

**THE CHARACTER AND THE DRAMATIC ACTION:
A Playwright's Window on Ovonramwen**
In Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

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Abstract

Ola Rotimi's characterisation of Ovonramwen in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* has generated dissatisfaction among critics, chief among whom are Michael Etherton and Chris Dunton. While attempting to place these critics' views in proper perspective, this paper assesses Rotimi's characterisation of Ovonramwen against the theory of characterisation and also against the dramatic action of the play, since the character and the dramatic action inexorably impact each other. The finding is that Ovonramwen is too weak to effectively participate as an antagonist in the dramatic action that the White man foisted on his Empire, and his weakness is traced to Rotimi's poor constitution of Ovonramwen's three dimensions—physiology, sociology and psychology which contrasts remarkably with Ahmed Yerima's, in the latter's play, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. The significance of the paper is, primarily, to the student of playwriting, who needs to identify the building blocks for effective characterisation and, secondarily, to students, actors and directors of the play, whose understanding of it may depend on the keen analysis of Ovonramwen's character here provided.

**The Character and the Dramatic Action: A Playwright's Window
on Ovonranwen In Ola Rotimi's *Ovonrammwen Nogbaisi***

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to critically assess Ola Rotimi's characterization of Ovonranmwew, in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, against the theory of characterization. Therefore, we shall review

the theory of characterization in relation to dramatic action and both the theory and the dramatic action in relation to representative earlier criticism of Rotimi's characterisation of Ovonramwen.

We shall also make comparative references to the characterisation of the same Ovonramwen in Ahmed Yerima's later play, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. This may help the student of playwriting to identify the appropriate building blocks for effective or ineffective characterization vis-a-vis the dramatic action. It may also be useful to students, actors and directors of the play, who may find the analysis of Ovonramwen's character as central to understanding the play.

The paper is in five sections, namely Introduction, Relationship of Character to Dramatic Action, Theory of Characterisation, Ovonramwen and the Dramatic Action in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, and Conclusion.

Relationship of Character to Dramatic Action

In *Poetics VI*, Aristotle identifies six parts of tragedy, namely Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Song. Of these, he says, plot is the most important:

For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists of action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes as a subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and

the plot are the end of a tragedy: and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character (Cited in Dukore 36).

It is difficult to agree with Aristotle here. If tragedy is an imitation of action and of life and not of men, that implies, falsely, that we can have meaningful action and life on stage and on earth without men, and that the action and life that tragedy imitates are not those of men. In fact, Aristotle's second sentence above contradicts the claim of the first in two ways: it suggests that characters, indeed, engender actions; it further suggests that their qualities determine the qualities of their actions, which may make them "happy or the reverse". The actions that those men engender, are they different from the tragic actions in the plays in which they feature? The end of tragedy, therefore, is not "the incidents and the plot", but the effect of the action of the character, the happiness or sadness of it, from which mankind learns a lesson. It can be argued, therefore, that character is more important than plot or action, for plot is the record of the character's action. If there can be no tragedy without action, how can there be tragedy without character, which generates the action?

Action, dramatic action, is a protagonist's decision in the process of implementation, often in the face of opposition by an antagonist, whose own goal may be ruined by the successful implementation of the protagonist's decision. The thematic and entertainment values of the action, its tension and excitement, and the effective propagation or opposition of it, derive from the passion, commitment and strength of the characters involved in it. Passion derives from ardent belief in the action or its opposition. Commitment is the obligation to propel or oppose it relentlessly. Strength is the high capacity and potency of body and mind required to sustain commitment. Hence John H. Lawson, in the

Theory and Technique of Playwriting, asserts that “every great literary work grew from character, even if the author planned the action first. As soon as the characters were created they took precedence, and the action had to be reshaped to suit them” and John Galsworthy claims that “character creates plot, not vice versa” (Cited in Egri 90). Aristotle's confusion in this matter of the relationship between the character and the action is betrayed by his later claim, in *Poetics XV*, that “Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level” (Cited in Dukore 45).

Therefore, the characterization of a protagonist becomes deeply flawed when he lacks the passion, commitment and strength to initiate and propel dramatic action. Similarly, the characterization of an antagonist is flawed if he lacks the passion, commitment and strength to effectively counter or jeopardize the action initiated and propelled by the protagonist, who is usually contrarily motivated against, and in rivalry with, the antagonist. Character is, therefore, so intricately related to dramatic action that the fortunes of one affect the other.

