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Aspects of Intercultural Performance Aesthetics in Femi Òsófísán's Drama

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Abstract

Nigerian dramatist Femi Òsófísán employs Greek and Shakespearean theatrical aesthetics mixed with Yorùbá performance aesthetics as framework to interrogate the use of myth in African performance cultures, specifically myths that originate from Yorùbá culture, and to investigate the interaction with elements from other cultures in defining class perspectives and social realism in African theatre. Not only that, he adapts plays from these cultures from the perspective of a Yorùbá cultural aesthetics. In this chapter, we examine the dialectics of “surreptitious insurrection”¹, which Tejumola Olaniyan describes as “uncommon sense”²; and the articulation of the will to freedom which Tegonni, Òsófísán's *Antigone*, uses to confront power; and the use of new technologies to articulate the issue of corruption in African political process through an intercultural re-reading of William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Òsófísán uses performances to transact and bridge the cultural landscape between nations to paint a portrait that defines our existence and the relationship between peoples. Further, I assess how our playwright uses Yorùbá (Nigeria) and Greek / English (Western) cultural elements to interpret and subvert contemporary realities, such as the re-interpretation of postcolonialism as being more than the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism but one that particularly explicates the consequences of exploitation in the

¹ Femi Òsófísán, 2016: 81-107.

² See Tejumola Olaniyan, 1999: 74-91.

postcolony by substituting colonialists with neo-colonial indigenous elites; exchanges in power politics; economic integration; and shifting cultural relationships. In this chapter, I am using the terms colonial and postcolonial in a way that has become accepted; colonial refers to the actual historical period of European occupation of various nations in Africa, but more specifically, Yorùbáland; postcolonial is temporally later and relates to various critical thoughts about as well as disagreement with the ideologies that accompanied colonialism³.

Introduction

I wish to frame this essay around an understanding of interculturalism that takes cognisance of the concept of lateral textualisation. Essentially, interculturalism accommodates the knowledge or existence of other cultures in performance. It accepts other cultures, sometimes without conditioning or questioning; it processes intricacies of other cultures and moulds the factors and forms into the kernel of the receiving culture. As observers, we consider the cultural features as semiotic acts from which meaning and perception are determined. In the process, we identify influence of cultural and human dispersal on correspondent significations and levels of alterity, say between dramatists of African origin and of the rest of the world. Victor Ukaegbu informs us that postcolonial theatre and intercultural theatre have different aims and performance strategies. The former term, he reiterates, seeks to “dismantle the effects of colonialism” or respond to the consequence of colonial productions, while intercultural theatre re-packages foreign materials for new ‘target’ audiences⁴. Sometimes, the re-packaged materials are not solely foreign but are an admixture of local and foreign, of the familiar, the not-so-familiar, as well as the unfamiliar. This involves a process of entextualisation that Harry Garuba (2017) has referred to as lateral textualisation⁵. Lateral textuality occurs when a text or

³ For more on this, see Elleke Boehmer, 1995:2; Helen Gilbert and J. Tomkins, 1996: 2; Ato Quayson, 2000:2.

⁴ Victor Ukaegbu, 2002: 71-85.

⁵ See “Lateral texts and circuits of value: Okot p’Bitek’s Song of Lawino and Wer pa Lawino”, *Social Dynamics*, 43:2 (May 2017), 312-327, DOI: 10.1080/02533952.2017.1372054.

a plot is lifted out of a particular context, only to be re-inserted in a different context. It deals with interiority of writing, beyond intertextuality, and examines the relationship between literary texts. Entextualisation, on the other hand, specifies the conditions for understanding a text and constrains what a text should mean and should stand for, culturally and in performance. I am using this concept to explore the importance of Òsófísán's project in using Antigone to create a new definition of the colonial history of the Yorùbá people.

Nigerian dramatist Femi Òsófísán employs European theatrical aesthetics mixed with Yorùbá performance aesthetics as framework to interrogate the use of myth in African performance cultures, specifically myths that originate from Yorùbá culture, and to investigate the interaction with elements from other cultures in defining class perspectives and social realism in African theatre. Not only that, he adapts plays from these cultures from the perspective of a Yorùbá cultural aesthetic. In this essay, we examine the dialectics of “surreptitious insurrection”⁶, which Tejumola Olaniyan describes as “uncommon sense”⁷; and the articulation of the will to freedom which Tegonni, Òsófísán's Antigone, uses to confront power. We also assess how modern technologies are used to articulate the issue of corruption in African political process through an intercultural re-reading of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Òsófísán uses performances to transact and bridge the cultural landscape between nations to paint a portrait that defines our existence and the relationship between peoples. Further, I evaluate how the playwright uses Yorùbá (Nigeria) and Greek/English (Western) cultural elements to interpret and subvert contemporary realities, such as the re-interpretation of postcolonialism as being more than the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, but one that particularly explicates the consequences of exploitation in the

⁶ Femi Òsófísán, 2016: 81-107.

⁷ See Tejumola Olaniyan, 1999: 74-91.

postcolony by substituting colonialists with neo-colonial indigenous elites; exchanges in power politics; economic integration; and shifting cultural relationships.

The Socio-Political Context of Òsófísán's Writings

One of the most remarkable and original writers on the African continent today, with more than sixty plays, Femi Òsófísán has always dialectically interpreted and re-interpreted history and myth from the perspective of the victims of injustice and oppression. His ideology is intrinsically entrenched in the belief that present cultural and socio-political realities are distilled from the crystallised creations of the rich and the powerful, and that the effects of these realities inform and influence the lives of the common people. The rich and powerful are patriarchal “gods” who flourish in times of poverty, insecurity and terror. They are “gods” to which the oppressed majority dance for and against, fawn and fall over, in a reaction to hope, to fear, and to terror; but whose machinations need to be challenged and rendered impotent by the voice of the victims, as echoed by the dramatist.

