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نود أن نعلمكم بقبول نشر بحثكم الموسوم :

The Africanization of Greek Tragedy in Ola
Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*

في مجلتنا ،

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The Africanization of Greek Tragedy in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*

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Abstract

In the late part of the twentieth century and the early part of twenty first century there was a remarkable interest in rewriting Greek tragedy. Playwrights from all over the world have attempted to re-work Greek tragedy to shed light on local issues. Greek figures like Oedipus, Dionysus, Media, Electra, Antigone and Trojan women have been modernized to dramatize the state of oppression and tyranny of their playwrights' countries. The present paper deals with the Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi's attempts at Africanizing Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to address the Nigerian civil war of 1960s upon the country's formal independence, and the way he naturalized Greek tragedy within the African-native tradition.

Key words: Greek tragedy, adaptation, Nigeria, the civil war, *Oedipus Rex*, tribal bigotry.

A New Understanding of the Past: The Nigerian Civil War Re-Allegorized

Over times, Greek tragedy has proved interesting to be re-used in many various contexts. Different cultures have re-contextualized Greek tragedy for they have found in it a living image for their current issues. Identified by its inherent qualities, Greek tragedy has *travelled* from the past to the present metamorphosed physically as well as metaphorically from its original cultural nucleus penetrating into different

realms to ensure its own aesthetics as well as capacity of commenting on the contemporary issues of the place on which it lands.¹ Helene Foley in her discussion on the modernization of Greek tragedy has listed several reasons for re-working the Greek text claiming that the playwrights of the twentieth century first find in “performing Greek tragedy ... a facade for staging political responses to various current events and issues, including a way around censorship.” Second, Sigmund Freud’s definition of the archetype in identifying the nature of humanity and the development of human personality by investigating stories like those of Oedipus and Electra have “proved irresistible to poets [as well as playwrights]”. Third, for the spiritual and philosophical “agendas” that Greek tragedy can provide playwrights like Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Les Mouches* or *The Flies* and Archibald McLeish in his *Heracles* have adapted the Greek model because of “its ability to frame, even if in pessimistic terms, a discussion of possible meanings to human action.” Fourth, many playwrights have attempted to discuss modern issues through Greek tragedy as representative of western civilization that “is largely devoid of complacency”. Consequently, the adaptations of Greek tragedy in the twenty and twenty-first century “have become a sort of dialogue between past and present in which the skeleton of Greek tragedies lurks behind new texts that fragment and undercut the myths in a modern context.” (n.d. 1-2)

In Nigeria and for many years Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* came to represent a magnificent piece of drama to both literature students and those who are saturated with the colonial education which dominated the country during colonization and

¹ I owe this description of travelling cross time to Hardwick’s migratory paradigm for discussing the cultural implications of Greek tragedy. See “Contests and Continuities in Classical Traditions: African Migrations,” in *Ima Parens Originalis?: The Receptions of Classical Literature and Thought in Africa, Europe, the United States, and Cuba*, ed. John Hilton and Ann Gosling (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 46-47.

even after the political independence. For those who are obsessed with the Greek drama, Rotimi is one of them, *Oedipus Rex* is a frequent title in their studies and a perfect example for analyzing the sociopolitical and religious belief system of the Greeks demonstrating thoroughly the politics, the feudal system and the literary values of the Greek society. (Na'Allah 2010, 98) The tragedy tells of the useless attempts of a man who tries to escape a fate imposed on him. It centres on Oedipus, the son of king Laius and queen Jocasta, who is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. With his feet pierced, Oedipus the baby is handed over to a shepherd to avert this misery. Out of sympathy, the shepherd gives the baby to the king of Corinth for adoption. Grown aware of his fate, Oedipus leaves Corinth and on his way out of Corinth and in a quarrel over the right way in a crossroad he kills a man who turns out to be his real father. When arrived at Thebes, the city was suffering from the Sphinx which kills its residents. Having killed the beast, Oedipus was made the king to the city. To follow the customs and fulfill the prophecy, Oedipus has to marry the former king's wife who is in reality his biological mother who then gives birth to his two daughters; Antigone and Ismene. (Ogunbile and Awoniyi 2015, 80-81)

