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"Why didn't you just stay where you were, a relic in the memory of poets?": Yoruban ritual and sororal commonality in Fémi Òsófisan's *Tègònni: An African Antigone*

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Abstract

This article discusses Fémi Òsófisan's transnational play *Tègònni: An African Antigone* in the context of other African and European rewritings of Sophocles' *Antigone*. The article argues that Òsófisan employs Yoruban ritual for a postcolonial revision of Greek tragedy that constructs an alternative tradition to the Western claim of *Antigone* as a foundational text of European democratic identity. Through innovative framing and by multiplying the protagonist, the play emphasizes that Sophocles' Antigone depends on theatrical reincarnations in order to survive. At the same time, the play's setting in colonial Yorubaland and its cross-racial casting allowed for oblique criticism of the Nigerian leaders of the late 1990s. In contrast to the usual reception of Antigone as a solitary, heroic martyr who scorns her sister's apolitical cowardice, Òsófisan presents Tègònni's rebellion as a collective female movement, thus rewriting Ismene's role. Òsófisan's portrayal of sisterly solidarity is paralleled in recent feminist readings and literary rewritings of Sophocles' *Antigone* which seek to redeem Ismene as a political agent and to explore interpretations beyond the rejection of female commonality that had been taken as typical of Antigone the character and the play itself.

Keywords

Fémi Òsófisan, Ismene, postcolonial rewritings, Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Tègònni: An African Antigone*, Yoruba ritual

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Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, written in the fifth century BC, keeps attracting audiences, directors, and performers. One recent British production was a celebrated version at London's Royal National Theatre in 2012, directed by Polly Findlay. In an interview with the *Guardian* (Gardner, 2012), Findlay notes that her interest in staging *Antigone* stems from the play's concern with fundamental aspects of culture, politics, and, of course, with the history and possibilities of theatre. In this interview, Findlay states that Antigone's story is "part of our narrative DNA" (qtd. in Gardner, 2012: n.p.). This assessment suggests that Antigone's story is deeply engrained in cultural memory. Indeed, *Antigone* is a story which existed long before Sophocles dedicated a tragedy to the mythical figure, and it is a story which has since been passed on for more than two millennia. The plot of *Antigone* is about the question of inheritance, of how the past — depending on the source considered, Laius's or Oedipus's deeds — shapes the present, and how stories repeat themselves, with variations, across generations. Regarding Findlay's metaphor of inheritance, the question arises: who is the "we" implied in "our narrative DNA"? The English? The British? Europeans? The West? Everyone who has ever read *Antigone* or seen it performed? What lines of transmission of cultural DNA from ancient Greece to today exist, which traditions have been constructed, and for which political and cultural ends?

For postcolonial productions and rewritings, the question of to whom *Antigone* belongs is of special importance. Sophocles' play was staged and adapted in many postcolonial contexts as a political intervention against marginalization. As Tina Chanter observes, in postcolonial adaptations, "[t]ragedy has been transformed into a vehicle of protest for those whose interpretation of everyday life as tragic is systematically delegitimated, or not given a proper hearing" (2011: 87). For example, several writers have used Sophocles' play to explore particular aspects of the postcolonial situation in Ireland, such as Tom Paulin's *Riot Act* (1984), Aidan Carl Matthews' *Antigone: A Version* (1984), Brendan Kennelly's *Sophocles's Antigone: A New Version* (1986), and Seamus Heaney's free translation *The Burial at Thebes* (2004).

In Britain's former African colonies, adaptations of *Antigone* need to be understood in the context of a colonial educational system that taught Greek tragedy as part of (supposedly superior, supposedly enlightening) Western culture and that presented cultural achievements such as Greek tragedy as one of the legitimizations of the entire colonial project.[1] Including Greek tragedy in a curriculum to transport British values meant suppressing the vast historical and local differences between ancient Greece and colonial England in favour of one particular construction of tradition. It also constructed a linear tradition from transmission lines which were in fact marked by gaps and cross-pollinations. Sophocles' *Antigone* had not been performed in Britain at all in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and was rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century via a German version first staged in Potsdam in 1841, accompanied by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's music, which meant to recreate the original musicality of the tragedy. The performance of Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's *Antigone* at Covent Garden in 1845, which translated the German version into English (not Sophocles' Greek original), led to "a seismic shift in the British public's relationship with Greek tragedy" (Macintosh and Hall, 2005: 317), as well as contributing significantly to the long-standing popularity of *Antigone* in Britain and its colonies.

