

Tradition as Theme and Form in Three Nigerian Dramatists

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RECENT THINKING AND criticism has generally identified and celebrated hybridity as a constitutive element of post-colonial cultures and literatures. Ideologically, hybridity is often presented in positive contrast to such perceived Western tendencies as exclusivity, homogeneity, and rigid hierarchization. In post-colonial theater it takes the form of inserting indigenous performance elements such as ritual, storytelling, song, dance, mask and masquerade within a basically Western dramaturgical framework. Christopher Balme, in the fullest study so far of theatrical hybridity — or, as he prefers to call it, syncretism — in postcolonial drama, argues that this “creative recombination” of elements drawn from both indigenous and European cultures is an effective means of “decolonizing” the stage, for two reasons: it is done without slavish adherence to one or the other tradition, and, because the dramatists and directors are themselves from these cultures, the indigenous cultural texts “retain their integrity as bearers of precisely defined cultural meaning” (5).

Balme’s book justifiably departs from the primarily thematic focus of most previous discussion of post-colonial stages to concentrate on formal responses. Moreover, his approach is predicated on the assumption that “the choice of form on the part of an artist is a political act, and that every modification and indigenization of, in this case, the theatrical form implies an ideological standpoint” (272). Though his study seems to me to be considerably stronger in its descriptive analysis than in its development of this insight concerning the selection and manipulation of form, Balme’s theoretical emphasis on the political and ideological implications of the use of formal elements drawn from indigenous performance traditions seems to

me to be important and to deserve further exploration. It needs also, I think, to be placed in a more detailed consideration of the nature and role of "tradition," both as theme and form, in post-colonial drama.

In what follows I will make some observations on tradition, as content and as dramaturgical form, in plays by Nigeria's three leading English-language playwrights — Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan. I want to suggest that there are significant differences between these playwrights, both in the ways they represent the traditional order, and in the indigenous modes of performance they use to do so. I will also argue that their approaches to the traditional have interesting generic implications. Soyinka's appropriation of tradition has been carried out primarily within the genre of tragedy, even if, in what has become his best known play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, it has earned him a rebuke from the Nigerian critic Biodun Jeyifo, who asserts that Soyinka yields to "typically conventional Western notions and practices of rendering historical events into tragedy" (27). Rotimi, whose drama, although it has not received anything like the critical attention or acclaim of Soyinka's, has arguably been at least as popular with Nigerian audiences, makes use of tradition, as form and theme, to dramatize history in ways which are more melodramatic than tragic. The youngest of the three, Osofisan, has been one of Soyinka's most trenchant critics and it is clear that Osofisan has extended his debate with Soyinka's *oeuvre* into an element of his own dramatic practice. Generically, Osofisan's treatment of tradition is paralleled by a rejection of the characteristic structure of tragic drama and an espousal, which is shared and celebrated by some of the other younger Nigerian playwrights, of a "Brechtian" aesthetic.

The concept of the traditional and the issues surrounding it — of what constitutes it, of how it is to be valued, of how it is to be used in the present and the future — are evidently crucial and problematic matters for any culture, especially in our period of rapid technological and social change. In societies whose relatively autonomous development has been historically disrupted by colonialism, which includes most African societies,

the effort to use tradition to authenticate cultural identity and to establish growth-points for the future has been a matter of urgency, at least among artists and the intelligentsia. If the context of this effort in an earlier moment of post-colonial history was the need to recover cultural traditions and differentiate the indigenous from the impositions of the colonial master, it is now more likely to be the desire to affirm a secure political and cultural foundation for national life in the face of "globalization" (by which we perhaps really mean Americanization). Given the elusiveness of a democratic politics or a dynamic civil society in Nigeria, the idea of tradition has been persistently and urgently invoked, not only by politicians or ideologists whose agendas have been conservative if not reactionary, but also by those who espouse socialist or radically nationalist positions. If our three dramatists all belong, broadly, to the latter category, their appropriations and uses of the traditional, and the kinds of meanings that indigenously traditional elements thereby generate for their audiences, are nevertheless quite different and implicitly — or, in the case of Osofisan and Soyinka, explicitly — antagonistic. And this is so even though they have much in common both in their professional backgrounds — all three have worked for long periods in universities — and in the kind of audience, also university-based, for which they primarily write and for whom their plays are performed.

Where English-language Nigerian theater is concerned, the focus of much of the debate over the nature and function of tradition has, inevitably, been the work of Wole Soyinka. In such theoretical and critical writings as *Myth, Literature and the African World* and *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, Soyinka has affirmed the indispensable importance of tradition for contemporary Nigerians; and in much of his drama he has adapted Yoruba mythology and such traditional ritual practices as the *egungun* and the New Yam Festival to create a mythic and ritualistic frame for dramatic action which, as I shall try to show, both exploits and reformulates the resources and energies of tradition. Soyinka's most persistent and crucial use of tradition is in his conception of the would-be visionary redeemer and the nature of the redemptive act he performs. Whether it be Demoke in *A Dance*

