

**Sankofa: engaging a ‘diasporic’ Afrocentrism****Literary Stylistics**

**Keywords:** adaptation, myth, Pan-Africanism, identity, negotiation, dialectics, Africa (ness)

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**Abstract**

Adaptation of canonical works, especially Greek texts and Shakespeare has come across as a way writers help us conceptualize our world through characters who “relate” with us in ways that continue to resonate as well as draw attention to significant questions that bother on our ontology, especially today’s world taken over by violence. This paper examines the aesthetics of the rich African and/or Yoruba background and worldview, derived essentially from myth, imposed on some “distant” texts to show how they underline the fact of transnational imagination, cultural transfer and the functional role of the hybrid form (adaptation) in engaging national and global discourse.

**I. Symbolic myth, mythical symbol**

There is the ever dynamic quality that some images possess, which make them not only important but also perpetual in their appeal. In her words, Morton (1977) observes that “images have the power to shape styles of life, values, self-image, ecclesiastical and political structures in the same manner that subliminal images have created for too many black children inferior and white children superior long before they reached the age of conceptualization”. Some of these images, like Sankofa, are derived from myth. Campbell (1968) believes “it would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation”. Ironically, he alludes to the Yoruba spiritual worldview as embedded in the mythical symbol of Ifa, the people’s system of esoteric wisdom and knowing that relates to adaptation through conceiving it from the perspective of Orisha as a “dialogic imagination”(Bakhtin 2004), which also clearly suggests that there is a continuum of knowledge and knowing inherent in the interpretive experience, derived from having a text function and respond to the tension in another totally different reality to its own.

**II. Myth: Of Adaptation/Rethinking?**

If anything, some kind of distinguished understanding will surface, knowing how important to the people’s ontology the knowledge that accrues to and from myth can be. As Campbell also explains, “it has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies”. Such assertion, within a postcolonial framework, draws attention to how myth functions in the African sensibility. One that is very significant is the Sankofa mentioned earlier. It is the Adinkra symbol of the Akan people of Ghana; an image of a bird that stretches its neck backward to pick its egg and move forward at the same time. Sankofa symbolizes one taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge. Sankofa metaphorically alludes to adaptation of Shakespeare and, especially of Greek

plays which are products of such mythic imagination that derives from the people and are channeled towards the education of the same people as well as the edification of their world. In the same notion of traditional origin, African festivals and ritual ceremonies provide a rich and varied context for dramatic and theatrical performances. Thus the idea of drama/theatre comes across as being environmentally determined and categorically different from its European counterpart. Adedeji (1969)'s research on the Yoruba Egungun Masque by which he shows that the masquerades serve both religious and secular purposes points in the direction of finding a ritual/mythic roots for drama in the social milieu of the people.

Writing about Tanzania, Lihamba (2004) notes that "the history of theatre in Tanzania is a history of the inter-relationship between the environment, societies and peoples, their modes of production, the cultural practices and aesthetics that have supported it"; for Chesaina and Mwangi (2004), contemporary Kenyan drama "is deeply rooted in the people's indigenous traditional dramatic forms. They came to be used as a tool for survival, interwoven with the social fabric", in a process Wynter (1979) describes as "guerilla resistance against market economy". Yet, the ritual origin is a universal impulse, for as Soyinka argues, the "search even by modern European dramatists for ritualist roots from which to draw out visions of modern experience is a clue to the deep-seated need of creative man to recover this archetypal consciousness in the origins of the dramatic medium" (Soyinka, 1976:42-3). When Campbell thus say that the "symbol of mythology are not manufactured, (that) they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed", for they are nothing but "the spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bear within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source", we are brought to a clearer awareness of how relevant mythical perception is to the Akan people of Ghana, as symbolized by Sankofa and the Nigerian dramatist who delves into his own cultural background to connect with Shakespeare and Greek texts in order to dilate on his own experience through the process of adaptation. Such artistic effort comes across as a kind of "ritualized context of reality" that falls within the scope of Kuntu drama (Jackson 1974).