Theory of Characterization

Characterization is the creation and portrayal of characters in a play or a narrative by ascribing to them certain attributes, which make them, not only recognizable, but also distinct from others. This is done by four means: the appearance of the character; his utterances; his actions; and the utterances of other characters concerning him. A single one of these cannot sufficiently delineate a character or guide the audience to fully understand him. Characters are imitations of real people, and, frequently, the looks or utterances of real people have proved deceptive when compared with their actions: their public utterances and actions have been incongruous with their private utterances and actions. Hence, for example, some publicly “devout” pastors of churches in Nigeria have been exposed in the past few years as receivers of stolen cars (Benin), tyrannical defilers of young girls and married women (Lagos), users of human heads

for money and power rituals (Agbor), and many others. Similarly, some reverend fathers of the Catholic Church in America have been discovered, also recently, to indulge in a secret pastime of sexually abusing women and children. This points to the complexity of man. Iago in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, Professor in Wole Soyinka's *The Road* and Ramonu in Zulu Sofola's *The Wizard of Law* are a few of the numerous examples of characters who are representations of such complexity. To delineate such complex characters, the playwright combines, not only the four aforementioned means, but also puts layers and textures to them, if he wishes to imbue the characters with tri-dimensionality and growth. Certainly, not all characters should be so delineated. Though every non-child in real life is complex and tri-dimensional to a certain degree, the playwright has time and space to make only a few characters in a play complex and tri-dimensional. These turn out to be the major characters among whom is the hero, who is usually the protagonist, and the antagonist. The three dimensions of a character are physiology, sociology and psychology. *Physiology* is made up of the sex of the character; the age; height and weight; colour of hair; eyes; skin; posture and poise; appearance, looks and gait; physical defects; and heredity. Of physiology, Egri, in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, says:

Our physical make-up...influences us endlessly, helping to make us tolerant, defiant, humble or arrogant. It affects our mental development, serves as a basis for inferiority and superiority complexes. It is the most obvious of man's [three] dimensions (33).

Sociology describes the social background and interpersonal relationships of the character his race; upbringing, socialization, and education; occupation; religion; political and social affiliations;

class or status; amusements, hobbies, and habits; home life, and outward responses to external stimuli. Partly influenced by physiology and psychology, sociology prepares the grounds or context for ambition or frustration to thrive, for temperament, attitudes, and complexes to manifest. Finally, *psychology*. This is the mental and emotional condition of the character. It is the seat of motivations and decisions, and “gives life to ambition, frustration, temperament, attitudes, complexes” (Egri 34). Moral standards, quality of mind, intelligence and talents also manifest in psychology.

Ovonramwen and the Dramatic Action in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

Now, what is the dramatic action in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*? In other words, what is the protagonist's decision in the process of implementation? Who is the protagonist? In other words, whose decision is in process of implementation? How does Rotimi's characterisation of Ovonramwen equip him to effectively impact on the action?

For much of the play, two forces are pitched against each other: the Benin forces and the British forces. For the whole of Act I, that is, the first twenty-one pages of the play, the focus is on the activities in Oba Ovonramwen's palace, especially in relation to the Oba's handling of internal and bilateral affairs. He sentences two prisoners, Obaruduagbon and Esasoyen, to death. They had killed his Chief Adviser, Uwangué Egiebo, after the Oba executed their own brothers, who opposed his enthronement. He had placed a ban on trading with the Ijekiris and now imposes on them stiff

conditions, upon which he might lift the ban. He sends messengers and soldiers to intimidate and recapture the loyalty of towns and tribes, whom his forefathers had ruled, but who are now dreaming of some measure of freedom and self-determination: Ijekiriland, Ekpoma, Akure, Ife, Agbor, et cetera. He would not “watch rascals sport with the Benin Empire” (9).

He receives the Ifa Priest, whose oracle sees death coming to Benin, “not the death of one man. Bodies of men...fire...and blood bodies floating” and warns that all that can be done to avoid this fire is “Caution” (15). He receives Gallwey and Hutton, White men who bring him gifts and greeting from Queen Victoria as well as a trade treaty, which Her Majesty required him to sign. He rejects the gifts and the treaty. He distrusts the Queen's motive in sending them. He must be cautious, but he can hardly veil his rudeness to, and contempt for, the Queen. So, the White men depart in a manner that is “not pleasing” (Ologbosere), like “waters in a well silent...but deep” (Uzazakpo) (20).

