Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation
Special Issue, September 2019

- **Indexed at: EBSCO, ProQuest, J-Gate and Sabinet**
- **Accredited by IBSS**

Pp 11-24

The Hero in Ola Rotimi's Play Kurunmi: A Preserver or Destroyer of the Law?

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Abstract

The last exploit of Kurunmi, the 19th century Field Marshall of the Yoruba Army had a far-reaching impact on the crumbling Oyo Empire, whose inhabitants were having challenges in settling down in their new homesteads. The setting of the Ola Rotimi's dramatic work *Kurunmi* was an accurate account of the historical event, (Johnson, 1973:331-360), despite the introduction of artistic creativity and polish. The object of this paper is to look at the cause of the conflict, which was essentially the Yoruba law of succession that was changed by the nineteenth-century Alaafin Atiba and his council. The paper addresses the following questions: are the Yoruba customary laws of the era sacrosanct and unchangeable? who is the proper authority capable of promulgating new laws, what are the processes of recourse for an aggrieved person? The paper examines the relationship between Kurunmi and Alaafin Atiba from the combined prisms of literature, law and history in order to determine whether Kurunmi was a preserver of the established law of the land or not.

Keywords: *Kurunmi, Yoruba law of succession, change, history, literature*

Introduction

Ola Rotimi, until his death in the year 2000 was one of the most renowned playwrights of the first generation of Nigerian playwrights

(Ayodabo, 2016). His works illustrate contemporary Nigerian socio-political and historical issues and events that relates to, and equally affect the Nigerian society. His plays including, *If…tragedy of the Ruled* (1983), *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1979), *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* (1977) and *Holding Talks* (1979) are samples of works inspired by his disposition "towards the kind of liberal democracy which is built around the welfare state together with its idealistic accountment of an independent judiciary and a free and functional press" (Shaka, 2000: 36).

His works, though different in style and technique from that of his major contemporaries, Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark, possess the kind of quality that is expected of postcolonial writers who were seriously suspicious of the Nigerian/African leadership-which has led to the current postcolonial predicaments. In the major works of Ola Rotimi there is a preoccupation with the theme and problems of leadership. As Sam Ukala opined in his essay "Tradition, Rotimi and his Audience", "Much of the turmoil in twentieth century Africa is caused by corrupt, inept or ineffective leaderships" (200:94-95). For instance, in dramatic literatures like *The Gods Are Not to Blame, Kurunmi, Ovonranwen Nogbaisi and Akassa*, Rotimi treats issues of traditional rulership and portray them in different forms. In *The Gods Are Not to Blame and Kurunmi* for instance, the kings are modeled after the classical hero, who are of noble birth, good natured, larger-than-life in intellectual strength, full of commitment, courage and passion, but in most cases, possessing tragic flaws. A play like *Kurunmi* (which is the major concern of this paper) features a hero filled with ego, which stems from hubris. It is this character-that initiate the conflict in the play. Therefore, this article will be concerned with the conflict that develops as a result of Yoruba law of succession that was altered in the 19th century during the reign of Alaafin Atiba, and his council. This article investigates through Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, on how sacrosanct or amendable, Yoruba customary laws were during that era, and also to find out about the proper authority duly certified to promulgate new laws, and the process of recourse for an aggrieved person. The paper shall also address the relationship between Kurunmi and Alaafin Atiba, from the combined prism of literature, law and history, in order to determine whether Kurumi was a preserver of the established laws or not.

Apart from the historical import that foregrounds the entire play, it merits mention that what also (partly) configures this paper, is the

inextricable link between literature, history and law which can be further constitute academic discourse, in these disciplines.

