

Deconstructionist Interpretations of Rotimi's *Ovonranwen* *Nogbaisi* in Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*

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INTRODUCTION

History and theatre maintain a close relationship. The former provides material for artistic recreation in terms of the latter. This link can be exemplified by historical plays, like William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Emeka Nwabueze's *Dragons Funeral*, Emmy Unuja Idegu's *The Legendary Inikpi* and numerous other dramatic texts. A playwright enjoys the artistic liberty to wield his tools in articulating a given historical subject to suit his creative philosophy – even when such creativity is of certain remove from facts of history. The playwright, however, may decide to be as faithful as possible to the authenticity of history. Consequently, different dramatists may present diverse pictures of a given historical event. Take as an example, the true history of ancient Benin Kingdom during the 19th century.

Following Obaro Ikime's version of the history, under the caption: "The Western Niger Delta and the Hinterland in the 19th Century" (262), the picture of the erstwhile powerful, peaceful and prosperous Benin was that of a troubled kingdom during the first half of 19th century. Economy was in disarray, while hostility with her Itsekiri neighbour aggravated matters. Numerous other circumstantial forces drove the economy further into dungeon.

The status quo generated political upheavals as rebellions and rivalries rocked the kingdom. Spirited efforts by the monarchy, to arrest the situation rather complicated matters. European authorities who were already establishing their influence within the Niger Coast exploited the turbulent condition as an excuse for imposing themselves on the kingdom during the second half of the 19th century. This condition lingered until the reign of Idugbowa, who ruled Benin with the name Ovonramwen, and was popularly referred to as "Nogbaisi" (meaning "The Enlightened") (Yerima 9).

Ovonramwen did not, like many of his predecessors, have to fight for his throne, but he had enemies among his chiefs. And to secure his authority, he executed all the chiefs. This did not solve the problem. Rather, it created fear and intrigue in the King's court and frustrated the needed stability for effective, rational and unified planning against the growing aggression from European imperialism of the 1880s (Ikime 275).

Ahmed Yerima recounts:

Since 1862, British efforts to persuade the Benin Monarch to sign a treaty of protection which would give the British government some legal basis for assuming control over Benin affairs had been rejected by the Benin authorities. However, in 1892, Henry Galway, the British Vice-Consul... visited Benin and was able to persuade Oba Ovonramwen to sign a treaty of protection with Britain. This treaty contained the usual clauses committing the Benin Kingdom to throw open their country to free trade (9).

But this contract rather spelt doom for the Benin Kingdom, since her subsequent insistence on the monopoly of trade against the interest of Britain, attracted confrontation. Hence, in 1896, under the leadership of Vice-Consul Phillips, the British government started the conquest and occupation of the kingdom. The disastrous consequences of this move led to the dethronement of Ovonramwen and his replacement by British hegemony.

This authentic history attracted the creative interest of playwrights like Ola Rotimi and Ahmed Yerima whose plays diverged in many respects, while the latter poses to be more faithful to historical authenticity. However, since a playwright may, inadvertently employ language and other elements of composition in a way that predisposes his work to meanings beyond his personal conjecture, post-modernist criticism advocates reading approaches that are not tied to interpretive determinacy. One of such approaches is a reading process conceptualized as "deconstruction". The objective of this essay is, to attempt a deconstructionist reading of Ola Rotimi's historical play – *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and explore Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* as a textual reflection of the deconstruction.

DECONSTRUCTION AS A READING PROCESS.

As a reading process, Jacques Derrida's brain child – Deconstruction – proposes that a literary text has varying levels of interpretation other than its seemingly definite or stable meaning. Derrida points out that a deconstructive reading always searches for a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he (the writer) commands and what he does not command.... (158). Deconstructive reading further aims at producing varying meanings of a text through the careful tracing and dismantling of possible binary oppositions, contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the literary work.

A binary opposition refers to two opposing concepts or elements which constitute “a tacit hierarchy” (Abrams 72) in which one element – the first of the two – is made superior and (privileged) while the other becomes (derivative) and inferior (Bressler 106). Example, in the following elements or binary oppositions; man/woman, human/animal, soul/body, good/bad, the first elements man, human, soul, good are privileged and superior to the second concepts – woman, animal, body, bad respectively. Binary opposition also implies the establishment of “one centre of unity” that functions “as the basis of all our thoughts and actions” while “another is decentred”. In the above example, the first elements are made the central focus of textual unity while the second which is derivative is decentred.

