

**NIGERIA'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP  
AND A HAUNTING PAST:  
A POSTCOLONIAL INTERPRETATION OF OJO  
RASAKI'S THIS LAND MUST SACRIFICE**

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**Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu *PhD***

Department of Theatre and Film Studies  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

**Abstract**

Ojo Bakare Rasaki's *This Land Must Sacrifice* is a compelling commentary on the Nigerian project. The play paints a vivid picture, albeit metaphorically on the genesis of the scepter of failed political leadership that hangs over the Nigerian nation and in fact most of Africa today. In addition to the often advanced thesis of mutual disunity, distrust and tribal irredentism often identified as the root of the problem, this paper seeks to use Rasaki's play to argue a post-colonial dimension that traces the beginnings of the country's failed leadership to the structure created by the former colonial masters at the dawn of their departure.

**Introduction**

Bakare Ojo Rasaki belongs to the respected group of multitalented and richly endowed artist/scholars in Nigeria. His rich vein of output and creative effort spans the genres of dance, directing, dramatic theory and criticism and playwriting, the latter of which will be our focus in this paper. As a playwright, Rasaki's works treat themes as diverse as political instability, leadership question, social responsibility, the plight of the oppressed among many others. His dramatic works include, but are not restricted to the following *This Land Must Sacrifice* (1991), *Drums of War* (1995), *Rogbodiyan* (1995), *Once Upon A Tower* (2001) and *Adanma*

(2003). In this paper we shall cast our critical searchlight on *This Land Must Sacrifice* which we consider representative of the socio-historical sub-kind of the radical genre in contemporary Nigerian drama. The highlights of this category of drama include, Femi Osofisan's *Aringindi and the Night Watchmen* (1987), Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* (1991), Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland* (2004), Ahmed Yerima's *Ameh Oboni The Great* (2005) amongst many others. These plays articulate materials from the nations historical past, materials which highlight issues such as political exploitation, economic backwardness, social dislocation and leadership questions. It is in this regard that we find *This Land Must Sacrifice* a fitting specimen to examine the problem of socio-political dysfunction in Nigeria with specific reference to leadership. In carrying out this critical chore, it would be necessary to situate our argument within the template of a recognizable theoretical framework such as postcolonial theory.

### **Theoretical Background**

Although there is considerable debate over the precise parameters of the field and definition of the term postcolonial, in a general sense, it is the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period. Postcolonial theory is often said to begin with the work of Edward W. Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. It looks at literature and society from two broad angles; how the writer, artist or culture worker and his or her context reflects a colonial past, and how they survive and carve out a new way of creating and understanding the world. In 1974 Chinua Achebe published an essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" which may be classified as one of the pioneering works on postcolonial criticism. In the

same vein, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Decolonizing the Mind: Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) makes a bold attempt to suggest that post colonial Africa should develop the indigenous languages as interactive literary languages. We can take another instance from Wole Soyinka the Nigerian Nobel laureate. In *Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996) Soyinka articulates features which re-examine the effects of the African's encounter with a colonial past. The South African writer Njabulo Ndebele's *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1994) also advances post colonialist criticism because it tries to highlight the dilemma of the African artist creating in mediums and conventions created by forces of colonization. The Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe also laid down the lines of postcolonial thinking in his book *The Invention of Africa* (1988). Beyond the cultural or literary sphere, this mediating effect of the continents colonial past still haunts the African political clime and one of the most significant casualty has been the leadership element. In *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice. Politics*, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins argue that,

The term postcolonialism, according to a too rigid etymology, is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept, meaning the time after colonialism has ceased, or the time following the politically determined independence on which a country breaks away from its governance from another state. Not a naïve teleological sequence which supersedes colonialism, postcolonialism is rather, an engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies... A theory of postcolonialism must then,

respond to more than the merely chronological construction of post-independence, and to more than just the discursive experience of imperialism (1996:43).

