

**Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the African Stage:
A Comparative Study of Euripides' *The Bacchae* and
Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides***

By

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Abstract

*This paper critically attempts a comparative analysis of Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* with a view to eliciting the parallels that exist between the plays and the innovations that Soyinka has brought into his own version. The theoretical framework of the paper is foregrounded on the mimetic theory of art by Aristotle, which conceptualises imitation as an intrinsic phenomenon for artists. Poetry, therefore, becomes the medium of expression. The paper also looks at the deployment of the theory as a means with adaptation of literary works which is the basis of this discourse. The analysis of the two texts covers the thematic thrusts, structural patterns, technique and language. Besides, a cursory survey of other instances of transportations and adaptations of literary works, especially by African literary dramatists is also made to support the trend in adaptation of literary works as a veritable development in African drama.*

Keywords: Adaptation, Drama, Euripides, Wole Soyinka.

Introduction

Adaptation of literary texts is a common phenomenon among artists and literary scholars world over. It involves a reworking of a text to make it more relevant to a new audience and also for a new purpose. It can be a partial or complete alteration of the original text to suit another socio-cultural milieu or to interrogate some contemporary thematic concerns that the artist considers very significant which might have been overlooked in the original text. It has been observed that some of Shakespeare's plays were adaptations from oral traditions and English histories. For instance, *Hamlet* was a reworking of *Amleth*, a 20th Century folktale in the history of Denmark. Besides, Kelly Asbury's film, *Gnomeo* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Several Greek tragedies have been adapted to suit the African stage and its cultural nuances. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* is an adaptation of Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. Ola Rotimi retains the plot structure of Sophocles' original text but changes the characters and makes the text a truly African text. Rotimi means his play to have the opposite meaning of the Greek model. He transposes everything of the Greek world into some Yoruba parallel as Oedipus becomes Odewale. Thebes becomes Kutuje, Jocasta becomes Ojuola and sphinx replaces war (139).

While Sophocles explores the theme of the inexorability of fate in *King Oedipus*, Ola Rotimi deals with the issue of personal culpability in *The Gods are not to Blame* (103). The transposition of the text to a truly African drama is one of the earliest adaptations of Greek plays by a Nigerian playwright. Also, Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin*, is an adaptation of

Gogol's *The Government Inspector*. Osofisan draws a resemblance between the corrupt practices among local government officials and in the public service in general and the Russian government officials. Femi Oofisan's *Women of Ows* is also a splendid adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. In Ohofian's version, he interrogates the essence of war and condemns its devastating consequences on the society especially on women and children who are the common victims and targets of war. Osofisan also berates the gods and attacks their inviolability whereas in *The Trahan men*, the gods are celebrated. Besides, Ahmed Yerima's *bobal* is also an adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horsemen* One reason for the regular adaptation of literary works according to Sofola (1991) is that Art evolves from the immortal soul, Art, therefore, is eternal. It is the soul of man that resides the divine essence from where art flows. Art is life, it is knowledge, it is feeling, it never decays because, according to her, "it is through the perceptive participation of the artist in the divine essence and fluidity of life that he emerges to unveil the unknown and the opaque to mankind in his art form (9). It is from this metaphysical perception that we understand that artists world over belong to the same cosmic universe and semiotic cosmos from where they are inspired by the divinity. It is against this background; therefore, the paper is foregrounded on the mimetic theory of art.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the mimetic theory of art, which was one of the earliest forms of literary criticisms propounded by Aristotle from (384 B.C. to 322 B.C.) According to Aristotle, art is an imitation, a simulation and recreation of great and low actions. Great actions, according to Aristotle are represented in tragedies, while low actions are represented in comedies. That is why Aristotle's definition of tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude..." (Poetics, VI. 2-3) remains a reference point for all subsequent literary scholars. According to Habib (2011), "Aristotle holds that poetry is essentially a mode of imitation. Aristotle asserts that all the various modes of poetry and music are imitations" 18). This mimetic theory of art is predicated on the assumption that the art of imitation is a natural human instinct. This is supported by the natural act of storytelling that is common with humans especially in the traditional age and even in modern drama by artists who combine oral traditions with their written artistic forms. According to Abrams and Harpham (2012), artists must not merely copy a literary work but "must imitate the form and spirit rather than the detail of the classic models, and that success can be achieved only by a poet who possesses an innate poetic talent" (172). That is what Dada (1994) means when he says that artists must imitate reality and suppress "accidental irrelevancies" (44). This concept of imitation according to Abrams and Harpham (2012) has also been used to describe a literary work "which deliberately echoed an older work but adapted it to subject matter in the writer's own age, usually in a satirical fashion" (172). This is where the theory becomes relevant for this discourse.

