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Fémi Òsófisan in Yorùbá: *Ònà Òmìnira Ònà Èjè* and *Yéèpà Sólàárín n Bò*[1]

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Abstract/Introduction

Although originally written in English as *Red is the Freedom Road* and *Who is Afraid of Solarin*, these two publications, which were meticulously translated by Adémolá Àrèmú on the one hand, and Dòtun Ògúndèjì and Fémi Òsófisan on the other, are clear demonstrations of the passion of the author, the translators and the publisher (this contributor), to make some of Òsófisan's works more visible in his mother tongue, Yorùbá. The theme of *Ònà Òmìnira Ònà Èjè* remains relevant today in our perennial struggle to be completely free from the clutches of imperialism. On the other hand, Sólàárín's battle with Nigerian societal vices of embezzlement, bribery and corruption; incompetence at work, soliciting for and acceptance of kickback, siphoning funds from the national treasury to foreign accounts and other forms of capital flight, hoarding of essential products in order to charge exorbitant rates and giving preferential treatment to certain individuals in society for whatever reasons, etc., are the main thrusts of *Yéèpà Sólàárín n Bò*.

This article affirms that Òsófisan's original assertions more than forty years ago remain relevant to our situation in Nigeria today, as they were when he first penned the ideas. I have endeavoured to tease out the relevance of the contents of these plays to the current generation of Nigerians and recommend that more of Òsófisan's works be translated, not only to Yorùbá, but also to other Nigerian languages, and more widely to other languages beyond Nigeria and Africa.

Ònà Òmìnira Ònà Èjè

Ònà Òmìnira Ònà Èjè presents an insight into the plight of a people in captivity; a people who were once free, but found themselves under the oppressive domination of imperialists; and their determined struggles to set themselves free and become independent. Àkànjí is the brave protagonist, the hope of his entire

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people, the ultimate saviour. However, while the struggle is on and before Àkànjí could lay claim to success, there is an unexplained and uncharacteristic twist in his character; his actions bear resemblance to those of a traitor. Firstly, he betrays Ìbídùn, the wife of his youth and a soul mate. Secondly, he instructs fellow slaves to beat her up mercilessly. Thirdly, the beating results in Ìbídùn losing her pregnancy, which is just two months old, and Àkànjí knows that he is the father of the young life. He also knows full well that the unborn child would become the one to carry on his name and lineage.

Àkànjí is eventually made the Basòrun, but before this success there is signal of an end to his strange behaviour of betrayal. He finally commands that his own mother be thrashed. This action is a rude shock to his mother, who in anger, curses his own son rather than suffer and be alive to experience the uncouth and evil humiliation. She decides to take her own life. Àkànjí plans a strategy for armed struggle, fights a courageous battle in the struggle and becomes the Kábíèsí. He sustains injuries and eventually sacrifices himself by spilling his own blood and dies. His people are set free; they become independent before he passes away. He witnesses the victory that comes out of the struggle. But before he dies, he makes it clear to all and sundry that the strategies of the struggle for independence is what turned him to, or made him appear to be, a traitor.

Several and varied interpretations to this work are possible, but from my point of view, the following issues, as expressed by the playwright, stand out:

> The vision of a strategy for emancipation from the clutches of colonizers, imperialists, multinational companies, whose intentions and plans are to continuously exploit, is not to be revealed to one's close relations, such as a spouse, mother, etc., except perhaps, they are part of the vision. If the vision and strategy are not closely guarded, they will be aborted before they could be implemented. The Yorùbá would say: *Òrò tí a bá so fún òré kì í se àsíírí mó, awo tí a bá fi sí nínú níí pé kó tóó ya*. => (A matter once revealed to a friend, no matter how close the friend is, is no longer a secret; secrecy of a matter depends on how long one decides to remain silent before revealing it). Hence, the twist in Àkànjí's character could be seen as harsh and callous, but it appears to be the only way to ensure success; the only means by which his vision could be accomplished (Osofisan, 1997:19, 33).

For the length of this drama (34 pages), there seems to be a preoccupation with blood; the spilling and shedding of blood. So many lives have been lost in the process of the people being put into bondage. The blood of Ìbídùn's two months old unborn child, that of his mother, those of several fighters and, eventually, those of Àkànjí and Ìbídùn are the price for the freedom. Red, with the blood of those who fell in the process, indeed is the road to freedom. There are constant indirect and direct references to blood throughout the play. The direct ones are

very prominent on pages 8, 28, 29, 30, 32. There is a suggestion here, that any freedom, which is not sealed with the blood some of the people demanding the freedom, is not a freedom that is worth rejoicing about, because it is not likely to be a genuine freedom. And the history of peoples and nations who are today basking in the glory of what may be seen as genuine freedom or independence, is clear evidence that the freedom they enjoy has been paid for by the blood of many of their brave and not so brave citizens.

