

*Research*

## **TRADITIONALISM AS SOURCE OF CHANGE: OLA ROTIMI'S *KURUNMI* AS AN EPITOME**

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**Abstract.** Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* has generally been classified as a tragedy, historical play, postcolonial text, satire etc. Such general classifications have limited the analyses of the play to thematic thoughts such as cultural clash, postcolonial disillusionment, and its understanding as an emblem of the Greek dramatic tradition. For this reason, this paper examines the issue of traditionalism in the play centering on the faithfulness of the writer in utilizing actual historical materials and personalities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Yoruba war between Ijaye and Ibadan armies (in Nigeria) and its implication on the general sensibility of the society. The paper examines the role of the major character of the play, Kurunmi, as a traditionalist and how his display of epic heroism helps produce resounding themes of socio-cultural relevance. It argues that a conscious reading of the personalities, attributes, and egos of Kurunmi as a traditionalist would make the reader have the privilege of having a real sense of the complex nature of Kurunmi's character rather than seeing him as a prototype of a Greek tragic hero.

*Keywords:* Kurunmi, traditionalism, traditionalist, epic heroism

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## Introduction

The discourse of Traditionalism permeates tradition as it refers to a systematic emphasis on the value of beliefs, moral codes, and mores known as traditional values. Hence, tradition is significant to the meaning of traditionalism in this paper. In its simplest and most specific sense, Edward Shils (2006) sees tradition as “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.” It is also “a belief or practice transmitted from one generation to another and accepted as authoritative, or deferred to, without argument”(Graham, 1993). Tradition in this sense is synonymous with customs or its institutions, in that they are actions, ideas, and written or oral texts received from the past and accepted as normal or normative for a given community. In its general and collective sense, tradition is the *modus vivendi* of a society insofar as it is understood as congruent and continuous with the past (Graham, 1993). This suggests that it is the collective consciousness and idea of a community towards the formulation of norms and ethos in dealing with the basic problems of human existence. Sometimes, tradition is used interchangeably with verbal arts, folklore or elements such as language and belief systems that are shared by a group; what gives a community its cultural and national identity. Hence, it is the “sum of a society’s specific traditions”(Heesterman, 1973).

The continent of Africa is perceived to hosts the largest reservoir of varieties of traditional arts, most especially in oral forms which could be classified into three categories, namely; poetry, prose, and drama. The poetry category includes poetic genres such as praise poetry, elegiac poetry, religious poetry, lullaby, nursery rhymes and topical poetry etc. The prose or verbal narratives include myths, legends, folktales, epics etc. while the drama category includes festivals, sacred chants, rituals, dances and acrobatic. Africa is also home to about 2,000 of the 6,000 languages spoken in the world today and many of these languages are used mostly in the oral, unwritten form (Akinoyemi, 2012). Therefore, the plurality of languages in Africa and the pri-

macy of oral communication imply that African oral tradition is one of the best known in the world.

The idea of tradition has generally been seen as explicitly negative. This negative valuation derives primarily from the European Enlightenment, which encouraged the denigration of tradition as the excess baggage of the past, an impediment to “progress” toward a scientific, rational “modernity,” and therefore to be jettisoned (Graham, 1993). For instance, traditional African society is rich with culture and deep in poetic history, but ‘primitivity’ and ‘backwardness’ have been used to describe African oral tradition by earlier European scholars. In extremity, the wrongly perceived non-existence of oral traditions in Africa, for example, has been expressed by scholars in a form as crude as that criticized by Burton centuries ago.

The savage custom of going naked’, we are told, ‘has denuded the mind, and destroyed all decorum in the language. Poetry there is none . . . . There is no metre, no rhyme, nothing that interests or soothes the feelings, or arrests the passions . . . (Finnegan, 1982).

Over the years, the existences of oral traditions are perceived to be derivatives of the encounter with Europeans. Therefore, African oral traditions have been labelled as “cretinous forms in a state of developmental arrest in terms of style, aesthetic canons, formalization of technique, and mode of historical transmission” (Olaniyan, 2000). It has been established that such misconceptions bore down to the inability of the European scholars to conduct a proper analysis of the literary merits of African oral traditions chiefly because they lacked a sufficiently deep understanding of indigenous African languages. Isidore Okpewho (1992) state that “many foreigners came to Africa, spent about six months at a time, and had lived among the people for no more than two years by the time they completed the study. In many cases the understanding of the indigenous language was at best disjointed.”

