

# Antigone in Yoruba Land Some Remarks on the Conception of *Tegonni, an African Antigone*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the Fall of 1994, I was invited to present an adaptation of *Antigone* at the Theatre Emory of Emory University, Atlanta. The context of performance—which I always allow to play a decisive role in the shaping of my dramaturgy—provided a number of interesting challenges. Theatre Emory was situated in the suburbs of a town which had been central to the resolution of the American civil war; which was the homing ground of Martin Luther King, and therefore heavily implicated in the civil rights movements; and finally, a town which was, at that moment, busy with the preparations for the coming Olympic Games scheduled for 1996. The campus itself, given its location, was conspicuously white in terms of its majority population, rich, and expanding; in marked contrast to the black colleges downtown. The cast I had to work with were therefore of mixed racial origins, but predominantly middle-class: its ignorance of the true realities of Africa had to be taken for granted. But at the same time, I was arriving from a virtually on the verge of civil war society, following the annulment of democratic elections by a ruling militocracy, and the consequent violent uprising of the civilian populace, torn among various ethnic and political groupings. I had meant *Antigone* to be my own protest against military dictatorship, an act of fidelity

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towards the people I left behind, just like Anouilh's version had been at the time of the German occupation of France. But my *Tegonni* proved to be more than that. This paper explains what kind of play it turned out to be, and the various pressures that gave the play its final shape.

## One

In the Fall of 1994, at the Theatre Emory of the Emory University in Atlanta, USA, I had the honour of directing the first workshop production of my play, *Tegonni*, an adaptation, as the subtitle announces, of the famous play by Sophocles into an African milieu<sup>1</sup>. About the fact of this adaptation—as you all know—there could be nothing new or unique: *Antigone* has been adapted thousands of times before now, and by several different playwrights, since the time of its original creation in the year 442; a phenomenon copiously studied and analysed some time ago by no less a scholar than the redoubtable George Steiner at Cambridge<sup>2</sup>.

The significance of *Tegonni* however, resides in the fact that it is the first known adaptation of the play by a Nigerian author, into an African context, and therefore presents peculiar challenges and characteristics, which may be of interest to an international gathering such as this. Since we are here to share experience, I imagine that the questions you would naturally wish to ask would bear upon such areas, for instance, as the following: first, the motivation for the exercise in itself, and its thematic purpose; secondly, the kind of difficulties the playwright encountered in this process of cultural transference, and how these were resolved; thirdly, the implications these may have for the cross-temporal, and intercultural dimensions of Greek classical drama; and perhaps, finally, the staging demands of a production mounted with a multi-racial cast in an intensely race-texture environment.

This paper will try to address these questions within the limited space given.

## Two

First and foremost however, no proper understanding of the challenges confronted by this playwright, in the creation of *Tegonni*, can occur without a preliminary acquaintance with the peculiar nature of drama and of theatre practise in contemporary Nigeria, and with the particular space in which the adaptation was accomplished.

Yorubaland—I am obliged to explain right from the outset, is in the southwestern part of Nigeria. The Yoruba people actually spread much farther westwards across the border, into the neighbouring country of the Benin Republic, which was once a colony of France (and is therefore today a “francophone” country). But it is the community within the English-speaking Nigeria that I come from, and which is the focus of this essay.

Within Nigeria itself, there are several ethnic, and hence linguistic, groups. The latest reliable estimate puts the number on fact somewhere above three hundred! Among them, the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa represent the three largest ethnic groups, with populations of about fifteen, twelve, and twenty million people respectively. This situation, as you may well imagine, has created enormous problems for language planners in the country, making the choice of a mutually acceptable, indigenous lingua a very contentious exercise [See Adekunle, 1972; Moag 1982]. These extremely diverse communities were forcibly thrown together earlier this century by the British into one single country, and to rule it, the British imposed their language, as they did elsewhere in their colonies around the world. Independence was won, in 1960, and since then the political rulers in Nigeria have found no other expedient so far, of keeping the country together administratively, than

by retaining the erstwhile colonial language. Thus English has remained the official national language of Nigeria, and it is in English that all forms of national discourse, including the literary and artistic, take place.