Textual Analysis

The Bacchae according to Maduakor (1987) is based on a classical mythology. An understanding of this myth becomes necessary for a successful evaluation and analysis of the text and the Soyinka's version of it. The myth records that Dionysus was a mixed parenthood. He was born of different mothers but engendered by Zeus. Through the instrumentality of Hera, Zeus' wife, the Titans successfully tore him into pieces but his heart was saved by Athena and given to Zeus who swallowed it, and out of it came a new Dionysus Zagreus, son of Semele. During his second birth, he was born at Thebes during the reign of Kadmos in a

mysterious way He was to have been snatched through lightening by Zeus from the womb of Semele. He experienced a transformation into a ram by Zeus and kept in a safe as a shieldingscheme Through the support of Silenus, Dionysus unwrapped the secrets of nature and the art of producing wine. Dionysius travelled all through the Eastern world teaching people his newly discovered mysteries and proclaimed himself as a great deity.

In *The Bacchae*, Dionysus returns to Thebes to establish his divinity and authority. It is important as mention the emergence of Dionysianism, a religious cult associated with Dionysus, a male fertility god whose symbol is the Phallus and the votaries are women called Maenads. In Euripides *The Bacchae*, the Maenads dress up in fawskin and display their thus as they walk up to the mountain to meet Dionysus where they indulge in sexual orgies. The real ceremony was of three district stages. "The first is the representation of Dionysus by one of his favourite totems: the bull, the lion, the goat or the snake".

The second is the frenzied dancing and revelling in the mountains amidst wine and the third which is the climax of the ritual is the dismemberment of the sacrificial animal called the Sparamagnos and the eating of the flesh which is known as the 'omaphogia'. This action is a re-enactment of the passion of Dionysus who was dismembered by the Titans.

The Greek play, *The Bacchae*, according to Gibbs (1986) has a very simple plot structure. The play starts with a speech from Dionysus who has just returned with a group of female worshippers to Thebes to assert his divinity and avenge the death of his mother, Semele. We later find the soothsayer, Tiresias and Kadmos, Dionysus' grandfather on the scene to show their support and preparedness to accept Dionysus' worship. This action enrages Penthus, king of Thebes, son of Agave and cousin of Dionysus. He refuses to accept Dionysus as a deity and his worship. He later decides to challenge his authority. This leads to the arrest of Dionysus on the order of the king Penthus. Dionysus mysteriously escapes from the detention. The verbal confrontation between Penthus and Dionysus is later interrupted by the report concerning the woman's strange behaviour on mount Cithairon. Penthus, dressed in female attire decides to spy on the Bacchantes. Penthus is ignorantly killed by Agave. She carries her son's head unknowingly. Agave is subsequently banished with Kadmos from Thebes (112).

Etherton (1982) points out that a playwright who transposes or adapts a play from another cultural background should not be seen by virtue of this fact, less of a playwright or an artist than who produces the original work. According to him, translation, transportation and adaptation "are the means by which play-texts have survived the process of history and have become part of a great tradition" (102). Reacting to Soyinka's *The Bacchae* of Euripides, Lindfors (1984) is of the view that Soyinka succeeded in re-investing the play with dimensions and complexity by introducing African elements that harmonise with the original theme but do not radically alter the nature of the drama. In other words, though he extended its basic structure and rearranged its furnishings, he did not tamper with its original design. The play was renovated, not demolished and rebuilt from the ground according to a new architectural blueprint. in form as well as in content, Soyinka's *The Bacchae* of Euripides remains more Greek than Camera Laye's *The Radiance of the King* remains German or Austrian (26). Lindfors' view is also supported by Gibbs (1986) by pointing out that Soyinka took the bones and some of the flesh, of the original and completed it in such a way that his own ideas on power, ritual, religion and tragedy became clear (112).

