

Africanizing Greek Mythology: Femi Osofisan's Retelling of Euripides' *the Trojan Women*

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Abstract

Nigerian writer Femi Osofisan's new version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, is an African retelling of the Greek tragedy. In *Women of Owu* (2004), Osofisan relocates the action of Euripides' classical drama outside the walls of the defeated Kingdom of Owu in nineteenth century Yorubaland, what is now known as Nigeria. In a "Note on the Play's Genesis", Osofisan refers to the correspondences between the stories of Owu and Troy. He explains that *Women of Owu* deals with the Owu War, which started when the allied forces of the southern Yoruba kingdoms Ijebu and Ife, together with recruited mercenaries from Oyo, attacked Owu with the pretext of liberating the flourishing market of Apomu from Owu's control. When asked to write an adaptation of Euripides' tragedy, in the season of the Iraqi War, Osofisan thought of the tragic Owu War. The Owu War similarly started over a woman, when Iyunloye, the favourite wife of Ife's leader Okunade, was captured and given as a wife to one of Owu's princes. Like Troy, Owu did not surrender easily, for it lasted out a seven-year siege until its defeat. Moreover, the fate of the people of Owu at the hands of the allied forces is similar to that of the people of Troy at the hands of the Greeks: the males were slaughtered and the women enslaved. The play sheds light on the aftermath experiences of war, the defeat and the accompanied agony of the survivors, namely the women of Owu. The aim of this study is to emphasize the play's similarities to as well as shed light on its differences from the classical Greek text, since the understanding of Osofisan's African play ought to be informed by the Euripidean source text.

Keywords: *Osofisan, Yoruba, Greek tragedy, Intertextuality, Lamentation*

1. Femi Osofisan's Version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*

Nigerian writer Femi Osofisan's version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, is an African retelling of the Greek tragedy. Born in 1946, Osofisan is basically the best-known playwright of the generation after Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka. The Nigerian playwright, essayist, editor, and poet has written over fifty plays and has always been a consistent critic of his society who attacked political corruption and injustice. One of the most important "thematic concerns of his writings, especially his dramatic genre," is "the power and agency of women not only to take charge of their own lives, but also to chart the course of progress for all of society" (Irele and Jeyifo 2010, 203).

The Trojan Women was the third tragedy of a trilogy dealing with the Trojan War, waged by the Greeks against the Trojans after the Trojan prince Paris took Helen from her husband king Menelaus of Sparta. The Trojan War is one of the most important events in Greek mythology and the topic of many ancient Greek texts, most famously Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Weyenberg 2013, 143). In *The Trojan Women*, Euripides follows the fate of the women of Troy after their city has been sacked and their husbands killed. In the Greek tragedy, "war is presented in its aftermath and almost exclusively through the eyes of the women who are its victims" (Walton 1991, xxi).

Greek tragedy was introduced into Africa during the colonial era. It "was used as a model for indigenous African playwriting and playmaking, for Greek tragedy was perhaps the most suitable model for African playwrights to build a hybrid modern drama" (Wetmore 2002, 21). The similarities between Greek and Yoruba drama include the utilization of songs, music,

dance, ritual, chorus, and gods as well as open-door performances. The success of the choral work and portrayal of the gods in *Women of Owu*, owe much to such affinities between the two theatre traditions (Budelmann 2007, 33).

In *Women of Owu*, Osofisan relocates the action of Euripides' classical drama outside the walls of the defeated Kingdom of Owu in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, what is now known as Nigeria. "The wider historical backdrop is the fighting between rival groups in Yorubaland in the first half of the nineteenth century, in the course of which large groups of people were displaced and enslaved" (Budelmann 2007, 17). Owu was destroyed in the 1820's after a siege that lasted for many years.

On the title page, "*Women of Owu*" is followed by "(An African Re-reading of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* first commissioned by the Chipping Norton Theatre, UK)" (Osofisan 2006, iii). "Distancing pre-text from adaptation", Osofisan does not appropriate the canonical text, but rather cites it as an available source (Weyenberg 2013, 142). The aim of this paper is to emphasize the play's similarities to as well as differences from the classical Greek text, since the understanding of Osofisan's African play ought to be informed by Euripides' original text which is an obvious intertext¹.

Women of Owu was first staged at the Chipping Norton Theatre in 2004 before being published in 2006. "A Note on the Play's Genesis" explicitly ties the play to the period of its first production, "in the season of the Iraqi War" (Osofisan 2006, vii). Osofisan represents himself as 'pondering' over the adaptation of Euripides' play while remembering the 'tragic Owu'. Such memories were fostered because the Yoruba Owu city had lasted out a seven-year siege by the 'Allied Forces' of the southern Yoruba kingdoms Ijebu and Ife, along with mercenaries recruited from Oyo, at the conclusion of which all the males were executed and the females enslaved. "The Allied Forces had attacked [Owu] with the pretext of liberating the flourishing market of Apomu from Owu's control" (Osofisan 2006, vii). Since the Ijebu and Ife troops probably did not call themselves 'the Allied Forces', this is likely to be read as an invocation of the contemporary British and American escapade in Iraq (Goff 2013, 23).

Osofisan not only evokes the contexts of Troy, ancient Greece and nineteenth century Yorubaland, but also refers to the War in Iraq in order to trigger critical reflection. Hence, despite the nineteenth century setting, Osofisan gives the war present-day resonances, as two examples will show. First, the slavery theme that runs through Euripides' play is made even more prominent in *Women of Owu*. Throughout the play, the women of Owu voice their fear of slavery, aware of their imminent departure for their new fates. Secondly, the play alludes to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when the United States of America along with other nations including the United Kingdom, deposed ruler Saddam Hussein. The besieging army is called the 'Allied Forces' (of Ijebu and Ife), as was the US-led coalition. (Budelmann 2007, 18-19). It claims to have come in order to liberate Owu rather than act out of any material greed, nonetheless, the women of Owu repeatedly question their motives for invading the city.