It will be recalled in history that, it was the treachery of the *Aare* preceding Kurumi, Afonja, which led to the Fulani incursion and the relocation of the Capital, Old Oyo and other Yoruba settlements from the Northern Savannah to the present forest area in the south west. Urbanisation in Yorubaland preceded the advent of the Europeans in Africa. (Smith, 1962: 335-336; Mabogunje, 1968: 28) Yoruba's customary law of inheritance and succession is a product of the age-long practices and worldview. (Oni, 2014: 30-43)

Customary law: A theoretical explication

The Yorubas' indigenous legal order which is the age long rules used by the people to govern themselves is normally referred to as Yoruba customary law, known as *Ofin* (Lloyd, 1962: 3-10) and, punishment as *Ijiya* (Anon, 1991:46). The latter involves the imposition of a penalty or an odious consequence upon an individual or his property as retribution for the violation of the law. This is a mechanism by which the Yoruba society frowns at impropriety of manners and socially unacceptable habits, "which are inimical to the developments of legal norms and capable of disrupting the social equilibrium" (Balogun, 2009: 45).

Customary law refers to the native customs which constitute the rule of law for the traditional communities (Obilade, 1979:83). The violation of these rules attract sanctions which distinguish it from ordinary social habits and observances (Kuruk, 2002: 4). A large body of the Yoruba customary law is unwritten (*leges non scriptum*), though recently, there are concerted efforts to document it. Custom is different from customary law. A custom is merely a rule of conduct for which no sanction is attached to its non-observance, whereas customary laws are binding or obligatory traditional rules, for which penalties are stipulated for its violation. The communal support for certain traditional rules make it obligatory, sanctionable and enforceable (Adaramola, 2003:109). Customary sanctions include excommunication, compensation, appeasement, restoration, penitence, capital punishment or sending a convict or a recidivist to fight an intractable enemy (Onipede & Adegbite, 2014; Cotran & Rubin, 1970). The distinguishing factors between a custom and customary law is general acceptability of particular

rules and the sanction attached to the latter which is lacking in the former (Nwabueze, 2002: 158).

The Courts of the land have given its own definition of customary law. The Supreme Court of Nigeria in *Kharie Zaidan v. Fatima Mohssen* (1973), defined customary law as: "any systems of law not being the common law not being a law enacted by any competent legislature in Nigeria but which is enforceable and binding within Nigeria as between the parties subject to its sway" (p. 86). The Supreme Court of Nigeria, in *Bilewu Oyewumi v. Amos Ogunesan* (1990) also defined it thus: "Customary law is the organic or living law of the indigenous people of Nigeria, regulating their lives and transactions. It is organic in that it is not static, is regulatory in that it controls the lives and transactions of the community subject to it. It is said that custom is the mirror of the culture of the people. I would say that customary law goes further to impart justice to the lives of those subject to it" (p. 182).

The origin of the customary law is not unlike the common law which made Austin (1885: 87), to describe the origin of common law thus: a custom originates as a rule of comportment which the citizenry observe instinctively due to general acceptability, as against legislation enacted by a political authority. The custom is converted into positive law, through its adoption by the courts and subsequent enforcement by the law enforcement agencies of the state. "But before it is adopted by the courts, and clothed with the legal sanction, it is merely a rule of positive morality: a rule generally observed by the citizens or subjects; but deriving the only force, which it can be said to possess, from the general disapprobation falling on those who transgress it" (p. 87).

Customary law is very dynamic and its rules changes accordingly by adjusting to the prevailing socio-economic circumstances. A prominent attribute of customary law is its flexibility and adaptability to changing conditions without losing its character *(Lewis* v. *Bankole*, 1909:100-101). Customary law, being a system of unwritten law, has the capacity to adapt to new and altered circumstances such as changes in the socio-economic and political milieu. It is also amenable to circumstances such as the supplanting of the indigenous legal order with the foreign legal systems, the introduction of capitalism and modern market economy. The customary law rules about land ownership elucidate its adaptive nature. In the earlier times, land was inalienable under the Yoruba customary law because it was jointly owned by the family or the community, but nowadays individuals own, sell and alienate land. Thus,

the Yoruba customary law is malleable and adaptable to changing conditions.