The Parallels and the Deviations

There are various similarities between Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Soyinka's *The Baccha*. Both plays touch the Dionysian communal purification rites in Thebes which essentially is the theme of the Greek play. The death of Pentheus is needed to serve as a carrier for the cleansing of the last of Thebes from the impending wrath of the gods. This carrier motif is well explored in both texts. Essentially, Pentheus plays this role in *The Bacchae* and Tiresias offers himself to play the role in *The Baccha* of Euripides.

Also, the devotees of Dionysus in *The Bacchae* carry a staff known as thyrsus-"a staff tipped by a pine and twined with ivy and vine leaves" while the worshippers of Ogun as shown in *The Bacchae* of Euripides carry a similar staff known as "Opa ogun", a long willow pole. Besides, Dionysus is the god of wine and Ogun is associated with vine. Yusuf (1985) observes that Soyinka "uses dexterously his vast knowledge of African mythology to give a useful illumination to the present African situation and at the same time evolve a forecast of what the future might be" (35).

Etherton (1982) further observes that the killing of a dog during Ogun's sacrifice and "mock struggle of the head priest and his acolytes for the carcass, during which it is literally torn limb from limb" reminds one of the tearing into pieces of Zagreus, son of Zeus (134). This similarity drawn between Ogun and Dionysus here is close to the myth of Sango as depicted by Duro Ladipo in *Oba Koso* and Ola Balogun's *Shango* and Femi Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King*.

Ashaolu (1990) points out two noticeable characteristics of the classic tragedy which are the mythology of the Dionysian communal cleansing rites in the land of Thebes and the revolutionary beliefs that are usually associated with the fall of a dictator. In his opinion, Soyinka has blended "these two features in such balanced proportions." *The Bacchae* of Euripides should, therefore, be seen as both a Nigerian political satire as well as a mythologised political statement on the clamour for liberty and freedom from the dictatorship of a haughty and tyrannical king which Soyinka's Pentheus portrays. Pentheus is portrayed as a Tyrant by being pitched against the yearnings and aspirations of his vassals as championed by Dionysus whose wrath Pentheus incurs because of his intransigence and incorrigibility (40). This view is also shared by Adejumo (1987) who believes that Soyinka in plays like *The Breed* (1984), *Camwood on the Leaves* (1984) and *The Bacchae* of Euripides (1973) demonstrates Soyinka's own revolt against tyranny and oppression through the use of mythic themes to involve in a movement for self-liberation (63).

However, Soyinka has brought some innovations into his version of the Greek play to buttress the theme of his play. Senanu (1980) has observed three structural changes made by Soyinka, and they can be seen in the nature of Pentheus' reign which has been discussed in part, the redefinition of the role of Dionysus and the transformation of the end of the play into a communion. Soyinka's Pentheus is very distinctive, being associated with "death, repression and megalomania". This is seen at the start of the play in the abrupt and dictatorial manner adopted by Pentheus against the slaves and the elderly Tiresias. "Pentheus has established a tyranny which involves a perversion of religious rites into a cruel and meaningless sacrifice of slaves as scapegoats" (108). It is this area of perversion of religion that Soyinka offers an excellent re-interpretation of the nature of Pentheus' failure as a ruler and offers the radical

cause of tyranny. At different times when the slaves show some hesitation in carrying out Pentheus' orders which should indicate to Pentheus that he has lost his authority, and that he is no longer in full control, he refuses to accept the divinity of Dionysus and rules in the most one-way manner.

Dionysus is presented by Soyinka not as a wicked and cruel god as seen in Euripides' version but as a god of the common people who bridges the gap between man and woman, between the slave and the master, between the free and the oppressed. Soyinka's Dionysus is more masculine and Ogun-like with rugged strength. Euripides' Dionysus has a soft, even effeminate appearance. Soyinka's Dionysus frees the slaves who are once held under the servitude of the exploiting ruling class. Soyinka thus brings the reader closer to the meaning of Dionysus' role as a ritual archetype. In Soyinka's version, Dionysus leaves the stage the moment he delivers Pentheus to his enemies. He does not show up again as he does in Euripides' text to mock Pentheus' bleeding head and vent further punishment to the house of Cadmus.

