

## RETHINKING 'THE TRAGIC' IN OLA ROTIMI'S DRAMATURGY

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### Abstract

*It is fairly commonplace to suppose that the persistent search for a conceptually-adequate and universally-acceptable definition of 'tragedy' will remain for the foreseeable future work-in-progress. What is, however, reassuring is the face that progressive-minded theorists and scholars in the humanities are at liberty to hammer out their own provisionally viable definitions of the form, reflecting in the process their own cultural and historical peculiarities. Our attempt here at a re-evaluation of Ola Rotimi's tragic dramas is merely a commemorative gesture undertaken on the occasion of the Nigerian literary community's festival of remembrance organized in honor of the late writer, Ola Rotimi. Our primary contention in this study therefore is that, contrary to conventional reading of Rotimi's tragedies as tragedies of character based on individual heroism of the Aristotelian paradigm, his tragic plays come across as tragedies of situation based on collective heroism in which myth and history interact in a common search for meaning and essence.*

**Keywords:** Tragic Theory, Culture, Character, Situation and Fate.

### Introduction

The persistent search for the meaning of tragedy, for a redefinition in terms of cultural or private experience is, at the least, man's recognition of certain areas of depth-experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories; and of all the subjective unease that is aroused by man's creative insights, that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as 'tragedy' is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources. There, illusively, hovers the key to the human paradox, to man's experience of being and non-being, his dubiousness as essence and matter, intimations of transience and eternity, and the harrowing drives between uniqueness and Oneness. (Wole Soyinka, 'The Fourth Stage', 140).

The word 'tragedy' is an English lexical item derived, we are told, from the Greek '*tragodoi*': meaning 'goat's song', itself referring to the ritual sacrifice of a goat in worship of Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility. The term 'tragedy', therefore, is not native or indigenous to Africa and the developing world. Before we, however, put out a disclaimer on the concept, it is important for us to ask whether or not traditional African societies had cognate concepts denoting the same experiential reality, since it is normally assumed that 'tragedy', like most human experiences, is a pan-human universal experience unlimited by national or ethnic barriers or/and sundry forms of cartographic convenience. But what is it about 'tragedy' which makes it defy tidy, universally-acceptable definition? Why the persistent search, as our opening Soyinka epigraph avers, for the appropriate and adequate definition of 'tragedy' by philosophers and scholars of all ages and from different national and racial provenance, and yet the matter still remains a moot one? Is it that 'tragedy' or what constitutes 'the tragic' varies from age to age, scholar to scholar and from society to society?

And, like morality, is it culturally, temporally, and circumstantially *relative*? What, then, is ‘tragedy’? Clifford Leech in his short but useful study entitled *Tragedy* furnishes a number of representative definitions of the subject, beginning from the classical era to the contemporary times. Aristotle is conventionally reputed to have defined ‘tragedy’ thus:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself in language with pleasurable accessories each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions. (The *Poetics* qtd. in Leech 1)

Diomedes (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) argues: ‘[Tragedy is] a narrative of the fortune of heroic (or semi-divine) characters in adversity’ (qtd. in Leech 2). Racine, the French playwright, is quoted as describing ‘tragedy’ thus:

It is not necessary that there shall be blood and deaths in tragedy: it is enough that its actions shall be great, that its character shall be heroic, that the passions shall be aroused through it, and that the whole effects shall be that majestic sadness which constitutes the whole pleasure of tragedy. (Preface to *Berenice*, 1668, qtd. in Leech 4-5).

Clifford Leech goes on to provide several other attempts by scholars at defining, or at the very least, *describing*, the tragic experience. For instance, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche asseverates:

...tragic myth has convinced us that even the ugly and discordant are merely an esthetic game which the will, in its utter exuberance, plays with itself. In order to understand the difficult phenomenon of Dionysian art directly, we must now attend to the supreme significance of musical dissonance. The delight created by tragic myth has the same origins as the delight dissonance in music creates. That primal Dionysian delight, experienced even in the presence of pain, is the source common to both music and tragic myth (cited in Leech 7).

Leaving this coterie of comparatively older definers as assembled by Leech, let us briefly contemplate the contemporary (post)modern tragic imagination; and to do that, we turn to the important study, *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. According to Wetmore:

tragedy is a form of drama in which the hero must transcend self and society while participating in an action usually a struggle, in which the hero is paradoxically both victorious and defeated. The play must take place within the human sphere, and tragedy occurs when awareness exceeds power and the “loser” must then transcend failure. (46)

Having thus gone to great lengths to furnish these panoplies of definition of the (western) concept of ‘tragedy’, we must then ask whether or not there exists homespun,

autochthonous words/concepts in traditional African cultures which denote or *signify the same* [western] notion of tragedy, or generically similar but tinged with local variation. Writing under the sub-heading ‘Tragic Theory and African Tragic Theory’ in his earlier cited book, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., report that: ‘Ketu Katrak holds that tragedy did not exist in Africa before the colonial period, quoting Anthony Graham White’s statement that many African cultures feared that “to express sorrow was ‘somewhat to invite it” (44).

Considering this argument made by Ketu Katrak, the question to ask is: Is ‘tragedy’ a thing like writing or a technology which is exportable from one culture to another; just like literacy was said to have come with the advent of western colonization in Africa? What *really* constitutes ‘tragedy’? Is it the academic formalization and the histrionic channeling of an emotional (or psychic) experience into a recognisably formal structure; that is, as a *genre* expressible on stage as *performance* or reduced to a written script? Does theatrical performance of ‘tragedy’ or ‘tragedy’ as dramatic literature not *ipso facto* seek to *concretize* a fundamentally universal human experience?. Is ‘tragedy’, finally, the prerogative of a race, say, the Caucasian or Asian race? In what seems like a counterfactual riposte to Katrak’s gospel of absence, Terry Eagleton contends: ‘Tragedy deals in the cut-and-thrust of historical conjunctions, but since there are aspects of suffering which are also rooted in our species-being, it also has an eye to these more natural, material facts of human nature’ (xiii). Eagleton notes further,

As the Italian philosopher Sebastiano Timpanaro points out, phenomena such as love, ageing, disease, fear of one’s own death and sorrow for the death of others, the brevity and frailty of human existence, the contrast between the weakness of humanity and the apparent infinity of the cosmos: these are recurrent features of human cultures, however variously they may be represented (emphasis added, xiii).

