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AFRICAN DRAMA AT LEEDS UNIVERSITY—PAST TRENDS AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: A REVIEW ESSAY ON "NAIRA HAS NO GENDER" BY OLU OBAFEMI

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BACKGROUND

Naira is the Nigerian currency. It replaced the pound sterling in 1973. Until its recent massive devaluation, one naira was approximately equivalent to one US dollar. During the 1970s oil boom when money was said to be no problem in Nigeria, Nigerians went places and did things with their "petronaira" like most of the other OPEC countries did with their "petrodollar." The liberal General Gowon, whose reign coincided with this affluent phase of modern Nigeria's history, gave Nigerians "Naira power" which they used sometimes arrogantly, sometimes foolishly, at all times extravagantly.

Now, less than twenty years after the Nigerian economy was able to boast of an annual budget that matched that of South Africa and was equal to the national budgets of *all* the Black African countries put together, Nigeria has become the biggest debtor in Africa. The once arrogant naira is almost a worthless currency, at least, in international terms. It looks as though Nigeria's international creditors are not going to get their money back—not for a very long time, anyhow.

This is a way of deconstructing the title of the play.

"Naira has no gender" relates the social and psychological attitude of Nigerians to their naira. Several writers have lamented the "oil boom" as the bane; a curse on Nigerians. Its all the fault of "an oil-powered, but otherwise inert economy with little motive power of its own...." says Professor Schatz (1984). Other analysts point to the debasement of the national psyche which attended the petronaira culture in Nigeria from the mid 1970s onwards. Richard Joseph is one, Wole Soyinka "on the rice import" and so on, another, and there are many more.

"Naira has no gender" is a continuation of that theme from, shall we say, a "feminist" or "womanist" point of view. It is in the ordinary sense (and in my view valid one) in which the playwright gives prominence to the socio-political conscience, sensibility and responsibility of the African woman. This departs from the white feminist propensity to a discoursive/theoretic praxis of little relevance to their less intellectual "sisters."

The place and the timing of the play is significant for a number of reasons. The Department of English at Leeds University has of course claimed fame with the award of the Nobel Prize to its most accomplished ex-student, Wole Soyinka, who recently graced his alma mater with readings from his latest publications, "Isara" and "Mandela's Earth." According to Soyinka, "Isara" is a sequel to "Ake"[1], a

fictionalised autobiographical novel. Both trace Wole's childhood in the Yorubaland of his ancestors. By contrast, "Mandela's Earth," apparently written before Mandela's release, is an anthology of poems covering such disparate individuals as Muhammed Ali, Master Sergeant Doe (the erstwhile military ruler of Liberia) and Nelson Mandela. Soyinka is clearly in top poetic form here. "Mandela's Earth" outstrips "Isara" in depth, relevance and topicality, although the historical, literary and narrative merits of the latter cannot be denied. Remarking on his disinclination to give or receive a "lecture" at Leeds on this occasion Soyinka quipped—"I have had enough lectures from Leeds to last me a lifetime."

It transpires that Soyinka's Plays have become "classics" at Leeds' African Theatre Department, where Wole Soyinka himself appears to have been elevated to the status of a Black Shakespeare. His plays are forever being staged, reinterpreted, remodeled. The fascination of the playwright with the Western classics sits well with the affirmation of his classical status in the Leeds Drama Dept. Thus, Soyinka's "Bacchae of Euripides" was recently staged there.

"Naira has no gender" thus is a dramatic expression of the "contractormania" which let loose in Nigeria a cult of mediocrity and a revolution of rising aspiration for acquisition of wealth and imported material goods which the oil-fueled economy could not produce—thanks to the dependency syndrome and other pathologies of underdevelopment. The swarm of "Importer-and-Exporters," "Clearing-Agents" and other "businessmen" cultivate a symbiotic "connection" with politicians and the top men in the military in a triangular web of greed that keeps the country rolling in constant crises of one sort or another—debt crisis, shortages of basic means of subsistence, political instability and repression, social chaos, high crime rate, high death rate, hired killings, hyperinflation, stagflation...ad infinitum. These are worrying problems and Dr. Obafemi addresses some of them in this play.

PARTY POLITICS AND THE NAIRA CULTURE (BALLOTS, BEDROOM, AND "BABY-BENZ")

The Second Republic in Nigeria was a tale of woe on the concept of democracy. During the military rule Nigerians, or more precisely, the vociferous political and intellectual elites (not yet a class but a "class-in-formation") had moaned and groaned (Etherton, 1982). No sooner had the military relinquished power to a fraction of the corrupt ancient regime than it proved its worthlessness in managing the affairs of the state in any meaningful way.