The views above encapsulate Ojo Bakare Rasaki's treatment of myth and history in *This Land Must Sacrifice*. Applying the postcolonial paradigm to the spine of his play and the conclusions which he prods his audience to grasp, we evince the fact that he does not see the end of colonization with the departure of the colonial powers. First, he makes them culpable for creating the structures that foist a corrupt and oppressive leadership on the people, and then through the back door, impoverish the country further by encouraging this corrupt leadership to mortgage the future of its people through Western financial and political institution. Another of the important critical works to present this point of view is Robert Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990).

A single definition of postcolonial theory however, is contentious. Some scholars have strongly criticized it as a concept embedded in identity politics. Ann Laura Stoler, argues that the simplistic oppositional binary concept of 'colonizer and colonized' is more complicated than it seems, since these categories are fluid and shifting (2000: 23-25). We agree with Stoler's views here because in the play that forms the nexus of our discussion, no sooner had the colonial power gone that a new crop of colonizers now in native skin emerged to oppress the people. According to its exponents, the ultimate goal of postcolonialism is to combat the residual effects of colonialism on cultures. It is also concerned with how we can move beyond colonial thinking and practice towards

a platform of mutual respect. Post-colonial critics recognize that many of the assumptions which reinforced the notion of colonialism are still active today. Thus it argues that exposing the biased and racist and imperialist nature of these assumptions will hasten their loss of the power of coercion and subterfuge. Some of the issues that would be examined here are the formation of post colonial political structures, the impact of the colonial experience on postcolonial drama, culture and cultural production of colonized societies with special reference to *This Land Must Sacrifice*. Others are how the experience of colonization has affected those who were colonized while also influencing the colonizers? What traces have been left by colonial education, science and technology in postcolonial societies? How do these traces affect decisions about development and modernization in past colonies? What are the forms of resistance against post colonial control? These are some of the pertinent issues that we would try to examine using Rasaki's play. The formation of the post colonial through various mechanisms of control and the various stages in the development of postcolonial structures is evident in the play. The expansiveness of postcolonial thought has given rise to lively debates. Even as some scholars deplore its imprecision and lack of historical and material particularity, others, argue as Rasaki seems to do in *This Land Must Sacrifice* that most former colonies are far from free of colonial influences or domination and so cannot be postcolonial in any genuine sense. In essence the glib celebration of independence masked the scepter of neocolonialism in the guise of modernization and development within the universal system of globalization and liberalism.

### **This Land Must Sacrifice: A Post Colonial Interpretation**

This Land Must Sacrifice is located in the fictional land of Okanlogun which one could take as a hypothetical Nigeria. Okanlogun is colonized by Mbakara a smaller but more powerful entity. Mbakara exploits the rich resources of Okanlogun, oppresses the people to the point that the demand for their freedom albeit from a very weak and subservient stand point. Freedom is finally granted Okanlogun and that heralds the beginning of a greater form of oppression and corrupt leadership. The Narrator highlights the uncertainty that heralds this new found freedom thus,

My people, the dream of many years have manifested itself. The hope of many days has come true. They shouted on top of their voices and their voices were heard. After many years of protracted struggle, the slaves have gained their freedom, and now they start their journey to the promise land... But turning into a lion is one thing, having the tail of a lion is another. Wishing to be a king is one thing, having a horse to ride is another. Being freed and reaching the Promised Land are no problems, but is it possible for the people to settle and live in peace in the Promised Land? They wear clothes of different colours and caps of different sizes... (9).

These pertinent questions raised by the Narrator constitute the spine on which the essential theme of This Land Must Sacrifice is anchored on; the problem of disunity that has occasioned bad leadership in Nigeria.

Right from the beginning of the play the playwright makes

clear the identities of the personae with regards to their real life parallels. In the first movement he writes, "There is fast tempo music. A man dressed in the colonial master's attire dances in. Another man, naked except for a pair of shorts, dances in from the opposite direction" (8). These two characters obviously represent the colonial power and the oppressed indigenous people. The ensuing choreographed mime reenacts the sequence that led to the demand for political freedom from the colonial power and the latter granting same to the natives. The resultant burst of happiness and high expectations of the people is contrasted by the cynical response of the departing colonial master whom the playwright aptly cast in the following mien, "The colonial master laughs and mocks him before disappearing into the opposite direction" (8).