of the Forests, Eman in *The Strong Breed*, Daodu in *Kongi's Harvest* or Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka's drama regularly presents a protagonist who at the climax of the play is involved in a ritualistic act as a "carrier" or sacrificial victim. As in traditional ritual ceremonies, this action is intended to cleanse the community of its spiritual and moral impurities and thus to ensure a transition to a future in which the community can be in harmony with those forces which provide its metaphysical anchorage. Many of these protagonists who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater good are members of the younger generation, often sons who stand in uneasy, conflictual relationships with their fathers. Demoke, himself guilty of a heinous crime, intervenes to try to save the Half-Child even though his father, the Old Man, has been instrumental in refusing a welcome at the Gathering of the Tribes to the child's parents, the Dead Man and Woman. Eman has left his own people, renouncing the role of sacrificial carrier that he would inherit from his father, only to discover that he must inherit it anyway. Olunde, the apparently "modern" young African, studying medicine overseas, returns to complete the ritual suicide which his father, whom he crushingly scorns, has failed to perform in the manner prescribed.¹

Soyinka has indicated in his theoretical writings that, although it can be no more than a mundane reflection of communal ritual performance, his literary tragic drama is intended, through the protagonist's experience on behalf of the audience, to serve the same function as ritual, that is, confrontation and integration with metaphysical forces. But as he has always been well aware, ritual is one thing and the aesthetic form of the drama, however much it may incorporate ritual, is quite another. Ritual is functional; drama, even when it avowedly seeks to create an arena of ritualistic energy for cathartic effect, is necessarily concerned with things that have no place in the ritual event. A Demoke, an Eman, a Daodu or an Olunde, while they may be reflections of the Yoruba ritual actor, are also characters in a play; and as characters they interact, primarily in relations of conflict, with other characters. As critics have often pointed out, Soyinka's tragic drama is characterised by the interruption or rupture of the ritual action as laid down by

tradition. If, as Christopher Balme suggests, the interrupted rite allows the dramatic exploration of “the psychic ‘abyss’ caused by suspended liminality” (79-80), it also has the wider purpose of serving as a theatrical metaphor for a Nigeria which, like other post-colonial societies, has suffered the disruption of its traditional cultural order and is undergoing a difficult process of transition. What the characters’ interaction within the dramatic structure of the interrupted ritual brings particularly into prominence is the protagonist’s conflict with traditional practice as it is most commonly understood and enforced by those who have the power to be arbiters in such matters.

This conflict between the younger generation and the custodians of tradition is central even in such a youthful play as *The Swamp Dwellers* (1959), but it is dramatized with particular power in the early tragedy, *The Strong Breed* (1964). Eman, the protagonist, has settled after a lengthy period of wandering in self-imposed exile in a community that is not his own. Through the flashbacks we see that his wanderings began at a crucial moment in his life, as he is undergoing the rite of passage into manhood in his native village. To prevent his young sweetheart Omae from being molested by his lecherous old tutor, Eman decides not just to leave the initiation huts but the village itself. Though his decision is apparently made on the spur of the moment, there is the sense that behind it lies a period of deep introspection, in the course of which he has come to realize that “a man must go on his own, go where no one can help him, and test his strength” (138-9). As he tells the Priest in a later flashback, he spent twelve years as “a pilgrim, seeking the vain shrine of secret strength” (143), only to discover what he had been seeking on his return, in the person of the still-waiting Omae. But as the first of the flashbacks informs us, Omae has died giving birth to Eman’s son, as his father tells him all the wives of the “strong breed” are destined to do. The Old Man insists that such pain and sorrow is all part of Omae’s strong breed inheritance and begs him, if he must leave because of his grief, to return:

EMAN: You do not understand. It is not grief alone.
 OLD MAN: What is it then? Tell me, I can still learn.

- EMAN: I was away twelve years. I changed much in that time.
 OLD MAN: I am listening.
 EMAN: I am unfitted for your work father. I wish to say no more. But I am totally unfitted for your call. (134)

Though Eman insists that "There are other tasks in life father. . . . There are even greater things you know nothing of," the Old Man takes his leave of his son for the last time with the prophecy that Eman will not be able to evade his destiny, and that he will use his strength among "thieves" who "will even lack the knowledge to use it wisely" (134).

The Strong Breed is not one of Soyinka's most accomplished plays but it is one of his most suggestive. Written with an urgency which suggests a young artist seeking to express matters of great personal relevance, its simplicity of structure and dramatic compression serve to highlight with particular clarity the main outlines of Soyinka's tragic vision. Initiating all the subsequent action is Eman's decision to break off his *rite de passage* and take the way of solitary quest, in search of some form of knowledge/power that is obscure even to him. His decision to leave his home seems based on a complex attitude to traditional belief and practice. It is not that he ignores or refuses to take seriously his rite of initiation. On the contrary, he is horrified at Omae's arrival in the ritual compound, with its threat of taboo-breaking and pollution, and by his own admission he has been pondering seriously the issues attendant on the passage into manhood. But for reasons that remain obscure he decides to turn his back on his community and father, excluding himself from both the obligations and protection afforded by their tradition. When he leaves for the second time, after Omae's death, it is in the belief, not just that he is unfitted to inherit his father's role, but that there are other challenges, other possibilities that have not even been envisaged in the narrow traditional world of the village.

