

An Interface of the Old and the New: Creating the Conscious Nigerian via an Interrogation of Sophocles' *Antigone* in Osofisan's *Tegonni*.

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Abstract

Postcolonial dramatists from Nigeria betray an affection for classical drama. Many classical plays have been adapted by some of the most renowned African playwrights such as Soyinka, Walcott and Aidoo among others. Some argue that there is some kind of affinity in the two traditions especially in the role of supernatural forces/gods in the affairs of men; as well as courts and kings in both traditions. Femi Osofisan, whose play this paper explores, has also been attracted to classical drama; but he seems to critique the two worlds – of classical Athens and traditional Africa – which many African adaptations have previously embraced. In his adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (titled *Tegonni*) Osofisan subverts the Athenian world of Greek mythology to make complex arguments about the relations between colonial and postcolonial, British and Yoruba on one hand, and the military jackboots of Abacha's era and the citizenry on the other. This essay seeks to explore the playwright's use of the existing complexities and contradictions in his cultural environment in creating an awakening of the consciousness of the average Nigerian during the period in question.

I

Critical study of ancient dramatic texts aims at educating among other things, possible cultural kinship between the world of antiquity and the modern. Such studies draw attention to the way in which antiquity can function as agent and catalyst in the process of cultural change and exchange. In line with the above, Greek tragedy has been adapted and interpreted in several forms globally. Indeed, African dramatists have found an affinity between Europe and the continent, in terms of cultural diversity and specificity, prompting Hardwick¹ (2003) to observe that "Greek drama in performance... acts as an agent of transformation enabling us to experience simultaneously and in tension, different cultural perspectives and aspects of being. This capacity is partly a function of Greek drama's creation of critical distance between ancient and modern, early modern, modern and post modern traditions." This transformation by the way is a manifestation of the ways in which modern performance is structured, especially in the adaptation and staging of Greek tragedy by African dramatists, and in this case Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni*. There is a parallel between Greek theater and the so called 'sacred spaces' of performance. Osofisan's adaptation of the Greek text

¹ Hardwick, L.2003b, culled from *Coco Ferguson The 'Tragic' Worlds Of Sophocles And Soyinka New Voices in Classical Reception Studies Issue2 (2007)*
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interacts with the dramatist's own cultural and mythic backdrop, and his performance culture. This aptly situates his works as 'intercultural'² (Allain.2002.9).

Osofisan employs such performance tactics as cross-cultural casting, multilingual performance and international collaboration in realization of his 'parody of difference.' (Coco ferguson.2007.1). His technique of casting blurs both cultural and temporal boundaries; (this is particularly evident in *Tegonni* where *Antigone* and her retinue, raced through time and space to be part of Tegonni's marriage procession) integrating traditional consciousness into modern sensibilities, continuing and re-inventing historical

traces. In *Tegonni*, Osofisan navigates between 'sameness and difference'³. The success of his adaptation is based on dialectics between his performance and modern audience, as they interact with the text being adapted. Okoye (2008:10) posits that Osofisan's dramaturgy does two things at the same time, in one fell swoop, accepting and rejecting/ subverting an existing myth; in this case the myth of *Antigone* in his 'parody of difference' in *Tegonni*.

As Hardwick (2004:219-42) further observes, "classical referents are a sign of a double consciousness which recognises both the assimilationist impact of classical texts on colonised peoples ... and also the capacity of writers to use the texts and referents to create new works." Their impact transforms "double consciousness into a more pluralistic and multi layered awareness."

II

Every age produces its own dramatists, writers, and every practicing playwright works from a basis of some sort of practicality; especially when the audience's preconceptions are known to the playwright and whose responses are sometimes predictable. Osofisan arguably one of the frontliners in the world of Nigerian dramatic arts, is known for his progressive stance against oppression and tyranny. His works have also betrayed sympathy for an advocacy of social change.

² Allain, 2002.9 states, "there are separate voices at distinct cultural positions, without integration"

³ Osofisan repeats an existing myth, even as he is objecting to it; e.g. the myth of *Moremi*. Likewise in the *Tegonni*, in his use of the Proscenium 'space'; he breaks the myth of the 'fourth wall' between stage and the audience in a sense, and reaches out to the audience, in order to keep the African participatory environment. Thus, the audience is helped to demystify the 'sacred spaces' of western theatrical performance. See the Prologue, *Tegonni*, an African *Antigone*, p.13-14.

