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Aesthetics of Cultures: The Yoruba Culture in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

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Abstract

In the face of world power tussle, many cultures today are endangered and threatened. As some have been widely encroached by foreign and imposing nations, some are on the track of extinction. Annexation ideologies and appropriation programs are developed by ambitious countries and under different shrouds to possess other national territories. A notable culprit is the western cultural hegemony and self-sought imperialism which is otherwise sugar-coated as civilization. While many independent nations have assimilated foreign cultures in guises of education, migration, and foreign interventions, many nations still nurse the brunt of colonialism. Unfortunately, cultural etiolation continues today with many unsuspecting nations falling victims. The causations for the decline in the traditional gamut of these societies are often hinged upon various instances. A notable mention is the lost Harappan civilization. Once one of the oldest civilisations and often classified with the Mesopotamian, Chinese and Egyptian civilization, the Harappan civilisation has now plunged into a site of research and excavational discoveries. Also, Ajawa, a formal language of the people of Bauchi state in Nigeria has become extinct. Thus, there is no gainsaying that these extinction of cultural values and traditions portend detrimental consequences for our futures than benefits. This is the more reason efforts must be made towards documentation in as many forms as possible. Such preservation mission could help to save cultural values like that of the Yoruba people of western Nigeria and others which may be endangered soon. Playwriting is a way to keep the flag hoisted. Writers such as Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua T. Sutherland, Tawfiq al-Hakim, among many others must be reckoned with for their efforts on African literature. These literary works are archival of African cultures. It is in this light that this paper considers the Yoruba cultural aesthetics in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Using literary analysis method, this paper categorises Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* as a play that documents the Yoruba indigenous culture and it examines Yoruba cultural elements like, oral tradition, dance, song, language, proverbs and wise-sayings, etc., in the play. This paper establishes the importance of documentation in cultural preservation. Some of the existing and endangered Yoruba cultural values are among those discussed in this paper. Imperatively therefore, to sustain African cultural values like that of the Yorubas, and keep them from extinction or obsolescence, efforts must be channelled towards writing plays and literature that document and celebrate African histories and cultures.

Keywords:

aesthetics,
culture,
interculturalism,
music,
oral tradition,
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Kültürlerin Estetiği: Ola Rotimi'nin *The Gods Are Not to Blame*'inde Yoruba Kültürü

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Özet

Dünyadaki güç mücadelesi karşısında günümüzde pek çok kültür tehlike ve tehdit altındadır. Bazıları yabancı ve dayatmacı uluslar tarafından geniş çapta saldırıya uğrarken, bazıları da yok olma yolundadır. İlhak ideolojileri ve el koyma programları, iktisadi ülkeler tarafından farklı kılıflar altında diğer ulusların topraklarını ele geçirmek için geliştirilmektedir. Bu durumun en önemli sorumlularından biri de Batı'nın kültürel hegemonyası ve medeniyet diye yutturulmaya çalışılan emperyalizmdir. Birçok bağımsız ulus eğitim, göç ve dış müdahaleler yoluyla yabancı kültürleri asimile etmiş olsa da, birçok ulus hala sömürgeciliğin izlerini taşımaktadır. Ne yazık ki, kültürel etiyolasyon günümüzde de devam etmekte ve pek çok masum ulus bunun kurbanı olmaktadır. Ne yazık ki, kültürel soldurma günümüzde de devam etmekte ve pek çok masum ulus bunun kurbanı olmaktadır. Bu toplumların geleneksel gamındaki gerilemenin nedenleri genellikle çeşitli örneklerle dayandırılmaktadır. Değirmeye değer bir konu da kayıp Harappa medeniyetidir. Bir zamanlar en eski uygarlıklardan biri olan ve genellikle Mezopotamya, Çin ve Mısır uygarlıklarıyla birlikte sınıflandırılan Harappa medeniyeti, günümüzde bir araştırma ve arkeolojik kazı alanına dönüşmüştür. Ayrıca, Nijerya'nın Bauchi eyaleti halkının resmi dili olan Ajawa da yok olmuştur. Dolayısıyla, kültürel değerlerin ve geleneklerin yok oluşunun geleceğimiz için faydadan çok zarar getireceği yadsınamaz bir gerçektir. Bu nedenle, mümkün olduğunca çok biçimde belgelenmesi için çaba gösterilmelidir. Bu tür bir koruma misyonu, Batı Nijerya'daki Yoruba halkının gibi kültürel değerlerin ve yakında tehlike altına girebilecek diğerlerinin kurtarılmasına yardımcı olabilir. Oyun yazarlığı, bayrağı yüksekte tutmanın bir yoludur. Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua T. Sutherland, Tawfiq al-Hakim gibi yazarların Afrika edebiyatı konusundaki çabaları dikkate alınmalıdır. Bu edebi eserler Afrika kültürlerinin arşividir. Bu makale, Ola Rotimi'nin *The Gods Are Not to Blame* adlı eserindeki Yoruba kültürel estetiğini, bu bilgilerin ışığı altında ele almaktadır. Bu makale edebi analiz yöntemini kullanarak, Ola Rotimi'nin *The Gods Are Not to Blame* adlı eserini, Yoruba yerli kültürünü belgeleyen bir oyun olarak sınıflandırmakta ve oyundaki sözlü gelenek, dans, şarkı, lisan, atasözleri ve hikmetli sözler gibi Yoruba kültürel unsurlarını incelemektedir. Bu makale, kültürü muhafaza etmede belgelemenin önemini ortaya koymaktadır. Mevcut ve tehlike altındaki Yoruba kültürel değerlerinden bazıları bu makalede ele alınanlar arasındadır. Bu nedenle, Yorubaların gibi Afrika kültürel değerlerini yaşatmak ve yok olmalarını ya da değerlerini kaybetmelerini önlemek için, enerji Afrika tarihlerini ve kültürlerini belgeleyen ve kutlayan oyunlar ve edebiyat yazmaya yönlendirilmelidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

estetik,
kültür,
kültürlerarasıcılık,
müzik,
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About the Writer: Ola Rotimi