The play satirised the farcical elections which the politicians clearly saw as a mandate to enforce their philosophy of possessive individualism. In Nigeria electoral politics has always been a zero-sum game. Elections are won by any means necessary. Thus the chief, the archetypal party-man, brilliantly portrayed in this play, has no qualms in stacking his wife's bedroom with ballot papers which are smuggled into polling booths by "pregnant" women. The means justify the end if his "party of national character" wins the election.

For it is the rewards of his loyalty to his party that ensure the right connections

which facilitate the prompt issue of his "mobilisation fee," which in turn ensures that his family can ride in "cool" latest model mercedes ("V-Booth Baby-Benz" as Nigerians call them). It is this twin evil of corruption and vulgar materialism that animates the outrages expressed in this play. In common with other conscientious thinkers in Nigeria, the author of the play cannot remain hidden behind the walls of scholarly detachment in order to preserve academic objectivity. For them in general, the artist must engage with his/her society. For Obafemi in particular: "It is the social dimension of the writers imaginative expression towards the nature of the experience in their society and the involvement of their artistic minds... (Obafemi, unpublished)," that constitute their unique contribution to the development of their societies.

SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AND PERSONAL POLITICS: THE DILEMMA OF THE HERO

It is no surprise, then, that the theme of social conscience, nobility of character, and recovery of basic human dignity in contemporary Nigeria receive major attention in the play. The hero, a radical teacher, maintains these social moralities in the face of pervasive corrosive forces of rampant corruption. The message is clear, and some young Nigerians will recognise it, as Aina consequently did. The country needs a disciplined leadership, "to spread general enlightenment and sow the seed of spiritual and social regeneration...(Obafemi, unpublished)."

THE PLOTS, THE ACTS AND THE SCENES

The play starts with the wooing of a nubile maiden, Aina, caught unawares in a desolate compound by Otunla (the hero) as she gently washes her partly covered body. Was he trying "to take advantage of her disadvantage" for being by herself...?

The second scene shows "Chief," the arrogant and vulgar nouveau riche party-man revelling at his success in obtaining a cheque for his services to his party..., a "mobilisation fee," worth several million naira for the construction of an industrial project. His "foreign" middle class wife fails to understand the unusual and prompt success of her husband in obtaining his cheque this time and she also is exasperated by his habit of talking in proverbs, riddles, adages and metaphors. Above all, *her* lack of understanding of Nigerian politics infuriates *him*.

The third plot is a lavish dinner party in the Chief's orchard. Political morality and the dilemma of the conscientious poor are explored, before a confrontation between Dad (Chief) and Son (Dotun) ensues.

The description of the market women's protest against social injustice, perpetrated against them by the local developers who destroyed their stalls and looted their wares in a clearance exercise to beautify the environment but without compensation led to an emotional passage movingly acted by the humble mother of Aina.

The Airport tale tells of drugs trafficking through the not-so-ingenious medium of a baby's diaper. Aina gives up her dream of a white wedding to a "radical teacher," and settles for a modest private ceremony in a declaration of and support for her fiance's honour, social conscience and nobility of character.

THE DRUMS, THE SONGS AND THE TEMPER

A sole drum, beaten by the playwright himself, pounds a gentle soulful rhythm all through the play—another facet of the artistic talent of the playwright. The beat pulsates with the mood and the movement of the unfolding drama from beginning to the end. It unobtrusively fills the inevitable gaps between scenes and plots and gives the audience a backdrop for a measure of "audience participation"—if only by the unconscious foot-tapping it invited. The role of the drum in African cultural life is well known . Its use here is doubly effective—first, as a welcome constant background throughout the play. Second, the actors occasionally spring into fits of dance, the drumbeat and the dance provide an audio-visual relief from some very painful moments in the play.

One such moment was the mournful dirge that culminated a series of sad episodes in one day of Aina's family life. Aina's aging father had been disgusted by the report of the market women's bare-breasted protest against the injustice of a gang of "men in khaki...armed with proper guns and tanks" who evicted them from the market—newly designated for development and "beautification." Their stalls had been smashed, their wares looted without compensation. Aina's father heard also of the death of a poor self-employed mechanic who "slowly very slowly" threw his tools into the embers of the fire in which the oppressive agents of the local state had burnt his clothes. The poor mechanic had done this before he slowly walked into the flames, oblivious of any sensation of pain. He roasted himself alive.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF "FEMINIST" CONSCIOUSNESS: THE CASE OF AINA

Aina herself had resolved to abandon her previous popular materialism, she had chosen to follow the modest lifestyle of her fiance. She informs her parents of her decision to reject an ostentatious "white wedding." The anguish of this family at this moment of the play was deep, deep for being *general not specific, social not personal.* It was the pain brought on by the *tension and contradictions* in the dichotomy of tradition/modernity, the conflict between the young and the old, the struggle of the poor for dignified existence in the face of oppression, exploitation and the demoralising opposition to their humble efforts to eke out a decent living. It was a social pain, a reflection of the strain of the pervasive social conflict in underdeveloped societies, a *personalised* form of *social anguish* of a traditional society in transition to modernity.

