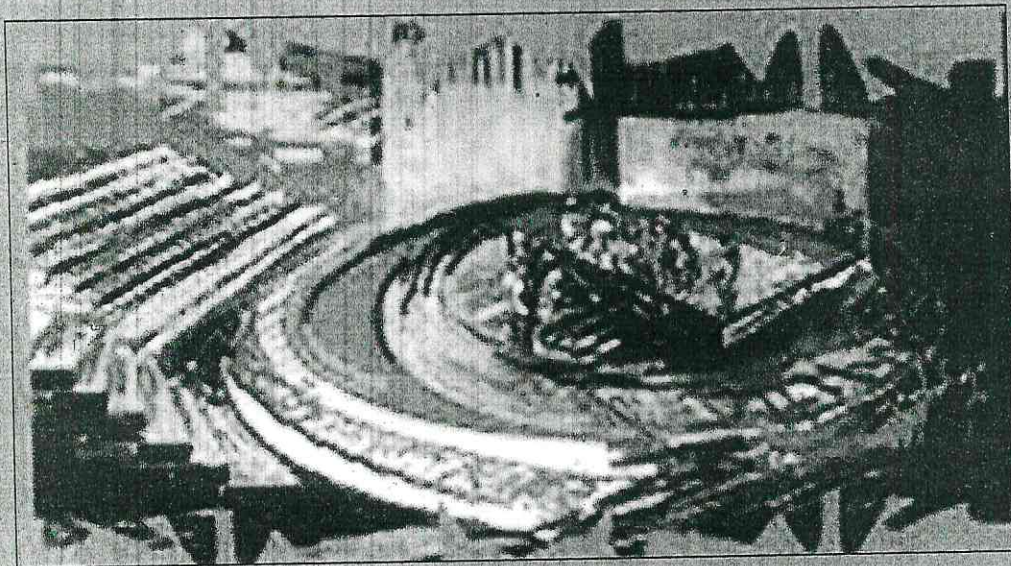


# UNCOMMON ARTISTRY

UNDERSTANDING BAKARE, OJO RASAKI'S  
DANCE, DRAMA AND THEATRE



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## Destiny as Aesthetics in Bakare's *Rogbodiyan* And *The Gods And The Scavengers*

By  
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### Introduction

African philosophical thought is one of the major influences on Nigerian playwrights. This influence is exhibited in the themes and forms of the written works and cuts across all the generations of Nigerian playwrights. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka for instance is inspired by the paradox of the qualities of creativity and destruction inherent in the Yoruba mythical god Ogun. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1975) which is modeled after the Western concept of tragedy is suffused with forms of African oral literature such as proverbs that are indicative of the origin of the playwright. Those that are referred to as socially-conscious playwrights such as Femi Osofisan and Olu Obafemi are no different as they employ myths and oral histories and many other African oral forms to relay their messages. Younger playwrights such as Ododo and Bakare have continued this trend of borrowing from their rich oral culture.

Bakare Ojo Rasaki is Ekiti, one of the various nationalities that make up the Yoruba. Therefore, it would be natural to assume that he would be influenced by some aspects of Yoruba philosophical thought and culture with which he had no doubt come in contact in some way or the other. This aim of this paper is to investigate Bakare Ojo Rasaki's deployment of African philosophical thought with reference to the Yoruba concept of destiny in his *Rogbodiyan* (1994) and *The Gods and the Scavengers* (2006).

### Yoruba Concept of Destiny

Destiny in Yoruba is referred to as 'ori-inu' i.e. 'inner head' and conceptualised as 'spiritual head' (Balogun, 2007; 117); the head is thus the seat/symbol for destiny. As agreed to by scholars such as Hallen and Sodipo (1986) and E. B. Idowu (1996), 'ori' in



Yoruba cosmology is one of the components that make up the human being. The other two being the body (*ara*) and the life giving force (*emi*). *Ori*, symbolized by the physical head, is the bearer of destiny and is representative of an individual's personality (Idowu, 1962: 170). The Yoruba believe that there is a Supreme Being who has planned the course of each individual's life; that this is destiny and as such whatever happens follows this course.