However, African writers over the years have been effectively projecting the literary beauties of African oral tradition with a feeling of understanding and pride (Babalola, 1966; Kunene, 1971; Okpewho, 1992). Okpewho (1992) argues that what differentiated the European scholars from the Africans is that while “foreigners saved much trouble by eliminating from the texts whatever they did not understand; the native scholars took the trouble to explain the meaning and the effectiveness of the various techniques in the original texts.” The trend set by these African scholars was followed by educated elites and creative writers who exploit the communal oral resources of their base for ideas, themes, and other linguistic influences in their creative works. Chinua Achebe’s novels, for instance, rely on African folk tradition of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe’s most read novel, the reader comes across Igbo customs, myths, legends, folktales, and beliefs in magic, superstition, omen, and spells. In the same novel, Achebe foregrounds some Igbo folktales such as “how the birds and the tortoise were hosted in heaven” and “the earth and the sky.” These folktales give the Igbo concepts of creation, communality, and diligence (Akinyemi, 2012). There is also a significant presence of materials from oral tradition in works of Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi of Nigeria, Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt, Ebrahim N. Hussein of Tanzania, Ayi Kwei Amah and Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana, and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o of Kenya etc. The continuous research into the oral tradition of African people by these writers suggests that tradition cannot be relegated, even in advanced industrial societies. Therefore, this paper examines traditionalism in Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* with a view of examining the character of Kurunmi as a traditionalist cum epic hero.

### **Ola Rotimi**

Emmanuel Gladstone Olawale Rotimi, born on April 3, 1938, in Sapele, Delta state, Nigeria was an Ijaw drama enthusiast. He was trained in play-

writing and directing at the Universities of Boston and Yale, USA. His exposure to western and indigenous writers such as Shakespeare, Gorky, O’Neil, Miller, Pinter and Brecht shaped his creative ingenuity (Gbilekaa 1977). Gbilekaa stresses further that from the indigenous playwrights and theatre practitioners, Ola Rotimi “has learnt from that indomitable versatile man of the theater, Wole Soyinka, his compatriots, J.P Clark-Bekederemo, Ogunde, Ogunmola and Ladipo” (149). The influence of these indigenous playwrights particularly, Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo is in the consciousness of utilizing traditional aesthetic features such as proverbs, music, dance, local idioms, incantations, praise chants, invocation and ritual indicators which are integrated in the western medium of expression in such a way that it reads like a “written orature.” Ola Rotimi plays include: *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971), *Kurunmi* (1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), *Holding Talks* (1983), *If:...* (1983), and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1983). Ola Rotimi spent the second half of his last creative decade working on several unpublished plays before his eventual demise in 2002.

It is indisputable that Rotimi was one of the most outstanding Nigerian playwrights. As an accomplished theatre director and consummate aesthete, Rotimi gained a prominent height on the post-civil war Nigerian theatrical stage. He has contributed immensely to the development of literary, theatrical form in Nigeria. At the University of Ife (now, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) he was a research fellow at the institute of African studies, and later in port-Harcourt as a professor of Theatre and Drama. Rotimi has contributed immeasurably to the training of actors and theatre directors. Above all, Rotimi has shown a serious commitment to his society by carrying through the people’s worldview, aspiration, sensibilities, cultural values and moral codes in a fascinating manner in his works. Gbilekaa’s comment on Ola Rotimi’s creative vision gives credence to the above assertion:

[h]is contribution in the integration of traditional artistic components like dance and music in theatre as manifest skill which is arrested by the high quality of his productions and his experiment with the English language in search for an effective and less evocative idioms of communication with the audience are all incontestable (150).

