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Colonial Niger Delta and Intra-Regional Conflict in Selected Nigerian Plays

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Abstract: This research examines and analyses the depiction of intra-regional conflicts in selected historical plays that are set in the colonial era of Nigeria's resource-rich Niger Delta region. The plays are Miesoinuma Minima's *King Jaja or the Tragedy of a Nationalist* and *Odum Egege*, Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, and Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. The plays depict two regional centres of power and their extensive control. Rather than situate the texts in the context of Nigeria's pre-Independence nationalism against British rule, attention is given to intra-regional otherness and its resultant conflict.

Keywords: Niger Delta; Nigeria; Miesoinuma Minima; Ola Rotimi; Ahmed Yerima

Introduction

Beyond the capacity of Colonial Britain to divide and rule its spheres of control, how do the history plays of Miesoinuma Minima, Ola Rotimi, and Ahmed Yerima show the tendencies, motivations, tensions, dichotomies, and disharmonies between/amongst the ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta? The plays indicate that the fractious region undermined itself even in the face of Britain's ruthless hegemony. It is the truth of art. There is a lot of significance and meaning in the intensity with which the plays beam their light on history.

History plays, which the Romans such as Gnaeus Naevius called *fabula praetexta*, draw from history but the genre presents as art, subject to the latitude of imagination and the necessity of omission. To understand the *historia* that anchors such plays is to understand that art does not seek to replace history; it seeks simply

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to be a representation of whatever is considered vital to the creative process and of whatever serves the artistic judgment or temperament of the playwright. It is a plus when history plays are mimetic enough to approximate history, not by exactitude, but by verisimilitude. As Julie Umukoro says, a history play "takes a retrospective view of society…indicative of *truthfulness* and *reality* irrespective of its artistic or imaginative essence" (153). The words she has placed in italics are instructive; their meanings are modified by the processes of art; it is literature that is appropriating the resources of history.

The colonial history of the Niger Delta has inspired several plays. Besides the primary texts for this paper, there are other examples like Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi,* Henry Leopold Bell-Gam's *King Jaja,* Matthew Umukoro's *Nana Olomu*, and JP Clark's *All for Oil*. Minima's *King Jaja* and *Odum Egege*, Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, and Ahmed Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* are chosen because they are remarkable texts on two of the most iconic sites of conflict in colonial Niger Delta. Collectively, the plays cover the period between 1869 and 1897.The fall of King Jaja (1891) and Oba Ovonramwen (1897), amongst many, define Britain's decade of bloody conquests in the region right on the threshold of the twentieth century. That story is often told. Thus, this paper examines what is often ignored, or glossed over, or skimmed at best: literary depictions of the downsides of the modes and/or habits of power amongst the indigenous peoples of the region.

Opobo and Benin are not the entire Niger Delta, but they represent (in the plays) a pattern of power and conflict in many other historical places in the region (Bonny's Manilla Pepple section over Annie Pepple section; Okrika over Eleme, Itsekiri over Urhobo, etc). Obaro Ikime has noted that the region's history has "sub-imperialists" who "found a new role for themselves and exploited it to the fullest" (213); those were the persons who "oppressed" the less-advantaged "more than the British did" (231).To what extent is that characterization depicted in the selected history plays? To what extent is the past mirrored in the present?

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been a place of contestation over resource extraction for centuries. Slaves, ivories, rubber, palm oil, crude oil, and gas are some of the commodities that have shaped the region's history of conquest and pillage since the 15th century. In postcolonial Nigeria, petro-politics has been the rage, and there are echoes from the colonial era when palm oil was the main export. The division amongst Niger Delta communities (in this era) mirrors the

conflict amongst them in the past (as depicted in the plays of Minima, Rotimi, and Yerima).

King Jaja's Mimic-Imperialism in Minima's *King Jaja* and *Odum Egege*

Minima's eponymous plays depict Opobo and its neighbours. Opobo was a powerful entity that emerged from the Bonny civil war of 1869. Its strategic location on the Niger Delta coast and its trade relationship with the British made it grow rapidly into a centre of power; it was strong enough to dwarf its neighbours, including Bonny. King Jaja, by many accounts a former slave (Fiofori, Daminabo and Ayotamuno 9; George 8), rose through the furnace of time to become Opobo's potentate, empire-builder, and mimic-imperialist. In both of Minima's plays, King Jaja is depicted as a man of force, seriously beyond a paradox of values and villainy. This is not to be romanticized as Benjamin Ejiofor does when he sees *King Jaja* as "an epic celebration of the struggles of a man, inexorably set in the vortex of contentions by destiny, and by a nature that is dominantly sold to nationalism, freedom and self-assertion" (334).