The implication of a binary opposition in textual analysis is, therefore, that the privileged and superior term forms the central basis of meaning while the inferior term is decentred. Deconstruction objects to this functioning of binary opposition and encourages, in textual interpretation, the inversion of the hierarchy of the opposition in order to create room for varying meanings of the text, when the decentred concept assumes the superior or privileged position in the hierarchy. For instance, when the hierarchy now reverts to woman/man, animal/human, body/soul, bad/good, textual meaning also varies in accordance with the changes in the centre of unity.

Ambiguity refers to the quality of having “more than one relatively distinct meaning” in a context (Cederblom and Paulsen 406) or “an idea, statement or expression capable of being understood in more than one sense” (New Webster 28), while contradiction implies a statement, action or behaviour “that cannot (logically) be true”, and are “inconsistent in all contexts” (Cederblom and Paulsen 407).

The aim of deconstruction is to create avenue for more than a single interpretation of a text, thereby making its meaning indeterminate. Barbara Johnson points out that:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction.... The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself....(73).

M.H. Abrams notes therefore that a deconstructionist study of a text “sets out to show that there are conflicting forces within the text itself which serve to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meanings into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities” (69).

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi

The play depicts the attitude of *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* – the Oba of the ancient Benin Kingdom and his subjects towards the intrusion of whitemen into their land in search of commerce. The first reading of the text seems to suggest a primary theme of commercial conflict. But the playwright's use of words and his portrayal of events in the play, expose equivocalities, ambiguities and binary oppositions that dismantle the play's claim to a single determinate interpretation.

The prologue exposes a binary opposition that engenders possible interpretations. For instance, the playwright begins with the following expressions:

If
I survive
THIS ONE
If
Indeed I survive
THIS ONE
I will lavish thanks upon
my maker;
for many a suffering have I
known but
THIS ONE
is the father of them all! (xii)

This statement signifies the presence of an oppressive authority which subjects the citizens of a given human entity or some of them to a distressful condition. Given this primary signification, an opposing binary idea, such as the denial of authority or deposition, appears in view. In deconstructive terms, therefore, the binary

opposition in the prologue involves the presence of power or authority in a contradictory relationship with weakness or denial of authority. The prologue, therefore, may also be interpreted as being a prediction of an imminent suppression of oppressive and powerful authority.

However, other binary oppositions can still be derived from the expressions of the prologue, which open up a realm of other significations.

For example, the opening statement in the prologue is an ambiguous signification implying both hope and hopelessness. The voices that are crying out, suggest suffering and danger, although there is hope of survival. But the fear that there might be no survival also looms in the horizon. Metaphorically, the prologue may be considered to be a representation of a kingdom in chains, which is struggling between two opposing ideas – hope of survival and fear of destruction or defeat. There is also a picture of some prisoners, who are subjected to the fear of death – hopelessness – even as they still nurse the hope of survival. As the play unfolds, the above ideas derived from the prologue become obvious, and help to assert the indeterminacy of textual interpretation.

In Act One, Scene One, shortly before a meeting begins in the palace of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, there is an opening expression which echoes the common spirit of Benin people and gives the impression that Benin Kingdom is united:

We move on
as
one.
We move on
the gods of our fathers
leading (3).

The suggestion of unity may be considered reasonable, given the strength of Ovonramwen's uniting power and actions. This statement also suggests the people's trust in their ancestral gods.

