RITUALIZATION AS PRAGMATIC DEPLOYMENT OF REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE DRAMA OF FEMI OSOFISAN

A. B. Ajayi
Department of General Studies,
Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Nigeria
P. M. B. 50, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria.
e-mail: deawale@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Early works of dramatic criticism seeking to draw parallels between ritual and drama in Africa concentrated on examining the dramatic characteristics of ritual to see how drama evolved from ritual. However, a closer application of the theories of Girard, Schechner, Smith, Hubert Mauss and Turner reveal new perspectives on the interaction between the related phenomena of drama and ritual. Precisely, in the works of Femi Osofisan, the drama of the revolution seeking social change meets with the mimetic in ritual which is seeking to re-establish cosmic order. The researcher in this paper sets out to investigate Femi Osofisan’s blend of ritual and myth with revolutionary aesthetics and themes in two plays, Once Upon Four Robbers and Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels. In the work, it is revealed that the playwright shows the materialistic push for wealth as a rough, immoral fight that forbids altruism and leads to desperation in seeking wealth. It comes to the fore that wealth when pursued this way remains elusive. He then seeks for a change in the socio-economic arrangement that makes people to unleash their efforts in a mindless, self-centered pursuit of material gain to the detriment of all. The way Femi Osofisan addresses this contemporary theme with a blend of Marxian aesthetics with myth and ritual is the focus of this paper.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Early theories of ritual and theatre concentrated on drama as an offshoot of ritual. This originary approach underlines Aristotle’s poetics in his attempt to account for the origin of Greek tragedy (Aristotle 1997; Schechner 2003; Nietzsche 1995). Nietzsche advances this thesis with an account of the emergence of the plastic arts as he traces the instrumentality of Dionysius to the emergence of the mimetic arts and the place of Apollo in its emergence:

Thus far we have considered the Apollonian and its antithesis, the Dionysian, as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist; energies in which nature’s art-impulses are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way: first on the one hand, in the pictorial world of dreams, whose completeness is not dependent upon the intellectual attitude or the artistic culture of any single being; and, on the other hand, as drunken reality, which likewise does not heed the single unit, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness. With reference to these
immediate art-states of nature, every artist is an ‘imitator,’ that is to say, either an Appollonian artist in dreams, or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies:... (5)

Schechner (2003) captures the thinking of one of the Cambridge school and this thinking is replicated in a seminal work by Ogunba (1978) in which he illuminates the thinness of the dividing line between ritual and theatre in Africa,

...it is always difficult to determine what is or is not a religious occasion in a traditional African context. Such strict categorization into religious and political seems alien to the spirit and nature of the traditional African .... It is true that every traditional festival is attached to a supernatural being or deified ancestor and to that extent may be said to be religious at base and inspiration. But in its realization a festival’s religious origin or foundation is too often and too easily superseded, the festival thereby becoming a veritable carnival, dance drama or ritual drama. (5)

Soyinka (1979) in tracing the emergence of African tragedy pictures Ogun as the godly essence of Yoruba tragedy and shows that the passion of the god is the essence of Yoruba tragic art. In actual fact, in the god’s forays, especially that of Ogun to the earth, reside occurrences that harbour the essence of tragic drama.

Ogundeji (2000) highlights the nuances and similarities of drama, showing ritual and drama as phenomena at different points of a scale:

At this point it is appropriate to draw attention to the fact that a cline or spectrum of ritual performance can be postulated, which existed in Nigeria before the coming of Islam, Christianity and colonialism. The three points that can be easily identified in the spectrum constitute the existing three types of ritual performances. They are sacred ritual performance, ritual festival performance and deritualising dramatic performance. (14)

Though this cultural evolutionary approach has been widely criticized, it captures for us the thinking of cultural evolutionists in the study of the emergence and growth of drama. More importantly, the critical re-appraisal of the approach by Geertz (1973), Bell (1992), Turner (1997), Schechner (2003) and others has led to the re-assessment of the nature of ritual, examination of its structure and analysis of the relationship between ritual and social life. Particularly, it has led to the re-examination of activities hitherto believed to be unrelated to ritual for ritualistic content. With this perspective, theory seems to have gone full circle, as we confront ritualization of everyday actions and the appropriate reading of ritual content into sporting events, public ceremonies, naming ceremonies, birthday ceremonies and burials (Grimes 1982).