Minima has written his plays as an "insider" of sorts. His ancestor (cast as a character called Minima in both plays) is believed to have been one of those who fled from Bonny around 1869 and 1870, one of the original founders of Opobo, and one of the authors of Opobo's instrument of governance known as the Minima Agreement (Brown 21) which was crafted even before the flight. In the civil war between the Annie Pepple and Manilla Pepple sections of Bonny, it was the former that relocated to establish Opobo on an island bequeathed to it by Andoni. Aspects of the war and the kind gesture of Andoni are represented in Minima's *King Jaja*.

There are overlaps between Minima's plays. Both plays reinforce each other, and they offer a fuller view of the playwright's intention to portray Opobo from its formation to the fall of King Jaja. Of the two plays, *Odum Egege* was first performed in Port Harcourt in November 1990 by the Rivers State Council of Arts and Culture. It became the Rivers State Government's Jubilee Play in 1992. It went on to receive further publicity when the Nigeria International Bank/CITIBANK adopted it as its 1997 play of the year and sponsored its highly successful stage run at the University Lagos' Main Auditorium (Onoko 25). It was a well-funded production that sought to secure theatrical acclaim (Dike 32).

King Jaja was premiered in September 1992 at the Port Harcourt City Council Hall. Like *Odum Egege*, it was published in 1997. Although *Odum Egege* is said to

be the first to be performed, Minima states in its preface that it is second to *King Jaja* "in a planned trilogy" (iv). There is no explanation to tell whether *King Jaja* was written first, but it is obvious that the play's setting in time begins earlier than and extends beyond *Odum Egege.* This means, therefore, that *King Jaja* covers the between 1869 and 1891 while *Odum Egege* primarily dramatizes one of the most explosive conflicts on the path to King Jaja's fall (Green & Koroye 211).

Again, in the prefatory note to *Odum Egege,* Minima admits that there are different versions of the conflict between Odum Egege and King Jaja but that the play has "combined historical veracity and dramatic truth in the interpretation of this conflict" (v). Minima believes that the play places both personages "in a conflict of *national interests*" which positions both for "admiration and respect" because of "their individual courage and struggles" (v). The playwright skirts around the moral subject of rights and justice because he thinks "there can be no unanimity of opinion as to the extent, in given situations, to which…actions are just and justifiable or morally acceptable" (viii). That is a position of ambivalence that leaves the audience to decide for itself. Thus, he says:

Our main objective…is to present dramatically and significantly human realities and experiences in society – indeed something of the essentiality of human nature that is limitless in time and space. This is why *Odum Egege* (like *KingJaja*…) instantly imposes itself on the audience like man's imperious conscience as it invokes the immortal voices from the silent tombstones of humanity in perpetual resurrection. (viii)

An example of what he calls "perpetual resurrections" was Britain's exercise of military might over the Falklands in 1982. As he says in his preface to *King Jaja,* it caused him to examine and recreate the encounter between his own Opobo (also an island) and the British in the previous century (iv).The playwright further states that he had wanted to write "a series of works on the encounters of Africans with white colonialists" entitled "The Trials of Colonial Masters" (iv).

Whereas the playwright presents a telling play that places moral rights on the side of the eponymous of hero of *Odum Egege,* he is unwilling to take a personal moral position on the events depicted in the play. Conversely, he is more than willing to take a position against Britain's colonial invasion of Opobo and the dethronement of King Jaja. He exercises a sense of fidelity to his own ethnic-space, points at the evil of colonial might, and explains Opobo's failings as a failed attempt to build utopia. He argues that Opobo failed to create a just society because it was open "to

the corrupt world outside" (iv). Yet, both of his plays depict Opobo as corrupted as much as it is a corrupter of the region. In relation to its weak neighbours, Opobo is depicted as a powerful and abusive empire-builder. There can be no equivalence, as Adagogo Brown suggests, about "the steadfastness and other leadership qualities of Odum Egege and King Jaja, patriots dedicated to the defence of the integrity of their lands and peoples" (24). There is no equivalence between a violator and his victim. There is no moral justification for Opobo's violence against its neighbours.