Spectators with a good knowledge of Nigerian history, know that Owu was one of the oldest and most prosperous Yoruba city-states. In the first half of the nineteenth century, slave trade and control of the trade routes to the British trade markets on the coast yielded great profits. The Owu War (1814-1820), to which Osofisan's play refers to, is seen as the start of a series of wars between Yoruba kingdoms with the prime purpose of taking prisoners to sell as slaves to the British. Populations were scattered and kingdoms devastated, and as a result, colonialism was established. Hence, as a result of greed, slave trade may become an explanation of the causes behind the Owu Wars which devastated the area and facilitated British colonization. Such an interpretation makes the reason behind the colonization more complex and points not only to an external enemy, but also an internal one (Götrick 2008, 85-6).

There are several similarities between Euripides' mythical Troy and Osofisan's historical Owu: both were autonomous city-states forced to give up their sovereignty when having been under siege for a long time and then sacked, their citizens either scattered or were taken as prisoners of war. Both plays present the horrors of war, for cities become ruins and even infants are killed (Götrick 2008, 85). Moreover, in "A Note on the Play's Genesis", Osofisan elucidates his choice to draw on *The Trojan Women* by calling attention to the correspondences between the contexts of both plays as well as the correspondences between the stories of Owu and Troy. The Owu War similarly started over a woman, when Iyulo, the favourite wife of Ife's leader Okunade, was captured and given as a wife to one of Owu's princes. Like Troy, Owu did not surrender easily, for it lasted out a seven-year siege until its defeat. Moreover, the fate of the people of Owu at the hands of the allied forces is similar to that of the people of Troy at the hands of the Greek: the males were slaughtered and the

women enslaved. Hence, “where Euripides has tried to make his audience aware of the horrors of the Peloponnesian Wars”, Osofisan’s retelling facilitates it for “Yoruba-competent spectators to find important references to a political reality in the recent past” (Götrick 2008, 85).

Each of Osofisan’s characters corresponds to one of Euripides’ characters, and his play follows the plot structure of its source text closely, with just a few significant deviations. Similarly to Euripides’ women of Troy, the women of Owu witness the destruction of their city, the execution of their husbands and sons, and their fate as slaves. They mourn as Yoruba women traditionally mourn: “their hair cut short and their bare shoulders made grey by ashes” (Götrick 2008, 84). The play focuses on the group of women lamenting what has happened to them. Their lamentations are expressed partly in the text, partly through Yoruba songs. The importance of orality is highlighted in *Women of Owu* by the dirges² it contains. Nevertheless, what is significantly different from the Greek text is the fact that Owu, Ijebu and Ife are all Yoruba, hence, the aggressors and victims all share the same Yoruba identity.

Osofisan’s stress on the suffering of women in war resembles Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. The Greek tragedy reveals the other side of war, focusing on the defeated Trojans rather than the Greeks, on women rather than men. “The condition of the captive women is desperate: because their defeat is still so recent, they have not had a chance to accommodate themselves to misfortune” (Gregory 1991, 155). Worth mentioning is the fact that in the context of ancient Greece, where citizenship was exclusively male, Euripides’ focus on women is remarkable (Weyenberg 2013, 154). *Women of Owu* differs from its Euripidean source text in that the lamenting women of Owu focus on their stories rather than praising their heroes or city. Like the women of Troy, they narrate history; unlike the women of Troy, the histories they sing are primarily their own (Weyenberg 2013, 157). They describe how they saw their husbands, brothers and sons slaughtered in front of their eyes:

Woman: Not one was spared! Not a single male left now

In Owu, except those who escaped the night before

With our king, Oba Akinjobi.

Woman: And – shame, oh shame! Our women were seized

And shared out to the blood-splattered troops

To spend the night. Only some of us – we two, and

The women you see over there

Were spared, those of us from the noble houses

And others whose beauty struck their eye:

We are being reserved, they say, for the Generals (Osofisan 2006, 3)

The women of Owu convey the pain of not being allowed to bury their loved ones and refer to the sexual violence, of which many women become victims in wars. In Euripides’ play, “the Trojan women assume they have lost everything – that their very identity has disappeared along with their city, families, fortune, and freedom” (Gregory 1991, 157).

Whereas *The Trojan Women* opens with a deity who explains the context and introduces the characters, the ancestral deity Anlugbua, who opens *Women of Owu*, has no idea about the siege and the defeat, and has to be informed by the two women he meets. The women display a sharp political awareness, commenting on their defeat as follows (Goff 2013, 123):

Nowadays,

When the strong fight the weak, it's called

A Liberation War

To free the weak from oppression.

Nowadays, in the new world order, it is suicide to be weak. (Osofisan 2006, 8)

George Bush used a similar rhetoric to legitimise the invasion of Iraq. Although the justification for the invasion primarily rested on the allegation that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, Bush repeatedly framed the invasion as a war of liberation, intended to grant the Iraqi people freedom and democracy (Weyenberg 2013, 173).

The god concludes, "It is the law of victory, the law / Of defeat" (Osofisan 2006, 7). When Anlugbua first finds out about the city's fate, he could not understand why his people did not call on him, as he had told them to:

Why didn't anybody call me?

My words were clear enough, I thought!

Whenever any grave danger threatens the town,

I said! Whenever some misfortune arrives

Too huge for you to handle, run

To my hill and pull my chain!