Doubting almost everyone else, including his chief army commanders, the Oba, on the advice of his jester, Uzazakpo, secures the loyalty of Ologbosere, the third in command, by giving to him as wife his eldest daughter, Evbakhobokun. The Oba seizes the opportunity to warn his new son-in-law: “Disaster threatens the empire, Ologbosere. Even the oracle of Oghene n'Uhe has seen its face...” (23). At the end of Act I, the lesser kings and chiefs in his empire do not show signs of open defiance or active resistance or aggression, but he still considers them as “little, tiny stars criss-crossing, under-cutting, out-shining each other to rival the moon

itself!" (9) Gallwey and Hutton leave his presence with an ominous acceptance of his rude rejection of their Queen's friendship, but they do not utter a threat. So, apparently, Ovonramwen has no active challenges from any side and, therefore, is not motivated to initiate any dramatic action against the British or any of his already cowed chiefs or vassal kings. Thus, he orders that preparations be made in anticipation of an action, but does not yet know the direction from which the action will come. He merely suspects almost everyone within and without.

The decision that initiates the dramatic action of the play comes from Britain. According to J.C. Anene, following adverse reports about Benin by British traders and agents,

The British protectorate officials began in 1895 to nurse plans for the overthrow of the kingdom of Benin... In the following year, the Acting Consul-General, J.R. Phillips, decided that the time had come to deal with Benin. He asked the British government for permission to visit Benin City and depose the Oba. This permission was not given... because troops were not available to accomplish, without a hitch, the Acting Consul-General's objectives. Phillips at last decided to pay a friendly visit to Benin. Although he was advised by the Oba of Benin that the time was not the right one for receiving foreigners, the British agent insisted on going (274).

This is a historical account, and it does suggest that Phillips was merely being cunning with the avowed decision to pay a "friendly visit" to Benin. Perhaps, Okavbiogbe, "the Chief policeman of the Benin Empire", is right to describe the visit as an "invasion". Phillips, who has just had all the revolvers and cutlasses locked up in boxes, replies, "Invasion? We aren't armed" (29).

Phillips' insistence on entering Benin, contrary to the Oba's advice, pours contempt on the Oba and the Benin tradition. For him, that was necessary: it was the first crucial step in the implementation of his decision "to deal with Benin". He needed to disrupt a ceremony, the impact of which may be harmful to British trade. For "Gallwey's observation that there were many fetish restrictions on trade in Benin had prepared the ground for the overthrow of that kingdom" (Anene 274). This possibly explains the response of Phillips hereunder:

PHILLIPS. [*to Okavbiogbe*]. Chief, you tell us when we can-
OKAVBIOGBE. Come back in... two months!
BOISTRAGON. Two months!

* * *

PHILLIPS. All right, all right thank you, we'll see the Oba in two months' time.
OKAVBIOGBE. Now you talk well but don't you play dirty tricks as soon as our backs are turned, I warn you...

[*To his lieutenants.*]

Follow me!

[*They storm out.*]

BOISTRAGON. Where do we go from here, Your Excellency?

PHILLIPS. To Benin!

[*Officers are disconcerted.*]

CAMPBELL. Your Excellency, I dare say that we all undertook to come on this expedition in the hope that we would make a peaceful ingress into Benin. But from all indications, continued advance is fraught with danger, I fear.

BOISTRAGON. I wonder why the haste, and why the insistence on entering Benin in spite of the Oba's objections, your Excel

PHILLIPS. Commerce, Mr. Campbell! ... Overami has placed a Juju on all produce from [the] interior. I get complaints,... I also get the blame from London for every blasted minute that passes without an effective enforcement of the 1892 trade treaty with Benin. Of course there would be objections from Overami:... Overami is bound to resort to devious excuses, stratagems, threats, even lies to delay free and direct trade by the White man with the people of his territory (31-32).

