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Osofisan's *Thunder-King* and the Recreation of Ladipo's Sango

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University of Ibadan, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Adaptation as a literary art in its entirety has been described as a mimetic art. The enterprise of reshaping and recreating a text, context and co-text from its original form to suit a new context, space, time or culture is the other element of adaptation which could take on the inter or intra cultural regalia. Femi Osofisan's folio includes dynamic inter and intra cultural adaptations; most of which have been studied across theatrical and critical contexts. This study examines his re-creative engagement of the Yoruba Thunder God, Sango, a character magically transformed from Yoruba history and legend into the contemporary theatrical life in Duro Ladipo's *Oba Ko So*. This study examines the demystification of the Thunder God and his queens, who are also prominent deities among the Yoruba pantheon. It comparatively examines the gaps Osofisan's *Many Colours Make a Thunder-King* fills along the observable and discernable convergence and divergence in the sinews of adaptation evident in the dynamic adaptation of characterology, thematic centring, plot structure and form in both plays. The triggers of Osofisan's exploration and craft are intriguing as he celebrates and interrogates existing texts and philosophies and, in this case, extending the philosophical, historical as well as gender related arguments in his recreation of the Thunder God and his queens.

Introduction

I begin this paper with reference to a tribute given by Femi Osofisan at a memorial symposium held in Duro Ladipo's honour in 1998. His insightful opening remarks were a character portraiture of Duro Ladipo who personified the Thunder God. According to Osofisan:

I remember the figure I saw on stage a few times – a tall, heavily bearded fellow with a leonie head and fiery eyes; a magnetic presence. He was, in short, just the image of the character he played on stage; the incarnation of Sango himself...the manner of his death did not surprise me. It was... most appropriate to his fabulous image, that he should leave on a night shaken by thunders and shredded by lightning (Osofisan 2001:171-172).

Before proceeding into the argument and thesis of this paper, I wish to further reveal the confessed source and dominant influence of Osofisan's *Many Colours Make a Thunder-King*. Osofisan in his tribute spoke of Sango, the god whom Ladipo had demystified. Osofisan noted that while the play had shown the grandeur and the humanity of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder, it had left some issues unresolved and several questions unanswered. Osofisan at the next best opportunity had responded to these issues as an artist. In his words "Oba Ko So was... the scaffolding around which my story constructed its own fresh identity" (174). Convinced that no reading of Sango's legend can be done without reference to Duro Ladipo's *Oba Ko So*, he sets out to raise and answer questions and fill gaps about the household of Sango, his wives; the prominent ones, the quiet lives they seemed to live before they became Sango's wives which he presumes may have been borne out of gender manipulation. He also chooses to resolve the issues that surround the dramatic transmogrification of Sango and his deification.

The Art of Adaptation

Eddie Iji describes adaptation as a mimetic art. The writer's ability to reshape and recreate a text and context of a text, to adopt, accommodate new ideas, extend concepts, meanings, space, time and to explicate upon culture and in its entirety, makes adaptation peculiar as well as unique. According to Iji (2006: 94-95), "The need and desire for adaptation can be seen from the demands, to recondition the original text to suit the ideological, philosophical and socio-political new waves in time and space." Yerima corroborates Iji's posture, though the logic and order of his argument are not as sequential. In his view the onus is on the playwright adapting the play to

make choices on the following: theme(s); for the infusion of his vision, the extent of the infusion of his vision, the extent to which he will infuse the modification and or rearrangements. However, both Iji and Yerima agree that there must be a stronger factor, a sort of fascination that draws a playwright to another playwright and his work to inspire an adaptation, which Osofisan alludes to in his tribute.

Yerima from his view maintains that:

Choice in adaptation can be seen as the interest or 'likeness' or even 'fondness' for an older playwright's work. It is this choice of a playwright and his works that allows the adapting playwright to further choose which of the playwrights' ideas he intends to adapt... Sometimes, playwrights intending to adapt much older plays, choose such plays in order to update them (Yerima, 2003:120).

