

# Traditions under Siege: Dissecting Socio-Political and Economic Pressures in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

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## Abstract

Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* are replete with palpable formidable pressures of incursive influences. The incursive elements represented in both Oyo and Benin Empires, as chronicled in these works have their overbearing socio-political, as well as economic influences on the people, thus exposing them to chaotic internal and external assaults and dislodging them from their customary *modus vivendi* or established way of life – socially, politically and economically. This paper examines these works on the background of these rather unprecedented incursions and critically analyzes their implications on the people's established way of life.

## Keywords

Conflict, Conspiracy, Custom, Dislocation, Disintegration, Dramaturge, Incursive Pressures

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## 1. Introduction

The context in which a word is employed obviously determines the understanding to be drawn from the word. The concept of tradition in this study, therefore, is located in the realm of those custom or belief as passed down through the generations. They are cultural features which are not only passed down through the generations, but are equally expected to be conscientiously preserved, never to be lost; which thus institutionalizes its perpetuation. Tradition, therefore, encapsulates the socio-political structures, ethics, religion, art and more which one generation hands over to another (Kalu, 1975); such whose continuity is firmly established. Mackean (2003, p.49) sees tradition as communication, couched in an intense emotional bond, since it involves a process of transmitting value through shared practices and lore. In the light of the foregoing, this paper highlights distinctive dominant traditions – time-hallowed

beliefs and practices in the socio-political and economical life of the people as represented in both Oyo and Benin Empires, as chronicled in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* respectively, which suddenly came under strong siege of both internal and external incursions, to dislocate and disintegrate agelong existing structures. *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* are, therefore, two of Ola Rotimi's plays in which the people's traditions – their established socio-political and economic ways of life – are unprecedentedly plunged into the vortex of a strong wave of disintegration both by internal and external influences, the pressures of which this paper tries to explore. In these works, Rotimi had consciously employed such techniques of dramaturgy that remained adequate for the expression of the rich and complex cultural base from which his creative impulse developed, and which also had popularized them (Nasiru, 1979); a popularity which Obafemi and Yerima

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(2004) in corroboration overtly attributed to the reachability of his employed techniques.

## 2. *Kurunmi and Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, Traditions Under Siege: Socio-Political and Economic Pressures in Perspective*

Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* are quite replete with palpable pressures of incursive influences – internally and externally. The incursive elements represented in both Oyo and Benin Empires, as chronicled in these works no doubt have their overbearing socio-political, as well as economic influences that greatly threaten the people from their customary established mode of life – socially, politically and economically. This section examines these works on the background of these rather unprecedented incursions and critically analyzes their implications on the life of the people.

### 3. *Kurunmi*

In *Kurunmi*, the tradition of the Oyo Empire, as practiced from time immemorial, is unprecedentedly ploughed into chaos by the ensued controversy over Alafin's *rather* selfish decision to change the succession policy to the office of Alafin. Sensing the imminence of his death, Alafin Atiba has called the supreme council of the empire to get them acknowledge his son, Adelu, as his successor, contrary to the dictates of tradition which required him to commit ritual suicide on Atiba's death, having enjoyed great power while he (Atiba) lived.

Alafin Atiba's decision is based, perhaps on his claim to dynamism in leadership: a stance which is claimed to find essence in the mutability of tradition for the development of the society. Under the cloak of this claim of dynamism by Atiba, however, lies a contrived intrigue to carve out an empire for his children. Thus in order to achieve this intention, he had to ensure the support of Ibadan Chiefs as well as other leading Chiefs in the empire, in what appeared to Are Kurunmi as a conspiracy against their tradition as they have known it from generations immemorial. This he vehemently opposes and revolts against, insisting that tradition must prevail over individual and self wish: He argues:

Kurunmi: There has been no exception to the rule, and wealthy Atiba can't now corrupt us to grant him special favour. (pp. 19 – 20) Time may pass but the laws of our fathers, tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on (Untampered). That is tradition. (p. 20)

He maintains that,

Whenever an Alafin dies, his first son, that Alafin's first son, must also die with him. (p. 19)

He stresses also that tradition is static; as such, neither time nor tide can affect it.