Eman, then, has his personal quarrel with tradition and seeks to break free of it; nevertheless, that tradition, embodied in his strong-breed inheritance, ironically determines even the terms of his revolt. He will leave for good the second time; but his departure is itself generated by an inevitable event for those of

the strong breed tradition — the death of their women in childbirth. His father, embodiment of the tradition, has always known this, just as he knows that Eman will ultimately play the role he shuns but which it is his fate to fulfil. The clear implication is that the exceptional individual who belongs to the “strong breed” caste may wish to forsake his inheritance because he sees something beyond it but ironically, like Sophocles’s Oedipus, he moves toward the realization of his predetermined destiny, in the very attempt to avert it. Traditional belief and practice, in this perspective, is all-powerful, and, the play suggests, indubitably authentic.

The strong-breed inheritance from his father is not, however, the only form in which Eman encounters traditional ritual practice. Traditional ritual is present in the play’s here-and-now, in the village in which Eman has settled, in the form of the New Year rite overseen by the elders Oroge and Jaguna. If the play endorses the wisdom of tradition as represented by the Old Man and the necessity of the ceremony he has enacted for so long, the ritual practice Eman now meets is presented, in contrast, as deeply flawed. The custom of using a mentally handicapped outsider such as Ifada to be the carrier — or, as it finally turns out, Eman himself — is the expression of communal cowardice and spiritual corruption rather than of an authentic wisdom and desire for collective purification. Soyinka seems to be saying that just because a ritual practice exists and has the sanction of tradition, this does not mean that it is necessarily authentic or wholesome. Even the villagers on whose behalf the rite has been performed are represented as turning away from their leaders in disgust at the end of the play, sickened by what they have witnessed.

In *The Strong Breed*, then, tradition, in the form of the New Year ritual practice of the “carrier” as purifier of the community, is presented in a double aspect: as a compelling force for good, the power of which is so great (and painful for the ritualist) that it can only be endured by a strong-breed élite, members of which are bound to their destiny even if they wish to escape or transcend it; and as a coercive, even murderous force of evil, which is spiritually corrupt in that it exploits the weak and vul-

nerable to perform its cleansing function which is then, in any case, presumably rendered more apparent than real. A "false" ritual is thus set beside and contrasted with a "true" one; but there is no doubt, in this play, of the efficacy of the "true" ritual, or its hold over the select few who inherit the ritualistic function.

The distinction between "true" and "false" rituals is, I suggest, one that runs through much of Soyinka's drama and thus gives his conception of tradition a pervasively ambivalent quality. In *A Dance of the Forests*, for example, the attempt by some of the elders, including Demoke's father, to keep the Dead Man and Woman away from the Gathering of the Tribes would evidently make the festivities less than wholly authentic, and would help promulgate a defective view of tradition that did not take account of the historical existence of the likes of Mata Kharibu and his court. But the forces devoted to "true" ritual ensure the presence of their less welcome ancestors, and the intervention of Demoke, himself a defective and indeed even criminal ritualist, who seeks to give life to the Half-Child, makes a true and possibly efficacious ritual out of what would otherwise have been a stage-managed semblance of festivity. In a quite different context, the failure by Elesin Oba to commit ritual suicide as the King's horseman is juxtaposed with his son's return to sacrifice himself for the sake of posterity. (There is also a dramatic contrast between the authenticity of Yoruba ritual tradition and the 'inauthentic' quasi-ritualistic ceremonies of the British, who are presented as not really understanding what they do and who also have no qualms about desecrating other's traditions.) Like Eman before him, Olunde has left his village and native land to seek knowledge (in this case Western medicine) among strangers, and although little is made of it dramatically, there are hints that his decision entailed antagonism with his father. Though Olunde, unlike Eman, is not involved in a personal quest, his experiences abroad have taught him much about the value of his own culture and its apparently outdated beliefs and practices, and he sacrifices himself as a man apparently at one with tradition.

If a ritual or festive action is usually central to Soyinka's dramatic structure, at least in his tragedies, the extent to which he

incorporates theatrical elements drawn from traditional performance varies considerably, both in quantity and function. For instance, though *The Strong Breed* is structured around a ritual action, it is very much a dialogue play, with no recourse to music or dance. Apart from the masque towards the end, *A Dance of the Forests* is also very largely a play of words. On the other hand, in *Death and the King's Horseman* there are sustained sequences of action, such as the celebration of Elesin's vitality and love of life in Scene 1 and his dance into trance and ultimately death in Scene 3, which are firmly based on Yoruba festive and ritual theatricality. It is important to recognize not just the presence of these traditionally-based performance elements, but also their purpose, which is, in Balme's words, to serve as "bearers of precisely defined cultural meaning" for their intended audiences (5).

