African Performance Review
Vol. 5, No. 2, 2011
pp 18-29

Beyond Influence: The Democratic Relevance of Ola Rotimi's Adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

Norbert Oyibo Eze
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract

Ola Rotimi's adaptation of *Oedipus the King* is a perfect example of how literature transcends place and time, and how an idea that originates in one place can influence perception and provide a paradigm for solving a problem in a different place and at a different time. As a popular play, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, which is the title of Ola Rotimi's rewriting of Sophocles' play, has elicited wide discussion among literary scholars in Nigeria, but as the literature review shows, focus has been on issues such as the question of fate, the traditional elements in the play, the play's capacity for mass–audience appeal, the paralinguistic aesthetic of the play as well as the play's concept of tragedy. To the best knowledge of this researcher, no one has examined the text as a contribution to the debate on the democratic venture in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, is undertaken to close up this lacuna in knowledge. This paper will not dwell on mere analogies but will reveal how *The Gods Are Not to Blame* addresses the question of intelligibility within its own setting. In the main, attempt will be made to articulate how the play is used as an undercurrent for the playwright's investigation of the problematic of democracy in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper will show how the hero of the play, Odewale, is deployed to perform ambivalent functions of promoting ethnic jingoism, which has been noted to be a major factor hindering the emergence of genuine democracy in Nigeria, and providing a paradigm for dealing with the problem of poor leadership which Chinua Achebe describes as the only factor that makes authentic development in Nigeria a will-o' the –wisp.

Introduction

This paper examines Ola Rotimi`s *The Gods Are Not to Blame,* an adaptation of *Oedipus the King*, as an undercurrent for the playwright`s investigation of the practice of democracy in Nigeria. It argues that the play goes beyond the facile assumption of primarily dealing with the problematic of fate, to demonstrate how the playwright solves the problem of unintelligibility usually associated with adaptation by relating the text to the socio-political history of his people. It is argued that the playwright uses the protagonist to explore the frightening image of the African democrat. He first employs the same character to highlight certain qualities of a genuine democratic leader before using him to illustrate the factors that impede understanding as well as hinder the flowering of democracy in the continent. The paper maintains that factors such as tribalism and absolutism are given enough strength to carry the weight of the play. The burden of this essay, therefore, is to explicate the democratic relevance of this interesting play.

The Democratic Relevance of *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

An adapted play is never an end in itself but a means to an end. It must be a vehicle for the conveyance of current ideas crucial to the well-being of the contemporary reader/ audience. In other words, such a play must possess a timely spirit by which I mean that it must be relevant to the people`s present socio-historical realities. Okechukwu Muoneke posits that "the reader or audience of any adapted work should not only get a feel of the old story, but must recognize a new orientation and insight" (1981: 3). Elsewhere, Antonin Artaud writes that we retain the right to say what has been said but "in a way that belongs to us, a way that is immediate and direct, corresponding to the present modes of feeling and understandable to everyone" (1974: 276). This paper argues that *The God Are Not to Blame* does not simply substitute local names and ideas for the foreign ones, but that its form derives from an experience that is meaningful to the people for whom the play is created. In an article entitled "Theatre in Nigeria: The Modern vs. The Traditional", Onuora Ossie Enekwe labours to clarify how a modern Nigerian play that does not have its form rooted in the people's culture, can stultify its value. According to him:

> I do not object to foreign influences: after all, no culture can grow without them. But I deplore a cultural contact that leads to the destruction of our culture, thereby inducing in our people a sense of rootlessness. We

> need a modern theatre that has its root in Nigeria and can, therefore, absorb foreign element without losing its own character (1976: 64).

What is derived from the foregoing is that the adaptor should make his people's experience the bedrock of his artistic creation. He should not allow the foreign element to carry the burden of the play. This paper will show that Rotimi actually takes this view into cognizance in crafting his play.

Critics and scholars like Vincent Ola, Effiok Uwatt, Etop Akwang, Solomon Ejeke, among others, have focused their discussions (specify where/when these discussions take place) of *The Gods Are Not to Blame* on the significance of the ritual symbol, the use of language, traditional performance idioms, the play's concept of tragedy, its capacity for mass-audience appeal, as well as the use of music and other paralinguistic aesthetics. However, Ahmed Yerima in his article entitled, "A Question of Leadership: Finding New Meanings in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*", examines the leadership and managerial qualities of Odewale, in order to show that "he is a good leader in conflict with higher beings, not man". (191). Nevertheless, his paper does not show how far the play highlights any systems of governance. This paper will discuss Rotimi's exploration of issues of democracy. Unlike the previous studies such as the works of Vincent Ola, Ahmed Yerima and Effiok Uwatt, the paper does not examine how fate undermines man's effort, but concentrates on palpable human conditions, and the undeniable disturbing psychological state of man, which have continued to make genuine democracy intractable on the African continent. It focuses on how the personality of the hero of the play embodies the realities that hinder the growth of a democratic system in the country.