In deconstructive terms, some binary oppositions are revealed here, such as unity versus disunity; trust versus distrust. Although the statement privileges the idea of unity over the opposing centre, events in the play invert the hierarchy of the opposition to place disunity at the privileged position – thus giving room for the kingdom to be considered as disunited. For example, when Ovonramwen states: "...Henceforth, a full moon's, my glow – dominant, and unopen to rivalry throughout the empire..." (7), he suggests that there are threats of disunity and insubordination in the kingdom. Rivalry and rebellion are largely evident in the kingdom, such as the murder of Uwangu Egiebo – the Oba's Chief Adviser; and other rebellious acts in the empire. Ovonramwen further proves this in his statements:

Ovonramwen: Brothers, ha! Rebels – all: Obazelu, Obaraye, Eribo,
Osia – the whole rout: rebels! [To the Chiefs.]
Or who here was so blind to the obstacles which those
scoundrels hurled upon my rise to the throne of Adolo, my
father? ... (5)

With the refusal of Ijekiriland to obey the Oba's trading terms, and the ban on their trade (8); the signs of disloyalty from Odundun – the Udezi of Akure (9); the Unease in little Ekpoma (11) the idea of unity becomes a distant cry in Benin Kingdom. Even when Uzazakpo, the court jester, advises the Oba to work more towards achieving the loyalty of his people than instilling fear in them, the Oba acknowledges the disunity in the kingdom when he remarks:

Ovonramwen: Loyalty! Ha! From the people of Benin? Not in our
time (12).

Generally, therefore, the expression of unity at the beginning of this scene, is contradicted by statements that portray disunity, thereby dismantling the play's possible claim to a single, determinate meaning.

Deriving from such ideas as trust and distrust, which are also revealed in the statement – as earlier pointed out – possible interpretations are obvious. For instance, primarily, the idea of trust is privileged over distrust. Spiritually, the people of Benin assume themselves to be safely led by their ancestral gods, who, they believe and strongly trust, shall lead them to success. In Act Two, Scene Three, Ovonramwen restates this trust when some of his chiefs – Iyase and Obakhavbaye – confront him with the questions of whether "to break custom and so anger the gods... or to break the white man's pride with resistance to his coming?... (33):

Ovonramwen: The gods are a part of our existence... They feel with
us our dangers; they share with us the peace. The blood of
slaves spilled upon their altars in prayer for wrongs done
them, is enough to calm their anger and win them back
into our existence again. Our gods do understand.... (34).

Ovonramwen's assumption that the gods "do understand" because they are part of the people, and have received sacrifice, demonstrate maximum trust. This level of trust appears after the Benin warriors have killed

the whitemen, bring home their decapitated heads and discover how sad Ovonramwen feels – Obakhavbaye, in order to justify the murder, expresses trust in the gods, even if the Oba does not approve the action:

Obakhavbaye. The gods of our fathers will not fail us, our brothers (37).

Even when it is becoming obvious that the gods have not protected their welfare enough, they still direct trustful prayers to them:

Prayer of the orphan: without a father; without a mother – Gods, may my next coming be different! (43).

However, the consequent failure of the gods to achieve success for the Oba and his people overturn the hierarchy of opposition, to privilege distrust over trust. The outcome of the events of the play shows that the gods should be distrusted and blameworthy, contrary to the people's, presentation of them as blameless.

The play's depiction of the whitemen also reveals a binary opposition in which two opposing ideas – diplomacy and indiscretion – are obvious. In Act Two, Scene 2, the whitemen are portrayed as being diplomatic, self-controlled and averse to the use of force against Benin people during the Argue Festival. This is demonstrated in the encounter between the whitemen and Benin warriors during the festival:

Idiaghe (breathless). Master! Danger, master – we go back!

Phillips. What is it this time, Mr. Campbell?

Campbell. That drumming, Your Excellency. From my knowledge of native customs, I fear it is summoning the people to arms!

Phillips. I appreciate your anxiety, Mr. Campbell, even though in their expression you incline toward melodramatic alarm at the expense of demoralizing the rank and file!

Campbell. On the contrary, Your Excellency.

Phillips. A little self-control might help in the present circumstances (29).