Like Èsù in Yorùbá mythology, Òsófísán questions political tyranny, using myths and history, and this use serves to distance and shelter the dramatist from persecution or censorship. Òsófísán is a revolutionary ideologue who is uncompromising in his criticism of colonial legacy in Africa and the neo-colonial attitudes of the ruling class. He is arguably the most consciously intertextual Nigerian playwright in his use of myths and history; writers such as Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi interpret history and myths to analyse contemporary issues, whereas Òsófísán remodels the same materials to recreate contemporary issues and find parallels by ideologically engaging with historical precepts and other oral and written texts. In this approach, he has often “adopted a free-wheeling iconoclastic attitude to antecedent texts

and authors from which/whom he constantly borrows materials”⁸ which he then subverts to satisfy his creative impulse. Harry Garuba suggests that this inclination to challenge previous plays, orthodox historiography and conventional wisdom is done by engaging contemporary historical facts in a debate to question and expose the subtexts. The nature of Yorùbá culture furthers and encourages this kind of engagement and exploration. Traditional Yorùbá city-states were sub-divided into twenty-five kingdoms with centralised governments. Each Yorùbá town generally maintains its own local interpretation of history, myth and the various religious traditions which guard the structure and organisation of the town. This sense of independence fosters variances in the interpretations due to, among other reasons, conflicts and results of internecine wars that were quite common among the Yorùbá in the pre-colonial period, until 1886, when a peace treaty was signed to end the last major war.⁹ Even historical legends and mythology are presented differently, depending on the political alliances among the kingdoms. Deconstructing the myths and history therefore is validated in Òsófísán’s dramatic engagement, and in the way he decodes the cultural reasons for many of the interpretations generated. In his work, and in the representation of the myths, some of which have become historicised among the Yorùbá people, we find a constant questioning and challenging of these interpretations, and a revelation of how they have now become interwoven with other myths, and how the culture have also become influenced or inscribed by elements from other cultures with which it has interacted.

Òsófísán couches his dramaturgy in a web of music, dance, songs and rich dialogue to evolve an aesthetics he has described as “strategies of enlightened guile that will ensure [the

⁸ Harry Garuba, 2002: 136-145.

⁹ Kírìjì War, the war between the Èkiti and Ìjèsà allied forces against the Ìbàdàn imperial forces, was fought at Ìmèsí-Ilé between 1877-1886.

playwright and collaborators] do not become the careless victims of official thugs”¹⁰, especially in his constant “dialogue” with the socio-political hegemonies in his universe. This strategy involves the manipulation of the mechanics and metaphors of playmaking and of performance in such a way that they do not directly expose themselves to immediate repression. He does this by appropriating the works of other writers and cultures, which sometimes lends a postmodern consciousness that questions and suggests new ways of interpreting ideas, to his dramatic engagements. With this consciousness, the works present a model that is foregrounded as a major part of Òsófísán’s dramaturgy, a device which aptly privileges the older work, thereby elevating the importance of the newer work. This realisation creates “an environment that promises... adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world”¹¹, and which offers avenues and opportunities for the playwright to present new alternative visions and other perspectives to the conceptualisation of the injustice and other dramaturgical concerns. However, this conscious deployment of intertextual modalities “creates new unforeseen problems that often lead to mass terror, overwhelming economic disparities, and unprecedented environmental issues”¹², among other issues, in the playwright’s efforts. To avoid this, Òsófísán introduces dialogues and interactions that go beyond Brechtian mode of dramatic engagement with his audience. In essence, he has taken drama away from the African shrine, metaphorically and symbolically, and brought it to the public square, where the mechanics of drama are exposed at the same time as the drama exposes the social and political terrors of living— the market (as in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, 1980), or the junction (as in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, 1984), or, more recently, to the theatre of war in *The Women of Owu* (2004), postcolonial questioning (*Tegonni: An African Antigone*, 1999) and globalisation (*Wèsóo, Hamlet! Or The Resurrection of Hamlet*, 2012). All these dramas remove

¹⁰ Femi Òsófísán, 2016: 82.

¹¹ Marchall Berman, 1983: 15.

¹² Iyunola Osagie, 2017: 3.

the essence of African realism, the notion that theatre is a replication of ritual codes and ethos for social rebirth, and invite the audience to be part of the engagement, of the questioning. In virtually all his plays, Òsófísán advocates radical social changes based on this ideological position. History and myths provide for him clarifying agents to examine the present, the critical exposition of which suggests ideas for a positive alternative future by unmasking the anguish created by the unmediated ancient formalistic myths or rituals in the society.

The Dialectics of Surreptitious Insurrection

Òsófísán's dramaturgy evolved in the 1970s to respond to the political and neo-colonial situations in Nigeria. He started writing plays critical of the military government in Nigeria, basing his drama on history, and sometimes adapting existing texts, in a method that stylistically imitates the tactics often evoked by Èsù¹³, the Yorùbá god, to evade censorship or avoid political persecution by the regime. Yorùbá culture and the performances that originate from it have always interwoven with other cultures, becoming more diverse and more intercultural after Arab incursion, and later British colonisation of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the politics of the postcolonial society. For, as Richard Schechner reminds us, "no culture is 'pure' – that is, no culture is 'itself'. Overlays, borrowings and mutual influencing have always made every culture a conglomerate, a hybrid, a palimpsest"¹⁴.

In an essay, "Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos"¹⁵, Òsófísán observes that:

The dramatic heritage available to us has simply proved to be inadequate. And it is not only that the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect, it is also that the very metaphysical *raison d'être* of that machinery has been eroded with the advent of a new socio-political philosophy.

¹³ Èsù is the Yorùbá god that directs adherence to traditions, customs and cultural purity between the other gods and also among human beings, where he mediates on the human choices.

¹⁴ Richard Schechner, 1991: 308.

¹⁵ Femi Òsófísán, 2001: 92.

