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It is our policy that contributions are not only original but also advanced in the respective disciplines. Contributions that receive positive assessment from our team of assessors are published in the Journal.

**Prof. Benjamin Omolayo**  
Editor

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## MYTH AND THE AFRICAN PLAYWRIGHT: OSOFICAN'S CRAFT IN *MOROUNTODUN*

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*The use of materials from folklore is one of the most sustained features of creative writing universally. Mythology is the greatest source of the said materials, and among the genres, drama appears to be mythology's greatest client. One interesting aspect of scholarship on such myth-based works is the examination of the authors' handling of the source material. Femi Osofisan's Morountodun is one of the well-known African plays that are rooted in mythic sources. And many a scholar, including the author of the play himself, has commented on the handling of the myth in the play, but their comments affirm the same idea of a subversive use of the myth. None has tried to closely examine how the subversion is realized, a task which should probe the intricacies of the manipulation of the myth in the play. Thus, this neglected but inspiring aspect of the handling of the source material is the major concern enabling him to head the play towards a denouement that is different from that of its source.*

### **Introduction**

The assertion that African oral literature is the mainstay of modern African literature is as old as modern African literature itself. From its inception to date, the written literature of Africa has relied heavily on materials from its oral counterpart. Whether for the purpose of cultural re-authentication, for some other utilitarian purposes, or for mere aestheticism, most African writers have always delved back into the different forms of their oral literary art to borrow materials, which they deploy either as full background resources or as spices in their works. Thus, the "creative use of our myths, legends, rituals, festivals, ceremonies and folklore" ("Trends" 191) has remained an indispensable, if not a definitive, feature of modern African literature.

*Morountodun*, an award winning play by Femi Osofisan, is one of such modern African works which relies heavily on material from the African oral literature for its making. Generally acknowledged as a revolutionary play, *Morountodun's* fame rests undoubtedly on its author's artistry, especially in his manipulation of mythic and historical materials, spicing them up with rudiments of the Marxist ideology to evolve a contemporary play of a classic stature. The mythic material is the ancient Ile-Ife story of Moremi, while the historical material is the Agbekoya Farmers' Revolt of 1969 which took in the present-day Oyo State. In view of these, therefore, the play becomes something of a *mélange* of myth, history and Marxist ideology. However, our focus in this essay is on the mythic aspect; and our aim is to examine the creative interface between African oral and written literatures through the investigation of Osofisan's craftsmanship in handling the myth in the play. We intend to closely examine the intricacies of the playwright's dexterity in manipulating the ancient oral prose material in the process of evolving the contemporary play.



The fourth category is made up of writers who use mythology in such a way as to suit the contemporary socio-political and economic conditions different from those of the old generations. Their reasons are that mythology alone cannot solve the problems of contemporary society, which rather demands a revolutionary consciousness. Egharevba asserts that the result becomes “An intensification of the critical spirit, an urge to overhaul the foundation on which the old social outlook was erected, and consequently an energy directed at creating a new mythology that would offer the projected or emergent society as a firmer road to self realization that cannot be found in the older generation” (27). Bode Sowande and Femi Osofisan are the examples identified in this category. Egharevba says that Sowande presents a re-created form of Olurobi in “A Sanctus for Women”; that he changes the spiritual immaturity inherent in the original myth of Olurobi with the destructive essence of materialism. In an interview with Ossie Onuora Enekwe in 1978, Osofisan speaks of his own subversive use of ancient forms (an instance of which is myth) to suit his revolutionary purposes. According to him:

Obviously I may use myth or ritual but only from a subversive perspective. I borrow ancient forms specifically to unmask them, to use theatrical magic to undermine the magic of superstition. All these gods and their pretended inviolability...one is tired of them. (*Awodiya, Excursions* 20)

Eldred Green has made similar categorization of African playwrights’ use of historical materials and his second category corresponds with Okpewho’s fourth category. Hence, what Green observes about the use of history applies favourably to the playwrights’ treatment of myth. According to him:

The second category is that in which the playwright makes a radical departure from the source and offers the audience a new angle for looking at the historical incident. Invariably, poetic licence is used to a greater extent here, than in the former category in order to make the action and denouement suit the playwright’s social, political, or other perspectives. (7-8)

A close reading of *Morountodun* will reveal that the handling of its mythic material takes the form of Green’s second category, because Green’s “new angle” tallies with what Osofisan himself describes as a “subversive” use of ancient forms, or what Egharevba terms the overhauling of the foundation of the old social outlook and the creation of a new mythology that will offer the society a firmer road to self actualization. Obvious and variously acknowledged is Osofisan’s twisting of the myth in the play to suit his proletarian concerns as a Marxist writer. This is what Muyiwa Awodiya means when he asserts that Osofisan “In *Morountodun* ... reconstructs the Moremi myth and legend of the past to suit his revolutionary view on the political forces of oppression, injustice and corruption in contemporary Nigeria” (106). It is the same thing that Atukwei Okai describes as the murdering of the gods (37).

Rich in critical commentary, therefore, is *what* Osofisan achieves in *Morountodun* by the use of the myth as expressed in such functional words and phrases as **subversion**, **new angle**, **reconstruction**, **overhauling**, **creation of new mythology**, et cetera. But the *how* of that subversion or overhauling is yet to be examined. Here then lies the significance of this essay, which seeks to closely examine the intricacies of that subversive and

reconstructive use of the myth of Moremi in *Morountodun*. This is necessary because much as it is important to know the outcome of what Osofisan does with the ancient form, it is also cardinal to examine **how** he does it. In a similar essay, I tried to investigate Clark-Bekederemo's manipulation of the massive myth of Ozidi to create a stage play of the same name, and my enquiry led me to the following conclusion:

In writing the play, Clark does not do much harm to the source. He retains the basic monomyth plot pattern and the major personae of the Ozidi myth. Nevertheless, using poetic licence, Clark makes secondary adjustments in theme, characterization, plot, symbolism, locations of events and objects appearing in the myth using the simple techniques of substitution, addition, compression, elaboration and deliberate omission. These adjustments relate and create new meanings for the contemporary audience of the stage play. (Ngwoke, 40).

### **The Manipulation of the Myth of Moremi in *Morountodun***

As has earlier been stated, Osofisan deploys the myth of Moremi and the Agbekoya farmers' revolt in the making of the play, *Morountodun*. To this end, it is necessary to present a summary of these materials as well as the plot of the play as they will aid the appreciation of what Osofisan really does with his mythic source. According to Edde Iji's account, Moremi was the favourite wife of Oronmiyan, one of the ancient heroes of Ile-Ife. She was of stupendous beauty and virtue, having only one son, Ela or Oluorogbo. Constantly harassed for years by a tribe called Igbo, the autochthon created by Obatala's rebellious act, the people of Ife were in dire need of a savior to exorcise the devilry of the Igbo thought to be gods or demigods. The people of Ife could not withstand the Igbo because the former thought that they incurred the anger of their gods rendering them easily susceptible to plunder by their enemies. Ife's entire attempt to propitiate and appeal to her gods to rescue them proved futile.

Fired by zeal and patriotism, Moremi undertook to do all she could to liberate her race for such political rather than religio-mythical incubi. Bent on discovering the real secrets of the Igbo, Moremi went to Esimirin stream, where she vowed to its goddess that if she succeeded in her venture, she would make an enduring sacrifice affordable to the deity. She planned to expose herself to the raiders who would capture her and take her to the Igbo country where she hoped to extract the secrets of Igbo success. Accordingly, Moremi was captured in the subsequent raid and presented as booty to the Igbo king who was charmed beyond words by her beauty and courage. Then she learnt their secrets, including how to conquer them. Moremi subsequently stole back to Ife, where she led the Ife against the Igbo whom the Ife defeated, but benevolently made peace with, resettling them within the city walls.

Having metaphorically solved the riddle of her people's sphinx, Moremi had no alternative, but to sacrifice her only son, Ela, in fulfillment of the treaty with the deity. In this way, Moremi assumed the great status of a mytho-religious heroine among the Ifes, partly serving their earthly-cum-ontological needs as a people capable of producing a

saviour-leader, and partly fulfilling their spiritual purgation in conformity with their ontological arguments.