How is that no one remembered? (Osofisan 2006, 3)

On the other hand, the women could not understand why he didn't help them earlier. The scene is one of mutual incomprehension and it ends with both parties further apart; Anlugbua departs lamenting his lack of worshippers, while the women leave with stinging rebukes for the gods' lack of concern:

Anlugbua: I ask you – without a shrine, without worshippers,

What is a god? Who now will venerate us?

Who sing our praises among these ruins?

Woman: Go back to your heaven, Anlugbua,

And learn also how to cope with pain.

If only you gods would show a little more concern

For your worshippers! (Osofisan 2006, 9)

So far, so Euripidean; the god even admits that he is 'shamed' by the women, which is a conclusion often invited by Euripidean gods even if never articulated. Here, both humans and their god claim to have done the right thing – offered help, or asked for help – and to have received no answering gesture from the other side (Goff 2013, 123-4). Also the idea that the gods are dependent on the humans is made clear from Anlugbua concern that a god is not a god without

worshippers, opposite to the Greek belief in the power of the gods to affect human destinies. This interdependency of humans and gods is characteristic of the Yoruba belief system.

The following scene introduces the Hecuba-figure, Erelu Afin, who like Hecuba shares the scene with the chorus leader and women of the chorus. They begin with lamentation, then move to anger and a storm of curses against their conquerors, which is completely absent from the Greek source text:

Erelu: Savages! You claim to be more civilized than us

But did you have to carry out all this killing and carnage

To show you are stronger than us? Did you

Have to plunge all these women here into mourning

Just to seize control over our famous Apomu market

Known all over for its uncommon merchandise? (12)

Woman: No, Erelu, what are you saying, or

Are you forgetting?

They do not want our market at all –

Woman: They are not interested in petty things

As profit –

Woman: Only in lofty, lofty ideas, like freedom –

Woman: Or human rights – (Osofisan 2006, 12-13)

Contemporary terms like 'human rights' again invite a comparison with the Euro-American invasions of Iraq, which were repeatedly accused of disguising economic motives with talks of noble political ideals. Hence, endowed by suffering with a moral intelligence that enables them to see through these politics, the women of Owu can play ironically with the categories of 'savage' and 'civilized', satirizing the invaders' motives (Goff 2013, 125).

Furthermore, Osofisan's women of Owu mock the official narrative of 'liberation wars' and the rhetorical conflation of democratic ideology and economic interests that characterize that narrative. Their ironic song of the official history of the invasion of Owu through negation, points to the 'profit', 'merchandise' and 'glitter of gold' that determine wars as well as the stories of slavery and oppression that are their result (Weyenberg 2013, 174). Hence, according to the women, the Allied Forces are not interested in such "petty things / As profit":

Woman: Oh the Ijebus have always disdained merchandise –

Woman: The Ifes are unmoved by the glitter of gold –

Woman: The Oyos have no concern whatsoever for silk or ivory –

Woman: All they care for, my dear women

All they care for, all of them, is our freedom!

Woman: Ah Anlugbua bless their kind hearts!

Woman: Bless the kindness which has rescued us

From tyranny in order to plunge us into slavery! (Osofisan 2006, 12)

It depends on the audience which of the contexts Osofisan evokes will resonate the most. For the Nigerian audience, the dramatization of internal warfare is likely to evoke resonances to other internal conflicts in Nigeria, especially the Biafran War, which resulted in around three million deaths. The suffering the women recount also resonate with that of many victims of Nigeria's successive military dictatorships, prompting viewers to reflect on Nigeria's contemporary political situation. The women in the dirge above, refer to the Ijebus, Ifes and the Oyos, hence, their criticism is directed toward the internal strife within Nigeria. On the other hand, for the British audience of the play's première in 2004, being probably unfamiliar with Nigeria's history, the allusion to Iraq may have been more prominent since the United Kingdom aided the United States invasion of Iraq. With more than eight thousand British soldiers stationed there and recurring headlines of British casualties, the UK's involvement in Iraq was, and is still a topic of political debate (Weyenberg 2013, 174).

Responding to the news that the ancestor Anlugbua has deserted Owu, the chorus leader concludes that, "The lesson is clear. It's us, not the gods, / who create war. It's us, we human beings, who can kill it" (Osofisan 2006, 15), emphasizing the idea that it is up to human beings to shape their own fate now. The lesson that human fate is in human hands, will be emphasized later in the play.

In Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, the play opens with a prologue involving the two gods Poseidon and Athena. They agree to join forces to punish the Greeks and make their homecoming journey as painful as possible (Walton 1991, xix). Hence, where Athena joins Poseidon at the beginning of the play to plan for the shipwreck of the Greeks, Osofisan's Anlugbua does not meet his female counterpart until after the scene between Erelu and the chorus. Significantly, Osofisan displaces the dialogue between the gods from its original place as a prologue to the third scene. While Euripides informs his audience from the start that the mortals are at the mercy of the gods, Osofisan makes it clear that the gods stand by helplessly while humans hold responsibility (Götrick 2008, 88). The Yoruba pantheon and the Greek pantheon alike are characterized as being human in the sense that they behave like human beings, being subject to many failings and follies. In their quarrels they often use human beings as their instruments.

In Greek mythology, Athena, together with Hera and Artemis, once initiated and competed in a beauty contest and when they asked Paris to be their judge, he chose Artemis – and so made Athena and Hera his enemies. When Artemis kept her promise to give him the most beautiful woman, Helen, as his reward, the other two goddesses used this as a reason for taking revenge and consequently instigated the Trojan War. The opening dialogue between Poseidon and Athena in the Greek tragedy reveals that Athena has started the war because of her enmity towards Troy. However, when the Athenians did not respect the divine temples in Troy, she changed her mind and decided to punish the soldiers who had carried out her revenge. Their journey back home is to be made as difficult as possible. Hence, it is quite clear in the prologue that the war as well as its consequences were initiated by the gods, and that humans are at the mercy of the gods (Götrick 2008, 87).

