

The Aura of Africanness in Ola Rotimi's drama

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Abstract. The term 'African Drama' connotes a play in performance about African people in social, economic, or political interaction. Beginning with the seminal, *The gods are not to blame* (1975) which many acknowledged was patterned after the Greek prototype-Oedipus, The King, Rotimi made a conscious attempt at indigenizing his drama and theatre through the matrix of African culture and philosophy. This paper is a study of the Africanness of Ola Rotimi's drama through three of his selected plays: *The gods are not to blame* (1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1987). From the standpoint of theatre as a reflection of societal realities, the study will explicate Rotimi's abiding engagement with Africa and African issues through the themes, languages and character expositions, coming to the logical conclusion that the plays are African drama in European skin.

Keywords: African Literature, Aura, Africanness, Drama, Theatre.

Introduction

To know the literature of any people is to know them well. It is the precipitation of their mentality,

their customs, their habits, their hopes and ideas
about life itself (Mbiti, John, S, 1954)

Drama, the most social of all the genres of literature, is a performed art that takes the collaboration of different artists and the audience. Often, it is a re-presentation of a story on stage. Scholars have given different definitions over time, yet there has not been any real consensus over what Drama is. Of all the definitions, Majorie Boulton's is expressive: Drama is literature that talks and walks on a stage before our eyes (Boulton, 1980:6). This describes Drama as an aspect of literature that uses dialogue (language) and movement on a stage before an audience. The use of dialogue and movement presupposes a story involving human beings (or his personification) being re-enacted before a group of people. Literature itself could be seen as a dramatic composition which would embrace the other genres such as poetry and novels because they all intrinsically tell stories.

Literature, in this respect has been variously defined as the reflection of societal realities. These realities being attitudes, norms, beliefs and moral dispositions of a group of people in social interaction. This means literature actually borrows from life and presents it in a reflected form either in

Drama, Prose or Poetry. Yet, the reflection is the attitudinal disposition of the writer, while the content of the literary piece is human beings in social interaction.

Literature, as Oyin Ogunba (1978:1) puts it, is an integral part of the people's life and usually grows from within. This implies that for Literature to be an African literature, it must dramatize African psychology (Ekwensi, 1972:81) or draw from African's experience of life (Mphahlele, 1972:100). If a writer is an interpreter of the society in which he finds himself (Rive, 1972:87) and he must write to seek truth (Ekwensi, 1972:81), then a true African literature must be one that presents life in Africa as it is instead of as it should be.

The argument of what should constitute an African Literature has been on for a long time, even in the short span of its development. Many argue that it should be written in African languages, for it to be acceptable. (Obi Wali 1966:113, Omoyajowo B.O, 2004:26) While Kole Omotoso a Nigerian playwright and Novelist toyed with the idea of abandoning writing in English Language. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan Playwright, Poet and Novelist took the bull by the horns by paving the way with his *Ngahika Ndenda* (I will marry when I want) in 1966, a play written in Kikuyu language. Okot p'Bitek followed this with *Song of Lawino* (1966). The failure of these experiments to hit it commercially or lack of acceptance in the critical milieu may have dampened the initial enthusiasm. This was because, as Ogunba (1978:6) puts it, the vast bulk of the audience and critics of African Literature have come from outside the continent. Whereas, in most cultures of the world, literature tends to grow within the culture that produces it and reflects the attitudes of the culture before attaining international

recognition, Ogunba (1978:7) averred further that African Literature starts from outside and grows inward. They are concerned with treating universal issues before local ones. Hence for acceptability, early African writers had no choice but to write in foreign languages such as English and French. But, the Africanness of their writings could not be doubted because they 'derive lots of impetus, from traditional African art form' (Aidoo, 1972:22).

The sum of this is that modern African Literature has been hybridized because of the society that produced it. As Okigbo (1972:144) puts it 'the modern African is no longer the product of an indigenous culture. The modern sensibility being expressed is complex, indigenous, modern, exotic and traditional. Inherent in this kind of literature is African psychology that promotes' basic traditions of African life, African communal life, and the general spirit that did motivate African societies long before the white man came (Awoonor, 1972:31).

2. African Drama

From the foregoing, African Drama is a form of African Literature that re-presents African societies and her people on stage. In this wise, *African Drama thrives on integrated use of music, dance, mime, masquerade, puppetry and symbolic body movements. It is a Theatre based on religion, folklore and mythology* (Brockett, 2004).