Here, the playwright imaginatively captured and dialectically deployed the three

moments of African cosmological trinity—the unity of the ancestral past: the present of the living; and the spirit of the future, each symbolised here by Aina's parents, Aina herself, and her unborn children, respectively. For me that passage was the most authentic in the whole play. It distilled, in a dramatic form, the social essence of modern Nigeria in a way that mere words, uttered or written, cannot do. The self acclaimed heightened sensitivity of the artist is vindicated here. For Obafemi had written elsewhere that for him "the writer is the most sensitive point in society (Obafemi, unpublished)."

MERITS AND DEMERITS OF THE PLAY

The play laid bare some of the sources and dynamics of the tension and contradictions in contemporary Nigerian society. For example, the tension between "tradition" and "modernity" was effectively portrayed by the conflict between the well-meaning but backward-looking "old" parents and the modern values of their daughter Aina. Gender conflict is captured by the tension between Debbie and Dotun. The more intense struggle between the rich and the poor is pervasive throughout the play. The state is pitched against the relatively weak individual in the plight of the market women and their feeble protests. The play is therefore replete with the dynamics of social tensions in an underdeveloped society. In view of these examples the methodological basis of the play seems to be a conscious exploration of the sources and dynamics of these tensions and contradictions in the contemporary Nigerian social formation. This constitutes the overall merit of the play.

On the other hand, the play has several flaws. One of the most glaring is the ragbag of different accents of the actors. This, arguably, may constitute both a strength and a weakness of the play. It is a strength in as much as it is a reflection of the linguistic reality of the actual actors in the play as it is an authentic reflection of the plurality of linguistic groups in Nigeria itself. Nigeria is known to have no less than two hundred tongues spoken by its many peoples with "pidgin English" being something of an unofficial lingual franca. The weakness of the jumble of accents in the play is that it strains the ears of the audience to have to cope with not only Yoruba and Ibo accents from Nigeria but also an American one, a "standard English" one, an East African one, a Southern African one...and so on, all in one play.

A second major flaw of the play is the improperly co-ordinated movements from one scene or plot to another. The spontaneous wish of the audience to join the chorus of the several tuneful songs in the play was frustrated for lack of proper indication of what was expected. This simple technical problem broke down completely at the end of the play leaving the audience confused as to whether or not the play had finished. Worse, the abrupt and of the play deprived the audience of a chance to express their appreciation and it deprived the actors, all non-professionals, of their well deserved applause. In spite of this the overall performance of the actors was outstanding.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

On the final night of the play a member of the predominantly white British audience mistook me for the playwright. I corrected his error but he still wanted to know "what I could tell him about the playwright." "Olu Obafemi," I said, " is a lecturer in literature and drama at the University of Ilorin in Nigeria. Ilorin is a... ." Before I could complete the second sentence, the man interrupted with a demonstration of his knowledge of Nigeria. "He is Yoruba, then," he concluded. He gave me no opportunity to inform him that Olu is a member of a new generation of Nigerian intelligentsia whose weltanschauung (or worldview) and their depiction of it is one of a unified totality—a unity of form and content, theory and praxis, art and politics. They consciously reject bourgeois reification expressed in the sentiment—"Art for Art's Sake." For them, art has a purpose, a social purpose. The purpose of their art is social justice, a better future. As Olu has expressed the same idea elsewhere, the "engagement" of the artist with his society is a spiritual and political commitment. Speaking about the specific social context of Nigerian writers Obafemi says, "The political betrayal of national trust and the general apathy of the citizens provoked a 'fighting' (revolutionary) literature from writers through committed satirisation of society with prophetic dimensions (Obafemi, unpublished)."

This was one of the playwright's objectives in the play. Although not all members of his class have "taken the path to a materialist direction towards art and society" as Olu has done (Obafemi, unpublished). "Naira has no gender" is an exercise in the basic political objective of this conscientious new generation. We will see many more of this genre—once championed by Wole Soyinka himself, with emphasis, not so much on *the past* as on *the present and a vision of a better future.* Leeds may yet see more of African drama "with prophetic dimensions (Obafemi, unpublished)."

NOTES

(1) Wole Soyinka, Mandela's Earth, and Isara, 1989.

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