As stated above, Rotimi's plays are pervaded with indigenous and foreign echoes. The treatment of his plays is basically on the understanding of the Greek dramatic tradition and the African ritual, festival and myth based dramaturgy. This is evidenced in the thematic focus in his plays such as heroism, the quest for identity, cultural diversity, tribal conflict, predestination and socio-political corruption, exploitation, and insecurity. Apart from the above classical techniques, Rotimi also employs indigenous aesthetic devices such as proverbs, the rituals of divination, incantations invocations, songs, praise chants, to embellish indigenous thematic portraiture. Thus, Rotimi's themes, subject matters, forms, and techniques are informed by the blend of indigenous and classical tradition. It is this neat hybridization of two different traditions that makes cultural diversity a recurring theme in his works. S. O. Umukoro (1994) in his review of Rotimi's plays expresses the need for audience engagement instead of the recording of past experiences. Umukoro enthuses:

His first play, *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971) is an adaptation of Sophocles' king Oedipus, the touchstone of Greek tragedy. Notwithstanding Rotimi's defence of it, the experiment is tangential to the needs of the home audience, the Nigerian audience. *Kurunmi* (1971) and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974) are historical plays, devoted to the examination of our precolonial and the colonial past. Here, again, the endeavour is afflicted with a severe inadequacy. While the past informs the present and an examination of the former clarifies the latter (41).

In terms of techniques, themes and forms, Ola Rotimi is highly rooted in his indigenous society. Colonial experience does not totally erode the cultural experience from Rotimi's vision. He expresses a nostalgic embrace of precolonial charms and naturalness to react to issues in the society. Wole Soyinka (1968) evokes the traditional African artists as showing socio-political engagements in contemporary society, saying, "the artist has always functioned in African society as the recorder of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time" (quoted by Umukoro (1994)). Chinua Achebe (1978) complements this view when he declares:

[I]t is clear to me that an African writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb a rat fleeing from the flames" (quoted by Umukoro (1994)),

Rotimi effectively explores history in *Kurunmi* to deconstruct existing colonial accounts of the war as well as foreground the fact that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century wars with their intrigues and consequent resolutions have a place in contemporary dialogue towards the achievement and understanding of the postcolonial discourse on war and peace generally in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. It is pertinent to state here that discrepancies exist in Rotimi's narration of the story of Kunrumi when compared to the historical Kunrumi. In fact he has been accused of "slavish nostalgic view of tradition and culture and of falsifying history" (Gbilekaa, 151). However, this study is not concerned with historical accurateness of the play. Instead, it focuses on the character of Kurunmi as a traditionalist and a heroic figure. The essence is to examine the complexity of fitting into the demanding image of a traditionalist and a public hero.

### ***Kurunmi*: historical context and summary of plot**

The play is premised on the Ibadan-Ijaiye war that erupted shortly after the establishment of a new Oyo Empire by Alafin Atiba (the royal custodian of Oyo Empire) by the middle of the 19th century in Nigeria. Atiba succeeded in building a new capital but for military strength, he depended on two major warrior towns; Ibadan and Ijaiye. He, therefore, cleverly, gave titles to the leaders of these towns. The leader of Ibadan, Ibikunle, a fierce warrior was given the title of Balogun (War General), while the leader of Ijaiye, Kurunmi, was invested with the title of Aare-Ona-Kankanfo (Generalissimo). The city of Ijaiye with a population of about 100,000 people at the time was virtually the most feared because everybody dreaded standing trial before its leader, Kurunmi, or Aare as he was popularly known. Thus, there was a rivalry between these towns established because the Ibadan people often questioned Kurunmi's overt domineering attitude. When Atiba sensed that he was soon to die, he called his leading chiefs, notably amongst them, Kurunmi and Ibikunle to accept the crowned Prince Adelu, as his successor. However, this was contrary to the constitution of Oyo, which stipulated that at the death of an Alafin, his eldest son, the crowned Prince, has to die with him. Ibadan accepted Atiba's plea while Ijaiye, under Kurunmi, rejected it as a violation of tradition. The outcome of their respective stance is, therefore, the source of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*.

Hence, Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is a historical tragedy that centers on the exploits of Kurunmi as an African chief of the 19th century Yoruba kingdom. It recounts Kurunmi, as a war general, who fought a war to maintain a dying tradition. Kurunmi refused to allow time to change the tradition of his people in which a prince must die with his father, despite all entreaties from fellow chiefs. He went to war with the crowned prince, lost the war and eventually committing suicide. Rotimi's dramatization of history in *Kurunmi* avails his evidence with the knowledge of the past and the reconstruction or social engi-

neering of the present and the future. Thus, the study examines how Rotimi's re-ordering of historical events places Kurunmi in a complex role of a traditionalist and the people's hero.