Although *The Gods Are Not to Blame* follows the basic structural pattern of *Oedipus the King*, one can argue that throughout the play, from the beginning of the unfolding of the play's action to its very end, the reader/or audience is drawn largely into the African world, with the situations that appear to make the evolution of genuine democracy intractable in the continent painted in bold relief. The view of this paper is that beyond the issue of fate, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* has a resounding and unmistakable political undertone. The protagonist of the play is used ambivalently to show us what genuine democracy entails and the factors that continue to mar it in Africa.

The first picture of Odewale in the prologue of the play is that of a genuine democrat. In the first place, he ascends the people's throne as a result of popular choice, not imposition. The people are unanimous in enthroning him and not one voice of opposition is heard even when

tradition is negated to make him king. This is because the manner in which he rescued Kutuje from the hands of the Ikolu people demonstrates to all that he possesses the basic qualification for the king they need. Besides, in Act One, Scene I, he is "established as a good and caring leader, at one with his people" (Etherton, 1982: 124). As a good leader, he understands the problems of Kutuje people and makes practical efforts to tackle them. In addition, not only that he helped Kutuje to defeat the Ikolu people in a war that sets them free from constant harassment and servitude, he made Kutuje to prosper and to live in peace and joy for eleven consecutive years before the plague. According to Odewale:

> I gathered the people of Kutuje
> under my power
> and under my power
> we attacked the Ikolu people,
> freed our people,
> seized the lands of Ikolu,
> and prospered from their sweat.
> So it is-
> he who pelts another with pebbles
> asks for rocks in return.
> Ikolu is now no more
> but Kutuje prospered
> (Rotimi 2003:7).

The confidence that Odewale inspires in the people makes them to love him and pray for his government to last long for as the royal bard says " kolanut lasts long in the mouths of them who value it" [Rotimi 2003 :7]. Though a patrician, Odewale maintains a common touch. During the pestilence, he demonstrates an unequal sense of humanity and compassion by stepping down from his exalted throne to touch and care for an ailing child. The way he handles the case of Iya Aburo, who becomes mad as a result of losing her husband to the plague, practically demonstrates the degree of his care for his people. On that occasion, Odewale asks his first wife to take Iya Aburo`s child and care for her and instructs Bokini with respect to the mad woman herself:

> Quickly take that woman to the home of Alaba the curer of sick-heads. Whatever he charges for the cure of her head, tell Alaba that I shall pay
> (Rotimi, [1971] 2003: 16).

The depth of Odewale's care for his people in this context leads Vincent Ola to argue unequivocally that his "prowess in war is even surpassed by his qualities of leadership, sympathy for his subjects, and his ability to instil courage in them, in times of crisis, all of which are abundantly demonstrated during the plague" (1982: 36). Again, beyond suggesting that the people should go into the bush to collect herbs as he has done himself, he, in recognition of his level of knowing, had sent Aderopo to "Ile-Ife, the land of Orunmila, to ask the all-seeing god why we are in pain" (Rotimi, 2003:12). When the character, First Citizen, suggests that rams should be sacrificed to placate the gods in case the people had angered them inadvertently, Odewale replies:

> Sacrifice did you say? To what gods have we not made sacrifice, my Chiefs and I? Saponna, the god of the poxes? Ela, the god of Deliverance? What god? Sango, the god of thunder and rain fall, whose showers can help wash away the evil in the soil on which we stand? What god have we not called upon to help us? (Rotimi, 2003: 11).

The above statement portrays Odewale as a leader who is genuinely concerned with the problem of his people, and as one who did everything he could to find solutions for their problems. It also depicts him as a leader who thinks ahead of his subjects in terms of how to cater for their well-being.