In this piece in which Òsófísán meditates on the role of myth and ritual in Nigerian theatre and the guiding principles of his own work, he identifies the idealising and mystifying qualities of myth as one of the problems that the contemporary playwright concerned with the dynamics of history must confront. He argues that since myths and rituals were used in traditional societies as tools for ‘communal retrieval’ and survive into the present as paradigms that transcend their historical origins, writers continually reproduce and represent them in their works, thereby according these tales a hegemonic power borne of insistent repetition. However, these myths, Òsófísán insists, have lost their efficacy in the currency of the social transformation brought about by the socio-political reality of colonisation, western education and the introduction of new philosophical and scientific concepts. In his plays, Òsófísán seeks to break this hegemonic hold by using the myths, rituals and history only as metaphors, as paradigmatic sites from which to conduct an interrogation of contemporary cultural and political issues, and to ‘repackage’ the argument of postcolonialism from the position of interculturality, or lateralness that lends itself to a post-postcolonial interpretation. However, he still recognises the importance of the corpus of traditional philosophy and knowledge; hence his adoption of Òrúnmílà and Èsù as patron muses because of Òrúnmílà’s role as the repository of wisdom and Èsù’s role as the link between the gods and human beings.

Òsófísán expresses in plays such as *Tegonni: An African Antigone* and *Wèsóo, Hamlet! Or The Resurrection of Hamlet* that, through the ages and in various cultural settings, political hegemonies have the same root in tyranny, and that myths are employed to inscribe this tyranny into the life of the people. Indeed, the value of his work as intercultural is in the reading of stages of realism into the actions woven into the cultures of influence in the plays, whether within Yorùbá or in the relationship between Yorùbá and other cultures. Yorùbá myths become raw materials to be interrogated and appropriated into the corpus of non-African performance

traditions, conventions and cultural styles. More often, this is done to mirror what is operative in Òsófísán's multicultural Nigerian society which, in its cosmopolitanism, absorbs the influences and interactions of other non-Nigerian (non-Yorùbá) cultures, particularly Arab, European and other Western cultures and practices. What Òsófísán is saying when he states that "the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect"¹⁶ is that the old rituals, and conversely, performance cultures, have proved inadequate to contend with these modern postcolonial realities. In play after play, he has attempted deliberate revisions of Yorùbá mythologies, often as a re-reading or adaptation of European classics. Òsófísán's idea of "insurrection" is not a position against myth, rituals, history or imperialism in whatever form, but rather clarity of intention based on choices that are not predetermined by any kind of hegemony; a re-assessment of past methods with a view to making them relevant for the present, using materialist principles. This form of writing privileges performances and ideas that coalesce under an intercultural umbrella.

Òsófísán's choice of Èsù as an inspirational patron emphasises the objective level he demands of his characters to determine their destinies, and to formulate these choices within a memorial understanding, within a framework that would enable different peoples, cultures and groups to confidently engage with the drama. Because of this, the dramatic interpretation is always subject to change or reversal and the paradigm of his plays is always dialectical. In finding similarities and parallels between Yorùbá mythology and folklore with modern conflicts, which he exploits in his dramaturgy, Òsófísán invokes Èsù as the agent of metamorphosis. This is more so in *Tegonni*, *Women of Owu*, and *Wèsóo, Hamlet!*, the two texts I am using to engage Òsófísán's dramaturgy. In these plays, the Èsù persona or 'type' provides the choices for both characters and audience and serves as the link to generate meaning between the codes in the drama and the comprehension of the audience. The characters in the plays not only establish

¹⁶ *ibid.*

the dramatic action and influence other characters, but also act as narrators who determine the mood of the performance. The choice of these two plays is significant to my discourse of interculturality and globalisation: written by a Yorùbá dramatist from Africa, the plays were both commissioned by universities in the United States of America.

Tegonni was first presented as a workshop production at Theater Emory of the Emory University, Atlanta, United States of America in 1994, and re-worked for the Nigerian audience at the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 1998. Because of the locations – USA and Nigeria – and the intended audiences, both versions are different, and the emphases are shifted and placed differently, as Òsófísán’s intentions and agenda changed from being reactionary to the pro-democracy protests which were fall-outs of the annulment of the 1993 elections in Nigeria; to being reflective of the postcolonial circumstances that led to the political problems. Òsófísán pitches colonial interpretation of culture against contemporary Yorùbá cultural norms. *Tegonni*, as summarised by Biodun Jeyifo, is set in:

the colonial past and engages colonial domination/authority at the point of its most retrograde, supremacist inscription in ideas of “weaker races” and “inferior, effeminate peoples” and the determination to absolutize, naturalize, and hierarchize racial and cultural difference.¹⁷

Wèsóo, Hamlet!, meanwhile was written and produced for the American audience and staged by the De Pauw Little Theatre Productions of the De Pauw University, America when Osofisan was the Lee G. Hall Distinguished Playwright in Residence in 2003, almost ten years after *Tegonni* was first produced in Atlanta. It was written as an “experiment” to assess the understanding of a “Yoruba man who lived in a post-Gorbachev, and post-Clinton era, especially now that a recent invention called globalisation as we know and live it nowadays is

¹⁷ Osofisan, interviewed by Biodun Jeyifo, 2001: 204.

acceptable to all”¹⁸ The experiment was to use theatre as a tool which traverses cultural barriers to explore globalisation and its effects on Yorùbá people.

Tegonni: An African Antigone: Challenging Colonial Ideology

Tegonni: An African Antigone is one of Òsófísán’s most consciously intertextual drama in highlighting points of connections in texts between cultures. In this play, Òsófísán shares the meaning of *Tegonni* as a context and as a drama, using the familiar Sophocles’ Greek text. The format successfully interconnects the Greek play with the Yorùbá context. However, *Tegonni* is neither a translation nor a parody, but an intertextual adaptation of Sophocles. The text is a device that exploits the interrelationships between the two texts. The intention of Òsófísán here is obligatory and this is apparent in the way he manipulates the texts and the characters to create a co-existence that highlights the significance of the reference, as I explain below.

