deconstructs the romantic emphasis or exotic idealism in Soyinka's drama. He attacks the perspective in Soyinka's writing which privileges the oppression of the weak by the rich and which also creates and highlights a culture of hero worship of the rich and powerful. He proposes a new agenda that focuses on social justice and environmental concern. Our dramatist raises 'the problem inherent in the tension between the aesthetic dimension of literature and the larger context of collective life' (Irele 1995: xix) in as much as theatre is not just for retrieval, perpetuation or consolidation of cultural or 'ritual vision', but as a tool of change to sensitise and discuss new messages with the people.

The setting of *No More the Wasted Breed* is a lagoon community in a period of extensive flooding. The plot is simple and revolves round a confrontation between Elusu, goddess of the inland waters, and a fisherman, Biokun, who bears the mark of the servant of the goddess and therefore must perform the annual sacrifice to her. Elusu visits the community in the company of her husband, Olokun, the god of the ocean who wants his wife to see the devastation caused by her desire for the renewal of her annual worship, which had lapsed since the tragic death of the last carrier. She feels the neglect of her 'subjects' who know she has not helped them in moments of anguish and deserves no reparation or sacrifice. To make them worship her again, Elusu floods the community. There is an outbreak of famine and an epidemic that threatens to kill the people, including the only son of Biokun. The priest of Olokun persuades Biokun to take sacrifice to Elusu's shrine in the creek in order to save the community. Saluga, Biokun's friend, however is against sacrificing to the goddess who does not care for the welfare of the community; and who only wants to satisfy her whims by sending Biokun on a dangerous journey to the shrine, despite the priest's persuasion that 'the goddess and that thing in his

blood' (p. 92)⁶⁹ will guide Biokun. Saluga sees the situation as a trap to maintain the old dogma of sacrificing the poor, questioning why it is 'always the wretched, never a wealthy man, never the son of a king, who is suddenly discovered to bear the mark of destiny at difficult moments, and pushed on to fulfil himself in suicidal tasks' (p. 94).

Osofisan contests the social role of myth and ritual; since the goddess could neither prevent the death of the old carrier while in her service, nor prevent merchant ships and colonialists from plundering the community and ruining the environment, she has lost relevance and the capacity to command respect and be worshipped by her subjects. For the first time since *Oduduwa Don't Go!* (1967), Osofisan introduces gods from the Yoruba pantheon as characters into his drama, not as metaphor, and not to revive them or renew their relevance; but to expose them in their new roles as agents of societal anguish. Osofisan introduces the gods as a ploy to conceptualise the confrontation between the humans and the many gods present in the people's consciousness; and to depict that gods as creations of the human spirit are embodiments of societal aspiration to seek a spiritual explanation for economic and scientific problems. The gods are revealed as objects of power; their existence represents for Osofisan all the elements of neo-colonialism, commercial exploitation, imposition of foreign religion, ignorance and environmental degradation in the lives of his audience. Olokun symbolically kills his wife and removes her influence and authority from the community, leaving the community to decide its future without recourse to superstition or dependence on gods. Saluga, a fisherman who depends on the sea for living, points out the futility of relying on gods to provide answers to their problem, even if they offered sacrifice:

Saluga: It's no chance for you, can't you see? No chance for us. Even if you survive, there's nothing in it for *you*. We'll go back to our squalor, to our desperate fight in the slums – (playwright's emphasis, p. 94).

⁶⁹ All page citations are from *Restless Breed: Four Short Plays*, Ibadan: Opon Ifa Readers, 2002.

Biokun continues the argument and accuses the gods of greed and betrayal of their worshippers' trust and loyalty:

Biokun: The people, goddess, they abandoned your cult because you failed us. Because you take and take, and give nothing back, except betrayal, except a great betrayal! They did not kill you, you killed yourself (p. 97).

The humans prove that gods have no active or responsive role to play in their existence or in the community, and that the gods are agents of the rich and powerful. The drama deploys a materialist argument to render the gods irrelevant, claiming they are myths who have reincarnated as exploiters. To expose the nature of the gods in this drama and their involvement in the life of the people, Osofisan symbolises the gods as colonial and neo-colonial agents. Using black and white symbolism, the dramatist presents a graphic image of colonial and neo-colonial influences in the economic plight of the people. The stage directions provide a description of the gods who have proved to be the bane of existence of the poor fishermen:

*Elusu extends her arms angrily forward like a sword. [...] At the same moment her mask cracks, and her garments begin to drop off, revealing a very pretty, **light skinned woman with strikingly long black hair**, whose body, from below her breasts to the hips, is covered with fish scales (emphasis mine, p.95).*

Apart from feeding into the mythical description of the *Mami-water*, or mermaid, with the fish scales on her lower body, Osofisan emphasises the European image of the goddess. The half-fish, half-human image depicts the 'foreignness' of the gods in Osofisan's representation. The gods identify with the human beings and their suffering when they have their way and receive the choicest part of the little that the humans have to offer. However, their identity lies in the non-human, foreign representation. If you combine the attitude of the gods with the effect of foreign commercial interests on the community, the goddess assumes the garb of 'predators who impoverished our people and turned them

into grovelling slaves' (p. 97). She not only, according to Osofisan, 'brought [us] the white slavers, who carried off [our] best men to the far plantations, to anguish and humiliation' (pp. 97-98), she personifies the predatory tendencies of the Europeans in the former colonies who mine the riches of Africa without giving the Africans due economic recompense. When they have achieved their economic goal, they depart in:

ships laden with plunder, with [our] oil and gold and diamonds, with [our] timber, coffee, cotton and cocoa... Leaving [us] abject and wretched. Except of course, for the few traitors among us who are prosperous because they agree to serve as the agents of the white predators (p. 98).

Elusu's husband, Olokun, is the collaborator, the black man whose role is 'to serve as the agent of the white predators' in demanding sacrifice from the hapless humans. Osofisan portrays him as the quintessential neo-colonialist. When Elusu, in her anger at being insulted by Saluga, Biokun's friend, reveals herself as the goddess, and not the masked impostor parading as the messenger of the gods, Olokun also reveals his true nature:

...a similar transformation has happened to the Old Man. His head, released of its mask, shows a kindly black face, with bushy hair. Fins are glistening from his shoulders, but the rest of his body is like a man's (p. 96).

While Elusu is a light skinned woman, half-scaly-fish, Olokun is a 'kindly' old man whose only difference from the riverine people is the glistening fins on his shoulder. Osofisan's choice of language is important in the two stage directions quoted. First, Elusu's mask 'cracks'; this makes it seem as if she is exposed against her better judgement – her machinations have been disclosed, showing the layer of colonial treachery, deprivation and environment degradation over the years. Osofisan could have used 'drops' or 'breaks' but 'cracks' expresses the pain and anguish caused among the people by the foreigners who have taken most of their riches, with the connivance of their 'trusted' leaders. In contrast, the old man is 'released of his mask', as if he has been under some form of bondage to his partner. When Osofisan stresses the 'Old Man', he is

drawing attention to the group of leaders that we have always had in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular, since independence. In Nigeria, despite a series of successive military and civilian governments, the ruling class has remained dominated by the same group who have been in government since 1960, the year of independence. The president of the country between 1999 and 2007 has been involved in government since the 1960s, and he was head of state between 1976 and 1979. The president elected in 2007 is the son of a former Minister of State and junior brother to a former Chief of Army Staff. The same names keep recurring and Osofisan draws the attention of his audience to this anomaly in a country with a population of more than 120 million by emphasising ‘Old Man’ with a ‘kindly black face’. A black face is familiar and appears sympathetic to the people’s problems; it is different from the white face that the people have identified with exploitation and oppression during the colonial period. The dramatist points out that it is the face that is black; the nature and attitude of the ‘Old Man’ is not that of a black man. This is an indictment on African leaders who are neo-colonialists. It is also a reflection of leaders like Leopold Senghor who pursued the concept of *négritude* as an intellectual exercise but retained the colonial privileges inherited from European colonisers⁷⁰. Osofisan uses symbolic registers that his audience would recognise to highlight the corruption of the political class. Describing Elusu as ‘very pretty, light skinned woman’ conjures up two clear meanings: a white person is an esoteric, mysterious figure whose personality is inscrutable. It also refers to the allure of beauty; the common metaphor among the Yoruba people is to equate beauty to light skin, as someone who stands out from the crowd. This description channels into the image of Europeans as desirable beings; the attractiveness conceals the meanness of the rapacious action.

⁷⁰ Leopold Senghor (1906 – 2001) ruled Senegal between 1960 and 1980 with the help of French political advisors, and was a member of the French Academy until his death in his home in France.

Despite the radical sentiments and the radical language, Osofisan creates a future dependent on the action of the gods, who need to fulfil their part of the social contract. Not only are they expected to protect the people, it is incumbent upon them to defend them:

Biokun: [...] You complain of pollution, but who brought the ships of merchandise from across the ocean to our shore? You complain of being abandoned, but who brought the predators who impoverished our people and turned them into grovelling slaves? Did our conquerors not come across your seas, Olokun? Did they not berth in your waters, goddess? (p. 97).

Biokun reprimands the gods for ‘protecting’ the ‘predators’ without asking for a token of allegiance from them; instead they make demands on the poor ‘subjects’ who barely survive due to the flooding. The poor are the ‘wasted breed’ who give their lives while the privileged ‘remain on the shore, bowing to their white masters, gathering fat...’ (p. 98). From the dialectical perspective of Osofisan’s argument, and from his position in earlier plays like *Cooling Spring*, I expect this lagoon community, who espouse such radical intents, to plan to use new technology and make contact with traders and artisans from other lands to revive their land; create flood drainage barriers and invest in modern medical practice. However, Osofisan constructs a disjunction in his drama by making the gods resolve the community’s dilemma. Olokun ‘kills’ his wife by destroying her cult and freeing the people of their dependence on her; with all their advocacy, Saluga and Biokun fails to claim victory in the dispute between the interests of the gods and the future of their community. In this attempt to prove the culpability of the gods in human misfortunes, and the wastefulness of the ritual involving carriers, he abandons his radical approach to represent gods as metaphors or ideas that can be replaced if they do not serve the intended purpose. It is interesting to investigate why he does this; it is my opinion that this has been Osofisan’s plan all along: to make the people aware of the dynamics of power play in the community, especially between the commercial and political interests of

the rulers whose influence he likens to those of gods; and the interests of the common people. He sets out to conscientise his audience, and once he achieves that by making the characters of Biokun and Saluga realise the futility of depending on gods, as well as by informing the gods about the effects of their greed and selfishness, the dramatist feels his work is done. To go further 'may be simply rhetoric, empty words or a mere propaganda stunt' (Awodiya 1993: 18).

Osofisan achieves another aim: to rebut Soyinka's stance about the importance of the ritual template and the significance of the carrier in the renewal of the society. But that achievement generates a disjunction between the realistic setting of the play and the exotic idealism at the end when Olokun withdraws to the sea after the rejection and the death of his wife:

Olokun: ... You have become the masters of your own fate. How beautiful and how tragic. Farewell (p. 100).

It is a 'beautiful' scenario to see the birth of a new ritual that demands food and justice from the rulers in exchange for support and collaboration. Togun, the priest, will use his skills to:

rouse our people up into action, to get them to build firmer sand barriers against flood, and reclaim more land from the sea, so we can grow food (p. 100).

This optimistic end paints a 'beautiful' future for the people but a 'tragic' one for the gods and the traditional customs that cannot survive a radical re-interpretation that Osofisan wants to expose his audience concerning the popular myths. His advocacy is to accept received history only after rigorous questioning. He challenges the unmediated acceptance of myths and history and also questions the practice of rituals that have lost capacity to affect the people positively.

Sandra Richards states that *Wasted Breed* is the only play by Osofisan to ‘directly attack the ritual worldview and commanding presence of Wole Soyinka’ (1996: 13), a statement I find incomplete if you take Osofisan’s interpretation of Soyinka’s ‘ritual worldview’ as a universe of power; prescription of ritual in the community is an exercise of power by the few over the majority. With such plays as *Morountodun* (1979), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1984) and *Another Raft* (1988), Osofisan has established an alternative ritual tradition – that of awareness in the minds of the people – and supplanted the ‘commanding presence’ of Soyinka with his dramaturgy. *Wasted Breed* however, in spite of its aspiration as a play that sets out to challenge Soyinka’s worldview, appears to be less radical than its pre-text, *The Strong Breed*. In *The Strong Breed*, Jaguna, the high priest, and his co-chiefs achieve their scheme of using Eman to cleanse their community ritually, thereby effectively privileging the ritual matrix. In addition, Soyinka presents the idea of being a carrier as manly, as Eman challenges the community – ‘A village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men’ (Soyinka 1973: 129). He also stresses the irrationality of the communal practice, as Sunma, daughter of Jaguna and friend of Eman states: ‘keeping faith with so much is slowly making you inhuman’ (Soyinka 1973: 122). Soyinka strives to create a balance between belief in the relevance of the ritual and the irrationality of the practice that seeks to target strangers who are ‘godsend’ (Soyinka 1973: 128). The apostate (Eman) from one community fulfils his destiny in the other because ‘it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him...’ (*Death and the King’s Horseman* 1984: 175). This is an echo of the descriptive terminology that Osofisan used to refer to Biokun in *Wasted Breed*, when the priest infers that Biokun is destined to be a carrier; ‘that thing in his blood’ (Osofisan 2002: 92) implies that Biokun has no liberty to decide his own fate. But while Eman fulfils his destiny by satisfying the ritual matrix, Biokun shows that customs change in line with modern development.

Tragic Compressionism: *Another Raft*

Sandra Richards expresses that *Wasted Breed* is the only play by Osofisan to challenge the ritual worldview and commanding presence of Wole Soyinka, but, as I have stated above, that drama is not unique in performing that role; *Another Raft*, first produced in 1987 at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, is another example of the Osofisan-Soyinka dialogue on the nature of rituals. *Another Raft* is a more ambitious play with more language registers and image representations that further broaden Osofisan's experimentation with language and accessibility.

Like *Wasted Breed*, *Another Raft* also has a maritime setting; a community whose religious observance has been discontinued and who in time of disaster resort to the use of a ritual carrier (Dunton 1992). The pre-text for the play is Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* (1963) by which Osofisan contests his reading of national and individual destiny; through an alternative theatre piece. *The Raft* may be the pre-text, but the framework upon which *Another Raft* hinges is *No More the Wasted Breed*. There is an incidence of flooding in a community. The Ifa priest divines that the ancient rites of collective cleansing must be revived and the carrier must perform the ritual to the water goddess, Yemosá. Osofisan activates the framework of the earlier play by linking characters from that play to characters in the new play. First, the old priest whom Saluga promises to teach what to preach (p. 100) is introduced as Omitoogun (Togun being a short form of Omitoogun). The carrier family is implored to produce one of their virgin daughters to carry the ritual objects to the shrine of the goddess. The raft is prepared and a crowd of people, many of them holders of ceremonial titles, join the entourage.

The metaphors in the *Another Raft* and *No More the Wasted Breed* are similar and used in the same way. For example, Osofisan repeats the reference to slave ships and acts of

treachery by the few privileged Africans in enslaving their people, both lines spoken by the designated carriers in the two plays. In *Another Raft*:

Agunrin: ...It was this same route that the slave ships passed, carrying our grandfathers. All thanks to THEIR grandfathers! (p. 50⁷¹)

And in *No More the Wasted Breed*:

Biokun: ... you brought us the white slavers, who carried off our best men to the far plantations... Leaving us abject and wretched. Except of course, for the few traitors among us who are prosperous because they agreed to serve as the agents of the white predators (pp. 97 – 98)

‘Another raft’ points at the existence of an earlier raft; Clark-Bekederemo’s 1963 play set in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Part of a trilogy⁷², *The Raft* focuses on four lumbermen whose raft becomes adrift on the river as the men transport logs of wood to be sold downstream. The raft drifts from its moorings and goes out of control. Using their clothes, they rig a sail hoping the storm will blow them to their destination but the raft breaks up and one of the men is carried off with the sail. One of the three survivors is beaten back by the crew of a steamboat as he seeks rescue and is caught in the stern wheel. The other two become lost in the fog. Many critics (Osofisan 1973 (see esp. pp. 473 – 86), Izevbaye 1975, Egudu 1976) have argued for the allegorical base of *The Raft*. It depicts the political situation in the four regions of Nigeria around the time it was written (1962-63) – West, East, North, Midwest. The four men are professional lumbermen, competent at their jobs and on water, belong to the same social grouping, yet, they cannot prevent the destruction of their raft. Others have read the play to be about economic determinism (Wren 1984), of failure of the men to achieve economic status to survive and be accepted as part of the ‘steamboat’ generation. Chris Dunton points out that Osofisan’s play is a ‘reassessment of the questions that need to be asked about Nigeria’s political culture’ (1992: 87).

⁷¹ All pages references to *Another Raft* (1988).

⁷² *Song of a Goat* (1961), *The Masquerade* (1962-63), *The Raft* (1962-63)

Another Raft rephrases and re-contextualises Clark-Bekederemo's play in three areas:

- a) In place of Clark's four lumbermen from the same social grouping, Osofisan introduces class differentiation between the crew and their passengers;
- b) Osofisan portrays a new kind of social ordering with this arrangement; and
- c) It is a play about historical consciousness as opposed to an allegorical presentation of history (Dunton 1992: 88).

The play starts with the composite figure of Yemosa exposing the play-making process. Yemosa represents the goddess, a further materialisation (secularisation) of the gods from *Wasted Breed* where the gods adopt the garb of messengers. Yemosa comes on stage to explain [her] roles, the improvisational method of production and the historical background of the play. She reads the director's notes in the play's programme notes. Unlike in *Four Robbers* where Aafa functions as the narrator and a major character in the performance, Yemosa retains only the narrative element in *Another Raft*. Dunton (1992) asserts that Osofisan told him that this opening is a result of lack of funding for the first production, as revealed to him by the author in an interview. That may well be so, as funding is always an issue for university productions in Nigeria. However, having watched a fair proportion of the play in rehearsals, it is not my understanding that funding (or lack of it) had much impact on the improvisational nature of the play. Osofisan has always experimented with forms, and the compressionist medium of the play suggested another opportunity to trial a 'poor' theatre approach with the production. We have to recollect that *Another Raft* was produced a few years after *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* and *Morountodun*. These two productions were successful because of the dramaturgy but also because of the minimal setting; the Ife production of *Morountodun* discarded the heavy setting used for the Ibadan production and opted for symbolic props to represent locations; plain backdrop, lit at the back to display dancing figures, with a

signpost strategically placed centre stage, was the set for *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*. Having seen the success of these productions, I believe that Osofisan decided to produce the play without heavy and cumbersome sets. I rely on two factors to support my opinion: Sumbo Marinho, who directed two later plays of Osofisan, was expecting to direct the first production of *Another Raft* but Osofisan changed his mind shortly before the rehearsals started, reducing Marinho's role to that of Technical Director⁷³. I also discussed the play with Marinho's assistants Wasiu Kareem and Elvon Jarrett, who showed me the set design and the model of the raft, based on a script that was changed a few days before the start of the rehearsals:

We wasted time constructing rafts and building ramps which we didn't use... *oga*⁷⁴ substituted mats during rehearsals (Wasiu Kareem, by email, 2009).

Based on these, and on the later conversation I had with Osofisan in 1990, when he confirmed that he was planning to tour with the play and a cumbersome set would not have been practical, I advance that not only is *Another Raft* designed to challenge the class perspective of the country's historical consciousness; it was designed to be portable. To support this idea, songs serve to move the play through various stages where scenic changes might have been required, and Yemosa continue(s) to intrude with commentaries and with the signature song, and with the confirmation that [they] are 'figures of fantasy' and 'dream images':

Yemosa Three: [...] Two boatmen, WAJE, and his assistant, OGE, received the commission [to locate the shrine]... The expedition was then entrusted to LANUSEN, a Prince of the palace, as well as the current Chairman of the Local Government Council – aided of course, by CHIEF EKUROOLA, the native son who had become a successful Lagos tycoon, and who had been invested some years earlier, at a most colourful ceremony, with the highly prestigious title of the ABORE, principal Priest of Rituals. He, Ekuroola, was the one who suggested that REORE, the reigning Farmer King, be asked to come along... (p. 6).

⁷³ The initial audition notice for *Another Raft* had the Director's name as Sunmbo Marinho.

⁷⁴ Boss or Teacher – meaning Marinho.

After the first scene, as already stated, Osofisan demystifies the theatre making process in his play, as he had done in *Morountodun* and *Four Robbers*, the second scene directly links to *The Raft* by summarising the earlier play and linking the story to the present. Osofisan suggests that a member of cast reads the speech, and in the 1987 production, this was done on the first night by the Stage Manager:

Yemosa One (reading):

FROM THE CAST.....

“In 1964, the Nigerian playwright, J. P. Clark, now known as Clark-Bekederemo, wrote his play, *The Raft*, which came to symbolize the troubled situation of our newly-independent country. So many events have occurred since then to take the nation many times just on the brink of sinking, but miraculously, we have kept afloat. Nevertheless, even as the decades drifted past, the storms have not ceased, nor have we been able to steer ourselves out of the fog of those initial errors. More and more obvious, as the 80’s roll to a close, the need seems to have become truly desperate for – ANOTHER RAFT... (p. 5)

Osofisan is not only establishing the framework of his play as *The Raft* and acknowledging his debt to Clark-Bekederemo in the title and in the dramatic reconstruction, the playwright is hinting at the revolutionary intention of the play; underscoring that *Another Raft* is a revision of *Wasted Breed*. The remaining speeches of the second scene are paraphrases of the plot of *Wasted Breed*, although in this incarnation, the emphasis seems to be on the other characters rather than the carrier.

Historically, the function of the carrier is a lonely one, and as tradition informs us, the carrier alone performs the role. Osofisan stresses this fact in *Wasted Breed* as well as in *Another Raft*. The parallel to the Nigerian situation is made more apparent by the inclusion of the community’s ‘who-is-who’ in this expedition to locate the neglected shrine and make the necessary sacrifice. Right from the outset, Osofisan establishes the class dichotomy – the messengers are separated according to their roles in the society; the nature of their shared predicament on a fragile raft, on the treacherous lagoon, seems not

to be important, at least to the privileged members of the party. Waje and Oge, the crew, are to one side, while the prince and priests are to the other. At a third location, upstage, ‘bound down, the back to us, farthest away from the side of the audience’ (p. 7) is the sacrifice. This positioning diminishes the importance of the expedition and an audience can make a wrong assumption about the relative importance of the characters.