According to Senanu (1980), the transformation of the end of Soyinka's version, of the Greek play to a communion further gives prominence to the ritualistic and sacrificial elements of the play. "The transformation of Pentheus' bloody head into a fountain of wine which ends the play suggests that the god's own sacrifice or that of Pentheus who re-enacts it is altruistic". The slaves' chants show Soyinka's Marxist perception of revolution and this he has displayed in *The Bacchae of Euripides* (108).

Etherton (1982) observes further that, in *The Bacchae*, Dionysus banishes Agave and Cadmus from Thebes and imposes a long period of suffering upon them for their earlier blasphemy and present crimes unlike in Soyinka's version. The response of Agave evokes pity and horror. This is similar to Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. Both Oedipus and Agave embrace their punishments and distance themselves from the places where their crimes are committed (133). Soyinka's romantic and somewhat reactionary position pursuing revolution through mysticism is at variance with Euripides' consciousness of the dualism in man's nature (139). Soyinka intends to be faithful to the intention of the original Greek version of the play. That is why he has gone Greek with the way he pursues his own play to a logical conclusion by retaining the Euripides' plot and characters.

It is pertinent to mention that Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* is a splendid adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis*. Asgill (1990) in his opinion remarks that Sutherland has worked a Greek theme like Soyinka does with *The Bacchae* and makes it to suit a popular African mystical belief that a man can postpone his own death by the substitution of another's life. This belief is popular among the rich as a way of prolonging their undue hegemony. Sutherland has jettisoned the dynastic exigencies which indemnify Admetus considerably and has substituted this motif appropriately in an essentially African extended family system where a dynastic recession is too remote by a selfish greed for prolonged wealth and long life for its own sake (176). In *Alcestis*, the wife is the central figure around whom the pathos of the play revolves while in *Edufa*, it is the husband who now occupies the central focus of the play (177). Sutherland's adaptation therefore can be seen as a new creation. The theme is purely African although there are obvious "Euripidean strains, in *Kankam*"; the revelling Senehi, and Ampoma (179). Soyinka's adaptation is quite different from both Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* and Sutherland's *Alcestis* because Soyinka's audience is primarily non-African.

although his theme is universal. The characters in the play retain their Greek names while "the world-view is predominantly Grecian (184)

The introduction of the wedding scenes by Soyinka in *The Bacchus* of Euripides, according to Asgill (1990) shows both the past and future of Dionysus. The first pantomime reveals the freedom gained by Hippoclidus, a worshiper of Dionysus, from the constraints of a marriage to a very ugly bride and that is in spite of her ingratiating wealth". Besides, the wedding scenes create a hypnotic effect on Penthus and from this point his resistance to Dionysus begins to crumble specifically after he has drunk Dionysian wine. He loses his will and gets mad that he has no choice than to spy on the Maenads (186).

The treatment that Soyinka gives to his *Opera Woyosi* (1984) an adaptation of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1973) which in turn is a transposition of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1969) gives a significant justification for its comparison with *The Bacchae* of Euripides. Lindfors (1994) observes that *Opera Woyosi* (1984) like *The Bacchae* of Euripides is a topical Nigerian satire whose quality lies in the power of its delivery. Soyinka retains the names of quite a number of his cast: Captain Macheath, Hookfinger Jake, Police Commissioner "Tiger" Brown, Jimmy, Polly, Jenny, Sukie and Lucy. Whenever he creates a new name, such a name does not have a significant change on the role of such a character. For instance, Jonathan Anikura, the proprietor of a business school for beggars known as the "Home from Home for the Homeless" resembles Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum, and his wife, "De Madam performs the role that Mrs. Celia Peachum in the Gay's and Brecht's Operas. However, Soyinka has introduced his own innovations like he does in *The Bacchae* of Euripides. The introduction of the Kangaroo court scene where Colonel Moses is tried by Anikura's beggars and associates and is convicted of belonging to a secret society is Soyinka's concoction. This is similar not in significance, to the introduction of the wedding scenes by Soyinka in *The Bacchae* of Euripides (26).

Maduakor (1987) makes a significant and useful observation on the structure of *The Bacchae* and *The Bacchae* of Euripides. He notices two dramatic moments in the Penthus - Dionysus conflict. The first is concerned with the physical incarceration of Dionysus and the other is the psychological detention of Penthus which provides the climax of the whole story. The subsequent death of Penthus with the various sufferings inflicted on him and the banishment of Agave and Cadmos which forms the denouement are present in the Euripidean plot. Soyinka accepts this plot but in his version, it is the self-surrender of Penthus that forms the climax of the entire action. *The Bacchae* of Euripides is not strictly structured along the Euripides' pattern. "Soyinka cleverly organises the action into a two-part movement without any demarcation, each part of which terminates, as is typical for Soyinka, in scenes of intensified action" (260).