This in essence implies that the style, themes, titles, dramatic tools or devices and characterisation are adapted, adopted or reinvented according to the whim or fancy of the adapting playwright. Van Weyenberg (2013) further lends the term 'adaptation' a more effective way to examine dramas written by African playwrights who engage ancient Greek tragedy as Osofisan and others have done. Van Weyenberg's posture is conditioned because it is apparent that the "pre-text is itself a changing object" (2013: xxii); hence the evolution and need for re-interpretation in a space that requires new ideas and interventions. The dynamic adjustment of the character delineation, plot, structure, and thematic focus, such as tragedy to tragedy, comedy to comedy and so forth is what Iji (2006) describes as the sinews of adaptation and these also encapsulate genres, forms, playwright's outlook among others. Osofisan himself un-riddles us in his inaugural lecture when he writes:

No wonder then: those old plays speak no longer to present desperation... Why did the laudable mechanics of that first generation's dramaturgy turn so suddenly... into what should be the noon time of its parturition, to blunted tools? Why did the innovative edge of the scripts grow blunt, powerless against the new weight of pain in the air? (1997: 21)

One understanding of the social relevance and significance of this statement is that his task is primarily to ensure that the pretexts and the adaptation continue to live and serve their didactic purposes.

Invariably, the degree of originality, the extent to which original sources of the adaptation are engaged or adopted including, history to opera, opera to drama as we have in the modifications of the Sango story sum up what Adelugba and his associates accomplished with adaptation of Moliere's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*. The grandly executed enterprise, *That Scoundrel Suberu*, necessitated reworking the "script, directing, acting, scenery, lightering, properties, make-up, costumes, sound..." (Adelugba, 1964:46) as well as transforming the production of the play into an itinerant country wide tour.

Therefore, for the adaptation of a play to be successful in a different location from the setting of the pre-text, several aspects have to be reworked. According to Adelugba in the case of *That Scoundrel Suberu*, "names of the dramatic personae were admirably changed" with *Scapin* becoming *Suberu*, *Zerbinette* becoming *Simbiatu*, *Nerine* as *Maggie*, to mention a few (46). Adelugba identified two forms: adaptation for general purposes and adaptations for cultural purposes.

Adaptation for general purposes ideally saves the audience from the boredom of long speeches, effectively minimizes the scenery and properties, reduces the members of cast as well as basically creates a setting that is theatre-within-the-theatre that removes constraints in production (55). Adaptations for cultural purposes are such that substitutions are accommodated (56). These include: speech forms, speeches, and the use of proverbs, songs or dance, and cultural modifications and, as the case may be, the creation of a different variety.

Femi Osofisan distinguishes himself as a playwright who thinks through other people's plays to query, rationalise, criticise, fill gaps and provide answers to questions that are deliberately left hanging by these playwrights. Osofisan is unapologetic in the manner in which he delights in providing alternative ideologies to the positions and postures of other playwrights. Typical examples of these are his responses to titles and plots such as *No More the Wasted Breed and Another Raft*, to Wole Soyinka's *The Wasted Breed* and J.P. Clark's *The Raft* respectively. The basis for Osofisan's fascination with Sango and Ladipo's *Oba Ko So* is explicit in his statement on his deployment of the Yoruba metaphysical world which is conceived as

ideological and aesthetic. To him,

The myths which crystallise around these cultural avatars, are the narratives which encapsulate, sanctify, promote, and celebrate those fundamentals that have led the society to survival; through its gruelling march through history ... they are the same elements that define humanity as a whole (Olasope 2013: 140).

The characterization of the Thunder King, Igunnu, Oya, Osun and other gods in the Yoruba pantheon do not just reflect his fascination with them but his engagement of the myths and the cultural significance of each in the past and in present realities. The theme, setting, time and space in his *Many Colours Make a Thunder-King* are reflective of his intents and reinvigorate the same.

The Thunder King as a Phenomenon

Storm gods are deities that are archetypically symbolic in many ways with the rainy season. They are venerated because of the supernatural powers that they have for fertility, justice, the nourishment of crops and distinct features that make them scary; lightning, thunders, and thunderbolts. In most societies, if not all, thunder gods are portrayed in diverse manners; the ferocious thundering personality being the most dominant (Brazell, 1997). The archetype of the thunder god whose personality is marked with the image of a larger than life personality that generates lightning and thunder is a universal one. In Greek mythology, it is Zeus, Indra in Hinduism, Thor, son of Odin, in Norse mythology, Perun in ancient Slavic religion, Ikazuchi in early Japanese mythological narratives (Brazell, 1997) and Sango in Yoruba religion; and in the religious varieties of its forms of worship in Africa and in the African Diaspora. Sango in Johnson's account can be either of the kings so named that reigned among the fourth king of the Yorubas (Johnson 2001:34, 149).