I have gone into this preamble only in order to explain why, in Nigeria, our formal encounters with Greek culture, whether classical or modern, is usually through translations, and especially translations in English. Greek and Latin used to be taught in our curriculum in the colonial days, in line with the Oxbridge tradition, but one of the consequences of decolonisation was precisely the review of the practise, in favour of “Modern European Languages”, that is, the colonial languages still in use on the continent—namely French, Portuguese and German. When we talk of classical Greek theatre therefore, in Nigeria, we are talking of such theatre as given to us through the efforts of English-speaking translators and also, as well, through written texts.

Furthermore, because the official language in Nigeria, as I said above, is English, the educational system, at least at the secondary and tertiary levels, is also centred on the English language. Thus, one of the consequences on our cultural life is that the literature and the theatre produced for, and by, the educated middle class is primarily in the medium of English.

I have to explain that this is not nevertheless English theatre or literature [See Jowitt, 1991; Bamgbose et al, 1995]. Those who are familiar with the works of the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, or of the novelist Chinua Achebe will know already how redundant this argument is. Even the most cursory encounter will reveal at once how very distinctly African the theatre in Nigeria is, even when, and in spite of the fact that, its dialogue is in English.

The reason for this is explained by a congregation of ideological and historical factors, all of which we cannot examine

here. One of them however is this, that Nigerian dramatists, following the pioneering example of Soyinka, James Ene Henshaw and others, write with a very high consciousness of their historical situation, and of the need to assert their cultural authenticity against the formidable obstacles of the borrowed language. Thus even the English they use is peculiarly Nigerian, filled with local mannerisms and jargons, and idiosyncratically enriched with saws and proverbs in the manner of the local traditions of discourse. But, even more distinguishing in this respect, is the question of stage mechanics. Here, the dramatists show the farthest departure from English conventions, through an almost spontaneous recourse to the comprehensive of traditional African dramatists, for whom “total theatre”—the mingling of speech with song, music and dance; of magic and fantasy; of the realistic as well as the ritualistic; of the surreal with the supernatural and the mundane—is the normal preference. Thus a play like Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, is as far as theatrical spectacle and presence are concerned almost at the opposite pole of *Oedipus Rex*, from which it is adapted.

But the main points I wish to deduce however are these: [one] that, owing to the peculiar circumstance of our country, classical Greek theatre has not been readily available to our dramatists in Nigeria, and [two], that the relatively few excursions that are made into the territory exist, in our repertory, only in the form of adaptations, and English language adaptations too, rather than in the form of translations into the indigenous language. Thus, apart from Rotimi’s play already mentioned above, the only other Greek adaptations that are of any significance are Harry Hagher’s reworking of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, titled *Mulkin Mata* [first performed 1985; published 1991], and Wole Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides* [first performed, and published 1973].

### Three

It is indeed surprising that there have been such few adaptations from Greek classics in the Nigerian theatre. As it is generally well known by now, the affinities between the ancient Greek world and the traditional black African world are quite impressive. Certainly the supernatural heroes who populate the dramas of Sophocles, Aristophanes and Euripides are familiar to the polytheistic, animistic world of the Yoruba, equally peopled by anthropomorphic deities. And the Yoruba similarly believe that the gulf of separation between the human and supernatural worlds is not closed but fluid, occasioning frequent, if sometimes tragic dramas of transition, as both human and deities struggle for periodic reunion.

Furthermore, and apart from this identical cosmology, the transference of the Antigone story into Yorubaland was also facilitated by the prevalence, in our repertory of extant myths, of exceptional female figures. Antigone was easy to place within the same category for instance as Moremi, a goddess in our pantheon who, as a former queen of Ile-Ife, had achieved her deification through a spectacular act of courage which helped to save the land from the recurrent invasion of her enemies.