Ola Rotimi was a renowned Nigerian playwright, theatre director, teacher and scholar. Named Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi, he was born to a Yoruba father (Samuel Gladstone Enitan) and he had a mother of Ijaw origin named Dorcas Adolae Oruene Addo. He was born on April 13, 1938 at Sapele. Ola Rotimi was quite different from his contemporaries. “While most Nigerian directors, particularly directors of the theatre of English expression, find expression in “Brechtian techniques”, “Grotowskian methods”, “Stanislawskian style” and “Meyerholdian models” among others, Ola Rotimi has consistently directed his plays with a view to evolving a directing culture that may be described as Nigerian in character” (Emmasealu, 16). He was educated in Port Harcourt and Lagos. In Port Harcourt, he studied at St. Cyprian’s School from 1945 to 1949, while at Lagos, he studied at St. Jude’s School from 1951 to 1952, and later studied at the Methodist Boys High School. He travelled to the United States in 1959 to study at Boston University. After receiving a B.A. in fine arts in 1963, he attended the Yale School of Drama and graduated with an M.A. degree in 1966. After he returned to Nigeria, in 1969, he began to teach at the University of Ife which is now Obafemi Awolowo University. In 1977, his teaching career took him to the University of Port Harcourt. He returned to Ife in 1991 before he left to continue his teaching career at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. In the year 2000, Ola Rotimi returned to Ile-Ife, joining Obafemi Awolowo University, and on August 18, 2000, he breathed his last. The history of Nigeria and Nigerian cultures and ethnicities are the subjects mostly captured in Ola Rotimi’s plays. For example, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (produced in 1966; published in 1977) is one of Ola Rotimi’s political plays. *Kurunmi* (produced in 1969 and published as *Kurunmi* in 1971) bothers about the Yoruba culture, indigenous tradition, indigenous politics and power play. Some of his other plays include: *To Stir the god of Iron* (produced 1963), *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (produced 1968; published 1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), *Holding Talks* (1979), *To Be or to Become* (1991), *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988), etc. Ola Rotimi’s works are profound in establishing and propagating Nigerian cultures on stage and dictating Nigerian style of dramaturgy.

Introduction

Globalisation and education have left us with one reality, i.e., the importance and indispensability of culture. Subjects relating to culturalism, “nationalism transferred from state to society” (Jens-Martin and Friederik 361), multiculturalism, “a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their sociocultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organisation or society” (Rosado 1997 qtd. in Elena, 916), and cultural infiltration and cross-

fertilization which are otherwise known as interculturalism have always held sway in interdisciplinary concerns. However, the importance of culture has been downplayed in our societies today. It cannot be overstated that “Culture counts...culture can be a lever that stimulate pride, personal development and self-fulfilment for minorities, and at the same time it can be a common language, a bridge between different groups” (Jan and Antonio 7). In most African societies, there are cultural codes in solving all issues. This phenomenal design has provision for rewarding good deeds and punishment for crimes committed in the society without having to think of being biased or witch-hunting. Many societies have provisions for the set rules and regulations that must ensure peaceful living and co-existence among citizens. Knowing the elements of one's culture is not only beautiful but also helps to appreciate and preserve it better. For example, the culture of the Yoruba people of western Nigeria is one of those that cannot be jettisoned in nation and character building. However, a general overview of the concept of culture will provide a strong base for the understanding and appreciation of individual cultures such as that of the Yorubas.

Culture: Meaning and Importance

While many people who have reasoned one time or the other about the word ‘culture’ may have tried to define or get a special way of expressing their experience, culture actually is not as such which needs much ado to conceptualise. Culture is phenomenal and is the closest to man. Man exists in culture and culture exists in man. It is everything about man, his environment and way of life. Culture “is so basic to human societies and so intertwined with our very natures that its workings are seldom acknowledged or thought about by those who have internalized it. It is so encompassing like water to a fish, that it remains largely preconscious and is obvious only when it is gone or has been seriously disturbed...” (Yerima 38). Culture is the way of life of a particular people including those things they share in common among themselves and their community which include their beliefs, tradition, norms, religion, ideas and ideologies, history, as well as their pain and joy. Culture is an indispensable and inseparable aspect of humanity. Culture is a very significant identifier of a people. Also, it is “an aggregate of the total way of life of a people. It includes the thought and belief systems, customs and habits, the arts and language, pastimes, folklore, history and civilisations, education and child learning and of course medicine and science” (Olajubu 291).

Furthermore, culture is acceptable to a set of people who have the recognition or identity of the elements that give them a distinguishing difference from other people. It is a set of traditions that has been put into practice overtime and has become characterizing features. It becomes the picture, mark and sense of identification and classification. It could be summarily put that, “the totality of our way of life today is culture” (Ukala 49). This essentially means the conglomeration of

the things that define a people. It is what they live by; it is the definition of their identity, personality and their existence. It is dynamic and the more reason it is aesthetically appreciated. It deals with our history and everyday life. It is manifested in the way we eat, the way we dress, the way we talk, our language, our ways of socialization and other things that characterize human life. These various distinguishing values therefore become aesthetic elements of our different cultures.