2.0 RITUALIZATION AND FEMI OSOFISAN’S DRAMA

Osofisan conceptualises his plays from a ritual consciousness. Looking at some of his plays, the fixation to a ritual consciousness is evident. His plays
exhibit ritualization even as they are steeped in contemporary Yoruba world view with which he analyses socio-political events.

2.1 ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS

In one of his early plays, Once upon Four Robbers, Osofisan casts robbery in ritual mode. The play is about some robbers who seek the assistance of a spiritual leader, Aafa who gives them a ritual solution. He teaches them a song with which they hypnotize their victims and as they sing the song, the would-be victims dance and in no time they sleep off. The robbers then rob their victims. The robberies in the play follow this ritual process of singing, dancing, hypnotism, sleeping and robbery. Aafa who is the story’s narrator leads the song on the robbery this way:

Iton mi dori o dori       I am still telling my tale
Dori olosa merin o       The tale of our armed robbers
Wone pade mi lojo kan    Who came to meet me one day
Mo wa fun won lagbara    Whom I gave a power of magic
Agbara orin kiko         The magical power of song
Orin kiko, ijo siko      The mystery of song, force of dance
Ijo siko kun won loriun  Which sends those who hear it to sleep
Aafa, a bewu yetu!        I, aafa, with billowing robes

(Refrain changes to: ‘Yetu-yetu’!)

Also- Yetu-yetu!      Billowing billowing robes!
Eleni - Yetu-yetu!     Billowing billowing mat
Birugbon - Yetu-yetu!  Billowing billowing beard
Ologbon - Yetu-yetu!   Billowing billowing wisdom!
Bee mo setutu fun won   Yes, I gave them the right antidote
Fun ogun araye titun    Against your modern travails
Owo nini o jewon o kobira Money-grabbing has made you mad
Owo nini, owo janturu   Money, empty money
Owo nini, ika sise      Money-hunting, evil-doing
Owo nini, ika sise      Money-making has made them mad
Owo nini o, owo yepeere Money, empty money
Owo nini, ika sise      Money-hunting, evil-doing
Ika sise, fi kolu agbara... Evil-doing to amass properties...
Iton mi dori, o dori     A modern tale I will tell you
Dori olosa merin o      A modern tale I will tell you
Danondanon akoni ni won Dangerous highwaymen
Ajijo soni apani lekun   Freebooters, source of tears
Awodii jeun epe         Like kites, eaters of accursed sacrifice
Arinko sole dahoro      Visitors who leave the house desolate
Ran mi sorun sunlo fonfon... Dispatchers of lives to final slumber!
Ran mi sorun apapandodo... Dispatchers of lives to final slumber!... (41)

The robbers succeed in robbing the people repeatedly, especially market women, and they even continue to refine their robbery enterprise as they find the operation quite amazing and efficient.
HAASSAN: (Exultant): I told you, didn’t I? See how it worked!
ALHAJA: You’re a genius, Hassaan!
ANGOLA: So easy. No more tedious work like last time. Carrying off those heavy
baskets and boxes. Finding a place to hide them. Then looking for a market to sell them
without being suspected.
HAASSAN: All that’s gone. Now we just wait till they’ve finished the haggling
and hustling and are ready to go home with the profits. Then we pounce.
ALHAJA: A tune and a song. And we pounce. (50)

From what we see of the robbers here, Osofisan tends to be showing us indirectly
that there is no gender distinction in crime, we see her a woman who is one of the
robbers and takes part actively in the robbery. With her and taking another look at
the Aafa who initially provides the magic that facilitates this robbery, Osofisan
also tends to be relaying a social fact which the society has been confronting for
some time and the fact is that the robbers are everyday people like everyone else and even the
religious ones like the Alhaja and the Aafa also get involved in active robbery or by aiding and abetting
the robbers as the Aafa does.