### **Kurunmi as a traditionalist**

Rotimi presents a traditional society that stands close to an advanced industrial or modernized society in which a major, or perhaps only the dominant elites, already have experienced, or see themselves as having experienced, a decisive rupture with the past and thus perceive themselves as no longer traditional. As a result, older traditions are wrongly perceived as dead or declining and no longer relevant. In order to preserve such traditions, the roles of traditionalists are very important. The term "traditionalist" refers to a person or a group of people who has a strong preference for recourse to tradition (genuine or invented) as the primary source of authority. Kurunmi's quest to save a dying tradition is the dominant theme that brings about the conflict in the play. Kurunmi, from the exposition to the resolution of the play, shows defiance and obstinacy in his struggle to avoid tampering with his African (Yoruba) traditional beliefs. In the first scene of the play, the audience is made to understand the bond of love that Kurunmi has for his traditional belief system:

Kurunmi:

The gaboon viper dies,  
its children take up its habits  
poison and all.

The plantain dies,  
Its saplings take its place  
broad leaves and all.

The fire dies its ashes

bear its memory with a shroud  
of white fluff  
That is the meaning of tradition...  
My people, we too have tradition  
This is what makes us men.  
This is what makes us ... people,  
distinct...  
the day the tall Iroko loses its roofs  
is the day the baby ants shit on its head  
the day a people lose their tradition  
is the day their death begins  
-weeds, they become, climbers,  
sea-weeds  
floating  
they know not  
where to  
doomed (Act 1 Scene 1: 16)

The above expression is evident of the fact that Kurunmi is a custodian of culture and tradition. The conflict of religion is evidently expressed in this play. In a scenic description, Rotimi details the clash between the Ijaiye's Egungun festival and the Christian religion:

A band of Ijaiye Christian converts appears,  
led in a procession by Rev and Mrs. Mann.  
Suddenly from the distance the sound  
of 'Egungun' drumming breaks forth and  
the converts begin to react very uneasily...  
Screams, yells, hoots of wild excitement

as a weirdly clad masquerade rushes  
into full view, accompanied by a frenzied  
mob of Ijaiye old men and youths...  
the mob converges on the Rev Mann,  
then moves away, leaving him bleeding  
from a slash on his forehead (Acts 1, Scene 2: 22)

His ability to subdue the colonial administrators and even gain their respects captures Kurunmi's determination against colonial or European influences. Rev Mann and Mrs. Mann both fight hard to introduce Christian influences in the land of Ijaiye where Kurunmi leads as a vibrant heroic chief. However, Kurunmi from the exposition to the resolution of the play shows defiance and obstinacy in his struggle to avoid tampering with his African (Yoruba) traditional beliefs. His tradition, we soon discover, is a symbol for the Yoruba nation, which he believes has been usurped and vandalized by inimical neocolonial forces comparable in greed and selfishness both to Alafin Atiba's pervasion and to the chiefs who did nothing. In a dialogic relationship between Kurunmi and Rev Mann we notice how steadfast Kurunmi is in his projection of the people's tradition. This same consciousness is planted in the mind of his people as experienced in the dramatic clash above. Even the converts find it very uneasy when they hear the rhythm of their traditional religion and they begin to respond uneasily and unconsciously. After this event, Rev Mann meets Kurunmi to get his people "to respond better to the scriptures" (33), stressing further that "it seems certain that the gospel is doomed to failure in this land" (33). Kurunmi does not help Rev Mann as requested, but instead attacks him sarcastically, letting him know that he (Mann) has come to insult their tradition:

Kurunmi:

I go to your country, and I tell your father: 'Mr. So-and-So, from this day on, I want you to give up the ways of your fa-

thers; cast away your manners of worship; neglect your rituals; Mr. So-and-So, snub the shrines of your fathers; betray your gods' (Act 1 Scene 3: 35).