History, as well as the play, suggests that, at this instant, it is Phillips, not Ovonramwen, who is full of tricks and stratagems. He would deceive or defy anyone to save himself from further "blame

from London", and, probably, give the British government a pleasant surprise by ensuring "that British trade policy [is no longer] crippled by the whims and ritual taboos of a fetish Priest-King" (31-32). In Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, a play based on the same history and published twenty-four years after Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Phillips reveals his motivation more clearly in his dialogue with Burrows:

... My discretion tells me that we attack Benin. I have assessed the situation and I feel that for a better grip of the trade area, Benin must fall. (*Aside*) The Home Office will be proud of me after the expedition. They could confirm me Consul-General with all the powers I need to establish a government in Benin... (22)

And, after the exit of Burrows, Phillips declares to the map of Benin on the wall: "I must take you, Benin, for the glory of the British Empire and mine" (23).

So, it is Phillips, acting in the capacity of the Consul-General, who is on leave, who makes the crucial decision, the implementation of which engenders the dramatic action of the play. His lieutenants join him, despite their earlier misgivings, more because of his passion and commitment than because of his authority over them. After he has been attacked and murdered with some members of his team by Benin soldiers, the British

government felt compelled to send more troops on the side of the protagonist, now replaced by Moor, the Consul-General, who has resumed duty. By sending the reinforcement, the British government joins the party of the protagonist in the implementation of the decision of Phillips. And Ovonramwen and Benin become the antagonists.

The massacre of Phillips and his men by Benin soldiers testifies to the determination of the Benin soldiers to be effective antagonists in the action that had been foisted on them. Their fierce engagement in war with even the British reinforcement testifies to their passion, commitment and strength (of body and mind), which the well-delineated antagonist requires to ruin or, at least, seriously jeopardise the enterprise of the protagonist.

But, caught in this dramatic action, does Ovonramwen exhibit the passion, commitment and strength of Benin soldiers? Does he take responsibility for their action, albeit unilateral, as the British government has done in respect of Phillips' equally unilateral action? Apparently, Michael Etherton misses this point when he suggests that "the British were obeying orders" while "Ovonramwen's chiefs and war lords were not" (153).

Whose orders was Phillips obeying? What orders of Ovonramwen were his chiefs and war lords disobeying? "Caution"? Does not the same Oba later hand over to Ologbosere a scimitar-like object, which he calls "the spirit of the empire... the life of the nation" and charge him to "defend it"? (41) That suggests the Oba's acceptance of the war and his making Ologbosere his

commander. But the song of the royal bards at that juncture suggests that his acceptance is due to helplessness: "... Who are you to choose/Helpless One/when it is the powers /that offer?" (41) Thus Ovonramwen is portrayed as unable to spearhead antagonism as Phillips or Moor or Roupell spearheads protagonism. He cautiously stands aside and helplessly watches the dramatic action until it engulfs him and his empire.

How, indeed, has Rotimi characterized Ovonramwen vis-à-vis the dramatic action? Let us examine his three dimensions, beginning with his physiology. He is an "imposing figure", usually with his "right hand resting on the left shoulder of his royal page who is bearing the 'ada' (royal scimitar)" or "supported at each arm by two chiefs" - only when he is alone in private would he be "casually dressed, and unsupported" (8); he moves "with slow dignity", "strides unrushed" (4). According to Chris Dunton, in *Make Man Talk True*,

A video recording of one of the early Ife performances [directed by Rotimi himself] indicates a powerful contrast between the characteristic movement of Kurunmi (rapid, spontaneous, physical) and those of Ovonramwen. The latter is erect, slow, with all movements - turning, responding giving a sense of power in the process of becoming immobilized (21).

To drive home this point, Dunton further describes Rotimi's Ovonramwen as "a totally inflexible entity", "neurasthenic" (21), and "a statuesque figure" in "a helpless sclerosis" (22). Yerima's Ovonramwen is significantly different. In Yerima's play, the Oba's arms are supported only in two ceremonial appearances and as he enters the court for trial. He is sharp-witted and can engage in repartee, as in his interaction with Obaseki (32-34); he can dance (63).

Now, Ovonramwen's sociology in Rotimi's play. He is the Oba of Benin and Emperor of the vast Benin Empire. He is hailed as the "Home-leopard", which, perhaps inadvertently, implies that he is a threat only to his home (or empire). The Isikhien, a cult of royal women, sing around him, for example, to "placate" him (5).

