

Zulu Sofola and the Nigerian Theatre Influences and Traditions

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Abstract

This paper examines two of Zulu Sofola's works with a view to establishing the level of influence which she wields on the Nigerian stage and in the growing Nigerian feminist writings. As a pioneer female writer in Nigeria, the paper focuses on the major influences that shaped her works with a view to a better understanding and appreciation of her role as a first female playwright and scholar in the Nigerian theatre.

Introduction.

Nwazuluoha Onuekwueke Sofola, born on 20th June 1935, one year after the birth of Wole Soyinka, belongs to the second generation of playwrights to emerge to prominence after the Nigerian civil war. They include: Meki Nzewi, Bode Sowande, Kola Omotosho, Ahmed Yerima, Femi Osofisan and Fela Davis. By far the most popular among this group is Femi Osofisan who is fast acquiring the title of Nigeria's most prolific writer and dramatist. Since their emergence, this group of writers have made tremendous impact on the artistic traditions of their predecessors. All of them, at one time or the other lived and worked within the academic community.

Zulu Sofola, as she is fondly called, occupies an important position in the history of the development of modern drama and theatre in Nigeria. As a pioneer female Nigerian dramatist

and a feminist writer of the traditional school, Obafemi observes that

we encounter in Sofola's plays a simple and even simplistic plot geared towards a thesis or advocating submissions to the whims and caprices of age-old demigods and custodians of bogus traditions, for those who kick, there is no restitution. (62)

She is a reactionary writer who reacts to issues in her society. Her plays feature characteristically magic, ritual, myth, legend and tradition, but not with the same depth with which myth and ritual is employed by Soyinka in his plays. Her application is rather shallow but lucid. She places young side by side the old. She is a strong supporter of tradition and custom.

In *Wedlock of the Gods* for instance, Sofola exploits themes of marriage, custom and tradition. She upholds the view that marriage is supreme. Thus, Ogwoma is unjustly treated by the male folk by being forced to marry a man she does not love. Sofola sees this as male chauvinism and Ogwoma vows to break free, not really out of the cultural inhibition to her marrying the man she loves, but of the world dominated by the male folk.

Ogwoma defies tradition and custom by getting pregnant during a period when she is supposed to be mourning her late husband. Uloko and Ogwoma's defiance of tradition and custom is the basis for conflict in the play. On the economic front, it is a rebellion against the tradition of a daughter being the source of wealth. Why is she forced to marry a man she does not love? Why is it that Uloko could not pay the sum of Four Hundred Pounds demanded as bride price? These are all economic problems. Sofola decries the high cost of marriage

which is determined by the male folk without the consent of the female folk who are most affected by such actions. The play establishes Uloko and Ogwoma as rebels against culture and tradition. "The two rebels are dogged, headstrong, and unwavering in their conviction" (Nwamuo 93). The characterisation of Uloko and Ogwoma is better identified with modern educated youths. Their stubbornness is almost too strong for the Ibo communities that spurn them. This stresses the play towards Romeo and Juliet type of tragedy (Ayejina 94). These are characters created by Sofola to fight her cause and defend her female rights.

Sofola's writing support enlightened traditional society. She believes in and affirms the value and spirituality of African traditional life above western conventions. She writes specifically from the point of view of an educated woman in a male dominated society. She is individualistic in her writings. She neither sides the Marxist, the feminist, nor the traditionalists. To her traditionalists are simply reactionary.

In *The Sweet Trap*, she puts forward her feminist ideas. The play is placed in a European-styled domestic interior setting and it is basically a talk-play. The play raises controversy over the issue of modern and international feminism in Africa and is peopled by middle-class Nigerians whose characters are a synthesis of their traditional heritage and acquired Euro-American values.

Zulu Sofola is a versatile theatre practitioner who wrote and produced several plays for the stage, radio and television (Akinwale, 89). Obafemi says of Sofola's theatrical and literary achievement:

She occupies the same position among females as Soyinka occupies among his male counterparts in the literary, dramatic/theatrical scene, not only in Nigeria, but indeed in Africa (213).