During the play, someone (or something) has cut the moorings, setting the raft adrift. This happens a day after they have lost their paddles. Instead of finding a solution to their problem, the rich men on the raft start bickering about responsibilities and finally decide to seek supernatural help, by praying. Orousi the Chief Priest of Ifa starts by listing the incidents of natural disasters which he blames on the goddess:

Orousi: ... We’ve had such troubled times! Accidents on the highway. Fires in the market. A cholera outbreak, followed by yellow fever! And now, even before we have fully recovered from those disasters, the flood. Ah, the goddess, how her stomach rumbles! (p. 13).

He goes into a chant in praise of Yemosa, the goddess; Ekuroola, the Chief Priest of Rituals, dismisses the chants as ineffective because the goddess is slow to respond. ‘*He turns away angrily, and begins prayers*’ (p. 14). Orousi too abandons his chants and, joined by Lanusen, the Local Council Chairman, ‘*they too begin to pray. It is obvious however from their seating position and their gestures that they are Christians, while EKUROOLA is Muslim*’ (p. 14). As he has done with Aafaa in *Four Robbers*, Osofisan satirises religious sentiments among Nigerians and their willingness to believe whichever spiritual way achieves results, whether through traditional religion and sacrifices, as the characters are pursuing, or through the imported religions of Islam or Christianity.

From the exchanges between the characters, we begin to understand why the cast has been assembled on the raft. Lanusen, prince and chairman of the council, misappropriated the

budget for building drainage and canals in the community and, to cover up his crime, set fire to the council offices. The accountant wife and the son of Oge, the boatman's assistant, were killed in the inferno:

Waje: Only three months ago, and with good cause. When his wife died, he—

Oge: Don't Broda! Make youno talk-am!

Waje: You see? He's not learnt to accept it yet.

Reore: What happened?

Waje: She was a clerk with the Council

Lanusen: With us?

Waje: With you, prince. In the Accounts section. She was there when the fire happened.

Lanusen: Oh, so she was the woman!

Waje: Her office was on the highest floor. And their only son was with her on the fateful day. Both of them in one afternoon. Both of them perished.

Reore: Oh God. I'm sorry.

Oge: (*Sobbing*): Of course dey killed dem! My son and my wife, dey killed dem!

Ekuroola: Right, no more of that now. Let's think of how we—

Waje: Oge went to pieces. Gave up sailing. Took to drink. Locked himself up for days in the house and just let himself go...

Ekuroola: Are you deaf or something? I said, forget all that for now and let us—

Oge: You hear, Broda? Dey no dey get ear for we! No ear at all for poor man wey dey suffer! (p. 21).

Even with Oge recounting his tragedy and revealing the role of the wealthy and privileged in the death of his family, Osofisan shows the rich as uncaring, intent only on covering up their infamy. Prince Lanusen describes his story as 'Rubbish!' (p. 23)

Ekuroola bribed the chiefs who are in charge of allocation of the communal land to acquire the farmlands and imposed unfair taxes on the farmers, including Reore; he boasts of the act in this exchange with the others:

Lanusen: Then you shouldn't have taken the title! It was not too long ago, you know, when you came crawling to the palace, you and your agents. Against my advice and against good sense, they allowed you to take the title.

Orousi: No, no, prince, don't say these things here! Please!

Ekuroola: You had no choice, it was the title of my fathers and my grandfathers! And I paid you well for it, damn it! It was my money that made you change your mind, Lanusen! ...

[...]

Lanusen: [...] The lands of the Abore yield rich harvest every year, not to talk of the Gbaguda farms at Ifetedo—

Reore: What! So it's you, Abore! So you're the landlord of our farms at Gbaguda! The landlord we never see! (pp. 25 – 26).

Ekuroola's boast is an echo of Agunrin's reference to slave ships and the roles played by ancestors of the rich who collaborated with slave dealers (p. 50). The act of his corruption and the negative influence it has on the community is repeated later in the play, when Lanusen accuses Ekuroola of being the most blameworthy among the wealthy and privileged group on the raft:

Lanusen: Ekuroola is a thief! And if the town had listened to me, he should never have been made Abore! It's a disgrace, such a person! But he had so much money. He came and spread money around, he had so much money! [...] Ekuroola grows fat, while the people suffer! He is a huge noose around the necks of our people.

Orousi, the chief priest of Ifa, made a false divination about the nature of sacrifice required to resolve the problems but the sacrificial object was changed at the last minute. Lanusen bribes the soldier brother of the virgin woman designated as the sacrifice to swap positions with his sister. During the preparation, Lanusen, who plans to kill Ekuroola and establish himself as the owner of the choice farmlands, switches the substituted military officer as the sacrifice. As the rich individuals accuse one another, we find out that the soldier cut the raft adrift, a metaphor of the Nigerian political situation. Osofisan is critically stating that the politicians' failure is comparable to the incompetence of the military who have ruled the country for twenty-nine of the country's forty-eight years of independence from the British.

Agunrin, the soldier-sacrifice, attempts to force the wealthy men to apologise for the anguish they have caused the poor boatmen and the farmer but Gbebe, Omitoogun's son, exposes Agunrin to be as privileged as the rest:

Gbebe: You're a soldier. You accuse the politicians and the Chiefs of exploiting the people, and leading us to damnation. But what of you, sir? What else do you do except milk the land? (p. 63).

The military firstly blame politicians for every *coup d'état* in Nigeria, even the ones organised against another military regime, such as counter-coups, but Gbebe's observation is that the structure of elitism involves both the military and the wealthy politicians. This is a departure from Osofisan's position in *Oriki of a Grasshopper* or *The Chattering and the Song* where the elites include university lecturers, trade union members and civil servants, and are not confined to military and civilian rulers. This is a major shift in Osofisan's target; he appears to change his mind about the contribution of educated members of the society to the condition of the society. On the other hand, this could be interpreted as an attempt by the dramatist to make the contributions of the educated class marginal and only tangentially relevant to the survival of the community. In later plays of this period, the educated elites, for instance, Ayinde in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1988) or Professor in *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle* (1988) are depicted as comic characters whose utterances are disregarded even when, in the case of Ayinde, they are directly relevant to the well-being of the community. Osofisan's message is that he wants to demonstrate the people's disappointment with the political class, composed of the educated elite; how they have lost confidence in the ability of politicians to contribute positively to the society. This is implied by Agunrin, as he refers the others to the lessons of history:

Agunrin: [...] Consult your books! Or are you saying that we should be always content to submit our heads meekly and let it go on for ever? Speak! We should let them continue to sell us, and shed our blood, and mortgage recklessly the future of our children, just for their own selfish profits?

This identification precedes the break up of the raft, causing a separation of the classes. I interpret this as an indication of the playwright's wish for Nigeria to fragment or break up as the people realise the duplicity of their heroes. Waje, Oge, Orousi and Reore end up on one part of the raft while Lanusen and Ekuroola are swept away on the other.

The final scenes of the play (pp. 71 – 86) demonstrate, through story telling, the need for joint effort in establishing order in the society. The three Yemosa recite a story about a king and his three sons who each have to find one unique thing to prove their love and devotion to their father. The sons each learn abilities to see far (with which they notice that their father was ailing), to fly fast (which they use to get home) and to heal (which they use to heal the king). Osofisan fails to provide a clear analysis of the social imperative in this drama; rather his focus is on critical evaluation of the factors causing societal anguish and presentation of this information before the audience. The play is aesthetically satisfying but all the spectacles of song, dance and storytelling (there are two full stories told by Yemosa) highlight the message of the play, that 'There's no goddess but our muscles! The strength of our forces combined!' (p. 85). This is an example that proves again that Osofisan not only re-uses metaphors, framework and imagery, he re-uses lines and phrases and thereby reduce some of the lines to mere ciphers which, read together, appear trite and hackneyed, but, spoken in the context of play, appear meaningful. The message quoted above is an echo of Akanji's rousing call to the other slaves in *Red is the Freedom Road*, 'The gods you speak of are in your muscles!' (Osofisan *Major Plays 2*, 2003: 114).

It could be argued that re-using lines and phrases increases the accessibility of his plays to his audience but only if those audience members have seen previous plays and remember

the dialogue. Though re-using lines from previous plays makes the dialogue of his drama sometimes repetitive, it tells us the actual dramatic obsession of the playwright which has to do with repetition of styles and messages. Osofisan constantly attacks the same societal problems, and directs his message to the same audience. In an essay, 'The Revolution as Muse', the dramatist describes this audience as students assembled from 'disparate backgrounds and cultures' and just 'old enough to be excited by the competitiveness of opinions and the selectivity of choice' but receptive to new ideas (Osofisan 2001a: 58-59). It is safe for Osofisan to repeat dialogues in different plays because, although his audience is made of the same set of people – educated, perhaps students – the fact that they do not remain the same keeps his dialogue fresh. Even if there were audience members who had watched an earlier play and heard the same or similar dialogue, the effect would be an instant identification with the playwright's intention which can encourage appreciation of other aspects of the drama like the songs, stories and the actors' performance. It can also encourage the director to be adventurous in the kinds of extra-linguistic materials he adds to the drama, as I show in my analysis of the production of *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* below.

The ending of the drama, with Yemosa guiding the raft to the shore, is an indication of the need to pool efforts together to move forward as a people, without the encumbrances of tradition, power and privileges. It is also a physical realisation of the effect of belief in gods. The goddess Yemosa comes to the people's assistance when they show a unity of purpose as human beings. The old priest is dead and the wealthy members of the party are lost at sea, leaving the workers – fishermen and a farmer – to forge a new future. This is a proposal similar to the class suicide Osofisan suggested in *Chattering* (with Yajin, the daughter of a high court judge and a member of the 'upper middle class' getting married to Sontri, an artist); and more clearly in *Morountodun*, where Titubi leaves the riches of

the marketplace where her mother is the leader of the market women, to marry the poor farmer Marshal. Is this the message perhaps that Osofisan wants to deliver by rejecting the colourful and heavy scenic design, or through the recitation of the two stories?

The first story, 'The Hunter and the Skull'⁷⁵, is about a hunter who sees a talking skull while hunting in the bush. Without stopping, he runs to invite all the townspeople to witness the occurrence. But when they gather, the skull refuses to say anything. The hunter is killed for tricking the townspeople, including the king. However, as soon as the people depart, the skull begins to speak again and the hunter then understands the moral – 'it was my mouth that bought me here!' (p.39). The position of the hunter is synonymous to the position of the playwright, or the critic writing under a military regime. The main function of the story is to define the vulnerability of those who speak the truth. The story is also a bridge between the part of the play when the characters are secretive and the part when they start to expose the corruption of one another; all the characters reveal themselves by what they say out of fear. This story reveals the complicity of everybody in the predicament of the characters on the raft, while the second story, the story of the king and his three sons, places the solution to their problems in their hands. It is my view that Osofisan wanted the audience to absorb the message of shared destiny. It is instructive that he pursued this agenda of collective responsibility in an earlier play, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, written after the civil war. But this message in *Another Raft* is formulated with more cunning. Osofisan exposes his Marxist agenda by destroying the wealthy class instead of sidelining them and making their contribution irrelevant as he has done in the earlier play.

⁷⁵ Like all stories in Osofisan's drama, 'The Hunter and the Skull' is a Yoruba folktale (Osofisan in interview with the writer on 10 December 1990)

Reconciliation and Story-telling: *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*.

The primary reference point of *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* is the Nigeria civil war, emphasised by the play's dedication, 'to the memory of biafra, for those who survived' (p. iv)⁷⁶. As I stated above, *Cannibal Rage* is loosely based on the plot of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, particularly the 'ancient grudge' between two families whose children fall in love against the wishes of their parents. *Cannibal Rage* serves as a metaphor for the legacy of bitterness and recrimination inherited from the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 – 70. This legacy is usually marked by the dictum, 'no victor, no vanquished'.

While critics like Sandra Richards (1996) and other western critics maintain that the major influence on this play is the Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, my position on this, and as I have stated in chapter two above, is that Brechtian influence is just one of many influences on Osofisan's dramaturgy. It is possible that Western critics, not understanding the theatrical elements of the Yoruba traditional performance culture, from which Osofisan's drama derives, and having no access to some of the performances like the moonlight tales, storytelling and private rituals and ceremonies, have over-emphasised the Brechtian influence on our dramatist's work. I maintain that some of the strategies of the playwright are considered closely linked to that of Brecht because he is an eclectic playwright who draws not only from his Yoruba heritage but also from world dramatic heritages and practices. His focus is on the narrative of the drama and the effect he wants the audience to absorb from it, rather than noting the immediate relevance of any influence, Yoruba or otherwise. He disrupts the dramatic action and introduces shock value to demonstrate theatre as a communicative medium. He deploys every viable method – including those judged to be successful by other dramatists – to present his message. Sometimes, these methods are 'borrowed' from, based upon or framed around

⁷⁶ All page references to *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986).

formats easily recognisable to both Nigerians and non-Nigerians, hence the conviction of Richards and other critics that *Cannibal Rage* in performance is modelled after Brechtian drama. The reality is simpler; the major factor in the design of *Cannibal Rage* is entertainment forms performed at night, popular among the Yoruba and in other parts of Africa; the structure is celebratory and it involves everybody as participants. There are dramatic re-enactments, storytelling, dance, music, poetry, games and other performances. Because of the loose structure of the performances and the lack of defined characterisation, I suggest that this form of entertainment offers a stronger contextual model for *Cannibal Rage* than the Brechtian heritage, even if elements of latter are obvious in the drama.

Cannibal Rage is a play about reconciliation. Akanbi and Olabisi both live in the city. They have come home to the village to inform their respective parents that they are in love and want to marry each other. There is a deep-rooted feud between Olabisi's mother, Titi, and Akanbi's uncle, Adigun, who is his guardian since the death of his father and the mental illness of his mother. Both parents refuse to grant permission despite the historical connection between the two families – Akanbi's and Olabisi's fathers were friends. Later, we find that agents of the paramount ruler who wanted the lands owned by the two friends had created the feud; they contrived to establish Akanbi and Titi on the farm, raising the jealousy of Olabisi's father who then killed his best friend. Adigun retaliated by killing Olabisi's father. Through a series of flashbacks and storytelling, the two families agree to end their feud and allow the alliance of the two lovers to go ahead. Richards states that Osofisan:

Manipulates traditional African performance conventions related to space, multiple perspectives, and performer-audience relationships. The result is a drama in which repetition, contradiction, discontinuity, and lack of an integrating vision loom large (1996: 83).

Cannibal Rage is written in free verse without following rules of poetic form or rhyme, but with a dramatic ear to rhythm, which varies throughout the play, although some parts are written in prose. Osofisan wrote this play when he was still developing his style and my assessment of his use of verse in the drama is that he was experimenting with form and style. This is the only play that the dramatist has largely written in verse. The lines in the play, like in his poems, have the same cadence and the same use of metaphors. Though the lines / words do not rhyme, they flow along in a rhythmic pattern. For instance, scene two opens thus:

Olabisi: The night has come
 With silence. With glow-worms.
 And here, on this silent hill,
 I stand alone.
 Alone with the moon and afraid.
 Oh, where are you, Akanbi?
 Akanbi! Only yesterday we parted.
 Promising to meet again tonight.
 Here on this hill of Iloto, where
 Lovers can be together, alone... (p. 5)

Now, if we compare that to the opening lines of ‘The muse remembers’, a poem the playwright wrote and published in the collection, *Dream-Seeker on Divining Chain*, we will notice the similarity between the language of his poems, which he wrote after *Cannibal Rage*, and the language of the drama:

In the morning,
 I remember,
 you held your arms
 around the trunk of the Tree

 and the Muse leaned down
 her branches
 and gave you a handhold
 to the sky, to where
 the day’s new hairstyle
 was a plumage of birdsongs

 It was your voice,
 glittering with the morning
 that touched me with its wings,
 I remember (*Dream-seeker*, 1993: 63)

My assessment is that Osofisan was experimenting with poetic style when he wrote *Cannibal Rage*, an experiment he discarded for no expressed reasons. I can however point out that when I acted in the play and later directed it, it was always difficult shifting between acting styles required for the two forms and retaining the flavour of the Yoruba night's entertainment. Delivery of lines is more measured and modulated in verse than in prose. Some sections of the drama are written in dramatic prose, for instance, the opening scene with Narrator (all his lines) and the breaks in the dramatic flow designed to accommodate change of scene or exchange of roles:

Narrator: Alright I am the loser this evening. I accept to tell you a story. Let me see... (He reflects briefly) Yes, I know the story I'll tell. It's one of reconciliation, which is very appropriate to our occasion (p. 1)

The play opens like a scene from an African night's entertainment. Actors dance onto the performance area, singing, in Yoruba:

Awa l'omo ile Africa [We are the children of Africa]
E ma je ko ya yin l'enu mo [Let it surprise you no longer]
Awa ti o aso eru wa [We threw off our slave clothes]
E wo wa, awa l'Oba ola [See, we're the kings tomorrow] (p. 71,
 English trans. P. 74)

The opening song reveals two factors about the play: Osofisan, despite dedicating the drama 'to the memory of biafra for those who survived...' (p. iv), has a broader audience in mind with the play. The setting, the songs and imagery are Yoruba; the costuming is not specifically linked to a particular area of Nigeria. In addition, the custom of deciding the narrator is not recognisably Yoruba, more like a game of 'musical chairs'. The stage directions read:

A bundle of rolled mats lie in a pile on stage. Enter a group of young men and girls, accompanied by an orchestra. They sing and dance round the mats. As the music stops suddenly, the dancers rush forward to pick up a mat each. Then we notice that the mats

are all of the same length; then, that one of the actors does not have a mat (p. 1)

The actor without a mat becomes the narrator. In Yoruba society, the storyteller is usually the eldest member of the family or someone designated by him; it is not a democratic option decided by voting or polling. With this opening, Osofisan sets the tone for the unconventional style of the play. The play begins like a cross between a children's game show and the opening glee of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre. Unlike other Osofisan dramas, such as *Morountodun* or *Once Upon Four Robbers*, for instance, the beginning does not involve the audience. In *Four Robbers*, the narrator (Aafa) begins the performance among the audience, before involving the rest of the actors, like a traditional Yoruba storytelling session whereas, in *Cannibal Rage*, the actors who are not cast in roles start as audience. As a result, the opening creates a disjunction between the understanding of the audience of an Osofisan play and the night's entertainment common among the Yoruba people, the kind of entertainment with which the audience is familiar.

The second factor revealed by the opening song is Osofisan's agenda to re-configure society by redeeming the negative influence of history as exemplified by the stigma of colonialism, which he compares to slavery. The earlier texts mention slavery in general terms without exposing the descendants of the slaves. *Wasted Breed* mentions the white slave masters and their black collaborators, and *Another Raft* describes the descendants of the collaborators as the ruling class, the traditional rulers, politicians and military officers. *Cannibal Rage* is the first play in which Osofisan pursues an open discourse on the flag independence of African countries, highlighting the shared heritage of colonialism by African countries, the kind of legacy that led to the civil war in Nigeria. The actors come on stage singing about being descendants of slaves who have the hope of deciding their future destiny

I mention above that the costume origin is not specified; it is a simple dyed, brown patterned linen shirt of the *danshiki*⁷⁷ type which confers a kind of equality and anonymity upon the actors. It is my view that the playwright wants the costume to project his idea of a classless society where everybody is equal, irrespective of their colonial heritage.

Of the few criticisms of *Cannibal Rage*, including those by Dunton (1992), Richards (1996) and Obuh (2002), only Richards (1996) has examined the aesthetics of performance and the successful dramatisation of Osofisan's intention on stage. Yoruba traditional performance culture is difficult to realise under staged conditions, particularly on a western-type stage with actors who are not familiar with the concept of total theatre, because of its improvisational nature and heavy reliance on codes and imagery that are familiar to the people who share life experiences and customs. This difficulty is probably why Sandra Richards' Stanford University (California) Drama Department production of 1987 was different from the Nigerian productions, in particular my production of June 1991 at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan and later the same year at the Cultural Centre, Ibadan, for the Nigerian president, Ibrahim Babangida, or even the 2007 production on the same Stanford stage by Rachel Anderson. The press release for the 2007 Summer Theatre announces *Cannibal Rage* as:

‘a *comedy* by award-winning Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan ... It riffs on the archetypal Romeo-and-Juliet theme, as enacted by a theater company that keeps shifting the roles they play and the outcome of the plot. Its theme is reconciliation, with a background of drums, music, movement and improvisation’ (Haven 2007; italics mine).

I sympathise with the cultural sensibilities and the requirements of the Stanford producers to make the play accessible to their audience. In the process of translocation, message

⁷⁷ A type of short, African shirt with a slit in the neck that can be freely worn by both male and female, young and adult.

becomes transmuted as the play is interpreted as a romantic paraphrasing of the Shakespearean tragedy. I did not watch the production and have not seen a recording of the performance, but it would have been difficult to keep shifting ‘the outcome of the plot’.

The emphasis of the 1987 production⁷⁸ by Sandra Richards was on spectacle and ‘authentic’ representation that transformed the auditorium to a theatre-in-the-round and presented an ‘African experience’. Richards did not set out to produce an ‘African Brecht’ or an ‘African Shakespeare’ that ‘riffs’ on an archetypal theme but transferred an African staging pattern to Stanford and decorated the arena to the audiences’ ‘expectations concerning theatrical conventions’. The producer did not want to stage an American adaptation of a Yoruba play; the director was aware that the spectators had a certain idea of what constituted an African plays – spectacle, percussive drumming, colourful costuming, props that can be identified as ‘African’ – and she produced the play based on these conventions, even if some of those conventions were re-presented using non-Yoruba, or non-African, motifs. The crocodile in the Handsome Stranger’s story, for instance, became a ‘glittering red and gold dragon’ borrowed from the annual Chinese-American New Year’s parade. Despite the non-illusionistic concept of the play, Richards’ production satisfied the romantic concept of Africa for the Californian audience. Still, if the *values* of African theatre were lost in the production, the director reproduced the aesthetics of ‘total theatre’, that is, ‘a multi-media production, in which dialogue is just as important as other paralinguistic signs’ (Osofisan 2001a: 65).

Richards’ productions are ‘different’ or less effective outside Nigeria, despite the directorial effort and the assistance from the playwright, and were not given the chance to

⁷⁸ For a full report of the production, see Richards 1996: 163 – 190

be an ‘authentic’ African drama for a reason which Osofisan has identified. The reason is that most African playwrights, like Osofisan, design their plays:

along the format of the performances that are so abundant in their own community – that is, as *ceremonies modelled after animist festival theatres* – and also that the characters they create for their stage are conceived after the kind of *composite actors* the playwrights are familiar with in their environment (Osofisan 2001a: 183-184).