Soyinka uses indigenous theatricality in various dramatic contexts, and for various reasons. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, its primary function, dramatically, is to carry out the imperative of securing the spiritual basis of Yoruba culture by taking Elesin into trance and thence into the passage to the ancestor-world. But before this, and in tension with it, is its function in the opening scene in the marketplace of establishing the life-force that is Elesin Oba and his undiminished desire for sensual delight. In *Kongi's Harvest*, indigenous theatricality is used to offer symbolic resistance to Kongi's tyranny at the climax of the play through a version of the theatricality of the traditional New Yam festival. In *The Bacchae of Euripides* — admittedly a play commissioned by the British National Theatre and composed, presumably, with the Theatre's audience in mind — the theatricality associated with the Ogunian Dionysos establishes the action as "a communion rite" celebrating revolutionary energy. In *A Dance of the Forests*, the performance elements of the masque sequence function dramatically as a questioning of and attempted intervention in history. In *The Road*, the "mask-idiom" of Agemo, as Soyinka indicates in his prefatory note, is used dramatically "as a visual suspension of death," the moment of transition from the human to the divine.

The success of these uses of indigenous performance modes — in other words, the extent to which traditionally-based theatricality creates “precisely defined cultural meaning” and is coherently and intrinsically dramatic in the meanings thus generated — is also varied. The consensus of critical opinion seems to be that, at his less successful, Soyinka is sometimes guilty of overegging the pudding, as for instance in *A Dance of the Forests*, where the masque sequence fails adequately to integrate the verbal and the spectacular and leaves the audience with too few clues to make sense of the plethora of word and action. (In any case, much of it involving the Questioner and Interpreter is not obviously linked to any Yoruba ritual or performance tradition.) A more subtle charge is that genuine difficulty sometimes becomes unnecessary obscurity or an unsatisfactory arbitrariness in the resolution of dramatic conflict. *The Road* is generally accepted as one of the richest of Soyinka’s plays but his suggestion in his note “For the Producer” that, given the strangeness of the theatrical idiom, “the preface poem Alagemo should be of help,” seems absurdly optimistic. Indeed, the poem is no less obscure than the dramatic meaning of the use of the *egungun*, and the sequence of action which culminates in Professor’s death and his final address. Similar criticisms have been made of *Kongi’s Harvest*; for example, Derek Wright complains that “the moral debate is submerged in festival spectacle and the protagonists’ functions in the mystique of the masque are more impressive than the characters themselves” (54).

At his theatrical best, however — and notwithstanding one’s view of the ultimate merits of his metaphysical world-view and conception of tragedy — Soyinka’s incorporation of indigenous performance elements is dramatically coherent and intrinsic, serving his complex dramatic meanings. In the first scene of *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Soyinka makes extensive use of the idiom of Yoruba traditional performance, drawing on praise-singing and choral interplay between the singer, Elesin, and the women, as well as dance, drumming, and song. He does so not just to delight the audience’s eyes and ears but also to present significant shifts in dramatic relationship and objective:

from the celebration of Elesin as life-force and life-giver to his people, to his sensuous distraction by the beautiful young girl and his demand, even in the face of Iyaloja's objections, that he enjoy her before he departs; and then to their reconciliation, which is still shadowed by Iyaloja's reservations and Elesin's momentary exasperation when she reminds him that the hands that will prepare his bridal chamber "will lay your shrouds" (162). Theatrically exciting though this scene is, the traditional performance elements in it are evidently not there merely to be exciting: they are essential means to Soyinka's dramatic ends. And the tragic irony that Elesin Oba fails to commit ritual suicide, in large part because of "a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" (207), is only enhanced by the seductive beauty of the evocation of the life-force on stage. In this example — and we could certainly cite others — Soyinka's formal appropriation of traditional ritual and theatrical performance is organic to his treatment of tradition as content.

In what he calls his "historical tragedies," Ola Rotimi shares Soyinka's preoccupation with the exceptional individual in the context of a threatened or disrupted tradition. His plays have met with popular acclaim from Nigerian audiences, partly no doubt because — as critics have recognized — he is a master of stagecraft, but perhaps also because the plays seem to be designed to make a strong but essentially simple impact. Not for Rotimi the ambivalent presentation of Janus-faced tradition or the exploration of complex quester-protagonists: tradition, in Rotimi's drama, has none of the problematic features associated with its dramatization in plays like *A Dance of the Forests* or *The Strong Breed*. In *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, *Kurunmi*, and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, the nature and continuance of tradition is a key element in the dramatic action but not, as I shall try to show, for the kinds of reasons that have preoccupied Rotimi's more illustrious contemporary.

