

## **THE STRUGGLE FOR SOVEREIGNTY AND NATION BUILDING IN OLA ROTIMI'S AKASSA YOU MI: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

**Sophia Otaria-Apoko (Obi)**

University of port Harcourt, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Theatre and Film Studies,  
Rivers State, Nigeria

---

**ABSTRACT:** *Modern African dramaturgy is a re-enactment of native historical, political, economic and socio-cultural variables interfused with elements and modes of the west, which is a clear pointer to its dual heritage. This study, therefore, deploys Stephen Greenbalt's New Historicism, as it privileges cultural context and history, to explore the struggle for sovereignty and nation building in Ola Rotimi's Akassa You Mi. The main aim is not only to unravel the power play and concomitant rupturing of relations between the British (represented by the Royal Niger Company) and the natives in the ancient Akassa Kingdom of present-day Bayelsa State of Nigeria but also, perhaps more importantly, to essentialize the enduring virtues of unity of purpose and selfless leadership as a sine qua non for a hitch-free and viable contemporary Nigeria.*

**KEYWORDS:** Struggle, Sovereignty, Nation Building, Ola Rotimi, Akassa You Mi, Contemporary Nigeria.

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, drama, together with other genres of literature (i.e. prose, poetry) has been a veritable instrument for venting human perceptions experiences ideologies, emotions, etc, all of which are varied strands of human life. Awhefeada (2011:286) avers that, of all the genres, "drama best approximates true life experience in its representation of human existence". The scholar anchors this position on the fact that drama privileges action or a verisimilitude of action which makes it more direct and credible than other genres. In the main, in order to re-enact the African situation through dramatic realization and productions, modern African dramatists dig into, or resort to indigenous African history, politics, festivals, rituals, etc, which are usually conflated with elements or modes of the west, to interpret their societies. The main thrust of this study is to thematize the struggle for sovereignty and nation building in Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi*, and show the dynamics of power relations between the British and the natives in ancient Akassa Kingdom of present-day Bayelsa State. In other words, using Stephen Greenbalt's New Historicism as the theoretical template, the focus of the study, as it were, is on how the author consciously interweaves historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural variables in the context of a specific geographical space typical of African societies in the colonial era, and their implications for contemporary co-existence in the Nigerian nation.

### **Synopsis of the Text**

*Akassa You Mi* or the Akassa War of 1895 captures the attack on the Royal Niger Company of the British government by the people of Nembe in present day Bayelsa State. The cause of war is the British maltreatment of the natives, through multiple impositions of taxes on goods and services. Thereby hindering the natives from trading or fishing freely in their waters. They insist that the "Nembe people obtain licenses before trading in their own areas" (*Akassa*, p.xii).

Therefore, in order to liberate his people from British economic and political domination, King Fredrick William Koko (1848-1898) on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1895 leads the attack on the company's headquarters at Akassa.

### Plot Structure

Events in the play are arranged into ten happenings and divided into three sub-titles namely: "...a people in search of a leader" (p.3), "...a dancer costumed as a hawk, must catch chickens" (p.103) and "Solidarity and Movement" (p.116).

*Akassa You Mi* opens with the wailing of Nembe people, due to prolong cruelty inflicted on them by the British forces. Their anger comes to a head, when the Whiteman and their Krooboys (made of the locals) defile Itari (Posi's wife) in the open. This action triggers their long awaited urge to fight for their sovereignty. They approach their king for solutions, but his calm disposition to their plight calls for concern. As the sub-title of the expository scenes indicate, (...a people in search of a leader), the natives worry because their king practices the whiteman's religion. Thus they do not know where their fate lies; whether in the hands of the invaders or their king, whom they suspect is conniving with the enemy to stragulate an already dying people. Hence Posi laments that "it is better to die eeh" (p.12) than suffer humiliation in his land.

At the advent of the missionaries in the nineteenth century, King Koko renounces his traditional ways of worship for the Whiteman's religion. However, Green observes that king Koko changes his heart, due to:

the incongruous situation in which the white man- purveyors of the new religion, turn out also to be practitioners of the great wickedness visited on the people by the Royal Niger Company (*Akassa*, p.xiii).

Koko relinquishes the ways of the whiteman, by approaching the gods he once abandoned to seek solution. Ozongbai, the Chief Priest, mince no words to let him know that he is lacking in his responsibilities. He warns him that "... the land is adrift, and even a twice-blind man can tell when his canoe, once sturdy and mobile, is turned adrift and sinking... (p.77). The opening scenes run from happenings one to six, establishing the cause of conflict, arising from the pains of the natives. This explains their heightened worries and pressure mounted on their king for a solution.