Kurunmi's response to Rev. Mann above projects a vision of cultural or traditional values. He tells his son, Arawole that "the boldness of the white man is the "tragedy of our race and the victory of his own" (36). The figure of Kurunmi as a traditionalist is also made prominent in his meeting with the king of Oyo. At the meeting, Alafin Atiba asked his chiefs to swear that at his death, his son, Prince Adelu will be king of Oyo. All the chiefs; Oni of Ife, Timi of Ede, Bashorun Oluyole of Ibadan agree to the Oba's demand but Kurunmi stands against it obstinately as he does not wish to "party to perversion and disgrace"(Act 1, Scene 1: 17). To Kurunmi, the Oba is trying to pervade the tradition of the people that "whenever an Alafin dies, his first son... must also die with him (Act 1, Scene 1: 19). As a courageous traditionalist, he speaks out firmly in the protection of the tradition while other chiefs watch. Kurunmi regards the death of the king's son along with the king as not tragic but "an honourable ritual of passage which is celebrated by the people as part of their cultural, religious sensibilities. It does not provoke mourning but celebration" (Act 1, Scene 1:19). One of the chiefs, Timi of Ede tries to make Kurunmi understand that "tradition adapts to time" but to the dogged Kurunmi, "Tradition is tradition. Time may pass but the laws of our father, tested and hallowed by the ways of men, live on. That is tradition" (Act 1, Scene 1: 20). The mission of Kurunmi as the symbolic embodiment of the traditional Yoruba people is to regain his kingdom, which has been lost to the ethics of greed and avarice, and to restore it to its traditional philosophy of communal sharing. He thus yelled in disagreement, "I shall be no party to perversion and disgrace. I picked up my staff and walked out" (Act 1, Scene 1, 17).

As a traditionalist, this is not to say that Kurumi's traditions or traditional society are immutable. On the contrary, as Levenson notes: "an idea

changes in its persistence as well as in its rejection .... While iconoclasts relegate traditional ideas to the past, traditionalists, at the same time, transform traditional ideas in the present” (Levenson, 1964). Hence, traditionalism or being a traditionalist does not necessarily involve conservatism or opposition to change in political, social, or religious life, although it may oppose modernism where the latter is perceived as destructive of important traditions in a society (Graham, 1993). Consequently, Kurunmi sees the king and the chiefs’ action as a Eurocentric view of syncretizing the African traditional belief and projecting that of the European. He, therefore, mocks their actions which he likens to a cow “about to be shipped to white man’s land and she is happy... When she gets to white man’s land, what will she become? Co-r-n-e-d b-e-e-fl” (Act 1, Scene 1:22). He uses this metaphor to portray colonial experiences and how it has hindered the African traditional values. The eventual enthronement of Adelu as the next king after Alafin Atiba’s death is not welcomed by Kurunmi and it is this quest to retain traditional belief system that illuminates the conflict in the play.

Kurunmi’s determination as a traditionalist does not only usher in the battle between Ijaiye and Oyo but also reflects the tension that greets war in a social reality. The challenge to war is introduced when the newly crowned Alafin sends a message across to Kurunmi, demanding that he state categorically why he is not present at his crowning. Kurunmi declares that the “supreme lord is dead. How can a dead king expect me to come to his crowning?” (26). Kurunmi calls Adelu a child and further adds salt to the wound by robbing a white cloth in okra soup and smirching it disdainfully, holding it up in a crude bundle, and handing it to the messengers to give to the Alafin. This act is an absolute act of derision of the authority of the Alafin. At last, when the path of peace and reason seems closed, the messengers, in turn, makes their message complete by unfolding three calabashes: one containing bullets, one containing gunpowder and the other a symbol of peace. Kurunmi is asked to

choose between peace and war. Being a heroic figure, he welcomes war by choosing the one containing bullets and gun powder. After the admission of war, Kurunmi derides his challengers claiming the “bull-frog that rivals the size of the elephant will burst” (Act 1, Scene 2:29).

Kurunmi is a man whose traditional stand surged him towards a need-less battle, but he is not ready for deliberations and is determined to face the consequence. As a tragic hero, he is deaf to Ogunkoroju, his chief warrior’s warning that “the land is not quite ready for war” (Act 1, Scene 1: 30), but shakes off the caution by telling Ogunkoroju that “to crush Adelu is our de-sires... get the warriors ready” (30). Kurunmi’s act of unneeded heroism and desire for war only stems from the objectionable circumstance of Adelu living on after his father which he sees as “a mockery of tradition ... a rude spit in the aged face of tradition”. (Act 1 Scene 2: 31).

