
**Re-inventing Multimedia Drama to Unite Africans in the
Diaspora: The Example of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to
Blame* in London**

***Sola BALOGUN**

Abstract

Over the ages, many Africans have had reasons to travel out of their fatherland in search of greener pastures in Europe, America and other parts of the globe. They have in the process built careers and families far away from their roots aside imbibing cultural, linguistic and social attributes that are originally alien to them. A major effect of this migration/relocation is that Africans in Diaspora gradually lose touch with their own cultural ethos and values while their own offspring are far more alienated and can neither be referred to as Europeans or true Africans. But drama, particularly total theatre which originates from Africa has all it takes to relive African cultural heritage in the Diaspora. A well-packaged African drama that is presented in the multimedia format has the potentials of not only uniting Africans and their relations living abroad, but also relaying relevant social, cultural, aesthetic, historical and political messages to them. This paper therefore examines the recent staging of Ola Rotimi's classic play; *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, in London as a multimedia production which rallied Nigerians, nay Africans together in a single cultural event. The theatre production which was produced by Lagos-based Ayo Jaiyesimi and directed by London-based Lookman Sanusi provided a unique platform for Nigerians living in the United Kingdom and other neighbouring European countries to meet their kinsmen and women, aside savouring the Yoruba culture and tradition which the play effectively dramatised. Beyond this, the multimedia production bridged the gap between Africa and Europe by

*Sola BALOGUN of the Department of Theatre and Media Arts,
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti Email: solabalog2004@gmail.com

showcasing Ola Rotimi's dexterity in adapting the European story of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* into another classic play of African setting. The latter produced a similar tragic hero in King Odewale, the Yoruba (African) king who, like Oedipus, ends up killing his father and marrying his own mother.

Keywords: Multimedia drama, Ola Rotimi, *The Gods are not to Blame*, Lagos, London

Introduction

Nigerians and their relations who are based in England and a few European countries assembled in London to watch Lookman Sanusi's interpretation of Ola Rotimi's classic; *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. The five-day theatre production (April 26-30, 2015) held at Lost Theatre on Wandsworth Road in the United Kingdom capital. The performance was produced by Ayo Jaiyesimi and directed by Sanusi as a second attempt at reliving and celebrating African culture in London. Sanusi had earlier produced and staged Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* during the London 2012 Culture Olympiad.

The idea of staging *The Gods* was conceived by the Thespian Family Theatre and Productions. But the production was done in collaboration with Heavy Wind Media Productions with support from the Ola Rotimi Foundation. The drama experimented with the mediums of live stage and screen projection, thus thrilling the audience on a fresh, illuminating multi-media platform. The juxtaposition of the conventional stage elements with the screen effects helped a great deal in decoding messages that bother on tradition and culture. This was achieved through a systematic transition from one scene to the other, recalling past events and limiting the time and scope of performance, without jettisoning both the didactic and aesthetic values of African total theatre.

Production of *The Gods*...: Tale of One Story, Two Cultures

The opening montage depicts the rustic but culturally rich Yoruba setting. This is followed by the narrator who speaks through the large screen to announce the birth of a baby boy to the royal family of Kutuje land. There is also the rejoicing royal train, comprising

Oba Adetusa, his wife, Queen Ojuola, the chiefs and some of the townspeople. As they all rejoice, the ominous message comes from Ifa oracle that the newly born would kill his own father and marry his own mother. As custom demands, such a baby carrying a bad omen must be sacrificed else calamity befalls the land and the people in the future. So Gbonka is ordered to take the baby to the bush and sacrifice him to the gods. Two years later, the royal couple is blessed with another son, Aderopo, who now replaces the curse-carrying first child.

The play further develops into a succession of dramatic ironies and elongated suspense, as several attempts at reversing the Ifa prophecy prove abortive. First, Gbonka who is expected to kill the child in the bush hands him over to two hunters; Alaka and his boss, Ogundele; who later names him Odewale and raises him into adulthood in the land of Ijekun. Odewale grows up with his tragic flaws of impatience and extreme anger, which soon lead him into slaying a prominent chief around Ipetumodu after a scuffle over land. The killing of this chief, which is revealed via the (screen) flashback, fulfils the first part of the prophecy as the story reveals that the deceased (King Adetusa) whom Odewale killed over land, is actually his own biological father. Similarly in the Greek play, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, the city of Thebes in Greece is struck by a strange plague and the king, Oedipus, consults the oracle of Apollo who declares that the sickness came about as a result of a past injustice against the previous king. The king before Oedipus was cruelly murdered and his murderer is still alive without facing judgement.