The most telling aspect of this drama is the use of storytelling which is common in African societies. It is a rebound of the oral traditions of folktales and folklores common among the African people. Examples of these are the Ananse stories of Akan people of Ghana or the Tortoise tales of the Yoruba in South Western Nigeria. Even when the

story of the play is not based on a folktale, its major characters are still personified virtues or vices recognizable in the African society. The story of the plays are intended to teach one moral or the other or serves as warning signals to would- be- rebels of societal mores. Example of this could be Anowa in Anowa by Ama Ata Aidoo (1970). One other interesting thing about these identified icons of African Dramatic art is that they are equally capable of being treated as icons of Theatre Arts. Storytelling, music, dance or masquerades are equally elements of good Theatre. For instance, story-telling involves the story teller, (narrator/performer) the person listening to the story (audience) and the space where the story telling takes place (stage). As these abound in all societies of Africa, then it is obvious that African theatre or Drama takes its roots from numerous festivals, rituals or masquerade performances abundant in African societies (Ogunbiyi, 1981). This means Africa does not have to look to Europe/ the West for its dramatic creations. This induces Brockett to comment that:

Contemporary writers are inspired by the oral traditions in which storytelling is a prominent feature which incorporates musicians and dancers, all of whom are engaged with the audience-community in a statement of social value. Both the actors and audience are active promoters of affirmative actions” (Brockett, 2004).

African Drama then is a representation of African’s view of life on stage. It is a drama that shows the great African humanism in contrast to widely held prejudices in the Western world (Ogunba 1972:8). As pointed out above, life is generally organized in communal terms in Africa; Drama from the continent then ‘emphasized the symbol which in essence is the representation of the attitude of the community (Ekwensi, 1972:89). Mazisi Kunene (1972:88) pointed

out further that African life is centred on the individual belonging to a community and on services that the individual may perform in relation to the community. In this wise, heroes in African Drama are communal representatives (good or bad) in their social obligations to the community. Notable examples will be Odewale in The Gods Are Not to Blame (Rotimi, 1971), Eman in The Strong Breed (Soyinka,1964) and Titubi in Morountodun and other plays (Osofisan, 1982).

2.1 Features of African Drama

Scholars have identified certain features as normative of Africa Drama (Awoonor, 1972, Brockett, 2004, Omoyajowo, 2004). These are the main ones:

- African Drama employs elements of oral, tradition in the structure, character and characterization and aesthetics. This element then includes folkloric elements of storytelling with the use of narrator; dance and music, mime, proverbs and ritual.
- Audience participation in the action is assumed since the story is well known but this is more common in performance rather than in reading the play as a play text.
- Setting and theme are the most central loci of African Drama. The setting is usually a recognizable space in an African environment, whether physical, social, political or even religion, while theme often reflects the socio-political and socio-economic reality of African societies. How well these features are reflected in Rotimi’s Drama selected for this paper is the focus of our paper.

2.1.1 Aura

The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language defines aura' as a distinctive air of quality enveloping or characterizing a person or a thing. Aura speaks of distinctive smell, colour or feel of a particular person or thing.

2.1.2 Africanness

Africanness is that quality that makes one an African; one who is defined by an African cultural heritage. He may be one who is committed to the issues of Africa and her people.

Aura of Africanness in this wise refers to those qualities or features that makes African Drama African. Since Drama is a universal art with recognized dramaturgy, yet, African Drama possesses some distinctive qualities to give it the generic form African to differentiate it from Korean, Japanese or European Drama.

2.2 Ola Rotimi and African Drama

Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi is a much celebrated Nigerian playwright and Theatre Director who has used his Drama as a forging fire for Nigerian disparages tribes. He was a consummate Theatre Director who put his art to developing a paradigm for the then largely unformed Nigerian Theatre.