Appeals are made to the powers of the divinities (Irúnmolè) to provide solution. Such an occurrence is when YÉTÚNDÉ says: 'Èyin irúnmolè, e dákun-ùn' (You divinities, show empathy) and BÓLÁJÌ supports by saying: 'Bó bá jésè, e dárí jìn wá' (If we have offended/sinned, forgive us) (17). However, Àkanjí's vision of a breakthrough is not dependent on the divinities. This is evident when he says: 'E má jèé ká tan ara wa je. Irúnmolè kan ò ní í sòkalè wá jà fún wa. Akèrèngbè wa ni yóó so ibi àfokùnbò. Owó ara eni la sì fi n ko ìwòsí, la fi n ko ìyà …' (Don't let us deceive ourselves. No divinity will come down and fight for us. Our Akèrèngbè (water gourd) will indicate to us where to insert the string. We must by ourselves reject insults and suffering…) (25). It does not appear that Àkànjí completely doubts the abilities of the divinities to intervene, for he later says: '*Sùgbón lágbára àwon irúnmolè tó so ayé ró, à-jà-gbòmìnira ni tiwa…*' (But with the powers of the divinities controlling the world, ours is a fight-to-freedom…) (25). The message here is clear: self-reliance and taking action for freedom is better than waiting for the intervention of the divinities. The subtext is that though the divinities are in the realms, and with their powers, *owó ara eni la fi í tún ìwà ara eni í se*, in other words, one is the architect of one's destiny or heavens help those who help themselves. We should not fold our hands and wait for the divinities to deliver us from our predicaments; let us take action to set ourselves free and let the divinities support us in the process.

The preoccupation of the army is however not all directed towards fighting for freedom. Some of the soldiers are more concerned about their position in the new dispensation, or rather, their position with regards to those of the women, who they consider as inferior to men. For instance, OMO OGUN KÌÍNÍ (First Soldier) refers to women: 'Obìnrin lásán, aláìní gògòngò' (Ordinary women, ones devoid of Adam's apple.), suggesting that they are unable to keep a secret and therefore perhaps unworthy to be considered part of governance after independence; and OMO OGUN KEJÌ agrees, saying, 'Ìbáà sì jé láàrin ogórùn-ún abo, gbogbo won ò tó okùnrin kan' (And even amongst one hundred females, all of them are not up to one man.). Though these comments about women may appear ill-conceived and offensive, they are indications of ingrained attitudes that perpetuate physical and sexual abuse against girls and women, especially in situations of conflict. I am persuaded that the author uses these comments to invoke a perception that is deep seated within Yorùbá/Nigerian society; a perspective that one would expect from soldiers, some of whom see women as second-class human beings or sexual

objects rather than the way women should be seen and accorded equality in human society. This insensitivity to the role and position of women in the society is a major weakness of the military in guaranteeing peaceful co-existence in governance.

The assertion that '*Ológun kan ò lè se atókùn àlàáfià láéláé*' (no warrior can ever initiate peace) and that armed conflict is a wasteful and futile exercise, are referenced in: '*Pógun kì í bímo 're àfi ìfèmísòfò àtàìrójú. Pólógun kò ye níjoba*' (30) (War does not breed any "child" of value except waster of life and agitator. War cannot institute good governance). There seems to be a contradiction here in that we have established the necessity of armed conflict to obtain independence whereas, the perception is that obtaining freedom through the wastefulness of life, the military are qualified to be good leaders in government. If the situation is applied to Nigeria as a nation, our several years under military rule has convinced us that democratic governance is far better. However, in light of the current experiment with democracy since 1999, the defiance with which democratically elected individuals have looted the Nigerian national treasury with impunity and without any credible way for the citizens to demand justice, the argument of the play is suspect. Governance is neither dependent on the nature of leadership, whether military or civilian, but on proficiency in the art of governance. This is the playwright's main point about the role of Àkànjí, who as a war leader, has the capabilities of leadership which his followers lack, and which therefore affected the acceptance of his authority as well as the outcome of his intrigues.

Yéèpà! Sólàárín n Bò!!

