

Ife Journal of Languages and Literatures
Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife
Vol. 7 No. 1 2021
pp. 313-335

**Yoruba Mythology: Osofisan's Ideological Haven in *Once Upon
Four Robbers and Esu and The Vagabond Minstrel***

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and critics around the world interpret Femi Osofisan's literary oeuvre from different perspectives. Beyond aesthetics, his dramaturgy offers multiple vistas for a critical appraisal of society. Given the many interpretations of his works, it is problematic to circumscribe them within a single ideological chamber as many scholars and critics have sought to do. However, this study demonstrates that Osofisan's ideological profundity derives mainly from the Yoruba mythology which foregrounds the matrix of his literary haven. Utilizing the rich potential of Yoruba mythology, Osofisan projects his social vision by revalorizing the complementarities of opposites as inexorable items of social progress. Through the critical lens of deconstructive criticism, this study reveals another stratum of meaning in Osofisan's plays. Using his two plays *One Upon Four Robbers* and *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel*, it is revealed that their primal ideological praxis derives from the Yoruba mythology. Thus, the Yoruba mythology provides an ideological imperative which galvanizes Osofisan's creative and aesthetic convictions. While scholars and critics may interpret literary texts from diverse perspectives, the success of Osofisan's creative leaning on the Yoruba mythology should encourage further interpretations of texts from other African mythological hues which are replete with suitable, ideological framework.

Key Words: Yoruba Mythology, Deconstruction, Ideology, Interpretation

Introduction

Humanity is a function of the inevitable interaction of opposites. Sanford L. Drob aptly opines that “everywhere one turns, opposition is at hand” (11). Perhaps, Drob implies that it is improbable to critically consider the world without confronting the existential and primordial alignment of opposites in every stratum. Thus, the progress in existence, within humanity and nature, is the end product of the mutual interaction between contrary elements. When Osofisan’s plays are scholarly and critically scrutinized, it is evident that he commits to the idea of social change. However, he achieves his social change objectives through a constant juxtaposition of opposites. His ideological cornerstone inheres from the Yoruba mythology which supplies him a plethora of remarkable proof of the inevitable interaction of opposites. No doubt, the Yoruba mythology is replete with deities and pantheons of contrary suppositions. In the two plays selected for this study, the playwright directly appropriates the Yoruba mythology using *Esu* as patron god to pursue his ideological vision. It can be profitably argued that some aspects of the Yoruba mythology are subsumed in complementarities and dualities which define the people’s appreciation of contemporary reality. Derek Wright remarks that:

Yoruba metaphysics, it has been noticed, is famous for its warring complementary dualities and has a special capacity for making extremes generate their opposites, with the design of containing conflicts and maintaining harmony through balance and release instead of by

repression. This spirit of complementarity is forcefully expressed by the *egungun*, in which the cultic and the festive, the sacred and the satiric, coexist. (23)

Osofisan's artistic ideology supports the notion that the world we live in is a conglomeration of opposites and their complementarities with each other. In this way, man can locate his spiritual and socio-economic essence in the unity of opposites, which offers a pristine model as the structure of reality. In nature, in art, in science and in thought processes, there is a sense in which we can say that man is confronted with a myriad of opposites and contraries competing for attention in a fluid and infinite relationship with each other. In art, there is attraction and repulsion, tragedy and comedy. In science, we have finite space and infinite space, cold and heat and in thought processes, we have positive thoughts and negative thoughts. This is in accordance with what Wole Soyinka refers to as "the metaphysics of the irreducible: knowledge of birth and death as the human cycle; the wind as a moving, felling, cleansing, destroying, winnowing force; the duality of knife as blood-letter and creative implement; earth and sun as life-sustaining verities and so on" (53). Soyinka's submission underscores the inevitable alignment of opposites.

While these opposites occur within the sphere of nature and the human system, they reveal mutuality where the existence of one brings the other into being. This conjoining of opposites is an inalienable factor of human existence, which operates across the world, and even in Africa as Wole Soyinka again remarks that "the African world, like any other world is unique. It possesses, however, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarities." (xii) Going by Soyinka's submission above, complementarities of opposites are virtues, which have been artistically utilized by Osofisan in the projection and achievement of his dramatic objectives. Osofisan's literary corpus draws on and is influenced by the Yoruba mythopoetic

cosmos, which is populated by pantheons of conflicting impulses and characteristics. These numinous oppositions and contrarities are deployed in his plays where a culture of opposites and their complementarities with each other is enthroned. The Yoruba belief system and mythology appear to be replete with deities of varying degrees with contradictory suppositions all deriving their essence from Olodumare, the Supreme Being. These deities are regarded as fundamental in the daily interpenetration of earthly activities where the fate of man is determined.