To demonstrate this diplomacy, Phillips orders his men to collect all the revolvers from the officers and lock them up as they wait for some Benin men advancing hastily towards them. He also requests his men to be warned “that under no circumstances must they display their cutlasses” (29). Phillips later instructs Idiaghe to take his swagger stick to “Overami” and tell him that “Consul-General Phillips sends him greetings from the bottom of his heart...” (32). At this stage in the interpretation of the whitemen's attitude, the text still places diplomacy at the superior centre, while indiscretion or tactlessness remain decentred. But this hierarchy is overturned, to lack of tact when the text begins to show the whitemen's undiplomatic defiance and contravention of the order from the warriors that they should leave Benin. Phillips demonstrates this contradictory interplay of diplomacy and tactlessness in the following remarks:

Phillips: Take this stick to Overami! [Hands him his swagger-stick.] Tell him that Consul-General Phillips sends him greetings from the bottom of his heart. Tell him that we are coming to salute him and to discuss friendship palaver. Nothing more. Tell him we had planned to enter Benin this evening, but I hear he is busy, so we shall not enter Benin this evening. But we shall enter Benin tomorrow morning.... (32).

When the errand bearer – Idiaghe – runs off, Phillips betrays most bluntly, the indiscretion that dictates the later disaster that befalls the whitemen in their adventure. This indiscretion is obvious when he dishes his orders:

To your positions, gentlemen. We march on to Gilli Gilli. There we bivouac for the night. At dawn tomorrow we start off for Benin.

If Phillips and his men were persistently and sincerely diplomatic – as the text intends to portray them – rather than tactless, they would have exercised some patience till the festival is over.

The depiction of Ovonramwen Noghbaisi's role in the murder of whitemen during the Argue Festival reveals an opposition between two antithetical ideas: disapproval and approval. The author presents Ovonramwen as showing disapproval to insinuations of war against the whitemen through his call for “caution” in dealing with them (34). But inversely, this picture of the Oba is contradicted to depict him as being in support (approving) of the attack. For instance, his equivocal response to the following remarks betrays his approval:

Obayuwana. Gods! What is Benin coming to?

Ologbosere. A fierce snake sleeping.

Ovonramwen. That may be so.

[His voice rising with emotion, himself unconvinced of the wisdom of his very stand].

But because a fierce snake sleeps, does not mean it has lost the power to kill if rudely vexed!

[Softer]

Caution is our word, my people. Let the whitemen rudely prod us further, in spite of caution, then he will know that the way a cat walks is not the way it catches a rat! (34).

No further information is needed here to prove that Ovonramwen has approved the killing of the whitemen, who are, no doubt, 'vexing' Benin people rudely right now.

The depiction of Ovonramwen in the text manifests a binary opposition in which two ideas – hero and anti-hero contradict each other and encourage diverse meanings. The text primarily depicts Ovonramwen as a dignified tragic hero of the classical Greek mold – an Aristotelian tragic hero: a personage who is not pre-eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty; one who is highly renowned and prosperous – a personality like Oedipus, Thyestes or other illustrious men of such families (Dukore 42). Ovonramwen, as a tragic hero, fits this definition, given the fact that he is an autocratic monarch who inflicts extremely severe punishment on any of his subjects that stands on his way. He sentences prisoners to death for killing his chief adviser, and for being rude to him. He damns all appeals from his chiefs who plead with him to forgive the prisoners' rudeness (5). He does not even respect his chiefs, hence, he speaks to them arrogantly.

Recognizing all this, his court jester – Uzazakpo – warns him promptly that the way he “talked to the chiefs was not the right way” (8). Uzazakpo warns him further, after his dealings with the elders of Ekpoma who come to report to him about crisis in the land:

Uzazakpo. You handled that one well. But I still say that you were too hard on your own elders this morning.

Ovonramwen. I offend no one.....

Uzazakpo. True, but your approach is fear. What you want is loyalty. Not fear.

Ovonramwen. Loyalty! Ha! From the people of Benin? Not in our time (12).

At any rate, these negative traits of the monarch are not entirely without reasons. He has to put on such a hard disposition in order to manage the internal crisis confronting him in the land. This is a mark of heroism, since he is not unnecessarily autocratic, rash and arrogant. Besides, he is not depraved since he can be admired for his firmness, sincerity of purpose and respect for tradition. But his hamartia or tragic flaw is his inability to heed the advice on how to enlist sincere loyalty of his chiefs, hence, it leads to his calamity. If he were sure of their loyalty, his equivocal attitude towards the intrusion of Consul-General Phillips and his team during the Ague Festival wouldn't have been exploited by his warriors, to cut down the whitemen. The warriors, irrespective of their strong urge to destroy, would have avoided killing the men until they get clear orders from the Oba.