Kurunmi: Time may pass but the laws of our fathers, tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on (*Untampered*). That is tradition. (p. 20)

Therefore, for Kurunmi, any attempt to tamper with tradition is a big threat to the cosmic order of the people. This is because of his conviction, as Crow (2000) notes, that tradition is the basic "defining characteristic of humankind and the source of a people's identity" (p.40). He further emphasizes to his people the values and sacredness of tradition.

Kurunmi: My people... tradition... is what makes us men. This is what makes us ... people, distinct from mud... The pride of man my people, is in his tradition – something to learn from for the peace of his present: something to learn from for the advance of his tomorrow. The day the tall iroko tree loses its roots is the day the baby ant shits on its head. The day a people lose their tradition is the day their death begins... they become... Doomed. (pp. 15 – 16)

Therefore, it is this conflict over the succession policy to the office of Alafin that had ignited the resultant war in which Ijaiye forces were pitched against Ibadan forces. Though what incidentally becomes evident about the prevailing circumstance is that it transcends the conflict over the succession policy. Obadiogwu (1992: 46) opines that "at deeper levels, it is clear from the play that there is a rivalry between Ibadan and Ijaiye". Obature (1982) has corroborated the above statement by observing that "since their inception, both towns (Ijaiye and Ibadan) had been jealous rivals" (37). Besides, Obadiogwu also sees *Kurunmi* in the main, as an intra-class or socio-political struggle among the ruling elites of Oyo Empire; and concludes that,

The conflict over tradition and change as presented by Rotimi in the play is merely a smokescreen to mask the real aim of the ruling class of Oyo dynasty. (p. 52)

However, Kurunmi does not only contend with internal threat in his defence for the tradition of his people, he contends too with external threat represented by Reverend Mann. This alien missionary force which he represents does not only pose a threat to the indigenous and primordial socio-political existence of the people, but also to their manner of worship – religion. This is captured in the play in Reverend Mann's dialogue with Are Kurunmi when he, Mann, tries to get him to persuade his people to embrace Christianity:

Kurunmi: Imagine me for a moment. I go to your country, and I tell your father: ‘Mr. So-and-So, from this day on, I want you to give up the ways of your fathers; cast away your manner of worship; neglect your rituals; Mr So-and-So, snub the shrines of your fathers; betray your gods.’ Now Reverend Mann, how do you think your father would feel?

Rev. Mann: The people of Oyo have accepted the Faith, and in Ibadan, the Reverend Hinderer is doing very well, not to mention Reverend Townsend in Abeokuta, and others –

Kurunmi: My friend, you do not answer my question. Instead, you talk of Ibadan and Oyo and – the people of Ibadan are no people. They are horses full of muscles, small in sense. And as for Oyo, I am not surprised... (p. 35)

Kurunmi, therefore, queries Reverend Mann in puzzled curiosity: “But you ... must you too join them to uproot the sacred tradition of our race?” (p. 35) Perhaps, he has been so overwhelmed by the prevailing circumstances to sum up his pessimism on the development by proclaiming in seeming desperation that, “it is the tragedy of our race” (p. 36). For with the eventual enthronement of Adelu as Alafin, there ensues a war in which Kurunmi solicits the assistance of the Egbas in fighting against Ibadan and her allies. Thus, he leads his people to war as Banham & Wake (1976) note, “in response to the neglect of tradition in the inheritance of the crown of Oyo” (p. 45). Kurunmi chooses war, therefore, in order to protect the sacred tradition of his people under a great threat of dissolution. However, Ijaiye is eventually defeated in the battle field with the Egbas taking to their heels; as the tragedy which Kurunmi earlier foresaw finally swoops on him. So, on hearing the news of this defeat, with the death of all his five sons, Kurunmi commits suicide by taking poison. His death, therefore, marks the climax of the devastation by the overbearing pressures that assailed them as a people, and whose seeming aspirations he had been so fashioned to carry.