Finally, the political history of Africa, from ancient times to the modern, is a story virtually of the unbroken succession of inflexible, tyrannical rulers on the one part, and on the other, of heroic rebels who have led the resistance against them. In the particular context of my country, in the later half of 1995, the story of Antigone was singularly apt. For in Nigeria, an election had just taken place, after several years of military dictatorship, an election which foreign observer groups invited just for the purpose had adjudged free and fair. But just as a civilian victor was emerging, to universal acclaim, the military rulers quite abruptly and arbitrarily annulled the elections. The result, of course, was an upsurge of violence from the deceived

populace, and the army's brutal move to suppress this. And it was in the very midst of this turmoil that I left the country for Atlanta, to begin work on the script of *Tegonni*. I was writing, that is, through a curtain of tears of bitter grief, and virtually with the blood seeping out of my open wounds. Antigone had become not just a distant or fantastic myth to me any longer, but the harsh and brutal reality of my living experience.

#### **Four**

All the same, whatever the inner grief of any playwright, or the pressure of his passionate need to communicate the experience, the concrete space within which his performance is inscribed must still be taken into account, if a terrible distance is not to be created between him and his audience. To write after all within the cauldron of instant history is to learn not only to become familiar with pain, with wounds and bruises, but also to master them in the end, to the extent of being able to hold them dispassionately at a distance where they serve not just as instruments of recrimination and vengeance, but rather of wisdom.

I arrived, as I said, in Atlanta, having literally fought my way through burning streets and rioting mobs to get to the airport in Lagos; and paramount in my mind were two palpable anxieties: the first concerning the future of my country, in the wake of the violation done to democracy and democratic movements by a recalcitrant militocracy; and the second naturally bearing upon the fate of the family and the friends I left behind. Uppermost in my mind therefore was the concern to make the play a mouthpiece for these pressing anxieties, to shape it in such a manner that it became both banner and therapeutic balm.

But in the bubbling, energetic atmosphere of a capitalist Atlanta, bracing itself up already for the coming 1996 Olympic

Games only two years away, the private agonies in my mind were, I rapidly discovered, patently out of place. Neither the sedate world of the campus, where the most pressing problem was to find adequate parking space for the staff and student cars, nor that of the city outside, grouping with rising industrialisation, and with the concomitant effects such as population growth, urban crime and juvenile pregnancies was in the least interested in the wayward exploits of some tin-god dictator in some faraway "jungle" in Africa, whatever the cannibal horror of such disclosures. And even among the enlightened and inquisitive, the tragic drama of Rwanda which filled the television screen every hour was sufficient pre-occupation. It was the kind of context, therefore, in which the political problems of Nigeria were of the most marginal interest to both actors and audience: clearly the wound in my mind was not the wound in the American mind, and my *Antigone* would have to undergo a major surgery to be relevant.

Fortunately however, finding a new matrix for this *Antigone* did not require any prolonged, agonising process. In Atlanta, and in most of Africa, if you are black, you become sooner or later embroiled in the issue which the late Dr W.E.B DuBois had prophetically identified as the single issue of the twentieth century that is, the issue of race. This turbulent of race relations is entwined in the very history of the town of Atlanta itself; it is of utmost significance in any reading of the character and symbolism of the Emory university campus located in the Decatur suburb, at a significant distant removed from the Martin Luther King Avenue downtown; it was pivotal to the decision to invite me, as the very first professor in the university to teach African literature and direct an African play at Theatre Emory. And if at first I was only vaguely aware of this, of my role as racial token, I was to be rudely shaken out of my complacency during the very first rehearsal sessions, when

one black actor after another came to meet me, and with gushing enthusiasm, confessed that it was the chance he or she had been waiting for “all my life”! whether I liked it or not, therefore, I was finally forced to take into account, in my conception of the play – a “*manuscript in motion*”, I called it – a fact that I had noted before, but only vaguely [in the course of my performance and lecture tours over the past ten years at Cornell, Northwestern, Brown, Stanford, Iowa universities and others], namely that on the American stage, and particularly on the campus theatres addicted as they are to European classics, very few opportunities and still fewer “attractive” roles exist even now for black actors.