As the action progresses, the play's events are unveiled as Jocasta tells the truth of her former king's death saying that it was strangers who killed king Laius. Meanwhile, Oedipus commands the "henchman", the shepherd to come. At the same time, a messenger from Corinth comes bringing the news of the death of king Polybus, Oedipus' foster father. Upon hearing the news, Oedipus unaware of the hidden truth, declares that the oracle that he once heard at Corinth that he will kill his father is untrue as he still thinks that Polybus is his biological father and that his father has not been murdered by his son but died peacefully on the bed. This feeling of relief does not last long as both the shepherd and the henchman tell him that Polybus is not his real father and that they exchange him out of pity. Hearing the

truth, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus plucks his eyes out and leaves the cursed city. (Na'Allah 2010, 106)

When it comes to the Nigerian re-writing, Rotimi's version follows the plot structure of the original text to a considerable degree making some changes for the sake of having a local relevance. First performed in 1968 and published in 1971, *The Gods Are Not To Blame* is Rotimi's most famous piece of drama. It was written after the civil war in Nigeria providing an allegorical representation for the war as well as the pride of the Nigerians that stems from the ethnic bigotry. (Banham, Hill and Woodyard 1994, 81) In his adaptation, the Nigerian playwright is very conscious of the play's noble position as a tragedy among its Greek counterparts and his state of being a postcolonial writer. He accepts the challenge and re-writes the most salient tragedy of all time coming up with a completely new creation. Oedipus turns to be Odewale, king Laius becomes the African king Adetusa. Queen Jocasta becomes the African queen Ojuola. Creon, Oedipus' uncle, turns out to be Aderopo, Odewale's brother. Tiresias becomes Baba Fakunle, the blind seer. The shepherd of the original text is now Gbonka and finally the messenger is now, in the African adaptation, Alaka of Ijekunland. Thebes is transformed into the African setting of Kutuje and the parricide is made in Ede. (Osofisan 2001, 66)

The Gods Are Not To Blame (the play hereafter will be referred to as *The Gods*) tells the story of Odewale who is like his Greek counterpart is predestined to kill his father and marry his mother as Baba Fakunle tells his oracle "This boy, he will kill his own father and then marry his own mother!" (3)² To avoid the tragedy, the king and the queen decide to kill the boy by giving him to the messenger of the palace, Gbonka, where he is supposed to take the baby into the forest and kill him.

² All references to Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame* are made from the edition by Oxford University press, 1971.

Driven by his sympathy, the messenger decides to give the baby to a hunter who lives in a far way village so as to prevent any sort of communication with the baby's parents. In his new family, Odewale faces his unchangeable fate again. He is told by the foreteller that he is fated to commit parricide and incest as the Ifa priest says "You have a curse on you, son. You cannot run away from it, the gods have willed that you will kill your father and then marry you mother!" (60). Believing that he is with his real parent, Odewale flees the village to avoid the tragedy "Continue to stay in the house of my father and mother? Oh, no, the toad likes water, but not when the water is boiling" (60). After leaving his foster parents, Odewale arrives at Ede, a place where he has a farm. One day, he is visited by a group of rude persons. They started to make fun of him mocking his parentage and background. Irritated by their attitudes, he kills their leader who happens to be his real father. (Na'Allah 2010, 107-8)

Unlike his Greek counterpart, Odewale feels guilty for killing the old man even before knowing that he is his real father and this is way he leaves for Kutuje "The whole world ceased to be. Ogun ... I have used your weapon and I have killed a man. Ogun ... ! with my own hands ... with my own hands I have killed." (49) Arrived at his real birth place, Odewale finds the city in a state of chaos mourning the death of its former king; an event that gave the enemies the opportunity to invade the city and kill its people. Motivated to help the city, he fights with the strangers helping the city to get rid of them. Triumphed over the attackers, Odewale was rewarded as the king and married to the former king's queen Ojuola who gives birth to his four children. (Conradie 1994, 30)