The implication is that the audience probably enjoyed the spectacle but missed the social-political messages, especially the kind that the playwright presents in the drama, concerning factors surrounding the Nigeria civil war and the effects of the war on relationships between people from different areas of Nigeria.

My 1991 production had none of the problems identified above; the actors, all students of the University of Ibadan, had no difficulty in understanding the cultural setting or representing the non-illusionistic dramatic style on stage. The actors approached the production with one idea: the concept of an African night’s entertainment with variegated, juxtaposed actions, that is, dramatic actions that are varied, mixed in different orders and presented simultaneously on the stage. The setting was an empty stage with some mats, a couple of drums, maracas, some painted cardboard papers representing flags of countries with colonial links to Africa and the actors’ bodies. In casting the play, I placed the emphasis on the selection of narrators. Although the play suggests two narrators who would swap roles halfway through the performance, I rehearsed six actors for the role of narrator, turning the choice of narrator every night into a real competition as would be expected on a realistic night’s entertainment among children. I located the play in the ‘present’ and the intertextual materials of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and the civil war did not feature in the preparation for two reasons: a knowledge of the Shakespearean drama did not add to a better understanding of the play, in particular when ideas of love

vary; the civil war was very recent when the play was written and first presented but Nigeria was facing a different socio-political problem at the time of my production – that of corruption and curtailed freedom of choice. The notion of reconciliation was however extended to include the performances, so actors who were not chosen to play a speaking role accepted the decision to become the ‘scenery’, landmarks and furniture, as suggested by the script. What stood out in my production notes are the description of actors, as differentiated from characters, and their individual functions as persons, as well as actors during the performance. This was my first departure from Osofisan’s script. Osofisan does not create unique characters; rather he depends on the language and dialogue to express his dramaturgy. Thus, anyone technically can play any role in an Osofisan play. However, I changed that by making the actors learn their roles, using methods that were closer to Constantin Stanislavsky’s than Brechtian’s or the conventions of Yoruba theatre.

The descriptors for the actors differed during each performance as we managed to include individual actor’s unique personalities into the performance. This included changing the spoken words to accommodate the heights of the different actors playing the role of Adigun during the wrestling bout between him and his nephew, Akanbi, for instance. The only exception was that of a pregnant actress who played the hill of Iloto, symbolically representing the future age of reconciliation. Her pregnancy became a permanent feature on stage as a reference point not just for the hill, but also for the expected union of the warring families after the resolution of their differences. Thus, not only did she represent the expectation, she was also the ‘unknown’ factor of the unpredictable future.

By the opening night, almost all the actors knew all the lines in the play and could act in any role, if necessary. Since all the actors were costumed in the same *danshiki*, a number of actors fought for and won the right to play certain roles each night during the run at the

Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, between 12 – 16 June 1991. On one or two occasions, some actors negotiated a change of roles when they felt that the actors playing the parts were not ‘doing very well’, just as would happen on any night’s performance in a traditional African setting among children. For instance, the actor ‘playing’ the role of a chair for Baba Soye swapped roles with the *babalawo* on one night because the *babalawo* was mispronouncing the location of the story and saying *Efon* (mosquito) instead of *Efon* (the town), which rendered a different meaning entirely to the narrative. On the other nights, the whole cast shouted out the name of the town, to give the impression of being part of the story, and in the process imbuing the performance with a spontaneity that is common to entertainments among the Yoruba people. This made for as natural and as close a performance as possible to ‘total theatre’ in terms of the play’s concept. Emphasis was placed on improvisation and development of the storytelling ability of the actors and every member of cast transferred the reconciliatory aspect of the drama to the performances.

Ordinarily, this performance arrangement would have confused the audience, but the whole arrangement is written into the script. For instance, the Narrator explains the process to the audience at the beginning and intermittently during the performance:

Narrator: ... You’ll all have a role after all. The rest of you, you’ll be scenery.

[...]

The scenery. Décor. Background. Location. The... look, I don’t know what the theatre people call it. But I’ll show you what I mean.

You see, this story I’m going to tell you takes place in a village. Right? Now, the village is at the foot of a hill, right? Well, we can’t have a real hill here now, can we? (*responses*) That’s what I mean. But we can simulate one. Create it, er,... figuratively. Yes, with our bodies and so on. Got it? That’s the background I mean.

Whenever a scene is about to begin, I’ll announce the location, where it is to take place, right? And then, you’ll all try and create that environment for us. Figuratively. The symbolic elements. The commonest sights. The sounds. Just enough to give us the proper framework (p. 3).

The audience is not involved in the play's opening but, with the Narrator's speech, they are now invited to be part of the play. The rest of the performance seems like a play within a play, with the main play being the idea of night's entertainment involving a group of villagers who are taking advantage of the moonlight. During the performance, as a reminder of the production method, specific members of audience selected at random were deliberately asked to participate in choosing between two actors who were already rehearsed into a role, which of them should act the next scene. It was new, but it was also part of what the audience had come to expect of an Osofisan's drama. The playwright has already written audience involvement into the play, through the agency of the Narrator, so asking the audience to choose which actor would perform a particular role was not as effective as I would have preferred. I was working on the basis that the audience come to an Osofisan play to question and challenge the actors, and to be part of the playmaking process. Involving them in the choice of performers was giving them a new role, for which they were not prepared but they embraced the activity enthusiastically and I think it added to the totality of the theatre experience, and made the audience feel more engaged with the performance.

The production at the Cultural Centre, Ibadan, held a few months later for Nigerian military president Ibrahim Babangida posed a few problems of logistics. First, the Cultural Centre, conceived as a multi-purpose theatre, with a thrust stage, and constructed as a venue for the 1977 Second World Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) celebrations, had never been completed. The floor was cemented and dusty, the walls were rough cement bricks and there was no lighting fixture of any description. Yet, the President was coming, with some of his Ministers of State and the state governor and his commissioners. To conceal the roughness of the venue, the management decided to hang

the country's flag along the walls; they decorated the whole hall with green and white balloons and posters welcoming and praising the president. This was a boon to the production as we could use some of these displays in our playmaking process. But would the military brass, who did not have a reputation for being theatre patrons, understand what these displays signify in the performance?

Cannibal Rage is a drama in many layers: the first layer is the gathering of the 'children' to have a night's entertainment and regale each other with stories, tales and songs; the second involves the story that the 'loser' of the first game chooses to narrate, the story of reconciliation; the third layer consists of the stories within the story that the characters in the original story invent to explain their actions or intentions. The third layer includes the flashback scene between musician Fatai and his wife Folawe, the story of the Handsome Stranger, the visit of the agricultural officer and the killing of Akanbi's father. The three distinct layers make *Cannibal Rage* a more complex drama to realise on stage than *Another Raft*, for instance, although there is clarity in the linear nature of the play and in the narrative flow which occurs between the three layers. The narrative structure of *Cannibal Rage* is very similar to that of *Four Robbers*, particularly the intervention of Aafa as narrator, Imam and Ifa priest, and that of the Narrator as narrator, director and producer in *Cannibal Rage*.

There is also a fourth layer of narrative in *Cannibal Rage* which is not easily discernible. The actors who are not part of the immediate action assume the 'roles' of scenery and contribute visual aspects to the dramatic action. The actions which constitute the visual features are not radical but can be made to contribute to the agenda of covert rebellion against the State. By the 3rd August production, our 'hill of Iloto' had delivered her baby so we could not use the pregnancy to make a statement about the political agenda of the

military to hand power over to civilians. The doorways, seats and other furniture were also inadequate or inappropriate to carry out our disruptive agenda. Finally, I decided to intervene in two places in the third layer of narrative and one place in the fourth layer by incorporating acts of rebellion into the sub-narrative. This was an opportunity to ‘speak the truth to power’ and challenge the myths of Nigerian dictatorship by using the ‘strategies of enlightened guile’ that would ensure that we did ‘not become the careless victims of official thugs’ (Osofisan 2001a: 50). A week before the production, some civil servants and security operatives came to the university to watch our rehearsals and collect a few copies of the playscript, to check that the play was not subversive and would not offend the Commander in Chief of the country. As there were no extra copies available, they watched a few minutes of our rehearsals instead.

The drama has many areas where a director can effectively intervene, but the three points that I chose in the play were:

- a) The first change was textual. In the flashback scene between Fatai and Folawe, Chief Owombe who made his money in the city became Major Owombe, a rotund soldier who made his money from contracts during the war. The ‘some of the richest men from Lagos’ he invited to his party became ‘some of the highest officers in the army’, the ‘chiefs and landowners’ became ‘soldiers and politicians’, ‘the boy from the city’ became ‘the captain from the city’, in:

Fatai: One of our biggest outings, and you were
 Not to be found. Chief Owombe was the host,
 And he had invited down some of the richest men
 From Lagos. We played all night, and
 By cockcrow, they were still spending...
 [...]
 But my wife and lead singer, you were somewhere else...
 [...]
Folawe: [...]
 That’s not how it is and you know.
 I’m only going away *with* him.
 The boy from the city. He opened my eyes

To other horizons. He can help me
Through the door into a new life... (pp. 26-27).

- b) The second change was visual. The Handsome Stranger wore a military uniform, instead of the damask and gold costume as the script specifies. Only the actor playing the role of the Handsome Stranger knew about the change in costume before the performance started and, as I explained to the actors afterwards, military uniform is as alluring as glittering brocade and would probably provide a more effective association for the soldiers in the audience. Osofisan's description has the Handsome Man wearing:

...the richest damask. His sandals
Gleamed with the flash of pearls,
And on his head, a cap of burning gold (p. 46).

We changed this prescription to a military Captain's dress uniform 'borrowed' from a friend of the theatre at the Army barracks, complete with epaulets and some costume medallions.

- c) The third intervention was also visual but riskier. During the graveyard scene, having conveniently forgotten to bring the cardboard papers painted in the colours of the national flags of European countries, to mark the tombstones, I hurriedly grabbed some of the posters praising the achievements of president Babangida and drew the flags on the back. The idea was to associate the government with neo-colonialism, which worked well as the presidential image became the tyrannical figure that gradually consumed the people's hope and aspiration, as imagined by Simbi's idea of marriage to the Handsome Stranger.

The president's entourage enjoyed the performance and participated in the sections where the audience was expected to assist the narrator in choosing actors, laughed at the appropriate places and did not seem offended by the exchange between Fatai and Folawe. However, by the exit of the Handsome Stranger, there was a perceptible change among

the audience. Immediately after the performance, the secretary to the state governor, who was acting as the Master of Ceremony announced that the second part of the evening was cancelled. The second part should have been president Babangida meeting every member of cast and then inviting us for a state dinner. I suspected he cancelled the arrangement because of the play's message; my suspicion was confirmed a few moments after the performance. My acting head of department and the secretary invited me to the governor's office for a 'chat' about certain aspects of the play and the 'shoddiness' of the 'props'. Regarding the textual references, I insisted we were only acting the script as approved by the government. For me, this was a triumph because the reaction from the president of Nigeria, some of his ministers, a state governor, government officials and the other audience members, showed that the criticism about corruption, neo-colonialism and fraud filtered through to their consciousness.

'The Story of the Handsome Stranger' infuses a new interpretation into the myth of the stubborn girl who, refusing her parents' injunctions, marries a stranger and perishes after the stranger reveals his true colours. Although *Cannibal Rage* is a play specifically written to encourage reconciliation, Osofisan uses the drama to attack the neo-colonial attitudes of his people. At the same time, he advocates a revolutionary discourse that involves dialogue among the common people. Osofisan employs the tale to warn the country to be wary of the attractiveness of foreign ideas which may not suit the condition of Nigerians. Simbi, the girl in the tale, follows the Handsome Man until they reach a graveyard where '[the] "tombstones" should be conspicuously in the colours of the national flags of European countries that have held colonies in Africa' (p. 49). Osofisan reiterates the significance of historical consciousness, a preoccupation apparent in his dramaturgy, as he challenges the myths of complacency and re-writes the received history to elicit new understanding of the people's heritage. Again, as in *Another Raft*, with the

exception of Folawe and Fatai, the musician couple, the role of artists and educated elite are reduced in Osofisan's revolutionary agenda. The radar of his attention seems to be focusing more on politicians and the postcolonial heritage. His gaze becomes steadier and more penetrating with the next play that I examine below, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, as he employs his dramatic heritage to draw attention to the acts of exploitation, injustice and oppression experienced by the common people at the hands of the wealthy ruling group. His writing becomes more materialistic as he renews his Marxist agenda in the same successful way that he has perfected to attack the ruling class – surreptitiously.

The Myth of Violence and Sex: *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*.

I have tried to show how Osofisan has made his drama accessible to his audience as he advocates social change. The theme of social change through rewriting past and contemporary history continues in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, the second of the magic boon plays.

The theme of *Esu* is suggested by Albert Camus when he wrote that 'Principles are needed in great matters, compassion suffices in the small', according to the Playwright's notes in the introduction to the play. *Esu* is a morality play set at a crossroads. The Yoruba believe that the god Esu lives at crossroads where he is master of illusionary devices. The drama has a festival motif; it starts with a community preparing for a competition. According to the stage direction at the beginning of the play, 'the community in the author's mind is a National Youth Service Corps⁷⁹ camp'. This prelude of a group of amateur actors coming together to rehearse a play for a festival or for fun is now a familiar stratagem in the theatre of Osofisan. The storyline is uncomplicated. After a

⁷⁹ All tertiary education graduates below the age of thirty in Nigeria undergo one-year compulsory national service in an area of the country that is different from their origin. The programme was introduced in Nigeria after the civil war – in 1973 – to aid re-integration and foster national unity.

military *coup d'état*, five musicians – Omele, Epo Oyinbo, Jigi, Sinsin and Redio – arrive at a crossroads, starving, homeless and out of work. They used to perform regularly for the former corrupt politicians but the new military regime frowns at such acts. Omele has led them to the crossroads so they have the opportunity of eating the food offerings left for Esu. However, instead of food, they find pots of cow-dung and sawdust. An Old Man appears and offers them a magic boon; the power to heal the sick and the distressed, and the reward will be whatever the grateful healed offer them. The magic boon works through songs; they have to sing and encourage the sufferer to dance for the healing process to take place.

The proviso is that those sufferers they heal must be worthy of compassion. The bulk of the play comprises a series of episodes in which all the musicians except Omele use the power with the hope of becoming rich, helping those whom Esu has sent to them without their knowledge. Omele, however, chooses to heal an impoverished, pregnant woman who will not be able to reward him, and violates the old man's injunction by using the magic boon a second time, this time to heal two husband and wife lepers, embracing them and taking their disease upon himself. Throughout the healing process, mysterious figures dance and accompany the Minstrels but refuse to join Omele when he disobeys Old man and uses the magic again.

Then the Old Man reappears, revealing himself as Esu, and all the sufferers as gods who have taken part in testing the Minstrels, and whom he has sent. Obaluaye, one of the gods, punishes the Minstrels by inflicting small pox on them. The two lepers also reveal themselves as Orunmila and the goddess Osun, who having initially sent the pregnant woman, disguised as lepers to confirm Omele's compassionate nature. They reward Omele with riches for his compassionate nature.

Osofisan's approach to *Esu* is based on the theme of compassion. In the programme notes (and preface to the published text), the playwright indicates that the play is to be 'performed in a context of delight, with song, dance, and spectacle, to please and enrich' the audience (p. 11⁸⁰). Though a morality play, 'it is also intended to be a rite of fertility, a celebration of the clashing and the fusing of the sexes' as well as 'sufficiently contradict, and compensate, these images of brutality and violence which fill our daily life' (p. 11). So, it is not going to be just song, dance and spectacle but a treatment of the political violence and corruption in the Nigerian social and political setting. Written and first performed⁸¹ in 1984 at the University of Benin, Nigeria, the play starts with a pungent satirical song about the recent military take over of government. The song compares military and civilian rule on the basis of their tendency to be corrupt in equal measure. In all, there are fourteen songs in the play.

Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels is divided into four parts: Orchestra, Overture, Opium and Hangover. After the now familiar playmaking process in the Orchestra, a feature employed in earlier plays such as *Morountodun*, *Four Robbers* and *Cannibal Rage*, the play within the play, which is the actual performance, starts in the Overture. Old Man 'entices' the Minstrels with the promise of wealth. The Minstrels use their mysterious power to help people in need in part three, Opium, and they become 'giddy' in expectation of riches. Epo Oyinbo helps an impotent man regain his virility in return for the promise of land and houses; Sinsin cures a wounded man, a victim of attempted assassination, who promises to repay her with property gained through human sacrifice; Redio helps three people to recover a dubious import licence in exchange for promises of

⁸⁰ All page references from *Major Plays 2* (2003)

⁸¹ *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* is one of Osofisan's more regularly performed plays, with the latest production mounted at the amphitheatre of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in the last week of March / first week of April 2009.

wealth; Jigi saves a prince's life and restores him to his position of power by using her power to kill a priest who wants to turn him into a carrier (p. 65) for killing the royal python. However, Omele becomes a leper after violating Old Man's injunctions.

Hangover starts the following morning when the minstrels are expecting their rewards. They have started living extravagant lifestyles, on credit, in the expectation of the promised riches, and have chased away Omele because of his leprosy despite his insistence on being present to defend himself before the Old Man.

The other Minstrels mock Omele, displaying their greed and breaking vows of solidarity, as Major does in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. The exploitation of parallelism to show how each of the supplicants represents or presents a better or worse cause, or how the Minstrels yield to greed or, in Omele's case, show compassion, is a technique that the playwright uses frequently to expose human nature. Osofisan extends the parallelism to Omele's song, as the other minstrels chase him away they sing antiphonally 'The Song of Tomorrow':

Omele:
 You hassle for glamour,
 For material gains,
 But money does not endure,
 Friendship remains...

When the Old Man reappears, the Minstrels continue to exhibit their selfishness and failure to follow the instructions of the old man to help reduce suffering in the world:

Epo Oyinbo: The important thing is – because I hate beating about the bush – the important thing is that we have reduced suffering for ourselves! (p. 80).

The play ends with an assessment of the quality of choice made by each of the minstrels. Omele is cured of his leprosy and his comrades, 'who have put their selfish greed first

before everything, including their humanity’ (p. 90) receive their punishment of leprosy from Obaluaye, god of small pox.

Throughout the episodes of songs and dance, Esu and his followers remain on stage. In the University of Ife production that I watched in 1986⁸², the followers danced along to sanction the potency of the mysterious power. There was a long, plain backdrop at upstage, which was lit from behind to show the silhouette of the actors as they danced, laughed, giggled and responded in various ways to the songs and reactions of the Minstrels on stage as they tried to redeem themselves. The Ife production received a much more accomplished staging than the Benin production a few months before. The Ife production had the advantage of being a collaboration between the departments of Music and Fine Arts who supplied the orchestra and the props, respectively, and Dramatic Arts. Despite the promise to present a play ‘with song, dance and spectacle’, the staging area was empty, apart from a lone signpost, to create space for dancing. There was a huge backlit linen backdrop, upstage. To stage right, and spilling over into the pit, was a 12-piece orchestra, with drums, wind and string instruments, and a group of singers.

Osofisan admits that he used violence and sex to shock the audience of *Esu*, under the cloak of spectacle and laughter. He admits that the play is an experiment with forms, ‘with forms of production, forms of presentation, forms of entertainment in traditional ways of life, all these forms presented a platform for spectacle and for parables, and for giving the audience choices’ (Osofisan, personal interview, January 1996). And in interview with Olaogun in 2006, Osofisan explained that the ethos of violence:

became even more entrenched in the military years. We were being ruled by soldiers and the concept of violence became the reigning ideal because you couldn’t get anything except by force.

⁸² *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* was performed on the Pit Theatre, University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife) stage for twenty-six days in January 1986, instead of the usual run of 3 – 5 days on University campuses.

The soldiers ruled through brutality. They continuously brutalized the society and of course this has effects on the psyche of the populace. Because we all had to learn in the end that, to survive at all, you had to become violent yourself, to turn into an agent of brutality, of cruelty (Olaogun 2006).

To mask the representation of violence on stage, Osofisan introduced sex and sexual innuendoes and symbols on stage. This attempt at using sexually expressive acts is of course familiar to his audience, who are involved with traditional rites like Oke'badan⁸³ festival during which people sing vulgar songs and women wear phalluses to celebrate fertility:

That's what I wanted: a kind of play that will end in an orgy of gross sensual *jouissance*, of an uncontrolled and liberating delirium. I am talking metaphorically of course, not in literal terms. But I mean a pure and primitive ecstasy, just as we had in some ceremonies of fertility in the traditional society (Olaogun 2006).

The first reference to sex in the drama is a criticism of the December 1983 coup d'état. It is the first song in the drama, by a lover to his partner, and it serves to familiarise the audience with the intention of the play and to encourage their participation in the performance. The song is adapted from a folktale, which I first heard during moonlight sessions in my teens, but which was made more popular as one of the tales in the primary school primer in Nigeria. This made participation easy for the audience. The folktale is about a fight between the Skunk and the Squirrel in the market. Ijapa the tortoise, being a friend of the Squirrel, attempts to 'separate' the combatants by dealing some blows on the Skunk. The Skunk defends itself by biting off Ijapa's nose, leaving the later to lament his foolishness.

⁸³ Oke'badan is the central hill deity of Ibadan, Nigeria and is celebrated every year in the city and surrounding villages in a carnival-festival directed mostly by women in processions going from house to house singing songs with explicit references to sexual organs, teasing chiefs, men and government officials.

Osofisan keeps the refrain and tune but changes the lyrics to satirical lines that comment on the reasons for the military takeover, citing the corruption and the fraudulent practices of the politicians. It ends with the lover asking the partner to forget about the terror of military incursion into governance and shut the door against prying eyes. As an alternative to extending the criticism of the new government, there is a suggestion of what goes on between couples behind closed doors, and in the Ife production that I watched several times, the actors and actresses fell down in a sexual embrace. The second song, Maiden and Music Man, continues with the theme, with phrases like ‘broken girl’ and ‘magic wand of blind love’ (p. 26), leading to more explicit sexual references in the dialogue and the other songs.

The new military government of Generals Muhammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon in 1984 launched a programme to encourage farming and reduce reliance on imported food and goods. However, this was a derisory proposal to the Minstrels who were not used to farming, and who turned every image into a sexual representation, after the custom of the Oke’badan festival. As Jigi recounts her response to the soldier who entreated her to change career from a musician to that of a farmer:

“Soldier, what do you mean? How can I go and farm, when I myself, I am a farm already?” He was puzzled by that. You should see his face. “I beg your pardon?” he asked. “You don’t understand? No? Well, it’s like this... the man brings his shovel where I am lying. He digs. Yes, he digs! And I respond, like this! (*Makes a suggestive movement with her buttocks*). Soldier, don’t turn away. Let me tell you... how the seeds pour in!” (p. 26).