In trying to shed much-needed light on the conceptual diffuseness as well as the notional indeterminacy of the subject of ‘tragedy’, Terry Eagleton therefore states that: ‘A further problem of definition springs from the fact that ‘tragedy’ can have a triple meaning. Like comedy, it can refer at once to works of art, real-life events and world-views or structures of feeling’ (9) There seems to be a western tradition of repudiation, denial and denigration of the African world as a veritable locus of life-affirming, positive potential *and* actualities, a perverse and pernicious practice which the intellectual movement know as Afrocentric classicism seeks to rectify. (see in this regard, Bernal’s *Black Athena Writes Black*, Poe’s *Black Spark, White Fire*, William’s *The Destruction of Black Civilization* Cheikh Anta Diop’s *Civilization and Barbarism?* and Edward L. Jone’s *Black Zeus: African Mythology*), Now, returning to our present subject, Ketu Katrak denies that Africa had ‘tragedy’ *as a form* before the white man arrived there in this storied civilizing mission. She is in good economy: Ruth Finnegan in her *Oral Literature in Africa* equally argues that the epic form did not exist in Africa before European imperialists invaded Africa; a baseless pseudo-argument which Isidore Okpewho debunks in his world-famous study *The Epic in Africa*. Let us in passing just say that it is this patently false (western) notion of ‘universality’ that Achebe addresses in his justly famous essay entitled ‘The Novelist as Teacher’ (see *Morning Yet On Creation Day*). In setting the record straight in regard to African cosmology, Benedict M. Ibitokun stresses that:

The Yoruba (African) worldview is multi-dimensional. It is not restrained to the physical, tangible plane of existence. Besides

the earth which is the measure of the present, and the locus of mortals and where you and I, in the form of existence, dramatize our distinctive destinies, there are the realms of ancestors (the past) gods (the eternal) and the unborn (the future) (21-2).

The Yoruba concept of 'ori': coming 'predestination' – also holds that human beings are here on earth because of the pre-terrestrial choice of existence they had made in the house of Orumila, the Yoruba god of divination. Accordingly, B.M. Ibitokun opines that:

Stationed in the same metaphysical edifice are the unborn whose exact apartment Wole Soyinka rightly calls "a staging-house". There is a pre-stage where man drills himself and rehearses before he appears (through birth) on the proscenium of the physical world... Yoruba metaphysics of the unborn, like that of the ancestors, proposes an extra-cosmic, and a more comprehensive reading of existence (22).

Ibitokun goes on in setting forth the *nature* and *structure* of the African world, to emphasise the role of sacrifice in traditional African culture and society:

Mortals, in the same vein, have to fraternize with the deities through the ritual of prayers, libations, and offering of sacrifices. By so doing, they assure their own self-adjustment to the superior powers, and to cosmic harmony. Ritual, therefore, guarantees and promotes constant re-activation of the divine in man, composed as he is of the soul which is his own share or gift from Olodumare (God) and which, ipso facto, links him to the Supreme Being, or better still, which reminds him of his spiritual home (22-3).

Addressing the source of Yoruba tragic drama, Benedict M. Ibitokun discloses that: "Ogunnian mythopoesis à la Soyinka offers an aesthetics and a morality through which a community (the Yoruba in this instance) comprehensively defines and re-creates its values: Ogun's paradigm is therefore better understood as a measure for man's abortive attempt at self-sublimation' (24). However, Ibitokun's position, with regard not to his rather brilliant characterization of the Yoruba (African) *weltanschauungen*, but his over-valorisation of the Ogunian myth as the primal matrix of the tragic act, does not appear to cut much ice with some African intellectuals. Oyin Ogunba, for instance, expresses deep reservation about Ogun's candidacy as a source of 'tragedy':

But does a theory of the origin of Yoruba tragedy really emerge from all these [that is, Ogun's heroics in unifying the gods and man]? *Hardly!* Ogun's ability to re-emerge through sheer will-power would appear to obviate any lasting tragedy. Even in his final self-exile and separation from the daily commerce of the human community, *there is still a hint of hope that all is not lost and that with appropriate propitiation Ogun is still at hand to answer man's call* (Emphasis added, 8).

Ogunba argues further:

Is it not true that the Yoruba worldview is too optimistic to admit of tragedy in the Hellenic sense? The function of the festivals of the gods and the Ifa oracular system is, in fact, to *neutralize any such looming tragedy* (emphasis added, 9).

Thus, Soyinka's essay, 'The Fourth Stage', is remarkable not for its articulation of a theory of the origin of Yoruba tragedy, but for the other statements on the Ogun phenomenon contained therein, that is, the nature and character of this god. Soyinka's key statement in the essay appears to be the following:

Ogun, for his part, is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues. Nor is that all, transcending, even today the distorted myths of his terrorist reputation, traditional poetry records him as 'protector of orphans', 'roof over the homeless', 'terrible guardian of the sacred oath', Ogun stands for a transcendental, humane but rigidly restorative justice (141, cited in Ogunba 9).