Accordingly, literary artists who pursue the rehabilitation of the Yoruba worldview, attempt to recreate the cultural hybridization and traditional possibilities of the mythopoetic paradigm in their works. These writers also, demonstrate the conflation of contraries and their intersections with each other. For Wole Soyinka, Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, represents the universal notion of duality, which can be located everywhere in the Yoruba cycle of existence. Ogun's symbol, the iron, is cast in its frenetic binary function of knife as blood-letter and as a creative implement of farming. Derek Wright juxtaposes the dualism in Ogun, and Sango, the god of thunder and of rainfall and their complementarities are revealed in the force field of human existence:

During the violent storms and harvest rains, Sango's fertile electricity is conducted by Ogun's iron staffs into the womb of the earth and is there discharged to be released into new crops thus tapping and harnessing potentially destructive energies to check their hostile expressions and ensure the regeneration of nature. (10)

This dualism and complementarities of opposites in the Yoruba worldview provide writers with a vision with which to interpret contemporary reality, and in their works, they create characters

who act as surrogates of these pantheons. For Soyinka, therefore, Ogun becomes the epicenter of his supernatural and mythic appropriation invested with diverse extra-terrestrial characteristics.

Derek Wright again writes that:

Ogun exemplifies the Yoruba dynamic of complementary, mutually determinative opposites. He represents the complete cycle of death and creation, in which dissolution and decay are accompanied by fertility, creation employs violently destructive energies, and even slaughter may be conducive to new growth. Ogun is the blood-besotted war god who in a drunken delirium slaughtered his own men; but he is also the protector of the orphans his wars make. As god of the road he is a force for progress, but he is also the greedy scavenger preying upon the wrecks that it daily provides. (15)

Soyinka's creative impulses as a writer, is located within the Ogunian paradigm. He demonstrates in some of his works, a concerted effort to amalgamate the reality of human existence with the fluid interplay of supernatural forces. Therefore, we agree with Derek that "in Ogun, forces must first collide before they can cohere, and the earth must be ravaged to be restored" (15).

Although, separated from Soyinka's ideological vision and literary inclinations, Femi Osofisan also derives his vision of change and social transformation from the Yoruba mythology. Even though he admits his ideological confluence with Soyinka which draws from their Yoruba

heritage, Osofisan highlights the point where he veers off with his mentor, in the use of the god Ogun, “in opposition to Soyinka’s towering Ogun, I have tried to place the Orunmila figures, and shift the accent away from violence to accommodation, reflection, construction, and healing. (22) In addition to deploying Orunmila and Ifa in his dramaturgy, Osofisan also propagates Esu as one of his patron gods. This difference in the use of Yoruba pantheons by Soyinka and Osofisan is, according to Funso Aiyejina because “Soyinka embraces Ogun as his major metaphor mainly because Ogun’s personality coincides with his as an unrepentant agent of revolutionary change, and Esu as the subterranean catalyst of dialectic self-examination” (16) It is Esu’s image as the “catalyst of dialectic self-examination” that underlines its constant dialectic inversion in Osofisan’s plays. Besides Esu, Osofisan’s works are always interspersed with other gods and mythical images that he situates as part of a transmutative process where they occur in mutual complementarities. Before embarking on the critical exegesis of the two plays selected for this study and Osofisan’s ideological leaning on the Yoruba mythology, it is necessary to examine other critical voices that have engaged the Yoruba mythology and the inevitable complementarities that exist in it.

The Yoruba mythology: Critical voices

Wole Soyinka in his *Myth, Literature and the African World* reinforces the central and symbolic role of gods and mythical images in shaping the African consciousness and worldview. This world view straddles the spiritual doctrines of the primitive African man on one hand and the secular transforming influences which have inspired academic and scholarly productions. It encompasses the metaphysical imperatives of deities located everywhere in Africa. These deities most times serve as animist materialistic mediums which act as sources of spiritual regeneration among the people. They also enhance the African consciousness as providing a platform for

regeneration and continuity. Soyinka's apparent prefigurations of the African belief system in relation to man's existence and environment is located more specifically in Yoruba mythology. This is because Yoruba mythology provides a symbolic platform where the mystical and the metaphysical are manifested. For Soyinka, there is a primordial existence of the unity of opposites in African culture and metaphysics which becomes a virtue pragmatically utilized by the homiletics and progenitors of African world view. Many scholars easily identify Osofisan as an African scholar that has made use of the complementarities in his native Yoruba metaphysics where gods and mythical images exist and share a reciprocal relationship. His use of Esu and Orunmila, two iconic gods with contrasting qualities underscores his commitment to demonstrate that there is unity in opposites and contraries require the existence of each other for progress and advancement. The universe of Osofisan's plays is dominated by the unification of opposites which range from available historical evidences to class struggle and socio-economic realities of his immediate society. Therefore, Soyinka's example of the virtues of complementarities which can be located everywhere in Africa is apt in describing Osofisan's appropriation and subsequent enthronement of gods and mythical images in his dramaturgy.