Ultimately, as a dignified, tragic personage, Ovonramwen suffers because he cannot escape doing so as the monarch – a representative of the social community. In fact, his high status is not in doubt, reaching the heights of Odewale in Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* or Oedipus in *Sophocles Oedipus the King*. Rotimi strives in his text- Ovonramwen Nogbaisi – to uphold the Oba's tragic status by showing his continued struggle and faith in his royal position, even when his deposition has become obvious during his trials in the whitemen's court. Example, when the Oba is about to surrender himself to the whitemen's authority at the courthouse, he is still surrounded by royal aura. Even when the trial has commenced, the playwright still strives to portray the Oba as powerful – being honoured yet as “Home – Leopard of the Benin Empire....” (62).

This positioning of hero as the primary interpretive centre is overturned in the text to privilege anti-hero. The author's attempt to sustain Ovonramwen's tragic status till the end of the play is frustrated and contradicted by the resultant creation of an anti-hero out of the Oba. For instance, following the declaration of Ovonramwen's deposition, Consul-General Moor demands for Ovonramwen's opinion. Before he responds, a soldier hurries in to report the death of Obayuwana, who stabbed himself in the court-house but was borne out. Quickly following this report, Ovonramwen descends into ignominious, clownish and dishonest behaviours. Instead of manifesting controlled, emotional attitude, dignity of physical carriage and soundness of mind, he reacts verbally, physically and emotionally, like a deranged clown, rather than a hero:

Ovonramwen. For me ... I know ... for me ... he honoured me still ... me ... say all you can ... my people still accept me –

me, as their ... their k - i - n - g ! Me - me ... [Rises proudly].

I am still Idugbowa, the son of Adolo ... Home - Leopard of the Benin Empire - O - v - o - n - r - a - m - w - e - n N - o - g - b - a - i - s - i [Dons his crown and strides off with defiant dignity. Soldiers rush forward to intercept him, but Moor stops them] (62).

Apart from the clownish and undecorous appearance of this reaction, it is also insincere or dishonest for an Oba of such a height, who is expected to be of a high intellectual level, to bask in the delirium that he can still be the king of the empire. After all, he knows full well that a greater power has seized his kingdom. Ovonramwen's clownish behaviour is acknowledged by Moor, who, noticing that the Oba has lost strength, articulation and grandeur, stops the soldiers from intercepting him. Ovonramwen is shown to have continued struggling, after escaping from the court-house, but it is anti-heroic to go about it the way he does - knowing how fruitless it is with the British forces against him. For instance, in Act Three, Scene 2, he disguises himself in the garb of a commoner, he further demonstrates narrow-mindedness by the way he still rates his lost authority:

Ovonramwen. I go to him no more. Let him overwhelm me with the worst: Calabar indeed... Do they think, like the sea-crossing parrots that they are, that I yearn to venture into lands distant and strange from my home? Oohh, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi will not succumb to their trickery, my people. So, now it is Ovonramwen's turn to be lured from the earth of his fathers with the glitter of free travel to Calabar or Lagos.

[Laughs dryly.]

One does not try the monkey's tricks on the bush-pigeon, my people. It will fly away...fly, I tell you...and that is what I am going to do...vanish (64).

The various binary oppositions identified in this text and the contradictions involved, reveal "a play of signification that infinitely opens the realm of possible interpretations" (Bressler 116). Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* captures some of such interpretations as may be demonstrated below:

The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen

Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* and Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* are concerned with an identical subject matter and story of how Oba Ovonramwen and his subjects react to the intrusion of British men into Benin Kingdom in pursuit of economic and political interests. But they vary in their expository movements, their portrayals of the Benin people's attitude to the gods, the role of British officers within the period of the Ague Festival. Yerima's text, through its interpretation of these issues, demonstrates its careful tracing and overturning of outstanding conceptual oppositions, equivocalities and contradictions inherent in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*.