The fabric of his plays and other writings is usually critical of the disequilibrium in the social structure, thus always creating a conflict between the old and the new; an alternative tradition in popular literature, he says should be a model for a new society. Incidentally, most critics are hard put to determine his philosophical bent. Some writers like Niyi Osundare, see his works as having tendencies ranging from liberal through the radical to the revolutionary. But others dismiss this reading of ambiguity, perceiving rather a Marxist leaning in the conflicts that characterize his plays.

As ideological aesthete, Osofisan
constantly experiments with forms and
enduring artistry to embody humanistic
social, philosophy. It is this search for forms
that has taken him to the primordial sources of
African indigenous performative provenance.” (210)

This revolutionary tendency in Osofisan, and his advocacy for social transformation has in the words of Olu Obafemi,⁴ led the playwright to search for forms in the primal roots of African traditional mores and lore. However, his search for form is not only limited to the African traditional provenance, but also extends to the Greek world of Antiquity.

Osofisan thus exhibits his creative ingenuity in the reconstruction of history, myth and consensus opinion in an attempt to create a more acceptable paradigm for the society.

In general, adaptations of Sophocles’s *Antigone* have always brought to the fore the problems of political freedom and Human rights. This is more so, since Sophocles’s original work is steeped in political controversies. Mirroring the tragedy and politics of 5th century Athens, *Antigone* brings to the fore the issues of political despotism and possible ways of resistance. The two sons of Oedipus, Polyneices and Eteocles, kill each other in battle, one in defense of, while the latter against the state. However, Creon, the current king decrees against burying the traitor, an order that draws the ire of Antigone their sister, who vows to intern the corpse of Polyneices her brother.

Antigone’s rather brazen defiance of the tyrannical decree of Creon appears a protest by Sophocles of the abrasiveness of the gods. Torrance (1965:300) sees *Antigone* as concealing vast potentialities of unreason and chaos. This tendency in sophoclean tragedies has influenced Osofisan’s subversion of existing myth and history⁵.

⁴ See, *The Drama of Osofisan* p.210.

⁵ An instance of two of his plays would suffice to illustrate Obafemi’s assertion: in *The Chattering and the Song*, a play within a play, he revised the history of the old Oyo Empire during the Obaship of Alafin Abiodun; a peaceful and benevolent king whom he portrays as a dictator. Latoye a rebel leader, challenges the Alafin’s style of ruling and is eventually vindicated, thus Osofisan proves that even in contemporary times dictatorships can be toppled via the radical stance of a citizen.

The playwright is very much at home with his audience's preconceptions, especially their socio-cultural and political nuances. There is a preconception with the fate of humanity in the universe, especially the downtrodden. Most critics of his works, have identified in the playwright an unrelenting concern for the improvement of man and his environment through knowledge, freedom from oppression whether divinely conceived or man made⁶.

III

Sophocles was a believer in supernatural forces, which was the traditional in Greek thought. And in his characterization and plot he makes use of the ambiguities of religious language to express his deepest insights. In most of his plays, Sophocles paints powerful scenes of forces outside man's control:

Sophocles's men and women believe in
gods who are the source of everything
in life, evil as well as good. The universe
controlled by these gods is involved in a
constant process of rhythmic change, but
they themselves are outside time. (Easterling.1997: 305)

Sophocles raises fundamental issues in the relationship of man and the gods; man and his society: men worship the gods, yet cannot expect unmixed blessings; both pain and happiness. The only sure event in any human future is death; 'tomorrow does not exist until today is safely past' (trach.943ff.)⁷. Being pious must include respecting divine laws which are the basis for the human society; right behaviour towards others and proper worship of the gods.

For her defiance, Creon imprisons her in a rocky tomb and leaves her to die. Later when Creon decides to release her at the prompting of the seer-Teiresias, he finds she has hanged herself.