Ola Rotimi was born on April 13, 1938 in Sapele, a town in Bayelsa State. His father is Mr. Samuel Enitan Rotimi, a Yoruba man from Ogun State of Nigeria and his mother Mrs. Dorcas Oruene Addo Rotimi, an Ijaw woman from Bayelsa State. The mixed parentage in Rotimi must have left a deep impression on him which is noticeable in all his works. This cultural mix may have influenced his passion for a United Nigeria where 'tribes and tongues maybe differ,

(but) in brotherhood we stand". The problem of ethnicity in Nigeria Nationhood has remained one singular problem confronting Nigeria since independence apart from the hydra-headed octopus of corruption in all spheres of Nigerian life, especially politics, dramatized in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977). He borrows freely from African Dramatic forms and traditional idioms which he presses to service in his dramatic and theatrical enterprise. Though he became known to the Nigerian public in 1968 with his production of *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (which was later published in 1971) at the height of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, yet his first play (*To Stir the God of Iron*) was produced at his Alma Mater, Boston University in 1963. Rotimi had his University Education in Boston University where he had a Bachelor in Fine Arts and later proceeded to Yale University where he obtained a Master of Fine Arts with specialization in Dramatic Arts. His return to Nigeria landed him at Ile-Ife, the reputed cultural roots of the Yoruba and saddled with the responsibility of organizing and directing the cultural troupe – Ori Olokun Players. It was while there that his first play *The Gods* was first performed. In all, he has written some eleven plays before his death in 2000.

3. Conceptual Framework

Literature, as well as theatre, is a reflection of societal realities but the reflection is often through the prism of the writer's culture and nurture. Since most African writers, either of the old traditions or the modern day are products of European civilization, they can hardly write anything not influenced by the cultures in which they were brought up. Almost all of the writers have learned their craft from the West. Yet it is the Africanness of the writings of these authors that is more in evidence (Ogunba, 1978:7). This is

because some of them have been able to achieve the rare blend of nurture and culture and gone back to their roots to fashion out relevant themes to African socio-economic and political development within African modes of expression. Ola Rotimi is one of these.

Besides, most of African Literature, early or modern, have been subjected to foreign epistemological tools for critical appraisal with some of them being labelled after one Western prototype or the other, in the guise of search for universalism, as if universal Literature is the only valid literature. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo a notable Nigerian playwright of the first generation is one of the beleaguered lots. His three plays: *The Song of a Goat* (1964), *The Masquerade* (1964) and *The Raft* (1964) are reportedly patterned after Aeschylus' *Trilogy* (Ogunba, 1978:7) yet, the themes in these plays are patently African. But by the time the playwright wrote *Ozzidi* (1966), the critics were shut up.

As Alex La Guma (1972:93) pointed out:
“universal ideas can be expressed within a particular milieu, within the environment, since human beings are the same everywhere, peculiarities of environment and culture notwithstanding”

Issues in Ola Rotimi's works can bear a stamp of universalism but the peculiarity of African treatment of the issues within these plays is the focus of this paper.

Eurocentricism, which Wikipedia defines as the practice of viewing the world from a European perspective and with an implied belief, consciously or subconsciously, in the pre-eminence of European culture' precipitates the Afrocentric idea (Asante, Molefi, 1987) and the argument for the decolonization of African Literature (Chinweisu et al, 1980) with the precipitate of African epistemological tools for African

literary output. A ready example is Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976). *Critical Theory and African Literature Today* (1994) is another compendium of such critical tools. Eurocentric criticism of African literature has always presented African literature as an appendage of Western Literature, particularly as it is written in a foreign language. Africanity is the socio-cultural response to this alienating philosophy of the West from Africa and Africans in the diaspora. It is a unique cultural face Africans presents herself to the world for appraisal.

This paper is then an attempt to explicate Ola Rotimi's selected Drama: *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1987) as authentically African mouthpieces to the world by bringing out the 'traditional African psychology' through the themes, language and character expositions.

4. Synopsis of the Plays

The Gods Are Not to Blame (1971), is an adaptation of Sophocles *Oedipus, the King*. The play tells the story of Odewale, an African prince in exile, destined to kill his father and father children by his mother. The divined solution was to offer the child back to the gods as a sacrifice. This assignment was given to a palace guard who probably pitied the innocent child and gave him to another hunter who came from a different town, and accidentally childless. By a combination of human actions and inactions, Odewale finds himself back at Kutuje, the land of his birth after killing his biological father in error, made king of the town and inherited his aged mother as queen. By this violation of the moral order, a plague was released on the town of Kutuje causing humans and animals to die and crops to wither. Odewale's attempt to find the cause

of this plague provides the fulcrum on which the conflict of the play revolves. It was eventually resolved when Odewale discovered that he is the culprit he has been looking for and that the predictions of the gods have come full circle as he has fathered four children from his own biological mother. Blinded, reproved and restored, he left the town for exile with his tainted children. The real focus of the play is not the irredeemable fate of the Greek prototype but that he (Odewale) because of his tribal bigotry has allowed himself to be used by the gods as their plaything.