### **The Story of *Morountodun***

In the process of disrupting a theatre company's stage re-enactment of the historical Agbekoya Farmer's Revolt, Titubi the spoilt daughter of the rich and influential Alhaja Kabirat suddenly decided to help the Government and her upper bourgeois class to infiltrate the camp of the warring farmers. Her target is to capture the elusive leader of the farmers' uprising named Marshal as a means of bringing the armed revolt to a stop. She is taken to a prison cell by Deputy Superintendent of Police, Salami, who earlier ironically cajoled her into taking up the role. There, she is taken through a process of coaching by the same Police Superintendent on her course of action in the camp of the revolting peasants in order that the peasant warriors will not understand her true identity as a state agent. Meanwhile, the plan is for her to remain in the prison cell and be released alongside imprisoned farmers whom the police have gathered will be released through a planned invasion of the prison by the peasant warriors.

The plan works and Titubi is released alongside the prisoners and she follows the warriors to their camp in the bush where she acts as a nurse for the wounded soldiers and men, in order to get all the information needed to capture Marshal. Persuaded, however, by a first-hand experience of the farmers' suffering and the raw inhuman conditions under which they live, she gives up her secret service for the government and state and identifies with the oppressed peasants.

In what seems like a fulfillment in her mission, Titubi brings Marshal to the Police Superintendent in the presence of her mother who has come to enquire of her progress and welfare. But to the amazement of the officer and her mother, Titubi returns to the bush with the captured Marshal and continues her duty for the peasant warriors having identified totally with their cause. Only then is Marshal convinced of her true sympathy for the peasant masses. As a reward to her, Marshal marries Titubi and changes her name to "*Moruntodun*", which means, "I have found a sweet thing". But Marshal does not stay either to consummate his marriage or to answer the government's call for a peaceful negotiation, but plunges back into the front and continues the struggle. However, we are told that peace returned through negotiation "after each side had burned itself out."

### **The Handling of the Myth in the Play**

In his manipulation of the myth in the play, Osofisan does three major things. Using the techniques of play-within-a-play, mock drama, multiple-role play and narration, he firstly, adopts the myth's journey motif in developing the play to a climax. Secondly, he models the events of the plot of the play on those of the myth up to the same climax. Thirdly, he models the play's major characters on those of the myth. These imply that in the play, the playwright creates socialist ideological equivalents of the myth's journey motif, the myth's events and the myth's characters.

The journey of Titubi to the revolting farmers' camp is modeled on the journey of Moremi to the ranks of the Igbo. Osofisan discovers that this journey motif in the myth would enhance his socialist dramatization of the Agbekoya farmers' revolt, thus, he adopts it. The use of the journey motif begins when Titubi decides to take up the same kind of role as Moremi does in the myth in favour of the state against the "enemies" of the state. Thus, just as Moremi journeys to the ranks of the Igbo to learn the secrets of their prowess as a means of conquering them, Titubi journeys to the ranks of the revolting peasant warriors to capture their leader, Marshal, as a means of quelling the uprising. The motif, thus, provides the pattern with which the playwright develops the plot of the play to a climax where he drops it through the heroine's role reversal from supporting the state to supporting the peasants.

It is therefore through the journey motif that Osofisan brings real government presence into the destruction of the farmers' uprising. Initially, it is only through the use of the security apparatus that the government of Western Nigeria tries to quell the uprising as the historical account reveals. This is to say that the myth (through its journey motif) enables Osofisan to broaden government's method of attack on the historical farmers' revolt.