The sixth scene, which spills into the second sub-plot; "...a dancer costumed as a hawk, must catch chickens" presents the pragmatic side of king Koko. He tactically approaches all his aggrieved subjects, including Crocodile Without-Shame (C-W-S), who hitherto terrorises traders for survival. Koko sounds it to his people that "... indeed, the suffering today strangles us... But who knows? Tomorrow another race outside Nembe could fall victim. *Therefore* we must all move together to crush oppression..." (Emphasis mine, p. 108). Koko's call for unity sums part of Rotimi's aim for the play. Inevitably, he calls on Nigerians to be united at all times, especially in their course to achieve a peaceful and progressive society.

The last sub-plot, "Solidarity and Movement" denotes Freytag's 'falling action' in his dramatic pyramid. It presents the concluding part of the play, where all conflicts are resolved. It starts with happening eight, as king Koko successfully leads his people to war. Alagoa (1967: p. 73) notes that King Koko's attack on the British government is different from wars fought by

African kings in the colonial era. This is because Koko did not merely resist British invasion, but secretly planned in the midst of the invaders and successfully executed his attack. "Koko is estimated to have led out a force of thirty to forty war canoes carrying upwards of 1,500 warriors."

Rotimi logically ties events in the play in a cause and effect manner to justify the actions of king Koko and his people. First he presents an already angered people, due to the whiteman's greedy impositions. Then the subtle nature of Koko as a Christian; even to the extent of his people doubting his loyalty. Nevertheless, in order to alleviate the plight of his people, he needs their support, and so Koko returns to his traditional forms of worship. Other reasons being that the whiteman's attitude contradicts the tenets of Christianity, just as Green observes.

Although Rotimi deviates a bit from history, as he omitted the effects of the attack on the natives. Alagoa (ibid, p.72) notes that the British forces retaliated and over 4000 natives, including women and children died. Rotimi notes that he deliberately omitted some details in the play. This is because his wish is to concentrate on the achievements of King Koko. Projecting him "(and...the people of Nembe), as models in purposive leadership, on the one hand; communal solidarity and advance, on the other" (*Akassa*, p. viii). However, historical account also has it that the war was a success, which made the British government set up a royal commissioner, John Kirk to investigate its cause. Due to Kirk's findings, the Royal Niger Company was charged for monopoly. This led to the "abrogation of the company's charter,... and latter restricted in its activities" in the area, Alagoa (ibid, p.73).

### Characterisation

*Akassa You Mi* projects **King Koko** as another tragic hero. At first his people misjudge him, because despite their plight in the hands of the whiteman, Koko practices Christianity. Thus, they feel he is collaborating with the enemy. However, he returns to the traditional creed he understands, so as to salvage his kingdom and people from the harsh grip of the whiteman. Thus, King Koko represents a flexible and honest leader, who sees no reason to rigidly hold on to a belief that contradicts itself, to the detriment of his people and freedom.

King Koko also projects attributes of a patient, wise and amiable leader, who although feels the rage of his people for vengeance, but first considers the importance of their safety. Aware of the sophisticated weaponry of the whiteman, King Koko knows that a foolish attack, will have them all killed in a swoop. He therefore presents a clear picture of the situation to his people, urging them to be patient in their desire for revenge. He notes that:

...the suffering of our land are not the work of our own hands. They are the outcome of our courtesy abused by the whitemen and their black krooboys...Now we have learned that too much openness to strangers can bring regrets and we shall seek comfort in vengeance. But to burst upon the whitemen in a single-handed fury, son, is the father of madness. You will be slain in vain...hasty attack in wrestling leads to a violent fall. We must prepare, son. If truly revenge you want, save your life, save your hate, continue to plan with me (p.12).

He seeks the understanding of his people, their unison (unlike Ameh Oboni). When eventually the Nembe troop launch attack on the Royal Niger Company at their base in Akassa, it proves to be a success and a shock to the British forces, who did not see it coming. Green, at the cover page of the play, observes that "whereas the British saw the incident as a raid, the Nembe saw it as a war to ensure economic survival for their people and maintain their sovereignty." The success of King Koko's attack on the colonial forces marks him as a meticulous leader, who rally not just his people, but also the "...Ibomen with them, Umongo men too, and angry men from Iselema, even from upcountry- the land of the Yoruba and the Hausa" (p.108). This proves that the Nembe people were assisted by men from neighbouring territories trading with them at the time.

