

PERFORMING BRITISH VIOLENCE IN THE NIGERIAN MIDWEST: ABMED YERIMA'S *THE TRIALS OF OBA OVONRAMWEN* AND THE "NARRATIVES" OF HISTORY

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Abstract: Theatre and its appurtenances can project events, problems and issues of society. Its hegemony consists in performances and varied possibilities of expression with great propensity to awaken social consciousness stimulate emotions, and provide certain 'experiences' to invent a 'new' future. This paper takes a look at one of such experiences through a critical appraisal of the stage performance of Ahmed Yerima's *Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* as presented at the Chinua Achebe Arts Theatre, University of Calabar. Invoking Elizabeth Wessling's *Writing History as a Prophet*, this paper argues that the political perspective of the narrator or writer conditions the many versions of history. The politics and poetics of performance as established by Augusto Boal in many of his works suggest that history need not be written by the oppressor alone but can be subject to the re-writing and re-interpretation of the "vanquished". In the case of Ahmed Yerima's *Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, the interpretation of history is both a creative and critical process in which the act of narration itself becomes a "symbolic" one through which past misrepresentations can be subject to critiques and re-readings. In addition to revisiting the version of this episode of "British Punitive Expedition" to the Benin Kingdom in 1897, this paper submits that through performance the oppressed can not only recuperate his/her history but also re-inscribe the correct(ed) version into the annals of global politics and archival repository.

Keywords: Theatre, Expedition, Punitive.

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INTRODUCTION

When in 1977, Nigeria hosted FESTAC, that is, “Festival of Arts and Culture” in Lagos Nigeria, one of the controversies at the time was the demand made by the British Museum for Nigeria to pay a ridiculous amount of money in order to have a stolen Benin mask temporarily returned to serve as the emblem of the said festival and when Nigeria refused and insisted on having the mask returned Nigeria, the request was turned down on the excuse that the mask was too fragile to travel (Nwafor 2010; Andrew 2014). Many patriots as well as the indigenes of Benin from whom the said art object was stolen in 1897, nothing could be more humiliating. I had the opportunity to revisit this issue when I directed a play inspired by this unfortunate event in the history of Nigeria using the play *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* (2007) by Ahmed Yerima at the Chinua Achebe Arts Theatre, University of Calabar.

Through the framework of Wessling’s ‘Self-Reflexive Strategy’, “a representation of an episode from the past alongside the process of gathering and formulating historical knowledge” (Jonassen et al., 2008, p. 962), the re-appraisal and recapitulation of the historical ignoble Benin expedition was reconstructed. Using the descriptive method, this research is, not aimed at a critical analysis of the textual and dramaturgical essence and quality of the pilot text; rather it focuses on the concept of violence as a strategy of domination by the West as well as the hypocrisy, cruelty, and inhumanity inflicted on the people of the Nigerian Midwest by the brutish British Armed forces. This paper, therefore, argues that the so-called British “punitive” expedition was nothing but an arrogant manifestation of colonial domination; for which, arguably, all European colonizers are guilty.

Proponents of this infamous sack of the Benin Kingdom had on one time or the other, arguably, churned out ominous lopsided literary versions of the

expedition. Directing the play, however, stirred up and brought to the fore the heroic deeds and affable character of Oba Ovonramwen, who perhaps, is considered as the most-celebrated African tragic hero. Delineating the strategy of violence, indignation, and oppression by the British invaders in the Nigerian Midwest, this paper takes a cursory look at other conquest made by the British Forces, especially the Abyssinian (present Ethiopia) invasion of 1868 to buttress this paper’s notion of Britain’s unjustified destruction and domination of African territories.

This inquiry exposes the sanctimoniousness of the British in different spheres especially as it relates to the looting of the ancient Benin Kingdom and the stealing of African treasures. It raises some pertinent issues and questions; what was behind the ‘invasion mask’ of the British invaders, why was Oba Ovonramwen’s life spared, why can’t Britain and other European countries retribute the stolen African heritage. Reflectively, could genocide be linked to the pattern and manner in which the massacre of the Benin kingdom and other African territories was carried out?