In *Women of Owu*, Anlugbua is joined by Lawumi, his ancestor, who like Athena, is responsible for the destruction of the city. The striking difference is that here, destruction is a punishment not for the wrong vote in a beauty contest, but for the city's involvement in the slave trade, "human beings learn only from suffering and pain" (Osofisan 2006, 21). She reveals to Anlugbua that his Owu people, arrogant and "drunk with prosperity," violated a law that, "no Yoruba should ever sell other Yoruba into slavery" (Osofisan 2006, 19). Hence, the people of Owu were the initial aggressors, as they were enslaving other Yoruba and their guilt marks a significant distance from the Euripidean tragedy.

Anlugbua thus comes too late to save his city and is angrily scolded by the women of Owu for this. Nevertheless, not only does Lawumi seek the destruction of the city, but she also talks Anlugbua into unleashing a storm on the attackers on their way home to make them pay for their religious impropriety; hence, she holds a grudge against both warring parties. The play's first three scenes show that the gods have a role in human suffering, yet in the end, Anlugbua puts the blame squarely on humans, leaving it to the audience to draw their own conclusions (Budelmann 2007, 20).

In Osofisan's play, Cassandra's counterpart is Orisaye. Like the Greek Cassandra, Orisaye is perceived as mad by her mother and all the other characters. In the Greek source text, Cassandra is known as a woman who had declined the advances of the god Apollo, and whom he therefore punished by giving the gift of prophecy, which was taken for madness. Thanks to her gift from Apollo, she knows that her mother, Hecuba, will soon die. Euripides' audience knew that her prophecies would come true, unlike the rest of the characters who took her prophecies for madness. Cassandra exhibits an uncontrolled craving for revenge, which confirms her madness to the other characters (Götrick 2008, 89). In *Women of Owu*, Orisaye's mother, Erelu, points out that she is "no longer in control of her senses" (Osofisan 2006, 26) as a result of the violent war, nonetheless, it is clear that she is not mad. Although Orisaye is the bride of the god Obatala, the god of purity and creativity, she is to be taken as a wife to one of Ijebu's kings. Like the Greek Cassandra's delirious wedding song, she sings and dances deliriously, although she knows that there is no reason for a celebration since she is planning to kill the general who is claiming her "to join his harem" (Osofisan 2006, 24):

Orisaye: I shall take my revenge!

Yes, I swear it to you mother, this wedding will be

Kusa's dreadful, unbreakable pact with death!

My presence shall bring such suffering and anguish

To his household, to his city and his people

That the wreck they have caused here will seem in the end

Like a joyous feast. I will destroy them

Totally, totally, without remorse! They will rue the day

They set out to conquer the city of Owu! [...]

All our dead will be avenged! (Osofisan 2006, 28-9)

When Orisaye embarks upon her mission of revenge, it is not at all in accordance with Obatala's principles, for he stands for balance and patience. When seeing herself as a "death-avenging spirit," she weighs revenge over balance and patience since this revenge is solely hers and not Obatala's. Very much aware that she will die after killing the king, she also knows Ijebu's destiny. Most of them will not get home and those who will, shall find their land invaded by others, and shall suffer a defeat worse than Owu's:

Orisaye: I'll watch his blood flow, gurgling like fresh wine

From the palm tree! I will be singing, mother!

Then of course they will seize me, and hack me to death!

Ah, what happiness is waiting for me!

[...]

As for the others, you will see.

They will never make it back home, will never again see

Their wives or children! They will not –

Chorus Leader: Please Princess, that's enough. You're embarrassing us

With these futile prophecies [...]

Orisaye: [...] Only a few will ever make it back home, and when

They do, they will find, waiting for them there, not peace

But new rulers, strange conquerors

Who in their absence would have taken over

Their land and their wives!

[...]

So my dear women, suspend your dirges! Let us sing and

Dance instead for the victory that is coming! (Osofisan 2006, 29-30)

Locating vindictiveness and its devastating effects on mankind in the world of the gods, Euripides could make his audience condemn the actions of the gods. However, Osofisan locates vindictiveness in Orisaye, that is, in the human world as opposed to the god she is to serve, and so his drama differs considerably from Euripides' (Götrick 2008, 89).

Additionally, Osofisan's mortals threaten to punish the gods by extinction because as Anlugbua puts it in the first scene, the gods cannot survive without their worshippers. Also when the last male in Owu, a child, is killed, one of the women state that, "They [the gods] too will die without worshippers" (Osofisan 2006, 46). One of the most heart-breaking laments in *Women of Owu* is uttered by Erelu when the soldiers bring in the corpse of her grandson Aderogun, the counterpart of Astyanax in *The Trojan Women*. Erelu's lament takes the form of an *Orik*³. Erelu celebrates her murdered grandson as a "brave one", as the "son of the warrior Jagunmolu," who is a "collector of heads except the new-born's" (Osofisan 2006, 77-8). The lamentation of Aderogun entails a celebration of the bravery and warfare of his ancestry, for through the funeral ritual, he will be united with his ancestors (Weyenberg 2013, 158-9). As the women of Owu prepare Aderogun's body for burial, they sing a dirge whose title translates as "If I'd known, I'd not have come to the World":

If I'd known, I'd not have come to the world

I'd have stayed peacefully in heaven instead

[...] *A woman gives birth and begins to cry*

As nursing mothers rejoice, war breaks out

The mother of twins will soon be mourning

– Refrain

The handsome turn sacrifice to the god of war

The brave go to battle and never return

Why have children then, if they won't last? (Osofisan 2006, 76).