For in Kuntu drama - it embraces dramatic contents of Black diaspora artists' efforts at reconnecting with the past of their race - Jackson believes that the African continuum is energized, through the fact that "Kuntu drama, though recognizes the distance between the audience and actors [now in the case of adaptation, between time and space], but definitely no separation". And, by African continuum, our attention is drawn to an active spiritual reality, which sees man as a part and parcel of the cosmos, having been integrated into the totality of everything, what Abrams (1962) terms "reproductive verisimilitude" that is quite different from Western "descriptive realism". African literature's relevance to social reality as a form of commitment that one glimpses from the adaptation of canonical texts by modern Nigerian dramatists' continues to gain in currency, judging from sociopolitical situations on the continent and beyond. As Abiola Irele brilliantly argues

For the literary/aesthetic cannot be divorced from the climate of reflection and discourse arising out of the comprehensive context of an African experience that extends from the precolonial to the present postcolonial situation. The term "African

Literature” is thus to be taken here in a wider sense than is denoted by the unusual reference to imaginative expression. As in other contexts, literature here not only communicates a structure of feeling but also reflects a climate of thought [...] that seeks to place literature within the total framework of life and expression so as to connect it to other forms of the social production of meaning in contemporary Africa (Irele 2001: xviii).

Within the same framework of meaning offered by Irele, we engage adaptation of Greek texts by African/Nigerian dramatists who impose myths from their own cultural background on those of the classics, from the perspective of “a transformation of consciousness” that is achieved through a process of “symbolic reversal” (Outlaw 1974). As Frye observes, “a mythology is formed, a temenos or magic circle is drawn around a culture, and literature develops historically within a limited orbit of language, references, allusion, beliefs, transmitted and shared tradition” (Frye 1970). Adaptation, in the words of Fischlin (2007) as “a way of doing things [...] as a primary form of engaging with the world, plays out along an extended continuum that integrates and disintegrates [and] takes a possibility and transmutes it into a new creative outcome”.

When they adapt, Nigerian dramatists, not only express local/native knowledge that is transformed through a global/transnational consciousness, but, they also express the validity of the local resources that go into the adapted work, as derived from a culture that recognizes the duality of nature: the interface between spirit and matter, as “expressive strategies located in the continuum of African memory”(Carter Harrison 1974). Folk tradition, music and archetypal images, such as in the Akan symbol, are collapsed and given fresh insights into their new experiences. In Shakespeare adaptation particularly, Fischlin observes that the “precipice between familiarity and estrangement”, is often always recognized because, above all else, “Shakespearean texts teeter between their putative civilizing effects and their alien potentiality”, so that, at the end, Shakespeare adaptation is “used to produce coherent visions of national, ideological and cultural affiliation [and] the vulnerability of such visions to forces of influence and change is exposed”.

Adaptations offer the Nigerian dramatists the opportunity to connect with works that break through the boundaries of their own time. In Bakhtin (2004)’s opinion, literary works “frequently [gain] in significance [...] and] are enriched with new meanings’, with time, provided by ideas and thoughts “which actually has been and continues to be found in such texts”. Adaptations also draw attention to the role of history in human conduct, as these works can help to evaluate the limitations of history, and re-emphasize the need for man to learn from the mistakes of history, especially those aspects that contain actions of human miseries and joy, sadness and laughter, which are essential ingredients for dramatic exploration (Yerima 2009:49). Such works actually fit into Amiri Baraka’s classification of the ‘theatre’ that “force change”, “be change” and “expose” (Baraka, 1965: 4-6), and, at the same time reconnects with Outlaw’s idea of “symbolic reversal” derived from the ontological system of knowledge, belief and practice, that is needed in order to “disentangle the assumptions projected by dominant cultures” (Carter Harrison, 2002:2). Even if we do recognize and acknowledge Western influence on the writings and expressions of contemporary African/Nigeria dramatists (brought about by colonial rule and Western education),

yet the texts chosen for analysis have drawn, as a mythic background, from the Yoruba Ogun paradigm, which not only suggests the idea of “an essential identity grounded in cultural knowledge”(Pettis:1995:147), but equally foreground the point Asante (1987) makes about utilization of myth as “a way to discover the values of a spiritual, traditional, even mystical rhetoric as it confronts a technological, linear world to provide [...] ideas for an Afrocentric alternative to apocalyptic thinking”. Soyinka argues the Ogun paradigm in African drama