DRAMATIC CONTEXT OF THE 1897 BRITISH PUNITIVE EXPEDITION

Perhaps the most widely discussed and dramatized expedition was undertaken by any European country in Africa is the 1897 British expedition carried out as a punitive measure against the ancient Benin Kingdom. The reverberation of this saga had become a veritable material for some Nigerian playwrights who through their poetic creativity have not only documented history but have, through the perspective of the annihilator reconstructed the historical aesthetics of the past. There is no doubt that documentation of the historical aesthetics of the past serves as a compelling avenue for the vanquished to state his side of the story. Performing this onerous function of recording history, Ahmed Yerima

dramatically chronicles the tangled skein that gave vent to the 1897 British “Punitive” expedition to the ancient Benin Kingdom, blending facts and fiction Yerima creates a sensorial picture of the Oba Ovonramwen’s story as told by the Palace of the Oba and the Benin cultural authorities. Commenting on the perspective of his dramatic interpretation of history, Yerima asserts thus;

For me as a playwright, the play allowed me the opportunity to blend fiction and facts in creating a work of history. It allowed me the false sense of illusion of going into the turbulent mind of a turbulent king in a most turbulent historical period. It also gave me a chance to be the king’s advocate, exonerating Oba Ovonramwen especially in the light of the court proceedings made available to me by the palace. No wonder then, that even after reading the first draft, the Benin Cultural authorities acknowledged the work as, “their version”, “their story” (p. 6).

Yerima’s ingenious weave of the imbroglia, conflicts, dissensions, intrigues, and violence that led to the ‘sacking’ of ancient Benin Kingdom largely reveal the covert reason, the extant nature and annexation style of the British colonialist as well as the system of governance of conquered territories (Naseemullah & Staniland 2016). Toyin Falola (2002) posits that the well-established trade in palm produce, cocoa, peanuts, and other commodities along the Benin route at the time made the Kingdom and surrounding territories lucrative hotspots and therefore susceptible to invasion. He further states that the invention of the rubber inner tube by John Dunlop in Britain during the period made the virgin forests of Nigeria’s Mid-West especially Benin very attractive.

The British authorities used confrontation, brutal force, and violent attacks throughout the colonies they sought to annex. Gaining control over

most of the territories and kingdoms along the Niger Coast was not difficult, but when it came to the turn of the Benin kingdom, the British met with great resistance. Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi the King of Benin kingdom in Midwest Nigeria, who became the king in 1888 was not oblivious of the powers of the intruders, having witnessed the ominous developments around him; how the British force occupied the territory of Ebrohemie and deported the paramount chief, Nana Olomu (his closest trade ally further East at Opobo in the Niger Delta), the trading Chief King Jaja was kidnapped and deported to Barbados in 1884, he fortified and strengthened the Benin fortress and dealt with all internal wrangling and maintained political and economic control of the Benin region and beyond (Edigin 2020).

Ovonramwen’s influence, sovereign power, and hegemonic status became a hindrance to British authority’s quest to annex Benin as her protectorate, Burrows, the District Commissioner of the then Oil River Protectorate while cautioning Captain Phillip against carrying his proposed strike on Benin kingdom echoed this his lines;

Burrows: His Lordship fully recognizes the influence exerted upon the protectorate by the attitude of the king of Benin and the loss of revenue which it may entail... (Yerima 2007, p. 21).

The play also exposes the treacherous exploitative moves advanced by the British Consul General and his men, Odokuma and Aganbi (2013) state, “the British tactfully brought Benin under their suzerainty as a protectorate” (p. 59). To avoid a face-off, the king had consented to the signing of a treaty of protection in 1892 with the condition that the Benin kingdom should throw open its door to free trade. However, the Oba who, as his cognomen ‘Nogbaisi’ (enlightened) suggests, was quite enlightened; being aware of the white man’s tricks, refused to give the strangers a free hand to control trade in spite of the treaty.