Then Erelu starts singing her grandson's oriki whose title translates as "My son, Aderogun!"

My son, Aderogun!

Farewell, till we meet again!

Son of the warrior Jagunmolu

Offspring of Owu's ancestors

[...]

Sleep on, but you will rise again

You'll not eat millipedes or worms:

When you get home there, say my greetings:

And tell them I am on my way! (Osofisan 2006, 78)

While Aderogun's oriki praises bravery in war, the dirge emphasizes the loss that bravery involves, particularly for the mothers left behind. The reference to twins in the fifth line adds weight to the hardship. Since the Yoruba perceive twins as special children who bring fortune to the family, their death is antithetical to the promise of their birth (Ajila 2004, 143).

For the women of Owu, a song is not merely a form of expression, but it also holds active potential. They sing to regain power from the men who have hurt them. This is clear in the following exchange between the chorus of women and the chorus leader:

Chorus Leader: Sing! Sing! In defiance of their whips!

Women: We curse you all!

Chorus Leader: Of their insults!

Women: We curse you all!

Chorus Leader: Of their rapine and assault!

Women: We curse you all!

Chorus Leader: Our curse on all men, and especially men of violence!

Women: We curse you all!

Chorus Leader: All those born of women, but who use us as dogs!

Women: We Curse! We curse! (Osofisan 2006, 38)

According to stage directions, the women then start a ritual song of malediction that reaches its highest point as they bare their breasts collectively, which is an ill-omened act in many African cultures, and utter their curse, 'We curse you all,' hence, mourning turns into resistance (Weyenberg 2013, 160).

Interestingly, this dramatization of the women's powerlessness and resistance is juxtaposed with a rather different treatment of gender in *Women of Owu's* retelling of Euripides' Helen scene (Budelmann 2007, 23). In Greek myth, Helen is said to be the cause of the Trojan War, which was started by her husband King Menelaus after the Trojan prince Paris took her away with him. Helen thus embodies the conflict between the Greeks and Trojans. In Osofisan's play, the Owu War started when favourite wife of Okunade, Ife's General, Iyunloye was captured and given to one of the Owu princes, Erelu's son. Okunade became bitter and swore to get her back. What happens to Iyunloye here basically resembles what has happened to Helen in the Greek tradition: all responsibility for the war falls on her shoulders. She alone is to blame:

Erelu: Many times I offered to lead you through one of our secret exits,

So you could go and intercede for us with your husband's

Forces. If you'd gone, the war would have ended years ago,

And certainly without this catastrophe we see now.

But did you listen to me? All you did was play me along,

Agreeing to go when it seemed we were about to lose

The war, and then quickly changing your mind

When fortune turned on our side! So what's this story

About loving or missing your husband? Listen,

It's time to face the truth and stop lying! (Osofisan 2006, 54)

The Mayé Okunade now comes to punish his wife, undecided whether to take her back home or have her die right away. A scene of debate takes place between Iyunloye and Erelu in which she portrays herself as a victim of circumstances, always missing her husband, whereas Erelu tries to persuade the Mayé to kill her for abandoning him for her rich and handsome youngest son rather than living in "the small and wretched hamlet of Ife" (Osofisan 2006, 55).

In Euripides's tragedy, Helen emphasizes the difference between Greek self and Trojan other. Comparably, in Osofisan's retelling, Erelu insists on the difference between Iyunloye and the women of Owu. This is emphasized in the scene where Iyunloye tries to convince her husband that she did not go to Owu with prince Dejumo (the counterpart of Paris) voluntarily. At this point, Erelu responds fiercely (Weyenberg 2013, 160-1):

Erelu: Confess, you liked my son, and

You liked this city! Dejumo was handsome, young,

Strong and wealthy. It was a breath-taking sight watching him

Ride a horse! And he had in his stable some of the most

Magnificent breeds. I know as a woman how it feels

To be chosen as the favourite of such a man. Besides,

Who would rather live in backward Ife than the city

Of Owu, if given the choice? When you gave yourself up

In Apomu, and were brought here to Owu, you saw suddenly

Such wonder as you had never imagined! You saw

Our city walls and our paved streets! Crowds that made you

Dizzy; the silk on the women, coral beads on our neck,

Gold in our hair! You were dazzled! Confess! (Osofisan 2006, 54-5)

When Erelu describes how the luxuries of Owu impressed Iyunloye, as Troy did Helen, her version of history sharply distinguishes between the women of Owu, legitimate victims of war and sexual violence, and Iyunloye who gave herself up willingly. However, Iyunloye responds to this with unexpected resistance:

Iyunloye: Yes, be cruel! Be arrogant! Boast of your riches,

Of your dazzling streets! So life is backward! Go on,

Jeer at us because we are a minority people!

[...]

But you and your chiefs always claimed, before this,

Didn't you, that we were one and the same people in all of

Yorubaland? So this is what you meant: the monkey

Does the work, while the baboon eats the food! (Osofisan 2006, 55-6)

Osofisan points here to the intra-ethnic conflicts that persist among Yoruba sub-groups in South-West Nigeria. These conflicts, Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo explains, usually reflect unresolved issues from the Yoruba Wars of the nineteenth century (2010, 1797). Dramatizing the conflict between Owu and Ife, Osofisan also demonstrates that what is seen as a unified 'Yoruba' ethnic identity is a construct. "The people of south-western Nigeria, the Republic of Benin and Togo, who are today all referred to as 'Yoruba,' were until the late nineteenth century organized in independent polities" (qtd. in Weyenberg 2013, 161). The emergence of the modern pan-Yoruba identity was largely the result of British colonialism, which organised its administration in a way that shaped ethnic communities as well as "modes of ethnic political mobilization and organization" (Berman 1998, 312-13). The image of a unified Yoruba people has become increasingly strong because "the nascent sense of belonging to a larger cultural collectivity has been catalysed by external perspectives introduced through regional and international political and economic networks" (qtd. in Weyenberg 2013, 162).