Also, in Epo Oyinbo’s song for the impotent man, ‘Let the Snake Rise’, there is no subtlety in the sexual reference, as the chorus sing

Our wells fill to brim –
 And the snake will rise –
 Snake will rise and strike –
 Then a mother’s cries –
 Welcome, new baby! – (p. 41)

The stage direction notes that ‘we now see a bulge under his cloth. The man runs after *Sinsin*, who flees, then after *Jigi*’ (p. 41). The ‘snake’ here is a metaphor for phallus. In the Ife performance, the actor playing the part of the impotent man actually ran across the stage among the audience in ecstasy, shouting ‘it’s working! My *kini*⁸⁴ is working! *O ti dide!*⁸⁵’. Osofisan’s introduced slapstick actions into this drama and this increased the popularity of the performance. The popularity of the production among the university audience however was almost overshadowed by religious controversy and a campaign by a section of the university community who were Christians to stop the it, as I relate below.

I remarked at the beginning of this chapter that Osofisan’s agenda during this period centre on challenging popular myths and rewriting history. *Esu* challenges Yoruba beliefs in gods and mythological beings. In an interview a few years before writing the play, Osofisan expressed his intention to use myth and ritual subversively. He states that he borrows ‘ancient forms specifically to unmask them, to use theatrical magic to undermine the magic of superstition’ (Awodiya 1993: 20). *Esu* advocates, as a drama, a societal change and a change from superstitious belief to objective analysis of the people’s ‘material condition’ (Awodiya 1993: 20), the immediate situation of the people and the capacity of the people to re-assess crucial problems through discussion and agitation. Osofisan subjects Yoruba myth to mediation and the result is a re-interpretation of the official version that is not the ‘reflection of the needs, the wants, and the aspirations of the ruling class’ (Awodiya 1993: 46).

⁸⁴ *Kini* is a Yoruba term for ‘something’ or an item. It is also used as slang for the male reproductive organ.

⁸⁵ *O ti dide* literally means ‘it’s risen!’ or ‘it’s awake!’

One of the most influential accounts of Yoruba history (and myth) is by Samuel Johnson⁸⁶, an Anglican vicar who mediated Yoruba history and sought to find Christian parallels between Yoruba myths and Christian mythology and biblical references. Yoruba gods were re-interpreted in Christian terms and, finding no equivalent to the Christian Satan, Johnson chose Esu as the closest in his estimation to the devil. However, the nature of Yoruba worldview is that there is no god in the Yoruba pantheon who is totally negative or totally positive. Osofisan's intention with *Vagabond Minstrels* was to re-interpret history and myth, to re-discover the real nature of Esu and the other gods, and reinstate them in the consciousness of the people, not as rigid Christian mythological creations, but as metaphorical beings whose existence is dependent on the people's action and commitment to social justice.

To re-ignite the debate about the gods, in particular Esu, and to expose the 'difference between reality and its many mirrors' (*Esu* p. 94); between reality of existence of the gods and their being as 'metaphors in a fading tale' (*Esu* p. 94) whose echo of believability is disappearing with the continual rise of Christianity among the Yoruba, Osofisan's *Esu* employs shock tactics and subtle subversive publicity to launch the debate about the relevance of, and re-interpretation of, Esu in the societal psyche. A few weeks before the Ife production, publicity began with emphasis on admiration of Esu as a Yoruba god. This created controversy on the Ife campus, especially among Christian groups such as Scripture Unionists, and some charismatic and evangelical movements. They started to picket the Pit Theatre and dissuade people from showing interest in the play because it was about Esu, whom they interpreted as the devil. This not promoted the drama but it maintained the argument between the Christian belief that equated Esu to Satan, and Yoruba belief that Esu is a god whose acts of trickery are necessary for balance in nature.

⁸⁶ Samuel Johnson's *A History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* was published in 1921, after it was located, 20 years after his death.

It also encouraged a debate between those two positions and the subversive intention of Osofisan to prove that ‘Esu does not exist, save in your imagination!’ (*Esu* p. 95); that all the gods in the Yoruba pantheon are, like history, mediated reasoning. Osofisan renders the gods ‘impotent’ by challenging their myths and casting them as ‘realities’ that exist only in the people’s imagination.

As the play ends, the cast, led by Obaluaye, declare their metaphorical existence – ‘I do not exist’ – subtly professing the capacity of human beings to shape and re-direct their destiny, for:

Redio: [...] Even a play must face the truth.

[...]

Epo Oyinbo: There is no magic to the riddle of evil.

Sinsin: Kindness cannot be willed by the waving of a wand.

Redio: No incantations can cure the anguish caused by the greed of politicians.

Jigi: And prayers are not sufficient to counter the violence in the streets (*Esu* p. 93).

Though Osofisan might have stated that his intention was to create a fertility rite for the modern stage, or ‘a simple morality play’ (*Esu* p. 11), the play is a re-assessment of the religious sentiments that accompany the manifestation of the gods in people’s mind. Osofisan persisted with demystifying and demythologising the gods through spectacular theatrical forms of presentation, even as he surreptitiously criticised the politicians for the excesses which led to the military take over of government in 1984, a topic he returned to in his next play, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*. which he produced at the University of Ibadan in 1988. The all-encompassing universe of the play covers many issues – from using compassion to respond to violence against the body and the people’s psyche in the society, to a counter-text on the hypocritical moralising of the Christian sects in the society, using the Oke’badan festival format of satire and fertility rites (hence the sub-title – a fertility rite for the modern stage).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how Osofisan challenges the myths he inherited from his culture, and to re-interpret and rewrite the history of the Yoruba people has been successful from the viewpoint of staging and popular reception of the plays by Nigerian audience⁸⁷. His language, both spoken and visual, and his use of imagery lend accessibility to his drama, making them easy to produce and enjoy as performance. For example, *Esu* needs only a backlit linen and a signpost, and the leprosy effect can easily be achieved with white powder. *Cannibal Rage* does not need a set, and the props are simple to make. However, from a materialist perspective, the plays have not achieved the agenda of changing the nature of government in Nigeria and launching a government of the people, neither have they created a class-less society in the country. Nevertheless, Osofisan has succeeded in using his drama to start debates on problems like corruption (*Another Raft*) and other causes of anguish in the society, to the understanding of the roles of the gods. Because of the reception of the plays and the frequency of production, it is my view that the playwright has succeeded in placing his drama at the forefront of democratic struggles in Nigeria. His intention during the 1980s, the period of study of this chapter, was to engage in a sustained debate with representation of history and myth. Having texts to which he responded to in paraphrases, or used as counter-texts or sub-texts, increased the awareness of his objective and the accessibility of his plays because the original texts – other plays or folktales – were familiar to his audience. For instance, Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* were not only popular in Nigeria, they are studied in secondary schools as literature texts. The texts are therefore familiar to Osofisan's audience, who are mainly university students and staff. The Civil

⁸⁷ See, for example, Sandra Richards (1987); Reuben Abati (1993); Dayo Ajigbotoso (1993); Waziri Adio (1994); Sina Oladeinde (1996); Chris Omozokpia (1996); Sola Balogun (1997); Christine Matzke (1997)

War is still a topical issue in the country's political debate, and so is the portrayal of Esu in Christian teaching.

In the next chapter, I examine how Osofisan extends the target of his drama to the rest of Africa with his pan-African nationalism and the quest for change. I scrutinise his re-interpretation of the pan-African agenda as 'pan-Yoruba', as he imposes the Yoruba influence and codes on his dramaturgical reassessment and re-interrogation of the African political situation.

Chapter 5

Pan-African Nationalism and the Quest for Change: Plays of the Nineties

Introduction

With the 1990s, Osofisan expanded the scope of his dramaturgy to include pan-African themes. In this chapter, I look at some of the plays. I examine his transition from being a Yoruba dramatist to being regarded a world playwright; and the renegotiation of his artistic principles to become more conscious of his Yoruba heritage. The plays I have examined in this chapter were all written and produced in the 1990s but the dramatic style and ideological concerns are closer to those in *Morountodun* (1979) and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1984) because our dramatist, in my view, has realised the success of such plays on stage and considered the form and use of language more accessible to his audience. In short, he has achieved maturity as a dramatist who is confident of his skills. The plays are modelled after the successful early dramas, with the playwright extending further his agenda to challenge and modify myth, and to re-write contemporary history. I have examined *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990), *Tegonni, An African Antigone* (1994), *Nkrumah-ni! Africa-ni!* (1994) and *Many Colours Make The Thunder-King* (1997)⁸⁸ as representative of Osofisan's dramaturgy in this period. Osofisan reviews the issue of political leadership in Africa, using contemporary and historical materials. The dramatist also links his socialist agenda, as expressed in *Morountodun*, for instance, with the ideals of the pan-African movement and the thoughts of some of the early African political leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sékou Touré of Guinea Conakry and Amilcar Cabral.

Pan-Africanism refers to political movements that have as their goal the unity of Africans and the elimination of colonialism and neo-colonialism from the continent. Started in the

⁸⁸ These are the years in which the plays were first produced.

United States of America and England by descendants of slaves, it had leaders such as Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois. Pan-Africanism was adopted by African leaders in 1958 at the First Conference of Independent African States in Accra, Ghana, and incorporated into the charter of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) when it was formed in 1963. The charter announced:

determination to promote understanding among our peoples and co-operation among states in response to the aspirations of our peoples for brotherhood and solidarity, in a larger unity transcending ethnic and national differences [and a desire] that all African States should henceforth unite so that the welfare and wellbeing of their peoples can be assured (www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/text/OAU_Charter_1963.pdf accessed 4 April 2009).

The purpose of the organisation, expressed in Article II (1) a, was to ‘promote the unity and solidarity of the African States’. In November 1958, Ghana and Guinea joined to form the Ghana-Guinea Union, which became the Union of African States when Mali joined the union in April 1961. The union dissolved during 1962⁸⁹ but there was still a strong cooperation between the countries; when Nkrumah was deposed in a military *coup d’état* in 1966, Sékou Touré made him co-president of Guinea. By 2000 when African leaders replaced OAU with the African Union, the idea of a United African States had been changed to defending the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of member states⁹⁰.

Pan-Africanism had two main objectives: to liberate Africans and the African diaspora from racial and political oppression and economic exploitation; and to achieve political, cultural, and economic integration among African countries. Osofisan’s attempt to identify his work with pan-Africanism in the 1990s is centred on finding the cause of

⁸⁹ For more information about this union, see Kwame Nkrumah, *Towards Colonial Freedom: Africa in the Struggle Against World Imperialism*, London: Zed Books, 1973

⁹⁰ See the African Union constitutive act, Article 3b at http://www.africa-union.org/root/AU/AboutAU/Constitutive_Act_en.htm accessed 2 April 2009.

Africa's underdevelopment. Pan-Africanism, as understood by Osofisan, is close to the ideals of the late Ghanaian leader, Kwame Nkrumah 'but as only one of the measures necessary for the process of creating an egalitarian, socialist society' (Osofisan 2001: 158) on the continent. The agitation for good governance by democrats served as a form of catalyst, influencing the Osofisan's direction regarding pan-Africanism. The plays he wrote during this period feature the role of women and other marginalised sections of the community in political reforms.

In spite of his engagement with pan-Africanism and political reforms in Africa, Osofisan continues to engage with other writers and dramas, and a few of the more recent plays are adaptations of, or responses to, dramas by other writers. For instance, *Tegonni, An African Antigone* is an adaptation of Euripides' *Antigone*. In *Andorra Goes Kinshasha* and *One Legend, Many Seasons*, Osofisan amalgamates his drama with the texts of other writers; he uses Max Frisch's play, *Andorra*, to scrutinize the latter days of President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and the failure of his ideology of *authenticité*. The ideology was Mobutu's attempt to re-invigorate the pan-African principles of the slain first president of Congo, Patrice Lumumba, and was designed to create a more centralized and singular national identity for the country. *One Legend, Many Seasons* re-tells the story Charles Dickens' novel, *A Christmas Carol*, from an African perspective.

To assess Osofisan's dramaturgy around this period, I have closely studied the four plays listed above as representative of his output. I noted above that Osofisan has moved from being a Yoruba playwright to being regarded a world dramatist of Yoruba heritage; he brings in the Yoruba influence, history, culture and customs into all his dramas, including plays that are set outside a Yoruba context, like *Nkrumah-ni...* Osofisan re-interprets the myth and history surrounding Kwame Nkrumah, Sékou Touré and Amílcar Cabral; the

political pronouncements; and the biographical importance of the men. He interrogates the general pan-African worldview and political ideologies through the narrow view of a mediated Yoruba history and myth. For instance, *Yungba-Yungba* uses Yoruba folktales and cultural practices to investigate political leadership and change of government in Africa. The playwright illustrates the ambition of African leaders with the play about the legendary deified Oyo king, Shango, in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* (1997).

Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest: A Rite of Rebellion

Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest is one of Osofisan's most accomplished dramas to date. An investigative rite of sociological rebellion, it is a deliberate revision of popular theatrical forms dealing with surreptitious insurrection. The phrase 'Dance Contest' symbolises 'the troubled situations' (Osofisan, *Another Raft*, 1988: 5) of African countries and expresses the intoxicating orgy of election carnivals celebrated in almost every community in Africa. Taking the metaphor further, a contest, to be adjudged free and fair, must have parameters of fairness, clear rules, 'Because unless the rules are clear / Every crook has a bright career / And, when cunning enters the race / Merit and hard work have no place' (Osofisan Osofisan, *Yungba-Yungba*, 1993: 84⁹¹). The question then is, how do you create a fair consideration that will be acceptable to all for a 'dance contest' without generating rancour and bitterness among groups who share the same experience, if we accept that dance forms do indeed come from a shared experience? Africa and its perennial problem of conflicts and misunderstanding are likened to a dance contest with no clear winner in sight. And the nature of the contest provides avenues for opportunities to create rules that are not in the interest of the general populace.

⁹¹ All page references are from *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contests: A Parable for our Times*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) PLC, 1993.

‘Yungba-Yungba’ is a Yoruba term which means, in translation, a season of plenty and contentment, or ‘sweetness’. This title links directly to *Morountodun* (I have found a sweet thing) in *Morountodun*, and a suggestion of a revival of the socialist intentions of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The idiom is that of hope; of liberation ideologues whose aspiration is to forge a universal understanding in an age of anomy. Joining the two metaphors in the title is a window into the intention of the play to intertextually challenge the political status quo with a message of hope. The sub-title of the play – A parable for our times – strengthens this position: a parable after all is another way of speaking unpalatable truth to power; part of the arsenal of ‘surreptitious insurrection’. In *Yungba-Yungba*, Osofisan applies the theme of sufferings under ruthless tyrants to Africa’s long history of oppression. The popular demands for democracy on the continent are expressed through the agitation of young girls for freedom. Yoruba rituals, myth, storytelling and praise songs are used to advance the argument of the play.

The plot of *Yungba-Yungba* is simple, and derives partly from folktales and partly from contemporary political and social issues. The community organises annual dance contests between girls from the three founding families – Mayesoge, Arooroton and Jeosunwon. The winner takes the most eligible man as husband. However, the annual contests had not always been solely to choose husbands. The winner also became a priestess and served as youth representative in the council of elders for a period of one year. The current priestess, in the post for ten years, is not ready to surrender the privilege, until a group of young girls, naming themselves Yungba-Yungba, and belonging to none of the contesting houses, challenges her. Through an eloquent articulation of arguments about freedom and responsibility, the Yungba-Yungba, led by Ayoka, compels priestess Iyeneri to allow the election of another priestess.

Rumbles of democratic yearnings, or what Osofisan refers to in the programme notes for the first production as the ‘fever of freedom’, popular across West and Central Africa in the early 1990s, underpin the slant of the play’s dialectics. As Laboopo, one of the Yungba-Yungba, implies, the demand for democracy, for things to be done with the consent and knowledge of all is no disruption of social ideals (p. 21). Ayoka adds: ‘...We must reclaim our rights, re-establish the principles of merit and free choice!’ (p. 26). Using her knowledge of history and tradition, Iyeneri engages the Yungba-Yungba in a debate over possible political reforms; humane dictatorship or rowdy democracy. She paints a picture of past chaos and rivalry caused by the contests, which she ended by holding on to power. She claims to have restored peace and harmony among the women and queries whether her achievements are presentiments of dictatorship:

Iyeneri: ... restored peace. And healed the gaping wounds among our people. And gave hope again to our new brides and our virgins. And renewed our annual, fertilizing festival, rich with blessings... Tell me now then, tell me, you who seem to have grown wiser than all of us your elders! Do all these sound like a lust for power in your ears? When you demand that we retire, are you saying that the harmony we have succeeded in imposing for so long has now endured enough...? (pp. 45 - 46).

She emphasises the enduring peace she built by arranging a symbolic competition in place of the traditional rite. When she finally agrees to step down, she creates a diversion in the democratisation process by attempting to destroy the leader of the Yungba-Yungba group. The plotting and deception that break out among the rival groups at the restoration of the democratic process appear to vindicate her argument for autocratic government (Dunton 1992: 93). Iyeneri’s machination encourage the squabble among the rival groups. Iyeneri’s intention of scuttling the democratisation process echoes the political tactics of many African leaders who seek to perpetuate themselves in power for ‘life’. The girls, however, are more than a match for the priestess. They introduce the principle of

deliberate deception into the dialectics to counter Iyeneri's scheming, aided by the priestess' assistant and interpreter.

Despite warning by the playwright against the temptation to read the play as a purely Nigerian phenomenon, the facts are just too overwhelming to disregard, although the signs are similar to the political situation in some of the countries in West and Central Africa, in particular Republic of Togo, Republic of Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. The parallel between the instances in the drama and the Nigerian republic is remarkable. The play was written and performed in 1990, three years before the 1993 elections that were cancelled in the same way that Iyeneri tries in *Yungba-Yungba*, but the process leading to the 1993 elections had started the previous year (1989), and the play could have been based on the political events around that period. The then Nigerian president, General Ibrahim Babangida, annulled the 1993 presidential elections in a bid to remain in power. Babangida came to power in a military *coup d'état* in 1985 with a promise to return the governance of Nigeria to an elected civilian leadership, 'as soon as possible'. Part of his plan was to start the process with the formation of political parties and establishment of local government councils. However, after a few years in power, he changed his plans, with the entire process culminating in the cancellation of the 1993 elections and the subsequent 'stepping aside' of the president. Babangida's imposed rule, to which he insisted there was no alternative, had a hegemonic notion somewhat akin to Iyeneri's pronouncement that the unnamed community has no choice but to continue accepting her as priestess.

In *Yungba-Yungba*, Osofisan uses folktales, myths, rituals and contemporary history to weave a plot around the life-presidency syndrome common among African leaders. Iyeneri, with the connivance of her assistant, Aro Orisa, a herbalist at the shrine, and the

knowledge of Aperin, interpreter and storyteller, decides to attack the plans of the girls by removing their leader. She contrives to make Ayoka, the leader of the Yungba-Yungba group, go mad, hoping that other girls would believe that the gods are angry with Ayoka for trying to go against the wishes of the priestess. However, Aperin warns Ayoka of the priestess' intention, an act that prompts Ayoka to devise another strategy – what I term 'deliberate deception' – to defeat Iyeneri in her game. She pretends to have become insane, hoping that Iyeneri would show remorse and allow the contest to go on, but the priestess attributes her insanity to the effect of the impertinence of youth and the particular stubbornness of Ayoka:

Iyeneri: ... It is the food that the child loves to eat that eventually chokes it... Ayoka has gone to answer the call of her head, and there's nothing you can do about it (p. 98).

This lack of compassion for Ayoka's insanity finally convinces her and the girls that Iyeneri is beyond being persuaded to vacate the office gracefully, as Ayoka articulates:

Ayoka: ... I wanted to give you a chance to redeem yourself. Because of the past, because of the love I had for you! ... But it's ended priestess. You're no longer the person you used to be! This power, it has corroded your soul. We must save you from yourself, and save our community... (p. 103).

Aperin adds, to Iyeneri:

Aperin: ... power [that] betrayed you! You held it for too long, you allowed it to kill your humanity! You would keep it at all costs!... And I tried in vain to warn you! (p. 104)

Freedom from tyranny is at the heart of *Yungba-Yungba*. Iyeneri becomes the victim rather than the controller of the forces of dissension she has unleashed, proving that leaders who refuse to take responsibility for their actions and act according to the wishes of the majority of their people can become victims of their actions. Aperin concludes that Iyeneri's continued hold on power has 'killed her humanity' (p. 104).

The role of Aperin in the play is intriguing. As interpreter and storyteller, she acts as the conscience of the community, subtly guiding it on the path that is in the best interests of the land. Yet, her stance on issues sometimes seems equivocal, prompting Iyeneri to remark:

For shame, Aperin! One of your tactical dodges again! If you go on like this, even the chameleon will have to concede her throne to you in the house of dissembling! (p. 40).

Later, Aperin's performance of the song 'The Stomach and the Limbs' to convince the girls about the different roles of the various members of the community, gives credence to Iyeneri's criticism of her assistant as a dissembler. The song gives an inexact legitimacy to the central authority of the priestess, by conferring on the stomach the right to be fed and protected by the limbs. The hands and gullet worship the stomach, feeding it with choice delicacies, until Esu comes to 'enlighten' them:

Look at Stomach, and look at you three
Who does the work, and who eats the food?
What's this kind of drudgery called?
So such fools are still in this world! (p. 51)

The three stop worshipping the Stomach but as Stomach grows gaunt from hunger, so do the limbs, until they decide to seek amends with an unrepentant Stomach:

“Listen,” he said, “the food the Stomach eats
Is for passing along to the needy streets
Of man's anatomy. All I do is
Distill it, drain it of poison and disease,
And then share it out among you
As I was born and raised to do:

“We feed ourselves when we feed a sovereign;
The capacious parasol of a queen
Shelters every one in search of a shade- (pp. 52-53)

The story appears to give legitimacy to dictatorship. Aperin's character comes closest to the role of Osofisan as a writer in Africa in promoting individual and collective freedom against all hegemonies. Although Ayoka emerges as the leader of the girls against the

machination of the priestess, it is Aperin who emerges as the revolutionary ideologue; she is the one who consciously probes the wounds of the community with her stories and riddles. Visibly part of the 'State' as Iyeneri's interpreter, indeed the voice of the state, she also sympathises with the democratic yearnings of the community to which she belongs and she serves as one of the judges presiding over the contest to elect a new priestess. She, more than Ayoka, is the pivot of the drama, fashioning a route towards democracy through deception, but with a focus on unity, the main objective of the pan-African nationalism:

Iyeneri: Aperin! You betrayed me!

