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### **Agony, Antigone and the Dialectics of Resistance in African Performance**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the political dynamics that informs the dialectics of resistance in African performance in the works of Nigerian playwright, Fémi Ọsófisan. Generally, African writers, since the era of independence from Britain, France, Portugal and other colonialists, have consistently pleaded against the subjugation of human freedom and justice, and the imposition of a Creonic code of administrative conduct, by the ruling elite with their imperial, and sometimes feudalistic, privileges. The struggle between traditional values and identities and the hegemonic Western construction of African values form the basis of most of African performances since the nationalistic era, through the periods of independence to the present day. This struggle is sometimes referred to as the 'clash of cultures' or 'clash of sexes'. However, the muse of Fémi Ọsófisan identifies and theatrically deploys a synthesis of post-colonial discourse that systematically constructs and authors a differing idealistic path, especially regarding the position of women in African society. In "Tegonni: An African Antigone", a play set against the backdrop of colonial dependency in Africa, Fémi Osofisan explores the angst felt by the women against the modern day Creons while "Women of Owu" questions the motives of male conquerors and heroes. This paper thus explores the discourse of the dialectics that inform these echoes.

Imperialism as a policy by a country or any powerful entity seeks to impose authority over another after territorial, political or economic conquest. Imperialists, like all empire builders, always believe that the justification for their actions lies in the positive good that they bring. On the cultural level, imperial power assumes an inherent superiority over the conquered culture leading to what Edward Said has described as cultural imperialism. Said's work itself is largely informed by Michel Foucault's concept of power as the more or less unilateral force with a potential to

bring about significant change in individuals or the society through influencing actions. My use of imperialism in this essay is instructive. It refers to the political impositions by foreign powers at the level of social and economic development, and to the level of cultural policy-making that governed the actions of administrators during the colonial period.

My thesis in this essay is to argue, with reference to Fémi Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, that political disruptions over the ages have continually re-invented African history, development and governance. This interference perpetrates the suppression of freedom as well as engenders anguish in the societal and individual psyche. The disruptions have generated quite a corpus of active resistance on the one hand, and on the other, a sort of defeat, treachery and / or fraud. The culmination of these is an unending cycle of resistance, defeat and acquiescence, or to render it simply, a dialectical carnival in which history repeats its dance, sometimes as a metaphor, in a continuous exchange of propositions and counter propositions.

The publication in 1978 of *Orientalism* by Said and the inauguration of colonial discourse analysis brought into theoretical focus the ways in which Europe 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 – even more than political or economic 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'.

While Said's work focussed 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, authorised by Europe. This challenge and contestation have always been part of the history of resistance to slavery, colonialism and domination. Beginning with the narratives of the freed slaves through to the counter-discursive manoeuvres of the Négritude movement, writers from every part of the colonised world evolved various strategies and dialectics of resistance to the 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 Fémi Osofisan, the idea of a metropolitan locus in which all power is located is physically de-centred and transported into ideological spaces. While acknowledging the historical significance of this

centre, Òsófisan sees pockets of power in various kinds of Empire-authorized spaces and the major impetus of his work has been to question and challenge these. Grounding his vision of change in a dialectical reading and re-reading of history and political discourse, Òsófisan manipulates the various heritages available to him as a post-colonial as well as post-négritude writer to devise discourses that engage with the practice of art in an intellectual universe.

I describe Òsófisan as a post-colonial writer based on Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins definition which argues that post-colonialism is, rather than a naive teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, an engagement with, and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies (1996: 2). While this definition reinforces the idea proposed by Ashcroft *et al* (1989) that African writers generally continue to privilege the 'centre', usually a former colonising 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 however 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. Òsófisan's dramaturgy however does not play a subaltern's role; it engages in intertextual discourses with colonial heritages. But even more than being a post-colonial writer, Òsófisan is a writer whose ideas refine the concept of négritude to respond to the post-colonial discourse. Òsófisan'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. In *Tegonni, An African Antigone* (1999), Òsófisan challenges the recuperative bias of the négritude ideology which classified everything African as noble, and proposes an assessment of imperial or pseudo-imperial tyranny as a more credible discourse of analysing post-colonial Africa.