Osofisan realizes that the contact is necessary because the yawning gap between the rich and the poor in our society and the condition under which the masses live persist as a result of ignorance on the part members of the upper class about the true condition of the masses. Thus, the motif provides Osofisan with a ready-made tool with which he brings these two classes of people in contact with the hope of effecting a change in the mindst and activities of the upper class and the bourgeoisie (whom Titubi represents) against the masses. Titubi's role reversal after her exposure to the realities of the suffering of the masses is, thus, symbolic of what the playwright achieves by adopting the journey motif and what he envisages for the capitalist Nigerian and, indeed, African society. Significantly, two stages are involved in Titubi's transformation. First, is self-realization. Thus: "I am not the same as I went away, A lot has happened. And I have a long story to tell..."(1:10). This is followed by actual role reversal. Accordingly, we are told:

...I had to kill the ghost of Moremi in my belly. I am not Moremi! Moremi served the state, was the State, and was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not true that the State is always right. (1.14).

The journey motif, thus, enables the playwright to present a weightier role reversal than that seen in the historical accpount in the action of the woman police officer. The police officer belongs to neither of the two major classes in a capitalist economy. Thus, her twist in role does not signify true class suicide but merely creates an awareness of the possibility of such an action.

In the playwright's adoption of the events of the myth, he creates what seems like two parallel plots in the play: a major one. The minor one is the Moremi plot, which is the mythic model, presented in the form of a play-within-the-larger-play and spanning from the point of the heroine's preparation ahead of the journey to the point of her return from the journey. The major plot is the Titubi plot, which is the socialist revolutionary equivalent of the mythic prototype. Each model event in the Moremi plot is placed in a scene

immediately following its socialist equivalent in the Titubi plot as a demonstration of the playwright's borrowing from the former in creating the latter. Below is a comparative demonstration of the model events and their equivalents.

Just as Moremi prepares ahead of her journey to the ranks of the Igbo, Titubi also prepares ahead of her journey to the camp of the revolting peasant warriors. However, while Moremi's preparation takes the mythic form of *rite de passage* involving ritual ceremonies with spirits and the priests; that of Titubi takes the form of rehearsals with the Deputy Superintendent of Police. While Moremi's is to fortify her against the danger of the wanton Igbo warriors, Titubi's is to acquaint her with her line of action in the farmers' camp so that she will not betray her true identity as a state agent.

Just as Moremi meditates as part of her preparation ahead of her journey, Titubi meditates as part of her own preparation ahead of her journey. But while Moremi's takes place in the small market square after the priests have left her. Titubi's takes place in the prison cell after the Superintendent has left her. The stage directions at the end of scene 4 and at the beginning of Scene 5 are evident. In the same manner as Niniola and Oronmiyon come to discourage Moremi from embarking on the dangerous journey, Alhaja Kabirat comes to discourage Titubi from embarking on the dangerous assignment. Just as Moremi stands on her personal sacrificial decision to embark on the journey despite her royal status as a queen and all the pleasures of the palace, Titubi stands on her sacrificial decisions despite the pleasures of her bourgeois family and class.

Moremi's decision to embark on the journey is remotely motivated by a personal ambition just as Titubi's is also motivated by a personal ambition. While Moremi's ambition is to become a god, Titubi's is to become a historical figure that will, with time, become a mythic figure like Moremi. However, while Moremi achieves hers, Titubi does not because the playwright channels her efforts to another purpose just when she is about to realize her ambition. Again, just as the YEYE-OBA women group laments the decision of Moremi to embark on the journey, ALhaja laments Titubi's decision to embark on her own journey.

The queen mother's search for her long-departed daughter, Moremi, in the myth and its play equivalent of Alhaja's search for Titubi, are skillfully woven together in a double-role-playing mock-drama. In one, Alhaja is the queen mother of Moremi and the bourgeois mother of Titubi in search of the heroines. Superintendent takes up the roles of Kabiyesi and his normal role as Police Superintendent to whom the women have come to enquire of their daughters, respectively. Corporal acts as bodyguard to Kabiyesi and as corporal attending on Superintendent. The scene is interesting:

ALHAJA: [beside himself, hitting the table] WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER, YOU MADMAN?

CORPORAL: [stepping forward omtpt the game] stand back, my Queen Mother. The King's person is scared. No one must foul it.

ALHAJA: Ah, Titu! Titu!