The battle begins properly when Kurunmi’s warriors sent to Ilorin are killed. The death of these twenty warriors engineers the battle as it draws eve-ry action to top speed. In readiness for war, Kurunmi sprinkles “good-luck charm powder” on his warriors and send them to Oyo. However, Kurunmi be-gins to perceive tragedy when his warriors are persistently marred by the Iba-dan and Oyo soldiers. When Ogunkoroju reveals that “out of a whole five hundred [warriors] only five...came back (Act 3, Scene 4: 64), tension grips Kurunmi and his subconscious mind reminds him of unforeseen defeat: “is Ogunmola sending greetings from Ibadan camp. Over and count the heads of your men in the ashes of my fireplace” (Act 3, Scene 4:65). This engagement of a dialogue with his mind is Kurunmi’s regrettable reflection of the killing of his soldiers. Another report that the people of Egbaland who joined forces with Ijaiye are all destroyed in a river further gear Kurunmi towards self-reflection: “am I in the wrong in this war? (Act 4 Sc1:83). Consequently, his inability to stomach the inevitable defeat leads him into committing suicide by drinking poison. He urges his people to bury him at river Ose where he is de-

feated and recaps “when a leader of men has led his people to disaster what remains of his present life is but a shadow of his proud past, then, it is time to be leader no more” (Act 4, Scene 1:93). At the resolution of the conflict, Kurunmi resigns to fate and takes responsibility of his action. This acceptance of defeat and blame, therefore, signifies syncretization of the African tradition with the western tradition.

Kurunmi may be have failed due to stubbornness and pride, but his effective use of proverbs nevertheless encourages the ornamentally of his language as it helps reflect on the worldview of his people. According to Akporobaro & Emovon (1994):

[A] collection of the proverbs of a community or nations is, in a real sense, ethnography of the people which it systematized can give a penetrating picture of the people’s way of life, moral truths and social values (69).

Thus, Rotimi’s engagement and commitment to his society are evident in the play’s proverbs which artistically reflect the people’s occupation, religion, social morality, heroic exploit etc. It is interesting to note that most of the proverbs are either said by Kurunmi or used by other characters when addressing Kurunmi. This offer importance, aura, flavour, significance and authenticity to Kurunmi and by so doing; he is given unique identity and personality that reflect his role as a traditionalist. In the play, Kurunmi constantly derides the strengths of the Ibadan with proverbs. Examples are as follows: (1) When the tortoise is heading for a shameless journey and you say to him: brother tortoise, when will you be wise and come back home? The tortoise will say Brothers, not until I have been disgraced (Kurunmi, 17); (2) The bull-frog that rivals the size of the elephant will burst (Kurunmi, 17); (3) The goat gets wiser after an ear has been cropped off (Kurunmi, 32); (4) The young

palm tree grow rapidly, and it is proud thinking, hoping that one day it will scratch the face of the sky (Kurunmi, 35); (5) When a rat laughs at a cat, there is a hole nearby (Kurunmi, 38).

The above proverbs reflect Kurunmi's heroism and his hope to defeat his enemies in Oyo and Ibadan. Other proverbs in the play are used by other characters and they unfold Kurunmi's personal traits and attributes such as bravery, anger, and temper. Examples include: (1) The okro stiffen with age, the garden egg toughens as it ripens, a trap stiffens in tension to kill a rat, hook and line tense tantly to catch a fish. A mountain, stiffly erect above ground (Asunsara, 15); (2) No matter how high the swallow thus it must at last come down to earth (Ibikunle, 47); (3) A stick already touched by fire is not hard to set ablaze (Ibikunle, 48); (4) A roaring lion kills no prey softly (Ibikunle, 48); (5) Like a baboon, Kurunmi cannot see the ugliness of his own buttocks (Osundina, 48).

These proverbs are used for different purposes, but what unite them is their authenticity and identity of the Yoruba culture and traditions. Words like; tortoise, bull-frog, goat, okra (draw soup), roaring lion, baboon are words that reflect the occupations and worldviews of the Yoruba people. Also, the speeches of Ibikunle, Osundina, Asunsara and few others, which are replete with proverbs, highlight their traditional roles in the play, making them stand out as unique personalities who have not lost touch with their culture.