It was therefore imperative, in the shaping of the play, that I took cognisance of the fact that the foremost issue for the American audience was not that of the struggle for “freedom”, a concept familiar to the French but which tends to sound abstract to the American ear, but rather, the problem of racism. And the challenge to me therefore as a playwright was how to satisfy the needs to this immediate audience, without at the same time jettisoning my own concerns, that is, to make my “*Antigone*” a site for both the exploration of the issue of political freedom, as well as that of racial collisions.

Still there was a third issue that had to be carefully navigated. This was the gender problem, made particularly sensitive by the sexist hysteria of US campuses, and into which unprepared newcomers from Africa unwittingly get drawn and most usually in the role of villains. Inevitably of course, in a play where the chief protagonist was female, and the antagonist male, the gender conflict could not but be of signal import. But in Africa, the manifestation of this conflict tends to be different from the experience of the West, a fact that has led to yet-unresolved tensions between African and Western feminists [Ogunyemi: 65; Davies et al: 75-88]. Dealing with

this issue therefore in a Western play, originally located in the ancient Greek polis, and now transplanted to an African feudalist milieu, at the moment of its decisive collision with expanding foreign capitalism, would involve delicate negotiations.

### **Five**

The first problem, that is the issue of the struggle for political freedom, demanded obviously that Antigone be recreated black, as a “daughter of the soil” as we put it, a trueborn native like any other. But with Antigone translated in this manner, how would the second theme, that is, that of racism come into the conflict? This was a thorny issue at first.

In the end, it was the Yoruba cosmogony –its mythology of origins, fertile with the breeding of successive gods- that provided a solution to this dilemma. The first thing to remember here is the Yoruba belief that all life originated at Ile-Ife, their spiritual capital. Here all human beings, of whatever hue, were given primordial shape and essence in the sculptural smithery of Obatala, the god empowered by the supreme deity Olodumare to preside over creation. Obatala himself, in some versions of the myth, is even conceived as a white god, white being the symbol of purity, and this is no doubt why all his paraphernalia are of white, or colourless things. Inscribed within this mythology therefore, Antigone could be white and still be a Nigerian, and the line of descent to Tegonni made logical.

Of greater import here, however, was the issue to Antigone’s repeated incarnations. Obviously only by divine afflatus could this re-invented identity become plausible, since only deities or their incubus –such as the abiku for instance – possess such extraordinary powers in Yorubaland. Periodic incarnations by the gods are believed by the Yoruba to be vital to their continued survival. Having been separated by the hubristic, primordial act of that first Iconoclast, Atowoda, from

their human essence and broken from the original Oneness, the gods are said to be doomed, just like their human counterparts, to a terrible, inconsolable nostalgia and incompleteness, because of which they must undergo seasonal journeys of renewal. These journeys, or 'pilgrimage rites', consist in the gods leaving their exalted places in "heaven" and travelling down, through the perilous gulf of transition that separates the human from the divine world, in order to effect a reconciliation, even if momentary, with man. Just as man himself is required to undertake a regular, complimentary journey upwards towards "god" through ritual processes, and experience the perils of ecstasy, epiphany and purgation, in likewise manner the gods must periodically take on the dangerous, elemental forces of that transitional interspace, and come to identify themselves with, and take part in, the struggles of men, in order to compensate again what Soyinka has called "the pain of severance". This way alone, says Yoruba metaphysics, is the process by which the gods can reconfirm their numerous identity and prolong their presence.

The Yorubas believe, in other words, that for the gods to continue to exist, they cannot remain aloof, like Christian angels, in some neutral celestial space, but must continually come around to commit themselves on the side of the living. Our gods regenerate themselves only through constant re-immersion in the struggles of men; they are "born again", when they undergo periodic testing through their involvement in the active affairs of their acolytes. Any other choice is a choice of extinction, for among the Yoruba, gods also die.