Aperin: Not me, Yeye! It was power that betrayed you! You held for too long, you allowed it to kill your humanity! You would keep it at all costs! You were even ready to defile your own peace week! No, Iyeneri, I could not follow you that far (p. 104).

The play ends in a dance contest to choose the next priestess, with everybody in the community eligible to participate in the contest. As in previous plays – *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, for example – Osofisan suggests that members of the audience be judges of the contest. The contest is in three parts: a few questions 'about our country and our culture' or 'about current events, or on the historical and cultural heritage of the community in which the play is being performed'; 'a kind of beauty parade'; and a free dance (p. 121-122). The script insists on this:

Aperin: [...] We want to ensure there is absolute fair play tonight! A neutral panel! Any volunteers please... (*She picks a number of volunteers from the audience, and leads them to a bench*)

[...]

(...*This must needless to say, be a genuine competition, in which members of the audience should be encouraged to participate. To enhance this, actresses should be planted in the audience, and give the impression of spontaneous enthusiasm which should persuade their neighbours*) (p. 122).

This is supposed to encourage participation among the audience, who have become 'co-opted' as members of the play's community. However, in the premiere production at Arts

Theatre, University of Ibadan between 18th and 28th July 1990, the director, Sunmbo Marinho, omitted this part, choosing instead to end the play with the penultimate scene, which is the story of Song, Drum and Dance. The director told me the ending was not performed for a few reasons:

It did not work in rehearsals and it was a decision I took... you saw the audience number every night... how could we organise a free-for-all dance competition without creating chaos in the building. The performance was long enough without that dance... (Sunmbo Marinho, interview with Sola Adeyemi, 1990).

I find this response unsatisfactory because my view is that omission of the competition at the end makes the performance incomplete, an assessment with which Osofisan agreed. The Arts Theatre space is not suited for that kind of free dance but the director could have moved the performance outside the theatre, creating a situation that integrates the theatre world with reality. Without the competition, the audience leaves the performance without really knowing how the play ends; it gives a picture of an incomplete drama. When I asked his opinion about the omission of the epilogue and the closing competition, Osofisan stated:

I think those parts are important to the whole structure of the play. The ending is important to make the full statement. That's why it's incomplete without it. The ending brings the audience into the final decisions made; without that, the play isn't complete (Osofisan, interview with Sola Adeyemi, 1990).

The Yungba-Yungba, through the final action of Ayoka, employs the same kind of strategy used by tortoise in many Yoruba folktales, a strategy Osofisan has referred to elsewhere as 'surreptitious insurrection'⁹²:

But by surreptitious tactics, the voice of protest in a one-party state cannot be pressed to the public ear. When the state in question is, in addition, under the iron grip of military dictatorship, and one too that is stridently intolerant of criticism and opposition, protest in whatever form becomes a gamble with danger, unless formulated with especial cunning (2001a: 50).

⁹² See Osofisan 1997: 29.

For the artist to criticise authority or a figure of power must employ tactics that will not make the criticism or the artist open to censorship. Ayoka puts herself in the frontline of the campaigners to persuade Iyeneri to change her mind and agree with the aspirations of the youth to see a democratic process that will place their future in their own hands. This is what *Yungba-Yungba* is about: the struggle, all over Africa, between self-perpetuating regimes and democratic forces; between acquiescence to tyranny and protest. It calls for a new generation with a vibrant and restorative ideology to step forth not only to question the tyranny of the dictators, but to take charge of the current and direct its flow ‘in order to demystify the Terror and help [my] people in their struggle for survival’ (Osofisan 1997: 29).

In questioning the tyranny of oppression and the hegemony of power, the success of *Yungba-Yungba* is advanced through its identification with current intricacies of socio-political problems in Africa. As a political play, it engages with issues that promote tyranny in Africa, especially the problem of ‘sit-tight’ leadership that has beset Africa since the 1960s. The play also re-presents the main source of anguish in African countries as leadership, and the perennial battle of the progressive forces against tyranny of oppression. The identification is not limited to issues alone; *Yungba-Yungba* also embraces the experiences of participants – performers, audience members, readers; all of whom are Nigerians living under the same political dispensation – thus resulting in a drama that recalls a critical awareness of the participants’ socio-political milieu. Moreover, Osofisan uses woman as symbol of the nation and of revolution in this play; a familiar device in African literature. From Sembene Ousmane to Wole Soyinka, from Nuruddin Farah to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, woman is often deployed as an embodiment of the nation. In discourses of nationalism and those who question these discourses (as in

Farah's *Maps*⁹³), the role of woman has remained much the same; as a signifying centre around which coalesce ideas of the nation and nationhood. Osofisan's use of woman in this play to symbolise the nation is progressive while still being part of an enduring tradition, because it appeals not to primordial sentiments and atavistic yearnings, but to rationality and progress. Woman is not only used as a symbol, but the unique aspect of *Yungba-Yungba* in this respect is that it has an all-female cast, and in the premiere production at Ibadan in 1990, there were forty actresses in the performance.

In Nigeria and most other countries in Africa, women are politically marginalised; their involvement in state affairs is limited to secondary roles allowed by men. The narrative in other literature has also been from the perspective of men; *Yungba-Yungba* offers an alternative to officialdom and insists on:

a dialectical counter-narrative in which history is seen from the lower side, from the perspective of those who are society's victims. This is why female heroes are so prominent in my plays, since the empowerment of women is crucial to this prospective program of liberation and modernization (Osofisan 2001a: 58).

Yungba-Yungba is close in intent to the ideals of pan-African nationalism and the quest for political change in Africa, with its accent on democracy and responsible government. The drama advocates the voluntary relinquishing of power by regimes who have served their elected terms of office and criticises leaders who hold on to power against their people's wish. This message is clear in the text, which is appropriately dedicated to one of the pan-African leaders, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who had voluntarily handed political power over to a successor four years before Osofisan wrote the play.

⁹³ New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999

Tegonni: An African Antigone: Confronting Colonialism

Tegonni, An African Antigone is Osofisan's most consciously intertextual drama and the first to directly engage with the colonial theme since *The Cooling Spring* (1967). The context is colonial Nigeria in the period between the existence of Yoruba city-states and the formal colonisation of the country; in the late 19th century. Before examining how Osofisan uses *Tegonni* in his agenda for change, let us examine the antecedents to this ambitious play.

Tegonni is an adaptation of *Antigone* by Sophocles, and the play owes its basic plotting to the Greek original; the story is similar to the conflict between brothers Polyneices and Eteocles. Osofisan closely engages with *Antigone's* plot and invites characters from the early play into the two main versions of *Tegonni*. The other major antecedent to Osofisan's play is the colonial context; the pacification of African people by European powers in the 19th century and the inscription of the colonial rules into the awareness of the people. It is my view that Osofisan uses *Tegonni* to link the oppressive sensibilities of Creon in Sophocles' play to the major political and economic uprising against British rule in Nigeria in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and to echo the pan-African sentiments of the colonial and post-colonial period. In a sense, his drama presents a shadow of the pan-African form, a localised protest which later became a major movement. Another major factor in Osofisan's play is the appropriation of Yoruba myth and legend; Osofisan introduces Yemoja, the Yoruba river goddess to bridge the transition between the classical past and the dramatic present, and between the pre-colonial legendary past and the colonial realities. Essentially, *Tegonni* is a 'post-scription' whose aim is re-presenting colonial narratives and re-viewing original prejudices⁹⁴ (Adeyemi 2000: [1]).

⁹⁴ My exact words: 'I use the term "post-scription" here for narratives whose aim is to explain or re-present colonial narratives in a more acceptable manner, acceptable in the sense of erasing original prejudices expressed by the original narratives, a kind of rationalisation after the fact.' (Adeyemi 2000).

Lastly, Osofisan advocates radical social changes in his drama. Because of the focus of his work, women, the underprivileged and the lower class in the society have taken central stage in his plays, as victims or, as revolutionary ideologues. In *Tegonni*, Osofisan introduces gender issue into the context of the play by establishing Tegonni as a non-conformist revolutionary who ventures into the male spaces of bronze casting and membership of *egúngún* cult. This sets the tone of the play and makes acceptance of Tegonni's choice to marry the white District Officer easier to comprehend.

The *Tegonni* text that I examine here is a major revision of an earlier drama presented as a workshop production at Theater Emory of the Emory University, Atlanta, United States of America in 1994, and which the playwright described as a 'manuscript in motion' (Osofisan 2001a: 204). The version I use was presented for the first time at the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 1998. Because of the locations – USA and Nigeria – both versions are different and the emphases are shifted and placed differently, as Osofisan's intentions and agenda changed from being reactionary to the pro-democracy protests which were fall-outs of the annulment of the 1993 elections in Nigeria; to being reflective of the circumstances that led to the political problems. The Nigerian version is the closest to the Osofisan style in terms of dramaturgy and therefore suits my assessment of his writing for this thesis. There is a third version which the playwright rewrote for the international stage, and which has been produced successfully by Chuck Mike in England, New York (USA) and at the University of Richmond, USA (19-22 April 2007).

To clarify the points I made above, Osofisan pitches colonial interpretation of culture against contemporary Yoruba cultural norms. *Tegonni* is, as summarised by Biodun Jeyifo, set in:

the colonial past and engages colonial domination/authority at the point of its most retrograde, supremacist inscription in ideas of

“weaker races” and “inferior, effeminate peoples” and the determination to absolutize, naturalize, and hierarchize racial and cultural difference (Osofisan, interviewed by Biodun Jeyifo, 2001a: 204).

The plot is similar to that of Sophocles’ text; however, the subject matter is different. Sophocles’ play ponders on the values of morality against the tyranny of human law and tries to differentiate between the attraction of a strong leader and the power of a tyrant. Osofisan’s argument in *Tegonni* centres on the dialectics of power play between the oppressed and the oppressor; the ruled and the ruler; the female aggressor and the male colonialist in an imperial context.

Tegonni is a struggle against colonial oppression. *Tegonni* is set in the imaginary northern Yoruba town of Oke Osun in the late 19th century when British imperial power was at its zenith in Nigeria. Princess Tegonni is about to be married to Capt. Allan Jones, the white District Officer for the area. As the wedding procession moves from the palace to the market square, it encounters the corpse of the bride’s elder brother, Oyekunle (Polyneices), with stern soldiers who have orders not to allow the body to be buried, standing guard. This is to serve as punishment for waging war against colonial rulers instead of collaborating with them like his junior brother, Adoloro (Eteocles). In a moment of defiance, Tegonni symbolically buries her brother, an action that enrages the colonial governor, Lt. General Carter-Ross, and earns her a death sentence. The governor offers to grant her a reprieve if she openly apologises, ‘before the whole town’ (p.93⁹⁵). The governor also orders Jones to cancel the wedding; he reiterates the political sentiment behind the colonisation of the various spaces of the Empire, which were to conquer and rule, and equates the bringing of the Christian cross to the ‘savages’ as a civilising – almost a cleansing – act. The women stage a protest to rescue Tegonni, which further

⁹⁵ All references are from *Tegonni (An African Antigone)*, Ibadan: Concept Publications Limited, 2007

enrages the governor. He threatens to sell her to slavery, like her ancestors (p. 104). In the confrontation, he suffers a heart attack while Tegonni is killed by gunshots.

My position in this section of the thesis is that Osofisan engages with *Antigone*, using the Greek play as an antithesis to re-write and re-define the colonial history of the Yoruba people. My argument is that he has gone further in that use, by reconciling the colonial position and re-interpreting the British imperialist policies collectively as a negative agent in the development of Yorubaland. His attempt at re-configuring history proves to be successful, particularly because of his employment of an old historical model, Sophocles' *Antigone*, a Greek play written in 441BC, as a base. Osofisan also uses other antecedent texts like Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, 'Ozymandias' to advance his debate about the link between imperialism and tyranny (see below).

Before discussing the importance of *Tegonni* and its position as one of the most significant plays in the oeuvre of Osofisan, I am going to consider the differences between the Emory script and the Ibadan script⁹⁶, highlight the changes and state why I have chosen to use the Ibadan script in this thesis.

The first notable difference in the texts is in the title; in the Emory version, Osofisan separates the two title subjects with a colon, as in *Tegonni: an African Antigone*. In the Ibadan version, the title has changed to *Tegonni (An African Antigone)*. Though subtle, the difference between these two titles modifies the emphasis of the play significantly enough to affect the directorial approach during the Ibadan production of 1998. The colon indicates that the play *Tegonni*, though complete in itself, is also related to another play or plays. The playwright is cognizant⁹⁷ of other African adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone*;

⁹⁶ I refer to the 1994 text as the Emory script; and the 1998 text as the Ibadan script.

⁹⁷ See Osofisan, interviewed by Jeyifo 2001a: 204-207.

like Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Odale's Choice* (1962), *The Island* (1973), by Athol Fugard (with John Kani and Winston Ntshona) and Sylvain Bemba's *Noces Posthumes de Santigone*⁹⁸ (1988). Having 'an' after the colon suggests that *Tegonni* is just one of many African Antigones, written or unwritten, acted or enacted daily on the continent against economic injustice and political oppression. Here, 'an African Antigone' is integral to the meaning and understanding of *Tegonni* as a post-colonial play mounted on an American stage. However, in *Tegonni (An African Antigone)* the use of parenthesis interposes explanatory comment and renders the included words very much an 'aside' which can be removed without affecting the meaning of the play. And as I show from a reading of the Ibadan script, below, the play had, within four years of the two productions, undergone the 'Osofisan process': without a knowledge of the Sophocles' original, an audience would find it difficult to understand the Emory production; but the Ibadan production was a more complete play whose reliance on knowledge of the classical Greek play was not necessary to understand or enjoy the performance. Osofisan has radically re-written the play for his primary audience.

The Emory script locates the actions of the play at an imaginary Yoruba town of Aiyesan, which becomes Oke Osun in the Ibadan production. 'Aiyesan' in Yoruba means 'the world has become comfortable', a reflection on the peace and cessation of the internecine wars among the Yoruba people during the colonial period, the effect of which included economic prosperity. Because of the phonological elasticity of Yoruba, Oke Osun can validly have two meanings, depending on the intonation, which are lacking in the published script. Since all the other Yoruba names and expressions have diacritics to indicate their sounds, I can only deduce from this that the playwright deliberately keeps the meaning ambiguous. The term signifies a land near the source of river Osun, a major

⁹⁸ Published in English as *Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone: A Drama in Three Acts and Fourteen Tableaux Inspired by Sophocle's Antigone*

river in Nigeria; a beginning for, in the case of our study, revolt against the colonial presence and contestation of the colonial agenda; it can also mean ‘hill of camwood’, suggesting the prosperity of the land. In the 19th century, the camwood tree and derivatives from it, like lotions and oil, were a popular sign of wealth among Yoruba people. This meaning links the location to the meaning of Aiyesan in the Emory production. Combining the two meanings provides an ambiguous sense of the location: is it a land of peace and prosperity, or the beginning point of revolutionary antics? Because of incidents of the play, I am going to base my reading on the first meaning – a settlement in the north, near the source of river Osun – and the connotation of a starting point for revolt, in spite of the governor’s statement that the town is ‘at the very heart of our trading network’ (p. 91). Indeed, being the centre of commerce makes it a viable location for a revolt to start. Historically, a nodal economic town in the colonial period would have a trading post and a police detail to assist the district officer in maintaining law and order, so the governor’s assertion is not exactly plausible and Osofisan is:

evoking circumstances rather than chronicling events. He scatters references in order to suggest, and he is not afraid to disconcert. Osofisan’s desire in establishing these circumstances is to subvert precise expectations. He does this in order to generate discussion about the experience of oppression as a result of British colonial activities (James Gibbs 2006: 81).

Etiologically, the name Tegonni can have two meanings in Yoruba, both of them descriptive of the character that bears the name in the play and I want to suggest that either meaning contributes to her role as the antithesis of imperialism in the play. The first meaning refers to the Yoruba word for barrenness – ‘agon’ or ‘agan’ – and the social significance that the name connotes. Childlessness carries a social stigma among the Yoruba but the issue of childlessness extends beyond not having a child. A woman who has a wayward child or a child not accepted into the community for one reason or the

other, for instance, can be considered childless, and the child referred to as ‘akukuibi’⁹⁹. In the play, we have Tegonni preparing to marry district officer Allan Jones. But, as Chief Isokun, the official town historian says at the beginning of the play, she is making a grave error that could turn her into an outcast (p. 12). Any child of such a union may not be recognised, given the social conditions of that period and the racial understanding which consigned black and white into two separate groups, even if Tegonni as the mother is later accepted in the community. Essentially, she becomes a ‘barren woman’ with no hope of maintain her genealogical line; an issue of cultural importance among Yoruba people. There is a feeling that Tegonni is aware of this fact and is actually activating the discourse to enhance her earlier decision to join the male-dominated guild of bronze sculptors and for economic reasons through access to the British market as the spouse of a District Officer.

The second meaning is closer to the reaction that Tegonni’s actions trigger in the play. Tegonni, instead of the freedom fighter against oppression that Osofisan wants us to adopt, may be acting ‘spitefully’, creating a union with the coloniser who wields economic and political power; an act of pride or arrogance that duplicates imperialist design. On the other hand, we can translate Tegonni’s act as a survival tactic – hitching up with the white man to enhance not only her economic power but also her social status. After all, ‘the Asipa broke off his engagement with her [and] no man since then would propose to her’ (p. 12); and no one in the community accepts her union with the district officer – ‘even her father’s spirit in heaven will not approve it’ (p. 13). It is becoming apparent that she is losing the patronage she hitherto enjoyed as princess due to the death of her father, the former king, and the war of ascension between her two brothers which has proved economically ruinous to the community. As soon as the colonial government

⁹⁹ Literally, ‘better not to have been born’.

appoints a new king, her influence will diminish: as the governor says, ‘a new candidate will be found’ (p. 91). To pre-empt that situation, there is a valid reason for Tegonni to use her power as a beautiful woman to exploit the position of power being the wife of the white officer will give her in the community.

There is another reference to ‘spite’ concerning Tegonni, which gives a clue to why she is marrying the white officer. Many suitors have rejected her and the marriage she is about to contract is ‘a lucky break’ for her (p. 12). The reason why other suitors rejected her is linked to her membership of the carvers’ guild and the masquerade cult, both male-dominated societies. In an interview during the Emory production, the playwright gave an intimation of the naming process for the Tegonni character:

I considered naturally a range of options. There was, for instance, the Yoruba word “*àgòn*” itself, meaning “childless spinster”, but I rejected it in the end as not exactly fitting for the character. Then I thought of “*àgònni*”, which is a derivative of “*àgòn*”, and refers to contempt. But there was also “*Àgònnón*”, normally a name used for a headstrong “mad” woman. That seems just correct for her vivacious, iconoclastic personality, and for a while I considered calling her “Anti Àgònnón” [Auntie Àgònnón]. But somehow I was still not satisfied with that, till “*Teniègòn*” and “*Tègònni*” came up. [...] I finally settled for “*Tègònni*”. As [you] said, “*ègòn*” immediately evokes the statement, “*ègòn ò ní kóyin má dùn*”, which would roughly translate as “spite can not make honey taste otherwise than sweet”. Or the other one, “*tègòn ni kó jè kí won ó yín wàá*”, that is, “it is because of spite that they won’t appreciate us”. From there, the link is obvious with hubris – the pride or arrogance before the fall, or, the pride that leads to the fall. Finally, the Greek “agon” remains as sub-text because one of the ways in which I deliberately counter the Aristotelian aesthetics is [...] by enriching my version with incident and action, and freeing it of the conventional spatial and temporal restraints (Osofisan, interviewed by Biodun Jeyifo, 2001a: 229-230).

I have quoted extensively from this interview to show that Tegonni’s femininity has profound effects on meanings that we can draw from her character and actions. Carter-Ross dismisses her as a woman ‘with the caprices of possessed children’ (p. 62), but it is exactly because she is woman against the might of the all-male European super class that

makes her effective as a dialectical figure for resistance. Yoruba society is patriarchal and there is a limit to the political roles of women in the governance of the community or in decision-making. Tegonni's role in the community changes however, on learning about the death of her brothers; she becomes a figure of resistance. I stress here that the main difference between Tegonni and Sophocles' Antigone is that, while Antigone's action is to defy Creon and bury Polyneices, Tegonni's role is more complex and trickier. Tegonni's role involves provoking a discourse about contemporary issues of tyranny and erosion of freedom on the African continent. Her resistance is against the white governor and his draconian rules; it is against the cultural imperative of her people, which dictates a woman's position in the community; it is also against the ambition of the governor who would achieve material wealth and recognition by successfully pacifying the Oke Osun community. She fights on all fronts, and gradually, the spiral effect of her action gathers more strength as more people in the community accept her views about resistance. Impressions about her change from that of a disgraced and rejected woman (p. 12) to that of a woman who used cunning and non-coercive means to defeat the might of the colonial power. The discourse is no longer about the right or wrong of Carter-Ross as the colonial tyrant to prevent the burial of Oyekunle, the renegade prince; the discourse is the subtlety of feminine guile against the brute force of a white imperialist; and the synthesis, the resultant authority is the triumph of the individual over the state. Control of power becomes transmuted from a white, male dominated extreme (Carter-Ross) to another extreme dominated by a young black female. Tegonni's resistance, her antithesis to Carter-Ross' thesis, defines a synthesis which integrates into the pan-African discourse.

The other major differences between the Emory and Ibadan scripts involve renaming and re-identifying characters. Osofisan did this in a way that revises the play. In the Emory version, the dual character Yemoja/Antigone serves to link the world of classical Greece

with that of Aiyesan; the Yemoja element was limited to the link with boat (river) that brought Antigone and her retinue through the corridors of history. The directions in the epilogue to the Emory script identify Antigone as Yemoja, and the relationship between her and Tegonni is that of mother/mentor and daughter/learner:

[...Now we can indentify the goddess clearly as the one who played Antigone. She calls out softly to Tegonni.]

Tegonni: I'm coming, Mother!

[She detaches herself from her body, and we see her dance off and climb into the boat, where she is welcomed with a garland – a specially decorated snake, such as Yemoja is wearing – draped round her neck.....] (Emory script, epilogue, p. 4).