Due, therefore, to the well-known 'terrorist reputation of Ogun', Oyin Ogunba, a foremost Soyinka critic and, hence, Ogun scholar, submits that 'Ogun is altogether too rough and too unpredictable to be associated with healing, expert in so far as retributive justice may be associated with healing' (10). Thus, Ogunba further stresses that 'what should be argued is that for every negative trait Ogun manifests, there is a counterbalancing positive achievement' (10). A principle of contraries, of the duality of life, Ogun is "after all, not so much a person as a metaphor for the conjoined nature of the creative and the destructive, the fact that you cannot have one without the other and that human civilization depends on how well the contraries are delicately balanced" (10). Ogunba, then, tells us that "... the totality of the Ogun phenomenon cannot rise to the level of tragedy, Hellenic or otherwise" (15). Conceding, finally, Oyin Ogunba, in the same breath, posits that:

If there is any tragic element emerging from the Ogun story at all, it is the general one that good and evil are inextricably entwined (a pessimistic view?), and that for man to attain a modicum of good, so much evil will have to be accommodated. It is a tragedy not of character but of situation, the desperate nature of the human situation on earth (emphasize added, 15).

If tragedy as 'human distress and despair, breakdown and wretchedness' is a truly universal human experience, as Terry Eagleton argues (x), and the fact that *as a form*, Africans in traditional, pre-colonial period dramatized it in the perfervid theatre-in-the-round of passage-rites rituals and festivals of the gods, then, can we empirically ascertain Ola Rotimi's deployment and appropriation of this endogenous epistemology? In order, therefore, to investigate and *rethink* 'the tragic' in Ola Rotimi's *oeuvre*, we shall simply limit our scope to four of his mature dramatic parables which seem to demonstrate a greater sense of 'the tragic' than the remaining ones. These four plays are: *The gods are not to blame*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *Kurumi* and *If: a tragedy of he ruled*.

## II

*The gods are not to blame* is a Yoruba adaptation and, more importantly, a transposition of Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, a play based on the conflict between divine will (or fate/destiny) and human freewill or choice. Accordingly, *The gods are not to blame* tells the story of Odewale, the biological son of King Adetusa and Queen Ojuola, who kills his father and marries his mother, *inadvertently*. As king, Odewale reigns for eleven years of apparent tranquility and prosperity, until his past crime (parricide and regicide) as well as incest unleashes suffering and adversity on Kutuje. Revealed as the culprit, King Odewale blinds himself and embarks on self exile among with four of his ill-fated children. The play opens with a prologue in which storytellers (namely, Narrator, Odewale and Royal Bard) narrate the mimed dramatic action. Modeled on the Epic theatre style, the prologue relies for effect on dramatic techniques of role-playing, play-acting and improvisation. The anti-illusionism of this Brechtian technique creates expectedly, an Alienation Effect which allows the audience to *critically* engage with the play's underlying message: the allegorization of the human condition on earth framed or circumscribed within an anthropomorphized cosmos. Appropriately, the play queries: 'what is it that the child has brought as duty to this earth from the gods?' (3). This question right from the outset of the play establishes the Yoruba concept of 'on' or predestination, the idea that earthly existence is the acting out of a grand script written in the pre-terrestrial realm by supernatural powers. Baba Fakunle, the Ifa priest tells King Adetusa and his wife as well as others townsfolk that the infant boy will kill the king and marry his own mother. To avert this evil eventually, the king and his wife sanction the killing of their child. The questions to ask are: Is infanticide approved in traditional Yorubaland? Also, do not the gods look out for the helpless infant in order to thwart human "dare" and re-assert the *status quo*, that is, man's continued dependence on and worship of the gods? Is it just a question of power, then? At what cost? What is the place of *morality* in all of this? What is right or wrong; or, is it just a matter of expediency?

In addition, Odewale is said to be 'the unlucky messenger of the gods' (3). Now, the word "luck" comes up again, thus highlighting the play's thematic pre-occupation with *chance* [cf: Jocasta says in *Oedipus Rex*: "chance rulers our life; the future is all unknown"]. The messenger is thus an "Arrow of God" whose bounden duty is his unquestioning obedience to the "inexorable will of fate". Another question: is the messenger not said, according to proverbial lore, to be innocent; that he is merely delivering a message? Why kill him, then? We are told that the 'unlucky messenger' is ritually immolated to the devious deities in order to 'stop the awesome will of fate' (4). We are also reminded of the Yoruba saying: '*Ayanmi o gboogun*' [meaning destiny has no cure']. If so, does it not, therefore, amount to self-deceit, to seek to thwart "destiny"? The answer to this question is dramatized by a thirty-two year-old Odewale who lives on in order to assert "the awesome will of fate". Thus for over three decades of his life, he "drifts", he *wanders*, "seeking peace and finding none" (6), until he happens upon the land of Kutuje – "a strange land" (6) – where he leads the beleaguered people to fight the Ikolu warriors and emerge victorious. He is made king over the people of Kutuje, against tradition.

The play proper begins with Odewale besieged by his suffering and sickness-harassed subjects who come milling to his palace requesting royal solution to the intractable problems besetting the land. Sickness or adversity is said to be as a result of *evil* in the land. We need to ask whether *evil* is in man *ab initio* or is part of the nature of life itself. This is because Aderopo says the Ifa divination claims there is evil in the land; and the evil in a man, hence the multiple deaths in spite of numerous sacrifices made to the gods for deliverance and

healing. The impotency of sacrifice in this regard, foregrounds the price of disobedience on the part of man and his congenital myopism in realizing the genesis of mortal insecurity. In the same connection, the play, which is now following the Aristotelian format of illusionistic “naturalness”, spotlights the tragic protagonist, king Odewale, recommending show death for himself; albeit unknowingly. Can Ola Rotimi be telling us that man is his own albatross; his own nemesis; his own enemy? (21-28). The interpretative inquiry is further bolstered up by Baba Fakunle’s counsel to Odewale in the resultant storm generated by his (Baba) shattering disclosures: ‘[yelling]. King Odewale, King of Kutuje, go sit down in private and think deep before darkness covers you up... think... think.... Think!’ (29). Perhaps one of the sources of life’s tragedy is amnesia; man’s willed forgetfulness as well as his hubristic discountenancing of the remedial functions of introspection. Hence, Alexander Pope counsels: ‘Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; The proper study of mankind is man’ (‘An Essay on Man’ II, 1-2) Reflection, indeed, brings self-knowledge. Witness, for instance, Odewale’s desperate supplication before his household gods:

Odewale:        God! What a woman! [kneels before the household shrine, arms raised]. Give me some of her patience, I pray you.  
  