The Yoruba law of succession and adaptability

The law of succession comprises the body of rules which regulates the transfer of the rights and obligations over the deceased's estate to his successors. It also encompasses the laws governing the state, the personal representatives and the administration of the deceased person with regards to the latter's estate (Oni, 2008: 40). The distinction between testate or intestate succession, is that under the former the deceased person made a valid will, while there was no will in the latter situation. Under the customary law, making of will is unknown. The only exception is a nun-cupative will or death bed declaration. Succession is embedded in inheritance (Adesanya, 2009:3). Different jurisdictions adopt varied inheritance systems based on primogeniture, ultigeniture, partible inheritance, patrilineal succession and matrilineal succession (Adesanya, 2009; *Danmole v. Dawodu,* 1958).

Under the Yoruba customary law of inheritance, the children of the deceased inherit his estate; both the male and female offspring are entitled to equal share in their deceased parent estate (*Salami v. Salami,* 1957: 43; *Richardo v Abal,* 1926:58). The eldest son referred to as *Dawodu* is responsible for the management of the deceased estate, only as a trustee (*Salami v. Salami,* 1957). All the children and surviving widows of the deceased are eligible to live in the family house, but a widow who remarries forfeits her right. The *Dawodu* has no right to alienate any of the landed properties (*Salami v. Salami,* 1957). The claim of ownership by any family member must be supported by proof of partitioning of the family property.

Ola Rotimi and his contributions to dramatic notions in Africa

Apart from his literary contribution which portrayed the best in contemporary socio-political leadership, Rotimi made two very significant contributions to the development of African drama and theatre. He launched what Sam Ukala referred to as, "a poetics of African aesthetics which endowed African literary drama and theatre with popularity" (Ukala, 2003:9). Chris Dunton has also observed that "despite that Rotimi is a contemporary of Soyinka and Clark, his seven

year absence in the United States meant that his work only began to register in Nigeria in the late 1960s, but when it did, its impact was immediate" (Dunton, 1992:11). The significant reason for the immediate impact, is the relief it brought to the bewildered audiences of Soyinka and Clark, who see African literary drama and theatre as esoteric, inaccessible, unpopular, irrelevant and, therefore, hardly enjoyable.

Critics who have made their voices heard on audience import and their inspired literary appreciation include Oyin Ogunba, Femi Euba, Bode Sowande, Daniel Izevbaye and Biodun Jeyifo (Ukala, 1996). Ola Rotimi's rise to literary and dramatic stardom was a relief due largely to the fact that the texts and performance of his plays are easy to understand, as much as they are relevant. Outside the university campuses, "an average literate member of his audience enjoys and assimilates his drama" (Osanyin, 1993: 4-5). Rotimi's affinity with "the audience is immediate, tactile and sensual "because of his employment of euphonious songs and heart-ending dirges, poetry, dance with echoes of traditional wisdom" (Osofisan, 1986: 179). The abiding rip of Rotimi's plays on the Nigerian audience apparently lies in Rotimi's faithful use of the sources, principles and practices of African traditional performance. These endow his plays with a large measure of authenticity and thus, the potentials to be popularly identified with by African audiences.

He was undoubtedly one of Nigeria's leading playwrights and had demonstrated an unwavering interest in historical drama (Gbilekaa, 1997: 150). He employed historical records to represent and interpret tragic historical figures such as Kurunmi and Ovonramwen Nogbaisi. Ola Rotimi's tragic are first, steeped in the Yoruba traditional styles, as well as the English, and the classical. His fascination with the Yoruba's sense of tragedy is equally central to his dramatic idioms, characterization and the atmosphere in his play (Obafemi, 1996: 92). Rotimi's theatre also relies on the western concept of stage craft and presentation (Gbilekaa, 1997:192) and he was able to enact as well as reveal the tragic hero's belief in his individual power, "his military genius and astuteness as the main germ of his tragedy" (Obafemi, 1996:99). Kurumi is a complex mix of virtues and vice, kindness and cruelty; an undaunted traditionalist who breaks the tradition in order to preserve it. This is the tragic conflict embedded in the hero that eventually provided the trigger that bring the tragedy into reality.