Only Ogun experienced the process of being literally torn asunder in cosmic winds, of rescuing himself from the precarious edge of total dissolution by harnessing the untouched part of himself; the will. This is the unique essentiality of Ogun in Yoruba metaphysics: as embodiment of the social, communal will invested in a protagonist of its choice. It is a paradigm of this experience of dissolution and re-integration that the actor in the ritual of archetypes can be understood (Soyinka, 1976:30)

Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame* (1975) and Femi Osofisan’s *Wesoo, Hamlet!*(2012),are works of adaptation (Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) and mythic imagination as well as the “continual process of transformation”(Quayson 2001), which emphasizes Africa’s embracing spirit, or what Soyinka calls “elastic nature of knowledge as its one reality” (Soyinka, 1976:52) of the race [and], “an attitude of philosophic accommodation, constantly demonstrated in the attributes accorded most African deities, attributes which deny the existence of impurities or “foreign” matter, in the gods’ digestive system”(Soyinka,54). For one thing, a much more elucidating perspective is given to this understanding by Levi-Strauss who asserts that

[A] mythic system can only be grasped in *a process of becoming; not as something inert and stable but in a process of perpetual transformation*. This would mean that there are always several kinds of myths simultaneously present in the system, some of them primary (in respect of the moment at which the observation is made), and some of them derivative. And while some kinds are present in their entirety at certain points, elsewhere they can be detected only in fragmentary form. *Where evolution has gone furthest, the elements set free by the decomposition of the old myths have already been incorporated into new combinations* (Levi-Strauss,1965:105) [emphasis mine]

The Ogun paradigm that runs through the “bones” of the adapted texts operates from both symbolic and metaphorical levels of knowledge regarding the mythical personage that fleshes them out, as represented by the protagonists of each text, whereby as Quayson argues “Yoruba aesthetics and culture are not posited in a vacuum”, but given greater impetus to embrace the fact that the “Yoruba tragedy” that they represent on the surface are “affirmed in relation to other world systems”. We may cite the example of Soyinka whose ability to negotiate this “space” is praised even by some of his most vocal critics. The comparative nature of his dramaturgy with Shakespeare and Greek dramatists, is attested to by Chinweizu, Jamie and Madubuike who note; “Soyinka’s syntax and verbal structure is Shakespearean: he speaks of ‘unsexed’, ‘such webs as these we build our dreams upon’, and ‘Propitiation sped/Grimly on, before’”(Chinweizu et

al:1980:165). Soyinka's retelling of Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which he invests the ancient text with an African/Yoruba mythopoeic sensibility draws attention to the fact that "Africa exists as a 'migratory concept', reconfigured and presented in multiple contexts" (Kasule 19). This is a point, which can also be read within the scope of "a culturally situated Black dramatic theory"(Olaniyan,1995:11).

### III. Greek Body but Yoruba Face

Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* follows the story of Oedipus very closely, yet stands out as a "Yoruba/African" drama, with vivid conceptualization of what Adeluba (1978) calls "the flora and fauna of our country". In the land of Kutuje that replaces Thebes, a plague seems at the point of destroying everything, and King Odewale must find a way to solve the mystery of the "one man" whose misdeed pushes the land to the brink of extinction. However, his good intention and effort are mired by suspicion of connivance from the land and especially the chiefs, clash with his younger brother, Aderopo (unknown to him initially), from the late king, Adetusa (his real father) as well as the "insult" passed on him by the blind seer, Baba Fakunle, yet he craves the "coolness of heart" of his wife, Ojuola (his real mother). Etherton (1982) writes that the play is successful as an adaptation that could be said to engage with the original and stand in its own authority "partly because of the powerful structuring of the ironies of the original" and, more significantly, the play's "relevance in the playwright's society". This last point works on several levels, but the most noticeable being in the aspect of language, worldview and historical reality. The intricacies of transferring a particular kind of a very well-established culture, and a system of thought into another, draws attention to the importance of occupying such "in between" space as Kasule (2009:19) argues, which requires "listening to the multivocality within the text and foregrounding the anti-aesthetics without which the classical African concept of theatre will remain muted."

