Vision of Change in African Drama

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Fémi Òsófisan's Dialectical Reading of History and Politics

By

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Solá Adéyemí

INTRODUCTION

THE DRAMA OF FÉMI ÒSÓFISAN

This book is a study on the development of Fémi Òsófisan as a dramatist in a postcolonial Nigerian setting, and his contribution to world drama. Òsófisan is a dramatist, novelist, poet, and essayist who has written more than seventy-five plays; with more than sixty of them published. This book is not a study of all these plays. Rather, it is an analysis of a selection of his plays and performances of his dramatic work to explore how he exploits his Yorùbá heritage, reading new meanings into mythology and re-writing history to proffer a new direction on social issues.

In Chapter One, I highlight the influence of colonialism and Western drama on the drama of Fémi Òsófisan and locate his work in the areas of post-colonial and African studies. Òsófisan grew up under British colonial influence in Nigeria; his secondary and university education were during the early years of independence. He was also influenced by the cultures of Yorùbá Travelling Theatre, storytelling, rituals, and festivals among the Yorùbá people. Chapter Two offers a comparative critique of the writing of Wolé Sóyínká, Òsófisan's foremost dramatic influence, with that of our playwright, to isolate areas of divergence from the earlier Nigerian literary drama and its pre-occupation with problematising issues along Western criticism. Chapter Three examines Òsófisan plays of the 1970s but also includes two plays written in 1967 and 1968, at the starting point of his writing. Nigerians who became major writers in the 1970s were referred to by the Nigerian press, academics, and critics as 'the angry young men of Nigerian literature' because of their Marxist orientation and because of their commitment to societal change. With University of Ibadan as their base, these writers sought to sensitise the societal psyche, or, in the English rendering of the name of the drama group formed by Òsófisan during this period, Kakaun Sela Kompani, to produce his plays and sensitise the people to a radical political consciousness. Òsófisan also experimented with many dramatic forms during the period.

By the 1980s, Òsófisan's drama began to challenge popular myths and historic facts along socialist maxims. Chapter Four analyses a range of his

work during this decade, the decade before he embarked upon a pan-Africanist quest in his dramaturgy. This quest influenced his interest in writing plays like *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1990), *Tegonni (An African Antigone)* (1994) and *Nkrumah ni!... Africa ni!* (1994), plays that appraise the position of Africa and its leaders in the world stage. This chapter assesses these dramas and their contribution to the debate on post-colonialism and pan-Africanism, and the importance of these concepts in the new age of globalisation, after the collapse of the Cold War structures such as Berlin Wall and the fall of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), and the rise of European Union and African Union. The concluding chapter considers the re-direction of Òsófisan's dramaturgy and the relative importance and relevance of his work to world literature.

CHAPTER ONE

FÉMI ÒSÓFISAN: DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY AND RECONFIGURING HISTORY

Introduction

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and the inauguration of colonial discourse analysis brought into theoretical focus the ways in which Europe has constructed other peoples and cultures as objects of knowledge to further the aims of imperial domination. What Said's analysis of Europe's construction of the Orient brought to the fore was that more than physical conquest, the more profound and lingering effects of colonialism were the *textual* conquest and subjugation by which Europe established a discursive hegemony over the 'other', the colonies and the various cultural manifestations present in the colonised spaces. Whilst Said's work focused on the unmasking of the operations of the European agenda in the Orient, writers and artists from Africa and other parts of the colonised world have always consciously or unconsciously, openly or surreptitiously, challenged this discursive domination by contesting the myths and stereotypes and indeed the image of other peoples as authorised by Europe. In Africa, these challenges have mostly come in the form of novels, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in response to both Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, in the main, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the drama form, they are in the works of Wolé Sóyínká, especially *Dance and the King's Horseman* and the early sketches and skits produced in the 1960s to satirise the New Nigerian political elites to whom he referred as neo-colonialists and political recidivists; and similarly, in *The Blinkards* by the Ghanaian lawyer and writer, William Kobina Esuman-Gwira Sekyi. Additionally, these African writers and artists also challenge the myths and socio-cultural practices of their own people. This challenge – and contestation – has always been part of the history of resistance to slavery, colonialism and domination, and the re-inscription or re-establishment of a collective identity. Beginning with

the narratives of the freed slaves through to the counter-discursive manoeuvres of the négritude movement and lately to the issues surrounding cultural identities and pseudo-religious activities on the terror stage, writers from every part of the colonised world have evolved various strategies for countering European representation of the colonial subject. These counter-discursive gestures, which have been collectively classified under the rubric of the Empire writing back to the *Centre* have become one of the major themes of post-colonial discourse. Bill Ashcroft *et al* (1989) and most post-colonial critics conceive of the centre as located in Europe, in the metropolitan centres of power from which the 'Empire' was created and controlled, the centre being more popularly regarded as a locus of points fixed in the socio-cultural and economic capital of the British empire, London. However, in the works of the Nigerian playwright and dramatist Fémi Òsófisan, the idea of a metropolitan locus in which all power is located is de-centred, and sometimes re-centred. Whilst acknowledging the historical significance of the imperial centre, Fémi Òsófisan sees pockets of power in various kinds of 'Empire' authorised spaces, and the major impetus of his work has been to question and challenge these. For Òsófisan, the Empire is not only the colonial legacy but also the cultural and political heritages of his people. Beginning with *Odùduwà, Don't Go!* (1968) through to *The Discombobulation of a Rookie Patriot* (2014; a re-reading of Chinua Achebe's 1966 novel, *A Man of the People,* 1966), and grounding his vision of change in a dialectical reading and re-reading of history and political discourse, Òsófisan employs and manipulates the various heritages available to him as a post-colonial as well as post-négritude writer to respond to the challenges facing his society, and to scrutinise the practice of art in the post-colonial 'Empire'.

