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No Victor, No Vanquished, No Past: Ola Rotimi, Yakubu Gowon, Sani Abacha, and ‘The End of Nigerian History’

Ìfọgbọntááyéṣe has a temporal dimension: it is knowledge as progress and by definition, does not have an end point. It is constantly assimilative and constantly shifting to fit the current societal needs. While it is moving toward ‘progress,’ the points to which Ìfọgbọntááyéṣe leads are not firmly codified. Notions of temporality are clearly at stake in Ìfá divination, spoken proverbs, ìtàn repetition, the political discourses of Yakubu Gowon and Sani Abacha, and Ola Rotimi’s history plays. As with ideas of authority and identity, the traditional Yorùbá notion of time contains a tension between fluidity and stability.

In terms of traditional treatments of time, the past, which is invoked in Ìfá divination – one of the primary modes of predicting and influencing the future in Nigerian culture – requires deity-driven interpretation. The future can only be understood when the past is correctly interpreted and this interpretation requires the intervention of the gods. Likewise, the recitation of ìtàn (historical stories and legends) makes the current political situation appear to be a reproduction of the past, albeit a past that fluctuates based on the political exigencies of the present. In this case interpretation of the past informs the present while the present is simultaneously informing the past.

Given that traditional performances dealing with history and the future have explicitly political contexts, it is significant that neither Yakubu Gowon (who was the military head of state from 1966 to 1975 during which time Ola Rotimi wrote and produced Kurunmi) nor Sani Abacha (who was the military head of state from 1993 to 1998 during which time Rotimi completed Akassa You Mi) utilize traditional concepts of time. Neither ruler bases any portion of his authority in the past, and nor do they couch the future in terms of the past. Gowon’s future is marked by the constantly receding promise of civilian rule and the
past is explicitly erased with his ‘no victor, no vanquish’ policy after the civil war. Abacha, on the other hand, was repeatedly accused of having no vision of the future whatsoever and erasing any moment in the past that did not suit his needs. In both these cases, the present exists as a deracinated moment in time.

As with the prior two chapters, theatre’s political intervention is neither a wholesale return to traditional performance nor a simple negation of the structures of political discourse. In this case, traditional performance argues for a complex, ever-changing, manipulatable, metaphysical notion of the relationship between past, present, and future, and political discourse claims the present exists on its own. Rotimi – who has familial ties to both the Ijaw and Yorùbá – demonstrates a mundane causal connection between past, present, and future. This causal notion of time in Kurunmi and Akassa You Mi – two of the most fully elaborated of the multitude of history plays in Nigeria – precludes abrogation of authority and responsibility to spiritual forces while simultaneously demonstrating that the individual can never overpower the forces of history.

A Future without End: The Memorialization and Alteration of History in Yorùbá Performance and Philosophy

Given that temporality is central to ìfọgbóntààyè, it is not surprising to find ideas of time reflected in a wide range of performances, including speaking of proverbs, recitation of itàn – a relatively unadorned bit of storytelling – and Ifá divination. In each of these performances, the notion of time is simultaneously fluid and static; subject to interpretation and manipulatable; metaphysically influenced; contingent and absolute. In these performances, the past, present, and future blur together, and the understanding of any one of these categories relies on an understanding of the others. The future is set and subject to change, just as the past is static yet subject to interpretation.

One of the most commonly encountered modes of performance in Yorùbá society is the repetition of proverbs, and this repetition reinforces the strong, immutable connections of past, present, and future while simultaneously suggesting possible modes of change. Proverbs appear in casual conversation, in political speeches, in debate, in newspapers, in Gèlédé performance, as part of some oríkì, and in virtually every other mode of verbal communication. In terms of a discussion of time, it is not necessary to differentiate between these various performance contexts. Proverbs provide an understanding of time both by the way they are used and by their content.