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The archaeology of knowledge and the field of dramatic discourse

Layiwola, D.

Abstract

I have taken my theme rather than my title from the philosophical discourses of Michel Foucault in his classic work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1977). Foucault tries, rigorously and implacably, to contain the imperial study of this ancient and pre-historical field and discipline within the elastic limits of the history of ideas and the literary concept of the oeuvre. We know that archaeology as a concept and as a method is not a language as in the association of signs. It is at the same time a form of representation of a past in its longing for a settled, stable, laid down and abiding present and an anticipation of a future that is settled and 'dead', yet real, perpetually haunting and compelling attention. As an intellectual empathizer with the field – cultural or archaeological – I hope to bring in, within the framework of the history of ideas, the value of preserved knowledge. I shall cite largely from literature, drama and history why archaeology will continue to be a dominant, if not a domineering conceptual science in the cause of our present century.

Introduction

This brief essay on the archaeology of dramatic discourses uses or adopts archaeology both as a discipline and as a concept; an intellectual method. Quite like Michel Foucault, I agree that the history of ideas constitute an unbroken whole, a method of reasoning which guarantees an oeuvre. Literature and history, disciplines not unconnected with archaeology, do institute beginnings and ends and also imply that with the linear concourse of a history or a story, there are intermediaries or a 'midpoint mimesis' otherwise seen as interventions. Knowledge, being a field, may grow from scientific axioms into philosophical facts and also take root as an artistic or literary form or may end up as political subjects of the day.



Secondly, I hope, with concrete elucidation from Greek Dramatic literature of the 5th century B.C., address the philosophical issues that archaeology, as a concept tends to raise all of the time. It is clear that archaeology tends to gaze at the past in the bid to recover it, but it also tries to regain stability and splendour. Whilst it ties itself to the events of history, it transcends it with the exploration of what may yet be undiscovered. The three dramatists of our choice will be Aristophanes who lived from 44-75 BC; Sophocles who lived from 496-406 BC and Aeschylus who lived from 525-456 BC.

In discussing Aristophanes, I wish to address the theme of culture and the nation-state; in the discussion of Sophocles, the theme of culture and the family whilst the treatise on Aeschylus will address the theme of culture and the fate of the individual in society. Hence, this is an essay on the theory of comparative cultural relativity between Nigerian and the Greek classics. Aristophanes, in *The Frogs*, elected Dionysus the patron of the Arts to pay a visit to the underworld with the express purpose of bringing back Euripides, the deceased Athenian bard for the rejuvenation of arts and culture in Athens.

Culture and the nation-state

Aristophanes' *The Frogs* was first produced in 405 BC. Dionysus feels that there has been an artistic lull in Athens, once a great centre of art, classical learning and culture. This, he feels is due to the demise of the great poet-playwrights who had died without great successors. As a conceptual solution, Aristophanes then set Dionysus the task of fetching Euripides who had died the year before in 406 BC from Hades, the underworld and the abode of the dead. After various encounters, Dionysus arrives with his slave, Xanthias in Hades. Pluto, the ruler of Hades sets Aeschylus (525-456 BC) and Euripides (484-406 BC) to a contest. The winner will return with Dionysus to Athens to begin life anew. It is an intellectual contest which brings about the finest as well as the base in each of the two contests. What emerges from the great competition is that Euripides is judged as being prosaic in his diction, he writes on themes that are vulgar and, therefore, corrupts manners and debases music. On the part of his older colleague, Aeschylus, his language is criticized for being turgid and obscure.

The contest ends in a deadlock, and judgment had to be extracted by introducing an external factor. There is a topical political problem: what should Athens do about Alcibiades?

Alcibiades (450-404 BC) was an Athenian general and statesman. He was also a brilliant pupil of Socrates but he was an irresponsible leader of the democrats. He was twice exiled but because of his exceptional ability and ingenuity in war, he became something of a political necessity for Athenians to have. When artistic tests became impossible between Aeschylus and Euripides, the political question of what to do with Alcibiades serves as the acid test for determining the better of the two artists. Euripides feels that Alcibiades should be treated as a traitor having worked against Athens from exile. Aeschylus, however, differs, arguing that as a citizen with rights, Alcibiades should be condoned. He justifies same thus:

“Best it is never to rear a lion in the city
but if reared

It has been. 'tis best to yield to its ways" (p. 412).