He is feared, not respected. He does not command the loyalty of his subjects. Uzazakpo, his court jester, testifies to this when he tells the Oba: "...your approach is fear the instilling of fear. What you want is loyalty, not fear", and he replies, "Loyalty! Ha! From the people of Benin? Not in our time" (12). Uzazakpo further advises him to work with his people as a team rather than be "a single finger [which] cannot remove a louse from the head" (13).

When Captain Roupell orders the Oba to publicly pay homage to the Queen of England, his chiefs, knowing how abominable that would be and seeing the Oba's reluctance, pay the homage in his place by kneeling before Roupell. But when Roupell rejects that substitution, that vicarious humility, the chiefs plead with the Oba to personally pay homage to Queen Victoria, which he

does by lifting his own crown off his own head (53), thus transforming his sociology from that of a king to that of a subject. His loss of royalty in his sociology as well as physiology is further evident in his crouching about in the bush in disguise and panic and in the failure of three of his armed subjects to recognize him, when he and Uzazakpo encounter them in the bush. He laments:

They didn't even recognize me!

[Uzazakpo chuckles, amused.]

To think that I have reigned over the land, and over men, all these nine years, yet, men see my face and it means nothing to them (71).

He is eventually captured in the rubbles of Ezomo's "yam house":

[In concerted response to a signal from Roupell, the soldiers raise their legs and bear them down in one brutal thrust, crashing the hut. Ovonramwen is exposed.]

ROUPELL. Go on Overami - run off.

OVONRAMWEN *[surprised, but stoically calm, rises slowly from the debris]*. Ovonramwen will not run!

ROUPELL. Why not? Are you tired?

OVONRAMWEN. If the ground runs away, where will it go? (76).

Will it be correct to interpret Ovonramwen's two lines above as a sign of bravery and dignity? This is the second time he had run to the bush to hide; the first time, he was convinced by his chiefs, after several months of hiding, to come out and surrender to the White man and he did (see pp. 52-54).

Is Ovonramwen, at this later point, truly "stoically calm"? Or is he scared of imminent death from the "brutal", "armed British soldiers"? Could anything have been more suicidal than for him to take to his heels within easy reach of "brutal" firepower? Has Ovonramwen the guts for suicide like Obayuwana or like Kurunmi, in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*? Has he the guts to hold out and fight on like Ologbosere? In any case, his crouching in the bush for the second time and his capture in the rubble of a crashed hut diminish his stature, his sociology.

Again, Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* does not show the Oba hiding in the bush and his humiliating capture. Rather, the Oba is decently, though cunningly, fetched from hiding through the instrumentality of Obaseki, unaccompanied by British soldiers: "His arrival must be that of an Oba", Obaseki convinces Captain Carter, the Acting Political Resident (61). Yerima's play further shows the Oba jesting and clowning with Uzazakpo, the Court Jester (32-34); and dancing "in royal sway, with about thirty other chiefs, wives, messengers (63). These reveal, not a tyrannical and high-and-mighty nature, but a congenial and convivial one. When, at his trial, Yerima's Ovonramwen pays obeisance to Queen Victoria, it is to stop the intended murder of two innocent chiefs by

Moor's soldiers: "Enough Bini blood has been shed already," he reasons (70). With this sociology of Ovonramwen in Yerima's play, it is not surprising that the Oba retains the genuine loyalty of majority of his subjects to the end.

Ovonramwen's psychology in Rotimi's play is characterized by two main complexes. The first is superiority feeling, which manifests in his imperial, feudal ambition; his pride, power-drunkness and high-handedness while relating to the peoples of his empire. The second is fear, which manifests in his debilitating cautiousness, pessimism, lack of drive, confusion, and cowardly acceptance of humiliation while relating to the British. With this psychology, Rotimi portrays him as a double-edged sword with a sharp edge, which cows his subjects, and a blunt edge, which caresses the ego of the White man.

Let us give examples of Ovonramwen's superiority complex and its manifestations when he deals with his subjects. Power-drunkness and high-handedness: He sentences prisoners to death, and Iyase, his Prime Minister and War Lord, asks, "But, my Lord... do they all have to die for the killing of one chief?" (6) The Ijekiri traders, on their knees, beg him "to deal lightly with our people," but he replies, "I deal lightly with men no more" (8). Imperial ambition and pride: Ovonramwen wants no rival king in his empire and cannot tolerate the Udezi of Akure fashioning for himself "two royal swords" or the people of Ekpoma choosing their own chief. He must also subject the kings and peoples of Ife, Ijekiri and Agbor to pay homage to him. He declares: "Henceforth, a full

moon's my glow dominant, and unopen to rivalry throughout the empire" (7). "Little tiny stars [must not] rival the moon itself" (9) Uzazakpo, the Court jester, advises him to "Forget pride..." (16).