#### 4. *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

In *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* on the other hand, we see Benin Empire facing internal dissension as well as insurrections by vassal states, besides British imperialistic intrusion. Rotimi has, therefore, woven the conflict of the play around Ovonramwen’s futile struggle against these forces which threatened to destabilize his kingdom, and which eventually got him defeated, climaxing to the consequent fall of Benin. Internally, the dissension experienced in Benin Empire is sequel to the succession conflict to the throne between Ovonramwen and his half brother, Orokhorho. Assassinations

and counter-assassinations, therefore, followed Ovonramwen’s eventual enthronement. This is manifest as the play opens with the trial of Oba’s arch rivals: Obaruduagbon and Esasoyen.

Ovonramwen: Obaruduagbon! Esasoyen! – I ask you, why did you kill Uwangue Egiebo?

Obaruduagbon: We ask the Oba: why did he kill our brother of the House of Iwebo?

Ovonramwen: Brothers, ha! Rebels – all: Obazelu, Obarage, Eribo, Osia – the whole rout: revels! (*To the chiefs*) Or who here was so blind to the obstacles which those scoundrels hurled upon my rise to the throne of Adolo, my father? (*To prisoners*) Your brothers threw ashes in the face of a rising wind; in reply, the wind smothered them with the same ashes from their hands. And you – you killed Uwangue Egiebo. Why?

Esasoyen: Uwangue Egiebo was your Chief Adviser.

Ovonramwen: And what offence, that?

Obaruduagbon: If a provoked houseboy cannot match his wicked master strength with strength, he maims the master’s favourite goat! ...

Ovonramwen: Because the moon is dim, the eyes of little stars cast a carefree glitter. Obaduagbon, Esasoyen, and the rest of you ... your stars have this day consumed themselves in the heat of their own unwisdom. This night, you all die... (pp. 4 – 6)

The eventual execution of Obaruduagbon and Esasoyen meets with disdain from most of the Benin chiefs whose loyalties to the Oba begin to wane. This perhaps explains their seeming disobedience on Oba’s advice to be cautious with the whitemen and allow them enter Benin during the Ague festival in order to avoid trouble. At the fall of Benin, these are the very ones who persuade him to forget his status and self and submit to the British force by paying homage to Captain Roupel. These are also the very ones who in order to save themselves, betray him when he tries to hide from the whitemen, the second time, at the fall of Benin.

Also, incessant insurrections from the vassal states against Benin domination continue to threaten the stability of the empire. In Akure, the Udezi has fashioned for himself state swords – an action which is symbolic of rebellion. Udezi’s action arouses Oba’s furious and puzzled curiosity. He questions:

Ovonramwen: So is has come to this? Little tiny stars criss-crossing, under-cutting, outshining each other to rival the moon itself! Even he – Udezi! He has fashioned for himself two royal swords, I hear. Two swords of state to buttress his vanity.

Okpele: That is what they say, Your Highness.

Ovonramwen: Go you then and tell him: it was not to watch rascals sport with the Benin Empire, that Ovonramwen Nogbaisi became King over this sacred domain. [*With quiet emphasis*] I want those cursed swords ... seized! (p. 9)

Udezi is therefore forced to surrender those swords. The people of Agbo too are not left out in the rebellion against Benin domination and oppressive tribute. The Oba informs us that: "the people Agbo have, of late, been getting too hot" (p. 21). So it becomes necessary that Ologbosere prepares a full squad of Benin soldiers to go and quell the Agbo revolt and dampen their hotness. Even the people of Ekpoma too are directing their own protest against the oppressive administration of Oba's imperial representative in their area. Ovonramwen does not hesitate to express his frown at their action too:

Ovonramwen: The snail pulls forward, the shell also pulls forward. Big towns rebel, baby towns also thrust forward. Or what is the cause of the present unease in little Epkoma? (p. 11)

Despite all the internal forces that militate against Ovonramwen's reign in Benin Empire, what becomes the immediate cause of the spate of events that culminate to the eventual fall of the empire is the external British incursion. The British trade mission, led by Consul Philips, makes an arrogant and stubborn attempt in blatant disregard of all warnings, to enter Benin on the occasion of the Ague festival. The abomination and calamity of this action is expressed in Benin Priest's sad reaction to the news of the coming of the whitemen.

