

## "THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME" -

### OLA ROTIMI'S VERSION OF THE OEDIPUS MYTH

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One of the interesting aspects of modern African drama is the fact that traces of the influence of Greek tragedy can clearly be discerned. This is especially noticeable in Nigerian drama where dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Efua Sutherland and Ola Rotimi have adapted Greek plays. There seems to be a special affinity between ancient Greek culture and the Yoruba culture of Western Nigeria. In discussing Soyinka's version of Euripides' *Bacchae* André Lefevere (1986:1210) makes the following interesting remarks: "After all; not so long ago the Yoruba formed a conglomeration of small, pre-industrial, mutually competing city states, as did ancient Attica ... Much of classical Greek drama derived from pre-existing oral traditions dealing with religious mythology and mythified history, and so does much of the literary and theatrical output of the Yoruba, whether in English or their own language. The extraordinary vitality of Yoruba beliefs and myths is further evidenced by the fact that they have spread through large segments of the black Diaspora, especially in Brazil and the West Indies, somewhat in the same way as Greek myths and legends have provided literary inspiration throughout the Western world to this very day. Soyinka's version of the *Bacchae*, therefore, should not be viewed in isolation; it is just one indication of some not yet unravelled deep kinship between ancient Greece and modern Africa - an indication to which scholars might profitably give more attention".

In this article I wish to examine Ola Rotimi's adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* in his play *The gods are not to blame*.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the action of Soyinka's play is set in Greece, Rotimi has transplanted his play to Africa and has also changed the names of the characters. He could not, of course, assume prior knowledge of the story on the part of the audience, and therefore the events preceding the beginning of the play are related and mimed in a prologue, partly by a narrator and partly by Odewale (the African Oedipus) himself. (It is interesting that Cocteau in his adaptation of the Oedipus myth, *La machine infernale*, also found it necessary to relate antecedent events.) Teresa Njoku (1984:91) suggests an additional reason for beginning with the birth of the child: "in Africa, the heroic career starts right from infancy".

In Rotimi's version, King Adetusa and his wife Ojuola reigned over the land of Kutuje. When their first son was born, they consulted the soothsayer Baba Fakunle about the child's future, but he foretold that the son would kill his own father and marry his mother. Accordingly the King's special messenger Gbonka was sent to kill the boy in the bush. Two years later another son was born and named Aderopo. After a number of years Adetusa was killed in mysterious circumstances and the people of Ikolu took advantage of this to attack the land of Kutuje. A stranger named Odewale, from the tribe of Ijekun Yemoja, rallied the people of Kutuje and defeated their enemies. As a reward they made

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him king and he married Ojuola; four children were born of this marriage. After eleven years, however, a plague breaks out in Kutuje.

Thus the situation is basically the same as in Sophocles' play, but Rotimi has made a few interesting changes in order to adapt the story to an African milieu. Odewale does not outwit the Sphinx, for it would have been difficult to transplant her to Africa; instead he rescues the people of Kutuje from the enemies who have enslaved them, and as a reward they make him king. Some critics, like Zulu Sofola (1979:135), have said that it is unthinkable that the people of Kutuje would make a total stranger their king. Rotimi, however, has defended Odewale's succession to the throne by quoting a parallel from Yoruba history: "Yoruba history abounds in heroes venturing to other lands, proving their mettle, and becoming leaders of those lands ... Ogunmola became Bashorun (Prime Minister) of Ibadan in the 19th century. But was Ogunmola a son of Ibadan? Of course not. He hailed from Fesu, near Iwu, some sixty miles north of Ibadan" (Lindfors 1974:64). Another change is that Adetusa and Ojuola have a second son, Aderopo, who plays the same role in the play as Jocasta's brother Creon. According to Njoku (1984:90) this change was made because in a patrilinear society it would be highly unusual for the brother of a wife to succeed to the throne after the death of the sister's husband. She also mentions the fact that Odewale is given a second wife, Abero, because in the traditional African setting a man of substance is identified by the number of wives and children he can maintain. As was to be expected, Rotimi experienced certain difficulties in transplanting the myth to Africa. An interesting aspect is the role of the oracle. The Yoruba have an elaborate system of divination, and in this respect they resemble the ancient Greeks. But there are differences in their use of divination; Sofola (1979:135) maintains that the people of Kutuje would have consulted the oracle before making Odewale their king.