Aesthetics and Culture

Thoughts, opinions and philosophies are integral in discussing aesthetics. It is “a study of sense perception and how these perceptions can be most effectively clarified, intensified and interpreted through a medium of specific recipients” (Zettl 2). Sometimes, aesthetics perception may be individual and subjective. Aesthetics can also be conceptualised as “a judgmental instrument, aesthetics apportions value to objects of appreciation” (Eseagwu 189). Essentially, the values of a people become their object of appreciation and this is their aesthetic perception, choice and reception. While some things may not be obtainable within other cultures, they form some other people’s identity and fancy. It is what a specific people find acceptable and beautiful. It is good to therefore note that, “the thing called beauty or the pleasant is intangible. Its emblem or traces could never be found in the object perceived neither in the properties that makes the whole but in the hearts of the perceivers which is now reflected in a form of judgment and reactions. Beauty is a light in the doldrums of beings” (Gibran qtd. in Kofoworola, 131). There are many aesthetic elements that could be identified within different cultures. Some examples of these elements include; “song, music, drum, flute, chants, incantation, proverbs, storytelling, dance, mime, divination, myths, ancestors, sacrifices, oracle consultation etc” (Imam, 3). Fashions, ceremonies, modes of celebration, languages, are among many other elements of cultures across the world. These various cultural components and the peculiarities that exist in the different cultures form the various aesthetic elements that are used in play writing and theatre performances.

Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

The Gods Are Not to Blame is a play of fate and destiny with tension mixed with anxiety, dilemma, fear, and reactions of wrath and rage forming the frame of the play. The play is a good example of dramatic irony. King Adetusa and Queen Ojuola are presented with the option of killing their new born baby or watch it grow into a disaster. The baby (Odewale), who is also the main character, is predicted to kill his father and marry his mother. After the hard decision is made, Gbonka who is to carry out the duty of killing the child spares him instead. He drops him in a bush far away, and there, Alaka - a young hunter sees him and picks him up. He grows up as the only child of a childless farmer at the village of Ijekun-Yemoja. By accident, Odewale gets to know

about the evil prophesy against him, and how he would kill his father and marry his mother. Not wanting this to happen, he decides to leave his place of abode, bearing in mind the thought that the people who nurtured him to that state are his true parents.

Odewale flees from Ijekun-Yemoja and he ends up mistakenly killing his own real father whom he could not identify. As a result of the murder committed, Odewale is not able to stay in that land. He runs to another village called Kutuje. Odewale is made the king of Kutuje because the king had passed on and he (Odewale) helped them to recover their losses from the Ikolu people who just plundered them. He automatically marries the past king's wife – Ojuola who also bares children for him. Inadvertently, Odewale now has his own mother as a wife.

Soon, a plague hits the land of Kutuje. It is said that someone who murdered the late king still resides in the land. Odewale in suspicion of rebellion against him, swears to reveal the killer of the past king. In the long run, it dawns on him that, the man he had killed a year before he was made king of Kutuje was his father and the previous king of Kutuje. As the truth comes to light, Ojuola commits suicide and Odewale plucks out his own eyes. He banishes himself from the land, groping away with his four incestuous children – Adewale, Adebisi, Oyeyemi, and Adeyinka.

Yoruba Culture Elements in Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

Song and Dance

Yoruba people are singing people. Dancing is also a part of them. Music permeates all the facets of the lives of the Yorubas. This is because, "traditional cultures are best expressed in music..." (Abiodun 25). "Music is generally called "*Orin*" among the Yoruba. *Orin* means song as distinct from "*Ilu*" which refers to instrumental music, "*Ilu*" means drum. "*Ere*" is sometimes used to mean Music" (Adeola 45). In fact, there are different songs for different moments. Songs are used for different purposes and as a means of differing expression of happiness or sadness. Songs are used during ceremonies such as naming ceremonies, marriage, house warming, festivals celebrations, etc.

***Orin Ariya*/Celebration Songs**

As it implies, celebration songs or *orin ariya* are songs sung at happy occasions and moments of joy. Such songs are usually used to mark the good time. It could be sung solo or by a group of people. They are always songs of expressions of happiness (*orin idunnu*). Singing the songs serve two major purposes. The first is to show appreciation to *Olodumare*, the Supreme being who has brought such good occurrence, while the other purpose is for the expression of one's excitement. An example in the text is the celebration of the birth of ODEWALE. The villagers

rejoice with King ADETUSA and Queen OJUOLA.

*[Merry singing and drumming. Enter QUEEN OJUOLA
bearing baby swaddled in white linen. She is accompanied
by elderly women in a dance procession...]* (Rotimi 1)

*[Lights on TOWNS PEOPLE again singing, dancing as they
disperse]* (Rotimi 4).

People often join in when there are such occasions. There are also spontaneous or extemporaneous short songs in cases of unexpected events that bring joy to the heart. Not only do the Yoruba people use songs as expressions of joy, they also show sadness by singing heart-pouring regretful dirges.

Orin Idaro/Dirges

When there is an unfortunate or unpleasant occurrence, the Yoruba do not only cry, they also sing dirges. Mostly, they incorporate the situation into the song lyrics which often evoke pity and sobriety. This is mostly done when there is a loss of life, property or when there is a looming misfortune. When a person is missing for example, the Yoruba people make the expression that, *omo eni ku, o san ju omo eni nu lo*. This is translated to mean, 'a dead person is better than the one who is lost'. The reason for such expression is not farfetched. A dead person may be mourned once and for all, knowing for sure that such a soul has been laid to rest. However, a missing person keeps the hopes and pain of the people for a longer period. The heart is continuously wrenched until the location of the missing person is ascertained. Every moment the brain recalls the missing one, a dirge follows. For example, the moment the situation turns around and BABA FAKUNLE tells the ill future of the child, the atmosphere changes to that of gloom and sadness. They express their sadness with a dirge.

