

**The playwright and colonial history: A study of Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi***

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**Abstract**

*This research examines the complex interrelationships between history and theatre, with a close analysis of the historical play of one of Nigeria's great playwrights, Ola Rotimi. It shows how history not only serves as the building block of creativity but also stimulates critical social reflections. It assesses how Ola Rotimi engages with historical narratives in his play, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, showing how he creatively makes use of the historical facts while being governed by playwright's ability to convey, develop and establish socio-historical truth and moral relevance. This research adopts a qualitative research approach, using textual analysis of Ola Rotimi's Ovonramwen Nogbaisi and secondary data analysis drawn from books, online sources and journals on the history of Benin. Drawing on ideas from Femi Osofisan (1980), the paper argues that theatre cannot simply represent a socio-historical or emotional truth, rather it must criticise, examine and question reality in a way that enables the audience to analyse history. History can occupy the past and the present, and Rotimi's play being treated in this paper is a good example of engaging the past as the mirror to review contemporary ideas of leadership, cultural identity and national memory. The study concludes that through the engagement of the past with creativity, the theatre is an educational process, which is a collective brain of memory development.*

**Keywords:** History, Theatre, Creativity, Cultural Identity

**Introduction**

There exist a long and strong association between history and theatre. History is usually a good resource for repertoire dramatisation because it offers events, characters and circumstances that writers can revise and transform with their imagination. History and theatre can be linked through some literary examples such as, among others, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*<sup>2</sup>, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*<sup>3</sup>, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*<sup>4</sup>. As evident in these cases, each playwright interprets history with his/her own sensibility and artistic licence, rewriting history fairly accurately, while others, invent the past towards an artistic or philosophical purpose. This rewriting permits various interpretations of the same historical moment. For example, both Ola Rotimi and Ahmed Yerima are inspired to dramatised the 19th century history of the ancient Benin Kingdom, but their versions take distinctly different forms based on their own perceptions. Furthermore, as language and creative decisions produce layers of meaning that could exist beyond the playwright's original

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<sup>2</sup> Soyinka, Wole. (2002) *Death and the King's Horseman*. Norton.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Arthur. (2000). *The Crucible*. Penguin Classics.

<sup>4</sup> Hansberry, Lorraine. (2004). *A Raisin in the Sun*. Vintage Books.



ideas, the postmodern critique of fixed meanings invited forms of reading that seemed far from being fixed. It is thus vital that drama serves a greater purpose than simple entertainment or propaganda, in that drama can inform, enable others to create cultural memory for future population and can resist the effects of neo-colonialism and self-colonisation. In this way, this study believes that drama must not be used to blind-fool the society into persuasion or acquiescence, but to awaken them to the consciousness of their history and a critical reading of their current circumstance. Osofisan (1980) expressed this similar vision:

We must begin to confront history at its empirical points. We must move our people away from superstition, and help them to analyse objectively, and hence master their immediate material condition. We must look at the immediate situation, at the problems that concern us here and now.<sup>5</sup>

As Osha (2021) explains, Ola Rotimi designed art to combat the disorder and moral decay in the society and his contribution to the development of indigenous drama in Nigeria is considerable. He established this contribution not only as a director, critic and producer, but more importantly, as a playwright, and made historical and artistic impact that is felt most directly through his plays. Historical drama portrays dramaturgical features of colonial experience that reveals past events in the society. It is regarded as the totality of how man creates and recreates himself. According to Etherton (1978), the historical drama provides themes specific to the dramatist's world-view, such as human struggles for survival. Furthermore, the obvious transformation of history into drama uses history as a tool to achieve a drama of heroism in a more recent manner.<sup>6</sup>The view lends credence to the fact that historical drama is in line with history because it qualifies the fictiveness of drama, while drama questions the reality of history. This is why another critic, Olaniyan (2002) takes the same stand, saying that "we may see historical drama as a fiction based on actual facts and rendered in dramatic form"<sup>7</sup>. Historical drama is usually regarded as a combination of facts and fiction.

The tension between historical fidelity and creation often invites arguments over how closely such plays can be allied to their sources. In African drama, the relationship between fidelity and creation is heightened when the themes investigate, interpret and turn African experiences into aesthetic and thematic forms. Although history provides a rich resource for a creative writer, moving historical events to a form of drama requires the creation of history and consequential compromise to fit the stage. The themes of resistance and oppression are common to the histories of nearly all African nations and many contemporary African playwrights use these histories in their work. In West Africa, Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* dramatises historical events

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<sup>5</sup>Osofisan Femi. (1980). *Theatrical Aesthetics and Social Realism in Nigerian Theatre*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.

<sup>6</sup>Etherton, Michael. (1978). *The Development Of African Drama*. London: Hutchinson.