The play is not simply a conflict between Creon and Antigone. But in actual fact, it is more like a classical statement on the struggle between the law of individual consciences and the central power of the state. In the fifth century Greece, such display of familial commitment is more than a private code of conduct; such challenge to constituted authority had serious political undertones. But some commentators like Webster (1936) perceive *Antigone* as a drama of the individual conscience,

⁶In another instance, the dramatist re-invents the myth of the legendary *Moremi*, in *Morountodun*, where the heroine *Titunbi*, a noble lady, transfers her sympathy for the government's oppressive tax laws to the side of the oppressed peasant farmers. Here the dramatist "deploys the energies of the past to defeat the forces of exploitation, oppression and injustice of the present society."

⁷Sophocles' women of Trachis, lines 943ff.

inspired with the categorical moral imperative in rebellion against the arbitrary, hence, immoral dictum of the despotic state, represented by Creon. Antigone is the standard bearer of the human conscience against the cruelty and inhumanity of established authority. But this kind of statement apparently betrays a post-renaissance view of the state and the individual; of signing a 'social contract'. How consistent is this view with Sophocles's disposition and perception of the state and the individual? For instance, was the polis and all it embodied in Creon's kingship so simplistic in the view of his audience at the great Dionysia in 441B.C? Was it just a matter of bowing to ancient customs and traditions presumed to have been set down by the gods?

Perhaps, it is necessary to peer a little more into the mindset of the Athenians and by extension Sophocles.' Athens of the fifth century saw the individual as a political animal, and so his highest good, i.e. *somum bonum*, was tied up with that of the good of the polis. This is the pervasive theme in Plato's uncompromising idealism in the *Republic* and Aristotle's' pragmatic perception of the state in the *Politics*. It becomes for the individual the first principle and point of departure in any of his dealings with the state. "The worst sin he could commit is that which introduces disruption, disharmony and corruption into the sacred precincts of the Polis" (Ferguson: 1975.43) And the penalty for this kind of sin, as recommended by both Plato and Aristotle, is not even death, but "Statelessness", i.e. exile. This is what we perceive repeatedly in his seven extant tragedies; whose plots hinge on a tripartite principle that all men seek justice/dike: harmony and proportionality in human relations; obedience to the harmonious and proportionate laws of the gods; and harmony and proportion in the relations of the self with the self. However, the focus of this paper is not just the ethical and moral issues of Sophocles' world, or the question of individual 'conscience,' whether in private or public matters, per se, nevertheless, there is a need to examine to what extent the individual's psyche has been awakened by the dramaturgy of Osofisan.

IV

It takes a measure of ingenuity to transmute a fifth century long Greek myth into the 19th century Nigerian socio-political atmosphere, at the dawn of imperialism. Osofisan has a peculiar conception of form, stylistic innovations and manner of organizing his plays that intrigues the reader. In his words, "I am always experimenting with form. I am discovering forms, some of which are already in use....I pay great attention to form, to manner... these have been my guiding principles in all my works".(The drama of Osofisan.201:5).

In his treatment of *Tegonni*, the playwright brings to bear on the form of *Antigone*, his principle of reconstructing history and mythology, using to the fullest the African dramatic mode of Song and Dance, not by any less costuming. At all events, the structure of Osofisan's plays manifests his

artistic goals and the desired effect on the audience. And in this particular instance, (that of the Tegonni) his goal is a subversion /re-invention of history and myth of the Greek Antigone by Sophocles; in order “to re-examine the issue of race relations and personal courage”; and in particular, a look at political freedom against the backdrop of military jackboots in governance (Osofisan.1999:11); at the end of which he expects an improved conscious renewal of the individual and the society as a whole.

The story of Tegonni, reads just like Antigone’s; a strong-willed, fire-spitting princess of the royal house of Oke-Osun, a town in south-western Nigeria; whose brothers hacked each other to death over their father’s vacant throne. One of the brothers is given an honorable burial by the authorities, while the eldest prince Oyekunle, the dissident is left unburied, on the orders of Lt. Gen. Carter-Ross, the British governor of the colony of Nigeria. Tegonni goes ahead and buries her brother in flagrant disregard for the orders of the white Governor.