The success of the war further presents King Kokoo as a steadfast leader, the only leader in the colonial struggle in Nigeria, who is not deposed nor killed by the oppressors. Green declares that King Koko's victory is "attributed to the justness of the Nembe cause and the fighting spirit he instils in his men" (p.xiii). His leadership stance is worth emulating, as he upholds selfless standards to deliver his people from their fears and struggles. He represents a rounded character who quickly adapt to positive changes, in order to improve the lives of his people.

### **A brief biography of the playwright**

Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi, popularly known as Ola Rotimi was born on April 13, 1938 to Samuel Gladstone of Osun State and Dorcas Adolae Oruene Addo from Nembe, Bayelsa State. Rotimi had his early education in Port Harcourt and Lagos respectively. He later travelled to the United States in 1959, where he obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts at Boston University in 1963 and Master of Arts at the Yale School of Drama in 1966, on a Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship. Rotimi excelled to international circles, where he was regarded as the encyclopaedia of the theatre world and one of Africa's leading dramatists and theatre directors. Upon his return to Nigeria in the 60's, he taught at the Universities of Ife and Port Harcourt. He founded the Theatre Arts Department of the University of Port Harcourt in 1977, and the OriOlokun theatre group at the University of Ife. He was a dramatist, actor, teacher and director. Rotimi wrote several scholarly articles and plays. They include: *To Stir the God of Iron* (1963), *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1966), *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971), *Kurunmi* (1971), *Invitation into Madness* (1973), *Grip Am* (!973), *OvonramwenNogbaisi* (1974), *Holding Talks* (1979), *IF* (1983), *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988), His radio play, *Everyone His/Her Own Problem* was broadcast in (1987), *African Dramatic Literature: To Be or To Become?* (1991) *Akassa You Mi*(2001). Ola Rotimi joined his ancestors on August 18, 2000 at Ile-Ife.

### **The Struggle for sovereignty and Nation Building in the Text**

At the success of "stopping the slave trade and putting legitimate trade in palm oil and kernels in its place," the British government strives to monopolise the present day Niger Delta region to seek raw materials for its factories (Alagoa, 2007: p.5). By 1800 the British took charge of business from the Portuguese, Dutch, French and other Europeans who had been trading with the Nembe people since 1500. To further cement their relationship and complete the abolition process, British signed a formal treaty in 1834 called "offensive and defensive" with the people of Nembe, headed by Great King Boy Amain who ruled from 1832-1846. King Boy Amain during the reign of his father, had in 1830 paid ransom to the leader of Aboh kingdom, for the freedom of the Lander Brothers, the British explorers who were captured at the bank of River Niger. King Boy later handed them over to his father, King Furday Kulo, Mingi IV, the first

king to invite British traders into Nembe kingdom. This shows that the British government initially had a peaceful relationship with the natives of Nembe. In his introductory note on *Akassa You Mi*, Green states that "the years between 1830 and 1879 had brought quite some prosperity to Nembe. During that period its people had functioned as middlemen between European traders on the coast and the market in the hinterlands..." (p.ix). With that understanding, Britain established a consulate in Twon-Brass from where they administer the area. Later they proceeded in the formation of the Royal Niger Company, a combination of all the British firms along River Niger, headed by Sir George Goldie. With its headquarters at Akassa, they ensured total control of the hinterlands, but the imposition of multiple taxation, seizure of fishing and trade routes, canoes and the abuse of the women, subjected the natives to hardship. Green accounts that:

The formation of the National African Company (later the Royal Niger Company) in 1879 and its move into hinterland markets on the Rivers Nun and Niger, Nembe's trade became gravely endangered... The Niger Company introduced alien and very stringent rules, disadvantageous to the Nembe, for trading in the same areas in which the latter had legitimately operated previously. Protest by the Nembe to the colonial authorities brought no relief. Rather, with the setting up by the British of the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1891, and the establishment of a boundary with the Niger Company just to the west of the Brass River, Nembe had become boxed-in and total monopoly of its erstwhile hinterland trade had been handed over to the company (pp. ix-x).

Hence, the natives struggle to trade in their territories and this generally leads to poverty, death and the eventual attack on the company in 1895. This is the historical material Rotimi explores to create *Akassa You Mi* or *Beke You mi*, (the war against the White-man), as referred by the natives.

