Playwriting: Therapies and Prophecies, Finding Meanings in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

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Abstract

Aside from the basic role of providing a working document for creative interpretation, the playwright functions in many capacities and this has attracted him many monikers. Ola Rotimi is a classical Nigerian playwright whose magnum opus speaks volumes of his commitment to the growth of the indigenous Nigerian society, promotion of culture and tradition, and recommendations towards a utopian future. This study explores the classical text The Gods Are Not to Blame (1971), which was deliberately used as a tool of influence on the larger Nigerian society. Hence, this study identifies the playwright's position on the effective use and prospects of traditional medicine as alternative medicine in the treatment of all sorts of maladies. This highlights the playwright's recommendation on trado-medicine as applicable beyond the world of the play, with an extension to recent occurrences in the contemporary world especially at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Africa is blessed but oftentimes we underestimate our potentials. It is against this background that this study examines the play text as a posthumous prophecy for the consideration of traditional medicine at a time the universe failed to provide a foreign cure, and as the trailblazer which sustained immunity before the arrival of vaccination. Therefore, this study echoes the playwright's perception on the effectiveness and healing tendencies of trado-medicine and its necessary acceptance as a potent form of remedy within and beyond African society.

Key Words: Playwriting, Trado-medicine, Therapy, Prophecy, Covid-19.

Introduction

Beyond doubts, the task of playwriting is quintessential in the theatre, as the playwright is responsible for providing the masterpiece for communication between artistes and the general society. The playwright is saddled with the creative responsibility of establishing the thread of dialogue on which the director and every other artiste derive muse from. However, the playwright writes not just to fulfill the righteousness of the two fold purpose, but to create writings which would resonate with his immediate society. These writers, especially the African playwrights, create dramatic dialogues that would not only entertain and educate but would display their perspectives on African cultural values, socio political issues, and comment on societal issues (Mbachaga 2014; Ukande 2014). In the words of Anjorin & Nwosu (2018) "The dramatist is meant to be relevant in his society; he is sometimes seen as a *social critic*, a commentator, *a prophet*, a propagandist, a teacher, an educator, an entertainer, a reformer, a crusader, a seer, and even a politician" (emphasis mine) (110). In the same vein, Yerima (2016) conducts an introspection to reveal the underlying objective of playwrights while writing. Observably, while some playwrights tie their muse to the need to mirror the society, some tie it to the need to recommend solutions capable of birthing an ideal society (69). Onah (2014) says succinctly that "every creative interpretation is a product of an ideological culture and often reflects the peculiarity of a given society" (29). It is against this background that this study examines Ola Rotimi's magnum opus, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971) as a classical Nigerian dramatic text with therapeutic and prophetic tendencies. Here, Ola Rotimi exudes a great sense of commitment to the African society as he engages his text to display the indigenous African society as one replete with diverse healing properties within itself, and prophesies a moment of total embrace of trado-medicine as alternative medicine (if not as a major option). This study places the therapies and prophecies contained in Ola Rotimi's dramatic text side-by-side with the perspectives on trado-medicine as a potent therapy due to the recent occurrences in the contemporary world especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Playwriting: Historical Perspectives

Playwriting began from the regularization of theatre in the 6th century when Thespis wrote the first tragedy followed by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides his counterparts. These tragedies were submitted as play entries at the annual City Dionysian festivals. Nwabueze (2011) gives an historical account on playwriting from classical antiquity to modern times. He chronicles thus:

> During the classical period, the playwright's role was fairly totalitarian…During the medieval age when plays were essentially church-related, playwrights were anonymous…in Elizabethan England

> when theatre became secularized, individual playwrights emerged…By the turn of the seventeenth century, playwrights enjoyed royal patronage… in the modern age, when the theatre became eclectic, the playwright became a philosopher and thinker, satisfied with being primarily a writer, a specialist who creates artistic world by putting facts into fiction for the satisfaction of a universal audience (Nwabueze, 2011: 147).

From the foregoing, the art of playwriting had existed since the beginning of the classical era and still continues to survive because of its consistency in purpose. From the Golden Age of Greece, to Shakespeare to Ibsen to contemporary times, the work of the writer had remained sacrosanct to shape not just what performance, but indeed, the writer's immediate society as well. Oftentimes, the playwright goes ahead to suggest solutions to recurrent societal problems, and offers possible predictions towards a utopian future (Anjorin & Nwosu 2018; Klinger, 1993).

In Nigerian history, playwriting has served as a viable tool to communicate, document history, preserve cultural values, and provide strong recommendations. Ogunbiyi (2014) recognizes Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, JP Clark, Zulu Sofola, Wale Ogunyemi, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Ahmed Yerima, Esiaba Irobi amidst other Nigerian playwrights as contributors to the growth of playwriting in Nigeria (31). Asigbo & Okeke (2013) further asserts that the history of playwriting in Nigeria is 'long and checkered', and with origins in Western influences. The ilk of James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark among others, who wrote to either to impress the colonialists or to stake Africa's claim to having a dignified an authentic history were basically acting upon the need to present or represent the values of their indigenous Nigerian society (2).