In Euripides' play, Helen's final line of argument is that although she did betray her country, she was the victim of force. She claims that she was impelled to follow Paris by the superior power of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, that no one, not even Zeus, can resist (Gregory 1991, 173). Osofisan's Iyunloye, on the other hand, blames her husband for being away when she was abducted at Apomu. She points to the vulnerability of women and girls during wars and civil conflicts. Osofisan might be pointing out here that may be she is no different from the women of Owu and suffers as they do:

Iyunloye: When the Owu forces attacked us at the market

At Apomu, you were not around, remember?

... There was no one I could call upon for help!

You must have heard what the soldiers did to us,

You are now a soldier yourself!

[...] In desperation, I had to buy my life with the only asset

I had – my beauty! (Osofisan 2006, 51-2)

The confrontation between Iyunloye and Erelu demonstrates that the women of Owu are not the only victims: Erelu is complicit in the abuse of power and the exploitation of fellow Yoruba. According to Erelu, "It is the fate of the conquered to toil for the strong! / That is the logic of war, the logic of defeat!" (Osofisan 2006, 55). Here she speaks of herself as a conqueror, thus, the defeated queen uses the language of her conqueror, for she already belongs to a city that enslaved other Yoruba. Hence, by focusing on the suffering of Iyunloye, Osofisan challenges Helen's traditional representation as the root cause rather than a victim of war.

Iyunloye quite explicitly flatters and seduces the Mayé since she has understood that her only weapon is her sexual seduction. The women later find out that "[...] beauty / Has conquered again, as before" after being informed that Iyunloye has finally, "regained the Mayé's heart, and joined his caravan" (Osofisan 2006, 61). This proves Erelu's opinion about the type of woman Iyunloye is:

Erelu: [...] Women like her are dangerous,

Especially to their lovers. Once they catch you, you're hooked

For ever: They have such powers of enchantment, eyes

That will set cities ablaze. (Osofisan 2006, 48)

Hence, 'the queen of lust,' as Erelu calls her, is pardoned and reunited with the Mayé, becoming the supreme victor who conquers one man after the other. This announcement is devastating to the women of Owu who envisaged her death because what actually happens to Iyunloye is completely different from what they expected: "the irony of the situation is savoured to its logical conclusion, for [the Greek] 'Menelaus' and 'Helen' are fully united before they get back home" (Goff 2013, 132).

The slave trade is certainly an important element in *The Trojan Women*, but it is the effect rather than the cause of the war. *Women of Owu*, on the other hand, adds a rational reason for the slave trade and clearly points out that human beings, rather than the gods, are the reason behind the war. Moreover, Osofisan's condemnation of the slave trade is extended to a condemnation of economic exploitation of people. When criticizing his own people for being involved in the type of slave trade that benefits the West, Osofisan not only attacks the economy on which that trade rests, but also uses the gods as a tool to criticize the Yoruba people for allowing themselves to be deceived by the false glamour of the West (Götrick 2008, 88-9).

Historically, slavery was indeed at the start of the Owu war. One of the main reasons Yoruba kingdoms fought against each other was to take prisoners to sell as slaves to the British. Olatunji Ojo explains that "the Owu war began when Ife violated a law that precluded the enslavement of Oyo citizens". When captives from war were sold to Ijebu slave traders, Owu soldiers rescued them. "In retaliation, Ife and Ijebu troops attacked Owu for trying to stop a lucrative trade" (2005, 383). The women of Owu have left this complicity in the slave trade out of their lamentations, and it is specifically for this reason that their ancestral god, Anlugbua, blames them (Weyenberg 2013, 165-66), "[...] you chose to glorify the story with lies! Lies! / Our apotheosis as you sing it is a fraud!" (Osofisan 2006, 66)

Thus according to their god, the history they perform through their lamentations is partly fraudulent. Nevertheless, the women defend themselves by objecting that it is not they, "the common fool", but "the rulers who write history"; it is "the hunters who compose the story of the hunt / It is the revellers, not the slaughtered cows, / who record the fable of the feast!"

(Osofisan 2006, 66). They thus present themselves as victims of historicism, reducing the histories they sing to a mere echo of the dominant narrative to which they have no access (Weyenberg 2013, 166). The women of Owu perceive themselves as the passive victims of a history determined by their ancestral gods, nonetheless, the god Anlugbua simply replies that:

Anlugbua: Then the deer must train themselves to seize the gun from

Their hunters! The cows to take over the narration of

Their own story (Osofisan 2006, 66).

He urges them to take matters into their own hands and compose their own history; this is a valuable lesson in self-emancipation. When the women ask their ancestral father Anlugbua for help, he offers them the following proverb, "a father can only chew for a child: he cannot swallow for her" (65). Thus the emphasis now is not on divine resolution, but human agency.

Surprisingly, while gender has been prominent in the play so far, it is now relegated to the background. The women are no longer addressed as women, but become the representatives of a collective that is co-responsible for a history of warfare. On the one hand, they are transformed from passive victims to possible agents of change. On the other hand, to disregard gender when talking about wars that generate gendered violence seems problematic, especially when bearing in mind the history of colonial and military violence in Nigeria, of which so many women have become victims (Weyenberg 2013, 166).