The real play now begins with the lamentations of the townspeople who are afflicted by the plague. In the place of Sophocles' priest, Rotimi employs a number of citizens and women to express their feelings. They are much more aggressive than Sophocles' priest and complain that Odewale does nothing to help them: "Now we cry in pain for help, and there is silence"<sup>2</sup> (p.10) Odewale answers them confidently and informs them of the measures he has already taken: he has sacrificed to the gods and sent Aderopo to the oracle at Ile-Ife. He shows them that he also suffers from the plague for his children are seriously ill. He is very sympathetic towards the suffering of the people, as is evident from his treatment of a woman who has been deranged by the death of her husband. In an interesting addition he criticizes his people for being too passive and doing nothing to combat the plague. He exhorts them to go out into the bush and to cut herbs to use as medicine. This scene ends with a procession of townspeople going out with song and dance.

In the next scene Aderopo brings the message from the oracle of Ifa. In Sophocles' play Creon hesitates for a moment to reveal the oracle before the chorus of elders who represent the people. Aderopo is even more reluctant to speak before the Chiefs who form a kind of chorus in Rotimi's play. He even tries to whisper in Odewale's ear and speaks vaguely of a curse. The Chiefs become impatient and make all kinds of caustic remarks. Odewale too, is on the point of losing his temper and asks questions which are ominous in the light of later developments: "This curse - is it in the body of a man, in the womb of a woman, in the head of some animal, in the air - where?" (p.19). Aderopo hesitates because he realises that it is a "hard" word that he has to say. When he finally declares that the murderer of King Adetusa is still living in their midst and is polluting the land, everybody is shocked. The reaction is more vehement than in Sophocles. Odewale summons the townspeople and expresses his mistrust of them; the murderers of Adetusa may be among them, planning

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations are taken from the edition by Oxford University Press, 1971.

evil against his throne. He believes that they were bribed to commit the murder. This suspicion is also expressed by Oedipus, but Odewale accuses his people more directly. He is especially suspicious because he is an Ijekun man, a "stranger" in the land of Kutuje. In this way the remark of Oedipus that he is a stranger in Thebes takes on a new and ominous meaning for tribal rivalries play an important part in Rotimi's play. Odewala now swears that he will find the murderer of Adetusa and punish him severely. There is bitter irony in the proposed punishment; before he is banished, he will be blinded: "... he shall be put into lasting darkness, his eyes tortured in their living sockets until their blood and rheum swell forth to fill the hollow of crushed eyeballs" (p.26).

The second act begins with the arrival of the soothsayer Baba Fakunle, the African counterpart of the Greek Teiresias. This scene takes the same course as in Sophocles. Odewale lavishly praises the seer, and then becomes very angry when he refuses to say anything about the identity of the murderer of Adetusa. When he is provoked Baba Fakunle finally declares that Odewale himself is the cursed murderer. Odewale accuses him of being bribed and sends him away. Instead of the riddling speech in which Tiresias hints at Oedipus' incestuous marriage, Baba Fakunle only hurls one reproach at Odewale, namely "bed-sharer".

After this confrontation with the soothsayer Rotimi adds a scene in which Odewale's reaction to Baba Fakunle's accusations is shown. He again expresses the opinion that some people are jealous of him because he is an Ijekun man. For the first time he accuses Aderopo of plotting against him. The reproach "bed-sharer" especially rankles with him, and he suspects Aderopo of being behind it. Again his words are ironic: "So, let him come and marry his own mother. And not stopping there, let him bear children by her" (p.31). When Aderopo arrives, Odewale accuses him and does not really afford him the opportunity of defending himself. The Priest of Ogun and Ojuola try to calm him, but he accuses them of taking sides against him.

This quarrel is followed by a scene in which the Royal Bard sings a praise song in honour of Odewale and Ojuola. The function of this scene seems to be the same as that of a choral ode in Sophocles. At an earlier stage, just after Tiresias' accusations, the chorus sings a song in which they show that they are deeply disturbed, but that they still remain loyal to Oedipus. In the same way the Bard expresses his support for Odewale in a time of crisis.