The context of *Tegonni* is colonial Nigeria in the period between the existence of Yorùbá city-states and the formal colonisation of the country by the British in the late 19th century. To understand how Òsófísán determinedly exploits the principles of intercultural performance culture in *Tegonni*, it is imperative to examine the antecedents to the play. Òsófísán’s version owes its basic plotting to the Greek original. Òsófísán closely engages with *Antigone’s* plot, to the extent of finding parallels between Yorùbá and Greek cultures and incorporating characters from the earlier play into *Tegonni*. The other major antecedent to Òsófísán’s play is the colonial context; the pacification of African peoples by European powers in the 19th century and the inscription of the colonial rules into the awareness of the people. Òsófísán connects the oppressive attitude of Creon in Sophocles’ play to the major political and economic events

¹⁸ Eyitayo Aloh, 2003 (online).

leading to uprising against British rule in Nigeria in the early 20th century, discourse of which echoes the pan-African sentiments of the colonial and post-colonial period.

Pan-Africanism is one of the more influential concepts or movements on many African countries in the periods before and immediately after political independence from the various European colonial powers. The main goal is the unity of Africans and the elimination of colonialism and the concept of neo-colonialism from the African continent. Started in the United States of America and England by descendants of slaves, it had leaders such as Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois. Pan-Africanism was adopted by African leaders in 1958 at the First Conference of Independent African States in Accra, Ghana, and incorporated into the charter of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) when it was formed in 1963. The charter announced:

determination to promote understanding among our peoples and co-operation among states in response to the aspirations of our peoples for brotherhood and solidarity, in a larger unity transcending ethnic and national differences [and a desire] that all African States should henceforth unite so that the welfare and wellbeing of their peoples can be assured.¹⁹

Pan-Africanism had two main objectives: to liberate Africans and the African diaspora from racial and political oppression and economic exploitation; and to achieve political, cultural, and economic integration among African countries. Òsófisan's attempt to identify his work with pan-Africanism is centred on finding the cause of Africa's underdevelopment and the connection of this to the interplay between different cultures in Africa, particularly in the way the cultures have been used to enhance the ideals of pan-Africanism and to find parallels with other cultures outside Africa. Pan-Africanism, as presented by Òsófisan in his plays, is close to the ideals of the late Ghanaian leader, Kwame Nkrumah, "but as only one of the measures

¹⁹ See www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/text/OAU_Charter_1963.pdf.

necessary for the process of creating an egalitarian, socialist society”²⁰ on the continent. The agitation for good governance by democrats served as a form of catalyst, influencing Òsófísán’s direction regarding pan-Africanism. In a sense, his drama presents shadows of the pan-African form. Another major factor in Òsófísán’s play is the appropriation of Yorùbá myth and legend; Òsófísán introduces Yemoja, the Yorùbá river goddess to bridge the transition between the classical past and the dramatic present, and between the pre-colonial legendary past and the colonial realities of both Greece and Europe. Not only does Yemoja navigate this gulf, she enables Antigone to become translated from the Greek princess to a mythical supporter of Tegonni. Essentially, *Tegonni* is a ‘post-scription’ whose aim is re-presenting colonial narratives and re-viewing original prejudices.²¹ Òsófísán pitches colonial interpretation of culture against contemporary Yorùbá cultural norms. Precisely a juncture where the interaction between cultures is at its most involving, most observable and therefore more dangerous. Sophocles’ play ponders on the values of morality against the tyranny of human law and tries to differentiate between the attraction of a strong leader and the power of a tyrant. Òsófísán’s argument in *Tegonni* centres on the dialectics of power play between the oppressed and the oppressor; the ruled and the ruler; the female aggressor and the male colonialist in an imperial context, in a battle of cultural superiority.

Tegonni is situated in the imaginary northern Yorùbá town of Oke Osun in the late 19th century when British imperial power was at its zenith in Nigeria. Princess Tegonni is about to be married to Capt. Allan Jones, the District Officer for the area. As the wedding procession moves

²⁰ Femi Osofisan, 2001: 158.

²¹ I use the term “post-scription” here for narratives whose aim is to explain or re-present colonial narratives in a more acceptable manner, acceptable in the sense of erasing original prejudices expressed by the original narratives. See Sola Adeyemi, “Review of Haggard, H. Rider. *Diary of an African Journey: The Return of Rider Haggard*”. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. October 2000. URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4626>.

from the palace to the market square, it encounters the corpse of the bride's elder brother, Oyekunle (Polyneices), guarded by stern soldiers, with orders not to allow the body to be buried. This is to serve as punishment for him disobeying colonial rulers instead of collaborating with them, like his junior brother, Adoloro (Eteocles). In a moment of defiance, Tegonni symbolically buries her brother, an action that enrages the colonial governor, Lt. General Carter-Ross, and earns her a death sentence. The governor offers to grant an amnesty if she openly apologises, "before the whole town".²² The governor also orders Jones to cancel the wedding, reiterating the political expediency behind the colonial project, which was to conquer and rule for the economic benefit of the Empire²³, and equates the bringing of the Christian cross to the "savages" as a civilising and cultural cleansing act. The women stage a protest to rescue Tegonni, which further enrages the governor. He threatens to sell her into slavery, like her ancestors. In the final confrontation, he suffers a heart attack while Tegonni is killed by gunshots. In this text, *Òsófisán* engages with *Antigone*, using the Greek play as an antithesis to re-write and re-define the colonial history of the Yorùbá people.