In establishing the ontological principle of the unity of opposites which abound in Yoruba metaphysics and which provide writers like Osofisan and Soyinka the ideological platform to experiment their art, Derek Wright, writing in *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (1993) examines the symbolic roles of gods and mythical images and the entire supernatural force in shaping the worldview of writers in Africa. Although Soyinka is the main focus in this incisive scholarly critique of the place of Yoruba pantheons in his works, it provides on a larger scale the encompassing principle of complementarities that runs through the entire Yoruba metaphysics from where other writers like Osofisan draw on. Derek observes that:

In Yoruba cosmology, a constant input of transitional energy is required to regenerate the universe and prevent its precarious equilibrium from settling into a sterile and stagnant harmony. This energy, in Soyinka's visionary reading in "The Fourth Stage," is supplied by an unceasing, alternating cycle of disruption and reparation, a dialectic of infraction and restoration ruled by the principle of complementarity. (13)

This aforementioned principle of the unity of opposites and complementarities of contraries provides a melting point for Soyinka and Osofisan. Although their appropriation of the different gods differ in that while Soyinka embraces Ogun and Sango to underline elements of violence and retribution, Osofisan is solely more concerned with Orunmila and Esu to reveal that in spite of their opposed characteristics and manifestations, there is an undeniable affinity between the two gods which reveals a symbiotic relationship where one cannot do without the other. Apparently, this principle of antinomy becomes a fundamental factor in shaping Osofisan's creative impetus and informing the growth of his theatre. Although some critics like Saint Gbilekaa, James Taar Tsaior, Chris Anyokwu, Hope Eghagha, have argued that Osofisan's appropriation of gods and mythical images in his art has essentially been to pursue his Marxist objectives where the gods are revealed to be hand in gloves with comprador bourgeois and capitalists as in *No More The Wasted Breed*, a critical insight into his dramaturgy reveals that his use of these pantheons and gods is to address the need for constant intermingling of disparate entities and to show that contrary elements require the existence of their counterparts. Even in *No More the Wasted Breed* as mentioned above, there is a sense in which we can say that humans and gods complement each other to build a pragmatic and symbolic new direction for social progress. When he draws on Yoruba historical provenance and the numerous evidences that abound in it, Osofisan buttresses that opposites must embrace each other in order to find advancement. In Yoruba history, the mythical Moremi must commit class suicide and embrace

her class opposite in order to uncover the invincibility of the marauding Igbos to save her people from imminent disgrace and shame. In reconstructing and dramatizing that famed historical episode in *Morountodun*, Osofisan, through a play-within-a-play technique, invests Titubi with Moremi characteristics and presents two classes of people, the peasant farmers and the bourgeois, the latter under siege from their class counterparts as a result of indiscriminate taxation. Titubi's decision to offer herself to be captured by the rebellious farmers is first informed by her search for fame and to save her class from ridicule like the mythical Moremi, but her subsequent sojourn with her class opposite in the jungle changes the entire class equilibrium. Unlike Moremi, she is equipped with a new consciousness and orientation which elevates her to the honorific status of a heroine albeit in a totally new sphere. So what Osofisan does is to squeeze history and myth to extract only the tangible as can sauce his idea of change.

Osofisan's appropriation of gods in Yoruba mythology and their subsequent deployment in his drama perhaps informs Chris Anyokwu's monograph series titled *Esu, Femi Osofisan and the Theatre Parable*. Anyokwu's attempt resembles Funso Aiyejina's own *Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticism*, a scholarly tribute to Esu and its deployment by Osofisan as a galvanizing symbol and as force for chance and indeterminacy. Chris Anyokwu, in his topical and critical analysis of Esu is concerned with Osofisan's use of the god as a trope for empowerment within the Yoruba metaphysics. He highlights Esu's conspicuous position in the overall spiritual universe of the Yoruba people and to what extent Osofisan rehabilitates the god in his dramaturgy. According to Anyokwu, "our overriding concern here is Esu as a titular divinity *and* a serviceable poetic metaphor in Femi Osofisan's dramaturgy". (7). From the foregoing, there is a broader sense in which Esu is projected as occupying a honorific position as a pantheon and as such, venerated by its adherers and