Let us now exemplify the elements of Ovonramwen's other complex in Rotimi's play, which is fear. Debilitating cautiousness: After the Ifa priest has told him that death was coming to Benin "not the death of one man. Bodies of men... fire...and blood bodies floating" Ovonramwen is gripped by fear. The Ifa priest tells him that all that can be done to avert the disaster is " Caution... that is the word caution" (15). Ovonramwen's first application of caution is in dealing with Gallwey and Hutton. The caution so debilitates him that it takes nearly three pages (17-20) for him to reject the gifts and trade treaty from the Queen of England brought by the two White men. Pessimism, confusion and lack of drive: His fear of impending death emasculates him and causes him to be generally pessimistic and confused. This is evident from the proceeding of the war council in Act Two, Scene 3. Ovonramwen's war lords are indignant and spoiling for a fight because Phillips and his men, by entering Benin during the Ague festival, regardless of an injunction from the palace, have defied their Oba, ruined their cherished tradition and, by implication, jeopardized their future. Then this dialogue ensues:

OBAKHAVBAYA. Must we welcome the White man, and offend the gods?"

OVONRAMWEN. The gods are a part of our existence... the blood of slaves spilled upon their

altars in prayer for wrongs done them, is enough to calm their anger and win them back... our gods do understand... but the White man is... a White man.

My people, the word is caution. [*Displeasure, disbelief, wounded pride confound the chiefs.*]

OBAYUWANA. Gods! What is Benin coming to?

OLOGBOSERE. A fierce snake sleeping (34).

Obayuwana had earlier asked, "My brothers in arms, is this how we must dangle the rest of our lives? On fear?" (33)

Indeed, at this time, the Oba is also confused. The echoes of the voice of the Ifa priest "*enshroud the sombre reality of [his] decision-making*", and he is "*himself unconvinced of the wisdom of his very stand*" (34). The chiefs are unable to understand the abrupt loss of bravery and drive in the home-leopard's psychology. Hence, after the Oba retires, Ologbosere interprets his attitude as a test of the loyalty of his war lords and chiefs:

OLOGBOSERE. The Oba is testing us!... When our own chiefs murdered his personal adviser, Uwangu Egiebo, did the Oba himself not reply the murderers with the ruthlessness of swift vengeance?... Now a foreign enemy threatens the whole empire, and the Oba says to us Defenders of the land: 'caution!' You think he truly expects obedience? (35-36).

Perhaps, based on this interpretation, the war lords take command

of the army and, in the next scene, attack the intruders and jubilantly bring to Ovonramwen's feet seven "decapitated heads of Whitemen" (37). A pleasant surprise they think it would be for the Oba. But they are demoralized by "Ovonramwen's uninspiring [pessimistic] reaction". The cautioning voice of the Ifa priest, now sounding like many voices, echoes again,

intimidating Ovonramwen's thought. He begins to sway dizzily. Chiefs rush to him to stay him. Leaning heavily on his supports, Ovonramwen barely manages to utter, as voices die down.

OVONRAMWEN. Children of our fathers, Benin, I fear, has this day swallowed a long pestle; now we shall have to sleep standing upright" (37).

Thus, scared to death, Ovonramwen abandons the defence of Benin while his chiefs pick it up. Obayuwana warns: "my brothers, now we know how he feels, let us not be caught unready by the White man's revenge" (37). The Oba has failed them, but they, unlike the Oba, are optimistic that "the gods of our fathers will not fail us..." (37). Underlying all of this is the Oba's fear that the White man was coming to do to him what he did to King Jaja of Opobo, Chief Nana of Ijekiri and King Prempehson of Ashanti (59-60).