Eventually, one of the robbers is caught in a counter-attack launched on the
robbers by the soldiers after a robbery operation. The robbers in their haste to escape capture by the
soldiers leave their loot behind but the police conceal this and make away with the money.
CORPORAL: They’re gone! They’ve run away!
SERGEANT: Too bad. We got only one of them. Recover that gun.
SOLDIER 1: (Doing so, discovers the money): Look, Sarge!
SERGEANT: What?
SOLDIER 1: The money, it’s all here!
SERGEANT: (knocking him down): Shut up, you fool! Can’t you restrain
yourself? (Looks round rapidly.) Corple, take care of the money. And listen, you
dogs who may have been cursed to eternal poverty! As far as we know, the
robbers ran away with the money! Is that clear? We found nothing. Okay? Let
us meet later tonight, at my brother’s house. And if I catch anybody with a
running mouth... (54)

The playwright uses this event to make the point that policemen, who are
supposed to protect the people and in this play, market women from robbers are
not necessarily better than the robbers. With this, he highlights robbery carried out
on the people by those who are in position of power and have the means to protect
them from robbery but who choose when the opportunity presents itself to rob
them.

The playwright shows that the police is powerless in tackling the problem of
armed robbery, this is because, even with the deployment of policemen to the
market and with their boasts, robbery continues unabated as they too are
hypnotized on hearing the song of the robbers. In actual fact, Mayor is caught only
because he breaks one of the taboos of the magical powers given the robbers by
their benefactor:
ANGOLA: We shall be here, when they bring him trussed up. They'll walk him up that platform and shoot him like a dog. He 'll get the death all traitors deserve. In a common market, among the smell of stale meat and rotten vegetables. He won't even make the Bar Beach.

ALHAJA: Tell me, what do you gain from such hatred?

ANGOLA: He foamed at the mouth! You saw it, he was going to shoot us. [...]

A companion: He was no longer with us, he had crossed to the other side of the street. (78).

The way Angola sees it, Major was in trouble because he chose to work against the group's interests, an act contrary to the directives given them by Aafa. This he believes led to his arrest.

Osofisan also uses the capture of the robber, Major, to highlight the debate on public execution of robbers, creating a basis to examine the desirability of the policy and its efficacy in stemming the tide of robberies and violent crimes. The robbers debate what they are to do by examining their options and posing the questions: should the robber be abandoned to the state for execution or should he be rescued by the robbers using the method of singing, dancing and hypnotism they use for robbery?

Also, the audience is involved in making this decision. This way, the playwright surreptitiously poses the social question: should society continue to execute robbers or should the public execution of robbers stop?

Also, the playwright presents the execution of robbers as carried out by the government as a public ritual in which we have different types of people function as participating audience. However, the playwright appears to be examining the efficacy of this ritual, to see how effective it had been in curbing armed robbery. More importantly it is commonly believed that during rituals of public execution of condemned robbers, other robbers attend and sometimes rob spectators watching the execution, the playwright portrays this, depicting robbers as participant observers, watching the ritual along with others.

At the end of the play, Osofisan asks the audience to decide the fate of the robber at the stakes, the audience is to indicate her approval or disapproval of the execution of Major. This way, he opens up for debate the law permitting the execution of robbers. In actual fact, Osofisan tests the victimage thesis of counter-killing of armed robbers through execution with the audience to see how the she feels about this policy of the government.

In order to situate the audience not just in a fictional world, but in a real world in which they would have experienced robbery before deciding the fate of robbers, the playwright sets the actors to and encourages directors to ensure that the actors really rob the audience in the course of the play so that they would not be deciding in the abstract on something they would never have experienced.