In the contest between the two great poets, points of artistic detail and literary technicalities are raised. This reveals a civilization and audience that is highly literate and conscious of its tastes, aspirations and artistry. The play also documents the all-pervading public consciousness that the poet is a responsible public teacher, a moralist and an orator. This play, its themes, its plot and sub-plots reveal a civilization that was quite advanced and a tradition that was classical and humane in every sense of the term. It shows a tradition of formal training and cultivation. This is why Dionysus, a patron of the arts was able to discern that the tempo of artistic tastes and value had fallen in quality. There was, therefore, the need to uncover the layers of traditions (as archaeology does) in the works of Euripides or Aeschylus to remedy the prevailing decline and anomaly. There is thus something of a historical consciousness, archaeology of knowledge perception and productivity, which attends each civilizing era. This is what T.S. Eliot often refers to as the 'historical sense'.

There would seem to be a need in the light of the conceptual overview of Aristophanes' vision in *The Frogs* to compel a disquisition on 'the historical sense' in the artistic tradition of a nation. A work of art produced by the consciousness of a certain epoch truly reflects the essence of that epoch but we can hardly contend that it starts and ends there. It is inherent in that work, the simultaneous presence of the archetypes of the past, and the idea of that past as it appears in the present order of things. There is thus a deeply philosophical sense in the idea of a tradition that reproduces the best of itself in subsequent epochs. This, I believe, is the meaning invoked when Eliot says that the historical sense 'involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' (1980: 14). He further contends that:

"This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity" (1980: 14).

The import of Aristophanes' concern in this piece of comic erudition is that the destiny of a whole nation-state lies in the adequacy and depth of perception or articulation exhibited by her artists and her philosophers. This is because in the extremity of its essence, these are the voices of vision and the leadership a nation is capable of exemplifying.

Aristophanes, the historical poet felt a loss of vision in the metier of those dead poets; he did a critical ranking of categories and felt that a whole generation of writers had to be interrogated and returned to their original place in Greek history. It would appear that a watershed was reached in the civilization that had flourished as a model and a crisis had ensued. At that critical point, the artist conceives of a *status quo ante*, which was desirable even if it would not have stopped the march of material history. But in its own favour, the art of the period seemed to have captured the historical essence and being of the nation that the corpus had to be invoked to revalidate the cultural identity of the race. We must therefore contend, as Eliot has done presently, that the composite identity of a nation lies in the context of her archaeology, her ancestors and the dead and forgotten memory of

her compatriots and foes. A history is therefore only complete if the whole of its narration coheres as an indivisible whole. This, in my modest opinion, is the whole purpose of the archaeology of culture as well as the archaeology of knowledge production in our twenty-first century context and in the whole of modernity from about the nineteenth century. I have deliberately chosen the nineteenth century because of its post-colonial import in the life of Africa and its fledgling nation states.

Culture and the family

In the domestic realm and the domain of the homestead, the play for our discourse is Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* written about 407 BC. Sophocles lived between 496 and 40 BC. This Greek tragedian was uniquely endowed, not only with his in om talents but also with the circumstance of the historical period in which he lived. His period fitted snugly into the high point of Athenian civilization. He lived during the golden age of Athenia intellectual, artistic and political glory. He was only aged sixteen in 480 BC when the Greeks had their resounding victory over the Persians at the battle of Salamis. This was the age when Athens prospered and enjoyed pre-eminence in world history. He died in 406 BC just two years before Athens fell to Sparta. Apart from the lofty events happening outside of him, he was reputed to be a most comely and personable youth with great artistic talents in drama, music and dance. He was reputed to have performed in the chorus celebrating the victory over the Persians. He was from a prominent family and was privileged with the company of great artists and thinkers including Herodotus, the reputed father of ancient history.

The affection and respect he enjoyed brought him honour and election into high office. He always comported himself with modesty and decorum. He wrote more plays and won more accolades than his contemporaries. His play, *Oedipus the King*, has been considered a masterpiece of all ages, so it is easy to relate to it, even in the 21st century, as a dramatic archetype. Its influence on our national psyche has begotten a play by the hands of the eminent playwright Ola Rotimi, which he translated as *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971).

The gist of the play is the story of a brave man who is born into a royal family. But he has accurse on his head which says that he will be great quite all right; will become a king. But he is destined to kill his father and unwittingly produce children by his own mother. This, by the standard of any human culture, is taboo and an unmitigated abomination and tragedy. To nullify this curse, the child was taken into the bush to die. However, fate is unrelenting. Instead of being left to die, he was given to a shepherd who will adopt and rear him away from the land of the anticipated abomination. The tragic irony in the tale is that the more he tried to move away from his tragic fate, the more he moved nearer it.

The play is a masterful mystery, which aims at the art of discovery. In modern times, it will have ranked among the greatest of Alfred Hitchcock's detective stories. The episodes in the play unfurl like the layers of an onion ball; each scene unobtrusively leading to the other in layered archaeological templates. The mood and texture of the individual characters and personalities fit the facts and the occasion seamlessly.

