

SOCIO-DRAMATIC TRANSITION OF LANGUAGE USE IN THE PLAYS OF OLA ROTIMI

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Abstract

Literary language in African writing makes for interesting study because of the linguistic nuances and flavour of the indigenous African language of its author that finds creative expression in English. How language is used in dramatic communication is a subject of serious intellectual debate. This study, through the textual analysis of some play-texts, which are constructed on the didactic and eclectic nature of theatre and the society, is a reflection on the socio-dramatic transition of language use in the plays of Ola Rotimi. The discussion will identify, conceptualise and re-think some major forms, styles and patterns of language use in the plays of Ola Rotimi. Given the theatrical, dramatic, literary dividends and effectiveness of Rotimi's works, this study concludes by calling on budding playwrights and dramatists in Africa to emulate/imitate/learn from re-thought language forms, styles and "linguistic possibilities" in the plays of Ola Rotimi as they experiment with language use in the African theatre.

Keywords: African theatre, language use, Ola Rotimi, play directing, socio-dramatic, transition

1. Introduction

The presence of foreign languages (English, Arabic, Portuguese and French) in Africa cannot be overemphasized. This historical fact has led to various creative interventions in prose, poetry and drama. Most of these interventions especially in the broader perspective of theatre scholarship are crafted through socio-dramatic transition of language use by a few of the continent's successful playwrights and dramatists. It is important to note that by socio-dramatic transition of language use, what is meant is the flexibility of language use and movement; its dynamism in dramatic construction through the playwright's dramatic characters. The second face value of this concept is the significance of language as a social vehicle of communication within society, culture, theatre and the audience.

Through the textual analysis of some play-texts which are constructed on the didactic and eclectic nature of theatre and society, this essay, reflects on the socio-dramatic transition of language use

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in the plays of Ola Rotimi with a view to ascertaining the level of linguistic possibilities and socio-cultural factors that influenced his use of language in these plays.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

The concern of this study is divided into three parts: the essence of literature and its relevance to the African society; the continuous search for the proper location of language in the African theatre; a review of some relevant works on language use in some plays of Ola Rotimi.

2.1 Literature and the African Society

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) reviews the values inherent in "a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature and a national literature for the African man". Fanon (1963, p. 187) testifies that:

To fight for national literature means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible. This need to build culture through national literature is responsible for the link between people's drama, dance, music, poetry and the idiom of total theatre or multicultural aesthetics.

Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature* (1977) is a study of ideology, literature and the tensions of economics, history, society and culture in human experience. Certainly, the essence of culture cannot be ignored in human development. Yet, its complexity is affirmed by Williams (1977, p. 11) when he declares that "the concept at once fuses and confuses the radically different experiences and tendencies of its formation". Womack (1999, p. 593) also says of culture that "variation and complication embodies not only the issues but the contradictions through which it has developed". The point here is that the dynamic nature of culture cannot be wished away in spite of its organic mode in social construct.

Literature is a central part of culture and experience; its text and sub-text draws inspiration from the society that it helps to create and give identity to. It is noted that "cultural studies is a large, heterogeneous set of practices which cannot be justly summarised under a single presupposition" (Miller, 1999, p. 604). The essence of the interconnection between literature and the African society has also received serious intellectual attention from Ogunba (1975), Soyinka (1976), Ukala (1987), Osofisan (2001) and Obafemi (2009). The focus of most of these works is on the fact that literature must continue

to be relevant to the African continent. How this can be achieved has also been clearly articulated by Marxist writers and scholars in other ideological divides. A rudimentary justification of literature is unnecessary in a discussion such as this.

2.2 *Language and the African Theatre*

Within the structure of dramatic dialogue, the argument has always been on what the language of African theatre should be. This argument is not insulated from the concept of hybridism that subsumes African theatre. The literary theatre tradition has succeeded somewhat in its sometimes experimental use of English language. However, this success has been detrimental to the building of a nationalist culture through language. Iweriebor (2002) sees colonial languages as instruments of “linguistic disempowerment”. He opines that:

An important aspect of the inculcation of psychological colonialism in the education system relates to the question of language. The new colonial situation effected a simultaneous advancement of European languages and diminution of African languages both practically and ideologically. In general, the languages spoken at school were those of the colonizers: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese... (p. 472).