In the aspect of language, Ola Rotimi conveniently replaces the elevated language of the classic text with Yoruba mode of expression and nuances, which are carefully constructed. Adelugba observes that Rotimi is particularly noted for his "adventurous creation of a new theatre language which borrows effectively from the indigenous oral tradition and uses metaphors and proverbs of our native land"(Adelugba,1978:215). In Olatunji (1987)'s opinion, "when a writer handles inherited materials this way, s/he can be said to not only display a high sense of tradition but also transcend and add new meanings to that tradition". Rotimi's representation of Yoruba culture through a Greek mythology shows how a writer mediates a foreign cultural ideal with the reality of his own background. In what Kanneh (1998) calls "the construction of Africa across and between disciplines", Rotimi invests and cleverly transfers Greek concept of immutability of fate (predestination), with the Yoruba concept of fate. As Etherton argues "Yorubas traditionally believe that your fate is your own doing [...]Further, it is intrinsic to Yoruba cosmology that a person's fate is never reversible[...]Finally, unlike the Greek Olympian pantheon[...]whose divinities pursue vendetta against each other and against mortals, the Yoruba gods are not capricious, least of all Ogun (Etherton,1982:124-5). Rotimi does a comparative as well as a distinctive interpolation of the idea from both worldviews in order to draw attention to individual and collective responsibility, especially under any given circumstance. He clearly argues the point

in an interview; “traditional Nigerian religions[...]do acknowledge the power of predestination. Furthermore, our religions appreciate the wisdom in personal submission...not only to the gods of the land but also to the memory of the departed ancestors...But the similarities seem to end there. A salient difference arises between the Greek original of the Oedipus saga and my African treatment of the same story (Lindfors,1974: 62-3).

In drawing that significant parallel and difference, Rotimi pays attention to the Aristotelian concept of *harmatia*, as it relates to fate and/or predestination. The interpretation of tragic flaw from both texts becomes a matter for contestation, for while “the human element of Oedipus’ tragic flaw in the Greek original is irascibility[...]On the other hand, in the case of Odewale[...]the human element of the tragic flaw is tribal bigotry” (Lindfors, 1974: 63). From here, we move to the very important aspect of adaptation that Rotimi underlines: the use to which distant/canonical texts can be put beyond the traditional concept of challenging claim to cultural autonomy. Rotimi imposes Yoruba myth on the Greek thought to address the irrationality of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), which was fought on the altar of ethnic bigotry. As he says “Indeed all the ridiculous facets of tribal bigotry are exposed in the end of the play when the hero realizes that the man he killed in defense of his tribe was his very own father; the land he has long suspected of plotting against him for reasons of ethnic difference is, in fact, his own motherland”(Lindfors,1974:63).The Nigerian society, and by extension an allusion to other African countries engulfed in political crisis shortly after gaining independence from colonial masters, replaces Thebes of the original. Vividly conveyed in the title is the thrust of the play, “the title really has more to it than meets the eye. [It] does not refer to the mythological gods[...]Rather, it alludes to national, political powers such as America, Russia, France, England etc...The title implies that these ‘gods’ shouldn’t be blamed or held responsible for our own national failings”. And, by holding on to “tribal distrust as the hero’s major flaw”, Rotimi’s vision certainly transcends the mythical origin through flying on its wings.