Temples, Water, Water Goddesses another Phenomenon

According to Ojo (1966), water is an important element in the geographic environment of Yorubaland. The Yoruba landscape has numerous rivers, lagoons and the sea which are believed to be the abode and place of worship of the deities, gods and goddess that inhabit the water. Irrespective of the

view held about these perspectives these beings were all revered and thought of as deserving of forms of worship and the waters were regarded as their temples. In Ojo's words,

River-spirits were worshiped for a variety of reasons but the most outstanding was to avert the peril continent on crossing the rivers during the wet season when many of them are in flood, inundating and overflowing their banks ... the casualties' were many and awe-inspiring; they suggested one idea in the minds of people: the river -spirit was infuriated and hungry for flesh as a result of which it must be placated, sometimes with human offerings in order to avert more appalling mishaps. For such preventive purposes, rivers were worshiped everywhere in Yorubaland (1966:164).

The goddesses of the longest and largest rivers such as the Ogun, Osun, who are personified in the texts comparatively examined here were naturally worshiped and regarded with great awe.

Oshun, the goddess of the river and the worship of the river also named Osun, centres around Osogbo town, where her most important sanctuaries, which are three in number, are located the it is thought that the founding of the town was regarded as an act of benevolence of the Oshun who permitted the people of Osogbo to become settlers around the deepest pool along the course of the river. To show the extent of reverence, the Osogbo people have for Oshun and her goddess the Oba, King of Oshogbo. (*Ataoja* or in full *Atewogbeja*, fish acceptor) was the arch-priest of the goddess, and crocodiles that are sacred to her and dwell in the waters are dreaded by the inhabitants of Osogbo (Ojo, 1966: 164).

Prior to the advent of modernity, road networks and bridges that minimise contact with waters were non-existent making it extremely important that water gods and goddesses were venerated. Oya, just as Oshun, the goddess of River Niger, was the outstanding river deity worshiped in the Northern Part of Yoruba land. The Niger bounding the former Yoruba country to the north-east, gave it further relevance and significance geologically and in placatory worship. She is briefly mentioned in Johnson's account as Alaafin Sango's "beloved wife" (34) and "favourite wife" (152) the Sango myth and his fondness of her added to the mythical

association the river enjoys. It also is a dominant reason for the high worship and honour accorded the river throughout Yorubaland. It is instructive that most of the earlier writings especially Johnson's privileged the gods in comparison with the goddesses.

Duro Ladipo's distinctly historical plays made his work to stand out among the operatic tradition to which he belonged and *Oba Ko So* was the play that defined his understanding and translation of the Yoruba history into historical drama. Ladipo's source was the Samuel Johnson *The History of the Yorubas* which is an encyclopaedia of the origin, early history, origin of tribes, manners and customs of the Yoruba; details of the lives and exploits of mythological kings and deified heroes also regarded as the founders of the Yoruba nation are also recorded in these works. Without doubt tales of mythological beings as well as mythical kings and the tales of legendary warlords influenced Ladipo's historical plays.

Duro Ladipo's *Oba Ko So*

Alaafin Sàngó is the central character of Ladipo's *Oba Ko So*. *Alaafin Sàngó* is portrayed as a king that possesses supernatural powers and who enjoys the awe-stricken company and adulation of his subjects. *Oba Ko So* is marked with intrigues that spring up from Oya's counsel and which in the final analysis is responsible for the crisis and rebellion *Alaafin Sàngó* suffers in his dealings with his legendary warlords: Gbòónkàà and Tìmì.

Alaafin Sàngó, provoked to wrath by Gbòónkàà after the unfortunate duel that led to Tìmì's death, uses his supernatural ability to emit fire and destroys his people and members of his family in its stead. He proceeds on exile and decides to commit suicide after his favourite wife and Queen Oya deserts him. Ladipo in a sweep deifies *Alaafin Sàngó* and his intention as one reads. It plays on the cathartic effect of his death on his audience. He becomes a deity worshipped by the Yoruba people. Ladipo creates a scenario that accommodates his veneration right on the stage. His voice is heard and he instructs his people to worship him and they do and despite his death say he did not hang.