SUPERINTENDENT: Titu! Did I hear someone call Moremi? [To CORPORAL] Leave her Majesty, Aresa. [Going to her] Calm yourself, dear mother. This fury becomes common slaves, not the Queen Mother. We understand your distress...(1.10).

As Moremi returns triumphantly, armed with the secrets of the powers of the Igbo, so also does Titubi return armed with the elusive leader of the warring peasant farmers, Mashal. It is at this point that Osofisan drops the plot pattern of the myth. This drop is symbolized by Titubi's return to the warring peasant farmer's camp with Marshal instead of submitting him to the Western government as a means of destroying the farmers' uprising. Unlike Titubi, Moremi did not return to the Igbo society, but provided the State of Ile-Ife with the acquired secrets of the powers of the Igbo which helped them to conquer the Igbo.

As earlier mentioned, most characters in the revolutionary Titubi plot are modeled on the characters in the mythic plot. Titubi, as has been observed, is modeled on the mythic heroine, Moremi. Osofisan has in mind, from the beginning, to transform Titubi into Moremi. Thus, he systematically achieves this beginning with the physical to the internal attributes of the mythic heroine. Firstly, he imbues Titubi with the beauty of the mythic heroine. Even before we get to see her first time, we hear that Titubi is "pretty" and "sensual" (1.1) just as Moremi is said to be of "stupendous beauty". Secondly, the playwright gives Titubi the name of the mythic heroine. This he does through a statement by the Police Superintendent:

Titu-Titu, the magnificent Moremi of the sixtis! Make your show let them clap for you! Destroy the theatre! Burn it down! They'll put your name in the national archives! (1.1)

Though sarcastic, the above statement is made to cajole Titubi into taking the heroic decision of fighting the enemies of the state the way Moremi did. This is Osofisan's way of preparing grounds for the 'Moremic' roles which he intends for Titubi shortly afterwards because immediately after that sarcastic cajoling, the heroic takes up, like Moremi, the self-imposed and sacrificial decision in favour of the state:

...suppose I do volunteer?

I said suppose I offer to fight the peasants? (1.1)

Thirdly, before Titubi embarks on the risky journey, Osofisan arms her with the internal traits of the mythic heroine which, together with her beauty, caused Moremi to succeed. Osofisan achieves this transfer of internal qualities through the symbolism of the necklace. The necklace which is not only called but symbolizes Moremi is deliberately made to yield its inherent significance to Titubi only after she has taken up the Moremi role, thus, transforming her mental make-up. Therefore, unlike other women for whom the necklace remains a mere fashion tool, for Titubi, it becomes a Moremi essence of bravery, courage, determination and fearlessness:

Now, when I wear this necklace, I feel a passion deeper than any fashion vogue. It is as if I have become history itself. (1.4)

In that sequential order, Titubi is imbued with the physical and mental qualities of Moremi including beauty, bravery, courage, determination and fearlessness. The playwright does this because having decided to adopt the journey motif of the myth, there is the need to also adopt the kind of heroism in the myth that enabled the mythic heroic to achieve her purpose just as Titubi is expected to achieve hers. In other words, Osofisan

realizes that Titubi requires the fearlessness of Moremi to expose herself to the rampaging peasant warriors:

They are already outside, she said. They'll soon be here! I... I am afraid, suddenly... No! Moremi was not afraid! Fear go away! Doubt and trembling retreat from me. She was a woman, like me. And she waited all alone, for the Igbo warriors. (1.4)

She requires the bravery and courage of Moremi to actually infiltrate the camp of the warring peasant farmers as Moremi courageously infiltrated the ranks of the Igbo:

There she goes then, my friends, bravely walking into danger. Stepping carelessly into the unknown. Ah, women! ...Moremi, I remember you and I celebrate you.... (1.8)

She needs determination of Moremi to withstand the suffering and agony of living and working with the peasants in her quest for their leader, Marshal:

Two or three of them hold down a woman, only barely identifiable as Titubi on the mat. Her condition is as appealing as the others': only half covered her cloth wrapper shredded and mud-desplattered. She is covered in sweat, groaning in evident pain. (1.9)

However, Osofisan deliberately makes the 'Moremic' qualities of Titubi not to have immediate impact on Marshal the way they did on the Igbo King to demonstrate, firstly, the focused spirit of the struggling masses; and secondly, to show that Titubi's mission is geared towards a goal different from that of Moremi. Thus, it is deliberate that these qualities begin to entice Marshal only when he has become convinced that they are truly for the services of the masses. Therefore, his marriage to Titubi is symbolic of the charm of the qualities of Titubi on him; a situation comparable to the Igbo King's taking of Moremi to himself.