#### **IV. Shakespeare: the Yoruba Prince?**

Femi Osofisan’s “retelling” or “remaking”, as it were, of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, challenges Gilbert and Tompkins,1996:19)’s assertion that the Shakespeare ‘industry’ helps maintain imperialist interests, for it is the same “imperialism” that the play critiques. Osofisan’s theatre of commitment, like that of Brecht whose influence on his dramaturgy has been acknowledged, draws attention to “a new drama which could be used for public “discussion” of political and social issues”(Styan,1981). In doing this, traditional African/Yoruba performance modes in the form of songs, symbols, mask, and other cultural elements are merged in dialectic and aesthetic to inform a subversive perspective. The performance arena, a peculiar feature of traditional village square of the verbal artist from whom he draws his inspiration, becomes the court of justice and adjudication; the mirror of the society where the affluent and privileged are taken up for scrutiny within set rules and standard. By using Shakespeare as contingency in engaging the sociopolitical reality of his time, investing it with ritual and cultural sensibility recognizable to the people for which the work is directed, Osofisan also plays into the idea of Shakespeare’s “cultural

memorialization”, which derives from a “discursive presence under pressure to conform to certain local, historically and culturally specific conditions” (Fischlin,2007:9), yet he also makes a distinction from Shakespeare’s through profound utilization of inherited cultural materials. His method derives from the sensibility of a past that holds sacred certain values even within the disruptive violence associated with contemporary aggressive society; a way of life so diffused with corruption and treachery, that his own brand of theatre persistently and consistently challenge and critiques. He underlines here the idea that adaptations, especially of the postcolonial hue, often come across as a process of aspiration toward reality. They also often come across as creative energies with significant appeal to the audience. “The more art aspires towards reality”, as Ibitokun (1995) argues, “the more dramatic it becomes” and, we dare add, the more virile and potent it definitely becomes.

Shakespeare’s idea in the original text, *Hamlet*, is subsumed in the African storytelling tradition which begins with the Messenger “summoning” the ghost of the protagonists of the original, namely Hamlet, Claudius and Ophelia, to be part of the African narration. This style recalls some elements of the belief in reincarnation, after-life etc as the actions traverse the space between the Elizabethan era and its new setting, which itself covers area of the Ilaje-Ijebu Waterside of the main actions, and Oyo traditions of the last years within the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “Shakespeare” is himself a living witness—an actor--- in the dramatic conflict being enacted as the playwright suggests (Osofisan, 2012:8). This artistic style, breaking the barrier between time and space, first and foremost, reinforces the belief in “African style of collective creation” (Lomax,1990); second, it draws attention to what Benston (1987) describes as “ritual---the event which dissolves traditional divisions between actor and spectator, between self and other”, and, finally, it actually does a delineation between Western paradigm of performance and/or text in relation to African “matrix of performative/ritual expressions” (Walker II,2012). Also, a sense of Kuntu and the African continuum is tapped into by Osofisan in his creative juxtaposition of the past and present, through having Shakespeare’s “real” characters emerge and interact with his own contemporary artistic creation achieved by the ritual medium of the mask at the annual Dance of Ancestral Masks. In her article “Behind the Inscrutable wonder: The Dramaturgy of the Mask Performance in Traditional African Society”, Okafor (1991) argues the centrality of the human as demonstrated in the masking theatre, which underlines the two-sided ontology of Africans and the essential fact that human beings can transcend the barrier of their own world and move to another. Soyinka’s “gulf of transition” which blends the past, present and future in a “cosmic envelope” of “man’s adventure into his metaphysical self”, can be recognized in this spiritual arrangement.

Leto, the central character, returns from schooling at the college in the city to Ilaje-Ijebu in the thick of the annual celebration, now heightened by the wedding of his mother, Olori to his father’s successor and brother, Oba Ayibi. His anger, like in the original text, is understood, especially as an idealistic young man whose sense of morality and justice cannot be reconciled with his mother’s, not to talk of the society’s established ideal that he considers crude and static, to say the least. By the time the ghost of Oba Sayedero (his late father) appears to him and instructs him to avenge his cruel death in the hands of the usurper, Shakespeare’s original text fully comes alive. However, in the flashback scene involving Ayibi and Sayedero, the conflict of interest leading to