A review template of this feature of the cultural experience may be sketched as follows:

- (i) Ngugian/Indigenous Language School
- (ii) Soyinkaerian/Kiswahili School
- (iii) Pidgin-English School
- (iv) The Ebonics School
- (v) Jeyifo/Irele’s Europeanism School, and
- (vi) Adelugba/Africanisation of European English School

The above parameters flow out of observations and arguments by scholars and writers such as Achebe (1975), Soyinka (1976 and 1988), Adelugba (1978), Nasiru (1978), wa Thiong’o (1981), Adejare (1992), Oloruntoba-Oju (1998), Coker (2005), Oyigbenu (2008), Anyokwu (2010) and so on.

The Ngugian/Indigenous Language School calls for the use of indigenous African languages in creative works. wa Thiong’o (1981, p. 41) submits:

It was imperialism that had stopped the free development of the national traditions of theatre rooted in the ritual and ceremonial practices of the

peasantry. The real language of African theatre could only be found among the people—the peasantry in particular – in their life, history and struggles.

Ngugi argues against the anomaly and contradiction of a character speaking in English in theatre wherein the central motif is oppression and subjugation of the underprivileged, deprived and exploited African. He thus questions the use of the English language and suggests an indigenous African language substitute as a more natural choice of medium of self-expression. He makes use of Gikuyu successfully in his play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* devised by the Kamiriithu community. This “epistemological break” with the past, as Ngugi will claim later, becomes a dominant site of critical debate.

Chris Anyokwu (2010) defends Ngugi's position and condemns “Linguistic Darwinism” to use a phrase popularized by Ngugi himself:

I think the Ngugist position is very germane. That is, to the extent that we see him as a post-Fanonist apologist of nativism. Yes, it is crucial for us to know how to speak our indigenous language and even use them as media for instruction from nursery to tertiary level. The reason I am saying this is because we are living in the age of globalisation and Western culture has swamped, destroyed and made caricature of our culture. So, if anybody is saying that Ngugi is being starry-eyed, atavistic and unrealistic, the person doesn't know what he is talking about. It might appear idealistic and far-fetched, but that is the destination for every right-thinking African for us to know that we must rescue our dying languages, because our languages are dying arts due to the suffocating influence of English, French and Portuguese on the African continent. So, I think that Ngugi's position is eminently reasonable and germane (Anyokwu, 2010, p. 19).

Scholars such as Irele (1981), Jeyifo (1988 and 2004), Uka (2000), Okebukola (2008) and others have argued against the position. They conclude that English has come to stay with us in Africa, and that whatever African writers make out of it within their creative ingenuity, ideological leaning, socio-cultural and religio-political realities should be seen as the subjective and the inherent change in their use of poetic licence.

The Soyinkarian intervention sometimes in response to “the charges of obscurantism” has included a call by Wole Soyinka for the adoption and use of a single language in the African literary expression. The Nobel laureate sums up his suggestion:

Yes, I have called for the adoption of one single language for the whole of Africa – Kiswahili – and I believe very much in it. I do not believe that I will

ever write in Kiswahili, although I will write a few poems in it, a few *careful* verses, you know. I will set up the machinery, assist and participate in setting up machinery for translating works, including mine, into Kiswahili (Soyinka, 1988, p. XX).

Since the above statement was made in 1988, no major works of Soyinka, to our knowledge, have been born into Kiswahili language. Kiswahili is not normally a West African tool of self-expression as it is to be found more in East and Central Africa.

Nigerian writers have experimented with Pidgin-English which linguists describe as a corrupt form of English language and a hotchpotch of local indigenous language idioms, vocabularies and accents. In fact, Fatunde's (2006) three plays in *Oga Na Thief Man*, *Water No Get Enemy* and *No Food, No Country* are good examples of plays in Pidgin-English. The three plays above have been recently republished under the broader title of *No More Oil Boom and other plays*. In the three plays, the plights of the common people in a capitalist economy are essentially dramatised. But Pidgin English is regarded more as a conversational rather than a formal tool of literary expression more so since the decline of the remarkable Onitsha pamphlet literature whose favoured lingo was Pidgin English.

In his celebrated articles, "Wale Ogunyemi, Zulu Sofola and Ola Rotimi: Three Dramatists in Search of a Language", Adelugba's (1978) aesthetics of "Yorubanglish" also celebrates the Africanisation of European English by the three playwrights. To him, "Yorubanglish" is "not just Yoruba English or Yoruba mixed with English but the many-sided attempt to catch the flavour, tones, rhythms, emotional and intellectual content of Yoruba language and thought in an adventurous brand of English" (Adelugba, 1978, p. 216). Yorubanglish illustrates in drama the Africanisation of English made famous by Chinua Achebe in his acclaimed novel *Things Fall Apart* which is based on the Igbo cultural experience.