Précis of the Play Text

The Gods are not to Blame, Ola Rotimi's magnum opus which was first published in 1971 is an adaptation in dialogue with Sophocles' classical text *Oedipus Rex*. The communal African tragedy displays the fate and faith of Odewale, the tragic hero whose presumed fate at birth was to kill his father (king Adetusa of Kutuje) and eventually get married to his biological mother (Queen Ojuola), according to the words of Baba Fakunle, the palace diviner, who had consulted the gods in the presence of both indigenes and onlookers on the occasion of his naming ceremony. In order to avert this evil and forestall the taboo, the lad had to be sentenced to death. However, Gbonka, the king's messenger sent to bear the lad to the evil forest to meet with death (his second fate), had compassion on Odewale and

gave him out to a faraway family who adopted him as foster parents. Odewale grew up to be a native of Ijekun Yemoja tribe, innocent of his previous fates until he encountered a priest who echoed his first fate of him killing his father and marrying his mother and then advised him to remain where he was. Instead, Odewale fled from his foster parents with the faith that he was running away from his terrible fate and attempting to prove the prophecy wrong. On his odyssey, he fulfills the first part of his fate by killing a stranger (King Adetusa) in a duel. Odewale took off to Kutuje –a land which was under siege of the people of Ikolu, charged them to war against Ikolu and as compensation, was made to replace their late king and was allocated the properties of the late king (including Queen Ojuola –his wife) as tradition demands; thus, he fulfilled the second part of his first fate. King Odewale's kingdom was peaceful for the first few years of his reign then tragedy struck in different shades. Upon revelation, the gods expose the turmoil to be tied to the entrance of a man with an evil fate into the land, the man who must be expunged for peace to be restored. At all costs, Odewale vows to search out this cursed fellow with the faith that his blood would bring normalcy. In this faith, he kept pursuing the truth which eventually pointed back at him as the man they have all been searching for, hence, he met his second fate –death.

Subtexts of Culture and Tradition in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

Ola Rotimi is famous for conserving culture and tradition in his dramatic texts. This he does through a deliberate use of dialogue, theme, music and many others. He sends underlying signals on three specific issues amidst a wide range of topics:

a. Leadership

As tradition demands, in every indigenous society there must be a leader who calls the shots. As an illustration, the Yorùbá community in which this play is set, believe in the superiority and capability of the monarchical head –the king (*Kábíèsí*) who wears the crown as a symbol of dominion and command. Hence, these people may not take independent decisions except as have been permitted by the king as they feed and totally depend on his wisdom and instructions. In the context of the play under study, tragedy had just struck Kutuje with sickness and multiple deaths and it was obligatory for the people to assemble at the palace to wail, complain and challenge the king for inactivity:

> SECOND WOMAN: Sickness has been killing us all these many days. What has the King done about it? (*The Gods Are Not to Blame*, 2015: 11).

Here, the playwright establishes the societal head (government) as totally responsible for the well-being and sanity of the society. This could have been typical of the Nigerian society, unfortunately, the reverse is the case. The societal malady is terrible and the

government shows little or no concern to alleviate the countless challenges. This negates the ideal position of a leader as the playwright communicates through King Odewale "what have I been doing about the sickness in the land? Have I been sleeping? If so, I am sick in the head; for only a madman would go to sleep with his house on fire" (*The Gods Are Not to Blame*, 2015: 11). With the availability of numerous leaders at the local, state and federal levels, the Nigerian society still suffers redundancy and perverse judgement.

b. Causality and Divinity

The playwright introduces the principle of causality and the superiority of divinity. Although there is a king who could call shots, according to tradition, the king is also subject to the instructions of the gods who are perceived as supreme to his earthly rule. The land is in chaos, and the gods had to be consulted in order to understand the reasons for the series of calamities and to arrive at possible solutions. In the words of the Ogun priest, a delegate had been sent to make enquiries from Ifá the basis for the turmoil and afflictions. "We have sent Aderopo to Ile-Ife, the land of Orunmila, to ask the all-seeing god why we are in pain" (*The Gods Are Not to Blame*, 2015: 12). Beyond the worlds of the play, it is believed in the traditional context that the gods are advantaged to know better than earthly beings and as such, it is considered wise to enquire from them and receive directions.

c. Trado-medicine as Alternative Medicine

The playwright advertises the potency of traditional medicine in curing all kinds of sicknesses. As contained in the passages of the play, the king's palace is filled with bitter citizens suffering different ailments and waiting on the king for answers. Expectedly, the king should provide a solution to their countless health challenges but he was rather disappointed with the people's degree of ignorance and oblivion of the healing properties of herbs. He says:

> ODEWALE: … But what have you done about it, I ask. You there – Mama Ibeji – what did you do to save your twins from dying? It is sickness that men can cure, not death. What did you do to cure their sickness? Nothing? Oh, I see, your body is too weak, your bones suddenly gone soft, you cannot move, you cannot go into the bush and cut herbs to boil for your children to drink is that so? Answer (*The Gods Are Not to Blame*, 2015: 12).