### **Kurunmi: an epitome of epic and oral tradition**

The characteristics exhibited by Kurunmi also show the greatest affinity to one of the most developed genres of oral narrative in Africa—the oral epic. Kurunmi, the main character whose name provides the title for the narration, is both a tragic and epic hero par excellence, a fact made more than evident by his physical, ethical, and moral traits, his relationship with fellow human beings, nature and the supernatural, as well as by the character of his

mysterious personality. The opening scene tells a lot about the personality of Kurunmi. As a ruler, he domesticated all Yoruba gods, turned them into captives whom he alone has the right to consult. The scene shows him as an arrogant lord of Ijaye and also prepares the audience for the grand arrival of Aare Kurunmi as drummers, dancers, villagers, praise singers all perform and announce his coming.

His physical size is also a matter of mystery. At one time, he is reported to be “a robust man” (75), at another, he is described as “old, smart in appearance” (34) and still at other times it is said of him that he is a “man full of years.” (81) Kurunmi also has supernatural personal traits that link him with such African, European, and other cultural epic heroes as Sundiata, Ozidi, Beowulf, and Odysseus. For instance, he is described by Asunrara, the praise singer, as “the unfathomable Granit”, “Lord that must be obeyed”, “demander of absolutes”, “the lion himself, prowling, unrushed in the mysteries of night” (25). In addition, his anger “is high, very high”; he is a “roaring lion” (48); he has a “piercing look” (49); he communicates with Yoruba deities because he is “chief priest to all the gods,” (39); the “Effigy of Sango and Ogun adore his palace”; his “sword is beside Ogun’s effigy”; an arrow is shot at Aare Kurunmi but he has a superhuman capacity to miss arrows; he fears no man but rather strikes fear into others. There is no gainsaying that a character portrayed in this way will definitely be arrogant, unreasonable, stubborn and abrasive, in fact, a perfect war-monger. So, when Kurunmi storms in, closely followed by his five sons, we hear the entire crowd pay homage to him, “kabiyesi!” (the unquestionable).

Not only does Kurunmi converse with the deities, his *agbo’le* (compound) is protected by Yoruba gods and the spirits of departed ancestors. Hence, his past heroism and ability to dodge arrows are similar to the frequent protective interventions by the gods on behalf of the heroes in such epics as *Mwindo*, *Gilgamesh*, and the *Iliad*. Consequently, Kurunmi takes much pride

and speaks so much of his heroic past and sees the world only from the perspective of the past. When he gets the news that the Ibadan people are joining hands with the Oyo to fight against Ijaiye, he confidently underestimated the strength of the Ibadan because “those bush goats of Ibadan... have forgotten the horrors of my power they once felt at the battle of Odogido” (Act 1, Scene 1:32). In the exploration of the concept of traditionalism, Graham posits that emphasis are very much in the past, and behind this definition is a very post-Enlightenment sense that that which is from the past is necessarily outdated and therefore useless (Graham, 1993). To Graham, being traditional is to accept unthinkingly the absurdities and credulities of the ‘long dark age’ that proceeded the modern era. Kurunmi, therefore, revels in his past heroism which describes him as a traditionalist that is stuck in the past, unoriginal, uncritical, uncreative (Graham, 1993). This act does not only end in a regrettable and tragic way for Kurunmi, it also reinstates the fact that change is the only tradition that can stand forever.

Kurunmi is the archetypal legendary national epic hero who comes into the play with an already established patriotic history, for his name indicates that he is the embodiment of a once powerful Yoruba war-monger who was the greatest Yoruba general (Azeez, 2013). He was king, judge, general, entertainer, sometimes also executioner who invaded many towns from where he captured hundreds of slaves and warriors until he tried Ibadan. According to Pa Adio, who is claimed to be one of his great grandchildren:

[W]e heard that Aare Kurunmi refused to pay homage and give royal gifts to the then Alafin of Oyo, Adelu who succeeded his father, Atiba. When Adelu discovered that Aare did not support him he then sent a message to him to choose whichever one that suited him: either peace or war; but Kurunmi chose war. While all the neighbouring

towns like Ede, Ibadan, Egba pleaded with him to choose peace but he refused until he was defeated.<sup>1)</sup>

