

## From the Eagle's Eyes: A Reminiscence of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the Yorùbá Historical Plays

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**ABSTRACT** History has always been a primary source for some modern Yoruba plays. This paper therefore examines how Yoruba playwrights skillfully trace the origin of the incessant inter-tribal wars and conflicts in the Yoruba society to the 18<sup>th</sup> century trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the main, the paper reveals that the hostility among the Yoruba race is a fall-out of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It also argues that the aftermath of the slave trade has aggravated disintegration in the contemporary Yoruba society. The paper concludes that many years after the European slave merchants had stopped the heinous act of human trading, slavery still exists in form of human trafficking in the larger Nigerian society.

### INTRODUCTION

The issue of diaspora does not exist in vacuo as it has its roots in both external and internal rife in Africa, where brothers had to war with brothers for selfish interests. Perhaps these interests include lust for powers viz political, economic and social. In sum, the internal wrangling actually seems to give rise to diaspora. Therefore we need to examine the antecedents as portrayed in Yoruba written plays. After all, these past events which have since become history are reenacted in written texts by literary artists. This should not be a surprise as history is one of the sources of Yorùbá drama. According to Oḅáfémi (1996), the dramatization of the history, myth and the legends of the Yorùbá community form the bulk of the themes of Yorùbá drama. This stems from the fact that the major preoccupation of the Yorùbá art form is to enhance the growth of socio-cosmic harmony.

The Yorùbá written plays have been classified into five main groups, viz the pure didactic plays, protest plays, propaganda plays, historical plays and satirical plays (Olatunji, 1986). The above classification is totally based on the content and functions of the plays. The historical plays will be our focus in this paper.

Ìṣọ̀là (1980) opines that the historical plays are not always loyal to history because the playwrights are not historians but social historians whose main occupation is to interpret history and comment freely on the social relations peculiar to a particular period. The playwrights,

like an eagle, keenly observe the problems facing the development of the society and proffer solution to such burning issues.

The burning issue that comes to mind in the history of the Yorùbá is, why is it that the Yorùbá is not united as a race? In proffering a solution to this question, the Yorùbá historical playwrights sieve from history so as to trace the causes of the animosity among the Yorùbá. The 18<sup>th</sup> century trans-Atlantic slave trade is reflected to assert their view on the fact that one of the remote causes of the hostility among the Yorùbá is directly or indirectly a resultant effect of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

It is pertinent to note that there had been inter-tribal wars in the Yorùbá land before the incursion of the European slave merchants. Critical appraisal of these wars shows that the principal factor contributing to the war was the leadership tussles among the various tribes; while some vassal towns were struggling for emancipation, the powerful towns were striving to perpetuate the oppressive rule. The emergence of the European slave merchants was a catalyst that aggravated the wars because many of the Yorùbá leaders saw it as an opportunity to sell the war captives to the Europeans merchants, thus the trans-Atlantic slavery began in earnest. The Yorùbá historical playwrights depict the experiences of their nation concerning slavery in their plays. The present study will examine Akinwumi Isọ̀là's *Olú Ọmọ* (1983) and Lawuyi Ogunniran *Ọmọ Aláté Ilẹ̀kẹ* (1992). We are mainly concerned with the two plays that depict the Yorùbá slavery system during the period of the transAtlantic slave trade.

## SLAVERY IN YORUBÁLAND

Slavery is not alien to the Yorubá culture. Before the advent of the Portuguese merchants in West Africa, domestic slavery had been in existence in the African setting. According to Crowder (1962), the African slaves had some rights, while their owners also had some duties towards them. Thus, in Yorubáland, slaves of the Obas exerted great power and were much feared by the subjects. Reflection on slave system as obviated in the texts by different Yoruba playwrights such as Faleti's *Basòrun Gáà* (1972), Işola's *Efúnsetan Aníwúrà* (1970) and *Olu Omọ* (1983), Owolabi's *Lísàbí Agbongbo Akala* (1977) and Ogunniran's *Omọ Aláte Ìlèkè* (1992) give a gory picture and dismal activities of the privileged slaves as concerned the free born. In these plays, the privileged slaves are portrayed as being on constant prowl. They unleash terror on the citizens and denizens with impunity as the surrogates of the Oba (Adeleke, 2003). Then, with appearance of the European merchants on the scene, the ember of African slavery was vigorously fanned in terms of incessant raids, waylaying and commercialization.