                      Some... some of her cool heart... and cool the hot, hot, hotness in my blood- the hot blood of a gorilla! [cleansing himself in the sacred water] (39).

Odewale, in his soul-wrenching supplication, highlights his “hot blood”, which invariably refers to his famed hot temper or “raw anger” (27), his intemperate impetuosity under which his subjects wilt and quail. Although Odewale ascribes this to *Shango*, the Yoruba god of thunder, the evidential minutiae furnished by the play itself argue the contrary: Ogun, the superintending deity during whose feast the drama takes place appears to be the play’s informing moral authority and leitmotif. King Odewale, therefore, may be regarded as Ogun-surrogate, who, in line with the so-called “drama of the gods”, gives flesh and blood to the Yoruba tragic myth. But as earlier noted, according to Oyin Ogunba, Ogun is incapable of evincing ‘tragedy’. Thus, the journey motif introduced by Ola Rotimi at ‘the play’s End in which Odewale and his children exit Kutuje *empty-handed*, just the way he came (like Hardy’s Michael Henchard) dramatizes the eternal epic battler between “wanton boys” and “flies”: *The gods are not to blame* is more a tragedy of *situation* rather than a tragedy of *character*. Character is *fate*, but fate is the essential basis of the human condition. In effect, Ola Rotimi is believed to have written this play to address the “interethnic mistrust” which was a primary cause of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of 1967-70 (Wetmore 103). The play is seen therefore as a “cautionary tale of leadership and fate” (104). Wetmore tells us that, following the critical acclaim which greeted the publication and the numerous productions of *The gods are not to blame*, Ola Rotimi was consequently constrained to throw some light on the *meaning* of his play. He then published *Understanding The Gods Are Not To Blame*, an interview with the conducted by his nephew. Wetmore, then, submits:

In understanding *The Gods Are Not to Blame* Rotimi notes that Nigeria “sacrifices” oil, natural resources, and raw materials to the “gods” of the West in order to win the blessing and support of those entities (2) Rotimi uses a Greek tragic narrative, adapted from a specific Sophoclean play, in a fictive African context, based on Yoruba history and culture, in order to provide a model of analysis for the political situation of the civil war of Nigeria (144).

*Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, according to Ola Rotimi, is “an historical tragedy in English” which dramatizes ‘Oba Ovonramwen’s tasks of controlling a growing rebellion within his kingdom and of reasserting the authority of Benin over surrounding lands”, a rather precarious situation “further complicated by the determined interference of the Whiteman in search of trade and dominion” (*Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Blurb). The Oba’s Chief Adviser, Uwangué Egiebo is reportedly killed in relation by some powerful Benin incipient intra-class elite dissemination, the Oba orders these two rebellious chiefs killed. Thereafter, Ovonramwen sets his sights on far-flung vassal for provinces and regions within the Benin Empire with a view to reasserting his imperial authority over them. Consequently, he imposes an embargo on trade between Benin and the Ijekiri, insisting that the Ijekiri traders must obey *only* him, and not the Whiteman who poses a clear and present danger to Ovonramwen’s authority. The Oba also asks the Ijekiri people to undertake to roof his palace with corrugated iron-sheets, a symbol of modernization. Ovonramwen Nogbaisi turns his attention to the Udezi of Akure (9) who is reportedly fashioning “for himself two royal swords” (9), indicative of his desire for self-determination.

The Oba thus dispatches the Benin war General, Okpele, to Akure in Yorubaland to go and rein in the rebel leader. Okpele promptly squelches the Akure rebellion by seizing the said two royal swords and handing them over to Oba Ovanramwen who breaks them to pieces. Furthermore, the Oba confronts the recalcitrant Elders from Ekpoma who refuses to crown the eldest son of the dead Enogie as their leader. The Oba diplomatically resolved the imbroglio and gets the Islam elders to return to Ekpoma to crown the eldest son of their late Enogie.

In order to further secure his kingdom, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi sends for the Ifa priest from Ile-Ife, so that the diviner can foretell the future of the Benin Empire. And the Ifa priest prognosticates: ‘Your Highness... the death I see here is not the death of one man. Bodies of men... fire... and blood – bodies floating – ‘(15). As precaution, the priest advises ‘caution’ (15) so as to avert the impending cataclysm. However, let us recall the dire prophesy of Esasoyen, who, in the maw of imminent death, predicts: ‘Indeed: the Whiteman who is stronger than you will soon come!’ (6). The first sign of the fulfillment of this prophesy is the visit of Gallway and Hutton, two representatives of the Royal Majesty, Queen Victoria of England, to the palace of the Benin emperor. Gallway presents the Oba with a framed portrait of Queen Victoria while Hutton presents him with an inner tube of a bicycle tyre made of rubber (17). These emissaries request the emperor to sign a treaty of trade between imperialist Britain and the Benin empire, but Ovonramwen refuses to sign the treaty, wondering, ‘... to love someone who does not really love you in return is shaking the huge Iroko tree to made tiny dew-drops fall’ (20). Following Uzazakpo’s counsel on the need for the King to secure the loyalty of his chiefs and the people of Benin, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi gives Ologbosere, Benin war lord, his eldest daughter, Evbakhavbokun, as wife, and consequently makes Ologbosere his most trusted and loyal chief. We are, by this act, reminded of the tragic story of Iphigenia who was sacrificed to the Olympian gods by her father Agamemnon so as to have a hitch-free voyage to Troy (see Euripides *Iphigenia At Aulis*).