In December 1896, the desperate and over-zealous Vice-Consul Phillips assembled “a team comprising of Nine Britons and two hundred and fifty African carriers bearing boxes containing weapons” (Yerima 2007, p. 3), his mission was to seek an audience with the king to persuade him to keep his side of the agreement. Phillips non-adherence to a warning not to embark on the trip because it coincided with the annual ritual of the 'Argue' festival (a period which they dedicate themselves to their King and non-Bini man or woman is forbidden to enter the kingdom at the time). In defiance of the warnings from the Benin royal court, Phillips and his men proceeded to carry out what came to be known as Benin's preemptive strike. This visit provoked a violent confrontation, Consul Phillips and six of his men and then 200 African soldiers with him were killed

This attack ignited a brutal British response, Rear-Admiral Harry Rawson commanding the squadron at the Cape of Good hope lead an expedition code-named 'British “punitive” expedition to Benin' in January 1897, its mission- to invase, sack, destroy, annex, and take over Benin kingdom. The king who did all he could to avert the crisis went into hiding with some of his men. The revenge mission which the playwright idiomatically expresses as “killing a fly with a hammer” witnessed large-scale looting within and outside the palace, the city was plundered and thoroughly raped, priceless treasures were stolen by the invaders. Caught in the murky waters of his oppressors, Ovonramwen came out of hiding in August 1897 and gave himself up for trial. Sir Ralph Moor the Consul-General who encompassed the Oba's downfall was the prosecutor, the judge, and the jury in the case. He convicted the Oba along with seven of his Chiefs; while the Chiefs were executed Ovonramwen was sent on exile to Calabar where he lived for 17 years he died in 1914 (Yerima 2007).

With the capitulation of the Oba Ralph Moor achieved his age-long desire of not only annexing the Benin kingdom as a British colony but he had free access to Benin virgin forest, Falola points out that; “the invention of the pneumatic tire in the United Kingdom in 1887 added to the urgent need to control Benin which was one of the richest areas of rubber resources in the region” (p. 9). Giving a parallax view of the subjugation of the Benin kingdom, the character Oba Ovonramwen in the play submits thus;

Oba Ovonramwen: I ruled strong, powerful, supreme, independent, and unquestioned. No one dared the Leopard. No one...but the white man. He desired my Empire and envied my position, and wanted my throne. Like a whirlwind cursed by the gods, he came, and now I am gone (Yerima 2007, p. 19).

CONCEPT OF BRITISH VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION THE OCCUPATION OF TERRITORIES

Definitively, violence in the context of this paper is approached from Toyin Falola's expression of violence in terms of its most basic elements, “the use of force to damage people and objects; the use of force to maintain control; and use of humiliating words to generate violent reactions” (2009, p. ix) This expression, to a large extent delineates violence along the corridors of power. Undoubtedly, the use of force and violence goes with an overriding role to politically dominate, subvert and create unequal societal conditions. Establishing a nexus between the British style of governance and violence, Falola asserts that, “the very conquest of Nigerian groups was an exercise in humiliation, a domination made possible by violence” (2009, p. ix). The unlawful use of force and subversion in the annexation of territories by the British colonialists has been widely established in the history of colonial rule in Nigeria. Various definitive

studies on the European conquest of Africa describe how the colonial masters deployed atrocious and seditious strategies of governance in their attempt to push into the territories, crushing every resistance with heavy and sophisticated weaponry. With a well-established trade in Palm oil, Palm Kernel, and other articles trade, Nigeria became a major attraction for the imperialists who plunder the resources for their selfish gains.

The recount of the 1897 tragic event brought to fore not just the cruelties and particular violence and oppressive patterns but the ruthless and cold-bloodedness that attended the attacks and characterize the encounters between Britain and the ancient Benin kingdom. Traoré et al., (2016) in his remark on the context of the killing of the inhabitants of Benin kingdom which he *describes* as chilling, he records that,

An eye-witness at the inquest into the death of one of the British officers mentioned that the British troops turned their Maxim guns on the defenders who fell from the trees "like nuts" (p. 169).

The first encounter pioneered and executed by Vice-Consul Phillips had in its team a total of nine Europeans and two hundred forty native soldiers. The second encounter, which was the punitive expedition, had in its team "1,200 European soldiers and Naval personnel thousands of African porters were brought in from the British military base in Sierra Leone and Gold Coast and Lagos, several thousands of black troops were also recruited locally to join the team" (Killingray & Plaut 2012, p. 138). Layiwola (1998) records that "the invasion force composed of three columns - the Sopoba, Gwato, and Main columns" (p. 53). This unwholesome alliance reveals the horrendous pattern of British domination, the inhuman treatment of the black Africans. The ruthless and cold-blooded nature of the expedition is evidently revealed in the diary account of Felix Roth a Naval

surgeon who a member of the 1897 expedition, Wayne Morrison (2013) wrote;

We shelled the village, and cleared the natives, as the launch and surf-boats grounded, we jumped into the water.., at once places our Maxims and guns in position, firing so as to clear the bush where the natives might be hiding luckily no white men were wounded we all got off scot-free our black troops, with the scouts in front and a few Maxims do all the fighting (p. 237).