From the foregoing, it is believed that if properly prepared, herbs could function as medicine and cure for all kinds of disease. Unfortunately, today, herbs have been relegated and replaced by different kinds of foreign medicines which also came with several kinds of misuse, abuse and adverse effects.

The Playwright as a Therapist and Prophet

Popularly, the playwright has received many appellations; as prophet, reformer, or as social commentator (Anjorin & Nwosu 2018; Yerima 2016). However, this study highlights the playwright's strategic use of spoken texts to give prophecies and specific recommendations which could be therapeutic to the sick society identified in the world of the play and any other society experiencing similar illnesses. In *The Gods Are Not to Blame* the playwright exalts the place of herbs as a potential cure for all kinds of sicknesses. His perspective hinged upon the fact that Africa was replete with all kinds of herbs which are quite medicinal and potent to heal various maladies:

> ODEWALE: What herbs did you boil?
> SECOND WOMAN: *Asufe ẹiyẹjẹ* leaves –
> ODEWALE: Y-e-s
> SECOND WOMAN: Lemon-grass, teabush, and some limeskins.
> ODEWALE: That's good… For how long did you boil it?
> SECOND WOMAN: As soon as it boiled, I put it down.
> ODEWALE: No, no. You must boil it longer, woman, longer, so that the medicines in the herbs can come out in full spirit to fight the sickness. Boil it longer (*The Gods Are Not to Blame*, 2015: 13)

From the playwright's perspective, herbs (which Africans possess in excess) are capable of healing any sickness as long as the leaves are carefully selected, mixed and well prepared. In the foregoing conversation, king Odewale was in a dialogue with one of the victims of the mélange of illnesses which have ravaged the land. His first question seemed like an immediate inquiry to ascertain the woman's level of knowledge, exposure and expertise in the use of herbs. In Kutuje, the similitude of a typical African society, traditional medicine is regarded as the certified means of treating any form of malaise and as such, King Odewale expected every citizen of Kutuje to harness the healing properties resident in herbs without exception to any kind of disease. He was disappointed at their level of ignorance when they neglect the option of getting herbs and instead paraded themselves in front of the king, who himself was also seeking remedies to the afflictions in his household:

> ODEWALE: …Up, all of you-into the bush! Go and get cutlasses-go on! Go and pick herbs from the bush, boil them, drink them. Get up, go on – in twos, threes, get up!...Bring me those herbs I cut from the bush…[Taking the leaves from Abero who has just entered with them.] These…see? My wife, Ojuola herself has boiled part of them for the

household. This evening again, I head for the bush for more (*The Gods Are Not to Blame*, 2015: 14-15).

Here, the playwright presents Nigerian society as one in possession of these healing qualities and does little or nothing to exploit the possibilities in these medicines. Oftentimes, the Nigerian society even depends on the salvation of foreign aid in such cases and care less in looking within for the possibilities of exploiting the unique tendencies in herbs. Therefore, as a therapist, the playwright charges the villagers with an extension to the citizens of the Nigerian society with full optimism so as to reorder their perception as regards the use of herbs:

O ya	Come round everybody
E, je, k'alo,	Let us all go, into the bush
E, m'ada l'o,wo, e gbe	Get your cutlasses
Koko	get cooking pots
Igbo ya, igbo ya.	Get ready for work.
Ewe gbogbo l'ogun	All herbs are medicines
Ogun gbogbo l'ewe	all medicines are herbs
O ya so,	come round everybody
E, je, k'alo,	let us go
E, m'ada l'o,wo, e gbe	into the bush.
Koko	
Igbo ya, igbo ya.	
At'onile, at'alejo	Landlord get up,
At'omode o, at'agba	Guests, join in too
Igbo ya, igbo ya.	Everyone, young and old
	into the bush (*The Gods Are Not to Blame*, 2015: 17).

From the foregoing, the therapies and recommendations are subjective opinions which could suffice for tackling any endemic disease as mirrored in Kutuje, however, the medical recommendations became prophetic as saving grace at the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. This birthed controversies as regards the possibilities of traditional medicine as potential cure for the viral disease, and these speculations influenced the universal search for medical salvation until the eventual arrival of vaccines.