Custom stipulates that for a period of seven days, no visitor should pay a visit to Benin and there should be no drumming in the bland while the Ague Festival lasts. Interestingly, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi is paid a “visit” by white men and there is drumming in Benin. Thus custom or tradition is broken. How does the King respond? (27-28). He decides

to *break* tradition by allowing the Whiteman to come into Benin, much to horror and chagrin of his chief warriors. Uncharacteristically, *fear* [as conveyed by the Ifa priest's disembodied voice relayed over the loudspeakers], rather than *courage* rulers Ovonramwen Nogbaisi at this juncture. This is in the main, against the backcloth of the Bini belief as encapsulated in the Royal bards' song:

Who are you to choose

Helpless one

When it is the powers

That offer? (41)

This traditional Bini folksong intimates the *helplessness* of man as well as the utter futility of human struggle in the face of the human condition. Ola Rotimi impresses upon us this essential tragic vision of life through the operative unraveling of the dramatic action. To be sure, the Bini language is by nature *elegiac* and *dirgic* especially when employed in singing; it rises to the gravity of threnodic languorousness when in –toned in bewailing the sundry sorrows of mortality. Thus, designedly operatic and with a suffusion of ritualism, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* operates as vehicle for conveying the tragic nature of life itself in its eternal play of paradoxes, as Ologbosere stresses:

The shortest path to

troubles

is

success.

Let's thank the gods for

our failures

and pray to them

for more! (38)

Fiefdoms, kingdoms, nations and empires rise and fall. It is inevitable. What is, nevertheless, *critical*, is the manner in which a kingdom or an empire falls: is it through the spineless cowardice of the emperor or through his thoughtless foolhardiness and suicidal tango with danger?

Power secures its precarious perch through discretion (which, we are told, is a better part of valour). But sometimes discretion may appear like cowardice; little wonder, then, Chinua Achebe in *Arrow of God* reasons: 'we sometime stand it he compound of a coward to point to that of a brave man where ruin has been done' (72). However, for Ovonramwen, he does not seem to have much of a say in the matter, since, as the playwright tells us through the song of the Royal bards, "the powers" (the gods) decide human fate and woe betide that man who dares to undo the Gordian Knot of the cosmic conundrum. Thus baulked by rebellion, within and without, which in essence *signifies* change, Oba Ovonramwen watches in anguished helplessness as his kingdom, and, more fundamentally, his proud and ancient empire crumbles under the superior logic of external (white colonialist) power spearheaded by Phillips, the Britain vice-Consul of the Niger Coast Protectorate, and supported by

Campbell and Boisragon, two British officers. In this Manichean universe propped as it is upon the warrior ethos of “might is right”, *tradition* as embodied by the Benin empire, yields ground to *change* (read: British) colonial rule). Hence, Moor, the British Consul-General of the Protectorate enthuses:

‘Let me make this clear once and for all [*His voice rising*]. There is now only one King in Benin, and that King is the Whiteman. Is that Clear? (62) Betrayed by his chiefs, and, in particular, Ezomo, to the marauding white invaders, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi is exiled to Calabar for life. In fact, the play’s prologue which periscopes its denouement as well as the epilogue dramatizes the symbolic enshacklement of the Oba, *and* the fall of the Benin Empire.

According to Olu Obafemi, ‘Rotimi dramatizes the development of the kings character from a hot-headed tyrant to a diplomatic, pragmatic and shrewd figure whose eventual fall is due to vulnerable and pathetic innocence’ (105). Olu Obafemi’s characterology is partly correct to the extent that he accurately traces the temperamental evolution of the Oba; he, however, misses the point by attributing the King’s downfall to “vulnerable and pathetic innocence”. According to Isidore Okpewho in *The Last Duty*, he advises that you don’t argue with a man armed with a gun. The ‘gun’ in the context of Rotimi’s play speaks of the Whiteman’s awesome war machine which destroys *anything* and *everything* in its path. Does Olu Obafemi expect Ovonramwen to fight the Whiteman with incantations and antiquated, and, hence, ineffectual crude weaponry? The simple fact is: *change* has come, *and tradition* must yield way. The British imperialists do not brook any form of opposition whether benign or violent. In whichever direction the wind blows, the forest giants must follow, as the Yoruba saw, The tragedy of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, therefore, is not one of *character* but of *situation*: the utter futility of effort in the face of life’s imponderables.

*Kurumi*, also, is referred to as ‘an historical tragedy’ by Ola Rotimi himself. The play is based on the history of the Ijaiye war of 1860s, and, in the words of foremost Nigerian dramatist-critic, Olu Obafemi, Ola Rotimi wrote *Kurumi* because of his “conviction that the Nigerian historical past is instrumental to the shaping of our contemporary experience” (95) Obafemi also reveals that, on reading Ajayi and Smith’s *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*, Rotimi says he was:

struck by the charged atmosphere of unrest in Yoruba land of that period-the turmoil, the internecine wars that occupied and bedeviled our forebears came to life in such intense colours. They were happenings of such raw belligerency that were at once frightening and yet captivating (LIndfors 65, cited in Obafemi 95).