The expository scene of Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* is a reflection of one or two of the interpretation accorded to the prologue in Rotimi's version. The Oba is now in chains, telling the story of his deposition and reflecting on his past glories. This situation tallies with the interpretation of Rotimi's prologue as a prediction of the Oba's deposition. With the Oba in chains, the situation also captures the interpretation of Rotimi's prologue as a metaphor of Benin Empire in chains, anarchy; for if the traditional monarch is deposed, the ancient kingdom is also destabilized.

Ahmed Yerima in his play captures the deconstructionist interpretation of the whitemen in Rotimi's version as defiantly tactless and indiscreet. From the onset, Consul-General Phillip is depicted as purely aggressive, defiant and combatant. He demonstrates his determination to attack Benin despite instruction from "Home Office" that "the time may not be just right for an expedition of this nature" (22):

Phillips: Not in my books, not by a mile, not in my books. I am an officer of the British army... I am also the officer on the spot. My discretion tells me that we attack Benin. I have assessed the situation, and I feel that for a better grip of the trade area, Benin must fall... (22).

In *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, the contradiction between the role of the gods and people's perception of them is removed. Here, rather than depicting the Oba and his subjects as highly reverent and reliant on the gods, when the gods are not actually reliable and protective, Yerima's play, contrarily, privileges distrust against trust. Opening his mind to Uzazakpo - the Court Jester - Ovonramwen exhibits a high level of disenchantment with the gods.

Ovonramwen: I asked the gods what they wanted, and they said nothing. So nothing do I give. I asked the gods what they would drink, and they said nothing... Here I am seated, waiting and doing nothing. If the gods want to give away Bini, I shall not stop them... I begged the gods to avert all these noises, the shedding of the blood of Benin people. And they refused... (54).

Uzazakpo: From childhood have I warned you, but you won't listen to me. People have told you that Uzazakpo is a fool, a jester, an idiot. I often say to you, never trust the gods all the time, for they poke at man for their fun... But you never listen to me. I have a story about that, told to me by your father. Do you want to hear the story?

Ovonramwen: yes. But now. First, I pitch my tent against the gods. Then, if I am still alive. I shall hear your story... Double shame, I tell you. Double shame (54 – 55).

Furthermore, the depiction of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi as being equivocal in his response towards the intrusion of whitemen into Benin during the Ague Festival is overturned in Yerima's interpretation. Here, the Oba is made explicitly unequivocal. He is clear in disapproving the suggestion of his warriors that the whitemen should be attacked. For example, during the festival, Ovonramwen receives a report that Phillips "says, that he cannot wait for even two more months to come and see the Oba (36). He observes his chiefs suggesting that he confronts the whitemen, "blood for blood", if they cannot exercise patience. But he opts that "the ceremony must wait for a while", while he gives them audience. Although, his decision attracts protests from his chiefs, he stands firm and even goes extra mile to instruct Ologbose and other warriors:

Ovonramwen: ... You follow Eyebokan to the camp of the whitemen. See their leader called Phillips. Tell him that I shall receive him... (37).

But some of the warriors like Uso, Ugiagbe, Obaradesagbon suggest respectively: "Let us attack them"; "Let us arrest and keep them at the palace prisons until the Oba can see them"; "Let us chase them all away..." (37). A dissenting voice from Iyase suggests that the whitemen should be allowed in, but should not see the Oba until the warriors desire them to do so. In his emphatic, unambiguous response to the diversity of opinions, he declares:

Ovonramwen: No one! Ologbose, no harm must come to the whitemen. I repeat, no harm! Eyebokan shall take you there. Tell them that I will see them but only for some hours. No more. Bring them in the dark through Urho'kpere (38).

When later, the chiefs return, led by Iyase, and wearing "triumphant and victorious smiles on their faces", the Oba is surprised that they have not brought the whitemen. Interrogating them, he is told that the whitemen have been killed. He, not only angrily disapproves again, but denies ever sending them to kill; moreover, he forecasts the danger of such action to both his crown and his kingdom:

Ovonramwen: (visibly angry). What did you say?

Ologbose: Dead, we killed the whitemen.