However, by transferring Sophocles' story to unspecified pre-colonial setting dominated by Yoruba traditions, the Nigerian playwright is enabled to create a Nigerian identity independent from the colonial heritage. In doing such, Rotimi

makes some changes to the original text. Before the action of the play starts, the audience can notice that the title of the play itself is changed. It signifies the fact that the gods are not responsible for the tragic end of the hero, Odewale whose tragedy can be read in terms of qualities that he himself has. He is identified mainly with “stubbornness, his too easily provoked anger ... [and] his ethnically based suspicion of the people around him.” (Larsen 2006, 178-9) This transformation of divine responsibility has its counterpart in Sophocles’ text as Oedipus first is shown as blaming Apollo for his fate then himself. Here, in the African adaptation, this is made more explicit and direct than in the Greek original. In *The Gods*, the individual is expressed as totally responsible for his actions. Odewale is shown as hunted by the fact that he is a foreigner belonging to a different tribe. Like Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* whose emphasis is on the hero’s origin in “a different *polis*,” Odewale is captivated by the idea that he might be mistreated by people in Kutuje because of his ethnic background and this in turn can be read in terms of the events that Nigeria lived in 1960s during the civil war upon the end of colonization as the war was believed to have been sparked by the European powers whose colonial and neo-colonial policies have effected Nigeria and contributed to the war. (Budelmann 2004, 8)

The question now to ask is how can the sense of transmutation of responsibility that the title informs be employed to addressing the Nigerian political situation upon independence? Like any other African literary work of the period, the *The Gods* is written in response to a devastating historical moment in the life of the Nigerians. During the 1960s, Nigeria witnessed the emergence of the ethnic strifes and bigotry among the Nigerian people which culminated in the civil war which in turn caused nothing but death and casualties among people of different parts of the country:

Written in 1967 as civil war was raging in Nigeria, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* reinterprets the Oedipus myth in the light of the Nigerian situation. Certainly the causes of the civil war are many and are rooted in the time of British colonialism. The military coup of January 15, 1966, in which the Hausa leaders of the north were killed, was followed by an orgy of slaughter of Igbo people living in the north. Those Igbo who could escape to the safe confines of Igboland in eastern Nigeria, and on May 30, 1967, the Igbo declared that eastern Nigeria — now called Biafra — was an independent nation. Three years and millions of deaths later, Nigeria became reunited. The war inspired many works by Nigerian dramatists, poets, and novelists. Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, however, was one of the first literary responses to the conflict. (Rollyson and Magill 2003, 2829)

Rotimi, in his Africanization, is conscious of his country's current issues as well as of his position as a writer of social and political consideration. In an interview with Bernth Lindfors, he has stated his intention behind adapting the Greek text:

Lindfors: What prompted you to write your first tragedy, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*?

Rotimi: Foremost, I should say, was the prevailing situation in Nigeria at that time — namely, the civil war. The title really has more to it than meets the eye. "The Gods Are Not to Blame" does not refer to the mythological gods or mystic deities of the African pantheon. Rather it alludes to national, political powers such as America, Russia, France, England, etc.—countries that dictate the pace of world politics. The title implies that these political 'gods' shouldn't be blamed or held responsible for our own national failings. It could be recalled that during the Nigerian civil war, the Biafrans blamed Russia and Britain for aiding Nigerian Federalists in the attack against them. The Federalists, on the other hand, blamed France, and to some extent, America through its charity organizations, for abetting the Biafrans' cause of secession. But the root cause of that strife, of the bloodshed, the lavish loss of life and property, was our own lingering, mutual ethnic distrust which culminated in open hostility. The frightening ogre of tribalism stirs in almost every form of our national life. Politicians capitalize on this for partisan ends; labor is infested with it; even human relations are sometimes tinted by tribal bigotry. So long as this monster is allowed to wax and incite disharmony among us, we must not blame external political for their initiative in seizing upon such disunity for the fulfilment of their own exploitative interests. That's the message this play attempts to impart. (Lindfors 2002, 351)

