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Interview with Professor Femi Osofisan

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Wesoo!

OO: You recall it's twenty years now since we had our last interview in 1989 - which was eleven years after we had the first. Ordinarily, it should be simply unnecessary us recording interviews, given the unique privilege of our intimate relationship. Yet, it is always critical for objective distancing, in order to make creative and scholarly mediation possible and enduring. This is the necessity, even expediency, for this interview.

We never talked about your adaptations, recreations of written texts across the world - Greek, French, Nigerian. What are the ideological and dramaturgic motivations behind these inter-textual interventions from old scripts to recreated scripts?

FO: Plus Russian, German, Norwegian, Yoruba sources and so on! Yes, I find that I have done a lot of adaptations, or if you like, re-readings. They can be broadly classified into two, you see, if you look at them from the angle of how they came to being, their genesis. The first are those that were commissioned. In these, I am mostly responding to a given brief, to the specific demands of the sponsors. You know, they give you a certain agenda, which you more or less have to comply with, and so your freedom as an artist is somewhat curtailed. Curtailed, I said, however not compromised, for I will not allow that. Never. Which means of course that I cannot accept every commission. But although most times the sponsorship comes before the script is written; sometimes, it comes afterwards. Here I am talking of those scripts I write deliberately to attract funding, say from a particular embassy or corporation, in order to

provide the boys (and girls!) a job, you know. That's the reality of our situation today, if you want to sustain a troupe.

It's the second category therefore that excites me. These are the adaptations I am inspired to write from the impulse of a powerful and mutual recognition, like the thrill of love or an unplanned re-union between long-separated friends. That is, I read some work, and both the work and I come to what I call a delicious understanding, a glowing accord, immediate or slow, but irresistible anyway. You know there are texts like that, authors who speak like blood ancestors.

From that meeting, a conversation begins between us, between that text and me. And the work won't let me rest until I have brought it back again to the ears of our present times. This will not be strange to you too, I am sure, being a poet yourself. To our sensitive imaginations, the past is always turbulently present. All the great texts that came before are always beckoning to us, refusing to die, murmuring into our inner ears, clamouring to return to present life. So I yield, perhaps more easily than others. I bring them back to life; not all of them of course. Only those I feel will serve my purpose, and only when the time is ripe, and on my own terms.

Those terms are dictated by ideological necessity, I admit. By the pressures of that particular moment that I seize the text; I mean the social and political pressures. The texts of the past were not innocent; hence our own re-reading cannot be neutral either, aloof from history. Especially in our own situation, where there is so much political work to be done; where elite betrayal, corruption and sheer incompetence continue to undermine our dreams of development.

OO: Developing from the previous question, what is the value of research in your creativity? I mean this entire plummet into history, culture, myths, the classics and so on. How indebted is the theatre to research - both as practice and as scholarship?

FO: Ah, research is everything! How much do I know? And of that how much do I even remember, what with my notoriously poor memory, which seems to be worsening every day! I have to do research constantly therefore, in order to fill up the many gaps in my knowledge, particularly where it concerns our history and our culture, not only in Nigeria, but on the entire continent. That's the sweat part in creativity, the 90% hard work that has to be added to the 10% of inspiration.

Here, as Africans, we have to work harder than others again. In our youth, don't forget, during our crucial learning and growing years, the school syllabus in the mostly Christian schools at the time expressly forbade the teaching of our local lore and traditions. Most of us grew up knowing absolutely nothing about, and therefore hostile to, and contemptuous of, our people's history, our myths and legends, our gods. There was an initial movement, after Independence, to change this, and reclaim our identity, but sadly it did not last! Nowadays, when history is no longer taught in the schools, and the globalized media have almost completely taken over our minds and consciousness everywhere, we have become even more alienated from our traditions! Not to talk of the powerful, pervasive Pentecostal churches, most of which denounce our cultural practices as satanic. It is unfortunate.

The children don't even know what happened in their country thirty years ago, not to talk of during the years of colonial occupation and the struggle for independence! I've told the story of how, the other day, one of my students asked me, in genuine innocence, "Sir, who is this Zik you keep talking about?" I can illustrate with several more instances. Ask any child today to sing you a traditional folk song—or let us not even go as far as that, let us ask the parent of that child—and it is almost certain that in nine cases out of ten, neither the child nor the parent will be able to do so. Instead, they will burst into a church song! Is it not tragic? Some families are even forbidding their children from speaking their own indigenous language!

Well, in this kind of situation, one of the tasks that I believe we must give ourselves as writers is to return, and hence force our audiences too, to return to our history and our traditions as often as we can. I am truly frightened. Very soon, if we are not careful, we may become a people without roots, without identity, without knowledge of ourselves.