The playwright utilises immediacy of the experience of robbery as the basis for audience participation in the presentation of events. Audience participation is a
key feature of rituals and festivals and he makes this part of theatrical performance. The audience thereby straddles two worlds, the fictional world of dramatized robbery which she watches and the real world of robbery which she experiences on her seat right in the theatre. The solution she would then proffer is based on these inter-twined observed and experienced robbery events. This tends to draw on Bell’s (1992) privileging of experience and detached observation, “...the outsider has only conceptual categories with which he or she approaches the ritual activity. Participants, in contrast, actually experience in the rite the integration of their own conceptual framework and dispositional imperatives (28).”

Osofsan in *Once upon Four Robbers* treads upon familiar and non familiar ground to bring theatrical experience to his audience. Using an analytical mode in the dialogue of the play, he employs conceptual differentiation and re-definition to show how social events give meaning to concepts like robbery and how experience shapes perception. The playwright influences the audience by impacting her perceptual mechanism after which he involves her in taking a decision. He sets this process in motion to influence the audience as to the kind of social change she would consider desirable.

### 2.2 ESU AND THE VAGABOND MINSTRELS

The presence of gods in Osofsan’s drama as characters with major involvement in the events signifies the underlying cosmic conception of the play and the author’s view of the inter-relatedness and co-existential nature of essences in the world, spiritual and physical.

As Soyinka (1979) says,

> Ritualism itself is allied to these axial constants; in the gods’ tragic drama the gods serve as media for this central experience, the conflicts and events are active contrivances for ease of entry into the experience, dramatic motifs whose aesthetic formalism dissolves the barrier of individual distance (28).

In the play, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* we have as character, Esu, the trickster god who also doubles as the god of fate to anchor the experiences of the characters. Situating the experience within contemporary reality, the playwright portrays characters affected by socio-economic problems such as unemployment, hunger and poverty. The characters are musicians who have been banned from performing by the government and advised to take to farming instead. The characters express their indignation on their predicament,

> Sinsin: No one! No one could have known that times would change like this! That the feasting would end, the dancers would go to prison. And we, the singers, so many times decorated, would turn to vagabonds.
> Redio: “Go back to the land!” “Go and farm!” crows the government radio. But with hands like these, made for drumming? The hands that have felt the
trembling skin of a drum, how can they condescend to hold a hoe? Is there no limit to all then to the vulgarity of the age (27)?

The playwright uses the mythic endowments of Esu to create a situation in which he gives these displaced characters the chance to solve his problem by making a choice based on the magical powers he, Esu gives the characters. Each character is to choose how to use the power and the expectation is that he/she would use the power to turn his/her situation around.

The depiction of Esu as a near ordinary character on the same pedestal with human characters further confirms the cosmic philosophy behind this play. For he does not shed his attributes as a god rather those attributes with which myth and religion invest him are the ones the playwright uses in portraying his character. Even with these mythopoeic endowments, he does not for most part of the play pass off as a god, rather, he appears and acts like any other character. This tends to illustrate the point that in Nigeria and in Africa, the spiritual and the physical are seamless.

The plot of the play, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, displays two central characteristics of Esu. He is known as the trickster god. For that reason, in this play and as existent in myth, human beings do not readily recognize him as Esu the trickster god because he conceals his real identity. Also, he features as an operational power in the process of choice. In any situation where choice is involved especially choice of destiny, Esu as the trickster god is always present to influence the circumstances and process of choice. Usually, he tasks the choice makers and ensures that they have to choose between glaring alternatives whose import may not be clear to them.

This situation recalls a popular trickster myth in which Esu wears a two-colour cap with black on one side and red on the other side. Two human beings see him pass but each person sees only one side of the cap. After Esu is gone an argument ensues on what colour of cap Esu was wearing. Other variants of the myth exist in which the cap becomes a dress but the motif and other details remain the same. (Euba 1989).