A version of this handling of language as proposed in Adelugba's poetics of "Yorubanglish" is the Ebonics School which describes an African American idiom for use of language for the creative interpretation of African cultural experience in the Diaspora. Oyigbenu (2008, p.75) describes Ebonics as the "African-American vernacular English, or slang". Thomas and Wareing (1999, p. 92) in a contrasting view describe Ebonics as "bad English of lazy or ignorant speakers". But African people who are living in America and other

parts of the world, not Africa, have evolved their own peculiar tools of self-expression and means of communication. One of the new forms developed is Ebonics and is comparable in character, it would appear, to Pidgin English, attracting conflicting reactions from creative writers and literary critics.

Contradicting all the above schools of language, and validating the essence of Standard English, is the Biodun Jeyifo and Abiola Irele's Europeanism School. This position argues that the English language in more or less a standard form has come to stay in Africa and it recommends the correct speaking and writing of the language. The position of the duo is based apparently on the reality of the experience of colonialism and its aftermath in Africa. The position seems to be strengthened by the growing stature of English as a global language. A critical examination of the schools of literary language discussed in this study will show that African theatre has had its fair share in the dynamic use of language. African dramatists have also experimented with the strategies of most of these schools.

3. Ola Rotimi and Language Use

Language use has been discussed in most of the published plays of Ola Rotimi. Works such as *Adelugba* (1978 and 2003), *Nasiru* (1978), *Gbilekaa* (1997), *Oloruntoba-Oju* (1998), *Uwatt* (2002a), *Coker* (2005) and *Bakare* (2007) have examined the aesthetics, semiotics and linguistic essence of the essential Ola Rotimi and his use of language. For example, Akanji Nasiru has attested to the "populist approach" of the Rotimian dramaturgy concluding that Rotimi "tries to reach all manner of audiences regardless of their level of English language proficiency" (Cited in Oloruntoba-Oju, 1998, p. 36). This "populist approach" is what Gbilekaa (1997, p. 149) calls Rotimi's "Romance with the left" to convince us of Rotimi's ideological leaning with Marxism and the language of popular struggle.

Oloruntoba-Oju (1998, pp. 35-68) while carrying out a robust and detailed work on language use in the plays of Ola Rotimi identifies "actional codes, macro and micro sequencing, functional signal, transaction management, turn management, exchange, acts, moves, dominance, conflict representation, rhythm and flow" in some of the dramatist's selected plays. Through illustrative examples, Oloruntoba-Oju's work also reviews the core of "social meaning" in the essential Rotimi and language use. On his own part, Uwatt (2002a, pp. 115-

137) identifies “Africanisms, transference, overt cushioning, covert cushioning, translation, experiential translation, expression of time and period, expression of kinship relationship, the use of euphemism, praise naming, stylistic, translation, idioms and collocations, folkloric similes, proverbs, rhetoric, Nigerian pidgin” and others as some of the authentic linguistic possibilities in the dramaturgy of Ola Rotimi.

Another important work on Ola Rotimi’s theatre is Coker’s (2005) *Ola Rotimi’s African Theatre: The Development of an Indigenous Aesthetic*. This book celebrates the richness, fluidity, adaptability and the mobility of language within what is termed indigenous aesthetics, and concludes that Ola Rotimi wants users of the English language to “tamper with its Englishness”. In the book, Rotimi is seen as making a quest to “tackle the controversial issue of appropriate language for African theatre, an issue that has dominated theatre for the past half century” (<http://mellenpress.com/mellenpress.cfm?bookid=6268&pc=9>).

Reviewing *If... a Tragedy of the Ruled*, Duruaku (2007, p. 119) appreciates Ola Rotimi’s different levels of language use and observes that “the exchanges between the characters range from the banal, through biting cynicism to the hilarious. The choice of words is interesting”. Also, Akwang (2007, pp. 151-6) concludes that Rotimi creates “deliberate adventure towards indigenising the potent, and creative linguistic machinery by exploitation of retrievable Yoruba and Bini proverbs, phrases, wise-sayings, chants and mythologies”, and that “Rotimi has extended the visible and unknown borderlines, both of his native Yoruba tongue, and the contact frontiers of the imposed English language”.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the eclectic, didactic, local, national and global languages and meanings that are adequately reflected in Rotimi’s plays have made them relevant to date. This relevance is rooted, as we will soon demonstrate, in his socio-dramatic transition of language use.