In the drama, Tegonni's plan to marry Allan Jones is, as Chief Isokun, the official town historian, says at the beginning of the play, an error that could turn her into an outcast²⁴; she is committing cultural suicide and repudiating her position amongst the people as the custodian of the community's customs and traditions in her role as a princess. There is a feeling that Tegonni is aware of this and is generating a discourse between the European colonial project and Yorùbá cultural survival by provoking a meeting of European and Yorùbá cultures on a level that not only challenges but equally suggests a new understanding of the colonial

²² *Tegonni*, 2007: 93.

²³ For more on this, see Lugard, F. D., *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1922).

²⁴ *Tegonni*, 2007: 12.

relationship. However, this provocation is a start; the main strategy of *Òsófísán* is to privilege Tegonni and elevate the Yorùbá codes and dramatic techniques as well as validate the colonial struggle against the British in contrast to the struggles of Antigone against Creon. Tegonni conceives this from an angle different from the male-dominated political relationship that the colonial project maintained with the colonial subjects.

Tegonni's femininity, therefore, has profound effects on meanings that can be drawn from her character and the dramatic actions, and ultimately the resolution of the drama in revealing the agency of resistance to colonial and imperial tyranny in Nigeria, from the perspective of the dramatist, and for deconstructing the colonial relationship. Yorùbá society is patriarchal and there is a limit to the political roles of women in the governance of the community or in decision-making. Tegonni's role in the community changes, however, on her learning about the death of her brothers; she becomes a figure of resistance. The main difference between Tegonni and Antigone is that, while Antigone's action is to defy Creon and bury Polyneices, Tegonni's role is more complex and trickier. Tegonni's role involves provoking a discourse about contemporary issues of tyranny and erosion of the African culture. Her resistance is against the colonial structure and its draconian rules; it is against the cultural imperative of her people, which dictates a woman's position in the community; it is also against the colonial project which wants the inscription of British culture into the landscape of the Yorùbá to erode the native culture. She fights on all fronts, and gradually, the spiral effect of her action gathers more strength and more understanding as her community accepts her views about resistance as a precursor to co-existence. Impressions about her change from that of a disgraced and rejected woman to that of a woman who uses surreptitious means to defeat the might of the colonial power. The discourse is no longer about the right or wrong of colonial tyranny; rather the discourse is the subtlety of feminine guile against the brute force of imperialism; and the synthesis, the resultant authority, is the triumph of the individual over the state in engineering

that discourse. Control of power becomes transmuted from a white, male-dominated extreme (Carter-Ross) to another extreme dominated by a young black female. Tegonni's resistance, her antithesis to Carter-Ross' thesis, defines a synthesis that integrates into the pan-African discourse.

Òsófísán writes Tegonni into the history of other "Antigones" – revolutionary figures in history – and makes her focus similar to that of Sophocles' Antigone as a revolutionary figure. This is observable in the trajectory of dramatic action in the first performance of the play at Emory University in 1993, where *Tegonni* was presented as an embodiment of resistance and civil dissent to the political crisis in Nigeria fashioned by the annulment of a presidential election in June 1993²⁵. Giving Tegonni and Antigone equal status is Òsófísán's way of stating Yorùbá culture's equality to other cultures; his point is that no culture is superior to the other and the colonial imperative was unacceptable on that basis. Òsófísán reveals this pan-African agenda of *Tegonni* when governor Carter-Ross raises the issue of slavery during the conversation with Reverend Bayo Campbell, a southern American Baptist Church missionary, who is acting as the 'father of the bride' at the wedding of Jones and Tegonni. Not only is he intolerant of Campbell, he suspects the religious activities of missionaries as being subversive and of anti-imperial interest. The empire can only exercise its authority over the "natives" if black people know their place; which does not include sitting beside the white master as a Christian missionary or as a wife. Therefore, Carter-Ross espouses the racist ideologies and practices of European colonisation in Africa, which pan-African ideas seek to repudiate. The European construction of the colonised, in this case black Africans, has always been that of inferior

²⁵ The military government of General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) cancelled the results of the presidential elections and arrested the winner, Chief Moshood Abiola. This led to a series of protests and civil disobedience in the country. Fémi Òsófísán wrote the play to respond to the "series of episodes in a grandiose melodrama [where] everything is acted out to the screaming pitch of hysteria" (recorded at a forum in the Munroe Theatre auditorium, Emory University, October 1993). The 'Programme Notes' to *Tegonni* supports this by stressing the terrors of contemporary Nigeria rather than the colonial past, which can "detract from the pressing business of freedom and justice in present-day Nigeria".

beings to be domesticated – seeing and never heard – and certainly never to be classified as the equal of white people. Òsófísán therefore re-interprets and rewrites the exchanges of power politics and cultural relationships, using one of the most influential European classics. Carter-Ross as a character is a tyrannical government official acting to defend colonialism and uphold the colonial code against miscegenation and cultural equality; Creon in Sophocles’ original similarly arrogates to himself the responsibility to defend the law. Òsófísán shows us that through the ages, especially among the Yorùbá, political hegemonies sometimes have root in tyranny; and that myths are employed to inscribe this tyranny into the life of the people. This range from the elevation of the gods, the patriarchal social structure, and the colonial project, to the institution of military and civilian governments in the postcolony. Whilst Òsófísán uses an intertextual *Tegonni* to confront power, in *Wèsóo, Hamlet! Or The Resurrection of Hamlet (Re-reading of Shakespeare’s Hamlet)*, we see an articulation of the African political process through an intercultural re-reading of Shakespeare’s intertextual text.

***Wèsóo, Hamlet!:* Re-reading Interculturalism**

The conception of *Wèsóo, Hamlet!* as a critique of a globalisation that is founded on uninhibited capitalism and personal enrichment in Africa is rooted in an intercultural exercise weaved around Yorùbá mythology, historiography, and a re-reading of one of the most influential of Shakespeare’s dramas, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*; with the characters from that play recalled by Òsófísán’s muse to redeem themselves and their roles in history, and to rewrite their colonial heritage as precursors of Western hegemony and cultural genocide, removed from their European heritage in the former British colony of Nigeria.