This Esu trick motif emerges in the play when the characters begin to argue on the value of the gift with which they have been endowed. The complexity of the situation they are in is also shown as they consider the use to which the magical, status enhancement gift could be put. A number of the characters – Sinsin, Epo Oyinbo, Redio, Jigi, feel the gift is meant for status enhancement and its use does not accommodate caring for other people or philanthropy. Omele however sees the gift as a means of easing human pain and suffering. He is the only one who truly uses the gift for this altruistic purpose, easing the pains of those who are not in a position to repay him.
Female Leper: (Desperately). Friends...look at us! We were beautiful too, once, like you! We had ambitions, dreams...
Male Leper: Let's go, Lewa. They are healthy, young. They have their future before them! They cannot listen to such arguments...
Omele: Wait! (He is visibly disturbed.)
Jigi: (Apprehensive) Let them go Omele! Why are you calling them back? You're not going to do something rash again?
Omele: I'm thinking – the Old Man, he gave us each this tremendous power. He said nothing about using it twice...
Sisim: He did! He warned us not to even try!
Omele: Why not? Why not, if it's to help people like these.
Redio: Well, go ahead. I'm tired of trying sense into your brain. Go ahead, it's your funeral!
Jigi: Omele, you're crazy!
Epo Oyinbo: I can even understand, if it's to try and repair the chance you bungled the first time. But, look, they haven't even told you that they have anything to offer.
Omele: It doesn't matter. I don't want anything. Come here, my dear people. I'll do it! I'll take the risk! (71 – 72)

Omele in his use of the gift is the exception. Other characters expect material compensation from the people they help. To their shock however, the gifts they expect do not materialize because contrary to their supposition, the beings they helped are not real human beings but non-human servants of Esu. These beings tempted all the minstrels except Omele to misuse the gifts, greedily concentrating on gratification. Jigi is shocked at the revelation that he helped the wrong one and no gratification would be forthcoming:

Jigi: Prince! I know you're an adventurer! Still, what a spectacular manner this of making a re-appearance! (The Prince laughs). Well, the Old Man is a magician, although you probably know that already, since I see you're friends. He was the one who gave me the power I used for you, to save you from that priest. Thank you for coming back to settle ac-
Prince: Woman, what are you talking about? Saved me! From what priest?
Jigi: Prince! Yesterday! Here, in this very place, when you...
Prince: Quiet woman! And move back! How you smell! Old man, this is extraordinary! Is this why you asked me here, to talk with commoners like this?
Jigi: (Bursting into tears). It's not possible! Prince, my beloved! This, this is your bangle...
Prince: Where did you steal it from?
Jigi: Oh God! Why are you -- ? 82

In order to deepen the philosophical roots of the play, Ososisan anchors the plot on the Yoruba philosophical and primordial rite of predestination. He discusses destiny, ayanmo from the perspective of destiny re-orientation i.e. atunyan. This is clearer when one considers the myth presenting the Yoruba concept of destiny. The myth holds that after Obatala moulded human beings during creation, they visited the home of Esu, the god of fate, where they chose their destiny. For
Osofisan, a revolutionary dramatist, acceding to the Yoruba traditional concept of destiny as sealed fate is out of the question. Destiny is believed to be responsible for a being’s current experience; acceding to destiny as sealed fate would make nonsense of the revolutionary ideal of re-ordering reality through a revolution.

Marx and Engels had in *German ideology* created the basis for revolutionary change of social and economic systems when they argued that the dominant forms of consciousness and ideology at any point in time are those of the ruling class. This ideology they said is existent for the purpose of sustaining the social, political, economic and class structure of the society in which it is found (Williams 1977; Lenin 1919).

Furthering this thesis, V.I. Lenin in his *State and revolution* regards social and political structures and instruments of law and order as instruments of coercion that should be seen as serving the existent structure of state. He makes the point that these structures should be questioned and possibly confronted in the process of the revolutionary struggle and dismantled with the success of the revolutionary war.