The confidence, the impetuosity and self-righteous rage of King Oedipus ensure that

the investigation and piecemeal revelations continue without obstruction. The hero-victim is honest and diligent in his search for the culprit oblivious that the criminal he intends to reveal is himself. The playwright himself is intellectually honest in the entire tragic ramification because he allows the tragic hero to live up to his stature. When the suspense ends and the king convicts himself, he brings the total weight and consequences of the law upon himself.

It is easy for an unperceptive reader to infer that Oedipus has committed heinous crimes against his family and friends; and for that reason convict him over same. But viewed as a whole in an archaeological oeuvre, he has done his best to avert the crimes and has fallen into them unwittingly.

An 'other' reading reveals the play as a vindication and 'heroization', if that neologism is permitted, of Oedipus. He suffered beyond the limits of endurance for sins he did not commit intentionally. And because he is noble and forthright, he probes relentlessly into the issues and events even when he was gently dissuaded from confronting the disaster just round the corner. Yet another tragic irony is that his moral strengths become, at the same time, a great source of weakness: vigour, selfrighteousness and consistency appear as conceit and foolishness.

In the end, fate destroys a righteous but temperamental man and consumes his family. It is certainly not all gloom because he is purged and the resolution of the conundrum gives satisfaction rather than prolonged puzzlement. Oedipus upholds the dignity of humanity by unraveling and wrestling down the dark forces that seek to dominate our lower natures. This exposition allows the audience to come to terms with the mystery of the world in which they 'live and move and have their being'.

But why have gods been so unfair to him and to his family? Why did Apollo subject him to such annihilating circumstance? Certainly the gods are divine and cannot be blamed. Their logic is radically different from those of mortals because they operate from a higher pedestal. The man, Oedipus behaves well, is truthful and consistent but because of his overriding temper and impetuosity is worsted by powers he can neither control nor fully comprehend. That is the basis of tragedy as an art. It does not dwell on the innocence exhibited by a personage; it agitates the resources of self-control that challenges the innocence across the field of forces. The big man or woman in our midst has been undermined, ridiculed and exposed. The fate of great personalities is therefore the playground and basis for the tragical art.

Among the Greeks, a hero is he who by an extraordinary career has pushed back the frontiers of the impossible and is therefore accorded dignity after his death. Among the Yorubas of south-western Nigeria; the acclaimed Greeks of West Africa, the saying is apt:

Baaku laa dere, eniyan ko sunwon laaye.

Meaning:

'The hero only emerges when the man dies and joins the realm of immortals'.

We are quick to note that the hero is not flawless; he is above the station of ordinary humanity but his tragic flaws are inseparably bound with the virtues that make him a

hero. Hence there is always a contention of conflictual and prominent attributes. In the story of Oedipus, a family curse arises from incest and the concept of *homophagy*; the consumption of one's own kind; like destroying its own kind. This, by extension, relentlessly consumes the family and the filial bonds that have hitherto been over-consummated. To dare to kill one's father is the same as to dare to ravage one's mother and they both amount to a taboo; a *hubris*.

Culture and the individualist principle

In the third and final section of this paper, we will consider a third Greek playwright, Aeschylus and, by so doing, discuss his play, *Prometheus bound*, written in 463 BC. But it is pertinent to discuss the life of the dramatist himself before venturing into the substance of the play. Aeschylus, the first of the three great tragedians lived approximately between 525 and 456 BC. Only seven of his plays are still extant. The play under consideration as first produced in 463 BC, just seven years before the death of the author. It thus points to the fact that it belongs to the later stage of his life. In structure, the play opens a trilogy with a hypothetical pattern of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. The other two supplementary plays being *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer* but are unfortunately lost. However, *Prometheus Bound*, in thought and action, is complete by itself. Regarded as a triptych, the pattern of the respective plays would unfold as: violence/revolt; further revolt; and resolution or reconciliation. The idea of the play belongs to the period, in Greek history, where mount Olympus and her gods loom large and man has no will power of his own. The yearning for freedom portrayed in the play is therefore that transitional phase between elemental terror and self-determinism; between primitive subjugation and reasoned judgments. The tedium in the tone and rhythm of the play and the rather slow pace is reflective of the painful transition from the primitive to the civilized world and the constant struggle between violence and reason. Phillip Vellacott rightly observes in the introduction to the Penguin edition that:

"The transition from the primitive to the civilized world, from the life of nomadic tribes and village settlements to that of walled cities and organized states, was doubtless a gradual and barely perceptible process spread confusedly over several centuries and large expanses of land So this stage in the development of Greek social order had its mythical counterpart in the story of a violent dynastic change among the gods" (1961:8).

It is, therefore, not an accident to equate the daring of Prometheus in his singular heroism to the necessity of any creative endeavour itself. This is the story.