The mutual distrust and antagonism between the tribes rears its head right from the onset as they set their foot on the hypothetical Promised Land (an allusion to the dawn of independence). It takes the mysterious Old man who the playwright used as a technique to orchestrate the force of history and dramatic point of view to caution on the need for restraint and cooperation. As the debate for the choice of leader ensues we are given the first insight into the depth of the crack in group unity and cohesion occasioned by irredentist cleavages and personal ambitions. The initial vistas of leadership problem manifests when Agbekoya goads the majority to choose the elder elements as the rulers of the new nation. Rasaki by this design seems to draw a parallel here to the choice of the departing colonial masters to tacitly anoint and hand over power to their lackeys and those individuals who were products of their structure of political and economic exploitation. Ebebudike infers this when he concludes that the new leaders will perpetuate the heritage of

exploitation from where the colonial masters left off and also be mere agents of the imperial power. "At last, the spider has entrapped itself in its own web. Our people have tied themselves to the apron of the imperialists forever" (17). The attempt to reason out this dilemma, by the youthful Akin, Abubakar, Ima and Ebubedike introduces more twists and complications to the irredentists' interests first espoused by the elders. One aspect of the problem that reoccurs however in both camps is the leadership question. Abubakar makes the choice of the future leader a condition for supporting a revolution (18). This disposition bring an angry retort from Ima who reminds him that the crown also fits his own head (18), while Akin also stakes a claim based on his position as the eldest of the four youths. A disappointed Ebubedike captures the sad atmosphere thus,

Do you see the ugliness of indiscretion? Rotten eggs decrying the odour of fart. I said it before, and I am now saying it again that until square pegs are fixed in square holes, our freedom has not come (19).

Ebubedike's indictment of the youthful elements in the society stands as a reflection of the fact that the problem of leadership in the country goes beyond age, gender, religious inclination or ethnic group. Rather he recommends that those who elect to lead should be scrutinized by the people and if found capable should be entrusted with leadership. This prescription of course, is at variance with what obtains in the country today, where hiding under the gown of Western democracy, our leaders inflict all kinds of oppression and exploitation on their people. The Narrator also lays the blame squarely on the past; the system thrust on us by the colonial master, "The mistake of the past brings misfortune to

the present. Cheats have been mistakenly made rulers. They contravene the laws made by Ayelala before he departed" (20). By the same token, Adeola the king's first wife confronts him with the fact that his orientation for giving out is skewed deliberately and outrageously towards the rich and that he governs as if he were not on the throne by the grace of his subjects. These accusations by Adeola have implications for our post colonialist thesis. First it evidences the assertion that the colonial masters ruled and exploited the colonies in utter disregard to the natives, and secondly that the emergent African leaders whom they helped inaugurate were well schooled in their orientation of aligning with only those who can help them perpetuate their political power. This feature is given further vent by his chiefs who deride the idea of conceding to the people's interest when it comes to farming, taxation and crass exploitation (29). We see here an abiding sample of the disposition of the African leader completely in tune with the structures akin to those created by the colonial powers. These structures of oppression were visible in the appointment and use officials such as Warrant Chiefs who took liberties to tax people arbitrarily and compel them to work for little or no pay.

Rasaki seems to hold the former colonial masters culpable in the leadership quagmire. He appears to say that the very structures put in place by the departing colonial masters were fashioned in a way that it was guaranteed to fail. Hence they waited on the wings with their modern globalization and post liberal institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, G8 among others to entice and further exploit the impoverished masses of Africa. The encounter between the King and the Stranger after the knowing revelations of the Diviner makes for interesting reading. The Stranger here obviously is representative of the former colonial master, now masquerading

as genuine partner out to bail out a people in distress. The King's initial suspicion of the Stranger's intentions based on the manner in which he happened on the climactic scene the very instance the Diviner left presents us with a profound image of the playwrights ability to juggle materials and orchestrate more than one issue within the larger template of a larger theme. To the King's probing of how he knew his people had a problem, the Stranger retorts in the familiar condescending manner normal in the master-servant relationship between the colonizer and the colonized,

Stranger: (Laughs) Ha ha ha ha. Don't worry. Just listen to what I will tell you. Then we shall help you (36).