In addition, these qualities are expected to increase the effect of the class-suicide, which the heroine commits towards the end. With those lofty 'Moremic' qualities of Titubi's expectations are high about the heroine's unwavering support of the upper class, but Osofisan deliberately twists her fate in order to achieve a heavy crashing thud from the heights of the bourgeois/upper class to the ground of the masses, thus, scoring a big point for socialism against capitalism.

Alhaja Kabirat is modeled on Niniola the Yeye-Oba Queen Mother. Both characters are the mothers of the two heroines, Titubi and Moremi respectively. Both mothers try to discourage their daughter-heroines from embarking on their individual journeys. And respectively, both mothers lament the heroines' departure. Superintendent is modeled on the spirits because just as the spirits lead Moremi into the grove for preparation ahead of her journey, the Superintendent leads Titubi to the prison cell for preparation ahead of her own journey:

All right girl...follow me...to prison... yes. That's where it's all going to begin. Come, I'll explain it all to you....(1.1)

Marshal is modeled on the Igbo King when he takes the heroine to himself albeit in a different capacity from the King's.

## Evaluation and Conclusion

The foregoing represents the intricate manipulation of the myth of Moremi in the play *Morountodun*. It also represents what Osofisan describes in his interview with Ossie Enekwe as the subversive use of myths and the unmasking of ancient forms. The adoption of the monomyth plot pattern of events in the play and the use of the myth's mode of characterization depict the author's borrowing from the mythic source. The creation of socialist revolutionary equivalents of the myth's journey motif and the socialist heroine's denouncement of Moremi constitute the subversive use and the unmasking of the ancient form. The identified techniques of play-within-a-play, mock drama, multiple-role-play and narration, represent the "theatrical magic" with which the playwright undermines the magic of superstition inherent in the myth of Moremi.

In the foregoing therefore, Osofisan has succeeded in reshaping the myth of Moremi into a weapon for attacking contemporary realities of the Nigerian political system – of oppression and exploitation – thus, revealing the dialectical dynamism of myth as source for modern literature. This he has done by diverting the myth from its original aristocratic service to the state, to an opposing socialist service to the masses. The myth, which is primarily concerned with restoring the dignity and pride of the State of Ile-Ife from the embarrassment, harassment, torment and disgrace which she suffered over the years at the hands of the Igbo, is on the contrary, in the play, put into a socialist revolutionary service in favour of the revolting farmers in the Agbekoya uprising.

Osofisan has also succeeded, through the manipulation of the myth, in evolving archetypal characters out of sociological personages. By her role as a government agent on the dangerous mission of quelling the masses' uprising, Titubi becomes a scapegoat for the fears and guilt of the capitalist and ruling class in the society that is presented in the play. By her make-up and role in the play, Titubi also reminds one of the historico-mythological Amazons of Dahomey. Alhaja Kabirat becomes the archetypal fertility-earth-mother goddess-like the Yeye-Oba queen mother of Moremi – in her capacity as the mother of the heroine, Titubi, and because she laments and searches for the absent heroine. Superintendent is, like the priests, an archetypal symbol of the mythological "more powerful being" whose outside assistance enables the hero to get through the stages of basic initiation and preparation ahead of the hero's journey.

The essay has been able to demonstrate that in writing the play, *Morountodun*, the playwright uses the myth of Moremi as a model with which he moulds the form of the play to its climax. The essay has also shown that the play's journey motif, plot structure and characterization, derive from the myth, which the playwright uses as a prototype while writing the play. The result of this kind of manipulation of the myth becomes the fashioning of a contemporary play out of a timeless oral literary source.

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