The State was the official representative of the whole of Society, its embodiment in a visible corporation; but it was such only in so far as it was the State of that class which, in the given epoch, alone represented the whole of Society. In ancient times it was the State of the slave-owners -- the only citizens of the State; in the middle ages it was the State of the feudal nobility: in our own times it is the State of the capitalists. (20)

The state with its structures is the state of the dominant class. It is this state as it is that revolutionaries seek to change. It then makes sense that Osofisan would not accept the finality resident in a theory of predestination.

In order to show that the characters in this play are in a position to make choices to change their destiny, the playwright places the characters at a junction on the road. We see them at a point in their life where they have a decision to make and that decision is first to agree to take the opportunity offered them to change their lives and then take charge of their lives by re-ordering their destiny through the Yoruba concept of *atunyan* i.e. destiny re-orientation.

The characters are meant to change their fortunes with the magical powers provided them by Esu. With this, they revert to primordiality where they have the power to reorder their destiny. In the midst of their lives, while suffering the effects of predestination and social disequilibrium, they have the chance to make a difference in their lives by freely choosing to use their magical endowment to alter their destiny.

In the process of destiny change however, they have Esu to contend with and the role of Esu in the play is captured by Beier, as quoted by Jahn, J. (1961) which is a distillation of the Yoruba metaphysical thought on Esu.
He is full of mischief and can be deliberately malicious. Usually, he is made responsible for all bad luck and all quarrels. Before a sacrifice is given to any other Orisha, Eshu (my italics) must receive his portion. Prayers and offerings are brought to him to prevent any kind of accident(63).

In this play, the mischief of Esu is countered by the intervention of Orunmila,

Obaluaye and Osun:
Female Leper: You hatched your clever plot, Esu, as usual. And as usual, I am using it to retrieve my children.
Old Man: And to frustrate me, of course! All right, both of you. You think you have won, but I still have a lsat card. I’m going to throw the question to the audience and let their fellow human beings decide. (To the Audience). You! Don’t just sit there and let an injustice be done. Say something! Should Omele return the disease or should he keep it? Speak up, we need your answers to decide! Yes, you sir? And you madam?...
A debate is encouraged among the audience, while the actors freeze on stage.
The auditorium lights come half up. The Old Man finally calls for a vote between the Aye’s and the No’s.
Old Man: Again, please? Let’s have the aye’s, those who want the disease returned. Okay, now the no’s, well, I’m sorry – maybe my ears are failing – but no side has won! (The Male Leper tries to intervene). No need, Orunmila. I know what you want. As well as the goddess Osun by your side. These tricks you play on behalf of humanity! It’s called cheating!
Male Leper: Decide quickly, now. It’s not just what we want, but what you must do. You know you have no choice in the matter.
Old Man: (Sighs) Yes. Let’s end the play then, old spoilsport! And yet so much fun still to be had! Well, as you like it! Let the disease go to those who have won it, those who seek to be rich without labour. Who have put their selfish greed first before everything, including their humanity. I mean you, my dear fellows! Take your reward! (The minstrels cringe in terror). Obaluaye, it’s your turn now! They’re yours!
Obaluaye, the god of smallpox, detaches himself with terrifying laughter from the retinue, and comes forward as his praise-song rises. The transformations begin: with Omele being cured, and his comrades writhing in agony as they are caught by the dreadful god, and are gradually covered in spots. Obaluaye finally leads them out in a dance. (90)

It is the intervention of other gods, Orunmila, Osun and Obaluaye that ensures that the situation is presented as it truly is and Omele is not made to suffer for his sacrificial use of his gift in contrast to the selfish, materialistic use of the same gift by Sinsin and the other characters. Omele is rightly freed of his affliction and the affliction is transferred to Sinsin, Jigi, Redio and Epo Oyinbo.