In the Ibadan script, the playwright separates the two characters, and we see both Antigone and Tegonni decorated by Yemoja after Tegonni's death in the town square:

In a symbolic dance, Antigone comes and wakes Tegonni and leads her, together with her retinue, to the boat. There is immediate, visible joy on the boat, with perhaps a few crackers. Antigone and Tegonni kneel before the Goddess, and are rewarded with a crystal fan and a dazzling blue necklace... (p. 106).

Osofisan writes Tegonni into the history of other Antigones and makes her the equal of Sophocles' Antigone instead of a follower who has to learn her role in history at the feet of Antigone. This reinforces my opinion that Osofisan revised *Tegonni* to make the play more independent of the Greek original, and a more uniquely pan-African drama. Giving Tegonni and Antigone equal status is Osofisan's way of making Yoruba culture equal to other cultures; his point is that no culture is superior to the other and the colonial imperative was unacceptable on that basis.

Furthermore, Capt. Herman Price – originally Herman Brand at the beginning of rehearsals for the Emory production – in the Emory script becomes Capt. Allan Jones in the Ibadan production. Herman / Allan is the equivalent of Haemon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Like the names – 'Haemon' is closer to 'Herman' in pronunciation than it is to

‘Allan’ – the character of Jones is unlike that of Haemon in Sophocles’ classical play. In *Antigone*, Haemon kills himself after failing to kill his father, Creon; in Osofisan’s Emory production, Carter-Ross, the governor and father-figure to Harman Price, dies of heart attack but the end scene freezes as Price ‘takes out a knife from his jacket and raises it to stab himself’ (unpub script, epilogue, p. 5). In the Ibadan production, Jones’ fate is unknown; in the confusion following the women’s protest to free Tegonni, ‘all the men, including the soldiers, flee from the square, leaving only the Governor, tottering, clutching his heart’ (p. 105). The significance of these differences is that Osofisan’s drama for the Nigeria audience makes knowledge of Sophocles’ *Antigone* redundant. The audience do not need to know the context or realise the association with the Greek play before understanding the plot.

In addition, it is not just the town’s name or the roles of Yemoja/Antigone/Tegonni, or the names of the district officer that Osofisan changes in his re-write; Oje, the master drummer metamorphoses into Chief Isokun, the town’s poet, chronicler and master drummer, while his assistant Kekere (which means ‘small’) becomes his friend, Chief Labiyi, a lesser chief. Kunbi, Yemisi and Morenike, Tegonni’s age mates become Kunbi, Yemisi and Faderera, Tegonni’s sisters.

Dramaturgically, the beginning and the ending of the two productions are different. The Ibadan production had four more songs than the nine in the Emory production; and one story instead of the two in the earlier script. The Emory production had the advantage of both white and black actors, so there was no casting problem for the production. To accommodate the lack of white students among the theatre students who acted in the 1998 production at the University of Ibadan, Osofisan inscribes his familiar opening style into the play. *Morountodun*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* and *Farewell to a Cannibal*

Rage all start in reality and move to the theatrical world, with the director demystifying the play-making process. The opening of *Tegonni* is the closest to that of *Morountodun* among Osofisan's major plays and this shows the recidivistic approach that Osofisan adopts in his more recent drama; as he employs the dramatic styles of the 1980s to address global themes in recent plays. In *Morountodun*, the director opens the performance:

Director: Hurry up. Hurry up. Play opens in five minutes.

An Actor: Fair house today?

Director: Fair. Better than in the last town we stopped.

Another Actor: And no sign of trouble? (*Morountodun*, 1982: 5).

The opening of *Tegonni* is similar, though the intention is to explain the skin colour of the actors playing the roles of the white characters:

Lights catch the Director peering anxiously into the audience. One of the actors enters.

Actor: Hey, Director, when are we starting?

Director: I told you all, whenever I find them.

Actor: You mean you still haven't...?

Director: Look, it's not my fault that there're no White actors around.

Actor: No white actors at all? (p. 8)

As in *Morountodun* where actors make up and try costume on stage, *Tegonni* further demystifies the play making process by entreating the audience to use its imagination in the house of dreams that is the theatre:

Actor: A house of dreams! So, just a little make-up, I announce my role to the audience, and we are set to go!

Director: And you think that will work?

Actor: Of course! All is illusion here, and everyone in the audience has come to play his or her own part in a dream. And dreams are where anything can happen. So give me a costume, anything to mark me out from the others, and this evening's dream begins.

Director: All right then, we'll try it. CM, where are you? Please give him a wig.

Costumes Manager: (*Entering*) A wig?

Director: Yes. He's going to play the D.O. tonight.

Costumes Manager: A White man? Well, what colour – blonde, grey, or brunette?

Director: Whichever, I'll leave that to you. Just remember he's a young English boy, in his early thirties. And make it quick (p. 9)

Osofisan reveals the pan-African agenda of *Tegonni* when governor Carter-Ross raises the issue of slavery during the conversation with Reverend Bayo Campbell, a southern American Baptist Church missionary, who is acting as the ‘father of the bride’ at the wedding of Jones and Tegonni. As I have stated above, pan-Africanism began as part of the fight for recognition by the descendants of freed slaves in the United States of America, a movement that spread to England and to Africa through the efforts of W. E. B. DuBois, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and other first generation post-colonial African leaders. Pan-Africanism encourages the recognition of Africa as homeland for black people but Carter-Ross does not accept this and subordinates the achievements of the Empire in stopping slave trade to his role as a law keeper in a ‘lost village in the jungle’ (p. 87). Not only is he intolerant of Campbell, he suspects the religious activities of missionaries. When the reverend’s wife organises a welcoming ceremony for him by singing a hymn, he explodes into anger and divulges the main reason for his visit – to stop the wedding of his district officer to Tegonni:

Gov: Welcome me – with that! Rather audacious, isn’t it! This is what they call Christianity, these liberated priests who come over to Africa! They bring the word of God to the jungle, and what happens! Satan takes over! Everything changes to voodoo! Our sacred hymns are turned to dark incantations! And I am supposed to like that! I am supposed to tolerate it as “the expression of another culture”, while the Devil crows triumphant in my ear!

Jones: The Devil? I don’t understand—

Gov: You will, my boy! All of you! You especially, whom I brought to Africa because there is work for us white races to accomplish here. But you catch the smell of some black arse, and you forget! (p. 46)

The empire can only exercise its authority over the ‘natives’ if black people know their place; which does not include sitting beside the white master as a Bible-toting missionary or as a wife. The governor had achieved his authority over black people in rail

construction camps and earned the sobriquet, Slap-my-face, because of his high handedness and lack of compromise in imposing English way of life over his subjects:

Gov:... We did not need to write the rules down, everybody knew what you had to do, and the options were simple. You came with the gun in one hand, and the whip in the other. You barked out orders, and you punished, summarily. You knew you were right, because you were white, and you believed in the Cross and in the Empire. You hammered the Union Jack down their throats, and made them sing “God Save the Queen”! For if you didn't do that, they would quickly revert to barbarism, to cannibalism, to living like apes (p. 99).

Further, he more than likens miscegenation to bestiality and barbarism; and considers Jones intention to marry Tegonni a criminal act which deserves to be punished with loss of privileges as a colonial officer; he would also be sent back to England in disgrace. Carter-Ross’ attitude is an echo of a concubinage circular that Lord Crewe, the British Colonial Secretary (1908 – 1910) issued in 1909 to prohibit liaisons between white male colonial officers and their black female subjects. The dialectics was always white male against black female, because the structure of colonial governance did not encourage women (there were no women district officers) to live in the colonies; only male colonial officers were employed in the service of the empire. Sometimes, these officers were single and alone in harsh and unfamiliar climates, making cultural and emotional associations with the colonised people inevitable.

In addition to the concubinage circular, the Governor General of Nigeria issued ‘Secret Circular B’ in 1914. This circular was so damning in its racist implications – more or less equating any union between white British officers and black women to bestiality – that every copy of the circular was later searched out and destroyed. Nevertheless, as Helen Callaway observed, there still occurred a few marriages between British officers and black women (1987: 14). This was not an isolated incidence in one corner of the British empire; in 1907, in what later became the present day Namibia, the Germans declared all

marriages contracted between Germans and black Africans before that date unlawful and made laws to dispossess all offspring of such marriages of German citizenship.

Therefore, when Carter-Ross flaunts his achievement of taming the natives and letting them know who the master is, he is only giving projection to the racist ideologies and practices that European colonisation of Africa had developed; and which pan-African sentiments seek to redeem. The European construction of the colonised, in this case black Africans, has always been that of inferior beings to be domesticated – seeing and never heard – and certainly never to be classified as the equal of white people. The action of Carter-Ross in halting the wedding then is not unique and he deploys all the usual racist arguments to aid his decision: marrying the black woman is a privilege that will make the ‘natives’ believe that they are equal to the white rulers (p. 92). But the order to stop the marriage introduces a conflict between white representatives of the colonial power into the drama. Osofisan portrays Carter-Ross as a tyrannical government official acting out of spite; Creon in Sophocles’ original is acting to defend the law but Carter-Ross’ deception is to uphold the then unwritten colonial code against interracial miscegenation.

The playwright tries to expose Carter-Ross’ attitude in many ways in *Tegonni*. First, he uses the Story of the Tiger and Toad¹⁰⁰ to predict the fate of oppressive leaders and to activate one of the nationalistic rallying-cries of the pan-African movement. Recited by the Spirit of Stories, summoned by Tegonni in the Ibadan production, the story is about how Ekun the Tiger betrays his friendship with Akere the Toad by unjustly swallowing him and stealing his beauty to woo a princess. Osofisan links the moral of the story to the optimism of the pan-Africanists:

the one who was swallowed gained a throne, while the one who
usurped power fell to disgrace – oh yes, that is always the end of

¹⁰⁰ ‘The Story of the Tiger and Frog’ in the Emory production.

those who come to rule by force, *when the light of freedom shines again, and the people regain their rights!* And it will surely be the fate of those who have seized power over us... (my emphasis; p. 73)

Kwame Nkrumah, Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe used statements similar to that italicised in their political campaigns, and such other lines as ‘light at the end of the tunnel’, ‘after a dark night comes a glorious dawn’¹⁰¹. Osofisan shows us that through the ages, in various cultural settings, political hegemonies have the same root in tyranny; and that myths are employed to inscribe this tyranny into the life of the people. However, Antigone states that history will always emphasise the myth of political hegemony:

many tyrants will still arise, furious to inscribe their nightmares and their horrors on the patient face of history. But again and again, as many times as such abortions creep up, as many times will others come up who will challenge them and chase them away into oblivion. Ozymandias will rise again! But so will Antigone! Wherever the call for freedom is heard! (p. 96).

Antigone and Tegonni recite the sonnet of the Romantic English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley to point out the limits of power and tyranny, and the resurgence of hope for the coming generation of freedom fighters and Antigones, for empires never last. As Kevin Wetmore observes:

The poem is a warning against hubris, but is also a tribute to the inevitable passage of time and the progress of history that symbolically and literally wears down oppression and tyranny (2002: 192).

As Ozymandias rises, so will the clamour for freedom expose the crumbling relic of the former tyrant. Osofisan’s argument in this play is that tyranny will always recur like a terrible curse to author cultural and political hegemony, and fuel the general concern for freedom, but people will always rise to protest or revolt.

¹⁰¹ See Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology* (London: William Heinemann, 1961); Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography* (C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 1971); and Obafemi Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (1947) – various pages.

Apart from the dialectics of the oppressed individual and the powerful state, another central agency in the play is pride. Both Tegonni and Carter-Ross are proud and refuse to renegotiate once they have taken a stand. This is akin to negotiations to end colonial rule in Africa. While Tegonni's pride is heroic and admirable as she defends the honour of her brother and her town, and the right to marry the man of her choosing, Carter-Ross is vain, arrogant and power-drunk.

Tegonni as a character is significant for her subversion of the cultural authority and the elevation of the rights of women in her community. Osofisan casts women in roles where they lead or join others in the quest for societal transformation. For example, in *Morountodun*, Titubi, the rich daughter of Alhaja Kabirat, leader of the market women, abandons her privileges to join peasant women in the camps to fight for social change. Tegonni is described as a headstrong woman who refuses to listen to the advice of her male compatriots. She insists on joining the all-male guild of bronze casters after a visit to the palace in Ife¹⁰². She has access to wealth and influences restricted to other women in the community, by virtue of her position as a princess. She is not betrothed to any of the important chiefs in the community, as befits her status as a princess, and she chooses to marry the white district officer because he is the only person who supports her in her quest to be a sculptor. It is noteworthy that in the whole community, the only character with progressive ideas is Tegonni and she is influential enough to make the chiefs and other women follow her example; she initiates ideas for others to carry out. For instance, her decision to marry Allan Jones persuades the community to adopt the district officer as a 'son'. Campbell makes him a member of his family, to make his wedding more realistic:

Bayo: Yes, my wife assembled them. Mostly from the parish. They're your "family" today, the ones who will receive the bride and formally welcome her into your life. Meaning that they will

¹⁰² Ile-Ife is regarded as the origin of the Yoruba people; it is also the setting of the Moremi legend (*Morountodun*).

wash her feet with their prayers and song, and then carry her across the threshold.

[...]

They pour out drinks, and clink glasses.

Jones: To your health then! To the health of my African father!

Bayo: And to yours, my *Oyinbo* son!... (p. 39 – 40).

Not only has she become successful as a bronze caster, her example in breaching the gender discrimination has encouraged other women to learn the art of sculpting, as one of Tegonni's sisters says:

Faderera: Thanks to which you've not only grown to be one of the best in the profession, but you've also helped train other women, so that we now have our own Women's Guild of Carvers and Casters (p. 56).

It is this singular act of Tegonni as a 'forerunner' of the women that leads to the major subversive act by the women to negotiate with the governor and free their community of his draconian decrees. They use masks to imitate *egungun* masquerade and combine that image with the sound of the bull-roarer, another secret male cult, to frighten the chiefs and the governor's guards so that Tegonni can have access to the governor.

Among the Yoruba people, *egúngún* is a male cult and women are not accepted into the secrets of the cult, or allowed to wear the mask. Not only do the women infiltrate the male dominated cult, Tegonni's sisters 'colonise' the sacred grove of *egúngún*, because it is the only place the governor and his guards will never think of looking for them. Osofisan constructs these women as 'those whose actions advance nation-building even as men do not value / validate their work' (Nfah-Addenyi 1998: 284). They are ready to risk their lives and customary beliefs for actions which they believe will release their community from the colonial imperative. Instead of engaging with the women to launch a unified action, the men remark:

Isokun: ... Our world is changing, even faster than we feared. [...]

Bayo: Yes, it's a new age! We are on the brink of a great transformation... (p. 83).

Osofisan, like Sophocles and other Greek tragedians, shows a humane response to suffering through a heroic character, heightening empathy for Tegonni. Like in *Antigone*, Tegonni's suffering / resistance produces an answering compassion but the dramatic emphasis lies more on the ideals or values for which she suffers (Vickers 1973: 495). Tegonni shows that 'freedom is an undying faith, the force which underwrites our presence here on earth' (p. 96) even when, out of desperation, Carter-Ross sentences her to be sold to slavery 'like her ancestors' (p. 104).

Tegonni is not the only representation of resistance in the drama; Osofisan stresses that the history of colonial Africa, as well as that of classical Greece, is a history of conflict and revolt. Resistance is emphasised on a serious scale, as in the confrontation between Tegonni and Carter-Ross, as well as in a somewhat comical scenario, involving Antigone's retinue acting the role of soldiers guarding the 'corpse' of Oyekunle or constructing the scaffolds for the execution of Tegonni. In a resonance of a similar scene in an earlier play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, when soldiers build a platform to execute one of the robbers, Osofisan uses the soldiers to comment on the role of the military in a post colonial African state. First, the soldiers 'revolt' and refuse to continue the construction work; then 'confront' Antigone with their grievances:

2nd Sol: You've got to find us another role. This one's no fun at all!

Antigone: You're tired of being soldiers?

4th Sol: Demoralised. All we do is carry corpses.

2nd Sol: Or build execution platforms—

1st Sol: Or terrorise people—

2nd Sol: Burn houses—

4th Sol: Collect bribes!

3rd Sol: We're so ashamed! Is this all that soldiers do in this country?

2nd Sol: Not even one act you could call humane?

Antigone: I know what you mean, but it's the times we've come into, my friends. It just happens that the soldiers here are trained to look upon their own people as enemies. As fair game to practice their weapons on (p. 53).

Osofisan uses the soldiers to comment on social injustice in Nigeria, in the same way that the soldiers comment on corruption in *Once Upon Four Robbers*; or the two soldiers comment on the futility of revolt in *Red is the Freedom Road*. The playwright appears to be turning to previous plays, in particular his plays, for materials to address social and political issues. In the end, Osofisan reduces Tegonni to a symbol, just like Antigone who goes off to be immolated in the tomb to which Creon has sentenced her. Though Tegonni does not die a cowardly death, her death is meaningless nevertheless: while her women friends hoist her up in a dance, she and her friends are shot dead, only to be woken by Antigone who leads Tegonni before Yemoja to receive her 'reward' (pp. 105-106). For all her progressive intent, Tegonni becomes an idea, a symbol of resistance against colonial power to be debated and evaluated as a complex ideological posits. Since the play ends in the realm of mythology, with Yemoja decorating Antigone and Tegonni, we do not have a sense of dramatic achievement that we have at the conclusion of *Yungba-Yungba* or even at the end of *Morountodun* where the women assume new roles of being community keepers. Tegonni's importance is subsumed into the world of myth: Yemoja is a mythological figure.

In conclusion, what *Tegonni* has proved is that when faced with a great dilemma like injustice, resistance alone is not enough; and anger and insurrection are futile. Tegonni may have learnt about resistance from Antigone, but what informs her dialectics is a form of uncommon sense, which she uses to entice the governor to the square, where her sisters and other women are waiting to confront the power of the empire with their nakedness; an act that reactivates the governor's heart problem and leads to his death. The symbolic act

of Tegonni in burying her brother creates panic in the town but she herself is unrepentant, saying:

I buried him. He was my brother. (p. 48)

adding:

...I felt I had to do it, in spite of the punishment, in spite of the fact that I was on my way to a new, married life! (p. 103)

and:

Never, as long as I live, will I be sorry for having done my duty to my brother. Let the governor kill me! I am proud that I buried my brother (p. 104).

This stubborn, resolute and eloquent articulation of the will to freedom is the primary concern of *Tegonni*. The play therefore deals with issue of individual and collective freedom and the role of women in igniting or re-conceptualising issues;

and not really with these merely intellectual discourses of “postcoloniality” which are currently fashionable because they serve scholars so well in the western academic circuit, but which are so remote from the concrete concerns of the people on our [African] continent (Osofisan, interviewed by Jeyifo 2001a: 206).

Osofisan stresses this point by adding that history is a game ‘and it is those who refuse responsibility for their own roles who become victims’ (Osofisan, interviewed by Jeyifo 2001a: 206), a reflection of Isokun’s speech almost at the end of the script:

Isokun: It’s all a game... There’s so much to do, my daughter, and the greater challenge before your generation, believe me, is to live, *and become engaged* (my emphasis; pp. 79 - 80).

Tegonni’s failed act of resistance leads to a reflection on the role of freedom fighters and the ambiguity in the pan-African movement where principles of democracy in creating the United States of Africa were embraced by the nationalistic first generation African leaders. The leaders however fail to translate their ideas into visible actions for the benefit of their people. *Tegonni (An African Antigone)* transfers Osofisan’s dramaturgy to the African and global level. It is also the first in a series of plays commissioned of the

playwright by institutions and theatres outside Nigeria; the beginning of a new stage in his dramatic career.

***Nkrumah-ni... Africa-ni!:* A Reflection on the Ideals of Pan-Africanism**

The next play to deal with Osofisan's pre-occupation with pan-African concerns is *Nkrumah-ni... Africa-ni!* (1994). Performed in 1994 for the African Literature Association conference at the W. E. B. DuBois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture in Accra, Ghana, *Nkrumah-ni...* was conceived as part of a trilogy of plays to probe the period that three leaders of the pan-African movement spent together in Conakry between 1965 and 1972. After he was deposed as president of Ghana while on a peace mission to Hanoi in 1965, Kwame Nkrumah accepted the invitation of Sékou Touré to be co-president of Guinea, until he would hopefully be invited back to rule his country. At the same period, Amílcar Cabral, leader of Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde¹⁰³ (PAIGC), who was fighting a war of independence from Portuguese rule in the Guinea-Bissau, was also a guest of Touré. Historical reports show that the three leaders met on an almost daily basis but the only official record of their association during this period is the collection edited by Nkrumah's secretary June Milne, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Conakry Years, His Life and Letters* (1990). The other two plays in the trilogy are planned to be about Cabral and Touré.

The significance of this play is that it was written with Nkrumah as subject, and it explores his feelings and thoughts; also, it comments on the relationship between the three leaders – Nkrumah, Touré and Cabral – and their commitment to creating a United States of Africa. It does not however debate the probability of such a union of states. Apart from re-placing that grand plan, the drama contributes little to advance knowledge about pan-

¹⁰³ African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC)

Africanism or the strategies that the leaders adopted to unite their countries. As a dramatic text, the play reads like an early work by a young playwright – wordy and with limited potential for dramatic action. Osofisan reveals the characteristics of the three leaders in a new critical appeal; as he states in the foreword to the published text:

Nkrumah was the oldest and the most experienced among them however; Touré the most cunning, and the most effervescent; Cabral, the youngest, the most compassionate, the most urbane, and the most assured (p. 15¹⁰⁴).

My study of this play shows that while Osofisan succeeded in mediating history and recreating the six years that the three leaders spent together in Conakry, the dramatic implications proved less than aesthetically rewarding for the playwright. I did not see the premiere of *Nkrumah-ni!* presented at the annual conference of the African Literature Association in Ghana in 1994 and directed by the playwright. The production ran from 26 March to 3 April 1994. There was a second production at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in October 1995 and January 1996. My study is therefore going to be based solely on a reading of the text, with reference to a workshop reading of the original script at the Arts Theatre, Ibadan, in 1993.