Sofola's drama has consistently argued for a more authentic Africanity in theatre and she sought to do this through idealistic presentation of Nigerian value systems. Ironically, the medium on which she worked (The University Theatre), which she never sought to bring closer to the mass Nigerian public as Rotimi whom she attacks for 'lack of Africanity' (Sofola, 1979, 1986), has done, is far removed from the mass African or Nigerian audience.

The Disturbed Peace of Christmas

The Disturbed Peace of Christmas, Sofola's first published play, was published in 1971. The play focuses on a peaceful church going family and uses the Christian celebration of Christmas to highlight and touch on the theme of infant and teenage pregnancies. In this unconventional nativity play, Sofola worked on the Christian premise of morality. Thus the worldview of the play is entirely Western, though set in an African (Nigerian) community and peopled by Nigerians who have embraced the Christian faith and Euro-American way of life. There is nothing in the mannerism and attitudes of the characters that portray them as typical Nigerians. They are portrayed as Nigerians who have been totally submerged in Judo-Christian ways of life.

The overshadowing issue in the play is that of childbearing and teenage pregnancy. This issue in the play is given prominence over the birth of Christ that the play purports to celebrate. One of the characteristics of drama is the fact that a play can only come alive on stage. As Tunde Amosu (34) argues:

When he writes, the playwright has some kind of audience in mind, which identifies itself with the author's culture and allusions with relative ease. This situation while encouraging complicity between the dramatist and his target audience,

lays the basis of the importance of language and culture in linking the audience with the work.

Olu Obafemi's (60) comment on the relationship between drama and theatre with regards to Sofola's dramatic endeavours becomes important in this regard when he states that

An indivisible inter-textuality exists between drama (as literature) and theatre (as performance). Any critical appraisal of Sofola's dramatic enterprise therefore must take off against the backdrop of this duality of intellectual exposure and accomplishment of literary product and praxis.

The question of shared experiences between audience and playwright ensures certain limitations for the drama based on human and moral experiences. In Sofola's play, there is an added dimension of dealing with the audience in a language and form, which is a fact of the author's cultural and academic borrowings from outside sources, which invariably helps to modify her ideas. Sofola's Christian upbringing coupled with her stint at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee and the Catholic University of America where she obtained an M.A. degree in drama stressing playwriting and play production have exerted considerable influence on her ideologically and doctrinally.

The influence of the art of play production from the theatrical perspective and procedure which is a direct influence of her M.A. studies and her experience with directing and producing plays for the theatre at Ibadan School of Drama, are very evident in the play. Her techniques, which are those of a practical person of the theatre comes alive full-blown in

the characterisation of "Director" in the play. "Director" is furnished with splashes of Sofola's personality:

Director: (Tries to finish it. Puts a finishing touch on the veil, corrects Titi's head position on Ayo's shoulder, walks back and surveys the position of things. He is satisfied with the picture it gives). Now, walk slowly left stage. (calls out to Olu) Olu, we are ready for the music. (music reflects the joyful mood of the good news of the pregnancy; Christmas carol either in English or Nigerian). Good, good; walk on gently. (They walk off the stage; music ends). Come back! (They reappear). That was good after all. Mary you were excellent. (7)

The idea of a director who stands outside the production and watches over the production and directs the action of the play borders on the theatrical from purely Western perspective. Play production in traditional Nigerian society is purely a communal affair. Both director and actors are woven into a single unit in the production process. Sofola is good at creating theatrical effects. In the play, Sofola portrays Titi, the girl playing the role of Mary as really pregnant and unmarried. Here she seeks to shatter the audience's expectation by coalescing the experiences of the Biblical Mary and Joseph in a strictly orthodox setting with that of Titi and Ajayi, bringing the issue of teenage pregnancy into contemporary perspective and giving it a humane strength. This "emphasis on theatre skills with which the D.P.C. opens, (the Director rehearsing the young actors) develops into an emphasis on the potency of theatre as a social activity" (Dunton, 32). The action of the play is set in the theatre. Here Sofola adopts the technique of the play-within-a-play which will latter be exploited more by playwrights

like Femi Osofisan.