Globalisation, for our purpose, is a process that has “produced the characteristic conditions of contemporary existence... [and] made it possible to begin to imagine the world as a single, global space linked by a wide array of technological, economic, social and cultural forces”²⁶. In a 2004 speech²⁷, Òsófísán explains his stance on globalisation and states a position akin to that of Imre Szeman but that at the same time emphasises that globalisation is not a recent phenomenon. If we accept Szeman’s definition, which though refers to the present condition of relationships in the world, we can recognise the significance of the phenomenon in the development of relationships between cultures, not as the removal of government-imposed restrictions whose implications extend to practically every sphere of contemporary existence, but as the creation and engendering of an open and borderless world²⁸. Globalisation and globalised imagination can be traced to the Age of Discovery, when European explorers²⁹ began the historic link with non-European lands and peoples, a link which led to the slave trade, and to the beginning of the colonial project that remoulded vast lands as colonies of European countries. Its recent incarnation however is a ploy to consolidate the cultural and economic dominance of the new “American empire” and subordinate other nation-states through economic and political factors that are illusionary at best, and fantastical in the extreme. One of the ways to question the consequences of globalisation in Africa is to admit that no culture is sacrosanct or static, or as John Donne puts it, “no man is an island entire of itself”³⁰. The re-imagination of our cultures requires a review or a public discourse, in consideration with other cultures, especially the cultures that were part of the imperial incursion into Africa, or that are now cast as part of the new world order. This questioning is most apparent in *Wèsóo, Hamlet!*

²⁶ Imre Szeman, 2001: 209.

²⁷ Femi Òsófísán, “The Humanities and Globalization”, delivered at Kogi State University, Nigeria on 28 April 2004 (now published in Òsófísán, Femi, *The Muse of Anomy: Essays on Literature and the Humanities in Nigeria*, Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2016).

²⁸ See Jan Aart Scholte, 2000: 16.

²⁹ I am fixing the position around this people for matters of literary convenience and this does not ignore the explorations of Arab traders, Romans and others before this period.

³⁰ See Meditation XVII in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624).

where Òsófisán engages the interconnectedness between the intercultural world of Hamlet and that of a composite Yorùbá culture.

Situated in Yorùbáland, Nigeria, in a deliberately undefined period in the last half of the 20th century and located in an area that is ambiguously removed³¹ from the centre of Yorùbá politics and cultural supremacy, *Wèsóo, Hamlet!* evokes the intrigues in the historical palace of Òyó. The location at Ìlàje-Ìjèbú Waterside seems however to be for dramatic reasons, as there is no reference to the political and economic cultures of that area in the script; rather, aspects of Yorùbá Òyó traditions are apparent in the text. The author clarifies his intention to “make the situation general to the whole of Yorùbáland – indeed, to Africa – rather than restricting it to a specific Yorùbá area”³² as a key to exploring the effect of postcolonial market forces in Africa. Before discussing and interculturally re-reading the text however, to adequately define the context, we need to look at the unusual structure of the play, based on the nature of the characters.

There are three ‘types’ of characters in the play, reinforcing the three-pronged subtext of the drama. As in *Tegonni*, where Tegonni becomes a symbol to subversively confront power and elevate the discourse of cultural equality, the characters in *Wèsóo, Hamlet!* are encoded to function as ciphers in furtherance of deconstructing the African postcolony. The first characters are the Masks, representing the ancestors in the form of masquerades.³³ Being ancestral spirits, they represent the link between the living and the dead, and between the other two sets of characters. According to Yorùbá mythology, ancestral spirits reside in the chthonic realm, the

³¹ “ambiguously removed” because, though the play is set in Ìlàje-Ìjèbú Waterside, in the furthest south west part of Yorùbá kingdom, the plot is centralised around the court practices of the Aafin of Òyó, the political capital of pre-colonial Yorùbáland, located in the northern part of the kingdom.

³² Femi Òsófisán, 2012: vi.

³³ ‘Mask’ and ‘Masquerade’ refer to a performance given by masked characters and to the masked performer (i.e. *egúngún*). Masquerades have no race or gender; they are ancestral spirits; and in this text represent spirits from other cultures all under the control of the Yorùbá Òrúnmìlà god, whom Òsófisán has rendered ‘global’.

bridging space between the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, where they have the capability of traversing between these spaces to influence the worlds of the living and the unborn³⁴. The role of the ancestral spirits in this text is primarily to bridge the divide between the world of Yorùbá antiquity, the Western dramaturgy of Shakespeare and the narratives of postcolonial experience in modern Nigeria. At the beginning of the play, the masks dance in a swirling mass of shapes and colours to emphasise their universality, before the Messenger from Òrúnmilà³⁵ interrupts: the ancestral spirits must transform into living forms of their former selves and go to Yorùbáland, to prevent a recurrence of a tragedy similar to that of the Danish Hamlet. The Messenger singles out three main characters from the drama of Shakespeare – Hamlet, Claudius and Ophelia. Òsófísán here is not only being intertextual and intercultural in introducing the characters from Shakespeare’s text, he is deliberately imbuing the dramatic characters with the appeal of their original culture, the European culture, essentially creating in them Europeans who will cross the sea of time to interact with others in Yorùbáland, in the same way their presumed ancestors had crossed the Atlantic sea to dominate and colonise Yorùbáland in the 19th century; and in the same manner that Antigone had crossed the seas on Yemoja’s ship to support Tegonni. The three characters are instructed to “participate” in the

recurrence in Yorùbáland, all in the hope that
The tragedy that is about to break may be averted³⁶

The third group of characters form the Court and townspeople from the Yorùbá community, who are calculatingly split into three historical periods: the pre-colonial period represented by one of the most despotic kings of Yorùbáland, Ayíbí, who reigned as the Alaafin of Òyó between 1678-1690. Ayíbí became king at a very young age but died quite young, possibly in his late teens or early twenties. As Samuel Johnson writes:

³⁴ For more on an explanation of the Yorùbá mythology concerning the role of the ancestral spirits, see Wole Soyinka, 1976.

