

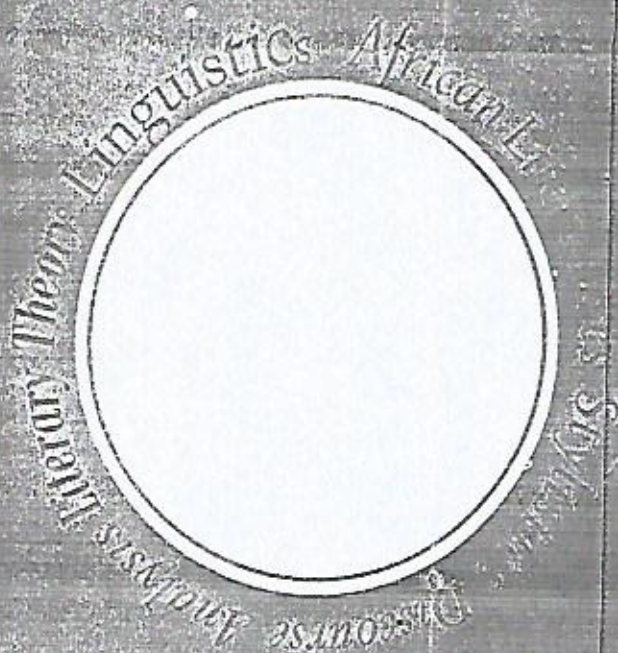


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The Efficacy of Incantations in African Performance and their Implicity in Ola Rotimi's Play

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Abstract

The present day agitation on African performance is that recent themes and motives negate the African custom, tradition, codes of conduct and mannerism. Most heroes for instance, will take an anti-culture posture, yet they are allowed to remain a part and parcel of the society. The general argument therefore has been on whether culture is put in continuity or in discontinuity in written African performance. This article uses Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* to clarify cultural continuity and to ascertain that characterization should not be the only parameter for judging the reflexivity of culture. Heroes within the setting may go astray but the culture and its cultic features such as incantations serve as checks and balances on the deviances and deviants of culture. Though interviews were carried out and translated from the Nigerian-Yoruba, (the setting of the two plays used as scope), into the English Language, majority of the raw materials are as depicted in the plays selected. The conclusion is the findings on the relevance and functional efficacy of incantations for cultural realization and stability. Incantations serve as the major vehicle through which Ola Rotimi for instance drives home his message and makes reference to one of the major sources that can be used to confront threats and negations to the cultural roots.

Introduction

Incantations in Yorubaland of Nigeria are known as "*Ofo*" and "*Ayajo*". It is a restricted poetic form traditional, cultic and mystical. Its end result is its expectational fulfilment. Hence, the Yoruba fondly refer to it as '*Ewi awise*'- what is done, once uttered. Incantations should be observed as organized and coded words of magical formula that are chanted to arrive at solutions to cultural and individual problems.

Incantations serve as sources of mystical power aimed at the attainment of metaphysical manhood. The Yoruba jealously guard it as a cultural property that must not be revealed to others, otherwise its revelation and form of use, is to lay the race bare to the attack of the enemies. "Incantation in the African setting is a manipulator of persons and things"¹

Use of incantations goes beyond the natural realm. The use of medicinal substances are aided by incantations. In examining the feature of the Yoruba Oral poetry, Olatunde Olatunji (1984) opines that; incantation is:

The verbal aspect of magical act among the Yorubas, the others being rites, charms or medicine. This verbal aspect is at times called 'spell' but we prefer the less coloured term-incantations.²

The form of incantations; a fastly uttered carefully arranged magical formulas, makes the Yoruba hunters (the *ijalas*) refer to it as *Ogede*. In whatever coinage the name of incantations appear in Yorubaland, *Ofo*, '*Ewi Awise*', *Ogede*, there is a strong believe in the power and use of words- the adage is 'say it and it will be: Anything said, wished and commanded must be done, just as the biblical Psalms are used by David for desired effect. Quranic incantation is known as *Yasin*'- a surat section used to control and manipulate living and non-living elements in line with man's desire and wish. Infact, there are different types and uses of incantations is the Yoruba setting, the content and form of Yoruba incantations therefore depend on the type. Some are used for protection. For example, 'and the '*ofo Isorin*' some for safety e.g. '*ofo Abo*' and the '*ofo iwosan*' for (healing). Consider the following '*ofo iwosan*' (healing incantation) for instance:

Olegbo
Elewuji
Ewo onsa
Kii jeki omo olufe le
Bi oloworo ban binu
Adetutu la fi nbe
Oloworo mo fi Adetutu beo

Olugbo, *Elewuji* and *Ewo orisa* are ancestral names invoked for effecting the process.

Line 4 – One that does not allow
 Olufe's child to be strong
 When *Oloworo* is angry
 Adetutu appeases him
 I hereby use *Adetutu* to appease *Oloworo*.