Cowardly acceptance of humiliation: Ovonramwen, pressured by mainly his self-seeking chiefs, lifts his own crown off his own head in homage to Queen Victoria (53-54), unlike

Obayuwana, who remains bravely defiant to the end and commits suicide by openly stabbing himself before British soldiers lay hands on him (61-62). Moor, the Consul-General, sentences Ovonramwen's chiefs to death in his presence, and he is silent (61). After the above three incidents and after Moor has promised to consider Ovonramwen merely as "one of my big chiefs", the Oba suddenly "rises proudly" and declares: "I am still Idugbowa, the son of Adolo...", re-crowns himself, "and strides off with defiant dignity" (62). Can we also interpret this as valiancy? He came out of hiding to surrender, and witnessed the three incidents above. Is he striding off now to raise a new army? No. He is striding off to Obaseki's house to disguise himself "in the garb of a commoner" and go into hiding again (63) so as to escape deportation: "I will not go to Calabar!" (64).

Dunton observes that Ovonramwen's "characterization... is rooted in the stereotypical [Classical] concept of the tragic flaw" (23). But the Classical tragic hero is one that is noble by birth and by conduct; larger-than-life in passion, commitment and strength; generally good-natured, though with a flaw, *hubris*, which will ruin him and cause his downfall. Rotimi's Ovonramwen is noble by birth but not by conduct. He is also not generally good-natured. His psychology reveals more than one flaw. A review of his three dimensions reveals him as weak all round. He is weak and slow in physiology. He is equally a failure in sociology, both among his people and among external aggressors. He is "trapped... by his own stranglehold over the decision making process" and is "hardly

presented as a model of successful leadership” (Dunton 23). He is crippled in his psychology by the two aforementioned complexes, which manifest in a number of flaws, including pride, high-handedness and fear. In confrontation with an active adversary, he lacks passion, commitment and strength. He is a great contrast, not only to Kurunmi, as has already been pointed out, but also to Phillips, who pursues his ambition at all costs, and the British authorities in England, who despite Phillips' misdemeanour in forcefully entering Benin without authority, assumed responsibility for his action and sent a reinforcement to realize his ambition. He is also a great contrast to King Koko in Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi*, who, like Kurunmi, inspires confidence in his troops by his own agility, military prowess and active involvement in war. With the foregoing, we can see why Etherton describes as “forced” his own “conclusion that Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi has unlimited powers but, in the exercise of them, he is weak” (153). For, indeed, among his people, before the commencement of the dramatic action, the Oba has unlimited powers which he is not weak to exercise while in the dramatic action, which provides ample opportunities for the exercise of powers, he exhibits only weakness and no powers at all.

Conclusion

Why has Rotimi characterized Ovonramwen so weakly, knowing he is in a serious dramatic action that will humiliate him, ruin his ancestors' cherished tradition, and bring his royalty and empire to

an ignominious end? It may be argued that Rotimi's flaw in the characterization of Ovonramwen, Kurunmi and even Odewale (in *The Gods are not to blame*) lies in his projection of individual rather than collective heroism, which the traditional African social system fosters. Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland* are examples of the many modern African plays, which project collective heroism. Why has Rotimi focused so inexorably on Ovonramwen as an individual? If his interest is to hold on to the classical theory of the characterization of the hero, as Dunton (23) suggests, why has he (Rotimi) applied that theory so haphazardly and made Ovonramwen a non-Classical hero?

Is Rotimi handicapped by his usual inclination to be largely faithful to his source? Dunton observes that, “apart from ... foreshortening of a series of historical events, the play follows its sources closely” (152, note 30), meaning, perhaps, that a different characterisation of Ovonramwen could have falsified history, especially in view of the fact that an earlier play, Evbinma Ogie's *Oba Ovonramwen*, first performed 1965 and published 1977, characterised the Oba as “bland, unable to engage in the defence of the empire” (152, note 29). Rotimi's initial intention, apparently, was to correct “the biases of colonial History”, which painted the Oba “in the mien of the most abominable sadist” (“Background” to *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* xi). Perhaps, this explains the great attention that he pays to Ovonramwen as an individual. Yet, as Etheron rightly observes, “his hero seems to end up more deeply indicted than before” (146). Etherton suggests, therefore, that the problem

may be in Rotimi's apparent philosophy of fatalism. "The colonial biases of history have been replaced by a fatalistic bias: 'this was bound to happen'". Etherton argues that Rotimi's aforementioned intention is "nostalgic" and negritudian and "runs the risk of becoming self-indulgent". He concludes: "The unfortunate fact is that Ovonramwen surrendered; he did not die defending the independence of his empire. He appears weak especially as a result of Rotimi's fatalistic portrait" (155).