I describe Òsófisan as a post-colonial writer based on Gilbert and Tompkins[1] definition, which argues that post-colonialism, rather than a naïve teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, is an engagement with, and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies. Whilst this definition[2] reinforces the idea proposed by Ashcroft *et al* (1989) that African writers generally continue

[1] Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 1996: 2

[2] My understanding of colonialism as the basis for this study is not limited to the effect of European expansionism in Africa but also includes cultural colonisation by different ethnic groups within Africa. For instance, Ilé-Ifè, Òyó, Ìbàdàn and Fulani, etc. have at one time or the other colonised other ethnic groups in present-day Yorùbáland, in a process which involves subjugation of existing cultural practices and imposition of languages, customs, traditions and social practices.

to privilege the 'centre' by engaging in a kind of counter-discourse, albeit in a subaltern's role, there is another agenda that African writers pursue and which the definition omits to explain. African writers attempt to confront the various problems of underdevelopment, the threat of alienation and, more importantly, the erosion of ethnic identity among the people. Therefore, the world of Òsófisan also includes the oppressive segments of his society – the churches and mosques and other religious establishments, the schools, the multinational companies, and the traditional institutions.

More than being a post-colonial writer, Òsófisan is a post-négritude dramatist whose work has proceeded beyond the rhetoric of Senghorian[3] négritude which responds to the rhetoric of colonial discourse. Négritude was sometimes regarded as a racist philosophy, or, as Jean-Paul Sartre puts it in *Orphée Noire* (1948), an 'anti-racist racism'. However, this concept is opposed to the idea of post-négritudism that seeks to identify with, and to promote African cultures that are under the threat of erasure by colonialism, post-colonialism and other cultural incursions into the African cultural structures, without conversely mystifying the African past. The focus, and the forte, of post-négritudism therefore is the identity problem among Africans who grew up under colonialism and who continue to live in a post-colonial society. Òsófisan's work, written into post-négritude, critically examines Africa's heritage as a dynamic process that needs to be re-appropriated and foregrounded for the benefit of Africans.

Most importantly, Fémi Òsófisan is a Nigerian writer who writes as a Nigerian, about issues affecting Nigerians from a perspective of his Yorùbá heritage. Thus, an understanding of the social and political dynamics in Nigeria is essential to appreciating the structure of Òsófisan's dramaturgy and his mythopoeic quest. The picture of chaos and disorder, of an anti-Ogunnian type, filled with images that could have come only from the brush of Sekoni, the engineer-turned-artist in Wolé Sóyínká's 1965 novel, *The Interpreters*, haunts the spectrum of Òsófisan's experiences, for, as he says of Nigeria, 'this country fashioned me... I was bred and fed on its gangrenes and its fetid sores. I have grown old on its carrion'[4]. Essentially, Nigeria's socio-political and cultural influences play

[3] After Léopold Sédar Senghor (9 Oct 1906 – 20 Dec 2001), the first president of independent Senegal, who was a poet, teacher, and statesman, and one of the proponents of the concept of négritude.
[4] Femi Osofisan, *Kolera Kolej*, 1975: 86

a strong part in Òsófisan's dramaturgy, marking him as one of the most committed and relevant dramatists in Africa today, in the company of others such as Wolé Sóyínká and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

Political systems have proved to be the main source of social and economic anguish in Africa. As Chinua Achebe says, 'our present leaders in Africa are in every sense late-flowering medieval monarchs'[5] whose selfish interests inspire conflict between the individuals, communities and ethnic groups they lead. Such leadership adversely affects many countries in Africa and has resulted in internal conflict and war. The push by the generality of the people is for what Ufo Okeke Uzodike has identified as decentralisation, accountability, transparency and the rule of law[6], in short, for an enduring democracy.

However, political leadership is not solely responsible for the demand for democracy. With the leadership, in its quest for superficial hegemony, are the multinational companies, the world's financial bodies, and the creditors whose major interests lie in the economic development of their own institutions, all of which help to retain unpopular African leaders in power. Thus, the tyranny of the multinationals occurs *pari passu* with political dictatorship, which, in time, erects mythologies of indispensability, of authenticity, of a fraudulent, self-invented immortality in the political psyche of many African leaders. In 2017, more than twenty-five African countries experienced violent domestic and international conflicts, primarily because of bad political and economic leadership, as well as due to religion and other social factors[7]. Several others were involved in serious disputes that have either resulted in violent interstate skirmishes or have the potential for doing so. Most of these countries operate political systems that do not offer much regard for the survival and development of the individual within the cultural environment. The drama of Òsófisan challenges the tyranny of political dictatorship in Nigeria that subscribes to the agenda of these foreign interests at the expense of the people.

For almost fifty years, Òsófisan as a committed Nigerian writer has devoted most of his dramaturgy in arguing for a just society. In plays such as *The Chattering and the Song* (1976) and *Morountodun* (1982), Òsófisan

[5] Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 1987: 74
[6] Ufo Uzodike, 'Development in the New World Order', 1999: 81
[7] See *CrisisWatch: Tracking Conflict Worldwide* (https://www.crisisgroup.org/), accessed 27 August 2017

challenges the recuperative bias of the négritude ideology that classified everything African as noble; he proposes the presence of tyranny as the dictating current behind popular African myths and traditional practices. In *The Chattering and the Song*, Òsófisan takes a story of power and 'deliberately challenges a specific distortion of historical consciousness'[8]. He uses the play-within-a-play technique to expose the fallacy of the received history of Aláàfin Abíódún who reigned in the 19th century. Abíódún is historically portrayed as a benevolent monarch who brought peace and prosperity to his kingdom but Òsófisan re-interprets the history to show the despotic nature of Abíódún's reign. Òsófisan uses role playing to link the radicalism of Látóyè, the son of the deposed 'prime minister' under Abíódún, with that of contemporary revolutionaries fighting for better life for majority of the people whilst asserting their identities, as typified by the Farmers' Movement in the play. Again, in *Morountodun*, Òsófisan adapts the myth of Queen Móremí of Ilé-Ifè who sacrificed her honour and freedom to save the city of Ilé-Ifè from the incessant raids of a neighbouring community. Òsófisan, whilst acknowledging the sacrifice of Móremí, interprets her actions as that of a royal who did not want to lose her privileges and is therefore willing to do anything to maintain the status quo; even whilst depriving the public of their rights.