The playwright's historical depiction of the Yoruba law of succession: *Kurunmi*- The preserver or violator of the law?

Imaginative, improvising and adaptive use of history into literary work is not a new invention- Aristophanes, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Ono Komachi, Williams Shakespeare, Seneca, Jane Anouilh, T.S Elliot, Anton Chekhov, John Lewis, Edgar Allan Poe, Dick Foot Bull, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Nguigi Wa Thiogo, Wale Ogunyemi, Akinwumi Ishola, Adebayo Faleti and others have used different literary techniques to project history from the classical period to modern time. They allow even illiterates to come to terms with the stories, and offer certain values to educate, entertain and admonished the society.

The play involves the Ibadan-Ijaiye war that started shortly after the founding of a new Oyo Empire by Alaafin Atiba (the royal custodian of Oyo Empire) in Nigeria around 1837 (Ajayi & Smith, 1971: 11). Alaafin Atiba constructed a new capital but depended on two major warriors' camps of Ibadan and Ijaye for military support. He conferred the title of Bashorun, the Prime Minister of the empire on Oluyole of Ibadan (Falola, 2017). Contrary to the constitution, Oluyole resided outside the royal city of Oyo (Falola, 2017). After Oluyole's untimely death, leadership of Ibadan devolved on Ibikunle. Thus, Ibikunle of Ibadan and Kurunmi of Ijaiye, were invested with the titles of Balogun (War General) and Aare-Ona-Kakanfo (Field Marshall) respectively by Alaafin Atiba. Kurunmi, the overlord of Ijaiye was a terror to most of the neigbours (Ajayi & Smith, 1971: 40; Smith, 1962: 336). Then developed, a rivalry between the two towns as the people of Ibadan often questioned Kurunmi's blatant overbearing posture. When Atiba sensed that the end was near, he summoned the leading lords of the realm and provincial kings to accept the crown prince Adelu, as his successor. However, this was contrary to the constitution of the empire, which stipulated that after the death of an Alaafin, his eldest son, the crown Prince must accompany him in death. All the provincial kings, the military and political leaders accented to the change of the constitution according to Atiba's wish. The singular exception was Kurunmi who insisted that the provisions of the constitution is sacrosanct, incapable of change, even by a near unanimous decision. Consequently, the outcome of the stance of the supporters (Ibadan and others) and the opponent (Ijaiye) is, the crux of Ola Rotimi's interpretation of *Kurunmi*.

The issue in Kurunmi as ably portrayed by Ola Rotimi borders on the Yoruba customary law of succession in the empire. It raises pertinent and important questions: was the law sacrosanct, fixed and incapable of being changed or was it capable of amendment based on the foregoing? The play shows how Kurunmi, the war lord and the sole dissenter fought a war to resist the change of the law of succession to the throne. Kurunmi vehemently opposed the change of the tradition in which the crown prince was duty bound to die with his father, despite the overwhelming support for the change by all the other lords of the realm, and as Ayodabo (2016) stressed "despite all entreaties from fellow chiefs….. (H)e went to war with the crown prince, lost the war and eventually committing suicide" (p. 75).

Rotimi in reinterpretation the historical events in *Kurunmi* availed himself of historical evidence to present the play with artistic embellishments. The *Aare* portrayed himself as the preserver of the law. This may also be seen in his representation as a man of tradition. This is because, his quest, was to rescue a dying tradition, which is a vital theme that brings about the conflict in the dramatic representation. The war lord was deviant and obstinate in his defense of what he considered as tampering with the established African (Yoruba) customs and mores.

Kurunmi:

> We have just come back from a meeting with Alafin Atiba in Oyo. Oni of Ife was present, Timi Ede was sitting next to him, Bashorun Oluyole of Ibadan, on my left. We were all seated. Oba Atiba came down from his high throne. In his right hand, the sword of Ogun; in his left hand the bolt of Sango. He came towards us: 'Swear, my people,' said he, 'swear to Ogun and to my forebear, Sango that my son, Adelu, will be king after me…' 'Clown I yelled …' '[Spits]' I shall be no part to such perversion and disgrace" (Rotimi, 1971:16-17).