Up to this point Rotimi has followed the structure of Sophocles' play fairly closely. From now on, however, he deviates from his model. In Sophocles Jocasta intervenes in the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon and tries to calm down her husband. In the long scene which follows both Jocasta and Oedipus reveal secrets from their past. Jocasta tells about the baby son they had to expose because the oracle foretold that he would kill his father, and incidentally mentions that Laius was killed at a place where three roads meet. Oedipus is deeply disturbed and relates how he consulted the oracle about his parentage and was told that he would kill his father and marry his mother. While fleeing from his parents in Corinth he killed an old man at a place where three roads meet. Oedipus now fears that he may be the murderer of his predecessor Laius. It is only when the messenger from Corinth announces that Polybus, his supposed father, is dead, that it is revealed that he is the son of Jocasta and that therefore he is the murderer of his *father* Laius.

In Rotimi these two threads of discovery are interwoven. Odewale is not at first prepared to tell Ojuola the cause of his quarrel with Aderopo so the revelations are postponed. He has summoned the Chiefs, but while he is waiting for them a stranger arrives who proves to be Alaka, a friend of his youth. He plays the same role as the Corinthian messenger in Sophocles, but he is more fully portrayed as a character in his own right. Banham (1976:44) remarks: "Alaka is half clown, half philosopher, a man of rural wisdom, who

reveals the true nature of the King's parenthood through a performance that is tantalisingly slow, warm with his goodness and innocence, enlivened by his country wit and manners, and finally exploded by his words". He has been searching for Odewale for a long time and they are overjoyed to see each other. When Alaka asks why Odewale left Ede, where he originally went after leaving his own village, Odewale tells how he killed an old man in a quarrel about a farm. This event is represented by means of a flashback scene. The killing of the old man is given more prominence in Rotimi's play than in Sophocles'. The quarrel is more serious, being about the ownership of the farm, and tribal animosity plays an important part. Odewale is at first determined to discuss the matter calmly, but when the old man insults his tribe, he loses his temper and attacks him. Both Odewale and the old man use witchcraft to mesmerise their opponents. Odewale finally manages to break loose from the spell and kills the old man with a single blow of his hoe. Rotimi has some interesting comments on the treatment of this episode which show how he attempted to adapt it to an African milieu. In Nigeria there would have been no justification for a young man to strike an elder in a dispute over right of way. But the young man would gain some sympathy if he believed the elder to have bewitched him or if the elder had stolen the young man's landed property (Lindsfors 1974:63). It is important to note that Odewale, unlike Oedipus, feels guilty about killing a man, even before he discovers the real identity of the victim. This is the reason why he flees from Ede and finally comes to Kutuje: "The whole world ceased to be. Ogun ... I have used your weapon and I have killed a man. Ogun ...! with my own hands ... with my own hands I have killed" (p.49).

In the next scene Odewale finally tells Ojuola why he quarrelled with Aderopo, and she tries to reassure him by declaring that prophecies cannot be trusted. As a proof she tells him about Baba Fakunle's prophecy that her son would bring bad luck and had to die. She adds that Baba Fakunle later also declared that Adetusa had been killed by one of his own blood. (Sophocles mentions no similar declaration on the part of Tiresias.) When the Chiefs arrive, Ojuola indignantly asks them why they trusted Baba Fakunle in spite of the lies he had told before. Then, just as in Sophocles, she mentions by chance that Adetusa was killed near Ede, at a place where three footpaths meet. Fearing that he may prove to be the murderer Odewale immediately orders the bodyguard who reported his death to be fetched.

Alaka re-enters and at last explains the real purpose of his visit. He has brought Odewale the news of the death of his father Ogundele. Odewale now reveals the reason why he left his native village: a priest of Ifa had told him that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He is jubilant because this oracle has been proven wrong. And now Alaka reveals that Odewale is not really the son of Ogundele, but that they found him in the Ipetu bush, his arms and feet tied with strings of cowries. Ojuola and the Ogun priest immediately realise the truth and try to prevent Odewale from enquiring further, but he persists: "I must know who I am" (p.65). In this way Rotimi has brought about all the revelations of Sophocles' play, but in a different order - Odewale tells how he killed an old man; Ojuola tells of the death of her first son and the place where her first husband died; Alaka brings the news of Ogundele's death; Odewale tells about the oracle given to him; Alaka reveals that Odewale is not the son of Ogundele.

Just as in Sophocles, the old servant Gbonka is originally summoned to give more details about the murderer(s) of Adetusa, but on his arrival he has to reveal the identity of Odewale's parents. The rest of the scene takes the same course as in the Greek original. Odewale finds that Ojuola has committed suicide and then plucks out his own eyes. Unlike Oedipus, however, he does not stay in Kutuje, but immediately goes into exile together with his children.