Kurunmi (1969) is firmly structured around the theme of tradition. The title character is obsessed with tradition from the moment he enters to tell his people that Alafin Atiba has decided to declare that his son Adelu shall succeed him as king rather than, as custom dictates, accompany Alafin Atiba to the world of the ancestors:

The gaboon viper!
 When the Gaboon viper dies,
 its children take up its habits,
 poison and all.
 The plantain dies,
 its saplings take its place, broad leaves and all.
 The fire dies, its ashes
 bear its memory with a shroud
 of white fluff.
That is the meaning of tradition. (15)

As his speech goes on to elaborate, to Kurunmi tradition is the defining characteristic of humankind and the source of a people's identity; the day it is lost "is the day their death begins" (16). When two of the nobles who have gone along with the Alafin's decision come to warn him against rash action, they argue against Kurunmi's intransigent traditionalism on the grounds that time passes and tradition itself must involve change and adaptation. Kurunmi rejects their argument, at least partly, it would seem, because of his espousal of hierarchy and his corresponding fear of social insubordination:

TIMI: We change.
 KURUNMI: Welcome.
 OLUYOLE: Tradition must change with man.
 KURUNMI: Go give your robes to your slaves.
 TIMI: Why?
 KURUNMI: Times change. (20)

In his dealings with his new enemies, with the white missionary Reverend Mann, and with his own people, Kurunmi is certainly quick to anger and insult and hostile to any form of innovation. His reverence for tradition is presented as being allied to a tendency towards autocracy which elicits rebellion among some of his own warriors, who complain that he has grown too powerful and aloof, and who force him to agree to more democratic procedures of consultation in future.

By the end of Act One, the quarrel over the violation of tradition has reached the point that war is inevitable. Dramatically, the emphasis of the rest of the play is on the changing fortunes of war and the gradual decline into defeat of Kurunmi and his Ijaiye forces. That defeat is presented as being largely the result

of insubordination and decisions, such as the crossing of the River Ose, with which Kurunmi has not concurred. Kurunmi has one or two moments of self-doubt about his advancing years and the wisdom of his initial decision to oppose the Alafin, but these are merely incidental and remain dramatically undeveloped. Having lost the war, Kurunmi does the honorable thing and poisons himself.

If *Kurunmi* is a tragedy, as Rotimi called it, it is so only in the limited sense that it is a tragedy of pathos, dramatizing the “fall” of a great man from prosperity into misfortune. Though the protagonist is far from faultless, audience empathy for him is maintained because he is “great” in personality and steadfast in his fundamental values, which the play does nothing to suggest are misguided. Indeed, the pathos generated by *Kurunmi* depends on the audience’s sense that the value of tradition, to which its protagonist is so firmly wedded, is worth fighting and even dying for, even if we are not encouraged to find all his enemies as despicable as he does. Consequently, we are invited to respond with regretful nostalgia to Kurunmi’s eclipse, and by extension, the passing of what he stood for — a whole-hearted attachment to traditional belief and practice.

Like Kurunmi, the protagonist of *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is presented as a richly-endowed personality, the embodiment and guardian of a great cultural tradition. Though, like the Yoruba general, he is not without blemish — it is implied that his rule, also, depends too much on fear rather than loyalty — he is shown as being brought low by overwhelming force, in this case of British commercial and military imperialism. Moreover, Rotimi is as careful to distance Ovonramwen from personal responsibility for defeat as he was in the case of Kurunmi: it is his chiefs who act unwisely and on their own initiative, against the Oba’s declared policy. As in *Kurunmi*, the dramatist identifies his hero with certain powerful but vague values with which the audience is encouraged to identify as an extension of its empathy with Ovonramwen.² These are presented as the values opposing colonialism — the values of a traditional, hierarchical society with its natural and necessary head giving strong but also spiritual leadership. As with *Kurunmi*, then, the dominant

emotional effect on a Nigerian audience is likely to be a powerful sense of loss and regret for what has been destroyed along with the protagonist, which is a settled and richly imbued set of traditional beliefs and practices.

Theatrically, the accompaniment of Rotimi's nostalgic vision of Yoruba and Benin history as the fall of great men wedded to tradition and embodying its unproblematic virtues is the use of elements drawn from indigenous performance traditions in ways that are certainly pleasing for Nigerian audiences but which are primarily indicative and opportunistic rather than organic. Take, for example, the first few minutes of *Kurunmi*. Rotimi contrives an exciting sequence of effects based on traditional ritual and performance, including the pouring of a libation before a shrine of Ogun, a dancing and singing crowd, a praise-singer lauding his master, and the arrival of Kurunmi himself, who "storms in" and then stands completely still, staring fixedly ahead of him, only to launch into song and dance in his "performance" for the crowd. Rotimi is too artful a playmaker for all of this to be merely decorative. The use of the praise-singer and the crowd as dancing and singing chorus help serve to imbed Kurunmi in a richly energetic traditional context, thus affirming his status not only as the spokesman for tradition but also as its cultural exponent. (His enemies do not enjoy the benefits of traditional performance to anything like such an extent in their presentation.) But, impressive though it may be on stage, the method is essentially simple and demonstrative rather than, as with Elesin Oba, complexly organic and ironic.

Interestingly, when in *If*, Rotimi deserts the genre of historical tragedy to write a tragedy of contemporary Nigerian life, the ideological implications of his drama seem to shift quite radically. In place of the great traditionalist individual overwhelmed by superior force, the emphasis is now firmly on the need for solidarity among the oppressed, mainly proletarian inhabitants of the backyard in Port Harcourt. Nostalgia gives way to anger. The performance traditions Rotimi makes use of in this contemporary urban play are inevitably quite different from those present in his historical tragedies: the highlife music, reggae, choral music of various kinds, and children's

anthems are modern but nonetheless deeply rooted in Nigerian urban culture. They are also woven far more organically into the fabric of the dramatic action. Rotimi is still, to my mind, a melodramatist who lacks the sense of complexity and irony to write tragedy, but even so, in *If* it is as if he has liberated himself, both formally and thematically, from the dead hand of a conception of tradition which prevails in his earlier plays.