However, after defining what good democratic governance entails, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* presents the factors that have continued to make the emergence of genuine democracy difficult in Nigeria/Africa. Firstly, tribalism is underlined as a key factor. Although land dispute, a typical Nigerian/African problem, appears to be at the centre of the crisis between Odewale and his unsuspecting father, the physical fight which leads to the death of the old man is precipitated actually by the latter's abuse of Odewale's supposed tribe. The protagonist of the play, Odewale, who is ignorant of his real tribe fights as an Ijekun man. He perceives the old man's mockery of his tribe as ultimate insolence as well as the limit of shame a man can bear. Thus, he must redeem his image. He tells Alaka:

> That is the end. I can bear insults to myself, brother, but to call my tribe bush and then summon riff-raff to mock my mother tongue? I will die first. (Rotimi, 2003: 46)

The play views tribalism as a deadly disease. In Act One, Scene 2, even before his encounter with Baba Fakunle, the seer, Odewale has begun to whip up tribal sentiment, and tremble with suspicion, especially

on hearing that the king's bodyguards ran away after the death of their master. In a pensive state of the mind, he states:

> Hmm. My people, I fear and I tremble. Suspicions,
> heavy suspicions fill my heart. I look about me…
> eyes, white, vacant, innocent, they stare back from
> faces of sorrow and pain. But the faces may as well be
> smiling. For who knows what is behind those eyes:
> white eyes, vacant eyes, innocent eye? When the
> frog in front falls in a pit, others behind take
> caution. It would be me next. Me, an Ijekun man, a
> stranger in the midst of your tribe. (Stares at CHIEFS)
> When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they
> not do to the flesh of a frog?
> (Rotimi, 2003: 23)

The above proverb is leaden with meaning. Odewale is simply suggesting that Kutuje people are incredible people. He seems to be saying here that if the people of Kutuje could kill King Adetusa, a home-grown king, there is no limit to what they can do to him, a stranger. This makes him to be suspicious of everyone, especially Aderopo who has a right to the throne.

The idea of a tribal intrigue appears to be given sufficient weight when the seer names Odewale as "the cursed murderer" (Rotimi 2003: 28) that he has been searching for. The statement compels Odewale to see himself and the people of Kutuje as strange bed-fellows. He blames himself for ever accepting to live among the people:

> (Faces FIRST CHIEF) It is my fault. I should have known. The hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come. I am an Ijekun man. That is the trouble. I, an Ijekun man, came to your tribe, you made me king, and I was happy, ignorant that plots, subversion, and intrigues would forever keep me company. (Rotimi, 2003: 30)

It is pertinent to note that *The Gods Are Not to Blame* was published following the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Ethnic sentiment was the major factor responsible for the war. By 1965, ethnic jingoism had torn the first Nigerian democratic system apart. This led to crisis and disillusionment everywhere about the idea of self-rule. Nigeria gained her independence from Britain five years back. To save the situation, the army staged a coup in January 1966, killing many political office holders, including the

Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa. When those killed were known, the northern elements in the army became angry, seeing a visible sign of partiality in the military exercise. Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu who led the coup was of Igbo extraction. By May 1967, it was obvious that things had fallen apart. Riots targeted against Ndi Igbo took place all over Northern Nigeria, leading to the death of thousands of them. At the same time, it was rumoured that the northern soldiers were planning a counter coup and by 29 July 1967, the coup became a reality. This second coup was deadly because most of the Igbo Senior Officers in the army were lured to Kaduna under the pretext of an urgent meeting summoned by Gowon, a northern element and the chief of army staff. Most of the officers were killed in the coup. Not yet satisfied, the northerners embarked on genocide against the Igbo people living in the north. The pogrom was indeed incredible. Alexander Madiebo says that the massacre of Ndigbo was "unprecedented in the history of Black Africa" [1980]. However, a failed attempt by Emeka Ojukwu, the governor of Eastern Nigeria, to stop the atrocity, constrained him to declare Eastern Nigeria as The Federal Republic of Biafra in August 1967. The attempt to stop the Igbo from seceding from Nigeria thus led to the bitter war that lasted up to 1970 and took the lives of over three million Nigerians, mostly the Igbo people.

It is, therefore, not surprising to see Odewale's actions and catastrophe as a lesson that tribal bigotry can generate. In an interview with Ossie Enekwe, the playwright argues that:

> 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. (1984: 39-40)

It is evident that the Nigeria-Biafra war was engineered by a justifiable feeling of alienation and persecution, which the Igbo people, especially those living in the northern part of the country, then felt and suffered. During the war, millions of people died, and property worth millions of Naira was destroyed. Before the war, tribal intrigue had led to the collapse of Nigeria's first democratic government; this was followed by military coup and counter coup. For example, in the second Nigerian democratic government [1979—1983], political parties were drawn along ethnic lines. For instance, Nigerian People`s Party was essentially an Igbo party; Unity Party of Nigeria was a Yoruba party while National Party of Nigeria was a dominant northern Nigerian party

What Odewale shows is that tribal sentiment is often used to place empathy where it does not belong. He has no clear evidence of tribal intrigues against him, yet he does incalculable harm on its account, including killing his own father and distrusting well-meaning people like Aderopo. Vincent Ola lends authority to this claim when he writes that "The central irony of the tragedy of Odewale is that he killed for double illusion, suspicion of tribalism, and for a tribe which he did not in reality belong to (1982: 30).