OO: You and the Yoruba pantheons. What is the essential link? You have talked about the connections as essentially metaphorical as different from ritualistic. What is fundamental about your deployment of the Yoruba metaphysical world in your creative vision - ideological and aesthetic?

FO: It's quite simple, really. For me, with an essentially secular world-view, I confess, at the risk of offending some believers, that the gods are not primarily objects of worship. Like all worthy ancestors of course they deserve and must be accorded all veneration. They were

certainly extraordinary, and were translated into gods precisely because through their conduct they came to be seen as the embodiment of certain fundamental aspects of the human essence. At least the primary gods, before others were brought into the cast. You will notice anyway that every society has a pantheon around which its cultural identity is established. The myths, which crystallize around these cultural avatars, are the narratives which encapsulate, sanctify, promote, celebrate, etc., those fundamental ideals that have led the society to survival through its gruelling march through history. Invariably too, they are the same elements that define humanity as a whole. So the Yoruba society cannot be different. It's just, as I said earlier, that there is so much ignorance about our culture and religion.

It is quite logical that everyone will have his or her own preferences. The gods also select their own acolytes and favourites. Indeed, in Yorubaland, where you have some four hundred and one divinities, it is not possible to give loyalty and propitiation to every god. Spurred on or goaded by family history, or current psychological needs, or the search for protection against a hostile agent, or remedy for some injustice or malady, each follower makes his or her choice. And we know of course that, unlike their Greek (equivalents) predecessors, Yoruba gods are never jealous, such in fact that the devotee can have multiple choices.

In my case, and I think I have explained this before, the choice is clear. All the gods in the pantheon are for me quite fascinating, each in his or her own way. Look at the turbulent Oya, for instance; or the serene, ever fertile Osun, who can still abandon her husband for Sango. What a story! But while as an artist I cannot but accept, say Ogun, or Obatala, as guiding spirits, I am most drawn to the message embodied in the cult of Orunmila and his friend Esu, that statement which is so forcefully, so conspicuously symbolized in the very iconology of the divining tray. The *opele* is the door to communication, the mouth of prophecy and knowledge, but you will notice that at its very head is the figure of Esu! I interpret this as the formula for a radical ideology, this combination of wisdom and scepticism, of authority and irreverence, of assurance and menace. Simply put, it is telling us that knowledge is vital to both the individual and the community, but that that knowledge itself has to be constantly challenged and subjected to new questioning, so that new knowledge can be born. Rigidity, immobility, a refusal to change, all these are anathema to the Yoruba gods. They will kill us. But this obvious interpretation will naturally be impossible if you have been misled by the Christian Bible to see Esu as Satan. This was really an unfortunate error

of translation by the revered Bishop [Samuel Ajayi] Crowther. In making that choice, he did to Yoruba culture a terrible damage that has remained hard to correct.

OO: Theatre and democratic politics. You have led your generation of Nigerian theatre practitioners to deploy the theatre for intervening in the social decadence of the nation. What success have we recorded, if any? Where do we go from here, given the magnitude of the problem? How much can the theatre be employed to do in this regard? Are you optimistic?

FO: Difficult to answer. I am not pessimistic, but I have to admit that, after so many years of struggle, and seeing how things are today, I have come to realize that hope is not a given, but something that also has to be fought for. If I allow myself to lose hope, then what shall one say about someone like Soyinka, who has been longer in this struggle than us, and has paid even a costlier price? If he does not give up, what right do I have to do so? So I am trying to evaluate things, to see where we possibly went wrong.

And one of the things I see is this question of leadership. I think the progressive forces now need to look at this area very closely, because it seems that we have only been interested in fighting the battle, but not in assuming responsibility when the battle is won.

Thus at every stage in our history, when a bad regime has been forced out of saddle by progressive forces, you will find that it is another group of negative people who replace that regime, while the progressives who fought the battle retreat into their favourite role as critics. This is what happens again and again! The ones who fight the battles always shy away from assuming power themselves, are never part of the new governments. So of course very soon things go back to where they were, looting resumes with a new zeal, the conditions of those outside the corridor of power degrades even further.

So I am thinking of this, and asking myself what is the solution, and how can I contribute to it? We have no shortage of critics, ready to suffer, to even give their lives, in the confrontation against bad governments and tyranny. But how many of them are prepared for the harder task of running a government? I don't know if you are following me? It's the difference between Awolowo and Soyinka, between Falana and Fashola, between the Sardauna and Aminu Kano. Normally, we should have the two kinds. But it's beginning to appear to me that we lack progressives

who have trained themselves for administration, for taking over power themselves instead of staying on the sidelines.

This may well be the area we should focus on therefore. The progressives should now perhaps devote their energies to raising the next corps of leaders and ensuring that they take over the nation. So naturally, as I am thinking like this, my despair begins to fade. A new line of orientation begins to open for my work, and for the work of others like me; a new challenge, new possibilities. The excitement begins again…

OO: Have we seen the essential Osofisan — the acme of his craftsmanship and aesthetic masterpiece? Or are we to wait for it, especially since, after more than fifty plays you are still ready to go, as they say?