The COVID-19 Pandemic: Discourses on Trado-Medicine

The CoronaVirus (Covid-19) is a highly infectious viral disease which broke out universally at the tail end of the year 2019 and gained prominence in 2020. The disease involved a variety of symptoms which varied from "Fever or chills, Cough, Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, Fatigue, Muscle or body aches, Headache, New loss of taste or smell, Sore throat, Congestion or runny nose, Nausea or vomiting, and Diarrhea" (CDC, 2021). These regular symptoms which were at first misconstrued and undermined led to uncontrollable deaths of thousands in Nigeria and more in other countries, especially in China and the United States. This resulted in a quick enquiry for answers and medical solutions to the worldwide anomaly. Unfortunately, at such critical moments, the United States could not provide a global cure. This gap paved the way for the thoughts of trado-medicine as alternative medicine. Countries, mostly from the African region; Madagascar, Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Tanzania, and Nigeria spearheaded the search for a potential cure of the viral disease from use of herbs. The president of Madagascar Andy Rajoelina, in a press conference on the 20th day of April 2020, announced a breakthrough in the fight against COVID-19. It was a hypothetical treatment –a herbal tea labeled 'Covid-Organics' tagged the first African cure for coronavirus, based on traditional medicine (Baker, 2020). Though, at the time, the World Health Organizations had not approved the intake of such contents as a cure for the viral disease yet, the move became widely renowned and Madagascar almost became the messiah for the viral disease at a time when the western world had not succeeded in arriving at a potent cure. Tiana Andriamanana, the executive director of local conservation NGO Fanamby submits that in Madagascar conventional medicine or hospitals are rather sparsely available or unaffordable. As such, the inadequate number of hospitals in Madagascar might have influenced the search for a viable herbal cure; however, it is important to note that according to WHO 87% of the African population naturally use traditional medicine (Baker, 2020). The discovery of the 'Covid-Organics' in Madagascar influenced the development of herbal remedies in other African countries, which in some ways boosted immunity and controlled mortality rate in African countries.

In Nigeria, the Lagos State government showed a sign of deep interest and belief in trado-medicine as a probable cure for COVID-19 by requesting trado-medics to submit samples of their drugs for clinical trials. He said in a public meeting "Africa is yet to find a cure to COVID-19, I, therefore urge the traditional medicine practitioners, as the space is still open, to bring their medicine for clinical trials, under good manufacturing guidelines" (Premium times 2021). Sola Ogundipe (2020) who wrote for the Vanguard, records that the chairman, Lagos State Traditional Medicine Board, Prof. Adebukola Oshintelu, disclosed that efforts were being made by the Traditional Medicine Board to find a cure for Coronavirus, and

are in the business of sending a few hypothetical samples for testing before making the public declaration for its general consumption (Ogundipe 2020). In the same vein, a renowned monarchical ruler in the South-Western region of Nigeria, the Ọọ̀ni of Ifè, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, Ọ̀jájá Kejì, in the search of a potential cure for the virus, unveiled an indigenous drug for the cure and prevention of the viral infection. According to Adedeji (2021), "this drug named Verozil, which is available in capsules, blister packs and liquid, was certified by the body regulating sales and use of drugs in Nigeria, the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). Verozil, which was launched alongside other three indigenous drugs, was researched and produced by Yem-Kem international group and Ooni Ojaja Global Outreach. It will be distributed by Organic Remedies" (Adedeji, The Nation 2021). The production of Verozil was by Yem-Kem, a prominent producer of traditional medicine nationwide although like in the case of Madagascar it was approved by NAFDAC for national consumption, but was not licensed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as certified cure for COVID-19 however, the WHO gave countries the liberty to conduct multiple research for potential treatments which might provide a way out of the devastating lockdowns that were collapsing national economies, and skyrocketing mortality rates (Baker, 2020).

Deductively, Silveria et al. (2020) opines that herbal medicines may not cure or prevent COVID-19 but they test possible to improve patient general well-being and actually offer them the opportunity to quickly respond to subsequent therapies (no. p). These multiple discoveries connect to the playwright's opinion as contained in the text understudy on Africa's potent use of traditional medicine as it subsequently became a major go-to option for African countries during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion

The playwright functions in many capacities and this has attracted him many monikers. However, more particularly, as a therapist and prophet, Ola Rotimi's dramatic text is a masterpiece of art which posthumously provided sustainable headways for Africa during the heat of the pandemic before the eventual discovery and circulation of vaccines. This presents him as a crusader on the use of traditional medicine as a potential medicine capable of treating any malaise. Therefore, in the words of Andrianjara, of IMRA, it would be beneficial to revisit our traditional knowledge. The indigenous African society is quite wealthy in culture and traditions and it is quite unfortunate that we undermine our potentials (Baker, 2020).

Biography

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