From this summary it is clear that Rotimi has kept the main lines of the Sophoclean plot, although he has not hesitated to make minor changes. The transposition has been done very skilfully; this is especially evident in the quality of the dialogue. It is clear, lively and adapted to his audience. Rotimi was aware of the linguistic problems facing the African writer in English who also desires to reach a wider audience. As Johnson (1981:137) puts it: "It is his commitment to his audience which decided the distinctive character of the medium in this play. His intention was to reach a very wide, many-layered audience, hence his attempt to create a new idiom, a kind of language close to the rhythms and speech pattern of his native language but not deviating too radically from standard English and adequate to carry the weight of his themes".

Not all critics agree that this attempt has been successful. Dunton (1992:15) writes: "In fact this experiment is not particularly far-reaching; there is nothing here of the translingualism found in the fiction of Okara or Tutuola. There is perhaps not much to say here except that the experiment occasionally misfires: the dialogue oscillates between the limpidly effective and an embarrassingly self-conscious attempt at acculturation". Nasiru (1979:23) regards Rotimi's language as inappropriate to tragedy: "For the actual weakness of the play is that language sounds a discordant note in the play that attempts to arouse tragic feelings and emotions in its audience. It is curious that a playwright who subscribes so much to Aristotelian tenets, as is evident ... from his adaptation of the quintessence of Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, ... can ignore the Greek philosopher's insistence on elevated language as the appropriate register for the tragic genre". It may be asked whether this criticism is really fair. With the exception of those who wish to revive poetic drama, most modern dramatists do not aim at elevated language but attempt to create the same effect by means of ordinary language. Rotimi should therefore not be judged by Aristotelian standards. Although he may sometimes lapse into banality, he has on the whole succeeded very well in combining simplicity and strength.

One characteristic of his dialogue is the use of humour. Banham (1976:43) makes special mention of it: "It is noticeable, for instance, that Rotimi's play contains much humour - but it is not humour that detracts from the awfulness of the theme ... Rotimi is able to maintain the integrity of the subject whilst exploring a wide range of human emotions and reactions". One example is the reaction of the First Chief when Aderopo hesitates to reveal the oracle's message: "We sent you all the way to Ile-Ife to bring us greetings from Ifa. All right, we greet Ifa too. Thank you" (p.19). Or later: "Don't you dare give us an 'I don't know' answer again young man, because Ifa oracle is not as dumb as you've been trying to make it. Hear me? If *you* want to be deaf and dumb, be deaf and dumb" (pp.20-21).

Another feature of the language is the frequent use of proverbs and similes to enforce a point. They contribute greatly to the liveliness of the dialogue. I quote only a few examples. When the people complain to Odewale, one of them says: "When rain falls on the leopard, does it wash off its spots? Has the richness of kingly life washed off the love of our King for his people?" (p.10). When Odewale fears a conspiracy because he is a stranger in Kutuje, he says: "When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they not do to the flesh of a frog?" (p.23). Or when he accuses Aderopo, he says: "Aderopo, if you think like a tortoise you can plot against me without my cutting you down first with my own tortoise tricks, then, fellow, madness is your liver" (p.32).

The frequent use of song and dance is also a prominent feature of this play. What Johnson (1981:146) remarks in connection with another play is also valid in this case: "The emphasis on African theatre in this play may be discerned by the unique character which those elements of traditional society give to the drama. Song, dance, mass and individual movements and ritual libation all add spectacle, facilitating the mechanics of the play and even defining character". As has been mentioned already, singing and mime play an

important part in the prologue, for example, when the attack on Kutuje is represented. Another example is the way in which the people go out with song and dance to gather herbs in the bush. At a critical stage in the action Ojuola is shown singing a song to her children. Nasiru (1979:26) has an interesting remark on the function of this song. "But the context of this song makes it clear that the playwright intends more than the depiction of a commonplace event. It comes from the story of a woman who swears to give anything as reward to the iroko spirit if she has a successful venture in the market. The request is granted but she realizes her folly when the spirit demands her only child. Rotimi skilfully brings in the song to forebode disaster ...".