In 1485, when the Portuguese started trading in pepper with Benin, little did they know that it would turn to the inhumane act of selling human beings. By 1493, the trade in pepper had given way to the trade in slaves. By 1552, the trade between Benin and Portuguese came to an end. England thereafter came on board, and she gradually became the leading trader in slavery (Crowder 1962). Where did the Europeans have the slaves? In Crowder's account, the bulk of the slaves came from Yoruba land. The reason for this was also traced to the incessant civil wars and inter-tribal wars that permeated the Yoruba land between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (p. 52). What happened then had since become history. Different artists – literary, musical, plastic-cast retrospective look at these ugly incidents and present them in their chosen modes or medium(s).

### Features of Historical Plays

The major features of the Yorubá historical plays are war, conflict and class struggle. As succinctly put in Jeyifo (1985: 7 – 8).

There is no drama that does not in one way or the other show in its structure a physical conflict,

a moral conflict and a clash between two different beliefs or ideas...

Thus, in *Başòrun Gáà*, the imbroglio between *Başòrun Gáà* and the royal family that Abiodun stands for is a form of intra-class struggle. (Işola, 1991: 29 – 37; Arohunmolase, 1997: 89-91). Also, in *Lisabi Agbongbo Akala*, the Ègba people's revolt is against the oppressive rule of Alaafin. In *Omọ Aláte Ìlèkè*, there is an intra-tribal war between Òwu and other prominent Yorubá tribes such as the Ègbá, Ìjèbú, Ifè, Òyó, etc. The inter-ethnic war between Ègbá and the Dahomeyans is the focus of *Olu Omọ*.

### Setting of the Texts

A playwright may make use of history to inform the plot of his plays, he is not a historian, so he may decide to be subjective. (Işola, 1980). Thus, the aim of the playwright dictates the presentation of the plot of his plays. The settings of *Omọ Aláte Ìlèkè* and *Olú Omọ* are the historic cities of Òwu, Ifè, Ègbá, Apòmù and Òyó. (Ogundeji, 1996: 8; Olasebikan, 2001: 1-3).

*Omọ Aláte Ìlèkè* is a dramatized chronicle as the actors in the plays vividly parody the principal actors in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Also, in *Olú Omọ*, the characters are directly named. The African chiefs who actually contributed immensely to the growth of the slave trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are paraded in the textual play. They are Kosokò, who stands for King Kosokò of Lagos, Posu, who stands for Posu of Badagry and Geso who stands for King Gezo of Dahomey (Oguntomisin, 1980: 17-28, 1983: 78-88).

The plot of *Omọ Aláte Ìlèkè* and *Olú Omọ* are straight. A critical look at the historical account reveals that *Omọ Aláte Ìlèkè* is based on Owu War of 1820s (Johnson, 1921: 206-210). The plot of the play is also put within the context of the general unrest that permeated the Òyó Empire and its collapse due to both the internal problems and the external invasion of the Borgu, Nupe and Dahomey. The war escalated because of the quest for slaves by the chiefs and warlords (Crowder, 1962: 91-93). This historical account is visible at the beginning of the plot of *Omọ Aláte Ìlèkè*. The dialogue between Òyìnbó (the European Merchant) and Àyàkò-n-àkí speaks volume. They say:

Àyàkò-n-àkí: Ojà tó dára ni mo mú wá lóní.  
Şùgbón iye owó tí ga sí í...

Òyìnbó: È má paró fún mi. Qjà pò lójà Apòmù... Qjà yín ti wọn jù

Àyàko–n–nàkí: Tèmi ò gbà pọ̀n m̀r̀n-un o, m̀e wàá ni t̀emi, k̀ò le dín ... Mo f̀e joyè ilé baba mi. Q̀la ni n ó gorí ité Olówu, owó púpò ní n ó s̀i ná sí i.

Àyàko–n–nàkí: I have brought worthy goods today but the price has increased...

The European Merchant: You need not lie to me. There are cheap goods at Apomu. Your goods are too costly.

Àyàko–n–nàkí: I cannot sell for five pounds. I am insisting on ten pounds. I will be enthroned as Olowu tomorrow. And this will cost me a lot of money.

From the excerpts, it will be seen that the chiefs get involved in slave trading for selfish reasons. Human beings are metaphorically described as 'ojà' (goods). This emphasizes the inhuman attitude of the African chief. Àyàko–n–nàkí's reply corroborates the reason why the slave trade could not be stopped according to history. The chiefs were getting themselves enriched, so they felt trading in human beings was the only way out of poverty.