³⁵ Òrúnmilà is the chief god in the Yorùbá pantheon of gods. He is the keeper of knowledge and the god of divination and oracles, and is regarded as Olodumare’s deputy in matters pertaining to omniscience and wisdom.

³⁶ Femi Òsófísán, 2012: 8.

he proved unworthy of the honour and respect done him; he greatly disappointed the hopes of the nation. This may have been due to a great defect in his training when a minor, over-indulgence taking the place of strict discipline. He proved to be a tyrant who took delight in shedding blood. When any suit was brought to court for his decision he often gave judgment by ordering both complainant and defendant to be executed... an insurrection was stirred up against him, and being rejected he committed suicide.³⁷

With Ayíbí as the character of Claudius who murdered the former king, Sayédèrò, are personae whose names are aptronymic because of the roles they play in the drama: Létò (Hamlet); Ìyámode (the trusted keeper of the burial vault, who also doubles as the Horatio figure); Olori (the queen/Gertrude); and Òjè (the musician/court poet/narrator). These are traditional roles that survive the pre-colonial period to the present day in Yorùbáland. Then there are the modern characters who are composites of current Nigerians in their response to the effects of globalisation, including Tùndùn, who is Òsófísán's Ophelia, and Àdùké, who rather than being the Laertes figure, plays an equivocal role in the resolution of the drama.

There have been several retellings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* over the ages, but in Òsófísán's version, there is a departure from retelling the narrative or adapting the drama. Instead, we have a 're-reading', a re-appraisal of the text from a postcolonial Yorùbá context/perspective. Though the plot is similar, Òsófísán does more to remove the situation of the play from the Danish court to Yorùbáland; he creates new engagements from the characters, including between Shakespeare's characters and his own, and adds stronger reasons for the rise of Ayíbí to the throne as well as for Claudius to defy Òrúnmilà and justify his action rather than liberate his former self from the guilt of regicide. The clue to Òsófísán's objective with the play is in the title: *Wèsóo, Hamlet!* The title invites us to re-encounter *Hamlet* as postcolonial text; to look behind the veil of Hamlet's revenge at the intrigues in the Danish court. More importantly, Òsófísán invites us to read supplementary meanings into the aims of Shakespeare's characters,

³⁷ Samuel Johnson, *A History of the Yorùbás* (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1971 (1921): 172-173)

and to simplify this for us, he fills the gaps in the original texts from materials provided by Yorùbá culture and modern economic motivations. “Wèsóo” in Ìjèbú-Yorùbá, translates to something along the line of: “I respectfully acknowledge you. Tell me how you have fared since the last time we saw”. *Wèsóo, Hamlet!* is an invitation to dialogue; a meeting between the dramatic world of Òsófísán’s Yorùbáland and that of Elizabethan England. For the dialogue to be meaningful, Hamlet has to be “resurrected” from the ancestral fields and encounter Létò in circumstances that replicate the original conflict as well as present new options for redemption. And not alone, but with the major players in the original text – Claudius and Ophelia – who are designed to satisfy the postcolonial agenda of Òsófísán to question and interrogate the idea of globalisation in Nigeria.

Hamlet is resurrected as an African, as himself as well as in Létò, his Yorùbá “self”. He serves as a narrator and a cautionary voice, but he is moulded as an agent wary of interfering in local African affairs or perhaps he is still too scarred by his fate to encode a coherent response to the unfolding scenario, or even prevent Létò from making same or similar mistakes. Ophelia equally appears psychologically incapacitated and both prove ineffective against the ingenuity of Claudius. Claudius reminds us of Carter-Ross in *Tegonni* although he is more shadowy and more covert in his game of redemption, making his effectiveness more devious and his role more neo-colonial. Carter-Ross in *Tegonni* was performing an imperial duty in furthering the colonial project; however, for Claudius, his role is unsanctioned as he is sent by Òrúnmilà from the ancestral realm to ‘avert’ the tragedy of Hamlet, or in this case, of Létò and the postcolonial problems of global infrastructure and economic mandate of the tobacco company – in essence, to remedy the neo-colonial effects of free market economy which foregrounds profits to the detriment of humanity and cultural survival.

Létò means “ilé tò” as in ‘organised homestead’ or ‘peaceful homestead’, or someone who is an organiser or solver of problems. Therefore, we are persuaded to imagine this incarnation as

a character that is going to be the voice of reason and common sense in an uncommon situation. He is faced with the same situation as Shakespeare's Hamlet, but he is not only fortified with the historical knowledge of the existence of Hamlet's pitfalls, he is aware of the ideals of good governance, his role in the community and Ayíbí's ambition to create a tobacco industry in his own interest. Ayíbí's ambition is well defined: he seeks to build a tobacco factory for economic profit to satisfy the demands of his foreign business partners who places a lot of importance on the economic implication of such a factory, despite the health arguments against the venture. First, having a tobacco factory in Yorùbáland, with a Yorùbá monarch as the chief executive, would forestall any argument of exploitation by a foreign company. The argument that the factory would provide benefits, including hospitals, public infrastructure and modern technological advancements funded from the profits of the tobacco business, in fact, highlights the danger of globalisation and globalised economy, where the advantages seem to be unidirectional. It is a capitalist venture, with the main beneficiaries of any gain being the West. It also opens the society to unintended repercussions, such as cancer from the tobacco products as well as creating an environment of initiatives that oppress and exploit the people; the hospitals and laboratories could become dumping grounds for cheap medication and dangerous experiments. The subtext provides clarity for Òsófísán's definition of globalisation about the menace of the single global space moderated by the "American empire" and the rise of a new global imperative.