Soyinka's project has simultaneously profoundly influenced and aroused strong criticism from some of his compatriots, particularly among the younger generations of Nigerian writers and intellectuals. His dramatic use of traditional mythic and ritual elements and the sorts of meanings they seem to invite have been attacked on a variety of grounds: it has been said, for example, that such techniques are obscure and elitist, and that they are highly selective and harnessed to an arcane private metaphysics. Perhaps the most substantial criticism is that Soyinka, although personally courageous during the Civil War and in his attacks on political tyranny and corruption in Nigeria and elsewhere, holds a conception of tragedy that is blind to the real history of class struggle and that privileges the values of a particular patriarchal, feudalist culture which, in the contemporary context, is deeply inimical to democracy and progress. Femi Osofisan has been one of the most articulate critics of Soyinka's conception of tradition and tragedy, his views sometimes taking the form of a theatrical response to particular works by Soyinka (for example, *No More the Wasted Breed* as a riposte to *The Strong Breed*) and by others of the generation immediately preceding his (for instance, *Another Raft* as a reply to John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft*). But what then are the meanings associated with traditional belief and practice that emerge from Osofisan's own drama?

In the "Epilogue" of his early but still popular play, *The Chattering and the Song* (first produced in 1976), Leje, the surreptitious revolutionary, tries to win over the artist Funlola both to himself and to his political cause. Frightened of what will happen to her vocation as an artist if she commits herself to political action, Funlola asks, "But what if I wither? If the creative spirit dies in me?" Here is Leje's reply to a question he has heard often enough before:

- LEJE: Renewal, I always answer. No one who commits himself will ever be asked to break with his ancestral roots.
- FUNLOLA: No?
- LEJE: On the contrary! But seasons change, oppression and injustice resurface in new forms, and new weapons have to be devised to eliminate them. (63-4)

Revolution, in Leje's — and apparently the playwright's — rhetoric, need not be incompatible with a respect for tradition, requiring only a necessary renewal in response to change which brings no disruption of the continuities inherited from the past. But a few minutes earlier, just before the play within the play ends in disarray, the force of tradition as reactionary ideology, protecting the very tyranny and oppression against which Leje is fighting, has been powerfully dramatized. Protected by the women, the Alafin Abiodun dances ritualistically and asks a series of rhetorical questions which underline the affirmation of Olori (played by Funlola) that it is the king who fulfills the ceremonial obligations to ensure that “[t]he world will not break in our time” (55). Latoye (played by Leje) replies with the accusation that for centuries human tyrants have dressed the gods in their own clothes but that “we know now how Edumare himself arranged his heaven, on which model he moulded the earth” and that he was careful to give each of the gods both power and fragility, “so that none of them shall ever be a tyrant over the others, and none a slave” (56).

If we take the Leje of the “Epilogue” as the authorial spokesman, Osofisan's position on tradition in this early play is not unlike Soyinka's in, say, *A Dance of the Forests*. The gods, and the traditional metaphysical order associated with them, may be a force for good in a time of difficult transition, but this can only be so when the ideological linkage between the traditional order and an ever-recurring tendency to tyranny is clearly recognized and broken. What we do not find in *The Chattering and the Song*, however, or in Osofisan's large and varied dramatic *oeuvre* as a whole, is anything like Soyinka's intellectual and emotional investment in the gods and the ritual order as manifestations of the eternal verities, and as the basis for the radical reorientation of Nigerian (and African) society. Either his plays do not in

any very significant way touch on the issue of tradition at all, or, when they do, his position is detached, skeptical and somewhat ambivalent, prepared to give the traditional order its due only within very limited parameters.

Of the accessible published plays, the one which most vividly exemplifies this latter stance, and most fully deals with the relationship between the traditional order and the urgent need for revolutionary change, is *Another Raft* (1988). The action involves the intended performance of a rite which never, in fact, transpires. A group of representative characters find themselves adrift on a raft on which they planned to journey down river and through the Niger delta to propitiate the goddess Yemosa, whose long neglect in favor of rampant materialism is believed to have brought on a series of natural and other disasters to the community. They are deeply divided, and not only by class. From the start there is a steady stream of accusation, recrimination and squabbling between Lanusen, a prince and chairman of the local government council, and Ekuroola, a successful Lagos businessman but also the principal Priest of Rituals. Both are acting in bad faith: Ekuroola resents every moment he has to spend on the raft, and Lanusen, it will turn out, has been plotting Ekuroola's murder on the journey. But the antagonism is not restricted to the elite characters: in his revolt against the tradition that his father embodies Gbebe murders his aged father Omitoogun, the priest of Yemosa who has been included to try to locate her shrine on one of the islands. And the young virgin who has been brought along as the ritual sacrifice turns out to be not a young woman at all but Agunrin, a man, and a military officer at that, who is intent on the retributive killing of all the representatives of the corrupt and exploitative elite on board the raft.