If tribal sentiment, whether real or illusory is responsible for Odewale's fulfillment of his destiny, it means that tribalism cannot be tangential in the play as Michael Etherton and Vincent Ola would want us to believe. This paper argues, therefore, that the tragedy of Odewale is the tragedy of human weakness. And this weakness in the Nigerian context is ethnocentrism which has not allowed the country to move a step forward democratically.

Another obstacle to democracy, as pointed out in the play, is the problem of absolutism. The obverse picture of the type of leader portrayed in the play before the plague is that of "a feudal monarch, an Oba who is in command, ever with his retinue of chiefs hanging around the palace, keeping him company by enjoying his jokes and sharing his joys and sorrows" (Muoneke,1981: 31), but whose view contribute little in decision-making. As the play suggests, the king is almost a god, the opinions of the chiefs do not count at all. They are just there to rubber-stamp his decisions and minister to his pleasure. The idea of succession must not be mentioned. Ahmed Yerima rightly argues:

> But from a study of the leadership qualities of Odewale, it is easy to conclude that like most leaders, Odewale suffered from the problem of not wanting his likely successor, Aderopo (the son of the last king and true heir to the throne according to the tradition of the people of Kutuje) around him (2007: 187).

Odewale has no concrete evidence to show that Aderopo is planning to overthrow him, yet he tells the chiefs of the young man's power intrigue:

> First that boy Aderopo or whatever he calls himself. He wants to be king, so what did he do? He bribed the seer to come and insult me, to call me the murderer of his father (31).

Odewale says this in order to make them, the chiefs, think that Aderopo is challenging his authority, that he is engaging him in a cold

battle. However, the text suggests that there is no such rivalry between the two. The rivalry exists in Odewale's head but he tries to make it real, thus, drawing Aderopo into unwarranted mistrust and hostility, which eventually culminates in his banishment. When Aderopo demands to know the reason for him being sent into exile, Odewale tells him plainly that "Two rams cannot drink from the same bucket. They will lock horns". (Rotimi, 2003: 34) Odewale sees Aderopo as a serious threat to his government. He takes his claim of loyalty and innocence as mere intrigues. Feeling that Aderopo is too young to think of the throne, he warns him: "Oohh! Take time child, if you rise too early the dew of life will soak you" (Rotimi, 2003: 35).

In this context, Odewale's disposition underscores the sit-tight syndrome which is characteristic of African/Nigerian military and democratically elected leaders. The question of not wanting to relinquish power compelled the recent president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo to think of a third term in office. Other examples would include Robert Mugabe who employs different means to remain in power in Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, Odewale's other trait that is typical of African leaders and which has continued to prevent the flourishing of democracy on the continent is naked rampaging power. In the text, Odewale abuses his power and he is depicted as a man prone to violence. In Act Two, Scene I, the chiefs restrain him from physically assaulting Baba Fakunle because he refuses to acquiesce in his impetuosity. Towards the end of Act Two Scene 4, he seizes Akilapa, his bodyguard, by the neck for intruding on his privacy. Again, in Act Three, Scene 3, Odewale combines physical and verbal violence in order to extract a confession from Alaka. Apart from wishing that Alaka kills his own father and marries his mother, a stage direction, in the same scene, states: that "Odewale hurls Alaka to the ground and pins him down." He further"twists his arm", but when Alaka prevaricates in narrating the story, he "rushes for his machete, comes back wielding" it over Alaka's head. With Odewale's glinting eyes and a machete above his head, Alaka forcibly tells the truth. Odewale can afford to take insult from Kutuje people, but he is not prepared to be insulted by a fellow tribesman. Hear him:

> You… must you shame me too? You an Ijekun man like me. Stand back everybody! Tribesman, must you shame me too? You, whom I`ve known so well, must you shame me in front of strangers?
> [Rotimi, 2003:61-62]

Similarly, elsewhere in Act 3, Scene 3, Odewale threatens the Priest of Ogun and Gbonka when he discovers that they are reluctant to give

him information concerning his birth. The above episodes, which clearly illustrate Odewale's concept of power, are similar to contemporary African/Nigerian leaders' notion of power. For instance, during Olusegun Obasanjo rule as a democratic president of Nigeria (1999-2007), opposition was muffled. Perceived political offenders were trailed, harassed, and some were assassinated outright both at the federal and state level. This disposition towards the people by the government compelled even the most outspoken legislators to either keep quiet or grovel to the leader.