It is in this capacity as the representative symbol of both the Yoruba tradition and Ijaiye people that Kurunmi claims kinship with all the people of Yoruba except for the Ibadan comrades whom he calls, “bush goats” (Act 1, Scene 1:32). Kurunmi is thus not only a national hero, but also a class hero whose brutish attitude set him apart from his equals. Osundina, an old Ibadan warrior, points out that Kurunmi has conquered many lands. He stresses further that “he stole Egband” and has become “lord over lands from Shaki right up to Awaye” (Act2, Scene 1:47). He also sleeps with the wife of Ogunmola, the Ibadan commander. He even imprisoned him for fourteen days as Ogunmola laments “Kurunmi made me prisoner... it was my wife I went to get from under his bosom in Ijaiye” (Act2, Sc1:46). His greatness is also evidenced in the respect accorded him by his subjects including Rev Mann who calls him ‘Lord’. His domineering attitudes are constantly questioned by the people of Ibadan. They are angry with Kurunmi simply because of such attitudes, and how he has claimed many lands as a result of such dominant spirit. Land dispute is a continuous issue in Nigeria and Africa which has brought about civil wars and many inter-tribal wars in the past. The same issue is about to spark war and Osundina submits: “Now Kurunmi is the lord over all lands, from Shaki right up to Awaye. One day, overfed and bloated as we are, Kurunmi will enter Ibadan, tie us all to posts and fill our fresh fat bellies with sweet dry ashes, then we will know...” With this, Osundina portrays the fear of the people of Ibadan. Kurunmi is a strong intimidation to the people, and they all wish him dead, “Are Kurunmi is a man full of years. Not long now, he will be gathered into the land of the spirit. Then we shall have in Ijaiye another leader whose ears will receive our words well and who will pay homage to the new Alafin” (Act 2, Sc 1:48).

Kurunmi is aware of his role as a hero; hence does not take things for granted to the extent that he rejects the philosophy of non-resistance and of turning the other cheek, thus distancing himself in this respect from Christ. When Rev Mann emphasizes the biblical injunction of loving one's enemies by turning the other cheek, Kurunmi sarcastically regards it as a "powerful philosophy – that which expects one man to keep giving, giving, giving while the other takes, takes, takes... (54). Kurunmi's sarcasm confuses Rev Mann to think ignorantly that Kurunmi actually likes the philosophy, but Kurunmi suddenly reveals that "the philosophy of frog is the true philosophy of life (54). He explains that the philosophy is that life is about reciprocating and thus, he must deal with the Ibadan people for violating Yoruba traditional belief. His demonstration of the philosophy of the frog though presents Kurunmi as an atheist; this agonistic trait nevertheless portrays him as an authentic hero.

In the play, Kurunmi has a set of formidable antagonists to confront. These antagonists come from the camp of the bourgeoisie, whose interests are challenged by Kurunmi's championship of the traditional cause. Kurunmi, in fact, is thrust into an unequal battle because the antagonists constitute the powers-that-be and possess an awesome arsenal of coercive instruments ranging from the support from Ibadan people to the stronghold of Oyo Empire, and to the spell cast by an aged witch doctor, *kuyenyo* which made the Egbas and Ijaiyes cross the river Ose to meet their destruction.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion has been devoted to the analysis of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. The play is a historical war drama, but the discussion has been on the character of Kurunmi as a traditional and epic heroic figure. While very sparingly references have been made to historical accounts, such references are made merely to buttress the views of the dramatist about Ku-

runmi. The play is both a sojourn through Yoruba cultural heritage and a lesson in human relationships along peaceful co-existence. Ola Rotimi skillfully projected the clash of Western and African traditional belief system with the hybridization of the two traditions in conflict. This hybridization, however, produced a character whose doggedness placed him in a complex battle with civilization and betrayal of the Yoruba traditions. The implication of this complex role eventually leads to the tragedy of Kurunmi through suicide which also becomes the tragedy of the African tradition, the syncretization of the horrific aspect of the African tradition and the marriage of the pleasant features in a unified blend with Western sensibilities.

#### NOTES

1. <http://thenationonlineng.net/kurunmi-valiant-warrior/>

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