Several versions of *Antigone* have engaged with the (post-)colonial situations in African countries. *Odale's Choice* by the Caribbean dramatist Kamau Brathwaite (1967) was written and first staged in Ghana in 1967. Even though his adaptation does not specify a particular African country or time period, the play's celebration of resistance against oppression spoke to the concerns of Ghana in the late 1960s, when the country was newly independent from British colonial dominion yet still not secure as a nation-state. The most well-known African adaptation, *The Island* by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona (1999), transfers the play's action to Robben Island, the infamous prison in which the South African apartheid regime kept political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela. Here, the prisoners stage their own version of *Antigone*, thus expressing and reinforcing their opposition to the white oppressors. *The Island* was first performed in 1973 in South Africa and has been revived worldwide many times since, including three productions with the original cast at eminent theatres in London.

This paper focuses on a third, more recent, African version of Sophocles' play: *Tègònni: An African Antigone* by the acclaimed Nigerian author Fémi Òsófisan. Òsófisan's version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, written in the mid-1990s at a time of severe political crisis in Nigeria, transfers the action to Yorubaland in the late nineteenth century, when the British extended their colonial rule.[2] My discussion is particularly concerned with the function of Yoruban ritual for the play's postcolonial concerns and aesthetics, and with the revision of Ismene's role as a way to stage a collective female resistance movement. Born of Christian parents in the Yoruba town of Erunwon in 1946, when Nigeria was still under British rule, Òsófisan had an international education in Nigeria, Senegal, and France. In the 1970s, he emerged as a prolific writer and member of the Marxist movement at Nigerian universities, opposing the cultural politics of the older generation, a generation which includes the prominent Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka.[3] Òsófisan was professor of theatre arts at the University of Ibadan until his retirement in 2011, where he also ran a theatre company that performed a number of plays including *Tègònni*. Currently, he is a Distinguished Professor of Theatre Arts at Kwara State University in Nigeria. He is regarded as Nigeria's most productive dramatist and as an eminent literary and political voice in and beyond Africa. In 2016, he was awarded the Thalia Prize by the International Association of Theatre Critics to honour his influential contributions to theatre studies.

Tègònni: An African Antigone is a cross-cultural adaptation which truly deserves the label "transnational". Set in colonial Yorubaland, where Yoruba and British cultures intersect, the play was written and first produced at Emory University in Atlanta in 1994, when Òsófisan worked with the university's Emory Theatre as writer in residence. Òsófisan adapted his postcolonial Nigerian perspective on the Greek *Antigone* to the audience expectations of the US campus,[4] though he wrote the play with a view to its relevance for Nigeria, where *Tègònni* was first produced four years later by the University of Ibadan as a convocation and 50th anniversary play (Adebola, 2014: 113). According to Òsófisan (2011: 210), this blending of Nigerian and American concerns in his adaptation of a Greek classic required "delicate negotiations" between concerns about the struggle for freedom, the problem of racism, and the question of gender. What makes *Tègònni* even less rooted in one national literature or culture is the rich history of *Antigone* adaptations that it draws on in addition to Sophocles' pre-text; for instance,

Bertolt Brecht's (1959) and Jean Anouilh's (1946) European *Antigone*s,[5] as well as the most famous African rewriting, *The Island. Tègònni*'s complex setting and production circumstances as well as the long adaptation history of Sophocles' *Antigone* undercut clear national allegiances. They also complicate the idea of a single tradition, in which ancient Greek drama shaped the values and aesthetics of Europe today, and which made *Antigone* part of "our narrative DNA", as Findlay put it. As Òsófisan's subtitle "*An* African Antigone" and the play's doubled eponymous protagonists, Antigone and Tègònni, highlight, Antigone has been multiplied; there are "different possible Antigones who come from a plurality of traditions[, which] undermines the notion of a singular and authoritative point of origin" (van Weyenberg, 2013: 39; see also Goff, 2007: 53). As Bode Sowande points out, the Nigerian theatrical tradition that Òsófisan draws on has been thoroughly syncretic ever since Nigeria's colonization. However, the intertwining of European and African traditions can be dated back further: "What we experience is a robust interaction of two mature traditions. One comes from the shrines of classical Greece and Rome, the other from the ashes of an African civilisation that once gave light to the civilisation of Greece" (Sowande, 1996: 20–21). The transcultural qualities of Nigerian theatre and of Antigone's dramatic legacy therefore further undercut the notion of a single or nationally distinct tradition.