King: What kind of help and what will I do?

Stranger: The first help is that we are going to lend you money. But if we are doing this, then we must know how you collect your tax in this land. You will no longer be the collector, we will collect it for your people. Secondly, the chairs and tables you supply free of charge to the community school must stop. This responsibility becomes that of the parents. The second solution is that you will buy them with our money at high prices. But if we must do this, then the prices of everything you sell in this country must sky rocket. You must increase the school fees of the pupils in your community school. We must know how farmers harvest and sell their farm crops. This conditionality must be fulfilled if we are going to help you solve your problems. Though your subjects may say these conditionality are hard, but listen not to them, to get your problem solved (37).

The King's glib acceptance of the Stranger's proposition demonstrates the proclivity of our leaders today to mortgage the future of their citizenry to foreign economic and political interest. The point being made here however that is the very structures that have engendered this tendency were tacitly put in place by the former colonial powers themselves. What we see today is a mere manifestation of this structure, the symptom of their collective and deliberate action to bequeath power to indigenous cronies and in fact entangle them more in the miasma of the so called foreign aid or assistance. It is this scenario that has led to commentators urging that what Africans need are not the usual 'foreign aid' but genuine foreign investment in areas such as education and agriculture that would empower the people economically and politically. Habituates' of this socio-political anomie manifests as petty thieves such as pickpocket and the belligerent but pseudo Beggar. Yet one is more inclined to empathize with them given the confluence of circumstances that has brought them and indeed most of the ordinary people to a low only fit for animals. Agbekoya says this much when he tries to reason with Aliyu,

Agbekoya: Aliyu, you will just die in ignorance, because, you don't even know your right from your left... What of us the farmers. The government announced the sum of ten million naira for the agricultural loan scheme. Since then we have been running up and down to get this loan, but to our greatest surprise, the chief in-charge said the genuine farmers have been given the loans... I don't know when Chief Ede, Alhaji Mustapha and all the rich people in this

land become genuine farmers. Could you believe that none of us got a kobo from the loan? (46-47).

Ngozi's remonstrations in the play summarizes the character of the leadership foisted on Nigeria by institutions built by the colonial masters, But why, why, why should human beings treat fellow human beings like half being? Does leadership mean dead conscience? (Pause) Dead morals sense and lack of feeling for propriety is now characteristic of our leadership" (51). Early in the plot of the play we could see that the playwright sought to show that the basis of the leadership problem lies in politics, unhealthy rivalry occasioned by the arbitrary balkanization, alignment, realignment and subtle imposition of socio-political and economic structures by the departing colonial power. It is this subtle imposition that engendered the kind of leadership Ngozi condemns above.

As Chinua Achebe rightly pointed out, the main problem in Nigeria's march to nationhood is corrupt and ineffectual leadership. This opinion is equally echoed by Kalu Uka in the blurb of *This Land Must Sacrifice*. The leadership problem has so fettered the nation that it has continued to stumble and stagnate in various endeavours of corporate development and cohesion ever since it got its independence from the British. It is this political albatross that Ojo Rasaki has tackled in his play by a marvelous recreation of some of the primordial interest and structures left behind by the colonial masters with some degree of frankness. Rasaki locates the genesis of the leadership problem at the dawn of country's political independence. It is this scenario that has engendered what I consider as a haunting leadership problem. We could see from the various examples we cited, the kind of leadership that emerged at

the departure of the colonial masters shared a marked resemblance with the people they replaced. They carried on like individuals still intoxicated by the rancid wine of previous colonial exploitation and greed hence, they employed these tools and disposition albeit the extremely to govern their people.

Another aspect of the socio-political equation which the post-colonialist critical paradigm throws up in the play is the fact that even as an independent country, the erstwhile colonial powers still exerts a measure of control in the body politic. This is evidenced by the ease with which our political leaders accept the carrot of aid and economic assistance from Western nations. As we argued earlier, the circumstance of the white Stranger happening on the very moment King Wonbiliki found himself in trouble finds a measure of parallel in the manner the various Western aid and development agencies prance around with their conditionality, predicting our political future and economic growth and of course send their experts and aid in a very patronizing manner.