With the 1980s, Òsófisan started focusing on breaking the myths of colonialism and demystifying the canons of neo-colonialism in dramas such as *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1984), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1984) and *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986). The first two examples belong in the category that he terms the 'magic boon' plays where solutions to real life situations are devolved to the intervention of magical realism, or rather the Ifá[9] motif. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Òsófisan centres the play around a debate on the public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria and the contributory role of the society in

[8] Chris Dunton, *Make Man Talk True*, 1992: 93

[9] The Ifá divination system is important in the life of the Yorùbá people. All ceremonies and ritual performances involve the consultation of Ifá. The Yorùbá people believe that Òrúnmìlà, the divinity held as the one sent by the Almighty to guide human beings, established the system of divination. The Ifá system of divination is a corpus with sixteen main chapters occurring in pairs: *Èjì Ogbè*, *Oyèkú Méjì, Iwòrì Méjì, Edí Méjì, Obàrà Méjì, Okònròn Méjì, Iròsùn Méjì, Iwònrin Méjì, Ogúndá Méjì, Osá Méjì, Ologbón Méjì, Orètè Méjì, Otúrá Méjì, Osé Méjì, Òràngún Méjì*, and *Eká Méjì*. The different designs these chapters form on a divination plate dictate the type of insight cast for the person seeking the assistance of Ifá. A *babaláwo* is a person who is responsible for Ifá divination and rituals. For more information, see Daramola and Jeje 1975; and Adeoye 1979.

fostering the conditions to breed criminality. Òsófisan advances the argument that it is really everybody who is criminal in intent and act and who therefore needs to be re-membered to a society that is just. He contends that the root cause of the endemic criminality of the people lies in the three symbols of authority and influence in the society – school, church and the home.

> **Hasan**: Teacher flogged us at the writing desk... Reverend flogged us with divine curses at the pulpit, the light glinting on his mango cheeks like Christmas lanterns… and poor Mama, she laid it into us routinely behind the locked door, her work-hardened palm stinging even sharper than whips… So that afterwards the grown man can crawl the street from month to month on his belly, begging for work, for a decent pay, for a roof, for a shelter from the pursuit of sirens?[10].

The main consequence of this three-pronged oppression is the defeat and permanent 'colonisation' of the people, preventing them from gaining knowledge and power and ultimately motivating them towards revolt. Òsófisan's suggestion in this play is that criminality, including armed robbery, is a form of rebellion against the colonising effect of the authority symbols. He proposes that there is no rationale behind executing armed robbers whilst neglecting fraudulent civil servants, corrupt law officers, politicians and profiteers. A social environment that will make criminality unattractive must be engendered.

Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels is about a group of out of work minstrels who are offered magical assistance that would reverse their fortunes. The only clause is that they must use the power to help only the needy. Òsófisan develops characters based on the politicians who were in power during the civilian regime that ruled in Nigeria between 1979 and 1983. As variously documented[11], the politicians are notorious for the high level of corruption and forfeiture of the mandate they were elected to defend. *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* captures the panic that ensued in the country after the military *coup d'état* of December 1983. *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* on the other hand is a play specifically written to encourage reconciliation after the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970. Òsófisan employs folktales and idioms to caution the country about the hegemony of colonial legacy. In one such tale, Simbi follows the

[10] Femi Osofisan, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, 1991: 90-91

[11] See Toyin Falola and Julius Ihonvbere, *The Rise and Fall of Nigeria's Second Republic, 1979-1983*, 1985; Ufot Inamete, *Foreign policy decision-making in Nigeria*, 2001; Abu Bakarr Bah, *Breakdown and reconstitution,* 2005.

Handsome Man until they reach a graveyard where the ‘’tombstones’ should be conspicuously in the colours of the national flags of European countries that have held colonies in Africa – Britain, France, and Belgium or Portugal’[12]. In these plays, and others written in the 1980s, Òsófisan attacks the neo-colonial and colonial attitudes of both the ruling and the ruled classes whilst at the same time advocating a revolutionary discourse stemming from the people.

In the 1990s and on through to the end of the last century, plays like *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1992), *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993) and *Twingle-Twangle, A Twynning Tayle* (1995) reappraise issues of post-colonial / post-négritude remembering. *Nkrumah-ni!... Africa-ni!* (1994), *Tegonni, An African Antigone* (1994), and *A Nightingale for Dr DuBois* (1998) situate the post-colonial and post-négritude discourses in the quest for a pan-Africanist nationalism that seeks to textually challenge and re-construct African neologism, tropes and the relationship of the ‘Empire’ to the centre, whilst also re-membering the disjunction created by the binary division of ‘us’ and ‘others’.

In *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest*, Òsófisan applies the theme of sufferings under ruthless tyrants to Africa’s long history of oppression. The popular demands for democracy on the continent are foregrounded in the agitation of a group of young girls for freedom of expression and choice. *Nkrumah-ni!… Africa-ni!* examines the dialectics of pan-Africanism as propounded by the late Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah. The actions of the play take place during Nkrumah’s exile years in the republic of Guinea and the play also involves the characters of Guinean president Sékou Touré and Amilcar Cabral of Guinea Conakry.

Recently, Òsófisan has embarked on a rigorous provocative re-reading and interpretation of empire inspired plays, from the Greeks to the Shakespeare as well as a dramatic reconceptualization of the Yorùbá novels of Daniel Fagunwa and the novels Chinua Achebe, in a radicalised manner that recuperates the idea of collective responsibility and dramaturgical form from his earlier plays.

Vision of Change

My thesis in this book is that the works of Fémi Òsófisan de-centres the idea of a metropolitan locus in which the entire thrust of African studies is

[12] Femi Osofisan, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, 1986: 49

located. Whilst acknowledging the historical significance of this centre, Òsófisan sees pockets of power in various kinds of 'Empire' authorised spaces and the major impetus of his work has been to question and challenge these, using materials available to him as a dramatist with Yorùbá cultural heritage These 'pockets of power' include neo-colonialism, elitism, political machinations, economic manipulation by local and foreign powers, and superstitious belief in gods and myth. Using his drama in both text and performance forms, I critically view, analyse and examine the way Òsófisan has highlighted the various 'centres of power' in Nigeria and the rest of the world.