The transformation of queen Erelu displays a similar dilemma. It also suggests a change from passive victim to agent of social change. Without her royal status as well as a man to offer her protection, Erelu felt unable to stand by herself, "I am not the widow of a hero. Only an old woman / With fallen breasts. Without this stick to lean on, / I could not stand alone by myself" (Osofisan 2006, 25). However, towards the end of the play, the chorus of women remind her that as, "the mother of the city" and "the only mouth" they have left to speak to their ancestors, Erelu has the duty to perform the necessary burial rites so that the spirits of the dead be released and sent home:

Chorus Leader: I know how you feel Erelu, but Kabiyesi,

Your husband is no longer here. All our priests and

Princes have been turned to corpses. Their bodies lie around

In the rubble there unburied. They and the other victims

Need someone to release their spirits and send them back

Safely home to the ancestors, someone trained in the task.

Among us there's no such person left now,

Except you. (Osofisan 2006, 62)

The women's lament and appeal to Erelu to save their future, result in her acceptance of the task to lead the newly dead to the ancestors. Thus "this inspires her to abandon her passivity and play an active part again" (Weyenberg 2013, 175):

Chorus Leader: [...] Erelu knows

What we must do to save our future from eternal damnation. It is

A duty she cannot evade or refuse. (Osofisan 2006, 62)

After "a series of hesitations and interruptions the rite is performed, the songs sung, Erelu entranced and possessed by Anlugbua" (Goff 2013, 133). Worth mentioning is the fact that, [w]hereas nobody answers the call of the Trojan women in the Greek source text, Anlugbua, makes his presence noticed in *Women of Owu* "being the foremost ancestor of the Owus, since he was the founder of the city" (Götrick 2008, 90). Together the women start their ritual dances:

The Women begin the dirge till they gradually separate into two Choruses dancing around the figure of Erelu. The dances are slow and ritually ceremonial, and will gradually conduct Erelu and the Chorus Leaders into a trance.

Erelu: Let this be our dance of defeat, our final dirge

To our wrecked city, to perfidy, the folly of war.

Dance with me now the dance of our death!

Chorus Leader 1: We dance –

For those who fell in the field of slaughter

Chorus Leader 2: We dance –

For all who fell to feed the greed of power

Chorus Leader 1: We dance –

For all the innocent silenced in their prime,

Silenced so that someone could win an argument

Chorus Leader 2: We dance –

For the numerous souls wasted again and again

In the ceaseless clash of liberty and lust

Chorus Leader 1: We dance –

For the widows and orphans who survive

But who will soon be drawn into fresh confrontations

Chorus Leader 2: We dance –

For the numerous ghosts we leave behind

For the bodies abandoned on these broken bricks. (Osofisan 2006, 63-4)

Through song and dance, the women perform a valediction of the dead and summon their ancestor Anlugbua who takes possession of Erelu, so that she speaks with his voice and delivers the play's final message. The contact is created on stage when the two choruses call him, "Come, Anlugbua! Come down! / *Maabo, Anlugbua!*" (Osofisan 2006, 64), while "Erelu is dancing herself into a trance. The lights then go down, the women lose their balance when they feel his presence, and a strong light is focused on Erelu" (Götrick 2008, 90). At the same moment, caught in a spotlight, the god Anlugbua

appears. Nonetheless, when performing the ritual, Erelu is attacked by forces stronger than herself, and she dies. Hence, Erelu is now transformed into a queen who saves her people, for she sacrifices her life for the sake of her community.

The trance dance and accompanying songs, however, communicate differently depending on the audience's competence. On the one hand, when spectators with Yoruba competence see the dance, they understand that Erelu is venturing into the dangerous realm of superhuman powers which overtake and kill her. They also realize what an enormous task Erelu has taken upon herself to fulfil, and they see her development into a responsible person who sacrifices herself for her community. By doing this, she opens a way not only to the ancestors but also to the future, because the ancestors stand for the collectively acquired knowledge that is needed in order to survive. On the other hand, spectators without Yoruba competence merely see a dance and might perceive it to have some relevance to the funeral. To them the songs performed in Yoruba basically convey a sad atmosphere (Gótrick 2008, 90-1).

Through Erelu's mouth, Anlugbua places the blame for the Owu conflict on the Owu people themselves because of their involvement in the slave trade, "You were given this life. You chose to waste it / In a senseless quarrel over a woman." He predicts that there will be a penalty beyond the loss of the city for their guilt of not learning from history, and not just for this guilt, but for the larger humanity failings of not learning from history:

If only you had read your history right, the lessons

Left behind by the ancestors! Each of us, how else did we go

Except by the wrath of war? Each of us,

Demolished through violence and contention! Not so? (Osofisan 2006, 66)

The women plead that they did not read or write the history, because they are its victims rather than its makers, however, the god tells them that they should "learn the wisdom of sticking together and loving one another ..." (Osofisan 2006, 66). In this line, "the god has ceased to be entirely Euripidean, because he can envisage the kind of compassion that in Euripidean drama characterizes the relationships of humans only, and offers them a defence against the machinations of the divine" (Goff 2013, 134).

Anlugbua predicts that the women of Owu will go into years of wandering and slavery as a punishment for their wasted lies. Thus the god has the final word. He condemns human beings for their ceaseless desire for bloodshed, yet leaves some hope when predicting that new Owus will come into existence; Owu will rise again, but not as itself, instead, the people will build new communities scattered over Yorubaland and in other locations of slavery (Goff 2013, 134-5). Hence, the message Osofisan delivers to his audience is explicit:

Anlugbua: Poor human beings! War is what will destroy you!