The seed of corruption is shown to be virile in Opobo even before its flight from Bonny. Bonny has imploded and the Annie Pepple section is weak in the politics of might. There are losses on both sides, but the scale of force is in favour of the Manilla Pepple section (*King* 1-3, 32). The Annie Pepple section is at the mercy of time. But even in the deliberations about where to flee to, you hear the chieftains refer to the peoples of the hinterland pejoratively as natives, bush people, backdoor of development (*King* 4). This is the attitude that shapes Opobo's relationship with the actual producers of the resources that have made Bonny, and later Opobo, significant and wealthy. Opobo and its leadership have no regard for the peoples of the hinterland, and it shows in many ways. At a time when its monarch is in competition and conflict with the British, one would have expected Opobo to build solidarity across ethnicities. King Jaja calls only Izon city-states and kingdoms to his summit because they have a shared interest to keep the hinterland subordinate in trade matters (*King* 112-117). That summit is both a response to and a mirror image of the Berlin Conference; hegemony serves its interest.

Opobo appears to have known its own tendency for abuse and corruption quite early. Thus, appreciable effort is committed to crafting a working document for the good of the expected kingdom, but Jaja's unease (not yet a king in the place at this stage), with the liberal phrasing of the would-be constitution, indicates his interest in the accumulation of power. Tuonimi's desire is instructive: Opobo cannot be a land of the free; it will carry its old habits and slaves (*King* 35). Tuonimi argues that Opobo's expected utopia is impossible:

TUONIMI (*sceptical*): But is it possible? Why are there wars today in Okoloama? Is it possible? Because it will soon be the same tales of woes in the new settlement, the *Alaapu* and the well-connected will abuse the laws of the land and our rights. Lies will be truths…while truth will be punishable offense. The people will be kicked about or killed in the name of protecting the kingdom and its constitution…. (*King* 34)

Tuonimi's projections become true. Ironically, he is an example of someone who loves freedom and slavery at the same time. Years after the abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807, he wants to keep his slaves in the new settlement, and he wants a life of freedom for the people of Opobo. He is like Jaja, a former slave, who loves to exercise power over others. He is like the rest of Opobo's aristocrats who see little or nothing wrong with Opobo's abuse and violation of the territories of others.

When Minima the character raises objections because of King Jaja's personalization of the resources and powers of the state (*Odum* 58-61) and Uranta flees to take refuge with the colonialists (*King* 90-95), Opobo's abuses are coming home to roost with an aristocracy that has hitherto aided and profited from Opobo's encroachment on the statehood and rights of its neighbours. Many of the chiefs complain about the situation but they continue prop up their abusive state. And so is the duplicity of Oruogolo who authorizes the sacrifice of seven persons to make King Jaja prevail, in an unjust war, over Azumini (Brown 21; George 8); says that Odum Egege's life should be spared because he has fought for justice; requests that King Jaja should restate his execution order because his men are hesitating to execute Odum Egege; and turns around to query King Jaja for killing Odum Egege (*Odum* 78, 92, 107-108, 111).Yes, there is also a mark of duplicity in the action of Odum Egege and other Azumini chiefs; their humanity does not allow any of them to sacrifice his son to Nene Obu, but they are pressured by the imminence of war to sacrifice a settler whose death does not secure victory because Nene Obu receives more human sacrifices from King Jaja (*Odum* 68-70, 78). This disregard for life, by humans and deities, is in contrast with the regard for and the pursuit of accumulation.

There is an inordinate drive to accumulate wealth and exercise power in both plays. King Jaja, the preeminent potentate in that axis of the Niger Delta, shows his greed, lust for power, and love for dominance (Nwakanma 8). He pursues accumulation through coercive trade practices, military expeditions, assimilation and/or occupation of territories. Azumini is not the only victim. In *Odum Egege*, the eponymous hero refers to Okpu Uro, Ukot Uti Okoro, and Ibuno (32). Ekeke, who holds King Jaja and Opobo in awe, cites Nkpirikpo (*Odum* 34). Ekeke is treacherous against his own people but he his right to note that Azumini's uprising against Opobo will attract severe attacks. In fact, while Azumini is shaping its resistance, King Jaja is destroying Ibuno. Nwosu tells his fellow chiefs:

NWOSU: (*serious-looking*): Didn't you hear what happened to the people of Ibuno?

(*Anxious, the others listen with more attention*)

ODUM EGEGE: Hear what?