Ovonramwen: Ha ha I did not send you... from now on, we walk at the edge. From now on, we sleep no more. Let us now go home and await the Whiteman's visit... Tonight, you tilt my crown for blood to flow (48).

In respect of Ovonramwen's tragic status and his heroic qualities, Yerima's interpretation, represents the Oba's dignified and heroic picture all through the play. He abrogates the anti-heroic qualities into which the Oba degenerates during the court trials. He starts this by presenting the whitemen as being full of regards for the Oba's personality. They acknowledge that roaming the bush in search of him without success has been a difficult and tiring challenge. And that the Oba must be an enigma for that:

Burrows: ... The Bini people seem to be different from the Jakri people. From my study, they seem to be fanatical in their zeal about their king. He seems to be a symbol of life and death to them.

Most of the natives were afraid to talk about him during our investigation.... (58 – 60).

Carter: So I have learnt.

We want him to come out of hiding. We are tired of roaming the bush... I am leaving the task of bringing him in to you (60).

Shortly, before the Oba's entry into the trial court, there is a ceremonial display. He is welcomed with song, drumming and dancing, supported as usual by his chiefs, and his well adored wives. The Oba's accustomed, carved wooden stool is laid out for him. With his usual dignity, he receives the praises and accolade, showered on him by his subjects, while he demands to be reassured:

Ovonramwen: We all have witnessed the new visitor to our land. We thank them for the burning of the ancestral abode of our kings. But can they touch our souls? ...Can the guns and bombs diminish the towering heights of your king? (The crowd grows wild with answers of "No!"...).

This short display serves to restore the esteem of the Oba as a highly placed personage, a leader of a human community, a tragic hero.

In the trial scene, he still enjoys his respect as he enters. Everybody in the scene rises, including the British officers and soldiers. When he turns with dignity to face his chiefs and villagers, "Chief Obaseki leads them as they all go down on their knees and touch the ground with their foreheads in obeisance three times" (67).

Even, when Consul-General Moor begins, step-by-step deposition of the Oba, he does so with calculated efforts not to be disrespectful or rude. Furthermore, when Consul-General Moor requests Ovonramwen "to pay obeisance to (their) new Oba, Queen Victoria" (68), his honour is swollen further when his chiefs offer to do so, on his behalf or have him do it in secret. It only takes all the chiefs to be on their knees in order to get the Oba to pay obeisance, and that is even under pressure of threats by the whitemen to shoot two chiefs if after ten minutes the homage is not observed. The Oba finally, in a most honourable manner, pays obeisance.

When the trial is in full swing and a soldier comes in to report that Chief Obayuwana "committed suicide after his arrest by Captain Koe", and that "he has since been buried..." (74), the non-reaction maintained by the text or the Oba over this casualty is not to be interpreted as lack of emotional response. Rather, it is a mark of heroism, emotional stability, endurance and decorum for the deposed Oba or any of the chiefs not to react extraordinarily or obtrusively to the court proceedings, as it happens in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*.

CONCLUSION

Diverse, yet, indeterminate meanings of Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* has been identified in Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. Where the former considers the Oba as both heroic and anti-heroic, equivocal or ambiguous in his attitudes, the latter clearly delineates him as purely heroic and unequivocal. Where the former views the gods as unquestionably trustworthy, the latter depicts the Oba and his people as extremely in distrust of the gods. Again, the whitemen in Rotimi's text command obvious sympathy, owing to the surreptitious diplomacy in them, yet, their submissive stance is quickly contradicted by their defiant and indiscreet moves. But in Yerima's play, disobedience and indiscretion propel all the schemes, philosophy and actions of Consul-General Phillips, who happens to be the moving spirit of the British around Benin Empire. In this regard, then, the indictment that would have accompanied the disloyalty of Bini war lords in sympathy for the murdered whitemen, is diminished by the whitemen's resolve from the onset to wreck, dehumanize, dominate and overthrow Benin Kingdom forcefully. The diverse, meanings articulated by Ahmed Yerima in his text clearly represent possible interpretations resulting from the careful dismantling of the identified binary oppositions that engender contradictions, as well as equivocalities in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. However, Yerima's play *The Trials* ... can also deconstruct itself, hence, its interpretations are also indeterminate.

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