This book explores the issues surrounding Òsófisan's vision of change in his dialectical reading of history and political discourse. Òsófisan manipulates the various heritages available to him as a post-colonial writer to speak to the challenges facing his society and to scrutinise the practice of art in Africa. He also challenges the recuperative bias of the négritude ideology which classified everything African as noble; he proposes the presence of imperial or pseudo-imperial tyranny as the dictating current behind the popular African myths and traditional practices. He confronts the problem of authenticity and accessibility that has led to the creation of a hybrid kind of theatre in Nigeria through an amalgam of different Western and traditional modes, semiotics and uses of language. Further, Òsófisan demythologises and demystifies the canons of neo-colonialism in his dramas.

There are numerous works on African theatre, but few have been written on the drama of Fémi Òsófisan. Therefore, my theoretical position is situated in African Studies, with special focus on studies already conducted on Nigerian drama. Òsófisan is the leading Nigerian dramatist of the generation immediately following Wolé Sóyínká[13]. In terms of prolificity and experimental attitude to received forms and theatrical traditions, Òsófisan is arguably a leading dramatist in Africa, in the company of Sóyínká, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Athol Fugard, with more than seventy plays[14]. However, regarding radical ideological attitude and a passionate commitment to a dialectical reading of the historical and political discourse in Africa, Òsófisan is in the vanguard of African dramatists and playwrights. Chris Dunton (1992), Muyiwa Awodiya (1993, 1995, 1996), Tejumola Olaniyan (1995, 1997, 2004), Sandra

[13] Tejumola Olaniyan, 'Review of Sandra L. Richards', 1997, 87-88.
[14] December 2017. Note that Fémi Òsófisan is still a very active writer, therefore a definite number of the dramatic works cannot be stated here.

Richards (1996), Sola Adeyemi (2006), Toyin Falola (2009), Biodun Jeyifo (2017) as well as others have studied the work of Òsófisan, but few have critically appraised his work in relation to post-colonial African studies and the importance of his work in this area. It is in this debate and the juncture between an epistemological approach that this book will prove essential, even whilst eclectically relating to the earlier criticism.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEFINING PRINCIPLES OF ÒSÓFISAN'S DRAMA

Dramatic performances among the Yorùbá people of Nigeria make use of elements of myth and rituals. Most Yorùbá performers, especially since the early twentieth century, and the performers of the Alárìnjó[1] tradition that dates to the eighteenth century, employ extra-linguistic codes such as dance, songs, poetry and other forms of narrative in their performances. Writers of Yorùbá heritage, including Wolé Sóyínká and Fémi Òsófisan, developed their dramaturgy out of this tradition. In this chapter, I establish this succession of performance tradition as a fact that have influenced the dramaturgy of Òsófisan, referencing the authority of myths and rituals on the life of the Yorùbá people from traditional performance cultures to the present.

The Yorùbá Socio-Cultural History, Myth and Belief System

The Yorùbá people claim a common ancestry from Odùduwà, the founder of the Yorùbá nation, and share the same cultural values, language, history, traditions and customs, and religion. They make up about a quarter of the Nigerian population and are mostly situated in the south-western part of the country[2]. They are also found in the neighbouring countries of Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone and, because of the trans-

[1] Alárìnjó is a term that describes the band of strolling players and magicians who grew out of the masked court performers of the 15th century Yorùbáland.

[2] See The CIA World Factbook https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html (accessed 11 September 2017); this is based on an estimated Nigerian population of 191 million. Census figures in Nigeria are unreliable as data source, but the 2006 census put the population at 140 million (http://www.nigeriamasterweb.com/Nigeria06CensusFigs.html; accessed 17 January 2018)

Atlantic slavery and modern migration, in Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Cuba and the other Caribbean Islands, as well as in the USA and Europe.

The Yorùbá are largely urbanised and live in close societies in densely populated cities. There were 25 complex, centralised kingdoms or city-states. The sense of kinship is very strong, and relationships are traced back to earliest remembered times. Each Yorùbá town generally maintains its own local interpretation of the history, myth and the various religious traditions. Variances in the interpretations are due to, and influenced by, among other reasons, conflicts and results of internecine wars that were quite common among the Yorùbá prior to the formation of Nigeria as a colonial state under the British Empire in the early 20th century.[3] Examples of these wars include the Òwu against the Ifè-Ìjèbú alliance (1816-1821); the series of battles between Ìjàyè and Ìbàdàn (1859-1861); theÈgbá Rémo war (1861-1865), the Ìjèbú andÈgbá trade war (1877), and Kírìjì War, the war between the Èkìti confederates army and the Ìbàdàn fiefdom (1877-1886) fought at Ìmèsí-Ilé.

Other motifs that bind the Yorùbá include the acknowledgement of the pantheon of Yorùbá gods and divinities, a belief in pre-destination and a reverence for the ancestors particularly through their earthly representatives, the Ifá priest (babaláwo) and other ancient institutions. Traditional Yorùbá religion is centred on a group of divinities collectively called Òrìsà. These Òrìsà direct the daily and other human affairs of the Yorùbá person. For instance, when a child is born a babaláwo is consulted to determine the destiny of the child and the path he will follow in life; adults regularly and periodically consult the babaláwo on matters of spiritual and material welfare. The Yorùbá believe in one supreme deity, Olórun[4], and regard the gods and divinities as the representatives and assistants of this entity in the world. This supreme deity is never worshipped, and there is not a single shrine that is dedicated to him. The Yorùbá never make sacrifices to him and he has no priests. The divinities under him are primarily of two types: the primordial ones whom God sent to form the world, and the deified human beings and natural phenomena like mountains, big rivers and hills. However, all the divinities are

[3] Nigeria came into existence as a country in 1914 when the British amalgamated the Northern and Southern British Protectorates of Nigeria. The first Governor-General was Sir Frederick Lord Lugard.