Ladipo's portrait of Sàngó is in what other characters particularly his wives and praise singers say about him. We are told that, he has an overwhelming personality: comely, clear-eyed, with ruddy, puffed out cheeks, elegant and graceful in his movements (1972:3). He is described as a masquerade that has capacity to emit fire from his mouth. He also handles

the unruly and immodest with ease. Oya, and Sàngó's other wives are portrayed to be on different pedestals. While Oya has the status of the queen and advisor *Alaafin* Sàngó's other wives only feature as the *akunyungbaa* (wives of the king of Oyo who make melody in his palace) who sing Sàngó's praises (Ajayi, 1989).

Osofisan, Adaptation and *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*

In Many Colours Make the Thunder-King, Osofisan again, does what Biodun Jeyifo says makes his adaptation unique and, to a large extent, original. Here he adapts a characterological style that gives life and humanity to the gods, goddesses, the mystical and the legendary figures. He creates Igunnun and casts him as a story teller who prods the riddle that gives an inkling into what Sàngó's quest is. This is in sharp contrast to Ladipo's opening, where Sàngó is eulogised by the Eunuch and his wives. Igunnun is the storyteller, the archetypal mentor who guides and protects Sàngó on his journeys as a quester.

This opening distinctly separates the structure as well as execution of the plot from Ladipo's. Here the deliberateness with which Osofisan removes constraints on stage and creates an interactive audience-actor setting comes to the fore (Abubakar 2009).

Igunnu therefore sets the pace with a riddle:

Igunnu: No man should marry a river says our fore fathers (10)

Igunnu: Why should a man never marry a river? (11)

Songleader: But this your new hand shake, it's like a fist

Igunnu, we do not follow your riddle!

Why should a man even think of marrying a river? (12)

Igunnu: My friends, but the answer is simple:

If a man a man marries a river, then

He must also bring in a forest as her co-wife! (13)

To dispel the danger of an early death Igunnun tells his audience

'... he must go to the mountain and ask for her hand! He must take the mountain as his third wife or he will never know peace again in his life! (13)

The members of cast include Sango, which is deliberately spelt Shango, his war lords Gboonkaa, Timi. Osofisan includes other characters found within the Yoruba pantheon Alagemo, Aroni, father of Osun and Eshu, among others. The portrait of Shango as the archetypal quester is also in contrast to

the personality of Ladipo's Sango, who is a revered king. Osofisan's Sango is agile, active; he goes hunting seeking divination from Ifa, seeking his mentor, seeking his wives, hunting for animals desperate to assert himself until he finds Ifa who tells him... the child who does not surpass his father remains a child! Ifa then counsels him to "...marry a river!..." (16) As preposterous as it seems he is, he troubled and puzzled and yet decides to take up the challenge.

Shango: Marry a river!

How does a man take a river for a wife?

He was mocking me! How

Do you couple a mortal body and a body flowing water? (18)

In spite of the Shango improbability of the quest, he decides to rise to the occasion

...I Shango, I am king!

Today I will take up the challenge!

I will marry a river! (19)

Shango resolves the first task and Alagemo who transforms from the personality, Igunnu leads Sango on his quest. Mate selection is a recurrent theme in literary writings. However, in the plot of Ladipo's *Oba Ko So*, the king was already in possession of Oya, his queen and his other wives. In Osofisan's *Thunder King*, Oya in her sub-aquatic palace lies in wait for a suitor for seven years. She ends her lamentation on her desire to be married on this note:

I need a man, such as father was to my mother, who will always be there as a companion. I need a husband, Irete, and I shall not wait forever! (Osofisan, 2003: 23)

Shango seeks Igunnu, who transforms to Alagemo and they proceed on the quest. The quest leads to Oya's sub-aquatic palace, where they successfully woo her. Scene three is the memorable celebration of Shango and Oya's wedding. The union was in many ways a resounding success: the kingdom enjoyed peace, wealth, stability and unequalled fame.

There is also that uniqueness in the "scaffolding" of the conflict in Osofisan's *Thunder King*. The intrigues are in levels of complication: the jealous queen who is unfortunately barren who makes a promise to the tree spirits in order to have a child. She also connives with the war

mongers, Shango's war lords to rid her husband of his most powerful ally. Finally, he sets up Alagemo and Osun to the detriment of her entire household. Ladipo's conflict is essentially that of controlling the warlords and taking his wife's counsel.