While it is true that Kurunmi's outburst may stem from his aversion for anything to disrupt the flow of cultural progress and existence, it does not mean society, any society at all is not subject to change. According to J.R Levenson, "an idea changes in its persistence as well as in its rejection… (W)hile iconoclasts relegate traditional ideas as to the past, traditionalists, at the same time, transform traditional ideas in the present". (Levenson, 1964). Therefore, being a conservative does not necessarily involve obscurantism or pointless antagonism to the idea of

change in politics, social issues, cultural or religious matters. However, one can oppose modernity in the real sense of the word where one perceived it as destructive and one has the support of the majority in the society (Graham, 1993). Kurunmi was an anarchist and a violator of the law; the following episodes and examples are self-evident. His walking out on his Sovereign, other title heads and nobles "I picked up my staff and walked out" (Rotimi, 1971: 17)

The contemptuous treatment meted on his fellow nobles especially his superior –the Bashorun Oluyole and peer Timi Ede is instructive here:

> **Oluyole:** Awu….. Kurunmi, have we fallen so low in the eye of your subjects that even slaves among them now feel too noble to prostrate themselves in respect for our presence? (Rotimi, 1971:18);

This above episode was after Oluyole and Timi had been given a cold reception and a disdainful look by Kurunmi (Rotimi 1971:18); which made Oluyole to angrily react as follows: "Kurunmi, son of Esiele, you insult me!" (Rotimi 1971:19). The fact that he violated his oath of office as the defender of the empire and his state, was being impressed on him by the nobles. However, this admonition had no impact on him, as Oluyole angrily says to him "We have come to warn you that as Are-Ona-Kakanfo, chief warrior of our kingdom, you must do nothing rash against the kingdom. Yours is the sacred duty to protect and fight for our people, not rip it apart." (Rotimi 1971:19)

He was also remonstrated that the high office he held was at the behest of Alaafin Atiba also brought out a mocking answer from him "Ijaiye is part of Alafin Atiba's kingdom. You are the Chief of Ijaiye today because Alafin Atiba, the Supreme Head of the kingdom, made you so." (Rotimi 1971:20)

The play portrayed him as a recalcitrant, stubborn and tyrannical war monger which he was. He did not consult his constituents and officers before resorting to fight his Sovereign and state. (Rotimi 1971: 36-40)

Kurunmi stated that Adelu dared him to fight when he actually had an option of not fighting, as he refused the peaceful overtures by his new Sovereign, Alaafin Adelu who ignored his intransigence by sending emissaries to ask him why he failed to attend his coronation (Johnson 1973:331-332). His head servant, Abogunrin was appalled by that

indignity of keeping the royal emissaries in the 'court yard' and soiling the Sovereign's majesty of the king.

Kurunmi also refused the appeasement by the Reverend Mann. In a dialogue with Reverend Mann, one can notice how adamant Kurunmi was in his projection of his people's tradition. This same consciousness was planted in the mind of his people, as experienced in the dramatic clash (Rotimi, 1971: 30). The Christian converts in Ijaiye also, found it very difficult to reconcile the change depicted by Christian tenets with their traditional religion, as they began to respond uneasily and unconsciously (Rotimi, 1971: 30; Ikyoive, 2016).

Kurunmi's treacherous nature was exposed by his willingness to align himself with the state' enemies and by extension, hitherto his enemies. He extended his hand of friendship to those who were instrumental in expelling them from their ancestral home, especially the new rulers in Ilorin. This behavior is instructive that he was no protector of the law.