Rotimi expresses the boldness of a leader, King Fredrick William Koko (1848-1898), who against all odds fights to reclaim his territory, as well as redeem his people from oppression. Although, Rotimi's account presents an outright victory for the natives, which (Alagoa, 1964: pp.10-12) concurs by noting that, Nembe troop destroyed machines, record books, account books, buildings and carried away prisoners and property. Also, Joseph Flint, the company's Agent General and Europeans escaped but crewmen were either killed or captured. Furthermore in Alagoa's account, the British retaliated, using naval gunboats; they invaded Nembe, destroyed its towns and massacred 4000 people, including many women and children. The loses notwithstanding, the natives still adjudged the attack a successful venture because they achieved their purpose, despite the superiority of the British weaponry. Rotimi seems to put forth to the natives and Nigerians generally, the lessons inherent in the war. That is, the call for unity amongst a people, to achieve common goals. At their successful return from battle, Ozongbai notes that "true we have gone to war, we have come back, and our rights regained... but have we now learned our lesson?" (p.134). Conversely, Nigeria has been independent for over five decades, but are the people truly free from the claws of oppressors (within and without)? *Akassa You Mi* achieves a considerable level of success in its thrust on some social concerns that are relevant to the development of contemporary society. Rotimi's use of the play to call for unity of purpose to achieve positive changes, by emphasising the importance of a

selfless and responsive leader. He presents “Koko (and through him, the people of Nembe), as models in purposive leadership, on the one hand; communal solidarity and advance, on the other” (pp. vi-viii). King Koko and his people demonstrate the doggedness of a people towards nationalism in the face of all forces inimical to their progress. That is the historical antecedent that should have positive effect on the present? Or as Ozongbai observes, do "men and women among you think with their skin, being too selfish to think with their heads...? (p.134) and so the nation is in this state of backwardness?

Over the years, Nigeria keeps grappling with developmental issues in all facets of its growth. From the military era noted for its despotism to the present democratic dispensation, the nation remains socially, economically and politically unstable. From the overthrow of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in 1966, post-independence Nigeria has witnessed series of struggles, coup d'états, religious and ethnic fights, the civil war, industrial actions, annulment of June 12 elections in 1993, the Ogoni riot, which led to the killing of the 'Ogoni 9' in 1995. In addition, is the Niger Delta crises, pipeline vandalism and militancy issues cum kidnapping, oil theft, to the series of deaths recorded by Boko Haram attacks. These struggles and more sums the social disorder of the nation, arising from lack of respect for government policies and insincere will power of the leaders towards national growth. The commencement of democracy in 1999, merely witnessed the change of baton from the military to their kinds in civilian apparels, hence, the general expectations of the populace from the joys of independence are fading away. The nation keeps recycling individuals in government with little or no political will power towards national interest. Thus, with the political scene characterised by cross-carpeting and lack of political ideologies, the nation is plagued with politicians who must remain relevant in power, even at the detriment of the masses. The polity is therefore bedevilled with myriad of issues, ranging from corruption, dearth in infrastructural development, unemployment, over-dependence on the oil sector, imported goods and insurgencies. These aberrations and more, characterise the retrogression of the nation, despite her immense wealth in human and natural resources. There is therefore need for government to sincerely revive the system, by upholding the social values of honesty, tolerance, contentment, implementation and respect for lay down laws in all institutions and desperately look inward for industry to thrive. Kunle Oderemi and Dare Adekambi, in their call for fiscal federalism and resource control (2014: p.4) observe that the thirty-six States of the federation, including the federal Capital territory are blessed with unmeasured natural resources. Ranging from clay, glass sand, salt, gas, lead, zinc, talc, gypsum, iron, limestone, copper, uranium, and other solid mineral resources waiting to be harnessed. They note that:

An estimated 10 million tonnes of lead/zinc veins exist in eight states, with five million tonnes deposits in the east-central part of the country alone. The statistics added that more than 7.5 million tonnes of baryte deposits are in Taraba and Bauchi states, and over 700 million tonnes of bentonite reserves in many states awaiting exploitation. The bitumen deposits, which is put at about 42 billion tones, is believed to be twice the quantity of the crude petroleum reserves in the country (p.4).

These potentials if harnessed are bound to diversify the economy, reduce unemployment, poverty, and the country's over-dependence on oil/gas, as well as States overdependence on federal accounts.

The success of Akassa raid is highly attributed to the leader's tenacity and the people's will, to "break the stranglehold on trade imposed by the Royal Niger Company, and to maintain Nembe's Sovereignty" (Green, p.ix). Thus, it takes the sincere determination of a people who hunger for change to fight against the monster hindering their progress. This is the strong desire Rotimi wants Nigerians to apply in fighting the vices hindering its progress, even after the departure of the colonizers. Alagoa notes that "King Koko was a very patient king...he was the only person who fought against the British that was not captured by the British. He had to leave town and go to a little village, Etiema, and when the British came back, they did not see him until he died" (see appendix, p.150). The solidarity of the people to fight for their freedom, communal growth, as well as, conceal the hideout of King Koko from the enemy, is what endears the past to the present. However, in spite of their success, King Koko did not want his people to rest on their laurels and so he warns that:

...until honour, truth, justice and above all consideration for others...until we uphold these virtues as new gods worthy of worship...I say to you, the war we just fought, is only the beginning of more wars to confront in the land. And note this, my people: the face of oppression comes in different colours and at different times. Yesterday, it was the whiteman, crushing us. Tomorrow, it could be even our own black brothers too drunk with power to let us breathe. In all this, always remember: oppression can only reign if the people join them... (p.134).