As it destroys the gods. But I am moved, and I promise: Owu will rise again! Not here,

Not as a single city again [...]

[...] but in little communities elsewhere,

Within other cities of Yorubaland. Those now going

Into slavery shall start new kingdoms in those places.

It's the only atonement a god can make for you

Against your ceaseless volition of self-destruction.

You human beings, always thirsty for blood,

Always eager to devour one another! I hope

History will teach you. I hope you will learn. Farewell. (Osofisan 2006, 67)

In actual history, new Owu did come into existence, for the migration Anlugbua predicts has a historical basis. After the Owu war and the fall of the Owu kingdom, the migration of Yoruba refugees resulted in the rapid expansion of the settlement of Ibadan, which grew to be the second-largest city in Nigeria. Although Anlugbua restricts his predicted migration to 'other cities of Yorubaland,' it could also refer to the Yoruba diaspora. During the transatlantic slave trade, many Yoruba were taken as slaves to different parts of the New World (Weyenberg 2013, 168).

Hence, Orisaye's prophecy that Erelu is to die in Owu comes true in the last scene, a scene partly without a counterpart in the original Greek play. Notably, at the end of Euripides' play, the Trojan women are forced to leave Troy without being able to bury their dead. In despair, they try to summon the attention of their dead husbands, but as the gods have heard nothing before, now the dead also hear nothing. Finally, the women walk away to slavery hopelessly. In *Women of Owu*, however, Osofisan extends some moments from *The Trojan Women*. When told they are to leave, the women of Owu, too lament those not buried, but here their lament and their appeal to Erelu to "save our future" result in her acceptance of the task of leading the dead to the ancestors which has no counterpart in the Greek source text (Götrick 2008, 90). It is through Erelu's sacrifice that the reason for the god's punishment is communicated to the surviving Owu citizens who are punished for their own misdeeds, namely their slave trade with the West.

Furthermore, there is a difference in tone between the endings of both plays. Euripides' ending shows that the Trojan women are left with no help. This hopelessness might have been his means to arouse his audience's sympathy for the slave women and prisoners of war in general. In the Greek tragedy, the gods do not care and the mortals are puppets in their hands. Osofisan's drama, however, indicates a possibility for change and improvement since people should learn from history how to avoid war, thus making humans in control of their own destiny. He ends his play with a ray of hope amongst the prevailing gloom, a sign that is underpinned by the women remaining on stage to sing a dirge until the final blackout, unlike Euripides' women of Troy who probably leave the stage to walk to their destined slavery.

Moreover, when Osofisan deviates from the original source text and adds a new ending, spectators familiar only with the Euripidean tragedy, are left with no guide, while at the same time the signs on stage become increasingly difficult for them to interpret. They are less likely to grasp the importance of Erelu's sacrifice for the murdered men, the surviving women, and the yet unborn. Nevertheless, the Yorubizing devices are compensated for by the detailed dialogue. Thanks to Anlugbua's lines, the audience can understand that: Iyunloye is not the cause of the war; the kind of crime the citizens of Owu have committed; and how the life of future generations can be improved. Hence, it is apparent that Osofisan's focus is on mankind rather than a particular colonial power (Götrick 2008, 92).

Conclusively, although set in a colonial context, *Women of Owu* "has clear postcolonial and neo-colonial overtones." It is about the consequences of military aggression and the brutalities of war anytime, anywhere: in nineteenth and twentieth century Africa, in the Middle East, or wherever spectators care to make connections (Budelmann 2007, 19). In this play, Osofisan sets up a three way relationship: ancient Greece, nineteenth century Yorubaland, and any present day war relevant to the spectators (Budelmann 2007, 17). While the various contexts Osofisan evokes will resonate differently for different audience, his portrayal of suffering as a condition that transcends those differences insists on a common humanity. It invites all audience to go beyond their own position and challenge the dehumanization of the other. He achieves this by inviting the audience to reflect on their contexts regardless of their cultural background, making it easier for feelings of loss and compassion that are evoked in one context to transmit to another distant one. Correspondingly, by tracing a wider and more diverse context beyond the play's setting in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, Osofisan tends to show that Africa is part of a larger world; that it is with this world, not merely the colonial heritage, that African literatures are concerned and to which African countries are connected (Weyenberg 2013, 175).

Finally, the different contexts and time-lines Osofisan includes, makes it impossible to determine the single pre-text to which his play responds. Its complex intertextual framework makes it hard to identify Euripides' *The Trojan Women* as its singular

point of origin. *Women of Owu's* variety of pre-texts about Troy, Owu, and Iraq are each inscribed in different historical contexts and cultural traditions. The play's "intertextual dynamic provides a lens through which all the texts that are referenced, including the Euripidean tragedy, are reflected [...] to bear upon one another" (Weyenberg 2013, 175). Lastly, *Women of Owu* as an intercultural performance, opens up new possibilities for diverse cultural interpretations and readings.

Notes

¹ Intertextuality denotes the way in which texts gain *meaning* through their referencing or evocation of other texts. For Julia Kristeva, this concept concerns much more than simply identifying literary references or inspirations. Rather, the idea of intertextuality is an expression of the complicated dependence of literary works on all the literature that has come before them.

² A dirge is a sad song of mourning and lamentation. It is basically a lament for the dead, especially one forming part of a funeral rite.

³ An Oriki is a type of attributive name that the Yoruba give to a newly-born child, expressing how it is hoped he or she will turn out to be. More generally, the term refers to praise chants or recitations of achievements. Oriki are uttered at births and different kinds of ritual festivals. At funerals, however, they function as a ritual farewell of the deceased and a celebration of the ancestors with whom the deceased will now be reunited.

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