Like Brecht's version of *Antigone*, Òsófisan's opens with a prologue that is comparable to epic theatre because it discusses the issue of casting for the play which is to be performed, thus starting with a metatheatrical stance. This metatheatricality, which pervades the entire play, should not, however, be understood purely as a Western feature, but one that equally ties in with an African performance tradition that has employed metatheatricality as a means of social criticism (Crow, 2002: 134). The ensuing action will focus on the confrontation between Yoruba society and the British colonizers, mainly the Haemon equivalent, captain Allan Jones, the British district officer whom Tègònni is about to marry, and the Creon figure, Lieutenant General Carter-Ross, the British governor of the colony, who strongly opposes the marriage even though he was hitherto a father figure to Allan. The dramatis personae hence require both white and black actors, and the prologue looks at the difficulty of finding white actors for the play. The black actors eventually suggest that theatre, as a form of make-believe, does not have to rely on realistic casting; instead, as one of the actors emphatically observes: "All is illusion here, and everyone in the audience has come to play his or her own part in a dream. And dreams are where anything can happen" (Òsófisan, 2007: 14).[6] This statement not only solves the problem of cross-racial casting, but also asserts Òsófisan's political take on theatre — to offer a heterotopic space for performers and the audience where anything can happen.

As the playwright explains in the programme notes for the first production in the US (reprinted in the 2007 play text; 8−10), he wrote the play in response to the bleak political situation in his homeland. After the civil war of the late 1960s and subsequent military rule, the first free and democratic elections in 1993 were annulled by the military junta, which established yet another cruel kleptocracy. Rather than straightforwardly criticizing the situation, however, the play draws the audience's attention to the parallels between the colonial past and the new military rule. For this project of oblique social criticism, the non-realist casting is important, too, because the depicted tyrant and

soldiers are black. Hence, as critics have argued, audiences of *Tègònni* might have felt "encouraged to see the African leaders of the 1990s as mimicking the abuses of colonialism" (Chanter, 2011: 111). This was a technique also employed by Brathwaite in *Odale's Choice* (1967), which famously does not specify Creon's skin colour.

Furthermore, the fusion of Greek tragedy, British colonialism, and the situation in Nigeria in the 1990s helped to highlight the continuing postcolonial influence of the West (see van Weyenberg, 2013: 19; Goff, 2007: 49). As Òsófisan states in the same programme notes, he chose Greek tragedy, often understood as a hallmark of European democracy, to come to terms with a paradoxical international situation:

> Black Africa's largest nation descends into tragic darkness, in the same decade, when, paradoxically, democracy seems to be the loudest cry. Britain, France, and Germany — democratic nations themselves — openly sell their conscience and lend support to military dictatorship, just as long as their vast economic interest in oil-exploration, telecommunications, the construction industry, and so forth are protected. (10)

Situating his rewriting of Greek tragedies in the colonial period, Òsófisan at the same time draws attention to the neocolonial aspects of the globalized economy and criticizes the Nigerian military government of the 1990s as a renewed oppression of the people.

The main action of Òsófisan's play replaces Oedipus's violation of the incest taboo with a series of violations of religious, gender, sexual, and racial taboos, all broken by Princess Tègònni herself. At the play's start, Tègònni is about to begin the celebration of her interracial marriage with a British officer, against the will of the authoritative male elders of the town, who perceive her decision as a "tragic error" (22), as much as against the will of the colony's British governor. Hence Tègònni radically questions the dominant kinship structures of colonial Yorubaland not only by burying her dead brother, but also by attempting to marry a colonizer. Even though her interracial marriage is a different strategy, Tègònni's challenge to the kinship system goes together with the re-reading of the character in feminist theory. Judith Butler's study *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2000) understands Sophocles' protagonist — contra Hegel and also contra earlier feminist theory — as a political actor whose rebellion against established kinship structures questions state authority. Antigone's "scandalously impure" politics (Butler, 2000: 5) are reflected in Tègònni's interracial marriage which, like the burial of her brother, "reinstates kinship as a public scandal" (Butler, 2000: 58). What is more, audiences learn in the opening scene that Tègònni had previously, with the support of the British officer, established the rights of women to cast bronze. She had also founded a Women's Guild of Carvers and Casters, hitherto a strict religious and artistic privilege of men, a transgression which excited the rage of the conservative Yoruba society and made Tègònni an outcast in the eyes of potential Yoruba suitors. Like Butler's Antigone, Tègònni "transgresses both gender and kinship norms" (Butler, 2000: 6) in Òsófisan's "unromantic picture of a society that not only needs to break free from colonial oppression, but also from repressive traditional forces" (van Weyenberg, 2010: 371). The fact that Tègònni's emancipatory project is supported by the colonizer also shows that her resistance against colonial oppression is to some degree in collaboration with the oppressor (van Weyenberg, 2010: 372), just as Sophocles' Antigone "appropriates the