<sup>7</sup>Olaniyan, Tejumola. (2002). *Arrest the Music! Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

concerning the Benin Kingdom at the end of the 19th century. Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile*<sup>8</sup> in East Africa captures early anti-colonial struggles, while Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*<sup>9</sup> examines the experiences of black workers under the exploitation of apartheid in Southern Africa.

Ola Rotimi was not only a playwright, but an actor, producer, critic, director and socially engaged historian. His dramatic works often revisit the past to understand contemporary issues and offer solutions to society's problems. One of such historical plays is *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, which, as earlier hinted, is a dramatised account of Oba Ovonramwen, the last king of the Benin Kingdom prior to the British colonial invasion.

### Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this study is New Historicism. Greenblatt (1980), argues that "texts do not exist outside of history", a text is a "product of cultural circulation, power relations and our own thorough recent history"<sup>10</sup>. From this perspective, Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* functions as a counter-discourse that seeks to disrupt the colonial narrative of history that depicts African monarchs as either naive or who are already complicit in their own subjugation. Ola Rotimi's drama does not merely recount a colonial encounter, it interrogates it. Cantor (1993) suggests that "the motto of the New Historicism seems to be 'I can connect anything with anything.'<sup>11</sup> Although this dismissive explanation minimises the importance of the New Historicism, it does speak of its value in bridging gaps between history and literary criticism.

### Ola Rotimi's Biography

According to Fatherland Gazette (2019)<sup>12</sup>, Olawale Gladstone Emmanuel was born on April 13, 1938, in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria, and had artistic flair inherited from his forebears. His father, Samuel Gladstone Enitan Rotimi, was a steam launch engineer who dabbled into amateur theatre, while his mother, Dorcas Adolae Oruene Addo, was an ardent Ijaw drama aficionado. Given such performing arts oriented parents, it is no surprise that Rotimi developed an early interest in theatre, which his environment further nurtured. "Rotimi was exposed to ample recognition of the traits of traditional Nigerian practices. Such traits were manifested in the ritual, theatre, masquerade theatre festival and storytelling theatre" (Emeasealu, 2010) alongside other immediate theatrical (though not formal) experiences. When he was four years old, his father "literally grabbed him and tossed him on stage to play a role in a public 'concert'" (Emeasealu, 2010).<sup>13</sup> The traditional drama troupe that his mother belonged to in Port Harcourt also made a lasting impression on Rotimi. His

<sup>8</sup>Ebrahim Hussein. (1972). *Kinjeketile*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>9</sup>Athol Fugard. (1976). *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Viking Press.

<sup>10</sup>Greenblatt, Stephen. (1980). "Renaissance Self-Fashioning". University of Chicago Press.

<sup>11</sup>Cantor, Paul A. (1993). "Stephen Greenblatt's new historicist vision". *Academic Questions* 6.4

<sup>12</sup>Fatherland Gazette. (2019). Biography of Olawale Gladstone Emmanuel Rotimi (Ola Rotimi) 18 October 2019. Retrieved 26 May 2020.

<sup>13</sup>Emeasealu, Emmanuel. (2010). "The Theatre of Ola Rotimi: Production and Performance Dynamics". Gurara Publishing.

educational journey extended here in Nigeria and abroad. Between 1945 and 1949, he was in St. Cyprian's Primary Schools in Port Harcourt. He transferred to St. Jude's School, Lagos, from 1951 to 1952, and had his secondary school education at Methodist Boys' High School, Lagos, between 1952 and 1957. He became the first person to receive scholarship to study theatre arts abroad by the Nigerian Federal Government. Sadly, in May 2000, Rotimi lost his wife, Hazel, and he himself passed away few months later. Some of his most notable plays include: *To Stir The God of Iron*(1963), *Holding Talks* (1970), *The Gods Are No To Blame*(1971), *Kurunmi* (1974), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), *if...the tragedy of the ruled* (1983) and *Hopes of the Living Dead*(1988), He also wrote some unpublished plays which include 'Man Talk, Woman Talk' and 'Tororo, tororo, Roro'.

### **Synopsis of *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi***

Ola Rotimi's historical play, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, chronicles the pathetic plight of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, the last Oba (king) of the ancient Benin Kingdom, in the late 19th century, as colonial British rule took hold of the region. The play begins with a crisis of political integrity in the kingdom. The Oba, Ovonramwen, faces hurdles to his authority from his rebellious Chiefs. The kingdom's priests and seers warned of impending disaster, or the breaching of the kingdom, predicting intruding foreign invaders and warning of imperialism. District Officers representing the British crown, under the guise of trade, arrive in the kingdom targeting Benin's rich resources, particularly palm oil and rubber. The Oba shows hesitation towards the British and clearly refuses to sign a trade treaty that would surrender his kingdom's independence. The attack of few British representatives soon turns violent when the war chiefs of the Oba boldly attack and kill an invading British delegation during the sacred Igue festival. Given the absurdity of this act, it provokes a British reprisal in the form of the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897, where British troops invade Benin, burning and plundering the royal palace; razing and pillaging everything in their way, destroying the kingdom's heritage and culture, including iconic bronze artworks. Oba Ovonramwen flees but is later captured, deposed, and exiled to Calabar, where he dies in obscurity.(Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, 1974)