The play's problem stems from the dramatist's intention to concentrate on political polemics instead of dramatic action; to hero-worship an ideal instead of dramatically scrutinising the circumstances that placed the three African leaders together for six years; to 'teach us all how to understand our continent a little better' (p. 10) instead of dramatising the characteristics of leadership. Despite the structure and the subject, the play was not successful at the Ghana production, or at the workshop reading in 1993, for reasons that I state below. As a critic wrote in a Nigerian newspaper in 1996:

What is the direction of Osofisan's creative and intellectual pursuits beyond 50? or rather, how does he intend to reconnect

¹⁰⁴ All references are from *Recent Outings II (comprising Nkrumah-ni... Africa-ni! and Reel, Rwanda!)*, Opon Ifa Readers 1999.

with his point of departure? The 1980s were a fruitful decade for him. Because he had the opportunity, he was able to fulfil a role, a purpose. This decade has been quite different... (Moyo Eniitan, *Festac News* July 6 1996, p. 14).

The 1990s was indeed different because Osofisan sought to transcend his local identity as a Yoruba playwright writing in English without the requisite audience base; or accepted media of style and production method suited to the continental audience that watched the premiere of *Nkrumah-ni... Africa-ni!* in Ghana. Essentially, as I have stated in this study, Osofisan's theatre is rooted in the traditions of Yoruba performance culture, the elements of which are:

a protean one-man cast, with or without the accompaniment of musicians, who narrates *and performs*; a story located in *fabu-land*, whose protagonists are frequently non-human figures, with in particular, the trickster figure of the Tortoise as hero; the involvement of the audience, through the use of music and antiphonal chants; and finally, a closing moral that summarizes the play's didactic purpose (Osofisan 2001a: 65-66).

These elements are present in Osofisan's drama: Aafaa in *Once Upon Four Robbers* and the minstrels in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*; as well as the composite figures in *Another Raft* and the twins in *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle*. Though *Nkrumah-ni...* has a 'protean one-man cast', a character who looms larger than the rest, and who is the focus of the drama, the story is much too recent for Osofisan to fictionalise or take much dramatic licence with the facts. His style of adapting Yoruba performance heritage was also unsuited to the wider audience at the production in Ghana; the use of music and antiphonal chants involving the Jesters and the main characters was not effective because it affects the naturalism of the performance that the audience was not familiar with. In addition, trying to be politically factual made the production seem like an apologia for Nkrumah.

With *Nkrumah-ni...*, Osofisan highlights three main problems with pan-Africanism: what went wrong with the ideal, where the dream took a wrong turning and why pan-Africanism failed as an ideal for other African leaders to follow. Crucially, Osofisan examined what, in the death of the three leaders, Africa lost or gained. Historically, pan-Africanism, or the dreams of the first generation African leaders, failed because of foreign economic intervention in African politics. The colonial powers, with the United States of America (USA) and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), developed interests in controlling the political leadership of the newly independent African countries for economic reasons. This was the height of the Cold War and each of the major powers sought political allies among the African countries. Many African leaders were also self-absorbed in creating states of political insularity; establishing regimes to foster their self-importance as an alternative to cooperating with other leaders to develop the economic interests of Africans.

Nkrumah-ni... is divided into four parts in a roughly chronological structure:

- a) Cabral (1966) expresses Nkrumah's hope to be invited back to rule Ghana after a counter *coup d'état* to depose the National Liberation Council.
- b) Nkrumah (1967) raises the question of doubt in the usual stoic personality of Nkrumah and the possibility of never going back to Ghana again as the president.
- c) Touré (1970) exposes Nkrumah's failure as a leader and his inability to offer constructive criticism to Touré and Cabral because he does not want to offend or seen to be taking sides. This is a major failing of the pan-African leaders: lack of courage to criticise other African heads of state when they deviated from the pan-African ideals of the articles of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).
- d) The fourth part, Africa (1971) dramatises the end of Nkrumah's dream to rule Ghana again; and his resignation to dying in exile. He agrees to fly to Bucharest

for medical care, where he dies, although, as Cabral says, his death is the beginning of his immortality:

Nkrumah will be born again in the hearts and the will of freedom fighters, and in the actions of all true African patriots. His immortal spirit will be there, by our side, every single minute, as we fight desperately to wrest the future of our continent from imperialist hands... (pp. 175 – 176).

Osofisan cautions against ‘deifying’ Nkrumah, stating that Nkrumah was a human being who made genuine mistakes in his effort to lead his people and unite Africa. He wants the audience to:

... reflect deeply on this moment and draw from the events all the lessons, both positive and negative, that it may have to offer... (p. 19)

In Osofisan’s play, Cabral, of the three leaders, appears to be the reflective character, willing to learn from the errors of the other leaders, but even he remains doubtful of eventual victory:

Cabral: ...have I pushed my people into a fire that we have to power no douse? Against opponents who are much too strong for us? Tell me, Uncle, this war – have I led my people onto a road of annihilation? (p. 31).

When Cabral becomes uncertain of his tactics, Nkrumah offers him support, by referring to the liberation of the island of Como and other parts of Guinea Bissau by PAIGC:

Nkrumah: Try and fix your mind on victory, Cabral, and forget the corpses (p. 23)

Gradually, Nkrumah’s hope dwindles and he begins to realise that his importance as the father of pan-Africanism may have been overrated, at least among the Ghanaians. Without the support that he expects from the Ghanaians, he feels like a fraud offering support and advice to Touré and Cabral:

Nkrumah: The market women and the members of my old Workers' Brigade, I know I can always depend on those. But what about the others – the Youth Pioneers for instance, the soldiers?

Touré: Even them! The obnoxious policies of the NLC have not spared anybody after all.

Nkrumah: That is true. Except that the youths, don't forget, are ever restless, ever fickle. The young have no lasting allegiances. We were like that once, weren't we?

Touré: I know what you mean. But –

Nkrumah: Our ancestors had long memories, Sékou, but we their heirs are products of colonialism, and our sense of remembering has been severely damaged. See, how many leaders we worship one day, and kill the next morning. It's a peculiarity of us, the black race.

Touré: Yes, how true! We cannot endure heroes for too long, it seems

Nkrumah: That's why we must be realistic. I've been away for two whole years, I can no longer count on the spontaneous loyalty of Ghanaians (p. 62).

Osofisan introduces the Jesters to act as the conscience of Nkrumah and to represent the silent victims of Nkrumah's policies in Ghana; as well as the voices of his opponents who see repression where Nkrumah uses the proposal of a one-party state to promote unity. The Jesters see this as denial of the people's right to organise their own parties and contribute to the future of the country. Nkrumah advocated socialism as president of Ghana, and in the play, Osofisan's defence of that model of government meets with the Jesters counter-discourse; support for capitalism. This debate also reveals the impatient, autocratic characteristics of most African leaders:

Nkrumah: ...History has given us no choice. For, in an African country, the accumulation of large capital by individuals is impossible by honest means! Thus only the government is able to raise the money for the kind of funds you require for development projects. That's why we African countries have no choice but to take to the socialist model. Of course, personally, I think it is a good thing. Because instead of merely satisfying private greed, the whole community benefits.

Jester: But suppose you are wrong? Suppose it requires the fire of that individual greed to spark off the development of a country? Suppose it is true that people only work at their maximum energy and competence, when they see the possibility of personal gain?

Nkrumah: That is a cynical view of humanity. It may well be the guiding philosophy of people in the West, but I do not share it. So now, if you'll please excuse me –

Jester (*Insisting*): What are you willing to bet that you're wrong, sir? That it won't be long before you're sent packing again from the Castle in Accra?

Nkrumah (*Furious*): I'll not answer such a question! (*Standing*). I'm sorry, but I won't continue this interview... (pp. 80-81).

The Jesters are described as masked players, played by the same actors taking the roles of Ghanaian staff in Nkrumah's household in Conakry. At the Ibadan workshop, we found that this did not work although we saw the playwright's point in using Ghanaian characters, or characters already identified as 'Ghanaian', to challenge Nkrumah. Using the Jesters to question Nkrumah's legacy was not successful because of the disjunction it created in the dramatic flow; it interrupted the dramatic action in a way that confused the audience's understanding of the performance. The playwright's intention was to use Ghanaian staff as the conscience of Nkrumah to initiate a discussion into the success of his policy as president of Ghana:

I want the Jesters to expose the other side of the argument, the contradictions in Nkrumah's leadership, to be the silent or silenced voices of the opposition, voices I couldn't bring into the play because of the setting. There were people like Danquah¹⁰⁵, or the military who deposed him, like Ankrah¹⁰⁶, who were bitterly opposed to him. They would not have been welcome in Conakry. I didn't want to depart too much from history... that's one of the problems of writing about recent history! (Osofisan, interview with the author, 2002)

If Osofisan had combined the roles of the Jesters with that of Cabral or Jane, Nkrumah's assistant, and made these characters to question Nkrumah, like they do in the press conferences, the scenes involving the Jesters would have been more convincing; though the dramatic style would have been more western and unrecognisably Osofisanesque. However, my suggestions at the Ibadan workshop, a position I still maintain, is that our dramatist should have 'borrowed' more from Yoruba performance tradition and not departed so sharply from his usual writing style. The introduction of *egúngún* in

¹⁰⁵ Joseph B Danquah was the leader of United Gold Coast Convention; Nkrumah left his party to form the Convention People's Party in 1949.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Ankrah became Ghana's head of state after Nkrumah was overthrown.

Nkrumah-ni... would have represented not only Nkrumah's conscience but also the spirit of pan-Africanism and the past leaders; it would have provided more spectacles and the scenes would have served as an evaluation of Nkrumah's legacy, using the impartial voice of the spirits.

Historically, and in the play, Cabral used a form of Theatre for Development to educate members of PAIGC. It would have made a more dramatic impact to create characters who would act both as Cabral's guards and his 'masked players'. Using Ghanaian characters that are 'loyal' to Nkrumah, or even his nephew, like the character Nyamikeh, proved unconvincing. Cabral, like the Jesters, is unrelenting in his criticism of Nkrumah and Touré, consigning the liberation of the pan-African ideals to the freedom fighters:

Cabral: I am already finding out. Where you and Sékou took your wrong turning, and the history of African independence began its dizzying spin. With luck, perhaps we liberation movements will straighten it! (p. 95).

Pan-Africanism, as Osofisan presents in the play, fails because of intolerance of other views, or other means of arriving at the same political conclusion, by the founding fathers. And like pan-Africanism, *Nkrumah-ni...* fails to achieve the dramatic impact necessary to rekindle the light of pan-Africanism in Osofisan's theatre. Theatrically, the drama was not successful on stage because it becomes a play about Nkrumah's failure instead of focusing on the achievement of pan-Africanism as defined by three leaders who lived together in Conakry for six years. The playwright set out to write about:

three of the most radical African leaders [who lived together in this small town of Conakry for six full years! They met, according to reports, almost every day, to talk and work out the strategies for the full emancipation of Africa (p. 15)

and to:

teach us all how to understand our continent a little better (p. 10)

instead, we have one leader fighting to regain power; another (Sékou Touré) imprisoning and killing political opponents; while Cabral is shown undermining his host by freeing political convicts. It is my opinion that the failure of this play on both textual and dramatic levels not only discouraged Osofisan from writing the remaining parts of the trilogy, it has forced the dramatist to revert to Yoruba myth and history, to address his commitment towards ‘re-membering’ the ideals of pan-Africanism to the African dramatic consciousness. His next major play then centres on the Yoruba traditional belief system. It weaves a drama out of many folktales, the myth of Shango, Yoruba god of thunder and lightning; and Yoruba history. *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* was commissioned and produced in February – March 1997 by Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, USA.

Many Colours Make the Thunder-King: A Dialogue with Myth

To understand the ethos of *Thunder-King*, a definitive understanding of Yoruba cosmology is required; in particular, the myth of Shango and the relationship of masquerade to ancestral veneration among the Yoruba people. In *Thunder-King*, Osofisan adapts stories surrounding Shango’s desire to transcend the influence of his legendary father, Oranmiyan, a prince of Ile-Ife, a king of Benin-City and founder of the Oyo Kingdom. ‘He wants to surpass his father in every way and be remembered for greater things – wealth, expansion of the kingdom, conquests...’ (Osofisan, interview with the author 1996).

With *Thunder-King*, Osofisan withdraws from the arena of pan-African politics to investigate the world of Yoruba history and myth to find a link between the failure of the first generation political leaders in African politics and past leaders whose achievements had almost become legendary. Kwame Nkrumah proved a student of history and even

changed the name of his newly independent country from Gold Coast to Ghana, the name of a once great African empire, but how much history did he really learn? Was his knowledge enough to establish his ideas and elevate him beyond the reproach of history, or did he end up like past leaders who grew dictatorial in the assumed invincibility of inherited powers? He could say that, in Osofisan's words, 'history had given him no choice' (*Recent Outings II*, p. 80) but did he allow dissenting voices or did he behave like a *Ghana*, the title given to the emperor of the old empire after which he named the independent African country? To answer these questions, which he failed to do with *Nkrumah-ni...*, Osofisan returns to the history (and myth) of Shango, a once powerful king of Oyo who fell from power because of his tyrannical hold over his people.

The Context of the Play

Shango is the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. He was the fourth king of Oyo Kingdom when the capital city was at Katunga, according to Yoruba orature. Shango was a warrior king who had the ambition of surpassing his father, Oranmiyan, the founder of Oyo. Oral history tells us that Shango married three women, Oya, Osun and Oba, who became river goddesses after his death. As a king, he was reputed to be autocratic and unresponsive to his people's wishes. Because of this, his chiefs and generals deposed him and he left the kingdom with Oya, his senior wife. When Shango realised the humiliation he faced as a king without a kingdom, he hanged himself from a branch of an *Àyàn* tree near Oyo, his capital city. After the incident, Yoruba myth has it that Oya became the Niger River, and Osun and Oba became rivers named after them, respectively.

When the people of Oyo heard about Shango's hanging, they started making a mockery of his death, dancing round the city singing '*Oba só*', meaning, 'the king hangs' or 'the king has committed suicide by hanging'. Shango's supporters, trying to redeem the image of

their monarch, went to the Nupe people, Shango's maternal relations, to obtain secrets of making thunder and lightning, which they used to burn the houses of anybody making a jest of Shango's death. The supporters spread the story that Shango was angry about the desacralisation of his memory and was punishing those who were doing that. So, the people changed the slogan '*Oba só*' to '*Oba kò so*', meaning 'the king did not hang' to escape the supposed fury of the now deified Shango. Gradually, the myth became established that Shango had become a deity controlling thunder, lightning and retributive justice.

Several Yoruba dramatists have written about the deification of Shango. The best known of these was Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* (1963). Ladipo's interpretation of the myth portrays Shango as a god even before he became the king. The drama depicts Shango as a god who came down among the people to rule them but who was rejected, and in his rejection, became vindictive and started destroying the houses of his former subjects, forcing the people to start worshipping him in a bid to restore the socio-cosmic order to the society. Ladipo's interpretation is a dramatisation of the life of a tyrannical king who revelled in military exploits against the wishes of his people, and who exiled himself when the people revolted.

Osofisan's *Thunder-King* is an interpretation of the same myth but our playwright casts Shango as a human being who became a king and had to live up to the image of his empire building father, Oranmiyan. While following the Shango myth in structure, *Thunder-King* subverts many of the beliefs surrounding the myth, proffering more rational explanations instead. For instance, adherents of Shango believe that he became a god controlling thunder and lightning after his death, but Osofisan debunks that, stating instead that the natural phenomena were only attributed to Shango because he hanged

himself during the rainy season when thunder and lightning naturally occurred. Shango became of god of thunder and lightning only by association, and not by any personal attribute. Not only that, Osofisan introduces other myths that have no bearing on the Shango myth, in order to explain the areas where the myth of Shango is silent. An example is the popular Yoruba Olurombi story that Osofisan brought in to explain the childlessness of Oya, a contributing factor to Shango's downfall. The Olurombi story is about a woman who enters into a ritual bond to sacrifice her only daughter to the spirit of the *Iroko* tree in exchange for material wealth. While in the original story the mother greedily mortgages her daughter for wealth to escape her poverty, Osofisan's version reverses the circumstances. Oya has all the wealth she could want but she is childless. She therefore pledges her child as a sacrifice to the spirit of *Iroko* tree, if she could only give birth, to wash away the scorn of barrenness from her. As I explained above (in the discussion of *Tegonni*), childlessness carries a social stigma among the Yoruba, irrespective of the amount of wealth a woman may command.

The Myth in Performance

Osofisan's *Thunder-King* is set in the festival mode, with Igunnun, an ancestral mask, serving as the storyteller. Osofisan invokes the African story telling performance style that he has used successfully in plays like *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* and *Once Upon Four Robbers*. The quest in *Thunder-King* revolves around a riddle and many metaphors. The riddle: A man who marries a river and takes a forest for a wife, must also conquer the mountain. Alagemo (the chameleon), a mythical figure in Yoruba folklore, comes back as an ancestor to guide Shango through his quest for self-identity. The play, structured as a narration, starts as an annual festival of tales during which Igunnun, an ancestral mask, narrates stories. Igunnun is a masquerade that can change its height at will, reducing it to a metre or two above the ground or elongating

it to many metres. Igunnun emerges and throws a riddle at the festival participants – Why should a man never marry a river? (p. 145)¹⁰⁷. To answer his riddle, Igunnun, as Alagemo, a representative of the ancestors, narrates the myth of Shango. The opening of the play is quintessentially Osofisan; similar to the opening of *Once Upon Four Robbers*, with Aafa narrating the story of the robbers. Igunnun relates how the ambitious king marries river princess Oya, with the assistance of Alagemo. Oya could marry only someone wealthier than herself, but because Alagemo could change his clothes and attributes, he persuades Oya to believe that Shango is wealthier. Oya marries Shango and after a while when Shango begins to agitate for an heir, Alagemo reminds the king of the earlier riddle. Shango decides to marry forest princess Osun.

Osun is dumb and can only be cured by swallowing the sound of a bird, but nobody knows which bird has the sound to cure the dumbness. Not even her father, Aroni, who has decided to give her in marriage to anybody who can cure her. Shango, again with the assistance of Alagemo, persuades birds to sing into a jar of honey in exchange for beautiful plumage. Osun drinks from the honey pot and regains her voice. Shango marries her and within months, she has given the king children. Jealousy soon enters the royal household because of Oya's inability to have a child. Osun takes her co-wife Oya to the spirit of *Iroko* to ask for a child, during which Oya pledges to sacrifice the child to *Iroko*. Despite pleas from Osun and warnings from *Iroko*, she sticks to her oath, saying she would be satisfied with just becoming a mother.

On the way to Oba's place to woo her for their king, Shango's porters are robbed by 'spirits'. Alagemo reveals to Shango that the 'spirits' are masquerades hired by his other wives and war generals who do not want Shango to marry a third wife. The story of the

¹⁰⁷ All references are from *Recent Outings (comprising Tegonni, an African Antigone and Many Colours Make the Thunder-King)*, Opon Ifa Readers, 1999.

ghost-mummers¹⁰⁸, a form of *egúngún*, from where the myth came, is not part of the Shango myth, but that of another king who reigned in Oyo many years after Shango; Osofisan incorporates the story into *Thunder-King*, because of the focus of the drama on birth and renewal; which links directly into the harvest festival and Igunnun performance that opens the play. Igunnun, like *egúngún*, is another form of ancestor veneration among the Yoruba people.

To achieve the ambition of surpassing his father, Shango has to deal with intrigues from two of his war generals, Timi and Gbonka. Oya also plots to rid the palace of Alagemo and her co-wife Osun; to regain her premier position in the palace. She persuades Osun to ask Alagemo to assume the image of Shango for fun. She then leads Shango to the scene, upon which Shango, believing Osun is having an affair with Alagemo, banishes her from the kingdom. He punishes Alagemo by ordering his servants to seal him in a cave. Ants dig him out and he makes his way to Osun's forest home for refuge. Oya also persuades Shango to stage a fighting contest between the two generals. When Gbonka wins, he sends Shango and Oya away from the kingdom, but not before the spirit of *Iroko* claims Oya's child.

Shango and Oya seek refuge with Osun. Taking pity on Shango, Alagemo promises to assist in rescuing Oya's son from Yeye Iroko, even though it would lead to his own death. Alagemo plans to assume the image of the baby and replace him while Oya escapes with the real baby. He plans to change back to Alagemo, using the magic of lightning, before the sacrifice but his powers fail him at the last moment. The forest burns; Osun and Oya end up becoming rivers and Shango hangs himself.

¹⁰⁸ For more on the story of ghost-mummers, see chapter one.

The transitions in the play at the Guthrie Theatre production were facilitated by songs, drumming and dance; in staging, there was no rigid border between music and dialogue, or history and mythology. The permanent presence on stage of the drummers and actors added to the play's construction as a traditional African public storytelling event.

To dramatise *Thunder-King*, Osofisan turns to Yoruba history, which he mediates to create a blend of history that is more mythical than historical. Essentially, the story of how Shango's reign as Alaafin ended is true; the story of the contest between two of his war generals is also true, and the names associated with his wives are true. The historical facts serve as a frame for the folktales and myth that form the rest of the drama.

Thunder-King begins in the town square with an orchestra accompanying the singing of a crowd of people, as part of an annual storytelling festival. As I have stated above, Osofisan introduces the audience dynamics into the performance from the beginning, in a style he has often used to make his drama accessible to the audience; like the opening scene of *Once Upon Four Robbers*, or the dance scene that begins *Farewell to a Cannibal*

Rage:

The sound of dundun drums, shekere, agogo and flute, accompanied by singing, welcomes us, as the lights come up on stage, to a public square, dominated in the centre by a towering iroko tree.

An excited crowd surrounds the orchestra, and behind them, to one side, is a gateway covered by a curtain of fresh palm fronds, the crown is watching this entrance expectantly. Apart from a small group of elders, who are seated on small wooden benches, everybody is standing. (p. 144).

The Yoruba storytelling setting is established at the outset. This setting reveals that Osofisan is going to dramatise a play with mixed metaphors, stories and idioms. For those who are familiar with Yoruba customs, it is immediately obvious that the choice of drums is wrong for a play about Shango. The drums used in the worship of Shango are *bàtá*, a

set of percussion instruments associated with Shango; *dundun* drums are not used in association with Shango. Fresh palm fronds are associated with the worship of Ogun, the Yoruba warrior god of iron and creativity. To further compound the mixture, the Igunnun that Osofisan introduces as the messenger of the ancestors, sent to collect the annual harvest from the living, is a cylindrically designed very tall masquerade famed for its engaging acrobatics and dancing styles. It has not related to Shango in a way; and the Igunnun in Osofisan's play later metamorphoses into Alagemo, the chameleon. This is a performance style established by the Alarinjo, an offshoot of the ghost mummers.¹⁰⁹

Igunnun enters as the storyteller and dances to the singing and drumming from the orchestra. The role of Igunnun as the narrator as well as a pivotal character is established right from the outset. Aafaa is a narrator, a key character and a link between the robbers and their victims. Igunnun is a narrator, a key character but also a mask, a representative of the ancestors, and the link between the living and the dead:

Igunnun: No man should marry a river, say our forefathers!
Exclamations of surprise, bafflement, etc.
Songleader: Baba Igunnuko, father of Masks,
 Welcome again from the land of the dead!
 It is a year since you last visited us (p. 145).