FO: Well, time will tell, as they say. I believe my last answer already provides some kind of response. Or how can a working artist be said to have reached his peak, when he's still alive and active? This year alone I have brought out five books, and one is in the press! Does that show any kind of slowing down? Of course, in response to daily history, to the constantly mutating world around us, the artist who is sensitive cannot remain immobile, unchanging. It is an irritating habit, at these moments of transition, when the artist is going through this cycle of rebirth, for some people to interpret it as a final full-stop, a death! But the gods forbid! One must stop from time to time to take stock, to re-assess the situation, and where necessary, seek new directions.

In the theatre, even a blind man can see that our audience has drastically changed, just as the world we knew when we began our career is no longer the same nowadays. Politics, new technologies, new anxieties dictate that the dramatist must seek new approaches, new strategies, in order to remain relevant. The message we have for our society can no longer be conveyed with the same alphabets, or it will not be heard. So I am in the process of searching for a new language for the theatre, as well as exploring the new forms of communication that are springing up around us each day. And my hope is to attain even greater heights of artistry, to create more works that will not only be more aesthetically satisfying, but will also reach larger audiences. That is partly why, as you know, my present focus has shifted to popular fiction, on one hand, and biographies, on the other.

OO: Culture is a main entrance of the African to the world of globalization. What is the place of literature and the theatre in this bid? I have in mind the Nollywood phenomenon, which shows so much promise, but in which the key theatre creators have not been very much involved.

FO: The problem of funding, you know that's why the ones you refer to as key theatre people have not been much involved with Nollywood. At the moment, as you know, Nollywood is funded and controlled by the spare parts marketers at Idumagbo and such places. For them, all is business, nothing more. And I mean the fast-food kind of business. They put down their money, and they want the returns the next day. It's like the old Onitsha market literature. They know what sells quickly — themes like ritual killings, prostitution, the new Pentecostalism, etc — and that is enough for them. They are not in the least interested in what you call 'culture', in the exploration of the profound aspects of human and social experience. That was how our literature was, in Onitsha, until the foreign publishers moved in, the Heinemann, Evans, Oxford University publishers and so on. And of course, don't forget, the CIA-sponsored Society for Human Freedom, which funded Mbari. These foreigners brought the funding, and that is how the Achebes and Soyinkas and Clarks came into existence. Nobody in the homeland, especially not the governments, was interested in publishing our literature! And we are back in the same sad situation.

There are many serious artistes who wish to enter the Nollywood business, but who cannot find funding, because the present marketers will not support them. Yet no bank will give you a loan for such a venture either, can you believe it? And if you find the funds to do your own film, these marketers will make sure it never finds a market. It's a mafia! Then of course you should add the problem of the pirates. So, as long as this situation prevails — I mean, this problem of funding and distribution and piracy — Nollywood will remain just as it is, with its low quality and noxious attitude to our culture.

This is where I personally believe that government can come in, at least a government that is seriously concerned about the image of this country and of our people. Nollywood is so enormously popular all over the world, and so is just as enormously influential. It is not a business therefore, in my opinion that any responsible government ought to ignore. I wrote again and again about this when I was in the Ministry of

Culture, as chief executive of the National Theatre. I said, and I still believe, that this is an area needing crucial government intervention.

This can be done in a number of ways. The first is to facilitate the funding — either by creating a special emergency fund for this in the budget, a fund from which would-be producers and directors can take loans at low interest; or indeed, a special bank for the film industry, such as was done for Agriculture. The other option of course is to activate the National Endowment Fund policy, which has never, up till now, been implemented! The same can be worked out for distribution, with the government using its agencies. But once you say this, the first thing some people see are the obstacles — how corruption might enter the game; or so and so would not pay back the loan; or bank officials steal the money, and so on! But can't we then draw up a plan that will envisage these problems and pre-empt them, and just get on with the plan? Why are people always so negative? In any case, all these suggestions just died away on the desks of successive ministers.

Then I thought maybe we could even go further. I drew up another plan, whereby the government would assemble ten or so storytellers in the country. And I mean people who can really tell stories, who have written good novels or short stories or film scripts and so on. We would bring them to a workshop, and ask them to write stories about the country, stories which would have positive effects. I prefer this to just throwing it out to a general competition, because in a competition, some names would just not participate, not our best storytellers. But we can assemble these writers and give them a brief. And of course you are going to pay them well, not just some silly and insulting pittance. This could even be in the form of investment in the whole project if you like. Let their imagination run any way they want, so long as the outcome will be beneficial to our community.