NWOSU: Hmm! The villages of Ibuno are no more. (*Odum* 20)

Given King Jaja's antecedents in the area, his attack on Ibuno is true to his character. Nwosu's report in this play only skims the surface of actual history. The level of destruction that is inflicted on Ibuno gets a passing commentary or reference in Minima's plays, but its experience is just as horrific as Azumini's.

Nwosu's report in Minima's *Odum Egege* has been corroborated by historians. Some historians have narrated grimmer details of that punitive expedition. History records it as a ruthless show of might. Ibuno, historically, wanted to trade directly with the British as a repudiation of Opobo's dominance. The new price prospect was better to Ibuno, better than King Jaja would permit. King Jaja knew that the incursion of the British into the hinterland communities would undercut Opobo's control. Ibuno's villages came under the fire of King Jaja's repression: "canoes belonging to Jaja and flying British flag arrived" in Ibuno territory "with breech-loading cannon and riffles…bombarded the villages… plundered and burnt them and took… prisoners" (qtd. Ejituwu and Okoroafor 83-4). The prisoners were mostly women and children. Many were tortured to confess King Jaja's kingship over Ibuno. Many more were decapitated – "some of [King] Jaja's own children" cut off "the heads of the Kwa Ibo children in order that they might earn the right to wear eagle's plume" (qtd. in Ejituwu and Okoroafor 84) which was a symbol to distinguish a person who has killed during warfare. Minima situates this historical event within the timeline of Azumini's fall and the execution of Odum Egege.

The imprints of Odum Egege's tragedy extend into *King Jaja* (69, 78, 92) where characters refer repeatedly to it. In both of Minima's plays, Azumini is more consequential than Okpu Uro, Ukot Uti Okoro, and Ibuno. But they all establish a pattern of power in the hands of a monarch whose subjects hail as "the terror" (*King* 133). It feeds his conceit to hear Odum Egege's words: "Ekwelem na Jojo wu mam," roughly translated as "I agree that Jaja is a spirit" (*Odum* 109). But the play shows that King Jaja is just a flawed human. His dethronement and deportation point at a reversal of his mimic-empire, sadly, by another despicable empire which he confesses to have supported in an unjust war against the Ashanti (*King* 53, 139-145).Here is a man who has been an enabler of the British empire, builds a mimic-empire that rivals Britain's control, and is cancelled and exiled by the British who are resolute to prevent the polarity of power or empires in the region.

When it matters the most to exercise intelligence and military might, King Jaja and his soldiers show themselves to be weak and naïve.

Benin's Empire of Dissonance in Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*

The central character in the plays of Rotimi and Yerima fits the profile of a famous Benin monarch (Umukoro 156). Benin is shown, in both history and literature, as a conflicted regional power: in conflict with itself and in conflict with its neighbours. As at when Oba Ovonramwen (whose cognomen was Nogbaisi) ascended the throne of his fathers in 1888, the British were already entrenched in the Niger Delta, the Berlin Conference had long been decided, and a new impetus had come to crown earlier motivations for trade and/or conquest. He reigned at a difficult time, barely nine years. He reigned at a period when traditional power structures in the region were modified or erased by the force of a plundering (also foxy) foreign state.

Oba Ovonramwen's life has inspired history plays, Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. Rotimi's play was premiered at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) in 1971 and published in 1974. A command performance was held for Yerima's play in 1997 to commemorate the centenary of the British invasion of Benin; and it was published in 1998. The emergence of both plays indicates that Oba Ovonramwen's tragedy had stayed active in public consciousness and national narrative, long enough to provoke dramatization many decades after his fall in 1897. The plays are acts of retrieval that enable postcolonial writing to depict colonial experiences through the literature of power or dispossession.

Both Rotimi and Yerima have presented a Benin story from a Benin standpoint as much as imagination and omission have allowed. There are differences in their handling of material or historical resource, differences in the details, and differences in dramaturgy. But both plays are united in purpose and the tenor of their works. In the short prefatory note to his play, Rotimi notes that Oba Ovonramwen is "a man more sinned against than he ever sinned" (xi). Similarly, Yerima speaks thus about his own play: it allowed me the opportunity to blend fiction and facts in creating a work of history. It allowed me the…illusion of going into the turbulent mind of a turbulent King in a most turbulent historical period. It also gave me the chance to be the King's advocate, exonerating Oba Ovonramwen

in the light of the court proceedings made available to me by the palace. No wonder then, that even after reading the first draft, the Benin Cultural authorities acknowledged the work as, 'their version,' 'their story.' (6)

What does it really mean to render Yerima's kind of advocacy? It is to look at the actions and circumstances that have led to the tragedy of the central character and his people. Yerima, like Rotimi, has created a remarkable work of art to serve the narrative of a power-centre. Both playwrights present power equations that are sympathetic to Benin. But there are hints that tell that there are other sides to the story; there are hints that are not intended to diminish the main plot; there are persons and ethnicities at the margin of Benin's power.