3.1 *Changing Socio-dramatic Language Use in Ola Rotimi’s Plays*

As a social vehicle of communication, imagery and dramatic construction, the flexibility of language use and its dynamism housed its transition in the plays of Ola Rotimi. Consequently, the following are some of the major forms, styles and patterns of language use in the plays of Rotimi which fall under the socio-dramatic transition’s

ambience:

3.1.1 Neo-classical Language

In spite of his resentment and rejection of Western aesthetics, Rotimi was labeled a product of the West early in his writing career. In language use, Rotimi is a neo-classical playwright who reduplicates some of the classical tragic canons (heroism, nobility, tragic flaw, reversal of fortune, purgation of emotion and others) in his tragic plays. A clear example is *The gods are not to blame* (1971). In this play, Rotimi retains the mechanics of the language of the master (Sophocles) in *King Oedipus* (1947). The poetic essence of tragedy and its trappings are evident in the first 8 pages of *The gods are not to blame*. For example, the first three lines of the play from the Narrator capture the tragic essence and the poetic nature of the play:

The struggles of man begin at birth.
It is meet then that our play
Begin with birth of a child... (p. 1).

This is extended through the Narrator's captivating words:

Bad word! Mother weeps, father weeps.
The future is not happy,
But to resign oneself to it
Is to be crippled fast.
Man must struggle.
The bad future must not happen... (p.3).

A clear comparative analysis of the above with Sophocles' play will confirm the relationship or the mere *tendering* of language for theatrical transition or culture flight. Oedipus starts it all:

Children, new blood of Cadmus' ancient line –
What is the meaning of this supplication,
These branches and garlands, the incense filling the city,
These prayers for the healing of pain these lamentations... (p. 25).

Baba Fakunle, the purblind seer in *The gods are not to blame* speaks the same way as Teiresias, the blind Prophet in *King Oedipus*. This *tendering* of language is also the core of adaptation that involves "the transplantation of the work of another creative artist into a different medium within a specific socio-historical and cultural context... sometimes the medium remains the same as exemplified in drama-to-drama adaptation" (Adeoti, 2010, p. 8). Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* is drama-to-drama adaptation.

The language of this play is, however, *tendered* to accommodate local flavours in a socio-dramatic transition in spite of the criticisms trailing this tragic work. The eponymous character in Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, who is also the defender of tradition, Kurunmi, captures the message of the play with another poetic neck-bending metaphor in the classical theatre garb:

The gaboon viper!
 When the gaboon viper dies,
 its children take up its habits,
 poison and all.
 The plantain dies,
 its saplings take its place
 broad leaves and all.
 The fire dies, its ashes
 bear its memory with a shroud
 of white fluff
That is the meaning of tradition (p. 15).

Before this, we should not forget Abogunrin, Kurunmi's Aide-de-camp's cultural purgation in the beginning of the play: "Termites dwell underground / Termites dwell underground / Ògún, god of vengeance, hear my prayer..." (p.11).

It is also important to consider the emotional grief and the tragic purgation of emotion that Rotimi employs to end *The gods are not to blame*:

Odewale: Let no one stop us and let no one come with us
 or I shall curse him...
 When
 The wood insect
 Gathers sticks,
 On its own head it
 Carries
 Them (p. 72).

The above is translated from the speech of Oedipus in *King Oedipus*:

Oedipus: As for me,
 No longer let my living presence curse
 This fatherland of mine, but let me go
 And live upon the mountains – and die there...
 (pp. 65-6).

The same neo-classical language conceived to parody classical tragedy in Africa is also used at the end of the play, *Kurunmi*. Ola Rotimi's

metaphor below which is similar to that of Sophocles in *King Oedipus* captures this through Kurunmi:

Kurunmi: A cow –
 A cow gave birth to a fire
 She wanted to lick it
 but
 it burned her,
 She wanted to leave it
 but
 she could not
 because it was her own...
 her own child;
 her own...
 child... (p. 94).