Two omissions are made by Soyinka in *The Bacchae* of Euripides. The first is the two futile attempts made by the Maenads to capture Penthus after he has been discovered where he is hiding in a tree and the second is the punishment meted out to Agave, Kadmos and their family. These two incidents take place in *The Bacchae*. Soyinka has perhaps omitted the two scenes in order to give prominence to the significant theme of the heinous picture of a tyrant either in Thebes, in Zaire, in Libya, in Iraq, in Nigeria or in any society under a dictatorial or autocratic government. This theme is also depicted in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* where the tyrannical regimes of President for life Macia Nguema (late) of Equatorial Guinea, Emperor

for life (ex) Jean-Baptiste Bokana of the Central African Republic; life President Mobutu Sese Koko of Congo Kinshasa and the life President (ex) the Field-Marshal El-Haji Dr Idi Amin of Uganda, DSC, DSO, VC etc," are satirised (v).

Similarly, in terms of theme, Oluian's *Who's Afraid of Salarin*, a play based on Gogol's *The Nigerian public servants*. The types of luola, the chief magistrate, the price control officer, the Govern Juceptor is according to Crow a direct satire on the corrupt practices of the unctionor for Education and Cooperatives, the chief medical officer are grossly condemned by Osofisan (112) Gogol in *The Government Inspector* draws a resemblance between the role of Ishola in *Who's Afraid of Salarin* and *The Mayor* in Gogol's version. Gogol had shown with such deadly persuasion the process of decay of the autocratic regime and its corrupt state apparatus. Behind the gallery of petty civil servants depicted in the play lurks the figure of the nation's top "civil servant" (14).

The use of language by Soyinka in *The Bacchae* of Euripides is superb. The play is charged with present day registers and hackneyed expressions, Asgill (1990) gives examples of these a general call-up, state of emergency", "territorial integrity, agent of subversion for some foreign power', 'professional code of conflict. (187). This type of expression is absent in *The Bacchae*. Soyinka might have done this deliberately to give currency and significance to the contemporary theme which he portrays in the play.

Mention must also be made of the influence Shakespeare play, *Romeo and Juliet*, has on Zulu Sofola in his *Wedlock of the Gods* Both plays teach moral lessons discountenancing the norms of the society. The two plays in the view of Bamigboye (1988) questions the legitimacy of the society's control on the liberty of man. *Romeo and Juliet* compare with *Ogwoma* and *Uloko* who are not prepared to recognise the societal evil forces that will disallow them from marrying each other. The eventual marriage of *Romeo and Juliet* with the opposition from Tybalt, a cousin to the Capulets is similar to the marriage of *Oguroma* and *Uloko* with *Odibei's* opposition. *Balthasar* in *Romeo and Juliet* plays a similar role with *Anwasia* in *Wedlock of the Gods* in breaking the sad news of the death of *Juliet* to *Romeo* and of the disappearance of *Ogwoma* to *Uloko* which eventually turns to be news of death. One of the differences that are noticeable in the plays is the fact that *Wedlock of the Gods* is an African play while *Romeo and Juliet* is an English play. While the characters in *Wedlock of the Gods* come from low social economic class, the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* are of the aristocratic provenance. But in both plays, love seems to have triumphed (40). While Sofola should be indebted to Shakespeare, Soyinka too should be indebted to Euripides for providing the foundation on which Soyinka and Sofola have built.

Conclusion

The issue of transposition and adaptation of play texts should not be seen as a strange development in the growth of African drama. In reworking play-texts, certain changes are made in order to show its relevance in the playwright's own society. The adaptation of Soyinka's *The Bacchae* of Euripides from Euripides' *The Bacchae* should not be seen as an exception but rather Soyinka's artistic wizardry demonstrated in his ability to bring a Greek drama of two thousand years ago close to the African world and contemporary experience should be commended. Such a brave attempt calls for a communal feast and a tumultuous celebration of scholasticism.

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