LOOTED ARTIFACTS AND CALL FOR RESTITUTIONS

The Benin forces resisted the British soldiers but they could not march the superior weapons of their enemies, Benin kingdom was finally defeated on 18 February, barely a month after the expedition started (Aremu & Ediagbonya 2018). British marines burnt down farmlands⁴ and villages, the palaces were invaded, shrines were desecrated several valuable works of art were stolen from the palace and the city, priceless treasures in Wood, Jewelry, Textile, Bronze, Brass, Ivory were taken. Relics and collections of the history of the Benin people collected over a period of 1,000 years were plundered. Some of these art pieces were auctioned to defray the cost of the expedition while some valuable works were kept by members of the expedition. In England some of the looted treasures were displayed in the Royal Colonial Institute in June 1897, the British Museum became the new home to several of Benin artworks. The art pieces were also dispersed by the British museum to other parts of Europe.

Accessing the immediate activities that attended the stolen relics, Layiwola states that;

A catalogue of the collection was published by the British Museum 899, subsequently, in 1902 and **1930** several auctions were carried out, many drawn from the collection of the British

expeditionary team. One of such was the auction held in May 1930 from the collection of George William Neville. His obituary in the newspaper dated November 30, 1929, read 'one of Neville's exploits was to accompany the punitive military to Benin in 1897 from which he returned with a remarkable collection of Benin curiosities' (1998, p. 3).

There is no contesting the fact that the art of the people tells their story and history. artifacts' are not just treasures they are a compilation of the tradition, ethics, ideology, and civilization, unique and cherished by the race that owns them. It is absurd, therefore, that the sacred treasures and history of the Benin people today are in foreign lands. Akin Onipede (2013) submits that "the last place to go if you want to see Benin art in Benin itself, very little of it is left in the city...(p. 60).

Nigerians in general and the Bini people, in particular, have suffered great pain and psychological trauma as a result of this pillage and disconnection from their archival past. Several entreaties have been made by the Nigerian government, the Royalty, and institutionalized agencies for the return of these treasures and artifacts but all the requests have fallen on deaf ears, the calls have been discountenanced and countered with arrogance and sophism.

CONCLUSION

Through the theatrical exploration of this specific historical event, an image connecting the past with the present is created; the recapitulation of the chaotic torrents that characterized the episode connotes a burden, a repressed feeling of an 'unfinished' business. The performance sense of immediacy did not only evoke peculiar emotions and responsive sensations, It generated peculiar reflexive illusion as well as an opportunity for me, the performers, and the spectators to exorcize ourselves from the trauma experienced by the king who was not just robbed of his Kingdom but

humiliated and exiled. It opened vistas through which the 1897 British incursion on the ancient Benin Kingdom could be reappraised. This experience and juxtaposition summate Augusto Boal's prescription and function of Theatre, as a platform where the notions of the past are collectively re-examined. Boal (2000) contends that such exposition aims to empower and liberate the people, stir up, and invite them to act desirably for social reforms. He asserts that "the Theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it" (p. 122). Commenting on the reformative and restorative potential of Theatre performances, Freddie Rokem (2000) also submit that "the creative energies of the Theater not only are central for the impact of a performance on its spectators but are crucial for the ways in which such a performance confronts the issues of collective identity and transgressions" (p. 3).

Motivated by the peculiar emotions evoked by the story of the ancient Benin kingdom, this essay submits that since the 1897 expedition and looting issues remain unresolved, there is an unfinished business from the past and we should not relent in lending our voices to other compatriots in the struggle. It is also the view of this paper that in time, even the most objective scholarship will confront the crime committed against the Benin kingdom.

We should be resolutely committed to asking for what is ours, if, freedom according to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is never voluntarily given by the oppressor it must be demanded by the Oppressed, then there should be a desirable harmonization of efforts to challenge the continuous disparaging and pillaging of Africa's rich cultural heritage.

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