The plays are focused on projecting Benin as a regional power at a troubled time, but they also present the peoples at the margin as irritants, deviants, and outlaws against whom Benin's monarch directs his grace or might. Thus, the snippets of the margin become significant narratives simply by the marginality that the playwrights have placed on them. Ironically, the subalterns speak even as the playwrights themselves keep such entities at the margin as if light most beam on only Benin and Britain to determine tragic heroism and villainy in the contest of empires.

Benin is repeatedly called an empire by its monarch and other personages in both plays (Rotimi 7, 11, 35, 79; Yerima 19, 21, 26-27, 50). The implication seems to have been taken for granted. It foregrounds a center-margin dialectics and a discourse of imperialism that keeps the margin repressed. It is not enough for the plays to have "choreographed" Benin's presence to blur or mask the downsides of Benin's power and empire-building. Rather than solely shore up empathy for Benin's monarchy, there is a basis for a critique of the monarchy's failed effort at self-preservation, together with its instruments and architectures of subjugation.

The question arises: at whose expense, therefore, is Benin an empire? There is no doubt about the objectives of Britain's empire of pillage, plunder, and conquest. What, then, is the import of Benin's power in an empire of its own making? Why does it insist on its hold on its vassal states? It is the habit of imperialism that drives Benin to extend its control over Itshan (Esan), Itsekiri, Urhobo, Agbor, Asaba, Akure, etc. (Rotimi 9-12, 20 -21; Yerima 21). Benin's monarch tries to govern those territories by terror and force as he wrestles with the contraction of his power (Yerima 22; Rotimi 12). In Akure, Benin's monarch puts a subordinate monarch in check; he sustains an unpopular dynasty in Ekpoma. The subordinate and contiguous lands provide a corridor of protection for Benin (Rotimi 20, 27),

and they are also sources of economic power. Oyeh Otu and Obumneme Anasi have barely skimmed the subject when they hinted at the nexus between trade and power in the Niger Delta's past (177).

The Itsekiri/Urhobo axis presents a complicated field of interests. Business is Oba Ovonramwen's grouse against the Itsekiri and Urhobo peoples and by extension the British who have upset the traditional balance of power in that axis. In Rotimi's play, the monarch says why he does not want to sign new trade papers with the British:

OVONRAMWEN: [*firmly*] There is a reason! I do not like the way your people go over my head and trade direct with Sobo and Jekiri. Benin traders set one price for palm oil; your people impose another – higher.

You will show me proof that the Whiteman's love for me and my people is deep. (20)

Note the otherness. The Oba implies that the Itsekiri and Urhobo peoples are not his people, but he wants to control trade in those territories. There is a pursuit of Benin's nationalism and suzerainty without a consideration for the opinions or interests of the contiguous entities. The haughtiness of Benin's might diminishes the humanity of smaller or weaker states around that locality.

In Yerima's play, the Oba says "the head of all troublemakers" are "the Iskiri, Uzon, and Agbor" (26). The portrait of the Itsekiri is even worse in the play. The Oba chides Obaseki for bringing Omatshola (an Itsekiri man) to the palace; he complains that Obaseki has "friends among the Itsekiri people" (33). The Oba says to Obaseki: "Your big black book scares me. Our Itsekiri secretary scares me also" (33-34). When Eyebokan, as a reverse spy, brings urgent information to the Oba, Iyase resists him: "You grew up in the palace. Most I tell your Itsekiri brain that the Oba is above the human world now" (35). From the Benin standpoint, the Itsekiri nation is a target of suspicion, jokes, and insults. Benin's superior airs have been wounded by the rise of Itsekiri's potentates who have bonded with British interest to further their own.