Several myths abound as to how an individual acquires his/her destiny. Idowu (1962: 173-174) and Morakinyo (1983: 72) recount the myth of '*ayanmo*' where the individual has his/her destiny thrust upon him. Another way of acquiring one's destiny is by kneeling before the Supreme Being and choosing one's own destiny i.e. '*akunleyan*' while in the third, the individual kneels down and receives his/her destiny, i.e. '*akunlegba*' (Idowu, 1962: 174). All these methods of acquiring destiny, '*ori*', are done subconsciously such that by the time the individual comes into the physical world, he/she has forgotten his/ her destiny. In spite of stating that once chosen/received/thrust upon, destiny cannot be changed the Yoruba also believe that after consultations by the *Ifa* priest who confirms the destiny of the individual/ or a people, an individual's (a people's) destiny may be altered in two ways. The first is through the appropriate sacrifice, '*ebo*'. Another way of changing destiny is through '*ese*', which means decisive and determined action, or struggle like hardwork. (cited Balogun, 2007: 120).

There is a lot of debate on the Yoruba concept of destiny, also called *ori*, in scholarship. While agreeing on some issues, these debates have however created other controversies. The points of agreement include the meaning, relevance and reality of *ori* among the Yoruba. One area of controversy concerns the interpretation of destiny i.e. whether the Yoruba belief in *ori* is fatalistic or not. A critical analysis of these ways of acquiring destiny at first glance implies some implicit contradiction. That is, while there is free choice in '*akunleyan*' and '*akunlegba*', there is no such freedom of choice in '*ayanmo*.' Contributing to



the issues in this debate is beyond our scope in this paper. However, our position necessitates a commentary, albeit a brief one, on the matter.

Scholars of Yoruba studies like E.O Oduwole (1996: 48), Taylor (1983: 52) and Idowu (1962) interpret the Yoruba concept of destiny as fatalist arguing that sacrifice (ebo) and struggle or hardwork to change it would be useless in the case of an individual who has been given/ or has chosen a bad destiny. For the purpose of this paper, we align ourselves with the interpretation offered by Abimbola (cited in Balogun, 2007 : 120 2014) and Balogun's (2007) soft deterministic view that destiny among the Yoruba can be altered. This view negates fatalistic interpretation.

Adopting Abimbola (cited in Balogun 2007) and Balogun (2007) enables our analysis of Bakare's deployment of destiny in the two play texts under study. We however re-interpret or extend Abimbola's 'ese' to mean attempts to challenge the perceived course of destiny in the life of an individual or of a people. Therefore, in Bakare's *Rogbodiyan* (1994) and *The Gods and the Scavengers* (2014), we intend to locate these attempts at challenging perceived destinies of individuals or groups of people.

### **Destiny as Aesthetic in *Rogbodiyan***

A rough translation of 'rogbodiyan' gives 'crisis' or 'disaster'. In *Rogbodiyan* (1994) Rasaki satirises a community, Koroju, which falls into crisis as a result of leaders who impose themselves on the people without going through the laid-down process of selection of leaders. All subsequent page references in parentheses only refer to this edition. The play is a parody of the events happening then in Nigeria during the regime of former military President Ibrahim Babangida and the endless transition to democratic governance. As Rasaki (2013) says in an interview with the Sun Newspapers:

I wrote the play *Rogbodiyan* during my Post graduate days in Calabar. I slept and had a



dream. I saw the Military refusing to hand over power. I saw a people's struggle as lead by MKO and there was bloodshed. I woke up and dramatically presented what I saw. A year later political events in Nigeria took the exact dimension. What I wrote happened exactly as I had written it. Those who had read and watched the play started calling me prophet. ("I'll Remain a Restless Artist " Sunnewsonline).

Sadly, to any observer of events in Nigeria today, nothing seems to have changed as the process of choosing the crop of the nation's leadership continues to be mired in crisis and violence. No doubt this is responsible for the poor performance by government at all levels. Therefore, Rasaki's *Rogbodiyan* remains relevant twenty years after its publication. Consider the prophetic words of Narrator in the text:

Koroju, a land where merit is thrown to the winds, Koroju, an entity controlled by nonentities, Koroju abode of religious hypocrites and political sychophants, Koroju, where intelligence means nothing and the academically brilliant is a potential pauper. Koroju, a land where truth has been hindered and falsehood exalted. Ladies and gentlemen, a land of corruption where material and political wealth are worshipped and the false acquisition of them is encourage (sic) is bound to be stricken by Rogbodiyan. (p. 7).

For seven years Koroju has been searching unsuccessfully for a king since the last king, Adeakin, died. The play opens with Regent in a meeting with the people on efforts to crown a new king.