[4] Also known as *Olódùmarè, Olúwa, Òbángíjì, Awímáyehùn,* etc. Most of the names are praise-names however, but the commonest in use is *Olórun*.

believed to have ambivalent attributes, with an ability to dispense evil or good blessings on human beings as they will.

The socio-cultural entity of the Yorùbá is full of festivals and ceremonies all geared towards oneness with nature and the unity of all human beings[5]. The divinities and the ancestors are venerated because they are believed to hold the power to re-mould the world; additionally, the divinities are worshipped in order that they may continue dispensing their good wishes.

Yorùbá Mythology and Beliefs

The beliefs of the Yorùbá concerning divinities vary significantly from one part of the country to the other. The deities are also variously regarded; a divine being or god could be asexual or of either sex; and a god in one community may be a goddess in another community. In addition, the characteristics and attributes of the gods may be different from one area to the next. These variations inevitably arose as the myths were passed orally down the generation and from one area to another and mixed with the doctrinal values of non-indigenous religions, particularly Christianity and Islam.

The Supreme God is the creator of all the other gods and human beings. He is omnipotent, omnipresent, immortal and unchanging. His is the power to judge both gods and men for their deeds in the world and the lesser divinities are to administer the world in accordance with his commands. With all these powers, Olórun is not one of the gods in the Yorùbá pantheon, and he is hardly referred to at all in daily life except in moments of dire crises. The leader of all the other divinities is Obàtálá (Òrìsà-ńlá). He is the arch-divinity. He acts as the deputy of Olódùmarè on earth in his creative and executive functions.

The other gods who are either created out of Obàtálá, or who descended with Obàtálá to the world include Èsù, the god of 'indeterminacy' who, as the messenger of the gods, interprets their will to man; other major gods are Òrúnmìlà, the keeper of knowledge, and Olókun, the god of the sea. Human beings who were deified after their death include Sàngó, the fourth king of Òyó who is regarded as the god of thunder and lightning (and the subject of several Yorùbá dramas, including *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* by Fémi Òsófisan); his wife, Oya, the goddess of the River Niger; and Ògún, the god of creativity and war. Though Yorùbá myth

[5] Olu Daramola and Adebayo Jeje, *Awon Asa ati Orisa Ile Yoruba*, 1975.

places Obàtálá as the deputy of Olódùmarè in creative and executive functions, Òrúnmìlà, the god of divination and oracles, is regarded as Olódùmarè's deputy in matters pertaining to omniscience and wisdom. Moreover, Òrúnmìlà is a companion and adviser to Obàtálá in the latter's mission to create human bodies before Olódùmarè breathes the life force into them. Òrúnmìlà's myth places him at the point of creation as the diviner and therefore becomes privy to the destiny of human beings and gods.

The myth surrounding the wisdom of Òrúnmìlà is shrouded in mystery, but the most important part of the belief is the system of divination based on sixteen basic and two hundred and fifty-six derivative figures (*odù*) obtained either by the manipulation of sixteen palm nuts (*ikin*), or by the toss of a chain (*òpèlè*) of eight half seed shells[6]. Oral tradition has it that the Ifá system of divination was originated by Òrúnmìlà, though the term is sometimes used interchangeably with the god himself in everyday and even religious references. The position of prominence in which the Yorùbá place Ifá makes it usual for it to be consulted before any action is undertaken. The response is revealed through the Ifá corpus. The chapters of Ifá are relevant to human beings because they represent the sixteen components of human existence, according to Yorùbá belief. The relevance of Òrúnmìlà in the Yorùbá pantheon is such that he has two other gods, Òsanyìn and Èsù, who assist him in his functions. Òsanyìn is the herbalist who prepares the medicine recommended by Òrúnmìlà for any ailment. He has the knowledge of all the herbs and receives instructions from Òrúnmìlà. Èsù on the other hand is one of the most respected divinities in Yorùbáland, in particular because of the unpredictability of his actions. He is accorded great power and importance and is reputed to cause great mischief to those who get on the wrong side of him.

Èsù is 'a 'special relations officer' between heaven and earth, the inspector-general who reports regularly to Olódùmarè on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular'[7]. He acts to intervene in human affairs by challenging the existing order in the society and suggesting a new order. 'Esu serves as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance'[8]. He is the trickster figure who orders choice in humans. Because of his importance as an interpreter,

[6] William Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 1991: 3.
[7] Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 1962: 80.
[8] Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey,* 1989: xxi.

when humans consult Ifá for divination, Èsù deciphers the metaphorical and sometimes ambiguous pronouncements of Òrúnmìlà and presents the available options. Although the relationship between Èsù and Òrúnmìlà is ambiguous, Geoffrey Parrinder suggests that Èsù acts as Òrúnmìlà's messenger by taking his oracles to men and returning with sacrifices to heaven. He refers to him as a 'dangerous trickster'[9]. Òrúnmìlà gives advice and issues commands regarding sacrifices and other ritual activities; the duty of Èsù is to make sure that the advice is taken and that the orders are carried out satisfactorily[10]. Èsù resides at the crossroads, the market place, or junctions of history. This makes the god significant in Yorùbá worldview. Èsù controls the relationship between the people, their destiny and their gods, acting as the link for all life's experiences. It is interesting to note that Òsófisan regards Èsù and Òrúnmìlà as the spiritual influences on his theatre.

Another particularly significant divinity in the Yorùbá pantheon is Ògún, god of creativity and destruction, of war and smithery, and of relationships. When the gods were descending from heaven to the world, according to a version of oral history, they encountered an impenetrable forest and it was Ògún who cleared the way for other gods. This action is what Sóyínká refers to in his essay, *The Fourth Stage* (1976), as battling the chthonic realm by bridging the gap between god and man, and renewing the bonds between the ancestors, the living and the unborn[11]. The other divinities, to show their gratitude, conferred on Ògún the leadership position, which he rejected, preferring instead to hunt and wage wars. There is an account from one of his praise-poems that he slaughtered some of his subjects in anger when he was a king at Ìrèé and they could not find palm wine to offer him after returning from hunting. He is a god who is respected and feared in Yorùbáland as there is practically no aspect of human life that he does not affect.