Obtaining the crown and marrying the widow of the former king are enabling acts in the realisation of Ayíbí's ambition for personal aggrandisement and greed. In *Wèsóo, Hamlet!*, Òsófísán defines Claudius's ambition in Act 3 Scene 3 of *Hamlet*: "Of those effects for which I did the murder'/My crown, mine own ambition and my queen". That ambition is revealed here as a global enterprise that may be harmful to Ayíbí's people whilst benefitting the leader.

To make the ambition more resonant, Òsófísán creates a connection with the Atlantic slave trade, which started around the Elizabethan period, and the colonial project that came later:

Oba Ayíbí: Oh, of course! I forget it was under you that those adventurers came here, tricked our people, and negotiated the treaties that turned us into slaves in our own homeland.

Claudius: Are you complaining? The tobacco company that's keeping your cheeks fat and gleaming, Kabiyesi, what difference is there between that, and the slave ships we used to send here? We take what we have to take, even if some people call that exploitation. And we pay those among you willing to cooperate!

Oba Ayíbí: Oh come, you know it's different now! Now we make these sacrifices for progress!

Claudius: Sacrifices! Is that what you call your bank account in Switzerland! Those slave dealers of old, what else do you think they called the mirrors and beads and guns and whisky that we brought them? Yes, those second-hand shirts and waistcoats? Were they not "items of civilization", just like your tobacco factory!³⁸

Òsófísán finds the same culture of exploitation that was in colonialism, in the effects of globalisation in Africa. This is much like the economic plans of the Owu people (in *Women of Owu*) whose interests in economic profit overshadow the cultural and political interests of keeping the Yorùbá nation safe, whereby they not only trade in slavery with the Fulani (Fellatah) and the Arabs, but also with the Portuguese, British and French slave traders from the coast, and sell other Yorùbá people for guns, trinkets and alcoholic drinks.

It is the ambition of Ayíbí and that of the reincarnated Claudius that makes redemption difficult for the latter to achieve, and that scripts the African postcolony into the global cultural infrastructure. Claudius will be proven right; and Ayíbí will be reinstated into the glory of the esteemed lineage of the kings instead of a disgraced monarch who committed suicide. As Claudius puts it, in justifying his underhand tactics to Hamlet and Ophelia:

"All these centuries that I have borne the opprobrium of men! How do you think I feel? Each time they told our story, who was always the villain, always the scoundrel, always the evil one! Claudius! Yes, me! Such a long and painful burden of shame! How do you think I've felt? But you were the heroes! Hamlet! Ophelia!

³⁸ Femi Òsófísán, 2012: 69.

You were the ones everyone sought to be! The ones remembered with affection!
But Claudius? Claudius! Well, now, at last, all that's going to change! The history
books will be re-written. The fable will reconstruct itself. This time, one person
alone will be left standing, among all the corpses. And it'll be me! Me, my
reincarnated self! Me to bury you all, and establish my own glory! At last!³⁹

But more relevant to our study is the third part of the play's title, "Re-reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*". In this case, to read *Hamlet* again, not as Shakespeare's play about the Danish prince, but as a text that 'speaks' to the postcolonial situation of economic imperialism; to read again and find meanings, not to the psychological madness of Ophelia, but to the ideological insistence of Túndùn (Ophelia's alter) to rid the community of the tobacco company. She is of the view that Létò's preoccupation with the factory is a hindrance to their happiness as a couple, and this can only be remedied by the destruction of the tobacco factory. Túndùn expresses her antagonism by burning down the factory despite the danger to her health. She inhales the poisonous fumes and dies. This singular act of sacrifice elevates the role of Túndùn from that of a woman who wants her fiancé back by removing the contentious element – the tobacco factory – to that of a character whose deconstruction interweaves the Yorùbá culture with that of the West to dismantle the agency of globalisation. Túndùn's action, rather than being a negative presentation of the reality of the danger of globalisation, reveals a deeper materialist capability to re-form the society along the path of resistance and commitment, and rid it of the corrosive effects of imperialism. In countering the threat of destruction of the society by the effects of tobacco, she has paradoxically domesticated the tactics of globalisation. By ruthlessly and selfishly destroying the agent that impedes her happiness, she has consciously intervened in the curtailment of the new form of cultural and economic exploitation. As a character, she seems the closest to Ìyámòde (the keeper of the burial vault and the cultural archive) in her perception of the significance of culture and globalisation, and her sacrifice serves as the

³⁹ *ibid.*, 84.

transformation that the society requires to forge a more advantageous intercultural strategy in this age of globalised economics. Òsófísán also invites us to read the play in the context of the idealism of Létò in rebuilding his father's heritage and repositioning the community along the path of advancement that is not subject to global exploitation; not as a text that explores revenge but a drama that views the economic culture, social factors, cultural connectivity, and the interrelationship between European classics and Yorùbá mythology from an intercultural position. This re-reading surreptitiously promotes acts of resistance in accepting the status quo but advocates a different direction of the discourse.

Coda

In *Wèsóo, Hamlet!*, Òsófísán introduces an “alter/native” ideological perspective⁴⁰, a perspective that deconstructs the accepted realities of the world of Hamlet/Létò. He weaves a web of intrigues that places Claudius/Ayíbí in the forefront of the global issues – economic, political and military. The interpretation of this perspective in the context of this drama is one that subverts contemporary realities of the influence of *Hamlet* in world literature and reinvents the classical relationship between Africa and the rest of the world as equal, encouraging an intercultural alliance that rephrases and repositions postcolonialism, exchange of power politics and economic co-operation in a shifting global relationship. Tegonni's effort is hampered by the colonial project and the lack of recognition of the postcolonial sensibilities. However, the effect of globalisation, though subtler, presents a more visible framework for Létò to interrogate and contest. This form of contestation is the manifestation of uncommon sense or the ‘surreptitious insurrection’ that is the goal of Òsófísán's dramaturgy.

⁴⁰Olu Obafemi, 1996: 119.

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