Also important is the use of costumes, décor, and properties. Very little attempt is made at Africanising or Nigerianising the nativity play. The scenes are expected to be played realistically with Western church hymns to accompany the actions:

Director: Keep your back straight and your chin high. Like this (Director adjusts him properly). Now, that's good. The other wise men follow him and walk like kings. Music, please, ("We Three Kings" is heard. They see the star).

1st Wise Man: It still moves.

Director: Stop! Cut it! Stop the music. (Mocks 1st Wise Man) "It still moves. Is that how kings talk?

1st Wise Man: How am I to Talk?

Director: Talk like an Oba. Talk with dignity and assurance. Talk like a big V.I.P. Talk like that you hear! (Shouts at him). (46)

The other scenes in the play, that is, the house of Mr and Mrs Ajayi, and Mr and Mrs Ladipo are set in European styled interior. Making the aesthetics of the play with its use of theatrical idioms purely Western.

Sofola and those who refused to be termed feminist have constantly concerned themselves with defining the role of women in a male dominated world and the need for women literature to articulate the definition of reality for women. This is apparent in her portrayal of issues relating to sex and marriage. In the play, it is the woman who feels wronged in an affair both enjoyed and could not consummate due to no fault of their own, while Mr Ladipo suffers, howbeit silently, for the un-fulfilment of his love desires. Again it is Titi's parents who

feel hurt for a crime both young people committed. These issues bother on Sofola's feminist theory. According to Savory "Sofola's feminist theory reinforces her own experiential reality, a woman's reality" (53) and this reality, from the individualistic stance of Sofola, is a reaction against modern and international feminist theories.

Sofola forges a link between her religion (Christianity) and her culture, seeking to interweave traditional practices with Christian doctrines. In the play, Titi, who is playing the role of Mary for the community's Christmas play is pregnant by Ayo, who is playing the role of Joseph. The entire Christmas programme for the community is threatened by the adolescent's "sinful act" which in turn threatens the message of peace for the period as both families are initially tense and poised for conflict. The rehearsals for the nativity play crawl to a standstill as the Director battles to keep his reputation unsoiled and continue with the play. With the help of Mrs Bandele, who acts as a mediator between the two families, the conflict is resolved for the play to go on stage. The play, which is a dramatisation of the Christian myth of the birth of Christ, is given new dimensions with Sofola's treatment and it also teaches the doctrine of forgiveness, which is central to Christian belief. This doctrine demands that no matter the degree of wrong that has been done, since to "err is human and to forgive divine" one should forgive one's neighbours and live at peace with all men. Mr Ajayi who has been wronged earlier by Mr Ladipo is asked to forgive Mr Ladipo so that reconciliation could be achieved. The conflict in the play is therefore sustained by her uncritical acceptance of Christian dogma, which is a direct influence of her Christian background and upbringing. The simple act of a theatre director casting a character for a role is seen as having divine implication. She turns to religious dogmatism in finding solution to the conflict in the play:

Mrs Bandele: Mr Ajayi, God never gives ears to man because of his sins. Heaven should not come down to convince you that the road you are taking is a wrong one. Worse things could happen to Titi and perhaps to the family as a result of your refusal to see reason. I myself have changed. Olu has returned to Mr Adesina for the Christmas play. You must not destroy the Christmas spirit for this year. Ayo and his parents want to marry Titi. It has happened. We must gather the broken pieces and make the best of it. Titi is the Mary of this year's play and as God wished, He uses us to accomplish his will, even the most sinful of us. For had God not willed it, He would not have chosen Titi to play the most important part in the Christmas play. Please, listen to all our appeals and forgive the erring young ones. (A pause) (44-45)

Thus through the young people, the elderly find reconciliation. Sofola emphasised here her ideological commitment of using the theatre as a healer and hero highlighting the role of the theatre as a social activity capable of bringing positive change to society.