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (1974) is a historical play based on the events in Benin in the late 19th century. In this play, Rotimi traces the events that led to the British punitive expedition against Benin Empire in 1898 (Kemi-Atanda, Ilori, 1988:206). Faced with rebellion within by surrogate members of the large and powerful Benin Empire and the threat of invasion by the British Expeditionary force led by Vice-Consul Philips and an ominous warning of caution from Ifa oracle at Ife, Ovonramwen took the only alternative open to him rather than allow the British to continue their campaign of calumny against Benin Empire as one of the outpost of the 'dark continent' ruled by a blood thirsty tyrant who rejoices in orgies of human sacrifice. Rotimi re-arranges the available historical data to show that the British interests in African societies were more than commerce and Christianization. At the end of the play, Ovonramwen who was inevitably betrayed by his own people was arrested and exiled, to pave the way for British castration of the ebullient empire.

Hopes of the Living Dead (1987) is a play which takes its inspiration from another historical incident in Nigeria in 1928-32. Even though the play deals with history, its contents is not purely historical rather it is

an imaginative reconstruction of the history of Lepers Riot at the Lepers Colony in Uzuokoli in today's Imo State (Ilori, 1988:208). The conflict in the play revolves around the Government's decision to eject the lepers from the General Hospital, Port Harcourt, where they have been under experimental care by a British consultant who has decided to go back to Britain. The threat of ejection weaves the inmates together in a common bond for a desperate fight of survival against a mechanical leadership that treats them as sub-human beings. Their epic victory in securing a place they can call their own at Uzuokoli, after series of maneuvering by the agents of government to get them out of the hospital is Rotimi's message of hope to all suffering people all over the world.

5. Conceptual Analysis of the Plays

The Gods Are Not to Blame

Themes: This is one of the best known plays of Ola Rotimi that established his reputation as an African dramatist worthy of note. He was reported to have written in a letter to his former teacher, John Gassner that the play was an allegory on the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 (Ilori, 1988:207). Yet, almost all scholars agree that the play is based on Sophocles Oedipus Rex (The King). Even the blurb of the published copy of the play labelled it as a 'transplant' to African soil. Similarities between the plots in the two plays are undeniable, yet the major theme differs. It is Rotimi's explication of the Nigerian civil war which he believed was fought primarily because of ethnic pride and distrust. Sophocles's focus is on the irredemability of man's fate which is consistent with the Grecian world view but this is quite not the same thing in the universe of Yoruba cosmological belief in which Rotimi conceives his own play. The

tragedy of Oedipus is based on his extravagant anger and temperament which clouded his vision of people around him. He turned round to accuse the same people, who gratefully crowned him, a stranger, king, after helping them to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, of disloyalty to him. The situation and the cultural relevance in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* differ from this. While Odewale accused the chiefs and Aderopo of disloyalty but his accusation is based on his being an alien in their midst. In Yoruba land, a young man cannot dare lift his hands against an elder routinely but in the situation of perceived insult to his tribe by King Adetusa when the latter calls him a man from 'bush tribe' (Rotimi, 1971:46). Odewale responded thus: '...I can bear insults to myself, brother, to call my tribe bush and then summon riff-raff to mock my mother tongue. I will die first' (p.44). This trivialization of his tribe is emphasized in much of his dialogue with the chiefs too. The old man should not have mocked my tribe. He called my tribe bush (Rotimi, 50). To cap it all, Odewale told Aderopo:

No, no! do not blame the Gods. Let no one blame the powers. My people, learn from my fall. The powers would have failed if I did not let them use me. They knew my weakness. The weakness of a man easily moved to the defense of his tribe against others. (Rotimi, 71).

This is the focus of Rotimi's tragic conception of the play, that because of ethnic pride, Nigerians that sing the anthem though tribe and tongue may be differ, in brotherhood we stand' everyday killed one another in millions in the civil war.