Also, in *Olú Omọ*, Gésò, Pòsù, Kòsókó and Adébógun are ready to capture their kinsmen and sell them as slaves because of financial gains (p 13). The major reason why the Europeans were coming to purchase slaves was to get people to work in their plantation. This comes to the fore in *Omọ Alátẹ̀ Ilẹ̀kẹ̀* when the Oyinbo slave merchant offers his (European's) motive to his African middleman. He says:

Sọ́ fún un pé, fún ìdàgbàsókè orílẹ̀-èdè ti wa ni a sẹ́ wá ñ ra erú n̄hìn-in láti máa kó wọn s̄isẹ́ ní oko irẹ̀ké wa àti à wọn oko wa gbogbo. (p. 3)

Tell him that we are buying slaves here for the development of our nation, so that the slave will work on our sugar cane plantation and other plantations.

The above excerpt draws attention to the folly of Africans. Instead of looking for a way of developing themselves, they ignorantly kept on ruining their heritage and foolishly boost the development of other nations. What a satire! The Marxist concept of individualism explains the selfish attitude of the Europeans and the African chiefs. As materialists in capitalist societies, they were accumulating wealth through the idea of materialism and alienation of the masses.

The various inhuman acts perpetrated against the slaves were picturesquely displayed in the scene where the European man throws away a baby from a woman sold into slavery in *Omọ Alátẹ̀ Ilẹ̀kẹ̀* (p. 4). The scene epitomizes women as victims of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Apart from the above, women are separated from their husbands and children. An example is the case of a newly wedded bride who is kidnapped and forcefully taken from her husband in *Omọ Alátẹ̀ Ilẹ̀kẹ̀*. In *Olú Omọ*, women are conscripted army to fight for the selfish interest of the wicked King Gezo of Dahomey. These women warriors are referred to as Amazons. The amazons attacked the Egbá in 1851 (Crowder, 1962). In the play, these women are alienated because a King is in quest of slaves. Thus, to show the effect of the slave trade on women, Ogunniran (1992) in *Omọ Alátẹ̀ Ilẹ̀kẹ̀* depicts a disgruntled Iyalode of Owu who has to cry out on behalf of other women. Her indignation is aptly put in the play:

Wọn ñ pa Owu run tan o !  
Wọn yomọ sọ̀nù lẹ̀yìn abiyamọ  
Wọn ti múyáa l ọ o!  
Omọ tí ñ múmú lówó  
Wọn tí ñ serú èyí sọ̀mọ̀ Òwu  
Èyèé gbọ̀mọ̀ Òwu tàa (p. 5)

Owu is being annihilated!

A baby is thrown away from his mother's back  
And the mother has been taken away  
A child that is still breastfeeding.

Why are they treating Òwu indigenes like this?

Stop selling Òwu into slavery.

The protest made by Ìyálóde in the play leads to the class struggle between Olówu and the other five monarchs. Olówu's decision to put an end to slave trading in Apòmù, one of the major slave markets in Yorùbá land, is as a result of the cry for liberation by the Iyalode. But the five other monarchs feel slave trading cannot be put to an end because of the financial gain. The decision

of Olowu to stop slave trading in Apomu market precipitates a hot disagreement between him and the other monarchs, and this leads to a war as reflected in the play. The above episode could be linked to the cause of 1820 Owu war.

According to Johnson's (1921) account, it was Onikoyi that ordered the Owu to attack some Ife towns that had been engaging in indiscriminate slave trading with the Ijebu. The immediate cause of the war was as a result of some altercation between the Owu and some powerful Ijebu traders at Apomu. The Ijebu then joined forces with the remnants of the Ife army and Oyó refugees fleeing from the Fulani to fight Owu, they laid siege on the Owu town and destroyed it in 1827 (Crowder, 1962: 91).

The above historical account is portrayed in *Qmọ Alátẹ̀ Ilẹ̀kẹ̀*, without any deviation. Okúnńwò an Ijebu man, is the principal seller of slaves. The altercation between the Owu and some powerful Ijebu is also picturesquely displayed by a humorous presentation of the linguistic setting of the Ijebu. Awobuluyi (1998) has classified the major dialect areas among the Yoruba of the old Western Nigeria into five: North-western Yoruba, South-eastern Yoruba and Central Yoruba, South-eastern Yoruba and the North-eastern Yoruba. The linguistic variation in these dialects is realized through the phonology and vocabulary; this brings about differences in the pronunciations of some words (Adeleke, 1995).