King Emene: A Tragedy of Rebellion.

With *King Emene* Sofola tells a different story. As she sub-titles it, "*A Tragedy of Rebellion*". It deals with the fall of an impetuous youthful king who is unusually intoxicated by power. Emene the king of Oligbo cannot enter the shrine during the peace week to perform the ceremony, which is to transform him into a god so that he can carry the problems of the citizens to their deity in accordance with the ancient traditions of the people. The oracle refuses to sanction the king's participation

because of a crime that has been committed in the land, until the culprit is known, public confession made and the gods appeased, the peace week cannot be held.

The members of the Olinzele council warn the king and advise him on the need for a public confession, but the king sees the advice as a ploy to destroy him. Emene's arrogance further alienates him from his people. He defies the oracle's warning and enters the shrine to perform the ceremony but a boa drives him out. In shame he commits suicide. His deaf rejection of the advice of the elders and his lack of self-criticism leads to the tragedy of the play.

In *King Emene*, Sofola followed the tradition of concealed crime that leads to crisis and by its revelation the resolution of the plot is achieved. In Sofola's play as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the concealed crime has to do with murder. Unlike *Macbeth*, but like *Oedipus*, King Emene remains ignorant of the crime until the end of the play when the reversal and recognition is achieved. Both *Oedipus* and King Emene share a lot of character traits. Both respond to the oracle's prohibition and pronouncement with a series of arrogant decisions that further alienate them from the people. They are both victims of the Aristotelian tragic flaw or "Harmathia". Both characters are rash and lack self-criticism. Emene's pride and stubbornness are well mirrored in his refusal to see the Olinzele council:

Servant: Obi Igwe! The Olinzele members want to see you.

King: Tell them I don't want any audience with them

Servant: Yes, my Lord.

Queen: (To Servant) wait! Your Majesty, you must listen to the members of the

Olinzele council. They are the members of the governing body and must see you anytime about things that affect the lives of your subjects.

King: You are stepping beyond your bounds

Queen: Your forgiveness. But I am saying this because of what I know and what I have seen.

King: I have nothing to discuss with them (21).

Both *Oedipus* and Emene are myopic; on discovering the truth Emene takes his own life.

King Emene exemplifies Sofola's pre-occupation with the non-verbal aspects of theatre language. She states categorically details of age, décor, music, dance, costumes, props, colour and sound effects. In the beginning of Act 11 Scene III, she describes the scene thus:

Evening of the same day. The king and Jigide are in conference. Jigide is 55 years old, but strong and lively. He is draped in a two-piece hand-woven cloth like those of the Ndi-Olinzele people. He wears one long strand of coral beads around his neck and carries a small feather fan. The king wears an ankle-length full skirt (Mbunukwu) designed with royal figurines, and a jumper (afe obi) made in the style of a cloak. The king is standing while Jigide is seated. The atmosphere is tense. (27)

Apart from the historical focus of *King Emene*, the play raises the question of leadership. Written during the period of the Gowon and Ojukwu tussle in the country, the playwright decries autocracy in favour of democracy and good reason. If

the play is understood in relation to the government of the time in which it is written, we find in King Emene's youthful arrogance, equivalence of Gowon and Ojukwu's youthful exuberance which plunged the Nigerian nation into a civil war. This is one of the earliest attempts by a female writer in Nigeria to use the medium of the theatre to address national issues. A trend which has been carried forward by Tess Onwueme, Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, Stella 'Dia Oyedepo, amongst other emerging Nigerian female playwrights.