### **The Meeting Point of History and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi***

If a literary work can be described as a significant historical tragedy, it is safe to say that Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* represents a strong historical tragedy. *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* recounts the fall of the Benin Kingdom and the exile of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, the last independent ruler of the Kingdom of Benin, after the British intrusion of 1897. Rotimi tells an important story in African history and skillfully tells the dramatic events that occurred, blending fact with drama through storytelling and careful craftsmanship while writing about real people, places, and events which elicit an emotional and connection with the audience. His rich and imaginative language breathes life into this tale while honouring both fact and creative imagination.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Rotimi, Ola. (1974). *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Ibadan: University Press.

Oba Ovonramwen, the subject of the play and the rich history of the Benin Kingdom, is an inseparable character in the fabric of an African story, proud and troubled, and he represents the cultural pride and sovereignty of Benin. Rotimi does not depict Ovonramwen as a distant historical figure, but rather a human character who is wise, cautious, conflicted and sometime too indecisive to predict the imminent threat of the British forces. The playwright's portrayal of Ovonramwen reflects the actual dilemma facing the Oba: he does not want to sign a brutal trade agreement which would lessen his control over his kingdom by agreeing to compromise. The play also portrays actual historical characters; for example, Consul-General James Phillips and Captain Gallwey are depicted as arrogant and completely unaware of the important and sacred customs of Benin.

The central events Rotimi depicts are founded on historical reality. The British delegation led by Phillips, against multiple warnings, trespassed on sacred territory during a festival in Benin and as a result was killed by the Benin warriors who laid ambush against him. The ambush gave the British the justification to initiate the indiscriminately destructive "Punitive Expedition." The "expedition," which destroyed Benin City, caused the looting of its treasures, along with exile of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar where he died in 1914. Rotimi's work demonstrates the tensions, betrayal and cultural misunderstandings that preceded this catastrophe with great empathy and insight.

In terms of place, Benin City, as Rotimi depicts, is an incredibly rich and vibrant kingdom full of art, tradition and meaning. The detailed descriptions of the royal palace, the festivals and traditions, and the power of the sacred rituals allow the audiences to see the beauty and complexity of the civilisation. Tied together by strong political and spiritual systems, the people, the court chiefs, and the priests were immersed in their customs and beliefs. The fall of the city was not just a military defeat, but the desolating loss of cultural identity for a proud people. Through the blending of real people, actual events and significant places, Ola Rotimi turned dry historical facts into a poignant, human narrative that commemorates the memory of the Benin Empire and the last great king of Benin.

### **The Parting Point of History and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi***

Ovonramwen had exercised every possible means to avoid the imposition of exile, including an offering to Consul General Ralph Moor of 200 barrels of oil valued at £1500, along with the location of 500 ivory tusks that he had hidden. Nothing in the text commented on this (Amadi, 2017). The exclusion of bribe offered by Ovonramwen to the British is a notable deviation, as suggested by Egharevba (1968)<sup>15</sup> and other colonial records. Rotimi purposely avoided the bribe in his play, for his thematic and dramatic objectives. By not mentioning Ovonramwen's bribery incident, Rotimi was able to show Ovonramwen in a more dignified, morally upright way by making it clear that he is facing the consequences of his actions with tragic nobility as opposed to desperation or compromise. The dramatic choice to erase the bribery from history heightens

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<sup>15</sup>Egharevba, Jacob. A Short History of Benin. Ibadan University Press, 1968.

the tragic stature of the Oba and positions him decisively as a heroic actor resisting imperial oppression. Rotimi's decision to remove the bribery offer indicates he would prefer to idealise Ovonramwen, as a cultural and historical figure reinforcing the theme of pride, resistance and the drawbacks of colonialism rather than political weakness or moral failure.

Amadi (2017), notes that unfortunately for the Oba, Moor rejected the offer as he had discovered the riches, and Ovonramwen was exiled to Calabar, with two of his wives (Queen Egbe and Queen Aighobahi), and he spent the rest of his life there until he passed away around the beginning of 1914. His body was eventually returned and buried within the royal palace premises in Benin City. After his death, his first son and rightful heir, Prince Aguobasimwin, became king as Oba Eweka II. Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is an outstanding example of Rotimi's talent as one of Africa's foremost dramatists.<sup>16</sup> In this play, Rotimi successfully intertwined history with dramatisation, creating a historical discussion of events of the past with the use of durable fluid language and actions on the stage.