But all the same— Antigone? The truth was simply that no such goddess by the name of Antigone exists in our pantheon, not even any other with a close, analogous biography to hers. The nearest, in terms of compassionate commitment, and mythic symbolism was Yemoja, the "mother of fishes", mother

of creation herself. It was apposite then to take a closer reading of her rituals of rejuvenation.

At such moments, I have to confess, writing turns into an exciting adventure. For, framed within the hypostasis I described above, Antigone could now be readily unmasked, and identified as she has always truly been, beyond the willful obfuscations that Western theatrical traditions have conspired to lay across our vision. Quite obviously she is nobody else than an incarnation of the pristine Yoruba goddess Yemoja. And her various re-appearances in history are nothing other than the periodic extensions of the goddess-mother into particular moments of conflagration when the issue of liberty from despotism has kindled the tinder of revolt among the human population. Antigones that have walked down the stage of history are, unknown to Steiner and other scholars, only masked metamorphoses of Yeye Yemoja, strategically self-reincarnating in the shape of her "daughters", as she chooses to re-immerses herself in human politics, and consequently, renew herself and relieve the suffering human community.

My Antigone had found her place: empowered by these antecedents, her drama could now confidently insert itself within the familiar Yoruba ritual cycle, that is, as a kind of Passion Rite of Yemoja, the mother of creation. And the stage was thus set for the confrontation, which the play enacts, between a living Tegonni, and an ancestral Antigone, both of whom finally depart from our physical presence in a kind of recessional, ferried in the boat of the goddess. Thus Tegonni, for me, became just one other significant in this never-ending ritual of renewal, through which the goddess Yemoja manifests herself on the side of struggle and resistance, against these perennial monsters that humanity ceaselessly spawns. They play is thus a Tragedy in the classical western sense of it, but rather solidly within the Yoruba Sacred Tradition, that is, as a quasi-traditional

purgatory rite.

## Six

The next problem then, was to find the appropriate context for Tegonni's hubris, particularly one with the requisite racial complications. Here, it was history, rather than mythology, that came to the rescue. Among a number of options, the most appropriate soon turned out to be the colonial period, when our country was ruled by British governors. In particular, for the kind of conflict I had in mind, the early period of colonialism, correlating roughly with the last decade of the nineteenth century, seemed ideal location. This was the decade that began, it will be recalled, with the Treaty of Brussels (as opposed to the earlier Treaty of Berlin) when all the European powers were finally made by Britain to pledge themselves to outlaw the Atlantic slave trade, after almost a century of persistent struggle by British Abolitionists.

At that time, among the several adventures into the continent, a high degree of idealism still lingered, fired by the ambition to replace slavery with "Civilisation" in the form of Commerce, Christianity and Agriculture [Anene: 27]. Thus the decade was to be marked by two major features: first, the growing competition between the European nations to secure territorial possessions in Africa –descending on the continent "like a pack of snarling, tearing, quarrelling jackals" [Woolf: 44] –and secondly, the impetus given to missionary activity by the new desire of Europeans "not only to trade with Africans but also to rule over them." [Ajayi: 233] These two factors – missionary evangelism, and imperial occupation—were to have decisive consequences for the future of Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular.

With Britain and other European countries, especially France and Germany, launching out on a fierce scramble for territories

in Africa, Yorubaland outside the Lagos territory, hitherto independent of the British colonial rule, was to be ruthlessly overrun in this period, helped largely by the fact that the area itself had disintegrated in a prolonged internecine civil war since the death of Alafin Aole and the spectacular rise of the city of Ibadan into an imperial power. Soon Governor Gilbert T. Carter set out on a determined mission to subjugate the Yoruba kingdoms, and the extent of their decay and disintegration can be measured in the rapidity with which the kingdoms fell: Ijebu in 1892, Ilorin and Benin five years later, and then in 1893 Oyo, Abeokuta and Ibadan. And European incursion, aided by the fact that quinine had been discovered in Yorubaland thereby attracting a mingled corps of colonial servants, with attitudes ranging from the most rabidly racist to the merely naively altruistic also brought about the eventual creation of the troops whose later notoriety would become a legend of colonial archives—namely the West African Frontier Force [WAFF] composed of native outcasts and ex-slaves recruited out of the initial "Hausa" Lagos Constabulary, of which Lugard would, not surprisingly, be the first commander<sup>3</sup>.