3.1.2 Multicultural Linguistic Aesthetics

In his call for unity in a multicultural society like Nigeria and elsewhere, Ola Rotimi experiments with multicultural linguistic aesthetics. This need for integration informs Ola Rotimi's writing of *If... a Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988) through Marxist dialectics. According to Ejue (2007, p. 219), the language of the two plays is "created with a common value from common people to seeing themselves as stakeholders in the collective struggle for survival". So many Nigerian characters and languages are directly and indirectly represented in the two plays to underline the multicultural aesthetics. Whether through Akpan, Landlord, Betty, Adiagha, Chinwe, Banji, Onyema, Papa and others representing the Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, Hausa and other tribes and languages in *If...* and in Nigeria, the deliberate creation of Ola Rotimi in this particular play is predicated upon the celebration of socio-dramatic transition of a multicultural nature. This is also aimed at making people to communicate, cooperate and live together in spite of their linguistic diversities.

3.2 Tribaltonism

Tribaltonism is the coinage of the researcher which means the use of detailed localised tribal linguistic and paralinguistic aesthetics for a particular play. Also, it is the creative writer's flourishing imagination at objectively reproducing and representing material and immaterial cultures of a given community or society without sacrificing the true essence of the people a writer is writing for. Other scholars such as

Nasiru (1978 and 1979), Oloruntoba-Oju (1998) and Uwatt (2002a) have written on this through various dimensions. Immaterial culture of greeting, proper mode of dressing, colour symbolism and semiotics, eating and walking, talking and laughing forms and styles are not physical objects that can be held. Yet, they housed and defined the ethics and mores of a given people.

As part of the transitional nature of the essential Rotimi in the use of language, tribaltonism is a contrast to multicultural linguistic aesthetics and it is Rotimi's adherence to the "given circumstances" of his plays not minding his own ideological posture or emotional state of mind at the time of writing. We also conceived the term tribaltonism to explain Rotimi's innate rationality at representing the tribal/linguistic setting of any play of his that is set in a particular culture. This is the hallmark of most of his historical tragedies. For instance, he captures all the subjectivism (now in his own objective re-creation) of the Yoruba race of the 18th and 19th Centuries in *Kurunmi*. The way the Yoruba people spoke at that time, their festivals and traditions captivated Rotimi. This cultural reality is an idea that he reduplicates in *Ovonramwen N'ogbaisi*, a play that has an Edo and partly, Yoruba setting. Tribaltonism is a call on the playwrights, the authors of world's affairs through drama to be faithful to cultural matters. Tribaltonism can also be seen as the language of cultural affinity especially in a monolingual setting. It is now lacking in most of the postmodern plays that give inadequate attention to locale or setting.

3.3 *Semiotics and Social Logonomic Variables*

Rotimi spiced up his creative works with imposed semiotics and social logonomic variables. In fact, Adelugba has said this (though in different words) through some of his interviews with Rotimi. In an interview with Rotimi on 19th November, 1975 with the title; "Hereditary Influence, Comic/Tragic Approaches and Directorial Style", Adelugba (Cited in Uwatt, 2002b, p. 52) submits:

I think, in your work, there is an approach to the theatre as a form where language is not just words but the totality of communication. Would you like to comment on your approach to theatre language?

Rotimi replies to the above that:

Yes, I think theatre language doesn't have to end with verbalising. The entire dynamics of the human body must be harnessed toward articulating the dramatic intentions of the producer or playwright. As a matter of fact, I am

trying to gravitate toward a silent language... (Cited in Uwatt, 2002b, p. 53). Scholars such as Nasiru (1979), Oloruntoba-Oju (1998), Uwatt (2002a), Ejeke (2007) and others have also written on the essence of the “non-linguistic variables as extra linguistic variables which are encased in sub-textualism” in Rotimi’s plays. Signs and symbols are created by the playwrights through their recourse to culture and are often used by the theatre directors to create pantomimic dramatisation. Semiotics and social logonomic variables should be considered apt in the creative process because “without signs, there is no ideology... Everything ideology, possesses semiotic value” (Voloshinow, 1973, p. 12).

Commenting on Rotimi’s “non-linguist techniques” in dramatic communication, Nasiru (1979, p. 25) in his article, “Ola Rotimi’s Search for a Technique” reflects candidly that:

There is an extensive use of music, dance and sound effects to reinforce mood and meaning. Such elements can easily degenerate into sheer theatricality if they are only employed for ornamental purposes, but Rotimi attempts to make them generate form and therefore reinforce the action.