Meanwhile, the blind seer, Teiresias, relays the controversial tale of how the incumbent king, Oedipus, is the one who killed his own father and went ahead to marry the same woman who gave him life. This revelation forces Queen Jocasta to disclose how the Apollo oracle earlier prophesied that her first husband would be killed by their son but that did not come to pass since their son was abandoned somewhere while her husband was reported killed by robbers at a crossroads.

The story builds up more tension as Oedipus begins to suspect that he was the abandoned baby who later grew up to kill a man on the road to Thebes, where he eventually met and married Queen Jocasta to assume the role of the new king. After a protracted investigation, a messenger and servant confirms the tale that Oedipus is actually the murderer. Upon discovering this, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus too uses the pins of Jocasta's brooches to remove his own eyes. (Sophocles, 1975)

The two tales above show how *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles served as inspiration for Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*. As a creative writer and dramatist, Rotimi adapted the story of Oedipus from Europe to recreate a similar tragic account of a Yoruba (African) king who allowed anger and impatience (tragic flaws) to ruin him. In the drama, the audience is sensitised on the need for humanity to imbibe universal virtues of love, tolerance, patience and peace. The two plays essentially show how certain innate qualities usually affect human behaviours, irrespective of race, culture, status or place of abode. The plays equally affirm the inevitability of fate and the helplessness of mortals in the hands of supernatural entities otherwise called gods.

Odewale: The African King (Protagonist) as Tragic Hero

Unaware of his fate, Odewale flees his foster parents in Ijekun after consulting the oracle and learns that he would kill his own father and marry his own mother. In the process, he rescues the people of Kutuje from the people of Ikolu who want to take advantage of the vacant stool in Kutuje to attack its people. Odewale's heroic exploits in favour of Kutuje force the people to crown him king hence he ironically succeeds his father as king and subsequently fulfils the second part of the Ifa prophecy by inheriting his father's wife and his own mother, Queen Ojuola.

After eleven years of Odewale's reign, the land of Kutuje is devastated by incessant tales of famine, disease and death. King Odewale, who now has four children by his own mother, is also not spared of disaster. The king and his chiefs seek solution from Ifa oracle, using Aderopo as royal emissary. But the message from the

oracle is that the killer of the former king still lives in Kutuje, hence disaster is imminent for the land and its people. Meanwhile, King Odewale suspects Aderopo of complicity, accusing the latter of plotting his downfall. He thus plans to get rid of him by all means.

Eventually, Baba Fakunle, the old Ifa priest who is summoned to the palace by Odewale calls him *bed sharer* and killer of the former king. But Alaka's visit to the palace from Ijekun throws more light on the circumstances that led to the death of Odewale's foster parents and the true identity of Odewale himself. In the end, the duo of Alaka and Gbonka, aided by the Ogun priest and Balogun unfold the mystery surrounding the identity of Odewale who is the same child that was ordered to be killed in the bush but who later grows up to become the killer of his own father and husband of his own mother. This revelation forces Ojuola to commit suicide while Odewale tragically plucks his own eyes and lead his four children into an unknown destination.

The play essentially mirrors the inevitability of fate in the affairs of men as commanded by the gods. It also emphasises how man's innate weaknesses usually lead him into trouble and his ultimate downfall. As a tragic hero, Odewale is consumed by his own shortcomings, although he occasionally demonstrates love and generosity towards his people in times of need. The protagonist depicts a fiery and temperamental character but who is also humane and considerate provided no one invokes his wrath like King Adetusa (his own father) who insults him by referring to him as 'a bush man from the land of Ijekun'.

Cultural Norms and Values in *The Gods are Not to Blame*

A play rooted in Yoruba culture, *The Gods* showcases the totality of the ways of life of the people in the South Western part of Nigeria. The setting of the play is the Ipetumodu area in Osun State, hence the costumes, props, accessories and make-ups in the play depict the cultural lives of the Yoruba people. Many of the characters appear in their traditional attires made of Aso-Oke, Ankara or Adire fabrics, just as women wear local accessories of beads, necklaces and earrings. From the names given to the

characters, such as Gbonka, Aderopo, Adetusa, Ojuolaetc, the audience is able to discern the heritage of the Yoruba people and their predilection for indigenous values and norms.