"In the earliest era of Greek mythology, the Titans were the lords of existence and Cronos was chief among them. They descended to inhabit the wilds and created the human race as a lower order of companions. This, in itself, was a heroic act of creation and of creativity. But they were soon disappointed with their human subjects, and so kept them in subjectivity and bondage. These gods were imperial in temperament and there were no such things as rights or reason. The Titans themselves were the products of the gods and mother earth and were gigantic in appearance, and had more brawn than innate intelligence. Prometheus became the first among them to evolve the faculties of reason and their counterpart institutional faculties of freedom and justice. Earth, the mother of

all gods knew that the future lay in those ideal principles rather than in brute force or strength had imparted this to one of her most promising sons, Prometheus. This was why he collaborated with Zeus, to overthrow the old order under Cronos, Zeus' father.

Prometheus' sympathies lay with the inhabitants of the earth, the human populace. Whilst Zeus saw humans as irredeemable and meant to destroy them, Prometheus was more optimistic in regard to their future potentials. He therefore stole fire from heaven and gave it to them and enlarged their capacity by teaching them other mental and manual skills. By empowering the old race, Prometheus has frustrated Zeus' plan to annihilate them and create a more perfect race. Zeus chains him to a rock and sends an eagle or vulture to nibble at his liver in daytime after it might have been restored at night. He suffers but defends his innate loyalty to mankind and to rationality".

One thing that stands out in the play is the rise of rationality and the love of freedom. The faculties and the institutions that attend them became a pre-occupation of the succeeding phase to primitive humanity. But I shall like to draw attention to the sensitivity and balance with which Aeschylus draws the character and humanity of the truly legendary Prometheus to whom humanity owes much. He is a hero truly imbued with compassion, mission and a sense of justice because as he pleads his cause we realize that he had applied the same principle in the help he rendered to Zeus. He narrates:

"I knew the appointed course of things to come ...
that not brute strength,
Not violence, but cunning must give victory
To the rulers of the future
Then, of the courses open to me, it seemed best
To take my stand ... at the side of Zeus.
It was I who gave
That counsel through which ancient Cronos and his crew
Lie buried now in the black abyss of Tartarus
That was the help I gave the king of the gods; and this
Is my reward – this is his black ingratitude" (p. 27).

There is no doubt that this is a patriot imbued with courage and consistency. Once he is convinced of the rationality of his motive, he acts swiftly and without bias. After all, he gave help across the sectional interests both to mankind and to Zeus who would destroy them. Individualist as he may appear, he is a citizen of the world who serves without grudge or malice and invokes the vision of a collective destiny in all of human affairs.

Conclusion

The privilege we have had in using the framework of the history of ideas as a basis for discussion in this paper is that it has guaranteed flexibility across disciplines. It has allowed a free rein in the association of ideas between disciplines such that there emerges a 'system' or oeuvre whereby the very idea of an archaeology or history is used in the broadest terms. By broad-range thinking ideas aggregate and disaggregate as is convenient without causing any permanent disequilibria. In the words of Foucault himself:

“The history of ideas, then, is the discipline of beginnings and ends, the description of obscure continuities and returns, the reconstitution of developments in the linear form of history. But it can also, by the very fact, describe, from one domain to another, the whole interplay of exchanges and intermediaries: it shows how scientific knowledge is diffused, gives rise to philosophical concepts, and takes form perhaps in literary works; it shows how problems, notions, themes may emigrate from the philosophical field where they were formulated to scientific or political discourses; it relates work with institutions, social customs or behaviour, techniques, and unrecorded needs and practices” (1977:137).

It is always convenient that in pooling resources for intellectual activity, the practices of the disciplines are quietly mapped into the outlay. Archaeology has undoubtedly insinuated the fact that its philosophical extrapolations will always be based on a conceptual modicum of praxis: the mapping of the field, excavations, sorting, nomenclature and laboratory analysis. The term itself has always insinuated the need for collaborative thinking and the ready acceptance of appropriate ‘other’ both in the sorting of the field and in the interpretation of raw data. This presupposes a republican spirit at work. There tends to occur a series of transitions and reformulations, which makes an idea new each time it is recalled.

Unfortunately, Foucault believes that the above-mentioned elasticity is the very life line that archaeology, as a pre-occupation lacks and allows it to part ways with the history of ideas. He believes that archaeology does not give itself enough scope to reorganize and rearrange in an order that is entirely novel. I am glad to say that by the very exploration of ideas in the present essay, we call on the discipline of archaeology to rise up to this challenge first thrown by Foucault so that it may transcend its limiting borders or *modus operandi*. By such daring strides, we are able to marry the very notion of archaeology to the history and philosophy of ideas. It will thereby not only have served my purpose for its use for the uncanny depths of those classical dramas, it will have helped to reinterpret them in historical perspective across the globalizing cultures of the twenty-first century.

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