The Yorùbá believe that these divinities exist to serve as a link between the supreme god, Olórun, and human beings. Olórun can only be approached through these intermediaries. Even when his name is acknowledged or invoked, it is still believed that it is not Olórun who would answer the request of the supplicant but another god acting on his behalf. To connect with Olórun, the Yorùbá people perform many

[9] Parrinder, Geoffrey, *Religion in Africa*, 1969: 63-64.
[10] Idowu, E. Bolaji, *African Traditional Religion,* 1973: 57.
[11] See James Gibbs and Bernth Lindfors, eds., *Research on Wole Soyinka*, 1993: 271); and Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest*, 1995: 50.

elaborate rituals and festivals in honour of the gods during the process of worship. Apart from gods, the Yorùbá people also perform rituals to *orí* (destiny) and the ancestors, represented by *egúngún* or other masquerades such as Gèlèdé or Èyò. The Yorùbá refer to *egúngún* as *Arà Òrun* (the denizens of heaven). The belief is that those who are dead are still very close to the world of the living, particularly to their relatives whom they protect from evil and other vicissitudes of life. Special days are reserved for the veneration of these ancestors who are represented by masked humans in the form of *egúngún*. It is from these acts of religious worship that the Yorùbá performance culture emerged.

I have dwelt at length on Yorùbá deities and the relationships between them to provide a background for the study of Òsófisan's dramaturgy. Òsófisan's theatre draws its cultural relevance from the belief system of the Yorùbá in the same way that he draws on the negritude and pan-African ideologies to structure his postcolonial engagement. For Òsófisan, Èsù is the quintessential cipher for the conception and organisation of his drama. The playwright places Ifá divination and Èsù's characteristics at the centre of his drama. An understanding of the importance of the deities and Yorùbá myths and culture is necessary to the understanding and proper appreciation of the theatre of Òsófisan.

Alárìnjó Tradition and Yorùbá Traditional Performances

The first written accounts of the Alárìnjó are found in the travel journals of Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander who stayed for a period of seven weeks at Katunga (Eyeo; Old Òyó; Òyó Ilé), the capital of Yorùbá kingdom in the early part of the nineteenth century. The king invited his guests to watch the rehearsals of a performance by an itinerant troupe in February 1826. The performance that Clapperton[12] and Lander[13] witnessed was already a tradition by then, having begun in the late sixteenth century as part of political intrigues in the palace of the Aláàfin. By the time Aláàfin Ògbólú became the king of Òyó in 1590, the capital city had been moved from Katunga to Òyó Ìghòho due to successful incessant raids by some neighbouring kingdoms. The king planned to move the capital back to Katunga but his chiefs (Òyó Mèsì) and advisers did not support the idea because they had been born in exile and had no recollection of the old capital city. Another reason the people did not want to leave Ìghòho, the

[12] Hugh Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition,* 1829: 53-56.
[13] Richard Lander, *Records of Clapperton's Last Expedition…*, 1830: 115-121.

new city, is that it was already well settled and fortified, with walls and an impenetrable hill to the east. Moreover, it was near the River Niger and the people had developed good trading links and friendly relationship with the Borgu and Nupe people on the other side of the river.

Nonetheless, the king commissioned emissaries to survey the old site. The six Òyó Mèsì – the king's councillors – each however sent ghost-mummers ahead of the king's emissaries to frighten the messengers. The councillors wanted to convince the king that even the ancestors were against the relocation. The ghost-mummers each represented an important member of the Òyó Mèsì: the albino (*Alápínni*); the leper (*Asípa*); the hunchback (*Basòrun*); the prognathous (*Sàmù*); the cripple (*Akíníkù*); and the dwarf (*Lagùnà*). These stock-characters are caricatures of humanity believed to have been created by Obàtálá whilst under the influence of palm-wine and are also sometimes believed to be messengers of the gods to other human beings. They are collectively called *eni òrìsà* (belonging to the gods). The royal cymbalist, Ológbìn Ológbojò, a leader of the *egúngún* cult, wise to the plans of the Òyó Mèsì, advised the king to send hunters who captured the ghost-mummers who later became a permanent entertainment feature in the royal palace.

With the failure of the Òyó Mèsì in preventing the move back to the old capital city, Katunga was reoccupied in about 1610 and by the middle of the seventeenth century, the ghost-mummers had become established at the king's court[14]. The group also took part in the annual *egúngún* festival and became variously known as *Òjè* or *egúngún apidán* (magic-performers). The metamorphoses to Alárìnjó performers however did not occur until Ológbìn Ológbojò's son, who was born with an abnormality that made him look half-ape, half-human, sought to disguise his features with different costumes designed to resemble animals and inanimate characters. The son, Olúgbèré Àgan, made a career as a costumed actor and a strolling player. His father 'served [him] as the masque-dramaturge or animator who handled the improvisations whilst Akùnyùngbà, the palace rhapsodists, provided the choral chants'[15]. The nature of his itinerant performance led to the development of the Alárìnjó performance culture. Several troupes were created along the same format and by the first half of nineteenth century, there were such troupes as Aiyélabólà,

[14] See Joel Adedeji, 'Trends in the Content and Form of the Opening Glee in Yoruba Drama', 1973a: 32-47; 'The Church and the Emergence of the Nigerian Theatre, 1866 – 1945', 1973b; 'Alarinjo', 1981: 221-247.
[15] Joel Adedeji, 'Alarinjo', 1981: 224.

Agbégijó, Àjàngìlá, and Ajófééèbó[16] who was reputed to have performed for the Europeans. By this period also, the repertoire of the troupes had increased from performing skits and magical displays to presenting full plays before audiences, and many of them had become professionals though they still participated in the annual *egúngún* festival. They started performing on non-festival days, particularly at secular ceremonies like child-naming, funerals and weddings. The performers became itinerant and began demanding gifts and other forms of patronage from those who watched their performances. With this development, Alárìnjó became a theatrical art and the increased professionalism improved the troupes' performances.