As he linked Aafa to Ifa divination; Osofisan connects Igunnun to Ifa by making Igunnun an emissary of Ifa, to clarify the link between the living and the dead:

Igunnun: I am Igunnun:
 I was born and raised in the shrine of divination!
 Any time anywhere that the nuts clatter on a tray,
 The message echoes back in the chambers of my mind (p. 152)

The association with Ifa makes it easier for Osofisan to reveal Igunnun as Alagemo later in the play. This also makes Igunnun's role more complicated; his function in the drama is now closer to that of Esu than to the traditional Igunnun role as a representative of the

¹⁰⁹See 'Alarinjo Tradition and Yoruba Traditional Performances' section in Chapter One.

ancestors. Esu serves as Ifa's messenger to confuse or clarify Orunmila's message, depending on his mood. Igunnun, and later Alagemo, poses riddles for Shango but also help him to decipher the codes.

The prologue is a long scene with riddles and proverbs, songs and music; it is full of spectacle and dance, which, to the American audience at the premiere in 1997 was 'long on words and short on action' (Vaughan 1997: E22). On his blend of riddles and songs, another critic comments:

They say that Yoruban (sic) [language] is the missing link between speech and song, and it's unbelievable to watch Femi integrate all these connections (Petrie 1997: E2).

Osofisan involves the audience more in *Thunder-King*. After the dance act in the prologue, Osofisan causes a disjunction in the dramatic flow by interjecting audience reaction into the performance. Shango orders Alagemo to be walled up in a cave after Oya tricks him into believing that Alagemo has been assuming Shango's image to deceive Osun. The ants agree to dig a tunnel for his escape if he can solve seven riddles. After the sixth riddle:

A member of the audience breaks in.

Member of the Audience: Can I... Will you, please, allow me to propose the last riddle?

Ant: Who are you?

Member of the Audience: I need to be sure you're not cheating.

Ant: And what business of yours is it if we do?

Member of the Audience: I bought a ticket! If Alagemo is not released, how will I see the end of the story?

Ant: If he isn't, *that* will be the end of the story!

Member of the Audience: Yes, that will satisfy you, no doubt. You're ants!

Ant: Listen to that. "You're ants!" As if we're not the ones to do the digging, while you just sit there and watch!

Member of the Audience: Well, may I?

Ant: If everybody who bought a ticket tonight were to –

Ant: Better let him! Or we'll be here the whole season!

Member of the Audience: Thank you! (p. 210)

The ‘audience member’ then poses the question; Alagemo answers. This is an example of Osofisan’s way of involving the audience in his drama. Even though the audience member is a plant, the intention is to encourage other members of the audience to participate in the play, to debate the issues being presented before them.

The use of proverbs in *Thunder-King* is comparable to the way Osofisan uses proverbs and pithy sayings in other recent plays; but in a more accomplished manner than in plays such as *Cooling Spring*. For instance, instead of responding to Shango’s query about the king’s identity, Igunnun responds with a proverb:

Igunnun: When an elephant walks by,
Does one still ask – is that a passing breeze?
The crocodile may leave his mouth open, but which animal
Will walk into it to have a nap?

Not only is Osofisan re-using Yoruba history and myth, he is also recycling his words, his lines and expressions. He does this for emphasis; Yoruba proverbs are generic and the meanings are dependent on the circumstances. Like Yoruba folktales which he re-uses in his dramatic work for their didactic functions. Compare the proverb above to Kansilor’s entrance at the beginning of Part Two in *Aringindin*:

Kans: Greetings my friends! When you see the elephant, do not say, ah, I felt a whiff of wind! The king of the forest takes the forest itself along, whenever he travels! (*He dances*) (*Major Plays* 2, p. 150).

After establishing that Igunnun is indeed a representative of the ancestors, the performance moves to the environment of Yoruba tradition and customs. Among the Yoruba, a person seldom embarks on any activity without seeking the guidance of Ifa or paying homage to the gods. It is a ritual process considered important by the people to their well-being, and without which an undertaking may not be successful. Igunnun’s ritual prayer is specifically directed at Esu, a god without whom sacrifices and

supplications cannot be delivered to the relevant god, and to Orunmila, the guiding spirit of Ifa. This casts Igunnun's role in another light: if he is not the Esu-type, who is he? From a reading of Osofisan's earlier plays, it is clear that the playwright is creating dual and multiple roles to focus the audience's attention on the moral of the story and not on the character. It is a style he used in *Cannibal Rage*, for example, and which falls under his strategy of surreptitious deception. After the ritual, Igunnun starts the storytelling session with a riddle, as is customary with Yoruba entertainment structure, before launching into the Shango myth.

The reference to Shango's mythical powers also precedes the story as Shango emerges in a flash of lightning and a roll of thunder. His two generals, Timi and Gbonka, accompany him. Shango asks Igunnun what he should do to surpass his father. Igunnun directs him to pluck the fruit of the sacred *odón* tree and make a wish –

Igunnun: ... And your journey will begin.
He disappears. (p. 155).

Shango attacks the tree and causes the *odón* fruit to dislodge; the fruit splits open to reveal Alagemo, the human incarnation of the chameleon, a messenger of the ancestors (and an ancestor himself). Alagemo pledges to serve Shango until he achieves the ambition of surpassing his father:

Alagemo: ... You have plucked the fruit of the *odón* tree, the sacred tree of Esu, my master! You have achieved a feat no one else has ever done! And to reward you, my master sends me to serve you. Order me, king Shango! I am bound to fulfil three of your wishes before I disappear!
[...]
I shall serve you, but be warned. Because you freed me by the way of violence, both of us will part by the way of violence! (p. 157).

Igunnun, now Alagemo, raises further confusion about his roles by referring to himself as Esu's servant. First, Osofisan transforms Igunnun into Alagemo, changes his role from

that of a messenger of the ancestors to an ancestral figure, then transforms him again into a mythical being, a chameleon, popular in Yoruba folktale and having the almost the same importance as that of tortoise. To reiterate, Osofisan introduces multiple roles not to confuse but to keep the audience focused on the story rather than the mythology.

Osofisan's reinterpretation of Yoruba myth in this drama is relevant to the success of the production. Without the re-interpretation to link the stories, some of which are not related, there would have been disjunctions in the storyline. He re-uses popular folktales, like in the story of exchanging the birds' voices for colourful plumages; it is the story of how all the birds got their different colours; the more colourful birds ended up losing their ability to sing while the birds with remarkable singing voices have dull colours. Osofisan reinterprets the tale to make all the birds contribute their voice to the honey pot, retain their voices and acquire colourful plumages to the bargain:

Alapandede: You mean you will take away our voice, and leave us mute?

Alagemo: You will not be mute. I have a pot here filled with honey. It is a special kind, it records sounds. All you have to do is sing into it (p. 169).

This lends a postmodern sensibility to Osofisan's writing; the honey pot is now a magnetic tape that records and stores songs, like modern electronic equipment. This trail leads to the modernisation of Shango's myth of thunder and lightning. In the original myth, Shango's supporters obtained the magic to cause thunder and lightning from the Nupe people. The Yoruba therefore regard Shango as the god of thunder and lightning; Osofisan however changes the descriptor and turns Shango to the god of electricity by creating an electric reaction which burns the city. Alagemo, disguised as Osun's child about to be killed by Yeye Iroko, asks Osun to fetch a piece of iron bar, and the Sprites of Yeye Iroko to fetch him a tub of water to bathe in before his death:

He climbs into the tub. Osun, now with the iron runs in, forgetting herself.

[...]

Osun throws the iron, without running away however. The iron hits the water. Immediately there comes an explosion, lightning up the whole stage. It spreads into blinding, lightning flashes and thunderclaps. Fires burst in various places (pp. 235 – 236).

Shango hangs himself; Oya stabs herself and immediately water begins to gush out from her breasts. The water turns into a river, as in the Yoruba myth. The playwright adds a twist however – Alagemo resurrects when the water touches his corpse:

He steps back slowly. His attendants begin to dress him again in Igunnun robes. He accepts the mask, and the Igunnun music from the beginning of the play wells up again (p. 238).

The audience realises that the play is an allegory for compassion, consideration and respect for the environment, as summarised by Alagemo:

Alagemo: ...Remember, whatever you do, and whatever choices you make in your lives, the Earth is older than all of us (p. 92).

In this drama, there is no distinction between myth and magical reality; Osofisan uses metaphor to connect nature and folktales. Osofisan's use of the Shango myth is different from the earlier dramatists like Duro Ladipo or Wale Ogunyemi, as I have explained above; the treatment of the materials is distinct in the way he reconstructs and modifies the stories. He radically revises and reshapes familiar history and myth in light of contemporary realities to stress their dynamism and their ability to be recycled, thereby providing his audience with his vision of a new dramaturgy, one which emphasises the 'Yorubanness' of the playwright to highlight his global appeal. Osofisan reconstructs the tales from Yoruba culture to 're-interpret history and myth for our own self-discovery' (Awodiya 1993: 47). In his quest for change, the playwright has reverted to earlier styles of writing, appropriating materials from previous plays, to use Yoruba historical past in addressing the future of pan-Africanism.

There is an old poster on the wall of Femi Osofisan's office with the picture of a tree and the legend by Marcus Garvey, one of the fathers of pan-Africanism; 'A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots'. It is my view that, after the production of *Nkrumah-ni...* in Ghana, Osofisan decided to return to his root; Yoruba history and culture to scrutinise the ideals that influenced the pan-Africanists and re-present them in a way that will appeal to his traditional audience as well as new people who may be interested in his drama. *Thunder-King* had its first two productions in the USA; subsequent productions in Nigeria in 1998 and 2000 were well received.

In my concluding chapter, I will consider the direction of Osofisan's dramaturgy from 1970s until 2000 and assess the relative importance and relevance of his work to world literature. I shall discuss the reception of his latest plays, including *Thunder-King*, and the growing global exposure of his work. In the period, he has written the biographical account of the first African Anglican bishop, Bishop Ajayi Crowther. I will show that the more Osofisan appropriates his Yoruba heritage, the more appealing his drama becomes on the international stage.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

I have conducted this study to examine how Femi Osofisan uses his Yoruba heritage to define his dramaturgy as a playwright. Osofisan highlights the various problems of underdevelopment, social injustice and oppression in Nigeria with his plays.

I have shown how Osofisan appropriates other writers' works as well as elements from other cultures to explain his ideological position. Osofisan borrows ideas and plot from contemporary Nigerian dramatists and classical drama to engage them in a dialectical debate on social justice. These debates include *No More the Wasted Breed* (Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*); *Another Raft* (John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft*); *Many Colours make the Thunder-King*, in response to myth and to Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso*; *A Diary of my Father: A Voyage Round Wole Soyinka's Isara*, the 2004 response to, and an adaptation of, Soyinka's novel, *Isara: A Voyage Round "Essay"* (1981); *Tegonni, An African Antigone* and *Women of Owu* in response to Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. Osofisan sees his plays as 'answers to existing works, refinements or rejections of their ideological burdens' (Dunton 1992: 69 – 70).

It is my opinion that Osofisan adapts other works, and relates intertextually with other cultures, debate issues and re-present familiar arguments before his audience. His adaptations are successful, as I have discussed, because he uses the same framework; the framework which is provided by Yoruba heritage of storytelling, songs, music, folktales, history and myth, and which are recognisable to his audience. The playwright writes for audiences who are familiar with his work; he is responding to a familiar argument, therefore his audience understands the basis of his drama and are able to see the two sides of the argument; his and the original view. His adaptations address concerns common to

humanity, in particular the quest for social justice and freedom in a post-colonial, global marketplace. He employs universal formats like storytelling and linear narration; on occasions when he uses flashbacks or plays-within-a-play structure, he appropriately signposts these to alert his audience.

Osofisan freely adapts stories, history and other literature to give new meanings to them. He has been effective in doing this because he varies his tactics from directly transposing foreign stories or re-situating a dramatic plot, using Nigerian situation; as he has done with plays such as *Tegonni* where he re-uses the Greek story of *Antigone* to address lack of social and political freedom in Nigeria. When he re-uses stories in this way, it is always to tackle what he sees as a parallel situation; in *Yungba Yungba*, he sees a parallel between the machination of General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria's head of state, to remain in power by muzzling the voice of protest against his decrees in the early 1990s, and the tactics employed by other African leaders to remain in power. Sometimes, as in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, the plays are not easily recognised as adaptations; where Shakespeare used the story of two 'stars-cross'd lovers' in *Romeo and Juliet* to unite two families, Osofisan's interest was in reconciling the warring sections of Nigeria after the Civil War. In a number of plays however, the adaptations are easily recognised, as in *Morountodun*, *Another Raft* and *Tegonni*, plays which builds on the framework of Yoruba myth and recent history, and classic Greek dramas.

Osofisan adapts plays when he disagrees with the argument of a dramatist, or when he wants to debate significant issues of societal importance. He has used the medium of the theatre to debate with Soyinka (*No More the Wasted Breed*) and Clark-Bekederemo (*Another Raft*); he also debated with his intellectual colleagues on the responsibilities of an educated Nigerian in a position of influence. Should that person act against dictatorial

tendencies of the government or only 'speak out' in academic gatherings like conferences and seminars? He used *Oriki* to assess the importance of capitalism as a weapon that can be employed by socialism in its fight for an egalitarian society. Claudius, the capitalist, serves as an instrument to restore Imaro's faith in socialism, after acting to prevent his arrest, thereby allowing him to continue functioning as an agent of societal reparation.

Certain principles of socialism are influential to Osofisan's dramaturgy. He believes in a classless society where the government controls all means of production and equitably distributes goods, education, welfare and justice. This is evident in some of his works, such as *Morountodun*, where he advocates fair taxation and equal distribution of infrastructure and resources, and in *Chattering and the Song*, where the Farmers' Movement promotes a kind of agrarian society where everybody is involved in the production of wealth. Osofisan always finds parallels in history to scrutinise class struggles in Nigeria. He sees socialism as an ideological weapon in the fight for political and economic independence. The principles have to be clear in order to avoid the kind of failure that characterises the example of Wole in *The Cooling Spring*, hence his use of familiar history, metaphor and songs in his plays. His belief that capitalism causes oppression and allows the wealthy minority to control access to opportunity for the working class is highlighted in such plays as *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *No More the Wasted Breed*.

Osofisan uses music, dance, songs, rich dialogue and metaphor in his plays, like several of his contemporaries. The major difference between how Osofisan uses these materials and how the other dramatists use them, is that Osofisan subverts their original purposes; he does not present the materials as unmediated codes but seeks to destabilise and challenge their representation. Early plays like *The Chattering and the Song* and *Morountodun* are

rich in music and dance which are used subversively. For instance, in *Chattering*, he used the Iwori Otura music and dance to demonstrate the shifting position of power, first from Mokan as he loses his fiancé to Sontri, and again as he loses political and strategic position to Leje when he arrests Sontri, which serves to recruit Funlola to the Farmers' Movement. Osofisan uses song and music to evolve an aesthetic he has often referred to as constituting 'surreptitious insurrection', especially in his constant 'dialogue' with the socio-political hegemonies of his universe. Or, to render the idea in Tejumola Olaniyan's phrase, it is 'uncommon sense', 'a concept that retains the dramatist's subversive agenda as well as its stealthy coding but is more descriptive, more accessible, less evaluative, and therefore infinitely more pedagogically resonant' (Olaniyan 1999: 77). This strategy involves the manipulation of the mechanics and metaphors of playmaking and of performance in such a way that they do not directly expose themselves to immediate repression, especially through a revolutionary use of music and humour. In doing this, Osofisan intertextually engages with the works of other writers and cultures, either to borrow plots, disagree with ideological positions or as a matter of necessity in 'inventing' plots (Osofisan, interviewed by Jeyifo 2001a: 231-232)¹¹⁰. This lends to Osofisan dramatic engagements with a post-modern consciousness that questions and suggests new ways of interpreting ideas.

I have mentioned the strategy of surreptitious insurrection a number of times in this thesis, and shown how Osofisan uses it to effect in his dramas. The strategy differs 'from play to play, and from occasion to occasion, depending on the particular subject the playwright has chosen to confront, as well as the circumstances of performance' (Osofisan 2001a:61).

To use this tactic in his dramaturgy, Osofisan selects a story from the repertory of Yoruba

¹¹⁰ Osofisan suggests in the interview that the dramatist re-invents his history each time the objective truth of 're-discovering history' occurs to him. I read an understanding of how he re-writes and revises his plays in this statement. There are many versions of several of his plays, for instance, there are four different versions of *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (1994, 1999, 2001, 2003). See especially page 121.

folktales and history, such as the story of tortoise used to illustrate the subject of robbery in *Four Robbers* or the history of Alaaḥin Abiodun to show how leaders misuse their authority. He weaves his dramas round the moral of the story, using music and antiphonal chants, songs and spectacle. The strategy is in how he presents the problem before the audience. As I have discussed, there are two main targets of Osoḥisan's criticism: the politicians who fail to create the climate for social and economic prosperity, and the educated class who fail to act against the failure of the State because of their 'inordinate horror of insurrection' (Osoḥisan 2001a: 57). Osoḥisan constructs dramas to denounce agents of political apathy in *Yungba Yungba*, for instance; and tried to provoke the educated class into 'anger and active resistance' (Osoḥisan 2001a: 57) in *Chattering and Oriki*, for example. In all, Osoḥisan disguises his argument for insurrection with music, songs and spectacle successfully that his audience becomes involved in the act as participants. By using 'metaphor and magic, parody and parable, masking and mimicry' (Osoḥisan 2001a: 51), the dramatist can criticise dictators and powerful people who are intolerant to criticism, and since it is the same influential people who have the capacity to change society, the message has to be non-confrontational. Osoḥisan deploys the strategies of 'enlightened guile' (2001a: 50) in two ways. The first way is by encouraging university students 'whose minds are still in formation' (2001a: 58) to embrace principles of social justice so that, when the students become an established member of the professional class, in whose hands the destiny of the nation lie, their allegiances will already be set.

The second way is the method used in addressing those already in power, an example of which I related when discussing my production of *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*. Using cunning and folktales, Osoḥisan constructs a drama that criticises government policies without directly exposing his methods to censorship.

Osofisan's dramaturgy draws heavily on Yoruba myth and ritual forms, whose repertory he raids and subverts to propose an alternative ideological position. He advances this position instead of pursuing the historical function of using drama to legitimise political and religious orthodoxy for which earlier writers were famous. Osofisan's plays are 'characterised by deft appropriation and re-interpretation of indigenous performance forms, a fine-tuned materialist vision of history, and a consummate dramaturgic sophistication and openness (Olaniyan 1999: 74). In essence, he has taken drama away from the shrine, metaphorically and symbolically, and brought it to the public square – the market (as in *Once Upon Four Robbers*), the junction (as in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* or the town square (as in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*). In the process, Osofisan questions the treachery and travesties of the ruling class. His plays seek:

to reshape traditional Yoruba mythology and ritual in the light of contemporary realities, to squeeze out of old myths fresher meanings, in the belief that Man, in the last analysis, makes his own myth. Not content to merely expose the ills of the society, he has dared to provide us with glimpses of his vision of a new society (Ogunbiyi 1981: 37).

He does not simply oppose tradition by subverting myths and history, rather, 'he subjects tradition to scrutiny and reinterpretation, using its own modes of thought and structure (Richards 1987: 288) to forge the structure of a new society. His 'new society' is one where voice will be given 'to the active forces of our community to democratise history, and demonstrate how [collective] participation is not only possible, but vital, for every level of society' (Osofisan 1992: 73). His use of myth and history to question political tyranny serves to distance and protect the dramatist from political censorship. For instance, during the production of *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contests*, a drama that was very critical of the Babangida regime in Nigeria in the early 1990s, state security agents attended the rehearsals and interrogated the playwright, but because of the shield of

myth, folktales and fables which are already common knowledge, the agents did not find the play dangerous or subversive.

For Sandra Richards, Osofisan ‘subjects tradition to scrutiny and reinterpretation, using its own modes of thought and structure’ (1987: 288), to proffer a counter-official version to history and to mythology. He ‘revises history, challenges and reinterprets myths and legends, and questions consensus opinion’ (Awodiya 2002: 5) in plays like *The Chattering and the Song* and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*. In virtually all his plays, he advocates radical social change based on commitment to a just society. History provides for him an image to view and interpret the present. In some other criticisms, Osofisan’s plays, especially *The Chattering and the Song*, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Morountodun*, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, and *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* are described as revolutionary or ground-breaking, not only in terms of language but also in their commitment to an ‘alter/native’ ideological perspective. For Abiola Irele, Osofisan’s ‘contribution to Nigerian drama in English has been to consolidate its development and practice as a viable form of cultural production in the modern context of a plural society’ (1997: xxxii), the multi-ethnic Nigeria. His drama ‘includes at least half a dozen of the most imaginative and powerful works in the Nigerian English language theatre’ (Dunton 1992: 67).

Osofisan’s dramas are popular in Nigeria and have been staged outside Nigeria, for example, in Sri Lanka, England, Ghana, Canada, USA and Lesotho. *Tegonni*, *Many Colours make the Thunder-King* and *Wèsòò Hamlet! or, The Resurrection of Hamlet*, for example, were commissioned by institutions outside Nigeria.

Osofisan is a Yoruba dramatist writing in English, the language that can best expose his dramaturgy to both his primary audience in the Nigerian university system and in the

world at large. Like the theatre manager of Yoruba Travelling Theatre, he borrows material frequently from Yoruba history and myth; he re-interprets the material to fit the purpose of the message he wants to present, or in certain instances, like the adaptations, re-present. He radically modifies and transforms familiar history and myth in light of contemporary realities to provide his audience with dramas that have global appeal even as they emphasise his Yoruba heritage. For this, he raids Yoruba history to extract the essence of stories, legends and tales to inject into the framework of his plays, which he sometimes combines with dramatic plots and stories from other writers. His dramas have proved that, to be a universal dramatist whose plays are accessible to different categories of people, the dramatist has to be conversant with his heritage and be accepted by his primary audience. Osofisan is a writer who is still active and who continually changes his writing style to re-interpret and re-present familiar Yoruba history and folktales.

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A Success Story

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 A Date With Danger
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