This captures the nation's dilemma, as the 'black brothers too drunk with power' perpetuate crimes with impunity. King Koko's warning is therefore a clarion call to Nigerians and its leaders to understand that the exigencies of today, in all sector of society; education, security, power, agriculture, health and others, require urgent attention by all for desired changes to take place.

## CONCLUSION

In this discourse, we have thematized the struggle for sovereignty and nation building in Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi*, highlighting its implications for a hitch-free and progressive coexistence in contemporary Nigeria. In other words, it is our contention that Nigerian leaders should imbibe the positive leadership traits projected in the text to instil national consensus and solidarity amongst the citizenry, which is a necessary ingredient for peace and progress. No doubt, this play further cements the creative ingenuity and technical competence that Ola Rotimi's dramatic corpus exudes, and demonstrates his keen awareness of the historical, political and socio-economic underpinnings of colonial and postcolonial Africa which constitute the motifs of a good chunk of his plays.

## REFERENCES

- Afigbo, A.E. "Oral Tradition and Historical Explanation: A Case Study from Central Southern Nigeria." *The Multi-Disciplinary Approach to African History: Essay in Honour of Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa*: Ed. Ejituwu C. Nkparom. UNIPORT Press, 1997. Pp.61- 79.

- Agoro, Saviour Nathan A. *A Handbook of the Ultimate Theatre*. Abuja: Gospel Unlimited Publication, 2005.
- Akoh, Denis Ameh. "Towards a Historiography of the Text: The Plays of Ahmed Yerima." *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama*: Ed. AdeotiGbemisola. Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007. Pp.110-122.
- Alagoa, Joe Ebiegberi. *The practice of History in Africa*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma, 2007.
- Aristotle, *Poetics*. Unabridged: Dover Thrift Edition, USA, 1997.
- Awosika, Kofo, "A President's Responsibilities." *The Guardian Newspaper*, June 17:1999
- Azaki, Steve. *Inequities in Nigerian Politics*. Yenagoa: Treasure
- Brockett, G. Oscar. *The Essential Theatre*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.
- Casely-Hayford, J. E. *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, by Walter Rodney, London: Bogle-L Overtures Publication, p.40.
- Clark, J. P. *All For Oil*. Ibadan: University Press PLC, 2009.
- Communications Resource Ltd, 2003.
- Critical Perspectives on ElechiAmadi*. Ed. SeiyifaKoroye. Port Harcourt: Pearl, 2008. Pp.1-19.
- Eko, EbeleEwa. "ElechiAmadi: Half a century of Creative Writing."
- Erim, O. Erim. "New Trends in African Historical Writing: An Assessment." *The Multi-Disciplinary Approach to African History: Essay in Honour of Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa*: Ed. Ejituwu C. Nkparom. UNIPORT Press, 1997. Pp.331-344.
- Esslin, Martin. *An Anatomy of Drama*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.
- Etherton, Michael. *The Development of African Drama*. London: Hutchinson, 1982. Pp.144-145.
- Farganis, James. "Karl Marx: Alienation, Class Struggle, and Class Consciousness." *Reading in Social Theory" The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*. Sixth Ed. McGraw-Hill, 2011. Pp.29-43.
- Green, Eldred Ibibiem. "History and the African Playwright." *Journal of Creative Arts*. Ed. Femi Shaka, Vol. 1, Pam Unique, 2000. Pp. 5-12.
- Rotimi, Ola. *Akassa You Mi*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research, 2001.
- Tarikh 4 Modernisers in Africa*. "Koko: Amanyanabo of Nembe." Ed. J. B. Webster and O. Ikime. London: Longman Group Ltd. Vol. 1, No. 4, 1967. PP. 65-75.
- Umukoro, Julie. "Drama and the True Tale: An Appraisal of a Historian's Vision of Oba Ovonramwen in Two Historical Dramas." *The CRAB, Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*. Ed. Emmanuel Emasealu, Vol. 1, No.2, University of Port Harcourt, 2006. 153-163.