The Alafin of Oyo had fled his capital in 1840 in order to establish New Oyo located in the present day Oyo State. The King’s physical shift from old Oyo reduced the spiritual and political structure of the Alafinate. A power vacuum was thus created with the eventual collapse of old Oyo and, therefore, Alafin Atiba struggled to regain the stature and prestige which the monarchy enjoyed in the previous dispensation. The tributary ‘states’ of Ibadan, Ijaiye, and Egba, for reasons of personal and territorial aggrandizement (96), had threatened the hegemony of Oyo. Sensing the loss of authority over these ‘states’ after his own demise, Alafin Atiba, in *Kurumi* calls a crucial meeting of the leaders of Ibadan, the Oni of Ife, the Timi of Ede, and Are Kurumi of Ijaiyeland. *Kurumi* humorously dramatizes what transpired

at the historic meeting:

Kurumi: Oba Atiba came down from high throne. In his right hand the sword of Ogun; in his left hand, the bolt of Sango. He came towards us: 'swear, my people, swear to Ogun and my forebear, Sango, that my son will be king after me'... 'Clown', I yelled, 'out of my cursed right (*spits*) I shall be no party to perversion and disgrace'. I picked my staff and walked out. (*Kurumi* 15-6).

According to Olu Obafemi:

*As a military commander, Kurumi is essentially an Ogun devotee. Atiba is a descendant of Sango, founder of Oyo. The intemperate and irascible nature of Kurumi, coupled with his great sense of humour and flair for entertainment reflect the essential attributes of Sango, his personal god. Rotimi subtly externalizes the tragic conflicts in Kurumi through the symbolic objects of the sword and the staff. He succeeds in conveying, with great economy, the tragic paradox in Kurumi: an undaunted traditionalist who breaks traditions in the process of preserving it.(99)*

Indeed, Are Kurumi's rebellion against the state - against Alafin Atiba and his successor, Alafin Adelu, who are Sango's descendants - is a rebellion against the source of his own being (99). Kurumi seems to advocate Popesque notion of *tradition* which is rooted in the classical conception of Nature: that is, unchanging eternal verities; this kind of 'tradition' does not admit of *change*, except in a rather meretricious sense, a mere burnishing of the ancient plinth. Kurumi does not seem to realize that, as we are reminded in the film, 'Coming to America', that it is also tradition that time *must* and *does change*. Thus, out of pride and stubbornness, Kurumi, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo of Yorubaland, orders Ogunkoroju, his Chief warrior, to ready the land of Ijaiye for an all-out war against the Oyo Kingdom. This is following Kurumi's choice of war over peace from the two options presented to him by Alafin Adelu's emissaries from Oyo. At first, Ibadan tergiversates over whether or not to go to war against Ijaiye, its blood-relatives; but, finally decides in favour of hostilities.

A combined force of Ibadan and Oyo armies under Balogun Ogunmola and Ibikunle (the master military tactician and strategist *extraordinaire*) crushes the Ijaiye rebellion. Kurumi, who is left in the lurch by the Egba forces, even after they have persuaded him to order the Allied forces of Ijaiye and Egba to cross over River Ose against common sense, commits suicide when he receives intelligence reports about the killing of *all* five sons of his in action. Like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, Kurumi sets himself up as the ultimate opponent of change. His rigid traditionalism stems more from romantic atavism than pragmatic reasonableness (29). Hence, *change* which comes in the form of Christian missionary activities to the entire Yorubaland is rebuffed by Kurumi and his subjects. Rev. Mann, for instance, laments to Kurumi: 'The people of Oyo have accepted the faith, and in Ibadan, the Reverend Hinderer is doing very well, not to mention the Reverend Townsend in Abeokuta, and other' - (35). Sadly, for all his exertions to get the Ijaiye "people to respond better to the scriptures" (34), Rev. Mann, has a cutlass attack on his forehead to show for it (34). According to Olu Obafemi, 'Kurumi's supreme belief in his own individual powers, based on his military genius and astuteness, is the main germ of his tragedy' (99). Probably so; but that is mistaking *effect* for *cause*. Humans largely

are like the computer: it is “garbage in, garbage out”. As a product of the hybridic synergy of *Nature* and *Nurture*, man is a tangled mass of conflictual stimuli propelled by his cosmic totality of being. In other words, man’s basic *constitution* determines his behaviour and character. Accordingly, Kurumi’s *hubris* is the *effect* of the Ogunian *cause*: witness, for example, the stage description of Kurumi’s ‘agbo’le’ (compound):

*In this particular ‘agbo’le’, for instance, the gods of the tribe are present in varying images of earth, granite and wood. Here also exist, or are believed to exist, the spirits of departed ancestors: ethereal, invisible eternal guardians of the bodies of the living... (11).*

To buttress this argument, we turn to Benedict M. Ibitokun for illumination.

*A Yoruba lives contemporaneously in all the four areas of existence. His life (the present) is informed and determined by the ancestral (the past), the unborn (the future) and the divine (the eternal). These areas of existence make up his “cosmic totality” (24).*

In the light of the foregoing argument, we would like to submit that Kurumi is Ogun-surrogate as the Field Marshal of the Oyo Empire and we would also like to draw our attention to his recourse to Ogun when he decides to go to war against his own race:

Kurumi:       Ogun, war has come.  
                  Ogun... Ogun, Ogun.  
                  This is what you have said:  
                  that, any time Are Ona Kakanfo goes to war,  
                  he first must bring his body before you  
                  .-       -       -       -       -       -       -       -  
                  Ogun, god of iron,  
                  Steel my heart, that it may know no fear... (31)

Just as Ogun butchered and, later, abandoned his own kith and kin at Ire, so does Ogun disappoint Kurumi who loses both the war and his sons. He ends up, empty-handed, and, thus, poisons himself and dies ignominiously. As Oyin Ogunba states, Ogun *cannot* inspire tragedy, so Kurumi’s tragedy, again, is one of *situation* and not of *character*.

The play *If... a tragedy of the ruled* has its title rendered in lower case, which makes it (that is: the play’s title format) autosuggestive of defiance against normative order. The dramatist’s iconoclasm and non-conformism are signposted right from the play’s frontispiece through the iconically charged graphology of titling which, semantically, is indexical of deformity, brokenness, fragmentation, incompleteness and decomposition. This unsavoury state of affairs must be apprehended both in the psycho-moral and materialist sense, since “the ruled (note: not “the governed” or “the led”) are led up the garden path, repressed, oppressed and existentially marginalized.