Ohonsa: (*Bitterly*) Your Majesty! It is the custom that for seven days while this ceremony of Ague goes on, there must be no drumming in the land, and no visits to Benin by strangers. For two hundred years my fathers before me led this ceremony of Ague without trouble! Why I ask Your Majesty, is it in my lifetime that the madness of drumming and strange visits should break up this solemn worship and so bring eternal curse upon my head? (pp. 27 – 28)

Therefore, more representational of the siege on traditions in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is the British imperialistic incursion. This determined interference which further complicated Oba Ovonramwen's task of controlling the increasing rebellion in his kingdom, and of reasserting the authority of Benin over the vassal states, constitutes the greatest force of siege attendant to traditions in Benin Empire. This is a force which hinges on their trade mission to the continent. British trade mission, therefore, spearheaded the attendant social and

political implications that culminated into the destabilization experienced in Benin Empire.

Consul General Philips was blunt and unequivocal about British imperialistic mission to Benin Empire. Listen to his rhetorics:

What then are we in Africa for? What object brings us here? Commerce... commerce brought us to Africa; commerce determines our action in Africa... (p. 32)

Therefore,

The conduct of trade in the colonies demands direct contact with the interior that produces the product! (p. 31)

It therefore does not matter, the rapacity and ruthless determination with which this expedient mission is pursued; for they must not only consolidate on the grounds they seem to be gaining in this territory, but must also do that with determined urgency if they hope not to be ousted from this prominent commercial zone that has continued to prove rather intractable. This explains Consul Philips' stubborn and adamant decision to enter Benin against Akavbiogbe's warning and advice during the Ague festival hence his reaction to Mr. Campbell's reservation on the insistence to hastily enter Benin in spite of Oba's objection.

Philips: Commerce, Mr. Campbell! That is your answer! The conduct of trade in the colonies demands direct contact with the interior that produces the goods! Meanwhile Overami has placed juju on all produce from that interior. I get the complaints gentlemen. (Besides) As her majesty's prime representative in this protectorate, I also get the blame from London for every blasted minute that passes without an effective enforcement of the 1892 trade treaty with Benin. Of course, there would be objections from Overami: of course, Overami is bound to resort to devious means, excuses, strategems, threats, even lies to delay free trade by the Whiteman with the people of this territory. But for how long ... must British trade policy remain crippled by the whims and ritual taboos of a fetish priest-King? Forever? (pp. 31 – 32)

Eventually, that arrogant defiance and stubborn insistence exhibited by Consul Philips, the leader of the British team, in entering Benin during the Ague festival, despite all warnings, cost them seven lives. Benin chiefs could not take their incursion lightly. They could not comprehend why they must force themselves into Benin with such blatant disregard; an action which as Shaka (2008, 2002) indicates underlines Rotimi's unequivocal indictment of British imperialism as infringing on otherwise existing institutions and structures.

However, true to Esasoyen's words regarding the Whiteman's supremacy at Ovonramwen's pronouncement of death sentence on him and Obaruduagbon, Benin really

could not stand the wrath of the British who were, indeed, stronger, as the gruesome incident triggered off a spate of more incidents that culminated into the eventual fall of the kingdom. Herein lies the fact, that the British trade mission in Benin remained an insidious devastation to the established economic and socio-political existence and stability of the kingdom. The height of British economic greed is made more glaring by Rotimi at the fall of the empire with the plundering of the palace shrine by Consul Moore and his fellow British officials. They ransacked and removed elephant tusks, carvings and bronze-work materials from the shrine, all of which were believed to have later found their way in several British museums. Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* dramatizes not just the economic fall of a kingdom, but also its socio-political destabilization. We see in the play, a sheer disruption of the primordial and harmonious socio-economic life of a people and the final imposition of British colonial rule on them.

## 5. Conclusion

In Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, what is most evident is the established economic, social and political life of a people plagued by strong wave of intractable and disintegrating elements, both internally and externally. That these traditions/structures eventually fell under the weight and pressures of their siege explains the overbearing effects of their influences.

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