A performance usually started with songs and drumming which herald the troupe to a town, where performances are staged in the market square. The performances are full of spectacles, including magical displays, acrobatics, mime caricatures, trance, and word-play where two actors try to use chants and incantations to determine a 'winner'. There are a few satirical sketches because the main intention of a troupe was to entertain first before making social or political comments. There is an order of events for Alárìnjó performance: ritualistic *Ìjubà*[17] or a sort of opening glee where the troupe recites its *oríkì* (praise names) and acknowledges any important dignitary at the performance. Apart from clarifying the role of the dramatist in society, the *ìjubà* reveals the relationship between the performer's art and the import of what he communicates[18]. The *ìjubà* is followed by an opening dance, divided into two parts in order: ritual dance to honour the notable deities and divinities worshipped in the town of performance; and social dance which invariably is the dance steps in current fashion. The drama follows. Usually the drama consists of two genres – spectacle and revue. Adédèjì, commenting on the genres, states that '[t]he dramatic spectacles are designed to meet religious objectives and are based on Yorùbá myths and totems. The revues are sketched out as components on the state of, or happenings in Yorùbá society. In both types satire is a theatrical element'[19]. In certain instances, the revues are omitted as a component of the performance, or included as elements of the main drama, the spectacle. The ending of the performance, the finale, consists of a valedictory song and dance.

[16] The names are descriptive and literally mean: 'wealth is created', 'dance while carrying a tree', 'tall and supple', and 'dance for the white person'.
[17] Acknowledgement of the ancestors' influence and the presence of the audience.
[18] Joel Adedeji, 'The Alarinjo Theatre', 1969: 52.
[19] Ibid.

Although the *egúngún* cult members and the masque-dramaturges are still bound together by ancestor veneration, their common root, the Alárìnjó theatre guild, is a separate, independent organisation. *Egúngún* is a communal celebration, but the Alárìnjó is a commercial venture, performed for remuneration from the courts and their audience, and more recently, performed on the television as well as using the film medium. Indeed, since the 1990s, the Alárìnjó and its successor, Yorùbá Travelling Theatre, have become part of the successful Nollywood[20] video films.

A Yorùbá performance culture that is different from the ritual performances emerged and proliferated until the early twentieth century when the efforts of missionaries to spread Christianity reduced the popularity of Alárìnjó performances. Earlier on, in the nineteenth century, the Muslims had banned theatrical activities in the northern part of Yorùbáland which they controlled numerically and politically, because they could not find theological support for the performances in either the Quran or the Hadith. With the coming of the Christian missionaries, the Alárìnjó found it difficult to make a living by performing, as many of their patrons and members started converting to Christianity, a religion that also regarded the performances as heathenish. The final blow was the growing 'elite' class, the converted Yorùbá who now maintained an attitude of indifference, at the least, and sometimes disdain, to Alárìnjó, probably so that the colonial officers would not categorise them as barbaric and unenlightened. These elites started forming social clubs and organising balls and dramatic activities[21] modelled after structures established by the colonial administrators, and later by the successive governments and civil administrations.

Modern Alárìnjó Performance and the Church

Ironically, the popular Yorùbá Travelling Theatre that developed out of the Alárìnjó tradition found initial expression in the Church, the same institution that had labelled Alárìnjó heathen and barbaric. The Travelling Theatre genre started in 1944 resulting from a fund-raising activity by a church in the capital city of Lagos[22]. The originator was Hubert Adédèjì Ògúndé, a former teacher and policeman who wrote and presented the

[20] The Nigerian film industry is known as Nollywood. It is the second largest film industry in the world (after India's Bollywood) and ahead of USA's Hollywood in terms of productivity.
[21] Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 1981: 18
[22] Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*, 1984

concert *The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God* for the Church of the Lord at the Lagos Glover Hall. The reception was encouraging enough for Ògúndé to resign his commission as a policeman and start a drama troupe. Two other teachers, Kólá Ògúnmólá and Dúró Ládípò started their own versions of the theatre in 1948[23], and 1961 respectively. Indeed, Ládípò developed his own secular folk opera, the Duro Ladipo National Theatre, after years of producing church plays[24]. These three theatre impresarios became the reference points of modern Yorùbá Travelling Theatre, with the purpose of using Alárìnjó theatre 'as an artistic instrument to spread and strengthen the creed and ethics of staunch Christian members of indigenized churches'[25].

The Protestant and Roman Catholic Missions were strongly opposed to the travelling theatre tradition and considered the performances ungodly. They were against the use of traditional drumming, dancing and singing and did not want to integrate Yorùbá cultural practices, which informed these performances, with mission drama. There was no expression of any Nigerian cultural form in the churches, schools (which were mostly church-owned) and among the converts to Christianity. Yorùbá music, drums and other accompaniments were totally prohibited and European music and accompaniments, dressing and forms of worship, were encouraged. The consequence of the disillusionment and alienation experienced by the people was an inevitable budding of a Yorùbá cultural nationalist movement. The movement was not limited to promoting Yorùbá culture in performances and dressing but promoted and actively influenced the formation of indigenous churches where forms of worship that were indigenous were practical. Independent African Churches like the United Methodist Church and the Aladura Movement (a form of evangelical and spiritualist group, which includes the Cherubim and Seraphim church) that blended Yorùbá music and language freely with European culture started emerging in the early 20th century. '[T]raditional masquerade songs were re-worked into church songs as a means of winning over converts from traditional religion'[26], but also because these songs were entertaining and resonated with the church members and could easily be accompanied by the traditional drumming and dance steps.

[23] Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 1981: 23
[24] Margaret Laurence, *Long Drums and Cannons*, 2001: 20.
[25] Joachim Fiebach, 'Cultural Identities, Interculturalism and Theatre', 1996: 52.
[26] Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 1981: 19.