Deploying the semiotics of spatiality, Ola Rotimi uses a decrepit and ghettoized “mega-prison”, which effectively is the tenement apartment block in which a human herd is housed. In a typically Sembene Ousmane novelistic style, Rotimi in *if... a tragedy of the ruled* assembles a fractiously discordant slew of characters, polarized by ethnicity, moral and ideological differences, age and status, and gradually welds them into a formidable phalanx of resolute, ideologically-minded counter-insurgents against a rampaging capitalist landlord.

The hedonistic landlord, who happens to be dating Betty, a tenant, is standing election into the nation’s senate, and needs the votes of his tenants. In order to intimidate and blackmail them into voting him into office, the landlord increases their rent from twenty to thirty naira. He, however, exempts Papa, Betty and Hamidu, from this arbitrary rent hike, in what he imagines is a deftly-choreographed divide-and-rule tactic. But the tenants resolve to pull together and cast their votes for their landlord’s opponent. Even though, they actually do so, their landlord and his incumbent party win the elections.

Rotimi’s play is constructed around the building-blocks of Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, a vital piece of ideological treatise form which Marxists and socialists draw inspiration. In this connection, Ola Rotimi cobbles together a cocktail of Nigerian nationalities comprising natives of Kalabiri [Mama Rosa and Fisherman], Bini [Betty, a prostitute with a vision], Ibibio [Akpan, Adiabga and Ukot] Yoruba [Banji Falegan alias ‘Di Law’] Hausa [Garuba Kazuire and Dr. Hamidu Gridado alias “Ernesto Che Guevara] Igbo [Chinwe Ejindu, Onyema Ejindu, Obiageli and Chike], among others. Additionally, these characters are drawn from various professional cadres: Papa, “martinet of the neighbourhood”, is a retired headmaster, Dr. Hamidu is a fresh graduate with a degree in medicine and is on National Youth Corps service in a hospital in Port Harcourt, Chinwe is a graduate and her nephew, Onyema, a secondary-school prospect, Banji is a lawyer, Akpan is a clerical officer, Garuba, a former boxer, is now a deaf-mute labourer and Betty is a petty trader and part-time prostitute. We also have in the gallery of players in this drama, social derelicts and toughies like political thugs and their more socially-tolerable fellow-travellers: policemen and political] jobbers.

This Nigerian cocktail let house “convolution concourse of happenings” propelled in the main by a subtle, well-primed and unobtrusive subtextual ideological interaction between Christianity and Marxism, the one represented by Chinwe and her Bible/choral group members and the other by Dr. Hamidu Gidado. Like ill-fated mariners trapped in a founding ship, the characters in *if...a tragedy of the ruled* grasp at whatever ideological anchor they can get to ride out the storm. Curiously, both Christianity and Marxism are ideologies of the poor which inspire in their adherents hope of a better future, and for Christians, a paradise in the hereafter. Ideological differences just like class, gender and ethnicity, set these characters against one another: for instance, Akpan is progressively indoctrinated with Marxism by Hamidu, just as the tenants interpret their unenviable situation in class terms (16-17) and Chinwe struggles to convert Betty to a Born-again believer, Rotimi adroitly makes these characters slough off their petty squabbles, animosities, and other forms of differences and become comrades-at-arms fighting a common foe: the capitalists symbolized by the Landlord. Indeed, the playwright’s deployment of various indigenous Nigerian languages and tribes is to foreground the theme of *national consciousness*. In the same vein, the “cheerless building”(1) imagistically symbolizes Nigeria:

Hamidu... Now the point is this-solidarity. Nobody should be deemed useless in a struggle against oppression. Not even our already chosified brother here-Garuba. The same goes for Betty. And you... Chinwe,

and me, and all of us. Nobody is useless... The greatest obstacles is HATE. Why? Because when a people are oppressed long enough, they grow to *hate* and *fight* themselves, while secretly *admiring* the oppressor. That's what I call the *Janu-psychosis* of oppression. The day one poor man starts loving another poor man, is the day the *oppressors start shitting in their pants* (*emphasis in the original, 17*).

Thus, the tenant-characters are gradually transformed from a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself; Papa for example, *mentors* the youth of the neighbourhood (28-31), Hamidu *instructs* Akpan on the rudiments of democracy and good leadership (31), Chinwe *disciples* young believers and everybody gets involved in arranging Mama and Papa's fortieth wedding anniversary and Mama's birthday against the backdrop of her terminal cancer. Mama's ailment as well as childlessness is simply an aspect of a wider embrace of debilities and vulnerabilities afflicting some of the tenants: while, on the one hand, some of these challenges are man-made and societal in origin, such as Garuba's "thingification" or "chosification" à la Aime Cesaire (17-18), Fisherman's destitution occasioned by oil exploitation and the resultant environment depredation. Betty's indecent lifestyle caused by material poverty and Akpan and Adigba's marital problems; and on the other hand, some of the characters' crises are *natural* in origin: Mama's cancer and barrenness, and Onyema's asthma.

Onyema, for instance, is a very bright and promising boy, who lost his father during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (24) and whose mother disappeared during the war, too. In the play, Onyema comes tops in the National Common Entrance Examination, thereby proving himself as the future hope of his nation. But he is asthmatic and prone to frequent bouts of attack which render him almost always anaemic. His classmate, Kalade Amaye (22), an equally promising lad, finds his future academic pursuit threatened by poverty and want; a disturbing scenario which Onyema attempts to help salvage. The culmination point of all the problems and crises detailed in the play is the death of Onyema, described by Rotimi as 'The Substance of Nothingness' (77). Onyema's demise is as a result of human negligence and dereliction of duty as well as societal antipathy and paranoia. Consistent with our main argument in this study, *If... a tragedy of the ruled*, although highlights the negative repercussions of bad leadership and capitalist social order, is a tragedy of *situation*. Man, in spite of his apparent effort at civilization and modernization, seems forever trapped in Hobbesian Dystopia: a short, nasty and brutish jungle.