A problematic aspect of the play is the prominence given to Ogun. He is a very important god in Yoruba mythology. Soyinka (1976:140) describes him as "God of creativity, guardian of the road, god of metallic lore and artistry. Explorer, hunter, god of war, Custodian of the sacred oath". He has, however, no direct share in the action of the play. Baba Fakunle, who foretells the fate of the baby son of Ojuola, is called a "priest of Ifa", and it is also a priest of Ifa who at a later stage tells Odewale that a curse lies on him. The command to search for the murderer comes from "the oracle of Ifa at the shrine of Orunmila". Nevertheless, the shrine of Ogun occupies a central position on the stage and references to Ogun are frequent. The priest of Ogun helps with the arrangement to kill the baby boy; it is he who binds his feet with a string of cowries as a sign of sacrifice. He is frequently on stage in the course of the play, and he tries to calm Odewale after the quarrel with Aderopo. In the final scenes he realises the truth and at first tries to prevent Odewale from enquiring further. When it is inevitable, it is he who tells him that Ojuola is his mother. Ogun is also the god before whom Odewale frequently swears. On one occasion the priest warns Aderopo not to swear: "My master, Ogun, is a god with fierce anger, son; one does not call him to witness so freely" (p.35). Sandra L. Richards (1988:456) maintains that Rotimi "strives to reject the fatalistic relationship of man to god, contained in the Greek original, by using as a central visual image the shrine of Ogun, the Yoruba god associated with iron and, by implication, with the technologies designed to extend man's manipulation of the environment". There is, however, little justification in the text of the play for such an interpretation. The solution should rather be sought in Odewale's special relation to Ogun. In Yoruba mythology Ogun is known as a god who sometimes gave way to anger, as the priest also says. When he was the first king of Ire, he once returned from a battle and started killing his own subjects because they did not honour him (Awolalu 1979:32). There is a reference to this incident when Odewale tries to break loose from the spell cast on him and mutters: "When Ogun, the god of iron, / was returning from Ire / his loincloth was / a hoop of / fire. / Blood ... the deep red stain / of victim's blood / his cloak". He even imagines that the god orders him to shed blood: "This is ... Ogun / and Ogun says: flow! / flow ... let your blood flow ...". Afterwards, however, he feels guilty because he has used Ogun's instrument wrongfully: "Ogun ... I have used your weapon, and I have killed a man" (p.49). Therefore it is rather the misuse of mythology that is stressed here.

The greatest problem in the play is the treatment of fate. Etherton (1982:124-125) has sharply criticized it on this account: "The traditional Yoruba concept of fate is only superficially the same as the Greek concept as expressed in *King Oedipus* ... Yorubas traditionally believe that your fate is your own doing: you kneel down and receive it as a gift from Olódùmarè before being born. Furthermore, it is intrinsic to Yoruba cosmology that a person's fate is never irreversible, and it can be changed from evil to good by appropriate sacrifices which the Ifa oracle at Ile-Ife will, in the last resort, always determine. Finally, unlike the Greek Olympian pantheon (Zeus, Apollo and the rest) whose divinities pursue vendettas against each other and against mortals, the Yoruba gods are not capricious ...".

Not all these points of criticism are equally valid. Although in some Greek tragedies, like the *Oresteia* and *Hippolytus*, a conflict between different gods is portrayed, in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* there is no sign of such a conflict. Apollo is the god who gives the oracle and no other god opposes him. The point is well taken, however, that the Yoruba concept of fate differs from that of the Greeks. Nasiru (1978:54, 1979:24) and Sofola (1979:134) also criticize Rotimi's treatment of fate on similar grounds. But the problem is more complicated than these critics suggest.

In the first place it is necessary to bear in mind that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for later dramatists to reproduce the Greek idea of fate. They have to adapt it to the views of their own times. This very difficulty is perhaps the reason why so few modern adaptations of the Oedipus myth have really made their mark in the dramatic literature of the world. Even one of the best known adaptations, Cocteau's *La machine infernale*, does not really succeed in giving an acceptable *modern* version of the idea of fate. Thus Rotimi's problem is not exceptional.

To set this problem against the proper background it will be useful to quote some statements of scholars on the Yoruba concept of fate. First there is the idea that the soul chooses its own destiny. Bascom (1969:115) describes it as follows: "Before a child is born (or reborn) the ancestral guardian soul appears before Olórun to receive a new body (shaped by the God of Whiteness), a new breath, and its fate or destiny (iwa) during its new life on earth. Kneeling before Olórun, this soul is given the opportunity to choose its own destiny, and it is believed to be able to make any choice it wishes ...". This happens before birth, however, and human beings do not know what their fate is, as Awolalu (1979:23) states: "The Yoruba believe that men's fate is sealed by Olódùmarè before they come into the world. The people concerned do not remember what their allotted fate is on earth ...". (There is a remarkable resemblance to Plato's myth of Er, where the souls who are to be reborn, also choose their own destiny, but then have to drink the waters of Lethe in order to forget: *Rep.* X 621.) Thus there remains something incomprehensible in man's fate.