The Gods equally showcases the occupational lives of the rural Africans who are mostly farmers, seers, hunters or traders who are not only proud of their sources of livelihood, but are most significantly at peace with their world view. For most Africans in the Diaspora, watching *The Gods* on London stage is akin to fraternising with kinsmen and women at home because many of them have long lost touch with their roots and have been quite alienated from their relations in Africa. The play thus offers a refreshing platform for Africans in the Diaspora to reunite with their people and ostensibly understand their cultural and artistic values.

In line with the above, the play has a total of fifty three proverbs (Monye, 1995) through which the audience learns about the social, cultural and natural lives of the Yoruba people. Some of the proverbs rendered by King Odewale in the play include:

- 1) He who pelts another with pebbles must have pebbles in return (Rotimi, 7)
- 2) The hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come (30)
- 3) All lizards lie prostrate, how can a man tell which lizard suffers from bellyache? (23)
- 4) Two rams cannot drink from the same bucket at the same time! They will lock horns (34)
- 5) A bush does not sway this way or that way, unless there is wind (60)

In a rather subtle manner, the audience learns how these proverbs determine the actions of particular characters on stage or predict what is about to happen in the play. Through the proverbs, the playwright succeeds in deploying appropriate wise sayings as a strategy to educate the audience about the totality of Yoruba culture. In the selected proverbs above, the imminent rift between King Odewale and his stepson/younger brother, Aderopo, becomes palpable. On the whole, the roles of proverbs are stressed by two

scholars (Owoeye and Dada) who unveil their meanings in the context of usage in *The Gods* as follows:

Proverbs....make for maturity, pragmatism, and effectiveness in speech through their euphemistic approach. In other words, proverbs, their euphemistic nature, make for politeness in speech in cases where a direct statement may sound offensive or may be utterly rude. .. The linguistic effect of proverbs reaches farther into the human mind than ordinary speeches as seen in the success of Queen Ojuola's attempt at persuading her son to speak his mind before the king and his council of chiefs. They also show the maturity and experience of the speaker in many instances, because their use calls for a measure of patience and decorum in the speaker. Proverbs are hardly used for aesthetic purposes only; they are intended to improve the overall comprehension of what is said.(Owoeye and Dada,2012)

Apart from the proverbs, the cast and crew of the London production were made up of mostly artistes of Nigerian origin some of who either travelled to the United Kingdom from Nigeria or are based in Europe. Among these are the Lagos-based Benson Williams who played Odewale and SegunAdefila (founder and artistic director of Crown Troupe of Nigeria) who doubled as one of the townspeople and Baba Fakunle's apprentice. Other prominent artistes are the Germany-based Nigerian actor, Jubril Sulaimon (Alaka), UK-based Moji Bamtefa (Costume and make-up/insane woman); Cecelia Sanusi-Olawale and Simisola Sanusi (townswoman and Odewale's daughter respectively) as well as Ahmed Aliu; formerly of the National Troupe of Nigeria. Others are SegunOgunfidodo, Ayo Adedapo, Felix Ologbosere (Aderopo), Tolulope Yusuf, Nike Bammeke, Yemi Oyeyebi, Prince Tade Olusile and Frank Oluwole Williams. Among the crew members were Africans and non-Africans such as Christina Simakova (Stage

Manager), IbukunFasuhan (Production Manager), Omoyemi Oni (Media) and Chermiah Hart (Technicals and Editing).

The Gods... as a Multi-media Drama

A multimedia production in the theatre involves the use of a variety of artistic or communicative media. It comprises a combination of several media such as text, audio, images, animation, video and interactive content. Lookman Sanusi who directed *The Gods Are Not to Blame* for Thespian Family Theatre described the production as a 'Film- Playø' where the audience members were treated to moving images on a cyclorama and actions on stage. This technique of theatre presentation adopted the inter-media concept featuring a constant flow of actions from the screen to the stage. When asked on the motive behind the use of 'inter-mediaø' or 'film-playø' concept, Sanusi explained further that:

The idea is to expand the world of the play beyond the physical stage by bringing in exotic scenery: the African rustic setting, sounds and euphoria to enrich, for the London audience, the authentic African experience while entertaining them with a classic African play (Sanusi, 2015).