BABA FAKUNLE: This boy, he will kill his own father
and then marry his own mother!

[The TOWNSPEOPLE sing a dirge, softly] (Rotimi 3).

[*Tinkling rhythm of Ogun rises again in the background, quickly overtaken by dirge-chorus*]

There is trouble
now in the land.
Joy has broken
and scattered.
Peace, too, is no more. (Rotimi 8).

From the excerpts above, it is obvious that the response to most tragic moments come with songs of regret and displeasure. In page 8, the present situation means that the people had been in a state of stability and have enjoyed peaceful moments until their happiness is interrupted by the sudden plague that hits the land. To withhold the expression therefore is to harbour more pain. To let it out is a freedom of the heart.

Orin/Ilu Ogun/War Songs/Drums

Apart from songs of celebration and dirges, the Yorubas also have songs for other situations and events. Most times, these songs are easily classified based on their uses. For example, there are war songs/drums that the Yoruba refer to as *Orin/Ilu ogun*. These kind of songs and drums are used only when there is war. The singing and drumming warn the people around and energizes the spirit of the warriors. Most of the time, people are able to understand and distinguish war songs/drums by the sounds. Statements are made during drumming and the tempo is always fast and cataclysmic. For example, a common tune played by Yoruba war drummers is *bo le d'ogun ko d'ogun, bo le di'ja ko di'ja!* This can be translated to mean 'we do not care, be it chaos or war!'

Orin Ise/Work Songs

There are also work songs – *Orin ise*. These types of songs are sung while the people are working so as to encourage them and lighten the mood for smooth work. The lyrics of such songs stir up the workers and reminds them that being industrious and diligent is better than being idle. In fact, Yorubas detest slothfulness. They believe that, *owo to ba di'le l'esu nlo*. This means, an idle hand is the devil's workshop. An example in the text is the song of the TOWN CRIER.

O ya

Come round everybody

E je k'alo	Let us all go, into the bush
E m'adal'owo, e gbe	Get your cutlasses
koko	get cooking pots
igboya, igboya.	get ready for work.
Ewe gbogbol'ogun	All herbs are medicines
Ogungbogbol'ewe	all medicines herbs
O ya	so, come round everybody
E je k'alo	let us go
E m'adal'owo, e gbe	into the bush.
koko	
Igbo ya, igboya.	
At'onile, at'alejo	Landlord get up, Guests, join in too
At'omode o, at'agba	Everyone, young and old
Igbo ya, igboya.	into the bush. (Rotimi 17).

Work songs lift the spirits of the workers; it criticizes laziness and encourages hard work. There are also religious or sacred songs. The categorisation and classifications are limitless depending on the purpose of usage. Singing can be occupational also because some families among the Yoruba are known for their specialisation in the art of music. "Among the Yoruba, there are families known for their musical arts. An example is the "Ayan" family - drummer's family. The 'Ayan' family is known for dundun" (Adeola 47). The drums for example are of various types and various purposes too. Some of the Yoruba drum types include the *bata*, *dundun*, *bembe*, *agba*, *agere*, and many others. Thus, music, dance and drumming as Rotimi has portrayed in the play, remains integral aesthetic elements of the Yoruba culture.

The Yoruba people do not only sing, they accompany their songs with dances too, and most times with drumming. Dance is a combination of action and inaction either which could be planned or extemporaneous. Dance is an important element of the Yoruba culture. Song and dance

work together most times. “In other words, when the Yoruba speak of “music” in its totality, it involves drumming, singing and dancing” (Olagunju, qtd. in Lasisi 109). Notably, “music and dance have always been an important part of Yoruba culture for those living in Nigeria as well as in the Diaspora. Yoruba music and dance are used for many different occasions in life such as religious festivals, royal occasions, and entertainment” (Winn and Jacknis 26). In Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, this element is expressed.

[CHIEFS *come forward and invest ODEWALE in royal robes and crown while the TOWNSPEOPLE **dance** round him...*] (emphasis mine)

[*Heavy bata **drumming** bursts forth, and ROYAL BARD dances off to the rhythm of *ketelu*.*] (emphasis mine) (Rotimi 7).

[TOWNSPEOPLE *appear, carrying earthen pots on their heads. They pick up the TOWNCRIER'S tune, and dance, heading for the bush. The women haven't completely danced past when a contrasting chorus of male voices approaches from another direction. The men, all skimpily clad in bante – undershorts – appear wielding cutlasses. Drum accentuate their dance song.*] (Rotimi, 17).

[ODEWALE and CHIEFS *come out and happily join in the dance.*] ...

[*The men pay homage with the dance and hurry off...*] (Rotimi 18).

The above extracted stage instructions reiterate the inseparability of dance and music from

Yoruba culture. Music and dance are forms of expressions used by the young and old, elites and commoners and cuts across all genders.

Oral Tradition

Oral tradition has to do with a people's culture, their idiosyncrasies and philosophies. This tradition is a conglomerate of their past, history, beliefs, customs, myth, folklore and all that concern the people. Oral tradition is "that complex corpus of verbal or spoken art a means of recalling the past and based on the ideas, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes and sentiment of peoples" (Adedeji 143). In other words, oral tradition is a people's spoken culture or one can also say, it is a people's verbal aesthetics.