In the play, an Ijebu woman is selling alligator pepper and kolanuts. An Owu man comes to buy some and discovers later that one is missing. An argument ensues: the Ijebu woman speaks Ijebu dialect that belongs to the South-eastern Yoruba:

Obìnrin Ijebu: E gba mi nówókunrin wèè, èwẹn ara ojà! Ó rataare nówó mi ó kátaare lọ ó wá padà dè ní sèín wèé. Ó kò pé. Irú oro rírùn wọ rọm bá mi sọ wé? (p26)

Ijebu Woman: Please everybody in the market save me from this man. He bought alligator pepper from me. He has gone home with it and he later came back to lodge a complaint. What type of nonsense are you saying to me?

The Owu man who speaks Oyó dialect which falls into the North-western Yoruba mistakenly interprets the Ijebu dialect and says:

Semi lo n pe lẹlẹnu rírún (p26)

Is it I you are referring to as having smelly mouth?

The semantic deviation from the standard

Yoruba evolves anger, and a quarrel ensues between the two of them. The animosity between the Ijebu who desires perpetuity of slavery and Owu that desires abolishing of slavery now degenerates into intra-tribal war between Owu and Ife on one hand and Egbá and Ijebu on the other hand.

Two things stand out like a sore on the thumb that conflict occurred as a result of misinterpretation of language use in the sub-group of the standard language. Second, apart from physical weapons, metaphysical means were employed to boost the activities and commercialization of slavery. Implicitly, the war victims/captives were charmed or hypnotized.

To show the actions of the disgruntled Ijebu, Ife and Egbá, the playwright makes use of poetic language. *Qfọ* is a verbal aspect of the magical act among the Yoruba. According to Olatunji (1985), there is magic power in the spoken word. The Yoruba belief in the power of the word is visible in the scene where *Qmọran* evokes the gods against the Owu. The invocation falls in line with the characteristics of *Qfọ* features as highlighted by Olatunji (1985).

The four elements of *Qfọ* viz invocation, problem, assertion and application are inherent in *Qmọran*'s magical intention against Owu. As he invokes the gods:

Eyin irúnmọlẹ̀ ayé mo júbà o, Eyin irúnmọlẹ̀? ode ọrun mo juba o.

Ìbà baba ìbà yeye

Oòdua mo júbà ọ. (p. 35)

The gods of the earth I salute

The gods of heaven I salute

I salute the mother I salute the father

Oòdua I salute you.

The excerpt above is a summon of the gods which shows the Yoruba belief in gods and the ancestors. As he pays homage to the gods *Qmọran* believes they will promptly answer without failing him. He later states the problem by making a case before the gods:

Olówu ló fín Ifẹ̀ níran...

Ó pa Qmọ ogún Ifẹ̀ nípakúpa (p. 35)

Olowu has challenged Ife

He indiscriminately massacred the Ife warriors

He later made some assertions that are incontrovertible and because of that he believes Owu will be defeated; he says:

Nítórí náà ìwọ Oòdua

O bá iná jà o dá iná

O bá Oòrùn jà o da oòrùn

O bà dàgbà jà lèsè Ọya  
 O dà dàgbà (p. 36)  
 You fought with the fire you won  
 You fought with the sun you won  
 You fought Dagba at the bank of Oya river  
 You won...

The application of the assertion that is the mystical intention of Omoran now follows as he says:

Bà mi da Owu  
 Gègè bí o ti da inà...  
 È bà mi bá Owu jà  
 È bá mi ja Òwu lógun  
 È bá mi t Òwu ri (p. 36)  
 Help me to defeat Owu  
 As you defeated fire...  
 Fight Owu  
 Wage war against Owu  
 Put Owu into oblivion]

Looking at the role of Ifè as the cradle of Yorùbá and their Oba as the spiritual father of the Yoruba, it will be surprising to see Ooni desiring a total annihilation of a tribe that he is supposed to be fathering. This shows that the African Chiefs were obsessed with passion as they failed to allow reason to prevail.

The causes of the evocation of the incantation are not far to seek in the sarcasm railed on the six monarchs in the play. Eyinlaaro who symbolizes Oodua, the progenitor of the Yoruba, sarcastically traces the causes of the disharmony in the world of the play to self-aggrandizement by the monarchs. Parallelism and semantic repetition are used to emphasize his point as he says:

Ìwọ ọlọgbọn – ilé Ọyọ?  
 O sọ pé o lógbọn nínú  
 O kò le fi sole Ọyọ ró!  
 Ìwọ Májèjé kóbàjé ọmọ òde Ègbá Láké  
 O sínà etíkun sílẹ̀ láti máa ra ọta àtẹ̀tù táwọn  
 Oòduà fi ñ para wọn bí ẹran  
 Ìwọ Olówólayémọ Ọmọ Awùjalẹ̀ Ìjẹ̀bú  
 Ló ñ ta ọta àtẹ̀tù fawon ọmọ  
 baba ẹ pe wọn a maa fi jara  
 wọn logun ki o báa rẹrú tà fẹ́bo..  
 Háààà! Nítorí owo! (p. 76)  
 You the sage of Ọyọ environ,  
 You claim to be wise, you cannot unify Ọyọ  
 kingdom  
 You Májèjékóbàjé of Ègbá.