As earlier mentioned, the actions of the story are set in the ancient Benin Empire and follow the story of the young Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi who is determined to ensure his authority rule despite his youth. In order to test his power, he orders the execution of the first group of rebellious chiefs he captures in his kingdom. The rebellious chiefs, however, predict the end of the kingdom and that the white man will come to bring the downfall of the kingdom. The chiefs are warning him, even the palace jester is warning him, but Ovonramwen will have none of it and will not reverse his decision, which is in the harshest way possible. The empire of Ovonramwen experienced restlessness, for the small towns under his authority demonstrated signs of rebellion but still, the Oba acted quickly to stop the revolts to protect his kingdom. Ovonramwen might have silenced internal opposition to his rule, but the broader question remained, could he resist external encroachment? As the chief priest Esasoyen foretold, the Whiteman was finally upon him, eager to indulge in the area's abundant commodity of rubber. But, to Ovonramwen, it mattered little what the outsiders presented in terms of equipment or probity. Previously they had already swindled him by creating their pricing of oil, after he had established a price, so how could they be his kingdom's friends when he had explained, openly trading goods with his people while they branded their own prices, thus stirring rebellion? To Ovonramwen, this was treason masquerading as friendship. He categorically refused to sign their trade agreement and rejected their gifts by seeing their smiles as masks concealing selfish motives. These instances—and the king's agitation and musings of prophecy—were moments in the playwright's fertile imagination and history provides no recollections of these moments.

Regardless of the King's rejection of their entry into the Kingdom of Benin, the Whitemen's greed for Benin's untapped resources pushed them to attempt entry into the Kingdom again. The festival of Igue was a rather unfortunate time for them to come as this is one of the most sacred festivals and Benin tradition forbade entry into Benin by outsiders or even visiting the King when the sacred

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<sup>16</sup>Rotimi, Ola. (1974). *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Ibadan: University Press.

festival was taking place. The guards informed the Whitemen that no entry was allowed, but they persisted in forcing their way in. This act of provocation angered the warriors of Benin and they slaughtered the invaders and removed their heads as trophies of war. The play presents a lesser violence scene than history indicates, once again the playwright had taken creative licence (Amadi, 2017). In *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Ola Rotimi actively diminished the evidence of excessive violence and omitted the full extent of the ambush on the British expedition that sparked the famous 1897 British invasion of Benin. Historical accounts provide a detailed record of how the British consul James Phillips and the other members of his expedition were ambushed and killed by Benin warriors. Rotimi avoided dramatising these events on stage, and only provides indirect references to this important event in historical conflict. This decision sheds light on Rotimi's artistic and thematic agendas. Instead of focusing on the bloodshed, Rotimi emphasised the personal, political, and ethical conflicts of Oba Ovonramwen. The portrayal of the Oba allowed for the possibility of tragedy, he was depicted as caught between the sacred customs of his kingdom and the imperial threat.

To avenge the slaughter of their comrade, the British government launched a campaign of brutal revenge that destroyed the Kingdom of Benin and its Empire. British forces flooded past their historical borders marking the fall of Benin and foreign imperialism entering Benin. Oba Ovonramwen was caught trying to flee and was taken away to Calabar, the headquarters of colonialism. The play presents a historical account of the downfall of a great king, while emphasising the clash between two great forces that were destined to vie for dominance over each other; the Benin Empire and British colonial forces. It also illustrated the disrespect that the British authorities showed for the cultural norms and traditions of Africa, and it reminds us of how African artefacts, now in institutions or museums in Europe, were plundered during this opportunistic conquests. The play's scintillating use of multiple Nigerian languages (Benin, Yoruba, Hausa), as well as English, distinguishes it from a simple historical overview. The rich linguistic context reflects Ola Rotimi's own ties to Nigeria's rich ethnic tapestry, as Rotimi himself was of Yoruba and Benin heritage. The dialogue in the play is also lavishly sprinkled with proverbs, an indication of Rotimi's strong understanding of African oral traditions. Alongside the traditional songs threaded throughout the scenes, these characteristics make the play a vivid and entertaining dramatic presentation rather than a dull historic narrative (Amadi 2017).

### Conclusion

Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* masterfully interweaves historical facts and historical creativity, in an attempt to recover the consciousness of Benin's last Obaduring the colonial era. Although the play is based on actual events, Rotimi presented a story with lyrical poetic dialogues, songs, proverbs and symbols that add emotional and cultural tangibility to the events he wrote about. Unlike others who create an image of the Oba stripped of power, indecisive and weak, Rotimi presented him as a dignified yet tragic hero faced with conspiratorial betrayal, foreign invasion and misunderstanding. This artistic reinterpretation elevates not only Ovonramwen, but an African misrepresented history that recasts and reasserts his dignity. This study, therefore, recommends that people

must always remember their heritage, as it remains the foundation of their existence.