In adopting this multi-media theatre format, the audience saw on different occasions, flashbacks of the lands of Kutuje and IjekunYemoja where the play actually derived its settings. First, we encounter on the screen, King Adetusa, and his wife, Ojuola and their newly born male child who is proclaimed by the oracle as a harbinger of bad omen. The audience is also led to the landscapes of the land of Kutuje where the rustic life of the Yoruba people comes into view. The screen further gives compelling visuals and sounds that depict the rustic yet physically beautiful and serene African environment.

Most importantly, the mixed audience that saw *The Gods* in London were more attentive to the multimedia messages which combined several elements of audio, graphics and the video to showcase natural endowments of Africa. Some of these

endowments include rivers, trees, domestic or farm animals, mountains, hills, landscapes, farmlands and vegetation.

Essentially, the multimedia projection in *The Gods* provides the overall content which the audience can easily connect with, and which is capable of being retrieved and shown to viewers anytime or anywhere. In other words, the same content (combination of picture and sound) that was screened to the audience in London can equally be shown to viewers in other parts of the globe without necessarily altering or changing its features or format.

As a dramatic technique, the multimedia production created a visually mesmerising experience that made it possible to have two levels of realities- the physical stage and the screen projection. So the audience members are open to two layers of understanding as the actions and movements oscillate between the stage and the screen.

Prospects and Challenges of Multi-Media (Theatre) Production

A multimedia production is different from the traditional motion pictures or movies either through the scale of production or through the possibility of having audience participating in the production. While the scale of production may involve a multiple display of text, sound, animated graphic images and video images, the interactive multimedia usually involves voice command, mouse manipulation, text entry, touch screen, video capture of the user or live participation (Webopedia, 2016).

Sometimes too, a multimedia production is usually associated with sophistication and huge cost mainly because of production and presentation challenges. Unlike the simple text-and-images, a multimedia production may come in diverse formats such as the Web, CD-ROMs, and live theatre. The cost of producing these formats and other electronic materials for the multimedia production may indeed pose a challenge to the media producer/director. Many years ago and until the mid 1990s, multimedia productions were said to be unpopular mainly because of the expensive hardware needed to realise them. However, with increased performance and reduction in the prices of the hardware,

multimedia productions are now popular such that nowadays, nearly all PCs are capable of displaying video, though the resolution available depends on the power of the computer's video adapter and CPU (Webopedia, 2016)

As a way of illustrating the relevance of multimedia in the contemporary motion picture industry, Hollywood is now widely believed to have been taken over by the multimedia technique. This is due to the creative use of animation and graphics, and a combination of texts and videos by film makers to enhance the filmic effect on the viewer, or as a strategy to tell the story in an unconventional manner. The multimedia revolution is therefore a growing phenomenon as more filmmakers and media directors across the globe continue to operate more intensely with an integration of animation, audio, graphics, text, and full-motion video through computer hardware and software for education, entertainment, or training (WebFinance, 2016).

From the explanation above, multimedia gives the media director or producer the opportunity to influence the presentation of materials through selection and manipulation of various aspects such as video, sound, music, animation, graphics, texts and pictures.

Conclusion

Over the years, Multimedia has performed critical roles in the business world. While information can easily be conveyed through the use of such devices as still pictures, video, film, audio, or text, multimedia has the potential of multiplying the degree of effectiveness of information dissemination owing to the added entertainment value and the extent to which the viewers receive the messages. As a proof of its usefulness, the use of Multimedia has been recognised far above the use of singular media format as follows:

The effectiveness of teaching, selling, informing, entertaining, promoting and presenting are all dependent upon one factor: the ability of the presented material to hold the attention of the desired audience. A dynamic multimedia

presentation can usually be more effective than earlier methods at accomplishing this task with an audience that was raised on television and motion picture. The computerised multimedia presentation offers added benefit of cost-effective flexibility allowing easy editing of the basic materials in order to tailor them to specific target audiences (Encyclopaedia, 2016).

From the above, multimedia sources always make communication and learning much easier for people all over the world. But these sources can be difficult and expensive to create and configure. For many people, a multimedia production is easy to understand and convenient to use because it makes presentations simpler. Also a single multimedia source can be used to convey a message or concept in diverse ways to an audience. Nevertheless, some forms of multimedia productions are incompatible with the hardware and software that a person or entity has. Moreover, a theatre director or media producer may require significant resources, manpower and skill in order create multimedia forms that can adequately convey intended messages to the audience.

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