However, democracy respects human rights, it does not abuse them. In a genuine democracy, people speak their mind and can express divergent views without fear of being hounded or killed by government agents. A constructive opposition is, in fact, the key to a genuine democracy. While the Greeks who helped to shape Western democracy encouraged public speaking and oratory, in most of contemporary Africa, speaking one's mind may earn one physical abuse, imprisonment or outright death. This tendency to muzzle and muffle voices of opposition and to wantonly harass ,or kill people for expressing contrary views, make the concept and practice of democracy in Nigeria/Africa a very huge travesty.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relevance of Ola Rotimi's adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* to the question of democracy in Nigeria, in particular, and Africa, in general. The position of the paper is that the major character of the play, Odewale, is used in an ambivalent formation to demonstrate that genuine democracy is people-oriented, as well as to highlight some of the ugly factors that impede the growth of democracy in Africa. In the first part of the play, Odewale proves to be "a functional leader with communication link with his people" (Yerima 186). He demonstrates how to use power effectively through his care for the deranged Iya Aburo, her child and his people during the plague.

The paper has argued that in the second part of the play, the same hero, Odewale, is used to point out how tribalism and absolutism constitute a cog in the wheel of democracy in the continent. Just as ethnocentrism provides the springboard for Odewale's fate, the paper agrees with Obaro Ikime's view that:

> The ethnic problem in Nigeria is, indeed, the National Question around which a great deal of our national life revolves, and in the name of which all sorts of crimes have been perpetrated against the nation. It is this issue which has produced the "we want our man" syndrome in Nigeria as

> a national politics, which syndrome necessarily compromises standards and makes it possible for known and even proven crimes against the nations, to be ignored and, sometimes glorified (1987: 20).

The implication is that democracy can never thrive in any environment overcharged with ethnic sentiments. The Nigerian civil war and the Rwandan genocide, to mention a few, are good examples of the outcomes of unguarded ethnic bigotry.

With respect to the notion of absolutism, the paper has demonstrated that just as Odewale blackmails Aderopo and abuses everyone in his community, African democrats, in their conception of themselves as gods among men, humiliate their subjects through blackmail, sheer brute force, and openly abuse democratic processes and the rule of law with impunity. Overall, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* gives us a glimpse into what constitutes a workable democracy as well as the factors that hamper its growth in Africa.

Works Cited

Adelugba, Dapo (1978). "Wale Ogunyemi, Zulu Sofola and Ola Rotimi: Three Nigerian Dramatists in Search of a Language", in Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (ed.), *Theatre in Africa*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

Akwanya, A. N. (2002). "Introduction: Literature and the Cultural/Nationalist Question". *Africa and World Literature: University of Nigeria Journal of Literary Studies*, 2, pp. 1-6.

Artaud, Antonin in Bernard F. Dukore (ed.) (1974). *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: From Greeks to Grotowski.* New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.

Enekwe, Onuora Ossie. (1984) "Interview with Ola Rotimi" in *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing* 25/26, pp. 36-42.

___(1976), "Theatre in Nigeria: The Modern vs. The Traditional" in: *Yale/ Theatre* vol. vviii., 1, pp. 62-66.

Etherton, Michael. (1982). *The Development of African Drama*. London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa.

Ikime, Obaro. (1987) "Towards Understanding the National Question" in *African Events*, 3 6

Madiebo, Alexander (1980), *The Nigerian Revolution and Biafran War*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.

Muoneke, Okechukwu Romanus. (1981) "Adaptation of Attic Greek Tragedies: *The Gods are not to Blame* (Rotimi) and *The Bacchae of Euripides* (Soyinka)". B.A. Project submitted to the Department of English, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Ola, V.U. (1982) "The Concept of Tragedy in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*", *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*. 22, pp. 23-31.

Rotimi, Ola. (2003 [1971]) *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Ibadan: University Press.

Yerima, Ahmed. (2007) "A Question of Leadership: Finding New Meanings in Ola Rotimi's The Gods are Not to Blame" in. Bakare, Ojo Rasaki (ed.), Ola Rotimi's Drama and Theatre: Issues and Perspectives.. Abuja: Roots Books and Journals Nigeria Limited.