You opened the coast for the sales of ammunitions that the descendants of Oòduà are using to kill themselves like animal...

You Olówólayémọ the son of Awùjalẹ̀ Ìjẹ̀bú is

selling the ammunitions to your kindred so as to wage war against themselves because you want to be selling slaves to the Europeans.... Ha! Just because of money...

The semantic repetition, above, sums up the historical account of the role played by the Yorùbá tribal chiefs in the merchandize of slavery in Yorùbá land. It becomes apparent that without the collaborative assistance from the African Chief, the trans-Atlantic slavery would not have flourished.

### Aftermath Effect on Contemporary Society

As a fallout of trans-Atlantic slave trade, there is still the manifestation of hostility among the Yorùbá even in the contemporary Yorùbá society. Instances abound of cases of parents from Ọyọ refusing to give away their daughters in marriage to Ìjẹ̀bú. On the other hand, the Ìjẹ̀bú prevent their children from marrying the Ọyọ and Ìjẹ̀sà. The hatred and animosity between Owu and Ìjẹ̀bú is verbally and telegraphically put in the song:

Bẹ̀ẹ̀ bá fojú kan Ìjẹ̀bú  
 Tẹ̀ fojú kan ejò  
 È bérí Ìjẹ̀bú, fejò sílẹ̀  
 (Ọmọ Alátẹ̀ Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀: p 29)  
 If you sight an Ijebu man  
 and a snake you rather kill the man  
 and leave the snake.

The song shows that an average Owu man prefers snakes to Ìjẹ̀bú and hates Ìjẹ̀bú to the core. This in Faleti's *Başòrun Gáà*, where he calls on God to bring unity among the Yorùbá. He says:

Ọyọ ò fẹ̀ràn Ìjẹ̀bú, Ìjẹ̀sà o nífẹ̀ Ìjẹ̀bú. Èdumàrè nikan ló le jé kí Yorùbá ó fẹ̀ràn ara wọn (p. 69)

The Ọyọ hate the Ìjẹ̀sà, the Ìjẹ̀sà is not friendly with the Ìjẹ̀bú. It is only God that can bring love among the Yorùbá.

Another implication of the slave trade and inter-tribal war is the conflict that exists among some of the refugees of the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century Yorùbá wars. The war refugees and their landlord, that is the host, are always at one another's throat. This strained relationship still exists even in the contemporary Yorùbá society. Notable among such is the Modákékéké and Ifè. According to Crowder (1962: 95), the refugees from the Northern towns and from Ọyọ who flooded Ifè later built a town called Modákékéké. The Ifè saw them as slaves, and so they sold them into slavery. This enhanced the bad feeling and cruelty between them since 1884. Up till now, the animosity has



not changed over time as the two communities have refused to live harmoniously. There is always a civil disorder and internal crisis between them. This culminated into a mini-war between 1997 and 2001. This is just an example of the implication of war, which is one of the effects of the 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trade on the Yorùbá.

There is also the indirect implication of the slave trade on the Nigerian society at large. This is seen in the way our people have imbibed the spirit of the heinous act of the trading with fellow human beings. Women are the direct victims of this act. Many women are sold to European countries, and they are grossly abused. Womanhood is being sold and many of our women have been exported to Italy and other parts of Europe to become international prostitutes. This is another dimension to historical slave trade. We believe the effort of Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) will go a long way to bring an end to the enslaving of our womenfolk.

### CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it could be seen that the Yorùbá playwrights skillfully portray the 18<sup>th</sup> century trans-Atlantic slave trade in their respective texts. It is clearly revealed that the 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trade aggravated the disunity and disintegration among the Yorùbá. The implication of the slave trade is inter-tribal war, which has given way to hostility among the Yorùbá even in the contemporary society.

The way out of the effect of slavery is also highlighted. Peace and unity are postulated as the only way out if, indeed, the Yorùbá want to experience development both socially and economically.

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