This incidentally, is where the similarity with *Antigone* ends. The remainder of the play betrays Osofisan’s ingenious contrivance to satisfy his goal, referred to earlier; a deliberate configuration of conflicts, occasioned through a clashing of the binary opposites– a cultural interface. While Antigone’s clash with Creon in Sophocles merely lends itself to ethico-religious hermeneutics; in which both characters functioned within the Athenian divinely ordained cultural and philosophical playing field; for Osofisan in *Tegonni*, the conflict/ clash reveals an underlying fundamentalism: that of racial and cultural supremacy, thus bringing to the fore, the struggle for power between the individual and the state on one hand and much closer home, considering the time and circumstance of writing, the power struggle between the recalcitrant jackboots and the ‘pro-democracy movements.’ Several arguments have been proffered as Osofisan’s reason for *Tegonni*; nonetheless, it is obvious that the repressive political atmosphere in Nigeria at the time was foremost on the playwright’s mind– the crisis precipitated by military dictatorship and of annulled elections.(Raji.2005:143)

Under the circumstances, it was apparent that whatever treatment and style to be adopted for such crucial dramaturgy would be that which takes into cognizance the situation of his audience. Indeed there was need for them to be alienated from the action on stage in order to see the events in a new and more relevant light. Hence the traditional African theatrical mode, which blends with the Brechtian epic theatre, would serve his purpose. And throughout the play, one finds elements of both genres generously deployed. This can even be seen from the improvisation of the opening scene which aptly portrays an African atmosphere, where Osofisan makes a skillful use of Song and Dance, the Drum and Miming. The atmosphere is one that reinforces the ritualistic and festive aesthetics of the African theatre (Ogundeji.2000:12). Yemoja, the water goddess, is decked out in

resplendent regalia, in a decorated boat, and her female attendants are also richly dressed, with mirrors; “They and the boatmen swing and sway to a song which, however, we do not hear at first”.

Eki Orekelewa	Greetings to the Beautiful one
-Yemoja lau erebe!	-Honour to Yemoja!
Ileke fomo olola	Beads for the child of the rich
Yemoja lau erebe!	Honour to Yemoja! (17)

An atmosphere of informality pervades the play, right from the prologue where the director of the play engages the none-ethnic cast in finalizing the role-playing, before the already seated audience:

D: I need white actors. For the roles
of Governor, his ADC, and D.O.
A: well how about me?...
A: A house of dreams! So, just a
little make up, I announce my role
to the audience, and we are set to go!
D: And you think that will work?
A: of course! All is illusion here,
and everyone in the audience has
come to play his or her own part in a
dream. And dreams are where anything
can happen. So give me a costume,
anything to mark me out from the
others, and this evening’s dream begins(13-14)

This informality tends to give away, as it were, the trade secret, baring all out in the open. But then it is a technique that is refreshing to the audience, as it captures and confers on them a feeling of being part and parcel of the action on stage. The audience is made to see the atmosphere of traditional African moonlight folklore where every one is a participant. There is nothing of the remoteness of action which one finds in Sophocles, where a major part of the action is narrated to audience by the Chorus or Messenger. The unique style of introducing Antigone, a relic of Greek history and myth from the past, through a flashback, further enhances the flow of the theme:

A: Antigone (*coming forward*) Greetings.
Has the play started?
F: Who are you, and where
do you come from?
A: My name is Antigone... it is a very long
way, through the channels of history.
The road at many points is unsafe. (25)

Yemoja was really Antigone and vice-versa! She is apotheosized– African goddess. The informality and freshness of this technique, leaves the audience/ first time reader of the work agape! It is like in the movies where anything can happen in a photo-trick. Besides, Osofisan here attempts to bring to

light some hidden issues about the ancient Greek myth of Antigone. There is simultaneity in the establishment of the realism and surrealistic effect of the play on the audience through the use of this technique. The audience hears for the first time the prospect of Tegonni's death from Antigone; but it is a dramatic irony, at once tragic as it is anti-climactic, that the heroine is preparing for her wedding and her death. "A: Tegonni! Where's she? / Y: Back in the compound there. Preparing for her wedding. / A: And for her death?" (26) This treatment is uniquely vintage Osofisan, where there is a heightening of the tragic note and combining it with the festive. In the third scene, where Greek myth meets its Yoruba/African counterpart, the conversation that ensues is interesting, *because* it not only reveals the playwright's skilful treatment of the plot, but also brings before the reader/audience certain useful information concerning the play:

A: Antigone belongs to several incarnations
K: But you... you're black!
A: And so? What colour is mythology? (26-27)

Osofisan reveals Sophocles' Antigone for what it is— a 'metaphor'. Thus she represents the struggle over the ages against Tyranny. And this theme is quite aptly woven into the plot of *Tegonni*: "we are metaphors. We always come in the colour and the shape of your imagination." (27) The playwright here combines metaphor with symbolism; 'colour and shape' of the reader's/ audience imagination. Since mythology has no 'colour and shape,' *per se*, it behooves the audience to bring meaning to bear, via its own interpretation of respective myths. However, in this instance, the audience may see Tegonni purely in terms of the struggle against the tyrannical forces of the black military jackboots, who replaced the racial bigot, Carter-Ross of the British colonial office and his men.

Every ritual festival performance has a mythological narrative. In order to do this with success, the ritual performance must be rooted in the culture of the people and their musical art. (Ogundeji: 2000:5). This perhaps informs the copuity of Song and Dance in Osofisan's *Tegonni*. Indeed this was the condition for extending an invitation to Antigone and her crew, to join Tegonni's bridal procession; "well, join us. As long as you can sing and dance." (27) Right from the prologue as indicated above, Osofisan uses his traditional African dramatic device, of songs and dance, even riddles and proverbs; "as comments on the action on stage and to involve the audience emotionally, so that they can appreciate the views being expressed (The drama of Osofisan: 215:8). For instance, the elders who met Gomina, on behalf of Tegonni use parables among other oral devices; in communicating with him : "well *Gomina*, as our people say, it is because it rains that the roof is placed above the house" (84ff) . This is somewhat similar to the role of the chorus in Sophocles.

There is a blending of the gloomy and the merry; before scene (6), which featured merry making by Tegonni and her bridal procession, there was the gloomy scene (5) where the soldiers are guarding the corpse of Prince Oyekunle. But this is over shadowed by the heralding drums and songs of the group of richly dressed young women, in high spirits, led by the talking drum- a uniquely African performative device, as the Drum Chorus. The melodious tune goes:

Jigi ati pauda mirror and powder
 Ni mo ko rode o i'm carrying with me
 Awure oja Osun the magic wrap of fertility
 Ni mo ro waye! Came to the world with me!

Tegonni d'adelebo tegonni becomes a wife
 O foko saso clothed herself with a husband
 Iyawo ni pauda for wives are like make up
 Oko ni jigi! and husbands are the glass! (35)

It is a long scene of merry-making– songs and dancing, with songs highlighting Tegonni's royal antecedent, and the story of how she met her husband to-be, Captain Allan Jones. The Masquerade, an important aspect of traditional African dramatic performance, is effectively used in *Tegonni* to bolster the confidence of the audience and show cultural superiority, while getting the better of the intruders. These masquerades supposedly spirits of ancestors and are used in ritual celebration. According to Ogundeji (2000:7) masquerades may be used for purposes other than sacred or cultic. They may be used for political, judicial and entertainment purposes. Thus the presence of masquerades in the scene (20), would appear to fulfill some of the functions mentioned above. The playwright is in effect making a political statement about the superiority of the masks or *egungun*–representatives of the gods/goddesses, and are possibly stronger than the Whiteman's guns.

Ist sol. <i>Egungun!</i> Na juju, Serge!	It is a native charm, Sergeant
They want take juju fight us!	They intend to fight with it.
3 rd Sol: they no fit! They know say we get gun!	They can't! They know we have guns
Chief-...take your guns!	Chief... take hold of your guns
2 nd Sol. Guns! Look as forest dey come with dem!	Guns! The forest is filled with them.
Make we dey go Serge!	Lets go Sergeant
Ist Sol. Yes! Make we run quick-quick!	Yes! Lets make haste!
Guns no go fit fight juju, Serge!	You can't fight a man with charms with a gun (109)

Eventually even the 'Serge' that had a semblance of courage had to abandon his gun and run for dear life-(alas! it was only three women in masks) But the technique worked, and the message is put across through Faderera:... "These soldiers think they're tough, but we too, we have our ways!" (110)

thematic goals embedded in his deliberate linguistic variations; the language of the soldiers mirror a militarized society, one that aptly situates his contemporary Nigeria. The same can be said of the other levels of language and their personages.