reinstated in literature as a force for progress. Anyokwu insists that given Osofisan's constant engagements with the human condition and the frequent interplay of various elements that confront or determine his daily life, and given Esu's main characteristics of creating indeterminacy, chance and confusion among men, the playwright easily finds in Esu a metaphor for continual interrogation of reality. Esu offers multiple categories regarding its essence and representations but the most obvious is the continual offer of alternatives. Although, Anyokwu's recrudescence of the Esu trope offers little in terms of creating a new vista in the understanding and appreciation of the deity, it does however emphasize the salient characteristics of the god which underscores its constant infractions and entrance in Osofisan's dramaturgy. Anyokwu notes that:

Eṣu inhabits a crossroads for two reasons. One, he deposits most sacrifices at the crossroads where they are needed. He is the messenger of deities. Two, as a god in his own right, Eṣu symbolizes ambivalence, duality or paradox, and he is at home at crossroads, a metaphor for confusion, bewilderment and all forms of conflict and contradiction, a neither-nor site for players where accidents are rife. Eṣu teaches us caution, vigilance to be mindful of opposition, to reckon with him in all that we do and to respect small things. (9)

From the foregoing, it is easy to contend that Esu's habitation of crossroads is symbolic as it underscores its indeterminate disposition and at the same time offers multiple avenues for advancement. Crossroads idealistically connote confusion, inertia, and indecision. Therefore, for Esu to choose crossroads as its main hunt, it buttresses the complexity embedded in vice and virtue. The crossroads again as Esu's place of abode leading to many other roads regenerate

alternative traditions in that it provides choices and emphasizes multiple approaches to the vicissitudes of life. In addition to encapsulating indeterminacy, Esu's abode, the crossroad also provides a platform where erring humans deposit their sacrifices for onward distribution and delivery to other gods to whom the sacrifice is made. For our purpose here, we can infer that Anyokwu's most important contribution in his critical inquiry of Esu is that he highlights its embodiment of contraries and contradictions, the physical manifestation of opposites and their alignments.

Funso Aiyejina's *Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticism*, highlights the place of the god Esu in the Yoruba metaphysics, but more poignant is the addition of 'Elegbara' as an accolade and a praise name for Esu which promotes it to the honorific status it occupies in the entire matrix of the Yoruba mythology. Elegbara, which means, the one with many manifestations, underscores Esu's multiple characteristics that encompass good and evil at the same time. However, Aiyejina's thrust in his work suggests the possibility of enthroning Esu Elegbara as a plausible theory in African Literature and criticism. Given its multiple manifestations which straddle opposites and contraries, the writer is of the view that Esu can become a metaphor for the interrogation of various tensions and dimensions that arise in African literature and criticism with a primary focus on the African socio-political experience.

According to Aiyejina, "Esu, the one who is simultaneously short and tall, hard and soft, the dark, short man who is yet so huge that no one can encircle him; Esu, the androgynous deity; Esu, the divine messenger, linguist and interpreter, Esu, the divine enforcer of the will of Olodumare, the supreme being". (1) From the above lines, Esu is many things in one and embraces numerous categories and identities, therefore stands tall in the gateway of the Yoruba

pantheons. However, in presenting Esu Elegbara as an embodiment of varieties and contrary suppositions, the writer is more interested in divesting the god of the devil accolade invested on it by Euro-Christian sensibilities. Aiyejina (2010) maintains that Esu is not the devil as erroneously assumed but offers humans options between good and evil, while punishing those who refuse to offer sacrifice to Olodumare, the Supreme Being. Esu is exonerated of the tragic fate and destiny of man but rather humans are berated for not heeding the god's many warnings. Aiyejina further provides us with an in-depth articulation of the dynamics of Esu and by so doing, introduce us to many important association of its nature as an important god in Yoruba metaphysical continuum:

In Yoruba philosophy, Esu emerges as a divine trickster, a disguise-artist, a mischief-maker, a rebel, a challenger of orthodoxy, a shape-shifter, and an enforcer deity. Esu is the keeper of the divine *ase* with which Olodumare created the universe; a neutral force who controls both the benevolent and the malevolent supernatural powers; he is the guardian of Orunmila's oracular utterances. Without Esu to open the portals to the past and the future, Orunmila, the divination deity would be blind. As a neutral force, he straddles all realms and acts as an essential factor in any attempt to resolve the conflicts between contrasting but coterminous forces in the world. Although he is sometimes portrayed as whimsical, Esu is actually devoid of all emotions. (4)