Incantations such as above reveal the religious implication of poetry. They are the words of the mouth uttered for the assurance meant to aid the effectiveness of these oral forms. Charms, rites, medicinal incantations are oral contents and materials.

The Incantatory Device as Performance in Ola Rotimi's Play

The first incantation in *The Gods are not to blame* was chanted by Odewale on a farmland at "*Ada*". This was during the instance when the old man he met on his farm was claiming ownership of the farmland. With a tortoise shell, talisman pendant, pointed at his assailants, Odewale mesmerizes with the following incantatory chants:

What are these before my eyes?
 What are these before my eyes?
 Are they mountains or are they trees?

They are human beings and not trees.
 They are human beings and not mountains
 Trees have no eyes,
 Mountains have no eyes (p 46)

Incantatory lines are deliberately repeated to have effects. Hence, Odewale uses these chants to overpower his opponents, no matter how many and how aged they are. He commands this opponents to sleep through the following utterances:

Let these eyes around me close
 Close, close in sleep, close in sleep
 That is my word- the mountain always sleep
 Sleep... sleep... sleep
 Remain standing, remain rooted-
 a tree stump Never sluffs
 stand there... stand back and sleep
 Sleep till the sun goes to sleep and
 You wakeup to know my power sleep...
 Sleep... sleep... (p.47 act 3, scene)

"The eyes around me, close," is a synecdoche. The eyes represent sleep is a natural phenomenon whose need can be sought through its repetition. Sleep is personified here and commanded to descend on Odewale's opponents.

In his attempt to counteract the power of Odewale's incantations, the old man using a dried eagle skill, a vulture's claw, and a bright red parrot tail feathers incantates as follows:

No termite ever boasts of devouring rock!
 I am your Lord, your charms can do me nothing
 Venom of viper does nothing
 To the back of a tortoise (Act 3 scene p. 48)

With a collation of cultural nuances and domestic implements, old man goes further in his chants to instigate fear into Odewale's mind and delimit his incantatory power and strength. Let us listen to the following subsequent lines of Old man:

The grinding stone says you must kneel
 To my power;
 The basket says you must tremble
 When you see me;
 Mortar and pestle say you must
 Bow countless times to my power:
 The day the partridge me the lord

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of the farm. (p.49) It jumps into the bush with it back or it drops dead, Drop dead (p.49).

Grinding stone, basket, mortar, pestle are domestic gadgets whose functions are rounded up in the image of the prey- partridge which very often comes around the home and the incantatory materials. The Old man in the disguise of King Odewale's unidentified father, records certain cultural phenomena which have from time occurred in the natural way. He envisages through incantation, the inherent problems in deviations, from cultural requirements.

Hence, he goes further to say that;

The plant that rivals *Opa* tree in size
Is killed by *Opa*
The tree that over-reaches
The *oriri*
Seeks its own death;
And the plant that entwines its branch
With the branch of Omoluwere
Will be strangled by
Omoluwere. (p 49-50)

True and correct assertions help to negate incantations merely full of personal pride and egoism. The old man ascertains his superiority over Odewale through acute comparison and emphatic assertions. However, Odewale in his aggressiveness and pride goes further to employ the power of Ogun in the following invocation:

When *Ogun*, the god of Iron
Was returning from Ire
His loincloth was a hoop of fire
Blood... the deep red stain
of victim's blood.
His cloak (p.49)

Such a reference to premordial incidents and mythical pasts are also effective incantatory devices. With this line, Odewale got a hoe (an Ogun weapon) with which he struck the Old man dead as he says:

This is *Ogun*
And *Ogun* says: Flow!
Flow... let your blood flow
Flow...flow... flow... p. 50

This incident makes possible the fulfillment of the first prophecy of the gods where Odewale as a child was predestined that he will kill his father and marry his mother.

Conclusion

Although Ola Rotimi is used as the sample writer for the examination here on the use of incantations by African-Nigerian writers, many other writers, especially in contemporary times also tap on the resource of native incantations for the empowerment and richness of their writings. Some of these writers are Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Olu Obafemi Cyprian Ekwensi, J.P Clark, Wale Ogunyemi, Gabriel Okara, Niyi Osundare etc. This makes the social role of the Enchanter even in all written literary aspects very important.

Ola Rotimi has skillfully used incantations to make his audience better understand his play. The audience can only understand and digest the message if only it perceives the language it is familiar with. Ola Rotimi's theatre is a socio-political one requiring confrontational scenes conceived in incantatory modes. The internalised messages are for conceiving a better society. Rotimi uses incantations as a viable form of cultural syncretism and a facilitator of alternative steps to be taken in cultural adjustment and dynamism. For political, economical and technological development, certain intrinsic values of culture are deliberately incorporated into literary documents, in order to retain their values for the present and future generation. Hence, in the words of Ulli Bier (1971),⁴ "African literature will stimulate interest in many parts of the world outside Africa.. It is a tradition very much alive. It has so much vitality that makes it survive in social contexts also finds itself new motives and functions".

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