After a long and arduous dialectics, a truce is brokered between Gomina and Tegonni. In contriving the cataclysmic events of the play's finale, Osofisan ingeniously distances it from the Greek original. The different forces at play are gathered at the village square, under the watchful eyes of the audience; whereas in *Antigone* we are served the outcome of the events of the finale, through the messenger's response to the leader of the Chorus.

Osofisan deliberately makes all take place before our eyes; the spontaneity of the incidence and outcome leaves the audience spellbound.

In the chaos and cacophony of voices a shot is heard and Allan Jones falls; the women suddenly bare their chests, "all smeared with ashes". Chanting:

Eni bosì!	It can't happen!
-ele sele!	No it won't!
Wele dide!	You can't stand!
Woo tii jego	you've swallowed trouble!
Wele bere	you can't bend!
Woo tii jego	you've swallowed trouble!(139)

In the somewhat anti-climactic melee that heralds the end of the play, the audience is left wondering and yet hoping to hear/see Tegonni's voice again. There is a momentary triumph, as the women bearing Tegonni on their shoulders chant in a frenzy:

Eba wa yo	rejoice with us
Eba wa yo sese	rejoice heartily with us
Amunisin	the tyrant
Afikapase	who gives wicked orders
Atisegun re o...	we have conquered him!(140)

This is short-lived: 'suddenly there are gun shots Tegonni tumbles from her side. More shorts and more women fall'. But then, she did 'resurrect,' into history; another version of the Greek *Antigone*, with whom she leaves the stage.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is apparent that Osofisan's ingenious dramaturgy, has not just Africanized the Greek myth, but has opened up whole vistas for this once 'closed' plot. In reconstructing the history

and myth of Antigone in *Tegonni*, he has stretched its hermeneutical possibilities to the 20th century Nigerian/African environment. What with his rather ingenious use of dramatic devices; especially those of the African traditional theatre and the Brechtian epic theatre, both of which share a lot of things in common, to help the audience see the play in its proper perspective.

Particularly, it is against the twin background of racism and authoritarianism' that the dramatist wants us to assess Carter Ross's stance in the crisis in the town. He exhibits all the demeanor of a dictator, all that matters to him is her majesty's authority, and all he believes in are instruments of force, of cohesion. (147). The fate of Oyekunle is instructive of that of a people struggling to determine their own affairs. He was the people's choice, but when this was annulled with impunity, Oyekunle took a decision to fight the injustice. Referring to his action, Tegonni says ironically:

My brother Oyekunle was foolish.
He was not as clever as Adetoro,
who had read the times right.
Otherwise he would have
accepted to collaborate meekly with
our masters, and made the most
for himself, as many among us are doing.(135)

Raji suggests, rather aptly too that these words are at the roots of the crises plaguing contemporary African societies, that of betrayal, of a lack of commitment on the part of the leadership, and an absence of freedom.

Through his demystification technique, he has shown that, we do not need religious or extra-human explanation for our problems; rather with the use of the Brechtian aesthetic technique of demystifying the gods, he is saying that human destiny is man's own responsibility: "He is essentially interested in the liberation of the down-trodden from the shackles of exploitation, plunder, greed and avarice of the elite class in Nigeria" (Obafemi: 1999:5).

Osofisan's dramatic hermeneutics further assumes a universal perspicuity in the story of *Tegonni*, and establishes a cultural interface between the European/ancient Greece and the African Continent. For the latter, this becomes a springboard to combat alienation, and create 'an ideology of relevance.' (Irele.1982:2) There is an urgent need to understand our alienation, and in agreement with Abiola Irele, justifiably explore all forms of scholarship devoted to European culture and western civilization in totality. Alienation, in this view, especially, its positive aspect, is the generative principle of culture, the condition of human development. This would mean that cultures maintain

their dynamism, while benefiting from the transforming values of contact with other civilizations and the consequent attainment of the much desired African regional integration. (35)

Notes

¹Femi Osofisan, "The alternative Tradition: A survey of Nigerian Literature after the war" 1982.

² Ibid. op. cit.

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