Òsófisan uses myths and history to question political tyranny and this use serves to distance and shelter his work from possible censorship. He is the most consciously intertextual Nigerian playwright in his use of myths and history and he has often 'adopted a free-wheeling iconoclastic attitude to antecedent texts and authors from which / whom he constantly borrows materials' (Garuba, 1996: 136) which he then subverts to satisfy his creative impulse. Garuba suggests he engages contemporary historical facts to challenge previous plays, orthodox historiography and conventional wisdom, like in *Tegonni: An African Antigone*.

Òsófisan couches his dramaturgy in a web of music, dance, songs and rich dialogue to evolve an aesthetics he has often referred to as constituting 'surreptitious insurrection', especially in his constant 'dialogue' with the socio-political hegemonies in his universe. 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. This is a concept, according to Olaniyan, 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' (1999: 77). This abrogating and appropriating of the works of other writers and cultures sometimes leads to his dramatic engagements a postmodern consciousness that questions and suggests new ways of interpreting ideas. In virtually all his plays, he advocates radical social change. Because of the focus of his work, women, the marginalised, underprivileged and the lower class in the society have always taken central stage in his plays.

In *Tegonni*, Òsófisan pitches colonial interpretation of culture against the contemporary Yoruba cultural norms. *Tegonni*, an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* is 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' (Jeyifo 2001: 204). The plot of the drama does not deviate much from Sophocles', 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 allure of a strong leader and the power of a tyrant. Òsófisan's argument in the Nigerian play meanwhile 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.

The dialectics proposed by Òsófisan defines a sharp conflict between the British Governor of the Colony of Nigeria, Lt Gen Carter-Ross and Tegonni, the daughter of the lately deceased king of the community. Tegonni is a woman whose social allegiance and roles clearly underlines her filial relationship. Carter-Ross, on the other hand, represents the State. Their positions are defined, allowing the playwright to create the kind of empathy he wants for Tegonni: she is portrayed as the helpless 'little African primitive, from a lost village in the jungle' to Carter-Ross, 'Governor, British officer... symbol of the Empire' (*Tegonni* p. 116).

*Tegonni* is therefore, in the main, a struggle against oppression by the colonial occupiers. The play is set in an imaginary northern Yoruba town in the late 19th century when British imperial power was at its zenith in Nigeria. Tegonni, the princess, is about to be married to Capt. Allan Jones, the white District Officer for the area. As the wedding procession progresses, it encounters the corpse of the elder brother of the bride, Oyekunle (Polyneices in Sophocles' play), right in the market square, with stern-looking soldiers who have orders not to allow the body to be buried standing guard. This is to serve as punishment for waging war against the colonial rulers instead of collaborating with them, like his junior brother, Adoloro (Eteocles). In a moment of defiance, however, Tegonni

symbolically buries her brother, an action that enrages Governor Carter-Ross and earns her a death sentence. Meanwhile, the governor has ordered Allan Jones to cancel the wedding, fore-grounding the political sentiments behind the colonisation of the various spaces of the Empire and equating the bringing of the Christian cross to a civilising act. Further, he more than equates miscegenation to bestiality and barbarism. This is an echo of infamous concubinage circular that Lord Crewe, the Colonial Secretary (1908 – 1910) issued to prohibit liaisons between white male colonial officers and their black female subjects. The dialectics was always white male against black female, for, as Amina Mama points out, ‘if there was one thing that unites all Africans, it was the collective experience of being conquered by the colonising powers, being culturally and materially subjected to a European racial hierarchy and being indoctrinated into an all-male European administrative system (2001: 253).

Further to the concubinage circular, the Governor General of Nigeria issued his own ‘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 wrote, there still occurred, astonishingly, a few marriages between British officers and black women (1987: 14). This was not an isolated incidence on one corner of the 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, the following year, made laws to dispossess all offspring of such marriages in order to prevent them from claiming German citizenship or inheriting property and land in the Fatherland.

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. In fact, the construction of the colonised, in this case, black Africans has always been that of inferior beings to be domesticated, seen and never heard, and certainly, never to be classified as the equal of white people. The action of Carter-Ross in halting the marriage then is not unique and he deploys all the racist arguments to aid his decision: miscegenation will give the ‘natives’ airs, making them believe that they are equal to the whites (*Tegonni* pp. 121-122).

My position in this essay is that Osófisan engages with *Antigone*, using the Greek play as an antithesis to re-write and re-define the colonial history of the Yorùbá 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 the Yorùbá nation. 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.