Rotimi, here, thinks that the colonial powers, as mentioned above the political "gods," should be historically exonerated from the responsibility of the civil war in post-independence Nigeria. This reading together with Rotimi's interviews is further elaborated by Odewale himself whose final words are (Simpson 2010, 88):

No, no! Do not the blame the Gods. Let no one blame the powers. My people, learn from my fall. The powers would have failed if I did not let them use me. They knew my

weakness: the weakness of a man easily moved to the defence of his tribe against others.
(71)

The circumstances in which *The Gods* is written which are identified with the Nigerian civil war are scrutinized by the play's events and analyzed to raise some sort of consciousness on the part of the Nigerian people "[t]he decision to write on the *Oedipus Rex* saga posed no problem at all ... Nigeria was in the throes of a civil war flared by ethnic distrust, the bane of all Africa. A shattering tragedy like *Oedipus'* calamity should bring out the warning against this cancerous foible." (Crowder quoted in Banham 1990, 63)

Written in the heyday of the Nigerian civil war, the African adaptation has enabled its writer to criticize tribalism and tell his audience that they should accept their fate and that what happened in the civil war and its aftermaths is only part of their faults and that they should not blame the gods or any other nebulous or outside foreign forces:

Rotimi [in *The Gods*] was exhorting Nigerians to stop blaming unknown and unseen forces beyond their grasp and management and to rather have an introspective examination and view as to what caused the disturbances, riots, coups, pogroms and massacre of the Igbos in the North, the mass exodus of Igbos from the North and eventually that led to the Nigeria-Biafran civil war. (Nkwocha 2010, 373-4)

For Rotimi, the ideas of tribalism and ethnic distrust are the direct cause of the civil war which as shown earlier were "the Root cause of that Stife, of the bloodshed." This is manifested in the play in Act Two when Aderopo comes back from Ifa bringing the priest's message that the murderer of the king is still alive in Kutuje. The reaction to this news is stronger than that in Sophocles' play. Odewale commands the townspeople to gather around showing his mistrust towards them thinking that they are plotting against him. This feeling of betrayal can be traced in Sophocles' text but here in the African setting is made much vivid and directly mentioned. Odewale thinks that he is a stranger to the city of Kutuje as he is an

Ijekun person. This can be seen too with Oedipus who finds in himself a stranger to the Thebans. In the light of this, Oedipus' claim that he is a stranger in Thebes takes a new sense because the "tribal rivalries" in Nigeria at the time of the civil war played a very noticeable role in Rotimi's African adaptation. (Conradie 1994, 30)

The African adaptation in this context follows its Greek object. Odewale finds himself in the position of facing the accusations made against him which he feels as a conspiracy to dethrone him. He is accused of being the curse bringer of the city as Baba Fakunle tells him "You are the murderer!" (27) to whom he chooses to manipulate his answer by deliberately responding "Why, I have not killed you yet ..." (27). For Odewale, the blind foreteller and his half-brother Aderopo are part of the conspiracy and they work for personal interests. Oedipus, in the Greek text, also shows this feeling as he tells Tiresias that the story of king's Laius murder is either designed by him or it is Creon's plan and that it's a kind of a robbery of his throne. Like his Greek counterpart, the African Oedipus is in a state of bewilderment hanging between his efforts to maintain his crown and the desire to face the Kutuje's false accusations which all have been attributed to his ethnic differences. Odewale thinks that it is his ethnic difference as an outsider which instigates such discontent (Wetmore 2002, 108-9):

I am an Ijekun man. That is the trouble. I, an Ijekun, came to your tribe, you made me King, and I was happy, ignorant that plots, subversion, and intrigues would forever keep me company. (30, italics mine)