Furthermore, the morality of the play is two-fold. It embraces Judo-Christian and the traditional Nigerian or African concept of morality. This forces a continuous shift in the worldview of the play as Sofola's perception of the gods continues to shift from the African (Nigerian) to the Judo-Christian. In the encounter between Nneobi and Obiangeli, she speaks of God categorically in terms of the Christian conception of a monolithic being:

Nneobi: I pity you! Is it that sons are expensive and sons are rare, but do not jest with God when he chooses to do His will. What we sow we reap, and as God wills He deals with us according to our sins.

Obiangeli: How the ungodly speaks. (8-9)

Also in Act I, Scene III, Jigide speaks of the gods in monolithic terms, while in Act II, Scene I, we return to the African (Nigerian) concept of the gods as polytheistic in Diokpa's lines:

Diokpa: When your father was with us, we saw the best of things; Oligbo was the favourite of the gods; the gods continue to warn us. We have come

sent by troubled and fear-ridden people to touch a soft part in you for our sake, but alas we find a wall of unyielding rock. (19-20)

In Act II, Scene II we return once again to the Christian monolithic concept of God in Odogwu's lines. Furthermore, Act II, Scene III is set much more like the Biblical story of King Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, king of ancient Judah whose reign was marked by conflict with rival kingdoms of the Northern tribes of the house of Israel. Rehoboam forsook the counsel of the old men or elders of Israel for that of the young men in 1 Kings chapter twelve. Commenting on the influence of Christianity and the generation of conflict in Sofola's work, Olu Obafemi (213) states:

Also, perhaps Sofola's Christian background coupled with an uncritical acceptance of certain aspects of tradition, which she must have imbibed from her Igbo/Edo origins, is a major influence in the generation and sustenance of conflicts in her plays. This is probably also responsible for her recourse to magic, ritual and religious dogmatism in finding resolution to these conflicts.

Unlike Soyinka whose Christian influence is subtle, Sofola's is profound. Her plays feature a synthesis of African and Judo-Christian worldview, often making a confusing synthesis of the world of the gods as believed in Africa with the Christian belief in a monolithic God. While Soyinka juxtaposes oral tradition and mythology with Euro-American parallels, Sofola borrows freely and uncritically from these traditions and uses them to enlighten and enrich her traditional culture. Her works show the interaction and hybridisation of the two cultures so

much so that a distinct new culture now arises which is neither faithful to the African nor to the Euro-American.

Conclusion.

As a pioneer female dramatist in Nigeria, Zulu Sofola's dramatic efforts indicate a strong interest in the use of theatrical idioms. She forges a unity, unlike Soyinka, of her traditional heritage with the language of the theatre, which she has acquired through her scholarly endeavours. She seizes upon the structure and framework of her native customs, manners and idioms, and erects new structures upon them.

Major criticism of Sofola's works centre on her lack of an ideological direction and the shallow treatment of themes in her works and the simplistic nature of her plots (Dunton 92). But as a scholar and professor of literature, Nwogah and Chaiwola-Mokee say of her:

Professor Zulu Sofola, author of over a dozen published plays, cannot be put on the reserve bench in a gathering of writers in the African continent. She was an unapologetic believer in the tragic genre, which purgative power she strongly believed in. Her theatre has been described as basically "reportive" with very strong characters who play from extreme emotions. Naturally, conflicts are easy to develop and resolve. (7)

As a feminist of a distinct traditional school, Sofola contrasts the place of women in traditional society with that of the Western liberated woman. To her and contrary to Western feminist arguments, women are not supposed to play the role of second fiddle in the home. Though a woman has to keep the home, her role is not secondary, even while subordinating

her ambitions to the larger ones of family and society. The role of Sofola's female characters hang on this belief and contrast with Euro-American feminist ideologies. Accordingly, Nwogah and Chiawola-Mokee (7) submit that

Sofola's female characters have exactly the same attributes – strong willed and unyielding, giving way to only the more overpowering social survival imperative for which they could gladly lay down their lives.

A characteristic of Sofola's drama is the counter position of the old and the young - old ideas versus new ideas.

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