The likes of Chief Dore and Chief Idudu (Rotimi 8; Yerima 22, 58), daring with their own imprints of treachery and accumulation, are poised to erode Benin's control in the Urhobo and Itsekiri axis. They have pitched tent with the British who are the only people the Oba is afraid to confront. Yerima's play shows that Obaseki, even as the Oba's son-in-law and business manager, has been close

enough to Itsekiri's power players to know that the Oba's power is a shell of the past. By extending its power as empires do, Benin has set up itself for revolt and subversion amongst peoples who have new motivations or provocations for self-determination, however untoward. Entities around the region are no longer willing participants, if they ever were, in Benin's empire. Time has forced a recalibration of power; dormant resentments are activated and stoked; and it has become impossible for Benin to maintain absolute control. Time has hatched potentates and upstarts who are resolved to define existence on their own preferred terms.

The Oba is a person "set to rule as king after the manner of his fathers before him" (Rotimi 6-7). The metaphor of "a moon" that "is dim," and suffers the rivalry of "the eyes of little stars" that "cast a carefree glitter" (Rotimi 6), is to the monarch improper. So, he says:

Some men there are who think that, by honour of years, or power of position, or by too much love for trouble, they can dull the fullness of my glow and bring darkness on the empire! But they forget…They forget that no matter how long and stout the human neck, on top of it must always sit a head. Henceforth, a full moon's, my glow – dominant, and unopen to rivalry throughout the empire. (Rotimi 7)

That attempt at assertion and self-definition is cast against the backdrop of shared knowledge. Even as the British have successfully scoured the coast of the region, secured loyalties, and propped up potentates within Benin's vassal states, there is a growing resentment of the monarch's power even within Benin. From the final words of Obaruduagbon and Esasoyen to the dreamscape of Oyibodudu, there is a revelation of discontent and opposition in the empire, actual or perceived, strong enough to warrant prayers or cries for the empire's fall.

The monarch's victims/detractors and the beneficiaries of Britain's power are united in purpose, though they act from different angles of motivation. Bitterness is not the only trigger of dissent. So much happens in an empire where seemingly harmless persons operate under the cover of duty: there is Idiaghe who guides the British into Benin during the Ague ceremony (Rotimi 28-32); there are African porters whose self-deprecatory song does not compensate for a lack of conscience or social neediness (Rotimi 28); there are black soldiers doing the bidding of a foreign power (Rotimi 76; Yerima 21); there is Eyebokan who is a double agent to Benin and Britain (Yerima 22, 35-8); and there is the Oba's son-in-law and business manager, sly Obaseki, who is emboldened by profit and power to undercut the monarchy (Yerima 34, 58-62). While the monarchy navigates the deep ends of diverse interests, the seen and the suspected, the divinities are given to dissonance,

unfazed in their surfeit of blood and flesh, or irascible and vengeful in their insatiety. By their insouciance in moments of calamity, those deities ask for too much, but say and do very little, if they say or do anything at all (Rotimi 15; Yerima 49-52). Although it appears that the Oba has known the limitations of the deities all the while, their love of blood and flesh (Rotimi 34; Yerima 49), he has been raised in a culture where dependence on the spiritual is inescapable, and the divine is considered infallible even in its failings.

Benin's internal contradictions and tensions are, as both plays depict, triggers of conflict. There are political and ritual killings in the land. The aristocracy has the power of life and death over the poor and the slaves. Slaves can be and are freely sacrificed to deities as articles of appeasement (Rotimi 34). It is futile therefore to expect loyalty from slaves during the trial of the Oba and his chiefs (Yerima 73-4); the social conditioning that has held those slaves in servitude and subservience seems broken by new realities. Benin's state apparatus has fallen even before those slaves are seen to have buckled under British pressure and force. There is no cause for remorse where slaves contribute inadvertently to the collapse of subjugation, if only they are powerful enough to ensure that one form of subjugation does not replace another. For the time being, it is significant to "revolt" against aristocracy given that Yerima's play shows that the story of Oyibodudu, sacrificed to the gods at Ugievie during the festival of the royal coral beads (45), is not an isolated event. There is little or no regard for the lives of the downtrodden and lower classes. The wages of slavery or penury are pain and death, often, easily.

In Yerima'splay, Ologbose/Ologbosere describes the Oba as the one "who looks at death and commands him to take and death obeys" (24); it confirms the Oba's view of himself as the "giver of life and death" (19), who sacrifices "humans when necessary" (49) and (as he tells Obiro) is willing to give his own head or the heads of his children "to avert destruction befalling" the "empire" (50). If the empire is truly worth the head of the monarch, why is it also worth the heads of royal children given the monarch's concern for the survival of the dynasty? It sounds like mere posturing; the play depicts the monarch as one who has acted in the past "to avert punishment" for his son who had "killed an old man in error" (50). Whatever that means and whatever traditional laws allow in such a society, Benin is like other hierarchical societies where there can be judicial omissions or justice tends to be uneven.