A thorough reading of Rasaki's play would highlight the notion that he subscribes to the critical nature of postcolonial theory which entails destabilizing Western post colonial structures and way of thinking, therefore creating space for subaltern or marginalized groups, to speak and produce alternatives to dominant discourse. He also seems to suggest that the term post-colonialism should not be taken literally to mean only the period of time after colonialism. It is an assumption which Rasaki in this work tried to refute because as characters and events in the play unfold, we see the once colonized community surrounded with contradictions and paradoxes. It is in this regard that we could say that the essential conflict of his play highlights what one could term, half-finished process of nation building which leads to

confusion, marginalization political hybridity and liminalities (Jeffery, 2002:95) In *This Land Must Sacrifice*, Wonbiliki the leader of the newly independent Okanlogun sets up his own structures of oppression which turn out to be hybrid imitation of those founded by the departing colonial power. The playwright also tries to deal with the theme of cultural identity of a colonized people. In this sense issues such as the dilemma of developing a national identity after colonial rule, the ways in which the artist articulate and celebrate that identity, often reclaiming it from maintaining an unhealthy relation with the colonizers are highlighted. Others are the ways in which the knowledge of the colonized people has been generated and used to serve the colonizer's interests, and the way in which the colonizer's economy has justified colonization via an imbalance that presents the colonized as perpetual consumers and producers of inferior culture.

The name of Rasaki's play is also instructive. The Idea of sacrifice is quite literal and metaphoric in the sense that it a signifier and also is signified. As a signifier, it denotes the need for collective and personal rigour in the march towards extricating the country from the clutches of neocolonialism and sustenance of political structures created by the erstwhile political masters. It is an action which the playwright believes would engender socio-economic development predicated on the ideals of self sacrifice, cooperation, honesty, patriotism and commitment. Herein lies the significance of the sacrifice as evinced by the playwright. It is a process of social immolation that sublimates self to collective good, group responsibility to personal indulgence. Perhaps, If King Wonbiliki had showed some modicum of these attributes highlighted above, most of the problems that bedeviled his community would not have been there, and there would also have been no need for the

Stranger from the West to infiltrate and prescribe solutions that further enmeshes his people in perpetual bondage to the dictates of powers from the Metropole.

### **Conclusion**

We can conclude by arguing that *This Land Must Sacrifice* cast a big doubt on our effort at building a modern progressive and united nation if we continue on the slippery path carved out by the colonial masters. The obstinacy of the ruling class in Nigeria to heed to the calls for dialogue and restructuring of the grey areas that constitute the clog in the wheel of socio-political progress is quite instructive here. Also significant is the tendency of this same class to recycle members of its tribe as leaders, thus perpetuating the status quo as inaugurated by those who handed power over to them at the dawn of independence. This anomaly further reinforces the notion that it was a deliberate act to guarantee an unfettered access to the nation's recourses by the former colonial power as they are quick to legitimize every succeeding regime one their interest are assured. Despite the usual hue of corruption and mismanagement of the nation's resources by "International Agencies", these plundered loot still find ready welcome in the economies of the West where they are used to buy palatial houses and resorts by our discredited leaders. It then becomes obvious to any discerning observer, that in the court of modern global politics, what informs legitimacy in the eye of the West is interest and not the development of the country. It is in the realization of this fact that Rasaki sees the salvation of Nigerians nay Africa not in the glitterati of borrowed political and social forms, but in the self discovery of the citizens themselves. Gilroy Paul also advances this argument in his vision for the improvement of the Africa in



the Diaspora. While Maya Jaggi in the Introduction of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savanna* highlights the feature of negation and recreation in postcolonial Africa (1987:xi). We should all sacrifice and subject primordial ethnic or group interest to national cohesion and unity. It is a sacrifice which by no means is easy because the pauperized citizens, apart from facing their local corrupt and oppressive leadership, also has to contend with a past colonial lord at bay in the West waging a relentless war to see that it still maintains significant economic, political and cultural interest in its former colonies.

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