Agunrin's self-revelation initiates a process of exposure in the course of which most of the raft's occupants are discredited. Lanusen has hired Agunrin to murder Ekuroola; Ekuroola is a corrupt thief who has bought his title and subsequently used it only for his own financial advantage; the priest Orousi is revealed as a man who has abused his sacred vocation, lying and putting false words in the mouth of Ifa as Lanusen's accom-

plice. But Agunrin himself is not spared. Ironically, it is Gbebe — the man from whom Agunrin believed he was hearing “the beginning sounds of a new age” (44), the man Agunrin admired for confronting and slaying his own traditionalist father — who attacks Agunrin for being, as a soldier, just as guilty as the likes of Lanusen and Ekuroola of exploiting the land and its people. Gbebe invites the poor occupants of the raft to view the two rich civilians, their priestly accomplice, and the military man as being essentially on the same side, however much they may squabble among themselves. Now unprotected by Agunrin, Gbebe is set upon by Lanusen, Ekuroola and Orousi, who are about to throw him overboard as the ritual sacrifice to Yemosa, when everyone is distracted by the sudden lurching of the raft, which until now has been stuck on a sandbank. Another lurch, and the raft is split in two, carrying off Lanusen and Ekuroola. When Agunrin and Waje, the boatman, dive in to save Lanusen and Ekuroola, all four become victims of the shark-infested waters. Gbebe utters a speech expressing his utter fatalism and then commits suicide by plunging into the sea.

The process of revelation and exposure by and of the human characters is now more or less complete. But another, rather different kind of “dis-illusionment” has been going on in the play. The characters have displayed a mixture of attitudes to the goddess Yemosa in whose honor the journey is supposedly being made, ranging from sincere devotion to cynical manipulation of her cult to outright opposition to the whole notion of the goddesses’ power. The audience, on the other hand, is likely to have been intrigued, from the beginning of the play, to discover that there are on stage not one but three Yemosas, and that they and their attendant chorus of sea-sprites are played by male actors who are to be made up, a stage direction instructs, as white females, “*but conspicuously and grotesquely, as in agbegijo masque*” (34). At several points the main action is interrupted by “masques” featuring the three Yemosas and their “maidens.” In one of these masques, following the killing of Omitoogun and Agunrin’s throwing off of his disguise, the three “goddesses” clarify their hitherto rather puzzling status:

- YEMOSA ONE: We're like this, as you can see,
Because we don't exist.
- YEMOSA TWO: We're merely the figures of fantasy.
- YEMOSA THREE: Actors made up, dream images
- YEMOSA ONE: Made real only in the minds of
These men on the raft.
- YEMOSA TWO: And in all the minds
Where such things as goddesses still exist.
- YEMOSA THREE: Minds such as yours - perhaps? (35)

The extravagant theatricality of the goddesses' appearances signals that, at least for the playwright, they are nothing more than figments of the collective imagination. The very *raison d'être* of the journey on the raft is thus presented as an illusion.

Yet the Yemosas will prove to have their uses. As the three men left on the raft — the boatman Oge, the farmer Reore, and the Ifa priest Orousi — struggle desperately against the current to avoid being sucked into the deadly whirlpool of Olobiripo, the goddesses come to their assistance. When the goddesses ask which of the three sons of the dying king should inherit the crown, Reore is able to answer the riddle. He realizes that all three sons are indispensable, and each of the three survivors identify with one of the sons, who are called "See-Far," "Fly-Fast," and "Heal-At-Once." As their reward, the goddesses climb on board and help the survivors row to safety, but only after setting the men straight about their own real nature and relations with human beings. The goddesses explain they have no real objective existence but merely "breed in the minds of men"; and although they are invested with "all kinds of extraordinary powers," these are "made only by your will." As powerful forces in the human imagination they can be useful servants, provided that humans "harness their hyacinths/with science, which is/the supreme will of man" (84). And it is on the optimistic image of the three survivors, no longer plagued by divisive recrimination and accusation, joining forces to save their craft in the knowledge that "[w]e make or unmake our destiny, we're human beings!" that the play ends.

Another Raft clearly reveals Osofisan's scepticism and ambivalence in regard to traditional order. If traditional leaders are not hypocritical criminals, like Ekuroola, they are hopelessly

feeble: the Baale in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* is humiliated and retreats from the stage, resigning his leadership to the predatory Aringindin. Traditional belief and ritual practice are presented as having no validity in themselves: at worst, they are merely the elite's means for deceiving the people; at best, as in *Another Raft*, they are essentially absurd figments of the collective imagination which may on occasion, nevertheless, be put to progressive use. In any case, there is in Osofisan nothing of either Soyinka's profound allegiance to authentic ritual experience or of Rotimi's cultural nostalgia for a vanquished traditional order. Given his pervasive scepticism, tragedy along Soyinkan lines is out of the question. Rather, his characteristic mode is a playful and subversive irony characterized by a love of unexpected reversals, swift transitions and *coup de théâtres*. Inevitably, this has encouraged comparison with Brecht, with whom Osofisan is certainly familiar and for whom, ideologically and theatrically, he seems to have much admiration, as do other younger Nigerian dramatists such as Bode Sowande.³