The issue of ethnicity and otherness is further emphasized by Odewale as he calls one of his men as the "son of Kutuje" (31) drawing a distinction between himself and people in the city by approaching them as Other with devilish intents. Wetmore explains that this can be applied to what occurred during the civil war:

When military leaders ... divided the country into separate regions based on ethnicity and geography. Ethnic strife and distrust undermined both the central authority of the

government and the unity of the nation. The governed who initially accepted leaders of a different ethnic group found themselves as a nation distrusted and alienated by those leaders who did not trust the people precisely because of their ethnic differences. (Ibid, 109)

During the Nigerian civil war, which lasted from 1967 to nearly 1970, there was consistent attempts to divide the federation; the system that the colonizer has left behind in Nigeria. Soon after independence, the strife turned out to be an intertribal conflict. By analyzing Oedipus' search for his biological identity in terms of questioning the tribal identity and locating the African re-writing within its postcolonial agenda, the desire becomes the creation of a pure consistent identity cleansed from the colonial threads. Rotimi has transplanted Oedipus myth into an African setting for vocalizing a local resonance "[t]hrough ... [the] story of Odewale-Oedipus ... intend[s] to show not only how tribal allegiance were ruining the country, but also how those allegiances might be illusory, as there must exist among individuals in Africa far deeper ties than the tribal ones, ties that its citizens can ignore only at their own risks." (Lauriola 2007, 222)

In the play, Odewale after his unwitting parricide and being crowned as the king to Kutuje for defeating the city's "tribal enemy" had to find the murderer so that the city can overcome the plague. This search, as with Oedipus, now turns to be a quest for his real identity; a quest that would lead him to his "his real tribal *identity*." The end result of the story shows that the African protagonist is identified with parricide and incest, but unlike Oedipus, these crimes are not caused by "Destiny" but due to the "tribal distrust and hate" instead. In Rotimi' adaptation, the parricide is committed over a tribal quarrel in relation to a land that supposedly belongs to Odewale. Thus, the act of killing is saturated with "tribal hostilities." (Ibid, 222) Demonstrating this meaning, Odewale expresses why he has killed the old man, Adetusa, highlighting the ethnic tribal spat:

... I once slew a man ... I could have spared him. But he spat on my tribe. He spat on the tribe I thought was my own tribe. The man laughed ... [a]nd I lost my reason. Now I found out that that very man was my ... own father (71)

Within the context of the play, Odewale has murdered his father for his love for his tribe. The former king is killed after he has mocked Odewale's language and claiming the property of the land. In an interview with the playwright, Rotimi says "Odewale is used, in the idiom of the play, to dramatize the shocks which ethnic jingoism is capable of paralleling in the relationships of African people. In this sense, Odewale's tribulations can be seen as drawing attention to that most obtrusive of African national evils: ethnicism." He goes on to explain that the gods are not to blame for Odewale's crimes:

the fault ... [rather lies] in Odewale himself, in his 'free' choice of tribal jingoism as a natural trait. That choice led him to unwitting parricide, which in turn led to his marrying the woman who was available to match his new status as King. The woman turned out to be his own mother. ... Rather than blam[ing] the gods for letting Odewale perpetrate such heinous crimes, people should look at Odewale's experience and learn the lessons from unbridled tribal bigotry. (Ossie 1984, 39)

The act of killing becomes a salient reference to the intertribal clashes and an indication of the relationships that connect the states in Africa. By having replaced the Sphinx of the original text with Ikolu attackers, Rotimi foregrounds the idea that "inter-tribal and civil wars ... have destroyed the quality of human relations between the tribes and the nations of Africa. Therefore, the plague and wars highlighted in [*The Gods*] ... could be a metaphorical representation of political conflicts and disease that pervade the African continent." (Chiangong 2010, 121)