Oral tradition is the vast field of knowledge through which cultural information and messages are transmitted verbally from one generation to another. It is the complex corpus of verbal arts created as a means of recalling the past. Sometimes oral tradition is used interchangeably with folklore or elements such as language and belief systems that are shared by a group; what gives a community its cultural and national identity. In contemporary usage, oral tradition or folklore means popular and group-oriented expressions of culture. (Akinyemi 27)

Categorized among the Yoruba oral traditions are the arts of praise singing or praise chanting, folklore and story-telling, incantations and evocations as used in Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. As musical as it might be, praise singing or praise chanting exist as a distinct element of Yoruba culture. Existing in various forms, chants are used for the purpose of praise singing, morning, warning and correction, paying homage, etc. Chants make use of vocal and monophonic style of singing. It may be accompanied with musical instruments too. In the Yoruba culture, the aesthetic essence is derived in the use of tonal inflections and, smooth and sonorous command and mastery of language. Chants are used to praise kings in the palace, important personalities or eulogize any person at all. Surprisingly, not only humans are eulogised in Yoruba culture. The Yoruba people also understand the praise names of animals (wild and domestic), tress, and rivers among other inanimate things. The common practice of this is known among the local hunters who have to perform some rituals either before killing a game or after. Rotimi makes use of the palace praise singer – the ROYAL BARD to note this aspect of the Yoruba culture that is predominantly existent and practiced till date in palaces.

ROYAL BARD: There are kings and there are kings:

King is greater than king.
It is not changing into the Lion that is hard,
It is getting the tail of a lion.
Odewale, King, son
of Ogundele,
you will last long to rule us:
kolanut lasts long in the mouths
of them who value it!

*[Heavy bata drumming bursts forth, and ROYAL BARD
dances off to the rhythm of kutelu] (Rotimi 7).*

ROYAL BARD: There are kings and there are kings
if you mean to hurt our king
you will fail
the lion's liver is vain wish
for dogs.

[Drums.]

Ehn ... whoever thinks that he can
rule better than our king,
let him first go home and
rule his own wives
then he will know how hard to rule
is hard. Meat that has fat
will prove it by the
heat of fire!
...

An eagle does not go to the market-place
unless there is something there.

Odewale, King, Father of us all
went to the town today
to see his seek people.

Odewale, King, owner of strength,
you have had too much greeting from me;

[Pushes ODEWALE gently aside, and faces OJUOLA.]

Make way, I pray, let my greeting also
touch your wife.

*[In appreciation, ODEWALE pastes some cowries on the forehead
of the BARD and drummers.]*

Ojuola,
Queen, daughter of Oyenike,
You and your husband –
two parts of the same
calabash split equal
by the gods. Indeed,
what is the difference between the right ear
of a horse
And the left ear of that same
horse?
Nothing. (Rotimi 36 - 38).

To win the favour of the person which may result into gifts of money, clothes, women for wives,

or other possessions, the praise singer does not merely sing, he/she makes sure to understand the personality he/she is praising, and to sink it down his nerves, he introduces the mention of his cognomen and recounts the valorous and good acts of the person travelling down the history lane to speak well of the personality's lineage. Among the Yorubas, "these bards sing or chant in honour of the kings and they also announce and honour important guests to the palace by drumming or piping the names and attributes of such guests as they enter into the palace" (Akinyemi 90). In times of trouble and turbulence, the lyrics sung are those of encouragement, reminding the leader of the good records that have been kept by his forebears. When the atmosphere is light, the chanter chants praises and jests. He also flatters. Although, only the good accounts of the people being praised are sung, even when such personality is popular with tyranny. This partly explains the loyalty of the people to their leaders.

Oriki in Yoruba means cognomen. It is an important aesthetic element of the Yoruba oral tradition and element of the Yoruba culture. *Oriki* "is felt to encapsulate the essential qualities of entities...The evoke subject qualities, go to the heart of it and elicit its inner potency. They are a highly charged form of utterance. Composed to single out and arrest in concentrated language whatever is remarkable in current experience, their utterance energises and enlivens the hearer" (Barber 12).

Chants are used as instruments of placation of angry people or gods to calm their anger. Just as with music, chants among the Yoruba are of various types and can be used for different purposes such as celebration of the dead, invocation, evocation, as ode, necromantic purposes, inspiration, etc. There are various patterns of chanting in the Yoruba culture and this suggests the types and categories that we place these chants. These chants serve as historical documentary instruments from which the Yoruba people can travel back in time and history. Some of the different types of chants that we have include: *ewi*, *rara*, *ijala*, *ekuniyawo*, *ogede*, *ofo*, *ayajo*, etc. The artists who perform these oral arts are often referred to as *Akewi*. However, Rotimi uses the English language for praise chants of the bard; it is important to note that, the Yoruba oral tradition uses the Yoruba language and in fact, thrives and is more appreciated at the creative use of the language. The dexterity in language use is one of the aesthetic appeals that serve as cultural condiments of the Yoruba. It is a fact to state that, language plays a huge, if not the most important role, in Yoruba oral tradition. First and imperative is the understanding of the language itself. The tonal inflections, variations, contexts, stress, etc. all must be considered in Yoruba linguistics. For example, there are basically three tonal variations in the Yoruba language. The first is known as *dò*, the second as *re* and the third, *mí*. The *dò* tone is the lowest sounding/inflected tone while the *mí* tone is the highest sounding/inflected tone. The *re* tone sounds in between the *dò* and *mí* tones.

Thus, words are pronounced and coined based on the appropriate tones. In written Yoruba, there are different tonal markings to these tones. As indicated, the marking for *dò* is a leftward-tilting stroke and the marking for *mí* is a rightward-tilting stroke. The *re* tone is identified by no markings at all.

DÒ RE MÍ

While some words may have similar spellings, they may have dissimilar meanings and pronunciations. For example, the word *Ogun*, may have more than five different meanings when marked and/or unmarked. This therefore makes language understanding and pronunciation, essential and in fact, obligatory in Yoruba oral tradition.