the latter being murdered is played out and it takes the play beyond mere response to how, in Fischlin's idea, "Shakespeare cultural capital conventionally operates", within the discourse of postcolonial adaptation, to showing Osofisan's real concern, what his theatre engages—the disillusion and immorality of power and its deployment as well as the bane of most postcolonial African nations inability to rise beyond the level they were just before the end of colonialism. The ideological concern of the adaptation is underlined wherein Osofisan's dramaturgy is channeled towards confronting forces that hold the society down and in limbo through corruption and wasteful spending, mismanagement of public fund and outright insensitivity to the true demand and yearnings of the people. In this case, the myth and ritual of the people are refashioned as "art", a meta-narrative deployed to engage in social discourse, that is, "mobilized in the dramatic tension between reality and illusion"(Ibitokun, 1995:92). Going back into the Ogun paradigm that we started with, a syllogism can be drawn from the encounter between the late king and his reigning brother, in the particular way it fleshes out the thematic thrust of the new text and offers insight into how materials locally sourced are made to function in the light of contemporary need.

While Sayedero cannot rationalize the basis of his brother's insistence on having a tobacco company established in the land, knowing the level of health risk for individual consumers and the pollution of the entire land as a whole such project will bring not minding the financial gains that will also accrue from it; on his own part, Ayibi accuses him of thwarting all his effort to be successful, even after being brotherly enough to let him be crowned though he (Ayibi) was the first to be approached by the kingmakers. With such scenario and gulf separating brothers and how it degenerates to murder, Barnes' opinion provides an insightful explanation here that

Ogun is a metaphoric representation of realization that people create the means to destroy themselves. He stands for humans' collective attempts to govern, not what is out of control in nature; but what is out of control in culture. He represents not so much what is inexplicable, unseen, as what is known but not under control (Barnes,1989:17).

Osofisan's dramaturgic choice of having Claudius appear to Ayibi and advise him on ways to avert the impending tragic confrontation with the young prince draws our attention to another aspect of cross-cultural perception that adapters of canonical texts sometimes bring into the exercise. It shows too how thoughts transcend the confines of time that such texts occupy and how new and fresh breath of life is usually breathed into them. Osofisan's version shows as well the "Shakespeare of alternative adaptive strategies that "do things" to Shakespeare [...]with more of vested interest in the here and now of making something new" (Fischlin,2007:10).

## V. Much ado about all of this?

We can submit that Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame*, an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Osofisan's *Wesoo, Hamlet!*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* both do more to "open up new ways of seeing, and understanding" (Mercer,1994:2); strive to "raise political and ideological questions" (Kasule 15), and find in the previous texts "significant parallel, rather than the canonical origin" (Goff and Simpson,2008:74).They can also be summarized through the



opinions offered by Bhabha (1993) in the “Third Space” and Pieterse on the interface between globalization and culture. Bhabha considers the “Third Space” in relation to what both adaptations have done as

[...] where I saw great political and poetic and conceptual value in forms of *cultural identification, which subverted authority*, not by claiming their total difference from it, but were able to actually *use authorized images, and turn them against themselves to reveal a different history* (Bhabha,1993:190) [emphasis mine]

In Pieterse own words, both plays try to capture reality within the illusion of their dramatic reworking of the old texts and, achieving in the process, to engage the question of globalization in relation to specific cultures. He says

More fruitful is to view multi-culturalism as intercultural interplay and mingling, *a terrain of criss-crossing cultural flows, in the process generating new combinations and options*; this applies in relation to political interests, lifestyles, choices, and economic opportunities (Pieterse,2009:38)[emphasis mine]

Images, as symbolic representations whether derived from antiquity(myth) or as the result of modern conceptualization, continue to serve various purposes and their relevance are renewed through various means one of which is by adaptation. Through them too, the idea of canonical status conferred on certain texts are challenged, sometimes “ridiculed” or “bastardized”, yet in some other ways, as Fischlin argues, are deployed thus doing more than to “trans-substantiate” them. Most importantly, they “celebrate difference and create a rehearsal hall of cultural and political re-imaging”(Berry,2000:23). Most importantly, as noted, they underline the fact of transnational imagination and relevance of cultural transfer beyond the confines of space and time.

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