The story of Tegonni, it seemed to me, could not have a more dramatic context than this! The missionaries, some of whom came to play quite decisive roles, as mediators, emissaries, and so on, during this period, also provided an extra, fortuitous dimension to the conflict. The Southern Baptist Convention of United States of America for instance, had sent that remarkable man, the Rev Thomas J. Bowen to Nigeria in August 1850, and he had established a mission in Ijaye in 1853. This mission had to be abandoned during the years of the American civil war, and for many years nobody else was sent. But in 1875 again, a new attempt was made to revive the Baptist evangelism, and Rev. W. David, who came to Yorubaland, brought along a "Negro" preacher. Before him,

another American Negro, but from Liberia, a pastor by the name of J. M. Harden, had followed William Clarke, and established a base in Lagos. Unfortunately the project to bring many black Americans across, both from North America and Canada, did not meet with great success in the end, partly because the blacks were suspicious of this attempt to repatriate them back to Africa, but still, the few of them who came, and who, like Bowen integrated themselves fully into the lives of their communities, helped the playwright to introduce into the adaptation an additional dimension of the race problem which was particularly suitable to the performance milieu. In the context of the Emory theatre, and for a cast of such mingled racial origins—ranging from British (Scottish) to Caribbean to African to American Irish, etc—the role of the Rev Bayo Campbell, an African American priest, who had come and settled in Yorubaland, was an imaginative boon!

Hence the issue to racism acquires a major place in the plot, and we are able to see the conflict from diverse angles: from the perspectives of a returned African slave, an Afro-American priest inducted into the worship of Ifa; of the British racist governor versus the idealist young soldier; of different Africans caught in the whole tangle, with each clinging to a different part of the elephant. My concern was deliberately not to take sides; but rather, to present a complex mirror in which the face of reality is continuously broken into new fragments and multiple refractions, as the characters shift from myth to legend, from folklore to history, from ancestral rite to social rituals.

### **Seven**

I chose the title carefully, and named my protagonist Tegonni, an African Antigone. Yes, because the sad history of African politics so far, - and indeed of other places, such as

Bosnia—assures us, if anything, that there will be need for future Antigones. So, the questions may well be asked—why write at all then? Why does the dramatist continue, if his play will not alter history? It *Tegonni* will not chase away the soldiers and restore democracy in Nigeria; if the play will not resolve the racial tensions on even just the Emory campus, then why waste the energy on it?

I myself have always wondered. What answers did Sophocles give to similar questions when he first created Antigone?

I do not know if there are any answers. But those dictators of ancient Athens and Rome, and all their decrees, are now merely a matter of dust. And yet Sophocles and Antigone are still with us, speaking to our innermost spaces...

### **Notes**

<sup>i</sup> Paper written for the Conference on “The Translation of Ancient Greek Drama in all Languages of the World” organised by the Centre for Study and Practical Realisation of the Ancient Greek Drama, Athens, Greece, from Oct 5-8, 1995.

<sup>1</sup>Two years before, in 1992, I had been a guest of the Theatre Emory, when I came to perform with my troupe, the Kakaun Sela Kompany, for the Atlanta National Black Arts Festival. It was the success of that trip that led to the later invitation to Emory to do this adaptation of Antigone.

<sup>2</sup> See: Steiner, (1984).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. this report in the West African Standard: “From Ijebu to the further interior, there is one painful cry echoing from town to town, from city to city, of the evil deeds of the Lagos Constabulary. Goods have been seized from traders; maidens have been assaulted, youths have been plundered; and have been browbeaten and women have been robbed...Travellers of



all ages have suffered from their cupidity, avarice, rudeness and effrontery, and there has been none to deliver, none to redress" Cited in *Odu*, n.s., 10 (July 1974).

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