Story-telling also falls under Yoruba oral tradition and the cultural aesthetics umbrella. Rotimi employs the aesthetics of story-telling in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. As a common tradition among the Yoruba people, the elderly ones often sit the children down and tell them different stories most of which go beyond entertainment but with undertone of didacticism. Some of these stories which are mostly told in the evening before bed time, sometimes outside the house under the moon light or at other leisure hours of the day, engage the children in singing short songs of warning or other short repetitional verses/lyrics.

OJUOLA: The song goes like this:

Onikulukunjeje, ewure, ewure, ewure,
Onikulukunjejeaguntan, aguntangboloji,
Olurombinjejeomore, omoreaponbiepo,
Olurombi join-join, iroko join-join.

[To children.] Now, sing the chorus with me everyone.

[They sing.] Olurombi o join-join, iroko join-join etc. (Rotimi 36).

The excerpt above can be interpreted in English as the mistake made by *Olurombi* (a woman) by vowing her beautiful daughter to *Iroko* (a totemic deity) instead of goats and sheep as done by other people. OJUOLA teaches the children the song after telling them the story of *Olurombi* – a common folktale in the Yoruba culture that warns people of vowing blindly or thoughtlessly, not allowing their present situation to becloud their sense of reasoning in decision making, and learning from others. As earlier explained, *Olurombi* vowed her daughter as payment

for a request from *Iroko*. When the time for her to pay her price came, after *Iroko* had granted her request, she was reluctant to let go of her daughter. She resorted into begging *Iroko* but *Iroko* insisted on their agreement. There are many other tales like this in the Yoruba culture. They all enrich and form parts of the aesthetics of the culture.

Proverbs and Wise-sayings

Proverbs are words with deep sub-textual meanings which may be reproof or critical, appraisal or exonerative, etc. Proverbs are used to impart knowledge and establish values. They are often underlaid with stories and history that are compressed into a pregnant statement. They are connotative rather than denotative. Among the Yorubas, proverbs are known as *owe*. In this writer's own interpretation, the word *owe* could be translated or interpreted as 'the one who wraps it'. Thus, proverbs are nuclear words around which many other words are wrapped or woven or hidden. To get the real meaning therefore, one must dig through the outer fabrics, unwrap, unravel, decode and reach for the yoke. In the case the surface words or expressions are taken as the real intentions, this is tantamount to misunderstanding or misinterpretation or misconception. Proverbs are integral parts of the day-to-day Yoruba communication. As cream is to coffee, and icing to cake, so are proverbs to Yoruba statements. They are like sweeteners of the Yoruba language and a way to compress conversations. Establishing the qualities of culture and celebrating Africanness, proverbs and wise sayings are inseparable from Yoruba culture. Finnegan extrapolates that, a proverb is "a saying in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of truth tersely expressed in it" (qtd. in Adegboye 15). Among the Yoruba people, it is acceptable for the elderly ones to speak proverbs in a gathering but this is not applicable to the young ones, especially when in a gathering with elders. Exceptions are when they are within their peers. When a young one finds him/herself to have used a proverb where the elderly ones are, he/she must apologize. If not, it will suggest the meaning that such a young person is equating himself in knowledge and experience to the elderly ones. In the Yoruba language however, proverbs are used in different contexts and circumstances, and they are meant for different purposes. For example, there are proverbs related to moral philosophies, patriotism, relationship, business, leadership, parenting, environment, spirituality, trees, animals, etc. For instance, the Yoruba proverb that says *ere ki laja nb'ekun se?* (the Tiger and the Dog are not playmates), is used to establish class and seniority. Thus, the person who speaks this proverb is saying, he is too big to rub shoulders with the other subject in the discussion. It is important to note that, proverbs are not spoken without cause. Rather, they are used to rebuke, sound notes of warnings, encourage, persuade, instil discipline, teach, etc. As an element of Yoruba cultural aesthetics, proverbs are included in the dialogues of Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*.

ODEWALE: ... he who pelts another with pebbles
asks for rocks in return. (Rotimi 7).

The interpretation of the above is based on the attack of the people of *Ikolu* who lunched their first assault at the *Kutuje* people. Since they have called for trouble, they should be ready to have it in full measure even beyond what they bargained for. This is a direct proverb. The Yorubas usually compare such situations as this to a child who lifts his little hand to beat an adult; such child will get a heavier blow in return and it would be from a bigger hand. Thus, it is a warning for people to always size up their opponents and make sure they pick up their own match in a fight or settle their differences amicably.

SECOND CITIZEN: When the head of a household dies, the
house becomes an empty shell. (Rotimi 9)

The above proverb as the Yoruba people have it is, *baale ile ku, ile d'aboro*. Thus, when the person saddled with a responsibility fails to deliver, or is not available or found wanting, there is always trouble and an aura of desolation. At this juncture, the head of the house is like the core or centre which holds other arms in place. When the core is corrupted or unavailable, the arms will lose hold and things will be in disarray. The proverb emphasises the importance of the men in the family or society. In the Yoruba culture, men are the heads and chief administrators of families, groups, or villages. They are the leaders who ensure that day-to-day activities run, and things are in order. They provide the basic needs of the family and check the excesses of the children and the wife or wives. The men are defenders too. They offer protection to the family. When they are available, the family or village feels safe and rest assured that they will be protected from external aggressors. In the play, the citizens of *Kutuje* express their grievances. Since ODEWALE is their king, they see him as the one who should be accountable and held responsible for whatever happens to the people. Now that there is trouble in the land, he must answer.

THIRD CITIZEN: When the chameleon brings forth a
child, is not the child expected to dance? (Rotimi 9).