How far Osofisan's affinities with Brecht really extend need not concern us here. There is no doubt, though, that like the German playwright, the Nigerian paradoxically delights in pursuing innovation by raiding the storehouse of theatrical tradition. Though he may take the ritual journey and sacrifice motif and turn it on its head in *Another Raft*, his more usual debt is to popular traditions of folk-tale and oral performance. These provide Osofisan with a repertoire of devices and conventions — narrator-presenters who can instantly transform themselves into required characters, music, song and dance, popular satirical masquerades, narrative inserts, direct address to and interaction with the spectators, a fabular structure and atmosphere, and so forth — which not only add to the overt (and sometimes rather overdone) self-conscious theatricality of which he is so fond but also, at least at their most functional, playfully ironize or subvert inherited form to confound the audience's customary expectations and responses. And as Osofisan has pointed out in a recent discussion of making plays in a repressive military state, the folk-tale tradition has another important benefit in the Nigerian context, in that it offers "the

kind of techniques to shelter the outspoken artist from official harm" (21) even as he voices trenchant criticisms of authority.

Soyinka, Rotimi and Osofisan can all be seen as using the dramatic medium to conduct an enquiry into the relationship between leadership and tradition in postcolonial Nigeria. Soyinka has affirmed, in play after play, the crucial importance of the traditional order in the forging of contemporary leadership, but only through a complex, potentially tragic process, usually involving the younger generation's re-evaluation of that order and the need to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic or defective ritual actions. Rotimi has offered, at least in his historical tragedies, a simpler view of the relationship: the leader here is imperfect but nonetheless the embodiment of a once settled, organic, hierarchical and patriarchal system, now defeated by more powerful forces, for which his audiences are invited to feel regretful nostalgia. Osofisan, who is convinced that the task of leadership must devolve on an educated middle class ("The Revolution as Muse" 14), is deeply sceptical of the traditional order, both in its leadership, which is enfeebled or positively corrupt, and in its beliefs and practices, which are presented as having only a limited capacity for empowerment.

This diversity of attitude towards the traditional order among Nigeria's foremost playwrights does not prevent them from exploiting the riches of indigenous traditional performance. But it does affect the kinds of performance modes which are drawn on, and the sort of meanings they are used to generate. Soyinka characteristically incorporates elements of ritual enactment involving trance and possession in a dramatic perspective which is unequivocally tragic in genre. Rotimi powerfully exploits the characteristic structures and effects of melodrama, making use of a range of traditional performance practices such as praise-singing, dirges, libations, choral responses in song and dance, and so on to enhance the combination of emotionalism and moralism so characteristic of that genre. Osofisan seems to reject both tragedy and melodrama, developing a more "Brechtian" aesthetic which is characteristically ironical and often subversive of audience expectations. His preferences have been more for the popular, storytelling elements of indigenous

culture than for the ritualistic, preferences which have enabled him to experiment with narrative form and its potential for such techniques as ironic reversal, interruption and authorial insertion.

This analysis has, I hope, confirmed the significance of Christopher Balme's emphasis on form in postcolonial drama and theater, and more specifically on the need for enquiry into the ideological and political implications of formal elements drawn from the indigenous performance culture. It suggests that, even among playwrights of one African country with much in common in terms of their personal backgrounds, their stated political views, and their audiences, there is a striking diversity of approaches towards the traditional order, both in terms of theme and in the selection and use of indigenous performance elements. This is an enquiry that may potentially be expanded to consider other English-language Nigerian dramatists, both of Soyinka's generation and younger — Clark-Bekederemo, Wale Ogunyemi, Zulu Sofola, Bode Sowande and Akanji Nasiru, to name only a few — in order to see how far their views of tradition, and the use they make of theatrical materials associated with it, correspond to or depart from work of the three playwrights considered here. In addition, for those with the linguistic skills to undertake such a study, it would be good to learn more about the differences that may exist between the treatments of tradition as theme and form in the English-language drama and in the popular Yoruba and other indigenous language theaters of Nigeria.

NOTES

- 1 In *Madmen and Specialists* the pattern is reversed, in that it is the father who is the sacrificial figure, in overt conflict with a son who is prepared to misuse his knowledge of traditional medicine as part of the apparatus of state power.
- 2 For a fuller analysis, see my "Melodrama and the 'Political Unconscious' in Two African Plays."
- 3 Sowande describes his affinity with Brecht in the following terms:

Brecht's techniques of theatrical communication definitely have much in common with Yoruba styles of dramatic presentation, but there is less similarity in the theoretical analysis of his polemics. Brecht could have put on an "agbada" in the Yoruba story-telling theatre and it would not matter if his

ancestors came from Oyo or Ile-Ife. What would matter would be the facility with which some of his plays could fit into story-telling theatre practice that came before the printing machine was invented, but which has been preserved by *Orature*, a unique African narrative technique ("Author's Note" 131).

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