In the above lines, Aiyejina exposes many Esu attributes to underscore its importance and overriding place both as a god and as a force for spiritual progress. Esu is the divine messenger

between God and man, who sits at crossroads and as the Orisa, offers choices and possibilities. Esu is the gatekeeper, the guardian of the door who safeguards the principle of freewill and keeper of the Ase. As a divine trickster that lures man's emotions creating variety which spices life, Esu brings out the fool and the symbolic child in every man. Its mischief serves to wake up humans from their lethargy and teach them a lesson of life. Esu represents the balance and dualities inherent in nature, day and night, white and black, construction and destruction, love and hate, attraction and repulsion and so forth.

Contraries in Osofisan's dramaturgy

Many critics have isolated contraries in Osofisan's drama to indicate a class relation of opposing forces where one class must overthrow the other in accordance with the Marxist model. For example, Saint Gbilekaa remarks that "in African theatre today, Marxist analysis of the society has been employed both in the conventional and popular theatre to release the people from the claws of exploitation and even to urge them to *revolt* against the decadent social order that oppresses them. (1) This study reveals that Osofisan's use of opposites as determinants of social change stoops at the door step of the Yoruba mythology where a culture of reciprocity and complementarities reign supreme. The foregoing analogy co-opts Sandra L. Richards' view that "grounding his vision of change in a dialectical reading of history, Osofisan manipulates his Yoruba and Western heritages to speak directly of socio-political challenges facing his society and to scrutinize art as a (counter) hegemonic practice". (vii) Unlike Soyinka who adopts Ogun as the primal god of duality, Osofisan adopts Orunmila and Esu as dialectic paradigms in his dramaturgy. Sandra L. Richards asserts that "Whereas Soyinka had selected Ogun, the god of creativity and destruction, as an inspirational model, in his 1976 response; Osofisan poses Orunmila as his own patron". (27) Osofisan highlights the principle of complementarities in the

Yoruba world view by conflating Orunmila and Esu, two gods of contrary qualities in his literary creations thus agreeing with George Sabine and Thomas Thorson that “opposition and contrariety are universal properties of nature; this is at once the Law of cosmos and of thought” (582). Before discussing the playwright’s deployment of traditional elements and the mythic trajectory of Orunmila-Esu-Ifa, let us first examine their origin, complexes and manifestations.

In the Yoruba mythology, Orunmila occurs as the god of justice and wisdom. He possesses the supreme knowledge of human existence together with other divinities. This is because he witnesses the creation of every human being and the enactment of his or her destiny. Thus, Orunmila is described as the god of human destiny and oracle who works hand-in-hand and on behalf of Olodumare, the Supreme Being. On the other hand, Esu is the trickster god of confusion and disorder who is noted for his contradiction and contingency. He is cast in the role of a messenger for Olodumare, dispensing punishment to humans and other gods who may default in offering sacrifice. Esu is also known as god of the crossroads, of indeterminacy and of disharmony. According to Robert D. Pelton, Esu is a god who “presides over the movement from order through disorder to diagnosis of a potential new order” (136). Owing to these contradictory manifestations of Esu, religious syncretism labels it a devil especially by the Christian faith.

Ifa, the third in the mythic trajectory embodies the entire divination essence and characteristics of the Yoruba mythopoetic dynamics. It refers to the system of divination and the verse of the literary corpus is known as the Odun Ifa. As an oracle of divination, the Yorubas who adhere to Ifa’s principles and geomancy consult it to determine their fate in the face of overwhelming odds of life. Ifa’s mantra is carried out through the Opon Ifa, the prognostic divination tray symbolic as a medium of consultation between man and deity. Wande Abimbola validates the sacredness and importance of Ifa in the Yoruba mythology by remarking that:

Without Ifa, the importance of the Yoruba gods would diminish. If a man is being punished by other gods, he can only know this by consulting Ifa. If a community is to make sacrifice to one of its gods, it can only know this by consulting Ifa. So that in this way, Ifa is the only active mouthpiece of Yoruba traditional religion taken as a whole. As a mouthpiece, Ifa serves to popularize the other Yoruba gods; he serves to immortalize them. (3-4)