Evidently, the different dialogues in the play are only dramatic mechanisms that the Nigerian playwright through which expresses the "ethnic bigotry" that has and still menaces the Nigerian society. Performing the adaptation during the time of ethnic wrangles has given the Nigerian playwright the opportunity to tackle such issues as ethnicity and bigotry "[Rotimi] attempts here to depict the ethnic bigotry

that threatened (and still threatens) to devastate the Nigerian polity. The play came at the time of the Nigerian civil war ... which was caused by ethnic bickering. Rotimi tries to demonstrate that ‘the gods are not to blame’ for the country’s woes.” (Oloruntoba-Oju 2009, 10) In a moment of “cathartic self-realization,” (Ibid) Odewale confesses that his tragedy is one of “a man moved easily to the defense of his tribe against other.” (65) Consequently, the adaptation ends with a long-aged African aphorism “When / the wood-insect / Gathers sticks / On its own head it / Them.” (68)

Understandably, Odewale’s assertion of his murder emphasizes Rotimi’s message which according to Rosanna Lauriola “condemns the overemphasis upon tribal origin and denounces the fallacy both of tribal identity and of a socio-political system that grants to tribal identity such an importance that it puts at risk the survival of the entire [Nigerian] society itself.” Lauriola goes on to maintain that, in the play, Odewale finds out that he does not belong to the tribe that he has always identified himself with, Ijekun, and for the sake of which he has killed. It is only then Odewale discovers that the man he has killed is his father, and the tribe that he considers as his “enemy” is his tribe. As a result, Odewale turns out to be “a social *hamartia*. People, as he says, must learn from his fall; they must take on their responsibility for the inner conflict that is destroying their nation, rather than blaming each other tribe’s enemy and their western allies, i.e., the imperial, neo-colonial ‘gods’ on the international stage.” (2007, 222-3)

Conclusion:

Rotimi’s adaptation comes to represent a powerful voice of the postcolonial theory which aims at re-writing and re-interpreting the European canonical texts. Rotimi has localized the western tradition to address the state of the colonized countries before and after colonization. He portrays a Yoruba setting with characters of

Yoruba background echoing their Greek counterparts. His re-writing tackles the Nigerian civil war which is considered as part of the colonial vestiges. By having the Greek characters of the original texts transformed into Yoruba individuals, Rotimi brings his Nigerian audience close to the play's main aim. He re-writes *Oedipus Rex*'s parricide and incestuous marriage to comment on local issues. In his adaptation, Odewale, Oedipus figure, appears as blaming himself for his miserable fate and illegal marriage. For Rotimi, the ethnic strife and bigotry is the main reason behind the civil war. Odewale, in the adaptation, is not shown as blaming the gods, as shown Oedipus in the Greek text, but blaming his hot temper and love for his land for murdering his father and his then marriage to his mother that way reflecting the Nigerian playwright's claim that people in Nigeria should not blame the European forces, which the adaptation shows as the "gods," for the war but should blame themselves in the first place.

ملخص البحث:

في أواخر القرن العشرين وبدايات القرن الواحد والعشرين كان هناك اهتمام ملحوظ في إعادة كتابة المأساة الأغرريقية. العديد من الكتاب المسرحيين من جميع بقاع العالم حاولو إعادة قراءة المأساة الأغرريقية لتسليط الضوء على مواضيعهم المحلية. شخصيات اغريقية كأوديب, دايونيسيس, ميديا, اليكترا, أنتيجوني و نساء طرودة قد أعطوا لمسة حداثوية لمناقشة مواضيع الظلم والاضطهاد لبلدان هكذا كتاب. تختص ورقة البحث هذه في مناقشة محاولات الكاتب المسرحي النيجيري أولا روتيمي لأفرقة نص سوفيكولوس "أوديب ملكا" لمخاطبة مواضيع الحرب الأهلية في نيجيريا في الستينيات بعد حصول البلد على الاستقلال الرسمي, والطريقة التي حاول بها أولا روتيمي إعادة تجنيس المأساة الأغرريقية في خانة التراث الأفريقي المحلي.

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