In the same vein, the citizens believe they have done their part in making ODEWALE king and they cannot act for him. He is expected to behave as the king that he is and perform the duties

expected of him. As said in Yoruba language, *alagemo ti bi'mo re, aimoojo dowo'e*. There are limits to which one can be assisted (spoon-fed) until he is left alone to carry on. Also, the Yorubas believe that everyone has a responsibility or role to play in the society. As there are roles to be played by the leaders, so there are for the followers. The citizens of *Kutuje* make ODEWALE understand that, he has been enthroned and accorded the respects due a king; therefore, he must also rise up to his duty of protecting the people and finding a solution to their problem.

ADEROPO: It is said that the secrete of a home should be
known first to the head of the home...

ODEWALE: ... a cooking-pot for the chameleon
is a cooking-pot for the lizard! (Rotimi 19).

The above proverbial dialogue between ADERPO and ODEWALE show that the duo is in a disagreement with an idea. While ADERPO wants to conceal the message he has brought from Ile-Ife, ODEWALE on the other hand wants it spilt. He insists the message should be delivered openly. In ADERPO's proverb, he tries to establish that, one must give honour to whom it is due. In Yoruba culture, it is dishonourable for the head of the house to be bypassed when an information is to be passed to the family. The head of the house or, the village head must hear the matter first, then he would decide how to deal with it. Sometimes, he may decide to keep the message from others, due to its sensitivity. For example, when a stranger comes into a village for the first time, he is expected to touch down at the house of the village head first, after which he may continue on his mission in the village. ODEWALE's response proverb is an advocacy for equal rights among the citizens. Hence, there should not be preferential treatment in any situation.

ODEWALE: ... When the
frog in the front falls into a pit, others behind take
caution...
When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they
not do to the flesh of a frog?
...

ODEWALE: All lizards lie prostrate: how can a man tell
which lizard suffers from bellyache? (Rotimi 23).

Suspicious of the death of the former king – ADETUSA, ODEWALE expresses himself above with these proverbs firstly, about using other people who have worn the same crown that he wears as examples. Believing that he is not a citizen of *Kutuje*, so, they would not spare him if they could harm even the former king who was a son of the soil. In ODEWALE's first proverb above, he makes us know that, we navigate life by learning from the mistakes of others. The animals mentioned in the three proverbs are personifications of humans; we must learn from their mistakes of others. The second proverb means, anyone capable of harming their own kin, would do worse to strangers. The third proverb expresses the mystery of human minds. The contents and intentions of a man's mind are only known to himself. ODEWALE therefore connotatively says that, the killer of the former king and plotter of evil against the throne is among the people of *Kutuje* themselves. He reveals that everyone is a suspect because, it is difficult to tell the evil man by merely looking at his appearance.

ODEWALE: ...

When

The wood-insect

Gathers sticks

On its own head it

Carries

Them (Rotimi 72)

The last words of ODEWALE as above are yet another proverb that means, when an evil person plots evil, the effects always boomerang against him. The proverb warns against doing evil or conceiving bad intentions. ODEWALE was busy throwing tantrums and causing fuss among the people. Unknown to him, he was digging his own grave. He finds out in the long run that; he is the one guilty of the crime of killing the former king and causing the land of *Kutuje* to be plagued. However, he already swore by *Ogun* – the god of iron and war what the lot of the killer would be. The play is loaded with many more proverbs and wise sayings.

Language

Language is the medium of expression that is used for communication among a people. Languages classify a people. It gives them sense of recognition and belonging. It forms a part of their culture and identity. Language is not just what is said, it is ideological and philosophical. Regarding language, McWhorter in his book (The Story of Human Language Part I) extrapolates that, "language is more than words; it is also how the words are put together – grammar...by

language, we do not mean solely words, but the grammar that we use to put them together to produce utterances that reflect our lives, experiences, and environment, as well as enable us to affect people and events around us” (McWhorter 3 - 4).

Rotimi in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, employs the concept of multilingualism with the English language dominating. However, it is impossible for him not to have employed the Yoruba language at all. This further reiterates the inseparability of the Yoruba language from the culture.

OJUOLA: The song goes like this:

Onikulukunjeje, ewure, ewure, ewure,
 Onikulukunjejeaguntan, aguntangbolojo,
 Olurombinjejeomore, omoreaponbiepo,
 Olurombi join-join, iroko join-join.

[*To children.*] Now, sing the chorus with me everyone.

[*They sing.*] Olurombi o join-join, iroko join-join etc (Rotimi 36).

TOWNCRIER:

O ya	Come round everybody
E je k’alo	Let us all go, into the bush
E m’adal’owo, e gbe	Get your cutlasses
koko	get cooking pots
igboya, igboya.	get ready for work.

Ewe gbogbol’ogun	All herbs are medicines
Ogungbogbol’ewe	all medicines herbs
O ya	so, come round everybody
E je k’alo	let us go
E m’adal’owo, e gbe	into the bush.
koko	
Igbo ya, igboya.	

At'onile, at'alejo	Landlord get up, Guests, join in too
At'omode o, at'agba	Everyone, young and old
Igbo ya, igboya.	into the bush (Rotimi 17).

In a few places, Rotimi spices the play with the Yoruba language. As an important cultural element, the play will not only be devoid of Africanness but also be culturally bare and dry without the introduction of the Yoruba language. Undoubtedly, language is an aesthetic element that cannot be jettisoned.