The political leaders then raised accusation and counter-accusations and even blamed the departed colonial masters but Rotimi's thesis in this play is well, let me tell you, brothers and sisters, the ruin of a land and its

people begins in their homes (Rotimi, 13). The home here, being the first school and the first agent of socialization. When individuals are brought up to respect human persons irrespective of the colour of the skin or the language, the different kinds of genocides the world has witnessed in the world wars and civil wars all over the world could have well been avoided. This may well be the ideological reason that prompted Rotimi himself to marry a Caribbean woman.

Rotimi's use of the Oedipus myth is in a specific socio-cultural setting of the Yoruba – the concept of 'Ori Abawaye' (destiny). The Yoruba believe in three inseparable concepts as far as destiny is concerned – Ayanmo (destiny), 'Akunleyan' (personal choice) and Adayeba' (course of action in the world). Ayanmo is the creator's input, Akunleyan is the personal choice, Adayeba – course of action in the world. The first two determines the third. This is the reason why the Yoruba would seek divine guidance at the birth of a new child to know what is called akosejaye' (the destined journey of the child through life in order to prepare for it. (Fasakin, 1990:257). It is through seeking divine guidance for Odewale that his destiny was discovered. Sophocles in his own treatment of this aspect of Oedipus birth, the parents only received a messenger from the Delphic Oracle warning them of the dangers surrounding the prince's existence and thereby advises that he should be killed.

Another theme in the play is the theme of universal quest of man for self-identity. This is not peculiar to the Yoruba. However, the cultural universe of this play is purely Yoruba. The naming of the characters is rooted in Yoruba culture which is expressed in the belief that one must look inwards before a child is named. Modupe Kolawole (1997:11) observed that naming is central to

the African woman's (man's) dignity. This is why it is not casually given. The names of the major characters in the play are reflective of their status and circumstances of birth. Odewale was picked up in the forest by a hunter, so the hunter named him. Aderopo was born after the loss of Odewale, so he was a child given by the gods to replace the dead one. Adewale, the first child of Odewale was so named that the King has come back home. King Adetusa, Baba Fakunle and others were so named.

Language is another element in the play that reflects its Yoruba cultural background. Even though the play was written in English, the English is such that Ogunba termed Yoruba-English, which is a transliteration rather than a translation. The use of proverbs at every turn of conversation lends credence to this fact. Besides, the use of incantations and praise chants for the king are all direct influences from Yoruba culture. The characters are all human personae imbued with the life of their own which Achebe tries to inscribe in his novel what Ogunba calls the great African humanism in contrast to widely held prejudices and individualism of the West. Odewale was not only concerned but really agitated about the suffering of his people that he was really moved to do something about it. And, he does this in consultation with people around him. He was not an isolated individual that lives in grandeur irrespective of people around him. He did not believe in his own perfection to the detriment of others.

Structurally, *The Gods are Not to Blame* is based on Yoruba's idea of time. Obi Maduakor (1994:11) identifies the cyclic continuity in African universe of time consciousness. The Yoruba believe that Time is also a sequence of three phases – Morning, Noon and Night and each succeeds the other in that continuum.

Yoruba would say 'Igba meta nigba eda laye' (people live through three phases) – the babyhood, the Youth and the Adult. This idea of time informs the structure of the play in Three Acts which divides the action of the play into the three phases.

Act I The morning which is the initial unfolding of the conflict, where the people discovers there is a problem in the community; what is the cause?

Act 2: The noon – the complication of the plot as Odewale accuses everybody of plotting against him being a stranger in their midst.

Act 3: The night when the conflict is resolved as the truth sets in; Odewale recognizes his error and takes the punishment for the restoration of the moral order that has been violated by his patricide and incest. The prologue could be conceived as the 'moment of transition', the 'womb of time' where the unborn action, time and the unborn baby, lives. This is in contrast to the unilateral time of Oedipus, The King which is designed on the Aristotelian principle of time – 24hours. The structure is also different from the Elizabethan practice of 5 Acts. This is another unique aspect of the play that makes it an African play.

The story of the Narrator in the Prologue is to establish the tradition of storytelling where the play comes from. As the unborn child in the womb of the night is not part of living existence, yet it could not be denied as a woman carries a child in her womb for 9 months. This structure sets the stage that the play is a story to teach people moral percepts as the folktales do. Even though, the mimed action is not organically part of the play but it foregrounds it. There is also the blend of the tragic with the comic in this play symbolizing Yoruba belief that life is a mixed grid not unilinear. This is contrary again to the Aristotelian principle of plot.