Òsófisan also uses Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, 'Ozymandias', to create a discourse about tyranny – not necessarily colonial – and the response of those who resist. Apart from the dialectics of the oppressed individual and the powerful State, another central agency to the play is pride. Both Tegonni and Carter-Ross are proud and refuse to renegotiate once they have taken a stand. While Tegonni's pride is heroic and admirable as she defends the honour of her brother and her town, Carter-Ross is vain, arrogant and power-drunk.

Etiologically, the name Tegonni can have two meanings in Yorùbá language, both of them valid and descriptive of the character that bears the name in the play and I want to suggest that either of the meanings contribute to her role as the antithesis to the imperial question in the play. The first meaning refers to the Yorùbá word for barrenness – 'agon' or 'agan' – and the social significance that the name connotes. Childlessness is a social stigma among the Yorùbá but the derivation of childlessness extends beyond not having a child. A woman who has a wayward child, for instance, could be considered childless. In the play, we have Tegonni preparing to marry the white District Officer, Allan Jones. But, as Chief Isokun says at the beginning of the play, she is making a grave error that could turn her into an outcast (*Tegonni*: 20). Any child of such a union may also not be recognised, even if Tegonni as the mother is accepted in the community after the wedding. In essence, she becomes a 'barren woman' with no hope of perpetuating her genealogical line. 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 carvers and increase her economic power through access to the British market as the spouse of a District Officer.

Again Tegonni, instead of the freedom fighter against oppression that the playwright 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. It is becoming apparent that she is losing the patronage she hitherto enjoyed as the princess due to the death of her father, the former king, and the war of ascension between her two brothers. As soon as the colonial government appoints a new king, her role as the princess will cease and she will more or less lose her influence. Thus, to pre-empt that situation, there is a valid scenario for Tegonni to use her referent power as a beautiful woman, admired by the District Officer, to use the reward power of the white officer to maintain her status quo as an influential individual in the community. There is another reference to 'spite' concerning Tegonni, which gives a clue to why she is marrying the white District Officer. Many suitors had rejected her and thus the marriage she is about to contract is in fact 'a lucky break' for her (*Tegonni* p. 20). The reason for her spiteful rejection by

the suitors is linked to her decision to join the carvers' guild and the masquerade cult, both all-male groups in a male-dominated society.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that Tegonni's femininity has profound effects on meanings that we can draw from her actions. Carter-Ross dismisses her as a woman, 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. Yorùbáland is a patriarchal society and there is a limit to the political roles of women in the governance of the community or in decision-making. Tegonni's adoption of feminine role 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 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 assumes the posture of provoking a discourse about contemporary issues of tyranny and the erosion of freedom on the African continent. Her resistance is against the white governor and his draconian rules; it is also against the cultural imperative of her people, which dictates a woman's position in the community. She fights on both fronts, and gradually, the spiral effect of her action gathers more strength as more people in the community accept her views about resistance, until her positions change from that of a degraded, disgraced woman to one of superior hegemony over the colonial power achieved through non-coercive means. The discourse here 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 the white imperialist, and the synthetic resultant authority is the triumph of the individual over the State. Power in the control of Carter-Ross becomes transmuted from a white, male dominated extreme to another extreme dominated by a young black female. Thus, Tegonni's resistance, her antithesis to Carter-Ross' thesis, defines a synthetic power which now creates a new discourse.

Òsófisan, like Sophocles and the other Greek tragedians, show a humane response to suffering through the heroic character, heightening empathy among the people for Tegonni. Like in *Antigone*, Tegonni's suffering and or resistance produce 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, as human beings' (*Tegonni*: 127) even when, out of desperation, Carter-Ross sentences her to be sold to slavery 'like her ancestors' (138).

In the end, Òsófisan reduces Tegonni to a cipher, just like Antigone who, despite her noble selflessness, 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 her before Yemoja to receive her 'reward', unlike Sophocles' Antigone (pp. 140-1).

*Tegonni*, which centres on a young Yoruba woman's resistance to British imperialism, directly dramatises the nineteenth-century colonial encounter, using the props and plot of Greek tragedy. However, Osofisan is known mainly for his probing analyses of *post-colonial*, and especially post-civil war, Nigeria. The pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial perspectives in the play are co-ordinated through the figure of Yemoja, the Yoruba water goddess, who serves as an essential imagery of feminine virtue, and that of an Antigone who claims to come from Greek mythology but who operates alongside Tegonni.

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, in the end, what informs her dialectics is a form of uncommon sense.

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