There is an indication that the monarchy thrives at the expense of the empire. The preservation of the people is not a moral necessity; the people are political props

for the power structures of Benin as epitomized by the monarch. Beyond crushing rebellion and sacrificing slaves for rituals to service the convenience of power, Benin's royalty loves its vanities. The mindset of the monarchy, in Rotimi's play, is shown in the expected marriage ceremony of Ologbosere and Princess Evbakhavbokun; the Oba's projection is grim, even cruel. Ostentation becomes disregard for life when the Oba says: "For my part, I will see that it is the mightiest happening in marriage that this land has ever known. Feasting, crowds, movement – people trampling upon people, some dropping dead in the massive crush to watch your union" (Rotimi 22). How is the Oba, therefore, the one who dreads the loss of lives in the event of a civil war (Rotimi 15, 23; Yerima 25-6) in the empire? It is ironic enough to show that the monarch feels it is right to have mass deaths to burnish his ego but not casualties in a civil war that targets his power. It is his ego and power that are paramount in the order of things, even in life and death situations.

The killing of Uwangue Egiebo/Igiebo (Rotimi 4; Yerima 40), who was the monarch's chief adviser, reveals the bad blood amongst Benin's aristocracy. As the monarch pronounces a death sentence on the killers, the rebellious duo of Obaruduagbon and Esasoyen, the palace chiefs are uneasy with the judgment, and they act out their shaky or pretentious loyalty. It is a sign that a dynasty that has persisted through centuries as an absolute monarchy has come into an era of open dissent and contestation. The Oba knows this situation, and he is concerned and unsettled about the survival of his government and dynasty in the face of uncertainties. When he gives direct orders to his chiefs, they debate them, and subvert them (Rotimi 28, 33-6; Yerima 38-41, 47).

To debate the order of an absolute monarch is an indication that the office has begun to wane in the eyes of the chiefs who are close enough to the throne to know its inadequacies and weaknesses. It leads to sabotage, driven by treachery or megalomania. When institutions of power are that subversive, the system is bound to fail. When there is crisis in the folds of leadership, governance fails. Thus, Benin's fall is caused by, amongst other factors, its internal failings. The Oba's attempt to salvage the empire, in an era of foreign aggression, is undermined by the contradictions and crisis of Benin's institutions of control. It is significant, therefore, that Iyase advises, at the height of the Oba's peril, that the monarch's power should die for Benin to live (Rotimi 53-4). Perhaps, that piece of advice (the demise of the monarchy) has been the actual code or intent of the relationship between the monarchy and the rest of the aristocracy, all the while. For many of the aristocrats are revealed to be persons who, despite the comforts and privileges that

tradition confers on them, are more than willing to sacrifice the monarch to secure their own preservation. The adversities of British invasion expose the limits of their loyalty to the throne. In the end, the monarch, who is known to have killed the members of the House of Iwebo to consolidate his power (Egharevba 48-59), loses the throne under a hail of fire.

Conclusion

Minima, Rotimi, and Yerima have dramatized an important era in the history of the Niger Delta region. The complex power structures of the colonial period have continued to intrigue historians, poets, playwrights, and novelists, perhaps, because there are patterns that have persisted. This is why Benedict Binebai says that history plays "capture present realities in spite of recounting of the past. The reason for their creation has contemporary prompting and expediency" (287). Writing about the past raises a lot of questions, particularly when the subjects of such texts are iconic personages in culture and politics. It is the nature of plays to call attention to society through deathless tropes; it is the nature of drama or theatre to "take on its community without apologies" (Omotoso 88).

There is no doubt that Minima, Rotimi, and Yerima know their materials well enough to subject them to art. To know the plays is to know the content and context of their dramaturgy. For, indeed, the plays have done what any history play is expected to do. That is, to shape drama "around an identifiable historical event" and use "dramatic principles" to reconstruct "a historical past for the benefit of posterity" (Umukoro 155). Posterity will look upon the plays of Minima, Rotimi, and Yerima as depictions of conflict (and more) in the colonial era of Nigeria's Niger Delta.

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