Kurunmi:

> Tell the Emir of Ilorin that I salute him from my heart. Tell him that there is a baby lion rearing a head of war on the horizon of Oyo. Tell him that, soon, Kurunmi will move fast with fire to meet that baby lion, lest it grows to be a great lion unmeetable. Here….. [hand him (his messenger) bags of gift] give him these presents. Tell him a man with fire on his hand welcomes no delay. Kurunmi moves on. And when the Emir hears the sound of my move, he, too, must not let alertness go by (Rotimi 1971: 28).

The Egba too were the Empire's enemy having just recently fought them in *Gbanamu* (grasping the fire) War as stated by Johnson (1973:241) thus- "Ife, Owu and Egba allies were completely routed by the Ibadan with the help of Aare Kurunmi". Shortly after this the same Kurunmi made this statement:

> **Kurunmi**: Prepare my horse, and two hundred warriors- the best. At dawn we depart for Abeokuta to see Bashorun Somoye and the Elders of Egba. These presents handing him (a warrior) bags we take along with us (Rotimi 1971: 29).

The play is an historical tragedy enrolling intransigence by a despot posed to destroy the empire he had vowed to defend. Kurunmi's intransigence

was evident in his refusal to obey his Sovereign- the king, and the new order agreed to by all - the royalty, nobles and the cults, with himself being the sole exception. Could a single chief be larger than the whole state? The statement of Timi, is very instructive at this juncture, "You are the only important chief in the kingdom who opposes Alaafin's wish" (Rotimi, 1971:19). The option of ignoring Kurunmi's insolence as death would soon reap him by *Balogun* Ibikunle and *Osi- Balogun* Osundina of Ibadan (Johnson, 1973: 331; Rotimi, 1973: 19-20; Akinjogbin, 2002:55), though seemed practical in the short run but would create a bigger problem of the probability of citizens defying constituted authority and thereby generating anarchy.

Lastly, the deployment of all Kurunmi's five sons to Iwawun (Rotimi, 1971:19; Akinjogbin, 2002: 55), far away from the war front where they were eventually killed by Ogunmola leaves much to be desired. Kurunmi's double standard is revealed as it showed that he was less concerned with the lives of the other soldiers but his sons' lives must be preserved. Eventually, Kurunmi was defeated, his allied routed, he committed suicide and his town was sacked. This was the end of the preserver of the law that ended as its greatest defiler. Unfortunately, what he failed to realize before his demise was that, his antagonists were more than formidable to contend with. These antagonists are his sovereign, the provincial kings, his fellow warriors and other lords of the realm who possess an awesome arsenal of coercive instruments.

Conclusion

The message of Ola Rotimi in this work goes beyond a mere rendition of the history of a period in an empire. The wordsmith in Rotimi present a vivid picture of a megalomania who must impose his will on the others irrespective of the fact that his was a lone voice. A huge account of historical matters, have been provided here, and such accounts have been used to give evidences of the nature of Kurunmi's character. This should serve as a lesson to the African political class, especially the Nigerians political elites. This likeness of Kurunmi is well represented in the old and new class of African political leaders. As such, African/ Nigerian political elites need to show respect for the law, put service above self, submit to the will of the majority, hasten to the pleading of well-meaning individuals and accept the inevitability of change, to avoid Kurunmi's fate.

According to Ayodabo, "The play is both a sojourn through Yoruba cultural heritage and a lesson in human relationships along peaceful co-existence" (2016:88). *Aare* Kurunmi's refusal to heed all the above admonitions led him to commit treason. It is ironic that the insults which Kurunmi refused to take from his Sovereign was given to him in a larger dosage from his allies, who held him in awe hitherto. The once powerful *Aare* virtually became the prisoner of his allies. The implication of his stubbornness and hubris eventually led him to his tragic end through suicide, which also becomes the tragedy of the African and the marriage of the pleasant features in a mix with the western orbit.

This paper showed Kurunmi as perfidious, unreasonable and a destroyer of the law and the fabric of his society; in the process he violated the laws and mores of his people not unlike his predecessor, Afonja and their reward appears similar. It also merits mention that, Ola Rotimi's effort at recreating the historical tragedy bring the whole issue before a larger audience.

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