From the above analysis, the two gods, Orunmila and Esu are diametrically opposed to each other both in origin and in characteristics. The occurrence of these two opposites throws up a tension, which is resolved by the Ifa principle where both are accommodated. Osofisan remarks that “the resolution of that comes out of the Ifa principle. The synthesis, the gathering of everything together, then, that’s resolved in the Ifa principle in the union of Esu and Orunmila”. (17) The two gods (Orunmia and Esu) with contrasting qualities are linked together on the Opon Ifa the Yoruba prognostic divination tray where they complement each other. Thus, there is a deliberate mix of opposites, thesis and antithesis, and their interaction is resolved on the Opon Ifa which acts as a synthesizing process where the fairness and wisdom of Orunmila as agent of progress must require the indeterminacy and confusion of Esu as a necessary determinant of social change. It should be noted that the images of Orunmila and Esu are clearly carved on the Opon Ifa tray of divination. Derek again submits that “Orunmila and Esu are not contradictory but complementary forces, containing their opposites within themselves” (10). Biodun Jeyifo articulates the contrary characteristics of Orunmila and Esu and goes to elaborate their reciprocal relationship, which is profoundly utilized by Osofisan in his plays:

Orunmila is the god of wisdom and prophetic, anticipatory knowledge. Esu, on the other hand, is the trickster god of confusion, chance and contingency. And yet, in the visual and iconic representations of these

two gods on the Opon Ifa, the tray of divination, they are always shown side by side, the principle of benign, prophetic wisdom standing side by side with the principle of disruption, confusion and indeterminacy. (29)

This conjoining of opposites and their intersections become Osofisan's take-off point in his dramatic engagements and it is from these mutations, which are located everywhere in his plays that his social vision is outlined.

The existence of Orunmila, the antithetical occurrence of Esu and the synthesizing platform offered by Ifa creates a mythic triad of Orunmila-Esu-Ifa in Osofisan's plays where they are deployed by the playwright to encompass the salient characteristics of social change achieved through the inevitable interaction of opposites. According to Sandra L. Richards, "Orunmila and his companion, Esu, god of change and chance, symbolically manifest themselves in certain Osofisan's texts as a non-linear, open ended dramaturgic construction that resists hegemony". (27) These manifestations can be located in the two texts we have selected in this study.

Mythical ideology: *Once Upon Four Robbers and Esu and The Vagabond Minstrel*

Once Upon Four Robbers highlights the perennial crossfire between state apparatus and disoriented members of the underclass. This set of people, victims of government's neglect, as a response to the various acts of economic despoliations in the state, decide to take laws into their hands and plunder the social space in order to make ends meet. However, beyond examining the contemporary social malaise of armed robbery, Osofisan pursues his unity of opposite objectives by once again invoking the supernatural to intervene in the affairs of humanity. The play enacts the activities of four robbers who are mourning the death of their leader recently shot dead by the police. As they discuss their fate in the absence of a leader, they are confronted by Aafa, *Esu's* embodiment in human form. The Aafa promise to make the robbers rich:

AAFA: I'll put a power in your hands that will take you out
of the gutters. Into the most glittering palaces.
(Osofisan 26)

He promises the robbers a magic chant that when sung, will enchant their victims allowing them to rob and carry their wares successfully. However, he gives them three rules which they must observe in order to have a successful outing each time they embark on their deadly mission.

AAFA: Three promises and you will be on the highway to riches.

MAJOR: The first?

AAFA: Never to rob the poor.

ANGOLA: But we've just told you-

AAFA: Promise! (*holds out his 'tira*) I know the poor, they do not love each other.

MAJOR: (*licking the 'tira*) Promised. (*they do so in turn.*)

ANGOLA: And the second promise?

AAFA: To rob only the public places. Not to choose your victims as you do among solitary women. Not to break into homes.

MAJOR: Alright! Promised! (*Again the ritual of assent*)

HASAN: Now let's hear the third.

AAFA: The most important. You must promise never again to take a human life. (Osofisan 28)

He also warns them to always chant the song collectively to ensure immediate efficacy. The robbers apply the magic wand and discover that it works. As they carry on with their illicit vocation, one of them ultimately becomes greedy and tries to steal from other members. Arguments and confrontation ensue and one of the robbers, Major is shot. The other members of the gang flee for safety and the police, upon arrival at the scene, arrest Major and take his money. Alhaja, the only woman in the gang approaches the scene where Major is to be shot. Her attempt to rescue Major does not materialize as she would require the collaborative effort of the

other gang members to chant the magical song. She entreats Angola, a leading member of the gang to forgive Major so they can come together to rescue him by chanting the magical song that will hypnotize the public while they escape. As the robbers collectively began to sing the song, the soldiers also prepare to shoot Major and Aafa reappears freezing the action and turning to the audience to ask them for an appropriate ending to the play. This audience participation in Osofisan's drama in a sense symbolizes a commitment to task the larger society with a responsibility to become active participants in the affairs that concern them rather than a docile acceptance of negative tensions that confront them.