One could see then that *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is authentically an African play with adaptation of the Oedipus myth.

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (1974), is Rotimi's second historical play, the first being *Kurunmi* (1972). Though, this play is in the genre of historical drama and Rotimi's set agenda is to correct the biased historical accounts given by Western Historians in relation to the punitive expedition by the British against the Benin Empire in 1898 (Ilori, 1988: 207), yet, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi is a dramatization of crisis of leadership of immediate post independent Nigeria. This is highlighted when Ifa oracle warned of impending danger. Ovonramwen replies: Civil war – the final curse of internal intrigues. This makes the play a further development of the theme of leadership in *The Gods Are not to Blame*. Ovonramwen is a metaphor of a leader whose singular decision can affect the destiny of the whole community. Since the position of Obaship occupied by Ovonramwen is communally chosen and respected by the whole community, his action or inactions (and that of his cronies) have direct consequence on the entire community. As in the earlier play, it was the king that 'sinned' by killing the British officer who intruded on the sacred festival of 'Ague' when strangers cannot or must not enter Benin. As Rotimi situated *The Gods Are not to Blame* within the Yoruba culture of his father, he situates this play within the context of the Edo, the land of his mother. Historically, the Binis have shared ancestry with the Yoruba, hence the similarities in their cultural institutions such as the kingship which is hereditary and have absolute powers, consults oracles before major decisions are taken, believe in efficacy of sacrifices to placate angry gods of their lands. The names of the major characters are also similar to Yoruba names, as the king is prefaced with the title 'Oba' as in Yoruba land. The war council is similar to

the war council in Yorubaland as evidenced in Oyo Empire before the coming of the British (Osae & Nwabara: 1968).

In this play, again Rotimi aspires to parade the beauty of African culture as opposed to the culture of the West. The ostensible theme is that of historical re-fix of facts but more important is to show that even though the West deride African culture as 'bush' and shows gross disrespect for her institutions, they secretly admire or even covet some cultural symbols of African State power. Rotimi shows the British's respect for their own Queen and her institutions represented by the soldiers. The Consul recognized the invidious respect the people have for the institution of the king, so they send out an all-out signal for the arrest of 'overami' which is their corrupt bastardization of the name when it was clear to them that the anchor of the whole war is Ologbosere. Even, Philip observes that Benin will not know peace until Overami is captured (Rotimi, 1974:77). Besides, they marveled as they entered Ovonramwen's palace and scrambled for the ivory and other cultural artifacts in the Palace. Apart from the use of vernacular names of the character as observed in the earlier play, Rotimi's copious use of music and musician which is a very notable aspect of African culture is pronounced in this play. The use of drums as instrument of communication is highlighted in the play. The drum is used to summon the people to war, announce the entry of the British soldiers to Benin and to commemorate their victory over the British soldiers whom they killed.

The use of time as a continuous process of human progression is repeated in the play as the structural patterns of the earlier play is repeated here also – the prologue, the first Act as the unfolding of the conflict, the second Act as the complication when the

Benin Warriors killed British officials as Ovonramwen looked in horror and the third Act when the conflict is resolved with the arrest, prosecution of the war-leaders including Ovonramwen; prejudicial trial process of the British where they are judges in their own case and eventual judgment and exile of the King from Benin. Again, Rotimi blends the tragic with the comic as Uzazakpo, in the presence of danger, could still joke with the King.

However, Rotimi did not just paint good pictures of the African culture in this play. He shows that the king could be so surrounded by the paraphernalia of office that he would be divorced from the common people. The warriors who are on the field fighting for the Benin could not recognize Ovonramwen the Benin Monarch. Besides, the chiefs were quick to betray the king for the 'general good' whereas Ologbosere whose loyalty was probably secured by marriage to the king's daughter was the only one who continued the fight against European imperialism.

Hopes of the Living Dead (1985) dramatizes the matured view of Ola Rotimi concerning the crisis of leadership in human development in modern African societies. As the titles implies: Hopes, dramatizes the conditions of development in a pathetically diverse tribes in a country like Nigeria.