Setting the play at a junction enriches the metaphor of predestination in the play. The junction is the place where the gods are appeased with sacrifices, and in contemporary thinking, there is a distinction between near-home or inner-city and
remote junctions. It is the thinking that most inner-city junctions have lost their potency for sacred ritual and sacrificial utility. This is because it is believed that gods, spirits and demons no longer inhabit these places but on the other hand, remote junctions still retain spiritual potency and this may have accounted for the playwright’s choice of a remote junction.

Omele: I ‘If explain. This place...this crossroads, I used to live here. After I left the village, they brought me here, to train as a mechanic. My master’s workshop was over there, by that tree. So I saw a lot of things, here. People used to bring a lot of food and leave it at this crossroads.

Sinsin: Why? What for?

Omele: As offering to Esu. From those looking for children, or for riches, or for long life. You see, Sepeteri is the last point between the town behind us and the sacred grove of Orunmila, over there. So Esu, the lord of Sepeteri, is regarded as a kind of intermediary, between men and their wishes, between destiny and fulfillment (italics mine). (23)

Apart from this, there are a host of meanings associated with the junction in Yoruba philosophy and social life. The junction like such other places as the market, the sea are places inhabited by spiritual essences and as such it attracts appeasement and corrective rituals, sacrifices and other practices like ritual baths, appeasement dances or parades; all targeted towards destiny change for mortal man.

The junction is a place where choice of direction is made. The wayfarer makes a choice to go in one direction or the other and of course such a wayfarer may be one that is not familiar with the environment and would be making a choice in partial ignorance of the total implications of his choice. Only at the back of his mind does he retain the knowledge of his real destination and the intention to make a choice in order to get there, but how that choice would get him there and the certainty of that choice getting him there cannot be easily determined.

Redio says as much in respect to the befuddling situation the junction as the place of decision and choice making can be:

Jigi: Now, my Prince can come! Ah, even if he doesn’t pay any more! If he merely twists his finger, and says, come along! What happiness! What a promise of luxury!

Redio: It’s the only song people like us lives for, the song of wealth! Otherwise, when we reach the crossroads at last, at a place like this – we may choose the wrong direction. But, Edumare, you created this jungle we live in, and you made some animals with teeth. Don’t forget us, listen to our song! (79)

The nature junction and the confusion that may attend the situation of decision making at a junction is replicated in the Yoruba saying Ikorita meta to n daamu alejo – the three forked junction that befuddles the stranger. It is thus with these loaded spiritual and metaphorical connotations of the junction as back up that
Osofisan conceives predestination, destiny, destiny re-orientation and socio-political change as interactive concepts in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*.

Setting the play at a junction deepens the ritual-dramatic quality of the play. On the one hand the characters are at a cross-road in their lives and they face a make or break moment for their destiny. It excites a level of anxiety and apprehension, thereby deepening the dramatic experience through suspense.

Osofisan in merging the revolutionary spirit with the tragic here depicts not a single individual who dares in this social-cum-spiritual space but a group of people who belong to the same class in society, the lower class. The uncertainty faced by these characters is about their fortune and future. The drama is not about life and death as in the traditional ritual theatre, the danger is not life threatening but the danger is about social placement, the question being: will these characters end up in entrenched impoverishment or would they be able to change their state and status in life. So, the revolutionary conflict is about life and death just as it is about class, social welfare and status in society. In Osofisan's portrayal, social state and status, the class of a man matters as much as life and the threat and reality of poverty. The struggle for man in the ritual environment of these plays is economic though the fate of the one who loses the economic struggle may be death. For as Soyinka (1979) says: “Ritual theatre, viewed from the spatial perspective, aims to reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces (43).”

Osofisan in this play, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* contrasts two cultural and social perspectives. He portrays the bourgeois spirit, the focus on individualism and materialism, the urge to excel and the triumph of the individual spirit in a competitive environment that cares little for the less fortunate but where the urge to excel and prosper becomes a life-long engagement forbidding altruism and concern for the welfare of others. Geertz (1973) captures the individual psyche that may produce this disposition, “Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives. And the cultural patterns involved are not general but specific – (52).”