Ejeke (2007, p. 70) in his article, “Para-linguistic Aesthetics in Rotimi’s Theatre” also concludes that:

The use of these paralinguistic devices enables Rotimi’s theatre to create and establish a “circular response” between the stage and the auditorium, the performers and the spectators. Rotimi’s theatre is communal in form, both actors and audience share in a ritual communion. This shared theatrical experience between players and audience makes Ola Rotimi’s theatre more immediate, relevant, enduring and aesthetically satisfying.

Rotimi’s acceptance of silent language in his response to Adelugba is in itself the beauty of semiotics which Saussure (Cited in Hodge and Kress, 1995, p. 1), defines as the “silence of the life of signs in society”. The interest in linguistic semiotisation rests on the notion that time (day, morning, night, holidays), social events (weddings, ritual and so on) and space are predicated on special behaviours in many cultures (Hodge and Kress, 1995, p. 73). While considering the special behaviours in many cultures, we should also note that the “logonomic system (the set of social messages) which govern the normal production and reception of the text rests on social semiotics, which housed some general assumptions about society and meaning” (Hodge and Kress, 1995, pp. 2-74). It is important that the three special behaviours below that fall within logonomic system in Rotimi’s *The gods are not to blame* be considered:

1. Blackout on stage. Rhythmic clinking of metallic objects can be heard in the background, building up, then fading to a sustained softness: the rhythm of Ogun, the Yoruba God of Iron and War... (p.1)
2. (CHIEFS come forward and invest ODEWALE in royal robes and crown While the TOWNSPEOPLE dance round him, paying homage, then disperse)... (Heavy bata drumming bursts forth, and ROYAL BARD dances off to the rhythm of kutelu... (p.7)
3. (As the lights fade on them, we hear a sound like the striking of a gong. Presently, the TOWNCRIER appears, his face tattooed with chalk, bare to the waist. He stands, stage-centre, strikes gong for attention, and intones)... (pp.16-7).

To understand the rhythm of Ogun music and song that often alternates between the mood swing of anger/anguish and joy/softness in Yoruba culture, the signs and symbols of a coronation ceremony in which Bata drumming of Kutelu rhythm is demanded, and the various forms of tattoos in the same Yoruba cosmos call for special investigation. This is important because these actions are special behaviours and are often relayed through special messages that can aid textual interpretation. There are numerous semiotic and logonomic messages in most of Rotimi's classics. It is, however, important to note that one culture's special behaviour is different from another culture's special behaviour. So the modes of theatrical production, linguistic acceptance and or possibilities in Yoruba culture are different from those of Hausa or Igbo culture in Nigeria. Rotimi has been faithful to the cosmos of his plays in his use of non-linguistic aesthetics.

In most of his plays especially those rooted in Nigerian cultures, Rotimi makes the effort to symbolise, and de-verbalise most of the cultural icons, signs, symbols and codes in the culture in which he may be writing on. This is evident in plays such as *Ovonramwen N'ogbaisi*, *The gods are not to blame* and *Kurunmi*. Most of the logonomic messages can be found in the detailed stage instructions of his major plays and a critical director should interpret them accordingly. It should be noted also that some of these symbols are known and will be received very well by members of the audience especially those who are from the same culture that housed the plays mentioned above.

It is important for example, to consider the following symbols and codes in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*:

- Agbo'le - Compound
- Ògún shrine

- Ògún Symbol
- Moulded Idol,
- Carved Calabashes
- Stew, ladle and Okro-soiled white linen
- Weirdly-clad masquerade
- Horsetail
- Divination Beads
- Black Pot
- The Bowl of Bullets
- The Bowl of Sacred Twins of Ògbóni Cult, and
- Dead Black crow

Certainly, the modern day Yoruba, Nigerian child may not understand the real meaning of the above symbols and codes except if he or she is told what they mean. This is because symbols and codes can be used for positive or negative reasons depending on the situation or the intention of the user. Beyond the general linguistic assumptions of their meanings, they also have some specific meanings. For example, If a Dead Black crow is sent to someone, that person is seen as a weakling in Yoruba culture of yore. The act is meant to provoke the person to action. Ogunmola presents this to Ibikunle to instigate him to fight a war with Kurunmi in the play, *Kurunmi*. Divination Beads are the eyes of the gods in Yorubaland and are used to foretell the future and solve problems. The warring camps (Ijaye and Ibadan) make use of the Divination Beads through their Diviners in the play. The Bowl containing bullets is meant for war while the one containing the sacred Twins of Ògbóni Cult is meant for peace in Yoruba culture. The white linen soiled with stew of Okro is a message of scorn, a rejection of the authority of someone or decision, and an invitation to war. The fact is that, there are rules governing the use of these signs and symbols in Yorubaland. Rotimi has made use of these symbols and codes for theatrical effects in his attempt to follow the general and specific rules within the logonomic system in Yoruba culture. Playwrights of Yoruba origin in Nigeria such as Soyinka, Osofisan, Olu Obafemi and a few others have also experimented with symbols and codes but in different forms within the logonomic system. Most logonomic symbols in the semiotic process can lead to good spectacle and visual pantomime if creatively used in the dramatic process. It is important to consider the following stage instruction in the play *Kurunmi*:

He leans back relaxedly in his chair, dips the ladle into the bowl of stew, scoops the contents; okro stew. He lifts the spoonful towards his mouth, repeatedly,

letting much of the sauce slaver sloppily from his mouth down on to the white cloth, smirching it. The messengers are shocked (p. 26).

To us, this is Kurunmi in pantomimic action. Words alone cannot convey the essence of the above. A silent theatre language with semiotic symbols interpreted through non-verbal aesthetics will be most appropriate. This, we hope, is achieved through the above by Rotimi.

Linked to the above are semiotic and logonomic metaphors Rotimi uses to represent human and material resources in the play, *Kurunmi*. The following examples are *words beyond mere words* and should thus be interpreted as *word capable of numerous linguistic possibilities*. Most of these metaphors can evoke good dramatic communication. They are:

- The metaphor of the termites (p.11)
- The feast of *Ororún* (p.12)
- The metaphor of the mother of the gorilla (p.13)
- The metaphor of the father of ape (p.13)
- The metaphor of the Gaboon viper (p.15)
- The metaphor of the tortoise heading for a senseless journey (p.17)
- The metaphor of the cow becoming corned beef (p.22)
- The metaphor of the frog which is kicked- kpa! (p.27)
- The metaphor of *Ìbàdàn* and *Òyo* people as horses full of muscles, small sense (p.35)
- The metaphor of the mosquitoes that will not bite (p.45)
- The metaphor of I give you, you give me from the frog (p.55)
- The metaphor of *Ògún* as lord of the battle, and (p.60)
- The metaphor of *Arùkú*, the corpse that was carried to the market that did not sell (p.71)
- The metaphor of I paddle here and paddle there (p.87)
- The metaphor of the cow giving birth to fire (p.94)

It is also important to explain some of the above. For example, the metaphor of the termite is a curse against any user's enemy. This is because termites live under the ground, so will all the enemies of Kurunmi in the play. The metaphors of the mother of gorilla and the father of ape depict weakness and heroism respectively. In the play, Kurunmi is the ape and a hero whose story should be told while his enemies are the gorillas that have no place in history. The metaphors of the Gaboon viper and the feast of *Ororún* represent the sacred nature of tradition in Yoruba culture. This is because the children of the Gaboon viper are expected to continue with the habits of their forebears. Habits here are ethics and mores which culminate into tradition. The cyclical

nature of Yoruba tradition in which Soyinka (1976, p. 148) echoes that “the past as the ancestors, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn” also finds root in feastings and festivals as we see in the feast of *Ororún*. Through Chapters III (pp. 26-39 and pp. 98-137) of his Magnus opus, *The history of the Yorubas* reprinted in 1976, Samuel Johnson has also alluded to “the Yoruba cosmos and epistemological traditions”. His extensive documentation of Yoruba names, manners, customs, funeral rites, the Egungun masquerades and religions point to the cyclical life of the Yoruba people. The metaphor of “I give you, you give me” from the frog represents the philosophy of equity and social justice where there is no place for superiority. Most of the metaphors above, we must say, can also be found in other African cultures though most of them are rooted in the Yoruba culture of wisdom where words are seen as horses decorated with silver, bronze and gold.

3.4 *Street Language*

Street language is one of the linguistic trappings in Rotimi’s plays. It is the combination of a corrupt form of pidgin-English with gutter, dirty, fancied or funkier utterances and words which are often loaned or created from some major Nigerian languages and English. Its users are mostly area boys, prostitutes (on the high and low streets), house boys and girls, and the half-educated. Street language is also used as comic interlude in dramatic communication and in a nation or environment beclouded by despair and anguish. *If... a Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983), *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* (1977) and *Who is a Patriotic?* (2006) are three plays by Ola Rotimi in which some characters make use of street language expressively. In *If...*, characters such as Betty Oviawwen, Mama Rosa, Akpan and others address themselves in down-to-earth street language which is almost the lot of semi-literate Nigerians. In *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Polycarp is a good example of a character at home with street language. The following dramatic dialogue from Polycarp in the play should make this clear:

I swear, master, make God hammer me for head if say na lie I ...
 Na true Oga major, I no crase yet.
 Yes, major, she see Mama Rashida well-well
 I dey go buy toilet paper sah
 So, I run four-forty come, sah
 Tory finish, sah (pp. 31-2).