This play takes a historical incident for its inspiration and the incidents were imaginatively reconstructed as a sign post of direction for a country patently in the grips of underdevelopment and left adrift by white technocrats who have been experimenting their own form of 'cure' for our peculiar lack of civilization. Hopes of the Living Dead is based on the life of Ikoli Harcourt Whyte who lost his parents at the age of fourteen and was stricken with leprosy at the

same time. He left school because of this and became one of the inmates of Port Harcourt General Hospital along with forty others. The conflict of the play is **The Crisis** (Act 1) when suddenly the European Surgeon departed because the 'good work' was not appreciated. Public outcry against the Surgeon soon spread to the lepers who were to be deported to their homeland without any State support in their deprived state. A decision was taken to stay together which culminates in the choice of some of them as leaders. Harcourt Whyte is the chief. Curiously, they choose three levels of leaders to cope with unforeseen exigencies that may arise. The group prepared for the impending conflict with State oppressive machinery who fails to recognize their right to decent existence. **Strain of Leadership** which parallels Act 2 of the play shows the complication the burden of leadership Harcourt Whyte and one of the leaders was arrested to break the ranks of the united lepers. At this stage, cracks begin to appear in their walls of unity in the midst of disparate differences. They almost broke up as even Harcourt Whyte became disillusioned but for the songs of encouragement offered by the Atulegwu. He braced up and re-envisioned a bright future if they can just overcome the present problems. Eventually, they decided to forged on in unity which is the resolution of the conflict in **Movement and Solidarity**. The people have discovered the innate strength in their unity in spite of their differences. Adopting a consensus decision to avoid handouts but to insist on normal treatment as people with distinct needs as other people groups, they won. They were relocated to Uzuaokoli, in now Imo State of Nigeria.

Structurally, Rotimi builds on the dramaturgy of the other two plays using all the elements of music for inspiration, encouragement and rebuke which is as much

a part of the action as the dialogue. The names represent the diverse interest in the Nigeria Nation State, the obvious setting of the play, and the lepers, the underprivileged, underdeveloped economies of the world. The language is no longer the transliteration of the other two earlier plays but a multi-language approach of communication where each person speaks his/her own language and it is translated for others.

This experiment on language is Rotimi's antidote against cultural barriers to unity in Nigeria because of language differences. The coming together of the diverse people and their consensus leadership constitutes the 'hopes' offered the living dead in the play. Rotimi's skill at creating a variety of characters in their complexities of emotional disposition comes to the fore in this play. He has not presented any of the characters as completely perfect, but as human beings who must continually improve as they learn to live with others. This is the picture of Nigeria that Rotimi envisions. It is a lesson in resourcefulness; accepting that no obstacle is too great to be overcome. It reflects the daily life of people that in the face of uncertainty and frustration, people should persevere and see such as a passing phase. Rotimi's Theatre, therefore, is rooted very well in ritual, songs and chants. Dance and mime are equally important as dialogue and monologue.

6. Summary and Conclusion

From the foregoing, one could see that African theatre is based on religion, folklore and mythology (Brockett, 2004). African playwrights integrate this in dramatic production. The use of music, dance, mime and masquerade performances is very evident in the Drama created in the continent. Storytelling appears the most significant aspect. Contemporary African

Dramatists are inspired by this oral tradition, not European tradition. Influences of education may reflect in their works but not that the work is wholly subsumed in foreign culture.

To Ola Rotimi, Oedipus is African ritual archetype which is reincarnated in Odewale to excoriate societal misadventures. The Gods Are Not to Blame is then written to warn Nigerians that the Nation cannot excuse its own failures merely by blaming foreign powers. Again, history offers lessons in retrospect. This is the reason for Rotimi's abiding engagement with Nigerian history as cultural materials for his historical plays. Apart from using Ovonramwen as a deliberate reconstruction of history to counter what Mazisi Kunene (1972:88) terms minimization of African history through Literature of the West; the character himself is imbued with the dynamism of great African humanism who feels for his people and yet aware of his own inadequacies. The historical plays are also used to remind Africans of their past so that they can understand the present better and from there reconstruct the future.

The aura of Africanness in Rotimi plays abound in his conscious use of materials drawn largely from African oral tradition of storytelling, music, chants, proverbs and praise poetry, drawing characters that are human as opposed to mechanical creatures of Western Literature that indulge in self-regard, self-congratulation and denigration of the 'other' run more deeply... infected more aspect of their thinking laws and policy than anywhere else (Alfred Bowring, 1997).

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