Osofisan criticizes the social arrangement that produces the level of self centeredness that pushes most of the characters except Omele, to ignore people’s real needs in preference for the needs of those who can confer benefits on them. He appears to be hinting at a corruption of values, and the weaknesses inherent in competition based on commercialism and mercantilism. He shows how this fixation gives room to destructiveness which swings both ways, to the one exercising the choice, and the one denied of acutely needed benefit.
Also, the necessity of sacrifice and appeasement for destiny change to take place is recognized in the play thus putting the play firmly in the ritual consciousness and process of sacrifice, appeasement and destiny in the Yoruba worldview. However, in contradistinction to the traditional position of the practice, the beings seeking destiny change cannot afford to sacrifice anything, rather they want to in a way steal from the gods by eating the sacrifice offered by others. This of course comes with its dangers but it also raises the question of Osofisan’s metaphysical temperament as he must know what a dangerous adventure it is to steal from the gods, Esu especially.

Osofisan here makes a statement on the fate of sacrifice and ritual in contemporary Yoruba society. There are about four types of scavengers, who devour ritual sacrifices placed at junctions and are called ajobo in Yoruba. These are, the insane who are thought to be psychically in-between the two worlds already; the hungry and vagrants who eat out of necessity, the apostate who eat out of scorn for traditional values and spirituality and the initiate who believes that eating sacrifices fortifies one; such initiates believe that eating sacrifices insulates them from the efficacy of charms.³

Osofisan portrays characters that eat food offered as sacrifice because they are hungry; these characters also happen to be people seeking destiny change. They do not offer sacrifices yet they benefit and are offered what they need. Osofisan here tends to be addressing the down trodden, especially the ones who dwell on their powerlessness and helplessness in the face of daunting social problems. The playwright attempts to make the point that such citizens need not despair but they can take the option of leaning on and scrapping from whatever the society offers them as a ladder to change their fortunes as long as they do not jettison morality, decency, altruism and kindness in the process of seeking change of fortune.

3.0 CONCLUSION

Drama is an imitative art. It imitates life but the imitation is not an end in itself, art imitates life for a variety of purposes and for an artist such as Femi Osofisan the aim is to effect positive social, economic and political change in society. Ritual is a life affirmation procedure seeking to re-establish cosmic order for the individual and the society. Drama and ritual have restorative and corrective social functions and in the drama of Femi Osofisan he appropriates dramatic materials from ritual and related phenomena such as myth, folklore and socio religious concepts and locales such as divination, markets, junctions, thus achieving ritualization through spatiality, mythopoeic characterization and an African cultural ambience towards the formulation of a radical metaphysics realized within the praxis of Marxian revolutionary aesthetics.
NOTES
1. The law permitting the execution of armed robbers looks like a preservation of the concept of revenge killing for appeasement. In a number of cases it has also been cast in the light of victimage in which the robber is the identified object of sacrifice on whom the public and the social establishment unleashes their frustration in the face of many armed robbers who go unarrested.
2. The three-way junction that mesmerizes and befuddles the stranger.
3. The practice of scavenging and eating sacrifices placed at junctions survive and is actively practiced as a ritual priest and key informant demonstrated to the researcher.

SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
Mr Adewale Ajayi has a Bachelor of Arts in Dramatic Arts from the Obafemi Awolowo University and a Master of Arts from the Department of English University of Ibadan. He also has an M.phil in African Dance from the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan. He has taught at the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State since 1987. He has held positions in institutional administration as Director, Polyconsult and Industrial Services, Dean of Students’ Affairs and Dean, School of Part Time Studies.

REFERENCES
http://www.jstor.org/stable/537295
http://www.questia.com/read/91883071?title
http://www.questia.com/read/13792578?title


http://www.questia.com/read/59498080


http://www.questia.com/read/13792578?title


Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
Willet, John 1959. The theatre of Bertolt Brecht: a study from eight aspects.