Believe in Local Herbs and Medicine

Part of the cultural constituents of the Yoruba people is, believe in local herbs and medicine. They believe in the physical and the metaphysical healing that can be derived through the use of these local knowledge. Along with their dependence on the supernatural powers which has to do with the recognition of the existence of deities in the Yoruba pantheon of gods, they also strongly believe that the possession of the adequate knowledge in the combination of the correct *ewe* (leaves) and *egbo* (roots), *epo igi* (tree backs) among other things, can result into the healing of the physical body from illnesses and diseases. While there are specialists who are known for rendering special assistance to people in this area, the average Yoruba man also knows one or two combinations of herbs for the most common ailments. "Since the dawn of time, leaves, fruits, seeds and roots of plants were selected beneficial for the maintenance of health and cure of the ailments man suffered from. Yoruba doctors have an impressive store of knowledge on a wide range of plant species. These plants are often used in a similar way to medications provided by western doctors" (Awojoodu and Baran 130).

It can therefore be said that, "the close examination of the nature of the Yoruba traditional medicine, according to some of the available literature and the practices in the society, makes it reasonable to conclude that Yoruba traditional medicine is also immersed in their cultural beliefs, which includes the belief in the supernatural powers" (Taye 74). In the light of this, examples abound in Rotimi's play supporting the above submissions on the Yoruba belief in the use of herbs and local medicines for cure and healing.

ODEWALE: Yes I know. But what have you done about it, I

ask...you cannot go into the bush and cut herbs to boil for your children to drink...

SECOND WOMAN: Your highness ... I have tried, in my own house, I have tried ... I boiled some herbs, we drank them, yet sickness remains. (Rotimi 12 - 13).

No doubt, ODEWALE knows the use of herbs is the usual thing to do, and so he asks the people about it. Because of the belief in the supernatural powers behind the use of these herbs, they are believed to readily work when administered but the responses of the SECOND WOMAN and THIRD WOMAN shows that they truly have tried as is the tradition but there is more to the illness.

ODEWALE: What herbs did you boil?

SECOND WOMAN: *Asufeeiyeje* leaves –

ODEWALE: Y-e-s.

SECOND WOMAN: Lemon-grass, teabush, and some limeskins.

ODEWALE: That's good. And nothing happened?

SECOND WOMAN: I and my household drank the medicine, yet we do not get better, my lord.

ODEWALE: 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.

THIRD WOMAN: I boiled mine longer – a long time. I even Added *dogo-yaro* leaves.

ODEWALE: And how does the body feel?

THIRD WOMAN: Not as well as the heart wishes, my lord.

ODEWALE: ...Keep on drinking the medicine; one day you will see change. Patience. (Rotimi 13 - 14).

From the extracted dialogues above, it is evident that, there are specific plants for specific cures. Also, there are ways to go about the preparation and the dosage of the herbs. The combination of the right roots and leaves bring about the expected result. When there is no health improvement from the use of these herbs, the Yoruba people resort to consultation with the specialist, perhaps there are some other recipes not known to the common man or there might be need for the metaphysical to be involved. Deities are associated with specified responsibilities. Some are known for healing. *Osanyin* for example possesses special knowledge in the use of plants and roots. Babalola, also notes that, *Obatala* is the “creator and healer of humans...custodian of *Ifa* Oracle...he cures illness and deformities. His priests are the herbalists (*babalawos*)” (qtd. in Borokini and Lawal 25). Thus, this practice is one of those that give the Yoruba culture its aesthetic flavours that it is known to possess.

It can be rightly understood that, song and dance, oral tradition, proverbs and wise-sayings, language, and the use of local herbs and medicine, are inextricable aesthetic elements of Yoruba culture. These elements work together and enhance each other. For example, it is not possible to sing Yoruba songs, speak Yoruba proverbs, explore the Yoruba oral tradition or make effective use of local herbs and medicine without good understanding of the Yoruba language. Also, communication in the Yoruba language without the use of Yoruba proverbs or wise-sayings, will not be complete or effective enough. Thus, all of these elements contribute to the aesthetic and cultural richness of Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*.

Conclusion

Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame* stands as a cross-cultural literary piece by which Rotimi demonstrates intercultural possibilities. By the adaptation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, we are able to understand the interplay of cultures and the existing culture universals in the Greek and Yoruba cultures. Apart from documentation of history and cultural preservation, Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame* positions playwriting as a tool by which other cultures can be interacted with, studied and understood. Just as William Shakespeare’s plays accentuate the British cultural identity, and Efuwa T. Sutherland’s plays establish and promote the anansegoro tradition and Ghanaian culture, so does Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame* pontificates, documents and amplifies the cultural condiments of Yoruba culture.

The aesthetics of language, tradition, rituals, music, ceremonies, relationship, religion, myth and belief system, sanctity of life, dignity and respect, honour and many other elements of the Yoruba culture are embedded in Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Language for example has been proven to transcend mere verbal or textual expressions but carries connotative and sub-textual meanings with the condiments of proverbs and wise sayings which one cannot fully explore. Rituals which are also a part of the Yoruba life come up as a result of the belief of the people in the

existence of supernatural forces controlling nature. This explains the reason baby ODEWALE is taken to the priest for the discernment of his future. That is another important culture of the Yoruba people. Important to mention among the many qualities is, the belief that death is a more preferable option to ignominy. As the Yoruba say, *iku ya j'esin lo*. Because the Yoruba people value the dignity of the human person, rather than live in shame and reproach, death becomes a better alternative. Death is considered especially when one is caught in a grievous crime or ignoble deed. Hence, the reason OJUOLA commits suicide and ODEWALE sentences himself to banishment. The thought of this has always guided the Yorubas in their behaviours, maintaining to be good, dignified, and responsible citizens. Consequently, the writer therefore suggests that, writing more plays like Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* will do a lot in the preservation of indigenous cultures across the world.

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