Osofisan's choice of the market place as a platform for the unity of man and god is fundamental. It functions primarily as a designated place where economic activities take place, where the rich and the poor and various other classes of people meet for exchange of goods and services. Besides functioning as a melting point for various economic activities, the market place, at least within the African region, has come to be regarded as a locale for the underworld to interact with humans. Various folklore recount how the market place accommodates humans, gods and animals who are eternally involved in various exchanges. The market place in some parts of Africa provides an abode for the shrine of numerous gods who monitor human activities, reward innocence and punish treachery. Almost every market is located at a crossroad where different parts lead to it. As a result of the location of the market, it is therefore not surprising that Esu, the iconic trickster god appears in human form to confront the robbers. Sandra Richards argues that "usually located either in the centre of town or at an outlying crossroads accessible to a number of villages, the marketplace is a favourite spot for *Esu* who mediates the intersections of stability and disorder and of the human and supernatural," (128).

The market therefore provides a synthesizing platform for opposites to achieve unity. However, in the play, Esu is hands in gloves with humans to perpetuate evil and afflict humanity with pain. By aiding the activities of the robbers, Esu demonstrates its complicity in the various duplicities that confront humanity. Although *Esu*, manifesting as Aafa in human form, initially berates the robbers for not following an honest vocation, the god wittingly becomes an accomplice in the dishonest vocation of the robbers by providing a scheme that aids their activity while offering them protection. In this way, Osofisan reveals that the gods, while uniting with humans can play a subversive role in perpetuating human misery. This also throws more light on the nature of the god *Esu*, a trickster who is capable of multiplicity, double standard and indeterminacy. With his unity of opposite objectives achieved, Osofisan advances the plays theatricality by halting proceedings at the end and introducing a totally new dimension to public perception and reception of drama as a form of entertainment. It marks a symbolic trend where the people themselves are to become aware instead of passive participants in social equation but active, in fact, vocal members of society. By adopting this Brechtian practical mode in this play, Osofisan exonerates himself from passing judgment or swaying the mind of the audience. This mode offers the public the opportunity to scrutinize his art and be at liberty to offer multiple and diverse interpretations. Central to unifying all forms of opposites for Osofisan is the market trope, a site where capital and labour must meet, where exploitation and bourgeois excesses must mingle.

Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels dramatizes the plight of five indigent minstrels in search of food. In their search for food, they arrive at a crossroad, *Esu's* best hunt. The crossroad or what Ola Rotimi calls "a place where three foot paths meet" (66), signifies indecision and apparent confusion. The crossroad location is synonymous with *Esu's* manifest characteristics as a

trickster god of confusion, indeterminacy and disorder. The minstrels' arrival at the crossroad heightens an inevitable meeting with *Esu*, a meeting that symbolizes the unity between humanity and supernatural elements. Commenting on Esu's nature and responsibility, Sandra Richards remarks that:

Esu is charged with enforcing policies that are only partially known to man, and because he seemingly delights in sowing confusion, he is known as the god of unpredictable, prone to playing tricks on unsuspecting innocents. Hence he is often popularly labelled a trickster figure and given religious syncretism, is sometimes equated with the Christian devil. (121)

Although the above description of Esu connotes negativity, there is a sense in which we can say that the god also offers opportunities to men that can improve or affect their lives in a positive way. The minstrels' search for food, besides reflecting the economic desperation of their immediate society, epitomizes humanity's endless quest for self-actualization. It does share a semblance with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where two vagabonds, Estragon and Vladimir continually wait for a mysterious Godot that never came. Osofisan's five minstrels are not as unfortunate as Estragon and Vladimir. As the five minstrels arrive at a crossroad searching for food, they encounter an old man who promises to make them wealthy and gives them a boon to assist people who need help

Esu does not see the heart of men,
Only their actions.
Are you ready
To help those among you, who are in distress?
To bring redress to the wronged?
And justice to the exploited? (16)

However, the old man warns them to give the help to people who will in turn compensate them.