The first indication of an attempt to challenge the course of events happens not too long after the play begins. Note the defiance of Woman, one of the people of Koroju who insists on stating her objection of Regent's unilateral and undemocratic imposition of two candidates on the people. The character

defiantly asks: "Aren't there established procedures for this sort of thing? Are we people without tradition?" (p. 12) However, Regent is successful in bringing forth two candidates who are not from her lineage out of which the kingmakers will choose one as king.

It may be argued successfully that the undemocratic stance of Regent is responsible for the corrupt process which we see in MOVEMENT 4 and which produces Asagidigbi as king of Koroju. This is evident in the kingmakers' disregard of Diviner Fadele's admonition that: "...none of the two candidates may rule this land...Put any of them on the throne and the problem of the land continues." (p. 24).

Agogo is another character who attempts to challenge the king. The king is in seclusion but does not have the discipline to curb his sexual appetite. He wants carnal knowledge of Arugba Oge, the maiden who bears the sacrifice to the shrine on the day of the king's coronation. She also has been in seclusion but against Agoro's advice, Asagidigbi sleeps with her. The king thus commits an abomination and brings disaster onto himself and his people as they are stricken with different physical and mental disabilities. The king for instance goes blind, his aide is hunch-backed (p. 42) and even Fadele is not spared as he loses one leg (p. 43). This recalls Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1975).

It is in the solution provided by the gods that we see Bakare's deployment of the concept that a bad destiny can be challenged and course of the tragic events playing out in the text are halted. Ifa's instruction that someone wearing the crown be sent to bring water from River Awogbaarun as the sacrifice that should be done for the destiny currently playing out to be altered. To gain access to this river, the land of the Dead must be crossed.

It is in the reluctance of the king to go to the land of the Dead is again used by Bakare to present the second way in which destiny is altered. Adegbani offers to go in place of the king by wearing



the costumes of the king in order to fool the inhabitants of the land of the Dead. The Yoruba believe that land of the Dead is a different world entirely and it is assumed that one who goes there will probably not return, since no one has died and ever returned to life. It therefore takes courage for anyone to decide to do this as this translates to suicide. Adegbani strives hard through and is rewarded in spite of the fact that his real motives are not hidden to the inhabitants of the land of the Dead:

Ara Orun: You bear this task not because of your people but because of yourself. But by helping your selfish self, you may as well be helping your people. Do not forget what you have promised us. We will allow you pass for your bravery, confidence and readiness to give unto the Dead what is theirs. (p. 51).

Before Adegbani returns however, the truth as to the person responsible for the disaster of deformities and the corruption in the process that produced the king are revealed. Woman, with the support of the people, insists on Fadele revealing the truth. In the middle of this, Adegbani returns and blackmails the people into making him king.

It may be argued that with this ending, Bakare provides no real solution to the problem of the land; more so as Adegbani is said to be no better than Asagidigbi and the kingmakers (p.56). Furthermore, one questions the type of leadership that will be provided by someone who is ready to break the calabash of spiritual water thereby condemning his people to perpetual deformity. However, if one applies the logic in our interpretation of the deployment of destiny as aesthetic, one realizes that Bakare asks the reader to look beyond this ending and rather look at the lesson implied by the challenge of Asagidigbi first by the people and later by Adegbani. If Asagidigbi can be thus successfully challenged, it follows that if Adegbani does not perform, he also can be removed.



### **Destiny as Aesthetic in *The Gods and The Scavengers***

In *The Gods and the Scavengers* (2006), Bakare aesthetically deploys destiny in a more obvious, though not simplistic, manner. All subsequent page references in parentheses only refer to this edition. The play text presents the same scenario of a group of leaders who is insensitive to the needs and wishes of the people it governs. Consequently, the people have become scavengers as evident in one of the songs:

We are the scavengers, we the main men. When these rogues eat their beans, we comb their bins. They cheat, we lift their shit... Though we sweat like God's beings, we feed from bins. Our land is sold to gods that we made with our votes. So cheat and shit and beans in bins have become our lot because we sleep. (pp 1-2)

Bakare equates the leaders to gods to serve the purpose of his deployment of destiny as aesthetic. Scavenger, 5 refers to the song that chronicles the sufferings of the people as being the result of bad leadership as "blasphemies" and shouts on the others:

Stop condemning those the gods have chosen as our leaders. Don't you know that it is the gods who put the kings on the throne and we must respect them no matter what? Don't rise up against the gods' own elect otherwise they will be angry and our situation will grow worse. (p. 4).