Osofisan's thematic centring lies in Sàngó seeking to be greater than his father Oronmiyon. He seeks Igunnun to know what he must do to surpass his father. Igunnun who has been waiting for this adventure transforms into Alagemo and accompanies Sàngó on his quest. Osofisan here portrays a king on a mission and a quest to be a man. Osofisan creates rounded characters of the women: the archetypal villain and the heroine. His portrait of Oya also supports this thematic centring that of a woman of affluence waiting to be married off with wealth as condition. He meets the expected requirement with the help of Alagemo and a flamboyant marriage ceremony is held while for Osun, Sàngó has to recover her voice which had being taken away by supernatural beings. He also meets this requirement and wins the hand of Osun and half of her father's kingdom.

The intrigues which are also thematic begin when Oya is unable to have children because she has opted for riches and Osun is fruitfulness personified. Jealousy becomes the overriding theme at this point. Oya is portrayed as being jealous of the attention and love Osun receives while she becomes a nagging and unfriendly woman who drives Sàngó even further away. She thereafter tries to seduce Alagemo who turns down her overtures. She is eventually helped by Osun and gets pregnant through the help of tree spirits. No sooner than this she begins to plan to get rid of Osun as well as Alagemo to ensure Sàngó never takes third wife. This works to the peril of all and disaster ensues because Sàngó acts irrationally and pays for it. The fire that consumes Osun and Oya's child and the landscape Osofisan paints is not Ladipo's fire from the supernatural Sàngó. Osofisan's Sàngó still hangs and transmogrifies and is worshiped for reasons different from Ladipo's Sango.

Other minor characters we encounter in this work are the personified forms of Alapandede and the other birds from which Osun's voice is recovered. Osofisan extends the plot structure, setting and form in a most arresting manner. The first prank Oya plays is taken from the tale of *Oba M'oro*. This plays out exactly as we have it in Yoruba history and as Ladipo engages it in his play *Oba M'oro*. Thrice the Osofisan style: opening, storytelling and engagement of the audience are introduced.

The Demystification of the Thunder God and his Queens

Oya as portrayed in Osofisan's *Many Colours make a Thunder King* is the precocious mischief maker who connives with the war lords. This is in sharp contrast to Ladipo's portrait of Oya as a queen who is concerned about the well being of the subject and comes up with a strategy to pacify the warmongers who were making the city ungovernable and the subjects miserable. Weary of Alagemo's supernatural intervention that may procure Shango a third wife, Osofisan's Oya categorically states:

Alagemo, that third service you claim you owe Shango!
It will no longer be required. The palace, and the town,
have decided. Two queens are enough for the king! ...
Shango has married the river, and wedded a mighty
forest. All thanks to you ... Now it is time for him to
return to the serious affairs of state (Osofisan 2003: 37).

It is an expression of a desire well conceived and supported by her collaborators who strengthen the argument:

Timi: Our neighbours have begun to encroach on our lands. And the Hausa troops, we hear, will soon be marching southward to attack us. War is what nourishes our people.

Gbonka: The king ... has neglected too much the affairs of state (Osofisan 2003:37-38).

Osofisan in this scene lends Oya (and even Osun) an individualist and feminist attribute. Oya believes because Osun bears children for Shango and she is naturally jealous and imagines she is valued while her infertility makes her to be less preferred. Shango shrewdly notes that Oya exhibits traits of jealousy before Osun is wooed. Osofisan makes an absolute statement by what she says to Ireti, her lady-in-waiting and her insistence in the presence of the warlords.

Oya: Your services are no longer required. The king does not need a third wife (Osofisan 2003: 38).

When Osun seems to concede to Alagemo's logic she over rules '...No Osun, don't listen to his nonsense! Why are we here, you and me?... we are enough propitiation for mother earth! (Osofisan 2003: 39).

She is further incensed by Alagemo's adulation of the would-be-third-wife (mountain). He categorically states that Shango needs to complete the

circle because bringing the mountain in is crucial to their survival. Her position geologically makes her senior sister to the river, because the waters begin from the mountain springs and because the forest thrives from the mountain ores. Her resolve to get rid of Alagemo becomes firm because Shango in her presence declares his readiness to conquer and wed the mountain. Her villainous attributes lead to her destruction; the destruction of her family.

Conclusion

Osofisan extends philosophical, historical as well as gender related arguments in this dramatic enterprise. Even though he claims that when one reads the work one "...will discover that the spirit of Duro Ladipo breathes through every page of it!" One sees a new ideology emerge with the plausible "many colours of Alagemo that made the Thunder King."

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