...sing and dance,
Let the suffering man heal, and
Afterwards, ask for anything...
...His gratitude
Will make you rich, or make you poor,
It depends on what you ask. (17)

Given that the minstrels were at a crossroad, Esu's best locale, they are unaware that the old man who has given them the magic wand is Esu, disguised in human form. This transformation from god to human as is the case in *Once Upon Four Robbers* becomes the point of unity between chthonic gods and helpless humanity. This again throws a question, is humanity doomed without supernatural intrusion? Can the gods and the supernatural world do without constant interruption and intermingling with human objects? The transformation of Esu into human form in order to have a relationship shares closeness with the provisions of the Christian religion documented in *The Holy Bible*. *The Holy Bible* chronicles the story of the God-head who sent His son Jesus Christ to take human form in order to identify with them and eventually die on the cross of Calvary to save them. As the Bible recounts, Jesus Christ the son of God is born in human flesh although his mother conceives him through the intervention of the *Holy Spirit*. As God's representative on earth in a human form, Jesus Christ begins his ministrations, propagating the word of God and preaching the kingdom of heaven. His extra powerful knowledge of events around him and his abilities to perform miracles set him apart as a spiritual being in a human form. The spiritual must embrace the physical. This unity must take place even for divine purposes. Therefore, the unity of opposites in terms of the union between the supernatural and the physical realm has a divine origin and it is from these that Osofisan's dialectical inclination draws on. In *Esu and The Vagabond Minstrel*, out of the five minstrels, four use their boon to

help people who promise them wealth and the fifth minstrel, Omele uses her boon to assist a woman who had been pregnant for nine years. The pregnant woman delivers her baby successfully. Omele also helps a couple who have leprosy to cure their leprosy but in the process contracts the deadly disease. The old man, Esu, in disguise reveals his identity and turns to the audience to ask them which of the minstrels deserves wealth, pity and mercy.

We can identify two kinds of unities between supernatural and physical elements. These are conscious unity and unconscious unity. The conscious unity between the two realms of existence occurs when, man in his search for solution to the many vagaries of life that confront him, willingly consults the underworld through their priests who offer sacrifice on behalf of the petitioner. The unconscious unity occurs when the gods, exercising their supreme, extra-terrestrial powers intervene in the daily affairs of men without invitation or invocation. With this analogy in mind, we can therefore categorize Esu's intervention in *Esu and The Vagabond Minstrels* as an unconscious one. This is because Esu voluntarily, through the old priest intervenes in the lives of the minstrels with a promise to make them rich provided they use their boon to help people who are in need. As the minstrels interact with the priest, they are in fact unaware that they are joined in unity with the underworld. The priest appears at the end to evaluate the choices made by the minstrels and as the first four all wait eagerly for their impending wealth, the benevolent minstrel wriggle in agony and pain. The priest rewards Omele and punishes the four minstrels. Soon enough, they all discover that the priest is Esu himself who had played tricks on them in order to determine their emotional and mental strength. Claiming inability to judge the choices of the minstrels as to who is right or wrong between Omele and his four other counterparts, the priest invites the audience to take a decision as to which set of the minstrels is right or wrong.

Conclusion

It is obvious that Osofisan experiments his art form at different levels accommodating a wider audience but at the same time opening a multi-dimensional vista from which his ideological concerns can be appreciated. First, as with Soyinka, Osofisan reveals an admiration for the Yoruba mythology using them as a metaphorical peg to hang his ideological convictions. Although, Osofisan's appropriation and subsequent interpretation of the Yoruba mythology differs from Soyinka's own, there is a sense in which we can say that both writers agree on the subliminal and symbolic effect which these deities have on arts where they are artistically espoused. While Ogun, the god of iron and the primeval motor mechanic captures Soyinka's fancy and is properly delineated in his works as a force for vengeance, Osofisan is more interested in the tripartite coalition of Orunmila, Esu and Ifa triumvirate. This is apparently because these three in the order which they occur underlie his idea of the inevitable unity of opposites. Significantly, it is this unity of the opposites that runs through the whole of Osofisan's plays demonstrating the inevitable reciprocity that exists between contraries. Again, Osofisan adopts a Brechtian approach to his art which identifies the extemporaneous issues that confront man daily. This has led many to suggest that there is a Herbert Ogunde worldview to Osofisan's theatre and dramaturgy. This view seems plausible because his theatre is primarily designed for the people who see themselves in his drama and can easily identify with topical issues which engage and confront their daily existence. Cabral and Fanon dimension enthrone a dialectical materialistic sensibility which has dominated critical enquiries into his dramaturgy. Of all the

dimensions outlined, it is the Yoruba metaphysics that provides Orunmila-Esu-Ifa principle which underlies the unity of opposites in Osofisan's art.

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