Here, Bakare reveals the belief of the people that bad leadership seems to be their destiny since the leaders are the representatives of the gods of the land and to challenge them will be to challenge the gods themselves.

At first meeting, Anago, the Chairman of the Council, seems to be an honest and caring leader as he rolls out people-oriented plans, prevents the market women from giving him produce from their farms as is the normal practice and attempts to halt the corruption in his officials. However, his adviser, Andy asks him: "...why do you make laws that you yourself cannot keep? No law



is obeyed if the maker is a rogue. Those who come to equity must come with clean hands." (p. 28) While Andy resigns, his other officials plan to remove him from office for their own selfish purposes and this leads to chaos as the different nationalities that make up the nation are set against each other, killing and maiming one another.

Anago's attempt to give food to the people he had banished to the desert is not the sacrifice that is needed to halt the bad destiny. This is because the people, led by Andy reject it. Rather, we interpret Andy's resignation as the sacrifice needed to be carried out for the destiny of the people to be changed. As Special Adviser, Andy is part of the corrupt government and as he confesses was also one of those who "hired a trickster whom we costumed to appear like a goddess...who spoke in guttural voice that Anago is the choice of the gods...because we believed our salvation rested in his hands." (p. 49) He consciously sacrifices a life of comfort, albeit ill-gotten, and strives to alter the destiny of the people. Just like we have in *Rogbodiyan*, it is not a task for just one man; the people must be involved as a collective.

Therefore, Bakare uses Andy to show that destiny can be altered and that this can only be done at the behest of the people themselves: "But people, we make our destiny. We are what we choose to be." Andy's story of a hiring a trickster to confer authenticity on Anago's government is not believed because the people wonder how the gods could allow that happen. We interpret this to mean that the gods allow Anago to be in government because that is the destiny of the people. Bakare graphically presents this through literary allusion by reconstructing on stage, a scene from the story of Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1975). Besija's defiance of his destiny seems to have taught Odewale that his initial acceptance of his bad destiny was faulty. Consequently, Odewale rejects his destiny and blames the gods for his actions. As Odewale puts it: "The gods are to blame, not the son of man. I choose to live and reign and be happy. Hold the gods responsible for your ailments. I choose to be free and I'm free indeed." (p 54-5) The story of



Odewale has the required effect; people alter their destiny themselves and apprehend their leaders. While Andy urges the people: "I say damn the gods and choose to be free", Scavenger I summarises it thus: "If the god mean to force us into the destiny of Odewale we should say no and refuse to die."(p. 61).

Responding to a question on the reasons for writing *The Gods and the Scavengers*, Bakare says:

I have used *The Gods and The Scavengers* as a clarion call on all citizens to wage war against corruption. They should wage war against the gods in the Presidency, in the Senate and House of Reps, in the Governor's offices, in the Local Government circles, In the Banking sector, in the Educational sector, in the ministries and parastatals, on the pulpit and anywhere they are. We should wage bloody wars against these gods who have made the rest of us Scavengers. Ordinary Nigerians should stop killing one another because of differences in tribe and religion, we should come together and fight the common enemy. That is my message in the gods and scavengers. ("I'll Remain a Restless Artist" Sunnewsonline)

### Summary

African writers do not write in a vacuum as they use their works to attempt to change their societies for the better. Thus Bakare employs destiny to teach his readers that their fate lies in their own hands. One way of ensuring that this reaches the people is by using aspects of their culture which they believe in. Bakare says that the arts "express that which has already been internalised" and stresses the importance of culture thus:

We need to align culture with the national ideology and philosophy. Today, apart from the current state of insecurity, almost every other social problem we have is because our culture has crashed in the first instance. What culture does is to mould humanity, to mould the human being in you. There is no cultured man that would carry a gun and kill his fellow human Being in the first instance – or throw bombs. ("I'll Remain a Restless Artist" Sunnewsonline).



### Conclusion

The paper investigated Bakare's deployment of destiny in his *Rogbodiyan* and *The Gods and the Scavengers*. We were able to trace his concept of destiny to that of the Yoruba people from whom the playwright descended. We adopted the interpretation of the concept of destiny as alterable when certain conditions are carried out. These include the carrying out of sacrifices and the conscious effort through hardwork. Our analysis attempted to interpret the two texts along these principles. Our conclusion was that Bakare employs this concept of destiny to serve some of the main the purposes of the arts which include to educate, inform and transform.



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