The play was first performed in its English original version between 29 November and 3 December 1977, directed by the playwright, before Scholarly Press (Nig.) Ltd published it in 1978. The play is written by Òsófisan to honour Dr Tái Sólàárín, who was once the Public Complaints Commissioner for Western State of Nigeria, now comprising Ògùn, Òyó, Ondó and Òsun states. Apart from honouring Tái Sólàárín, the play is designed to satirise the kinds of vices that have become endemic in government offices up and down the country at the time: the incompetent are offered employment, not because of their merit but because of the best connections they had in society; some people pay heavily (in cash or kind) to secure their employment in government service; for some, their security in the workplace is their paid up membership of esoteric/secret societies; for some, it is small and large scale embezzlement; hoarding of government products meant for public consumption; kickback on government contracts; looting the treasury and exporting monies to different foreign accounts.

The characters are carefully selected to display the kinds of human frailties that one could easily encounter in the workplace. SÍÁMAN alias GBOMIAYELOBIOJO, for example, is a prototype of a person who has been in

office and has secured a permanent role there because of his connection to important office holders and influential people in the society, and because of his membership of secret societies. From his pronouncements, his educational attainments are poor, as he mispronounces common words and simple expressions: jabbering and wrangulation (3); one pinch; emergently (9); expedition vs expenditure (12); frailings vs frail (18); lettered vs littered (19); aggrabervating vs aggravating (20), among others. Significantly, he is using these English words in a code-mixing situation while speaking Yorùbá in order to impress and show off his proficiency in the English language, which he does not have. This is a vivid observation of this kind of individual in the workplace; the relevance of this observation and characterisation is that, as this kind of character existed when the drama was written, such individuals are still available in workplaces in Yorùbáland, and widely in many parts of Nigeria today.

The Councillor for Education and Works is a typical example of officers who sit on the monies voted for capital projects in schools and the Local Government Councils. However, because such officers see the funds as their personal properties, they never use the funds for what they are designed. What is worse is that there is no culture of accountability. Those to whom they should be accountable are collaborators in the unending process of looting and embezzlement. When there appears to be an occasion for such officers to give an account of their stewardship, they would often go to whatever length to ensure that no account is given. It is no wonder that the schools and local government councils have no enduring infrastructure that can be improved upon year on year. The roads are constructed and dusty; where they are tarred, the quality of materials used does not guarantee the road for the term of office of the councillor who commissions the project. Although we have qualified civil engineers who could do a thorough job; but in a polity where a percentage of the budget for the project is to be given to the person who commissions it as kickback, the money that is left is not enough to execute a quality project. Hence, the poor road constructions; and because the person(s) who commission the projects know that they have received their kickbacks, there is no moral uprightness and confidence to call the construction companies to account for the poor quality output. The same story goes for procurement of equipment for hospitals, schools, etc. The bulk of the corrupt practices in Nigeria are aided and abetted by individuals such as this character.

Several other characters such as Tolú, Polycap, Làmídì, Lèmómù, Adájó, Adíyelójà, Dòkí, Bàbá Fáwomi, Pastor, Cecilia, etc., act the roles they are assigned in such a way that typify what one would encounter in the society at the time. And almost forty years after, these characters do not appear as though they are individuals of a bygone age; what they do and say are still relevant to the society in which we live now. Herein lies the power of imagination of the playwright, not only to satirise the present ills in our society but, to do so in such a way that, even

with the passage of time and the evolution of society, the drama is neither rendered irrelevant nor obsolete.

The roles given to Bàbá Fáwomi and Pastor are very significant in the sense that they provide an insight into the roles of individuals known in society as custodians of indigenous and world religions such as Islam and Christianity in compounding the problems of corruption and lack of accountability of government officials. The drama satirises them as incompetent, fraudulent and cheats, taking advantage of unsuspecting gullible citizens, who want to cover their tracks after being caught out in activities contrary to what they are employed to deliver. Ìsòlá, on the other hand, typifies and foreshadows different forms of scams, 419 scammers[2], impostors of different kinds, who either deliberately or inadvertently take on the image of a credible, genuine reformer such as Sólàárín, dragging his good name and reputation in the mud by using it to commit crime.

We must be reminded that, Sólàárín who is honoured in *Yéèpà! Sólàárín n bò!!* was an individual so passionate about witnessing a transformation of Nigeria. Sólàárín would agree with BJ (Bíódún Jéyìfò) when he writes:

Let me put this idea in concrete political and moral terms: "we are re-dedicating our lives to the struggle for a country – our country – that will be free of oppression, of "ireje", of looting, of poverty and insecurity of life…. (2016)

Sólàárín was a relentless critic of Nigerian military rule, as well as of corruption in government and church. He believed in going all out to tackle the problems of life, rather than spending several hours of the week explaining the significance of the deity. This may give one an idea of how awful he would feel about popularisation of religion, proliferation of churches, mosques, prayer houses, spiritual centres, mountain tops and other "sacred" locations now being set aside for unusual spiritual experience, and the deeply worrying levels of corruption in our country today, notwithstanding the increased levels of our religiosity.