Then you take the scripts and commission the well-known talents to turn them into film scripts. From these we then make our films, which will rival the Nollywood scrap. This venture, if successful, as I believe it will be, will be such an eye-opener that banks would be attracted, and even the Nollywood barons may want to emulate it. Anyway, I was not able to get the government interested, so I am now trying to find some independent sponsorship for the idea. But till I succeed, or something as positive turns up, don't count on someone like me to join the Nollywood bandwagon.

OO: The generation after us are a bundle of anger and creative directness — even raw verbiage as an expression of their anger. Have we given them enough challenge as we got from the generation before us — which was why we strove to create an alternative, materialist tradition? What is the future of Nigerian literature?

FO: I really can't say what the future is, I am not a soothsayer. But frankly I can't see, I'm afraid, that any of the present generation is really directly influenced by us or is interested in taking after us. I wish I did, but their influence, as I see it, seems to come from elsewhere, from the tradition of the best-sellers in the West. I think they see us as failures. The world we fought for has not come into being, and we ourselves are changing. Many of us were also not around in the country, to serve as models, during those difficult years they were growing up. Then the Cold War ended in the 'defeat' of socialism, and the triumphant parade of capitalist forces. This also coincided with the military years, where corruption ('settlement' is what IBB's regime called it) was rampant, when selfishness, brutality and kleptomania became the official religion, and virtually all the welfarist programmes established in the First Republic to take care of the poor and the underprivileged were gradually and callously dismantled. No graduate is sure of employment any more nowadays, as you are aware.

So, inevitably then, I think the choice of writing has become largely just part of the struggle to earn a living, and nothing more. Most of the young ones write now only in order to win a prize, particularly the international ones. Their works are full of anger of course, such as in ours, but the tone and tenor are poignantly different, filled with deliberate shock, with unbridled violence, with provoking eroticism. I think only few of them believe any more that writing can change society, or that literature should even aim at that. Whether this will last, or for how long, remains to be seen.

OO: Do you regret remaining behind when many of your colleagues left for Europe and America? Now that you are nearing retirement, are you considering exile, since things have actually gone worse on our land, in spite of our staying behind and the struggle of the progressives?

FO: I think most of what I have said so far has answered your question. I certainly do not regret staying behind when others left, since it

was a conscious and deliberate choice. True, I was baffled at first, even disoriented, when I suddenly discovered myself alone here, almost overnight. It was like waking up from sleep, and finding yourself stark naked and lost in a cold and windy night. You know, something like King Lear! My collection, *Dreamseeker on Divining Tray*, you remember, already deals with that experience, with the depth of my desolation. But then I came to terms with it in the end, and began to work out new ways of survival. Having the kind of wife I have helped enormously, I confess, since she is a professional in her own right and so could bear a good part of the burden. And she understood the choice I made, and agreed with it. Ah, those were difficult and lonely years indeed, with one's comrades all departed! What a struggle, every day almost, not to be humiliated, or compromised, or crushed! But it's not a story that can be told here.

The relief was that we survived — only to face a new threat of survival, this time not from the tyranny of government, but from its sheer ineptitude. And I am referring here to the collapse of the whole post-retirement system for government workers, including of course all university staff, teachers, administrators and all. Suddenly life has become precarious and bitter for those who retire nowadays from government service.

Gratuities are no longer certain, and pension payments have become totally erratic. It is pathetic to see retirees, most of who gave the best of their lives and energy to the nation, languishing on long lines in sun and rain as they wait to collect benefits that never arrive. Some of them didn't have the time or the gumption to build their own houses while in service, and so still need to pay landlords! All this at a time when our colleagues who left are coming back, with handsome pensions from their positions abroad, erecting comfortable mansions and opening new businesses, with their children and spouses well-educated and well provided for abroad! Having dual citizenship, they also travel with ease whenever they wish, while you have to queue for visas and endure insulting searches at airports! So of course, inescapably, the question does come up—who has lost, and who has gained? What has it all been worth, your so-called sacrifice in those years?

But for me, however, it is pointless asking such questions, really pointless. All of us made a choice for our lives at a particular moment, and we have to live by the consequences. Instead of wasting time on fruitless complaints, what I need to do instead, what I've been trying to do since this retirement crisis cropped up, along with some of my colleagues who are similarly affected, is to try and plan ahead, to see how

we will not suffer when we finally leave the service. The time left for us is crucially short of course, but still, at least we are fortunate that we have some advance warning, unlike our senior colleagues. And we still have the health and physical strength to pursue other options. With luck, we will make it.

But I can assure you that the possibilities I am considering do not include exile! If I didn't leave during those iron years of the locusts, why should I now? What assets would I be able to market now anyway in my old age? There is still a lot to do here, as you can see. And, even with all the wreck and disappointment around us, I ask you — how can one live anywhere else than in Nigeria?

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