Yemí Ògúnbìyí traces the advent of Nigerian indigenous drama to these African churches, citing the production of D. A. Olóyèdé's *King Elejigbo and Princess Abeje of Kotangora* in 1902 by the Bethel African Church and St. Jude's Church, both in Lagos[27]. The plays had biblical themes but there were influences of Alárìnjó theatre, such as the opening and closing glees, caricatures and acrobatics. Attempts were made by the educated elite who had become the main patrons of theatre to introduce western dramaturgy into these productions by scripting coherent plots instead of traditional loose improvisation based on an agreed storyline[28]. Lineage issue and *oríkì* were not as important to the practitioners as they were to the Alárìnjó practitioners, and the performers were church members who were members of one or another church society. The dramas did not become popular with many of the people since most of them were still excluded from watching them because of their lack of competence in English or because they did not belong to the same social class as the theatre practitioners. They therefore were not encouraged to attend the performances that were held in the exclusive areas of the city, particularly in Lagos. The plays were staged in suburban areas of Lagos, such as Ikoyi and Victoria, in a bid to cultivate the educated elite and publicise the new message of cultural nationalism being promoted in the churches, but this still did not make the drama popular with the common people. Moreover, the average gate fee charged for a performance was equivalent to twenty-five percent of the monthly salary of an average worker at the time[29].

In effect, the theatre that grew out of the direct effort of the indigenous churches was not popular and it died soon afterwards, particularly after the introduction of cinema. People who could not attend the dramatic productions but who desired entertainment found an outlet for their yearnings in the cheap and sometimes free propaganda government films.

In the 1930s, when the Aladura Movement was still new, some members of the movement evolved a new kind of performance called Native Air Opera which utilised the 'theatrical format in its propagation of its brand of the gospel'[30]. The Movement employed music, dance and songs as 'a

[27] Ibid.
[28] Joel Adedeji, 'The Church and the Emergence of the Nigerian Theatre…', 1973b: 391
[29] Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 1981: 21.
[30] Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 1981: 22.

means of impelling its members to express their religious experience'[31]. These 'split-away' churches started to perform Biblical stories to instruct their members and raise funds. They treated Biblical texts quite freely; Ulli Beier describes a performance where 'Adam and Eve, both dressed in black swimsuits, indulged in ribald remarks on discovering their nudity in Paradise'[32]. The churches were involved directly in the nationalist movement which rebelled against colonial influences and 'stimulated intense exploration of African identity, history and culture'[33]. Some of the choirmasters in these churches, after experiencing the popularity and success of this brand of entertainment as a theatrical art form, started organising their own drama groups outside the church[34].

In 1946, Hubert Ògúndé resigned from the Police Force to become an actor-manager. He inaugurated the African Music Research Party and started producing plays that were not biblical; he secularised the theatre and incorporated the performance structure of the Alárìnjó into his plays. He added ritual performances like those practised by members of *Òsùgbó*[35] and *egúngún* cults, and well as Ifa rituals to his theatre. Ògúndé changed the presentation style from theatre-in-the-round to a western style proscenium staging, though he sometimes used thrust staging techniques; he used modern theatre equipment such as lights, make up and elaborate scenery. Furthermore, he relied solely on public patronage. According to Èbùn Clark, 'the greatness of Ògúndé's achievement, therefore, is that he changed the direction of Yorùbá theatre and gave it new impetus and dimension. Almost single-handed, he established what is now loosely termed "Contemporary Yoruba Theatre"'[36]. His theatre focused on 'the tragedy, the hopes, dreams, triumphs of his time and age'[37] He brought back the term 'travelling' into Yorùbá performance culture by organising extensive tours in Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Benin Republique and Ivory Coast[38]. These tours served three main purposes: they made his theatre popular with the people; they brought back the tradition of Alárìnjó; and

[31] Joel Adedeji, 'The Church and the Emergence of the Nigerian Theatre', 1973b: 390.
[32] Ulli Beier, 'Yoruba Theatre', 1979: 243-254
[33] Remi Adedokun, 'The Nigerian Travelling Theatre…', 1981: 18
[34] Joel Adedeji, 'The Alarinjo Theatre…', 1969: 45
[35] A secret conclave of elders with a principle based on justice and the ways of the forefathers; not much different from the *Ogboni*.
[36] Ebun Clark, *Hubert Ogunde*, 1980: 5.
[37] Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 1981: 23.
[38] Ebun Clark, *Hubert Ogunde*, 1980: 147-153.

they served to influence other artists who started emulating his style. Other artists soon started their own groups[39]. The Yorùbá Travelling Theatre that arose out of the Ògúndé initiatives has been described by Jeyifo as 'one of the most vigorous, widely popular and thriving theatre traditions in modern Africa'[40].

Yorùbá Modern Performance Culture

In describing the Yorùbá Travelling Theatre as a popular cultural form, Bíódún Jéyifò notes two features that are fundamental to its relevance:

1. The Travelling Theatre troupes have extensively and consciously drawn upon, and exploited traditional Yoruba folklore, performing arts and poetry, and the resources and properties of the Yoruba language. Furthermore, there is now a pervasive, articulated feeling that this Travelling Theatre movement is a contemporary expression of the collective identity of Yoruba society and as such should sustain and transmit the perceived traditional values of the Yoruba people.

2. There is a marked tendency among some of the troupes and individuals towards 'conscious' art and experimentation and the refinement of the technical and artistic equipment of the medium[41].

The "'conscious' art and experimentation can be linked to the constant evolvement of this theatre genre and the strategy of the practitioners to be commercially viable as the troupes increase in number, from its inception to the modern day. The constant move towards experimenting with styles and dramatic forms influence the drama of contemporary writers such as Femi Osofisan, who also views the features of the theatre as not rigidly codified. Yet, there are certain codes of the theatre; features that make it identifiable and that differentiate it from other forms of theatres from the Orient and the Western world, and from the rest of the African continent. The distinctive features that sometimes imbue a carnivalesque character to the theatre are derived from the performance conventions of the Alárìnjó tradition. Like the Alárìnjó, the Yorùbá Travelling Theatre dramatic entertainment begins hours before the actual performance on stage. These 'pre-performance' performances take place during the publicity period

[39] Lere Paimo, interview, 1996.
[40] Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria,* 1984: 1.
[41] Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria,* 1984: 5.