It should be noted, however, that Rotimi's play is based on Benin historical sources Egharevba's *A Short History of Benin*, an article by Philip Igbafe, and interviews with indigenes of Benin, including the then Oba (Dunton 152, note 30). If, as earlier mentioned, he followed the sources closely, then it is either that, midway, he found his own intention impossible to achieve because the Oba was simply irredeemable, regardless of whose history was adapted, or the playwright failed to adequately exercise his poetic licence in treating history.

No doubt, if Rotimi had created, in his play, an Ovonramwen that is good-natured, more of a pivot for his people, and strong enough to reconfigure the dramatic action of the play and, possibly, win the war against the British, then he would have ruthlessly adapted history and made it unrecognizable. His would have been, not a historical play, but a free reconstruction of history just as Osofisan's *Morountodun* is a free reconstruction of myth and history. That would have been maximum exercise of poetic licence, which is arguably legitimate. But Rotimi has not been one such

playwright. His massive audience appeal, as Ukala points out in "Tradition, Rotimi and his Audience", derives from "his creatively faithful use of his audience's artistic patrimony" (103). Therefore, in creating Ovonramwen, he may have found it difficult to break from his cherished proclivity to largely maintain the integrity of his source. It may be for the same reason that he could not exploit till the end the potential for collective heroism offered by the passion, commitment and strength of Ologbosere, Obayuwana and the other Benin war lords.

Nonetheless, the most telling dent in Rotimi's characterisation of Ovonramwen is in his handling of the Oba's three dimensions. Yerima uses essentially the same history, and, like Rotimi, does not falsify it, but, in *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, Yerima characterizes Ovonramwen in a way that elicits greater admiration and understanding. He clearly shows the fatalism of the situation in the following dialogue between Ovonramwen and Obi-ro, the diviner:

OVONRAMWEN: The Leopard can rest then? If his claws are blunted and his whiskers dry from sea breeze, what can he do to avert all this?

OBIRO: Nothing.

OVONRAMWEN: Nothing?

OBIRO: Nothing. No matter what you do to stop it, the dew must fall each morning.

OVONRAMWEN: Nothing. Then my cup is full.

The gods made me king, if they will, let them take their crown (52).

Yet, Ovonramwen's response to his fate and the fate of his empire in Yerima's play is that of total submission to the will of the gods, which is the norm in his culture. The play leaves a clear impression that the Oba was able to and could have fought if his gods asked him to. He *voluntarily* capitulates and pays obeisance to Queen Victoria because, in his words, "Enough Bini blood has been shed already" (70).

Yerima's Ovonramwen does not also leave his chiefs and warlords in any doubt about his motives. He gives them specific orders: "Ologbose, Obakhavbaye, Uso, Obaradesagbon and Ugiagbe. You follow Eyebokan to the camp of the whitemen. See their leader called Phillips. Tell him that I shall receive them" (37). He further orders, "Ologbose, no harm must come to the whitemen. I repeat, no harm!" (38).

This elicits the understanding of the audience, and it is the testimonies of it by important witnesses in the trial, especially those who actually murdered the White men, that convinces Consul-General Moor of the Oba's innocence: "Let it be entered that the testimonies of the other prisoners agree with the fact that the Oba did not order the massacre" (77). It is worth noting that the chiefs, according to Obakhavbaye, obeyed the Oba and "decided not to kill the whitemen". But the White men did not wait in their camp at Ughoton for the Oba's messengers to arrive. In defiance of the Oba's

warning, they had approached Benin when the chiefs met them. The chiefs then "decided to scare them off. In the ensuing confusion to stop them, the leader of the group was mortally wounded.... The remaining eight were trying to bring out their guns from their boxes, when we decided to continue shooting" (76). By clarifying all crucial motives; making the Oba quicker in wits and movement; showing him, once in a while, in jestful and convivial relationship with his people; presenting the trial scene in detail, and showing that the chiefs did not intentionally disregard the Oba's directive; Yerima, has generally characterised the Oba more sympathetically in his three dimensions. More effectively than Rotimi, he has played "the king's advocate" (Yerima 6).

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