The Yoruba have a less rigid concept of fate. Bascom (1969:118) writes: "Except for the appointed day upon which an individual's several souls must return to heaven, destiny is not fixed and unalterable". Nevertheless, the idea of an overriding fate is also present, as may be gathered from other statements. Bascom (1969:117) remarks: "A diviner explained that an individual cannot basically change his own destiny ...". He goes on to quote a number of Ifa verses, used in divination, in which destiny is specifically mentioned e.g. Olórun will "put the calabash of destiny into his hands", has sent "a pouch of destiny", will "open the road of destiny for him", and will "kindle the fire of destiny for him". Awolalu (1979:15) also says: "... the Yoruba believe that Olójó (the Controller of daily events), another name for the Supreme Being, has pre-determined what will happen to everybody in every moment of his life here on earth, including when he will die".

In a provocative article in which he criticizes tragedy because it is not reconcilable with faith in human progress, Gurr (1981:141) concedes that the idea of fate still plays an important part in African literature: "In modern Africa traditional literatures, evolved as they have been in relatively static social situations, tend to owe more philosophical allegiance to fatalism than to progress. Even Wole Soyinka, committed social critic as he is, can write of Yoruba tragedy as a thoroughly meaningful concept in the modern world". He interprets Soyinka's remarks on Yoruba myth in his essay "The fourth stage" as meaning: "Man is smaller than his fate. The cosmos has an underlying frame of order". This attitude he also discovers in Soyinka's plays: If we set aside the satirical plays ... we often find a strongly expressed desire to accept fate and destiny, a desire entirely consistent with the essay on Yoruba tragedy" (Gurr 1981:143-144). Thus it is clear that the idea that

there is a power stronger than man, which has a part in determining his fate, is also prominent in Yoruba thought.

In his play Rotimi emphasizes that man is also responsible for his fate. When Odewale arrives as a stranger in Kutuje, he exhorts the people to struggle against the Ikolu attackers: "Up, up, / all of you; / to lie down resigned to fate / is madness" (p.6). As mentioned before, he also commands the people to do something about the plague. He asks: "What have you done to help yourselves?", and declares: "If you need help, search for it first among yourselves" (pp.12-13). In the case of Odewale also, the dramatist clearly shows what share he has in his own fate. He especially stresses his hasty temper. In this respect he resembles the god Ogun. Odewale's friend Alaka mentions that he used to call him "Scorpion" because of his temper: "One that must not / be vexed. / Smooth on the surface / like a woman's jewel; / poison at the tail" (p.43). Baba Fakanle reproaches him with it: "Your hot temper, like a disease from birth, is the curse that has brought you trouble" (p.29). After the quarrel with Aderopo, Odewale admits it himself and tries to be calm like Ojuola: "... let her cool spirit enter my body, and cool the hot, hot hotness in my blood - the hot blood of a gorilla!" (p.39). The most fatal result of this failing was the killing of the old man on the farm near Ede. In this case his hot temper, aggravated by an insult to his tribe, led to an act which he bitterly regretted. In the final analysis it proved to be even worse than he thought, for he had killed his own father. Odewale is thus held responsible for what had happened to him.

Dunton (1992:16) criticizes the way in which Odewale's hasty temper is portrayed; he thinks that the idea is introduced too abruptly. In the scene in which Aderopo hesitates to reveal the oracle's pronouncement Odewale's impatience seems reasonable: "No more than twenty minutes of stage time later, and Odewale has changed almost out of recognition from his early model of self-control and initiative. By the end of Act two he appears pathological". This criticism does not seem to be justified. A dramatist does not have the time for an extended character analysis and frequently has to juxtapose two different states of mind. Precisely the same criticism could also be directed at Sophocles' play; in the first scene Oedipus is a calm and efficient ruler, but shortly afterwards, in the Tiresias scene, he shows a violent temper and makes the wildest accusations against the seer and Creon.