Other key words and phrases such as:

If major say jump, I jump! ‘e say stand, I tanda, butu, I butu, ‘e say run – na four-forty dat!

One by each, mister Gentlemen, talk one by each!

I beg to report sah!

She go Bar Beach, major (pp. 60-61).

If Polycarp relishes in rural-urban migration and attempts to learn and speak English more than the steward that he is, Lejoka-Brown, the protagonist in the play succeeds in bringing the real street language of the commoners (this time through his experience as a politician) to the fore in the play. Let us consider the example below:

Are you there...? Politics is the thing now in Nigeria, mate. You want to be famous? Politics. You want to chop life? – No, no – you want to chop a big slice of the National cake? – Na politics... so I said to my party boys – when was it? Last week, or so. I said to them... I, said... cakes are too soft, Gentlemen. Just you wait! Once we get elected to the top, *walahi*, we shall stuff ourselves with huge mouthfuls of National chin-chin (p.40).

In *Who is a Patriot?* (2006), characters such as Soldier and Policeman, Lawyer and Politician, Reporter and Academic, Christian Evangelist and Muslim Imam celebrate street language in abundance. Rotimi’s style here is his intention to reach a wider audience. Let us consider the unpatriotic act of the Politician and Lawyer in the play as an example:

Politician: In other words, all that the party needs is a two-thirds of senate vote et cetera, ba?

Lawyer: By the constitution, yes

Politician: No problem

Lawyer: But the company has to be registered well in advance, O!

Politician: Enheen. Now you’re talking business. You handle the law part, et cetera. Ok? Hmm. Leave the political wahala for me (p.5).

The deliberately paired characters in the play are created to elicit dramatic conflict of higher amplitude. This is Rotimi’s socio-dramatic transition of making his language efficient, effective and successful. The new generation of Nigerian youths is at home with street language which is at times, a mixture of all existing languages that they are familiar with into one continuum. So, we find Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and English words and phrases such as “yes now, abi you want awuf?”, “God no go gree! Oya...”, “Na wa o!”, “Madalla!”, “Nain I tell my Captain. I say make all civilian patapata change one time to soldier, fa!”, “All

bloody civilians, mana!” and many more used in *Who is a Patriot?* to celebrate street language.

4. Conclusion

Ola Rotimi’s use of language in his plays transitioned from neo-classical form to multicultural linguistic aesthetics and from tribalism, semiotics and social logonomic variables to street language. These forms and styles of language use are the metaphors behind his socio-dramatic transition in his dramaturgy. It is also important to note that socio-dramatic factors of age, period, trends, timelessness of space (physical and spiritual), culture, tradition, economy, politics, religion, tradition, ethics, mores and others, are responsible for the transition of Rotimi in terms of language use in his plays.

The dynamic nature of a play-text cannot be overemphasized when subjected to textual analysis or play production. Each reading or production of a play-text often leads to fresh insight. This is always the case with classics or plays whose thematic relevance, forms and styles cut across all age grades. If a playwright is with the downtrodden, he or she should respond to and reflect on the very essence of the language of anguish, sorrow and oppression. If he or she is in the feminist terrain, the language of equality of sexes and women empowerment should be his choice. The circumstances and the dynamics of the various characters that the playwright will represent have conferred on the playwright, the creative ability to transit with language and to create various atmospheres that will help him or her to convey the very subject of his discourse. Rotimi attempted these in his plays.

Rotimi celebrates the notion that language is not static and cannot be static in his creative works. Therefore, the re-thought socio-dramatic transition of language use in the plays of Rotimi marked by neo-classical language, multicultural linguistic aesthetics, tribalism, semiotics and social logonomic variables and street language may be considered by budding playwrights, researchers, actors and artistic directors as they interpret the plays of Ola Rotimi. The forms and styles of the re-thought language discovered in this work are veritable mechanisms for effective dramatic communication, cultural emancipation and historical development where linguistic conservatism is substituted for its flexibilities.

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