*If ... a tragedy of the ruled* files in the face of the obituarists of tragedy like George Steiner who in his book *The Death of Tragedy* performs the obsequies on the form, arguing that the contemporary times are incapable of producing and sustaining the tragic experience Steiner claims: serious drama, yes; tragedy, no!. George Steiner and company obviously conceive of the tragic art as some kind of elitist, exclusivist preserve of the Orphic few inhabiting a realm uncorrupted by technological sophistication and the crudities and recrudescence of modern man.

Tragedy, then, becomes a rarified site for the subjectivization of class and status, hence leftists' unease about the tragic muse. If anything, *If... a tragedy of the ruled* can draw its theoretic warrant from Arthur Miller's 'Tragedy and the Common Man', an influential essay which gives everybody people, even the person next door, the courage to contemplate the tragic grandeur and consider him/herself, if not a 'tragic' hero but, at least, an anti-hero. Ola Rotimi casts a veil of political allegorizing over this ostensibly naturalistic "truthful lie", with some of the characters coming across as types and semi-types representing ideas and

issues. Ola Rotimi by the same token, uses the term “drifting” (or “floating”) as his archetypal image of man: *The gods are not to blame* (72), *Kurumi* (16), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (71) and *If... a tragedy of the ruled: Papa...* [clears his throat] Now, as I was saying... if chickens were frogs and frogs were drifting... drifting, just... drifting. (stops abruptly) (81).

### III

History bulks large in the overall conception of the tragic vision in Ola Rotimi’s dramaturgy. All four plays under discussion here have a well-defined element of history as part of their thematic foci: it is either, as in the case of *The gods are not to blame*, the playwright *historicises* myth, or as in the case of *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *Kurumi*, he *mythicises* history through the memorializing imperatives of art; or, yet, as in the case of *If... a tragedy of the ruled* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (which is not considered here as ‘tragedy; because it is basically a ‘problem play’) he deploys probable societal *facts* as material for histrionic mythopoeia. Historical man set against the starkly inscrutable cyclorama of dark powers-capricious idealities and deities – seems to be the abiding lodestone of Rotimi’s tragic vision of life. However, in the true spirit of the remorseless secularization of the protean universalism of the African experience *à la* Soyinka, Biodun Jeyifo argues that these idealities and deities are, “after all, ... none other than the projections of our own natural propensities, of drives and passions rooted deep in our natures” (Jeyifo 238). This view impliedly throws down the gauntlet to man as the architect and master of his own fate, an aporetic moment in our discourse whose resolution must be located within the Derridean *différance*. Going forward, man, here, might not necessarily signify a single individual, but as in the classical African sense of all-for-one; one-for-all, *man* should be understood in the collective sense of a people persona: just as the seemingly singular pronoun “I” of the African griot or oral bard/raconteur actually *connotes* a collective “we” of the entire community, so does the singular pronoun “I” of Ola Rotimi’s protagonists subsume a human collectivity. By the same token, Odewale, through the principle of complementary duality, extends beyond himself to include, say, Ojuola. Consider, for instance, how Odewale in his moment of acute self-doubt and confusion, goes to Ojuola for encouragement and reassurance; he later on the play prays to Ogun to “give me some... some of the patience”; additionally, it stands to logic to assume that Ovonramwen Nagbaisi is equally a figure of multiple selves and personalities: besides considering his chiefs and warriors as dimensions of the Oba-psychic, martial, intellectual dimensions of the royal self, Uzazakpo, the Court Jester, also appears to be the King’s intellectual and philosophical self. The intellectual sparring between the King and the Clown, which runs through the entire play, dominating the dramatic action at climatic moments amply demonstrates this fact. *Kurumi*, too, is ‘diffused’ among his five sons. They are his strength and stay. Consider, again, the excerpt below:

Kurumi...      In the River Ose/where my honour was buried / there will you also bury my body (3).

The blood of his slain scions was split in Ose River, thus Kurumi thinks it fit and proper for he himself to end it all therein. In the same connection, the collective challenges, the negations and contradictions of post-colonial Nigeria; its antinomic tension embodied by the “immates” of the run-down building in *If... a tragedy of the ruled* are concentrated in Onyema, the boy-protagonist of the play. The tenant-characters’ private demons and defeats coalesce around the lone and apocalyptic figure of Onyema [a name which bespeaks profound skepticism]: a symbolic representation of shattered dreams and “stolen future”.

All tragedy in a sense stems from man's finitude, the simple fact of the insecurity and the uncertainty of life; and, moreover, that man is *not* in control of his situation but is *merely* a plaything to forces superior, malefic and inscrutable; forces which are hell-bent on thwarting man's self-plenum. According to Benedict M. Ibitokun, "Tragedy as it is to be born, it is equally tragic to live and die because we cannot control or steer any of these experiences in the real sense of the word" (40). Tragedy in Africa as in other regions of the global space, takes its root from this vision of life. Ola Rotimi is a humorous stoic whose outlook on life is the so-called philosophical calmness, an unflappability informed by a settled acquiescence to the unchanging essence of human fate; a fate which genetically conditions human beings to be *who* and *what* they are. Even then, Ola Rotimi appears to be gripped by some form of idealism, a tireless hankering after a Holy Grail of sorts, an earthly Utopia I which humans can be beneficiaries of the good things of life. Perhaps this is what he means by the word "struggle" – a negotiated process of *be-ing*, of becoming, of social praxis. Paradoxically, life, like joy "has a slender body that breaks too soon" (*The gods are not to blame* 8).

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