The importance of ethnic distrust as an explanation of Odewale's actions has frequently been discussed. Rotimi himself was mainly responsible for this since he maintained that the main purpose of the play was to warn against tribalism. Referring to the Nigerian Civil War he said: "But the root cause of that strife, of the bloodshed, the lavish loss of life and property, was our own lingering mutual ethnic distrust which culminated in open hostility ... So long as this monster is allowed to wax and incite disharmony among us, we must not blame external powers for their initiative in seizing upon such disunity for the fulfilment of their own exploitative interests. That's the message the play attempts to impart" (Lindfors 1974:61-62). Since Rotimi wrote this play during the civil war, his emphasis on ethnic distrust is understandable, but this interpretation unnecessarily limits the meaning of the play and many critics have argued that this theme does not really form an integrated part of the play. Ola (1982:28) says: "But the idea of ethnic distrust simply hangs in the play and is not successfully woven into the fabric of the work". In fact the author's own interpretation does not really do justice to the play, as Njoku (1984:90) remarks: "Many people may doubt if Rotimi has fulfilled his intentions in *The Gods*; all the same, it is difficult to accept in the light of what we know about the play, his single critical assessment of his contemporary intentions for the play. The meaning of *The Gods* is not, and cannot be exhausted by the author's intention .... The meaning of *The Gods* will develop and grow as it is criticized by its many readers; we cannot base any full meaning of the work on the view of our times alone".

Thus it is difficult to regard ethnic distrust as the main theme of the play. Nevertheless, it can be seen as a factor which in combination with his hasty temper led to Odewale's fatal mistake. As such I find the treatment quite convincing and would not agree with Dunton (1992:16) when he describes it as "rationalization imposed by Rotimi in a not very successful attempt to make Odewale's stubbornness, his failure to listen and consult, more convincing".

In his portrayal of Odewale Rotimi is influenced by the theory that Oedipus has a character failing, a tragic flaw: "In the original Greek version the hero is afflicted with a behavioral handicap - namely irascibility. He is quick-tempered - a tragic flaw which prompts him to commit his first major crime of patricide" (Lindfors 1974:63). This interpretation is now rejected by most scholars; Aristotle's term *hamartia* is usually translated as "an error of judgement", and this fits the Sophoclean Oedipus very well. But the way in which Rotimi depicts his hero cannot be criticized on these grounds. Like all modern dramatist making use of a Greek myth he has the freedom to adapt it to his own situation and purpose.

The question now arises how this personal responsibility is related to the oracle which foretold Odewale's fate. In his final speech Odewale says: "No, no! Do not blame the Gods. Let no one blame the powers. My people, learn from my fall. The powers would have failed if I did not let them use me. They knew my weakness: the weakness of a man easily moved to the defence of his tribe against others" (p.71). The argument here is more subtle than Etherton is prepared to admit. Rotimi plays with the idea that the gods have foreknowledge but do not predetermine. Knox (1957:35,38) has used this idea in his interpretation of Sophocles' play: "The external power might predetermine, with or without direct interference; it might also merely predict .... And in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* Sophocles has chosen to present the terrible actions of Oedipus not as determined but only predicted, and he has made no reference to the relation between the predicted destiny and the divine will". It must be admitted that this idea does not completely solve the logical contradiction between human responsibility and predicted destiny, but it is plausible enough to make Rotimi's play very effective theatre.

Rotimi's play has frequently been criticized on ideological grounds. Dunton (1992:17) objects to his concentration on the individual leader "which appears to preclude any consideration of the nature of the hierarchy of power itself". Sofola (1979:135) declares: "Ola Rotimi seems to have been blind to the reality of the African world when he transplanted a Greek worldview into the Yoruba cosmos". Sandra Richards (1984:450) says: "... it seems that in this instance the choice of material identifies Rotimi with the period in modern African literatures when writers were eager to validate their cultures in terms which the former colonial masters could appreciate". Njoku (1984:88), however, regards Rotimi's transposition in a more positive light: "... it must be realized that a classical work like *Oedipus Rex* ... should in itself, be a source of literary influence to writers, because it has (like other classical works in translation) opened up a literary tradition that is rich and distant".

In spite of these objections the play seems to have been very successful in Africa and elsewhere. Etherton (1982:123) mentions that it "has proved to be one of the most successful modern plays in performance ever", and adds: "African audiences always receive it most enthusiastically". Dunton (1992:17) also admits the wide-spread success of productions of the play and admits: "*The Gods* can be a gripping experience". This is proof that Rotimi strikes the right chord and that he has succeeded in giving his own version of that world view which has made the original play so influential.

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