These vices have not suddenly disappeared in our society: in public and private sectors and in the inner circles of government. In fact, what was satirised then in the late 1970s was like a child's play when compared to what we are now hearing and reading about how our national economy has been mismanaged in the past few years. Recent revelations are showing how our national leaders have squandered our hard earned taxpayers money on abandoned projects because the kickbacks made it impossible to execute the projects successfully. Meanwhile, the ill-gotten proceeds of such corrupt arrangements have made individuals super rich and powerful, while the people they are supposed to govern are left

[2] Advance-fee fraud named after the section of the Nigerian Criminal Code dealing with fraud and the charges and penalties for such offenders

suffering, the economy is weak, leading to a tumbling down of the value of the Naira to the Dollar, Pounds Stirling, Euro and other foreign currencies of a majority of other strong national economies. The infrastructures of good roads, regular and constant supply of electricity and drinkable portable water remain at best, epileptic, and at worst, non-existent. Schools and hospitals are in dire need of adequately supply of the state-of-the-art equipment to make them functional and comparable to world standards. The monies that could have been used to effect these changes have left Nigeria through the worst kind of capital flight imaginable. Our God-given wealth, which should benefit us, the vast majority of our people and our posterity, is sitting in bank accounts in Switzerland, USA, UAE, Germany, UK, etc., benefiting the economies that hardly need it!

A vast majority of our leaders have no confidence in the educational and health care systems they are providing for the vast majority of the people they govern. It's no surprise that a large number of them who could afford it, would rather fly out to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Germany, the UK, USA or India, for routine medical procedures, which our medical personnel in Nigeria can handle. The irony of the situation is that, some of the medical practitioners who would attend to Nigerian big people and politicians (especially in the UK and USA), are their fellow countrymen and women, whom they have somehow forced out of Nigeria, but are better appreciated elsewhere and are earning their living and contributing to the national development of their host countries.

I conclude this article by stating that, if not for any reason other than to leave the records for posterity, many more of Òsófisan's creative works ought to be translated into Yorùbá, into other Nigerian languages, and into other African languages. The fact that some of the plays are deeply rooted in Yorùbá/Nigerian/African history and mythology, for example, *Women of Owu*, may be the reason why it may be argued that the works do not need to be made available in Yorùbá and/or other African languages. However, if one is to follow up on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's reasoning in *Decolonising the Mind*, where he argues that "[l]anguage as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Wa Thiong'o, 1986:15), one's language carries one's memory. If a language is a carrier of memory, and a language in which a drama is scripted preserves some memory in that language, it makes no sense to continuously and incrementally preserve the memory of our national struggles – failures, successes, corruption, etc., only in the language of our former colonisers, which according to Wa Thiong'o, is one of the "languages of imperialist imposition" (1986:5).

There is dignity in having these national and international treasures of ours in our own indigenous languages. It may be argued, and convincingly I suppose, that works written in English address more audiences worldwide than those scripted in indigenous languages. Given the global relevance of English and its ubiquitous

nature universally, this may appear to be a valid argument. However, nothing detracts the validity of preserving one's heritage in one's mother tongue or in Nigerian/African languages as opposed to making them available exclusively in English. I further argue that, insisting on making the works of Fémi Òsófisan available only in English on the grounds that there is no need for them in Yorùbá and/or other African languages, is tantamount to endorsing the culture of colonial mentality, which Fela Kuti lambasted in his famous track, *Colonial Mentality*[3], more than three decades ago. The aesthetics of the presentation and preservation of these works in African indigenous languages apart from English would be very rewarding for the present generation and generations unborn, and for these reasons, I strongly recommend it. After all, some fifty plays written by Osofisan have been performed in different countries worldwide including Nigeria, Ghana, Canada, USA, Sierra Leone, United Kingdom, Australia and Sri Lanka. If the works have such a universal relevance/appeal and worldwide acceptance, it would be a shame for them not to be locally available in at least a number of Nigerian/African languages, including Yorùbá, which is Osofisan's mother tongue.

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3 *Colonial Mentality* by Fela Kuti, released in the album *Sorrow, Tears, and Blood* (1977)