stance and idiom of the one she opposes" by assuming Creon's sovereignty (Butler, 2000: 23). Òsófisan's two Antigone figures are fighting for social, religious, and political change through and beyond their unruly, public acts of mourning. They thus correspond to Gillian Rose's (1996) reading of *Antigone* in her influential study *Mourning Becomes the Law*, in which Rose shows how individual bereaved women "against the current will of the city […] reinvent the political life of the community" rather than abandoning the laws of the city or fortifying their outsider status (1996: 35). However, there is one crucial difference between Butler's and Rose's Antigones and Òsófisan's political actors: while Butler and Rose present Antigone as an individual fighter for communal change, Òsófisan not only doubles the protagonist in Antigone and Tègònni, but also makes them part of a much larger movement of female protest, as will be argued in more detail below.

The early scenes negotiate how radical Tègònni and her friends' reinvention of tradition is. Chief Isokun, the town poet, who represents the town elders (and partly replaces Sophocles' chorus) is not unequivocal about the behaviour of the princess. While he claims that "[e]ven her father's spirit in heaven will not approve it" and that the marriage would violate the tradition represented by "the dead" (22), he considers the argument of Tègònni's friends, "If her marriage will help the living, why would the dead complain?" (22). This responsibility of the dead for the present and future of the living implies a flexibility of tradition, which might have to be adapted to speak to the moment. Accordingly, the oracle Ifá remains enigmatic about the matter and gives Isokun the freedom and burden of interpretation: "several times already I've consulted Ifá on the matter, and each answer has been like a riddle. I confess, I don't know what to do" (24). As Glenn Odom (2015: 23) has argued in his study of Yoruba performance and politics, in general the "prophetic performances of the Ifá corpus […] have an open-ended quality", since the traditional "poems and stories have drastically different prophetic signification based on the contemporary context". The oracle which protects the heritage of the past at the same time allows for fluidity for the sake of the present and the future.

The exposition thus sets up an individual as well as communal conflict in the colonial context. The uncertainty of the situation is underlined by the interruption of the marriage rite. When Tègònni's bridal procession is on its way to her husband's house, it is stopped before the procession can enter the palace to ask for the blessing of Tègònni's dead ancestors. The soldiers who guard the body of Tègònni's dead brother Oyekunle halt the procession and turn the mood of joyful anticipation into shocked mourning. Learning that Tègònni's brother has died and is meant to remain unburied in the town centre as a punishment for his fight against his homeland and its colonial rulers, the procession returns to Tègònni's home. In the following scenes the suspended wedding fuels the further escalation of the conflict, as the bridal procession returns to the palace as a cover for Tègònni's mission to bury her brother, which leads to the imprisonment and imminent execution of the princess and her sisterly friends.

The *ritus interruptus* is a well-established device in Nigerian theatre. Soyinka, whose plays often use the dramatic potential of interrupted rites, has proposed to interpret the state as a metaphor for the destabilization and transitional state of traditional culture (Balme, 1999: 89). In Òsófisan's oeuvre, traditional music, mask, and dance are usually employed, as Sandra Richards has shown, "as potentially disruptive modes of critique" (1996: 78). Odom has likewise concluded that "Osofisan's work pushes the audience to

consider the extent to which they must depart from ritual and tradition in order to accomplish something new" (2015: 21–22). The blending of an interracial marriage and a traditional bridal procession including the appropriate clothing, singing, dancing, and rituals opens this space of innovation and the potential to accomplish something new — in terms of the social situation, plot, and theatrical aesthetics. As Chukwuma Okoye argues,

> Modern African theatre emerged in response to a turbulent reality and adopted avant-gardist aesthetics, charting a new path but utilizing tools from tradition it radically challenges and embraces — both Western European and indigenous African. Thus modern African theatre is modern and counter-modern; neo-traditional and counter-traditional. (2015: 212)

In terms of both content and aesthetics, the play negotiates the tension between tradition and innovation, and the interruption of traditional rites is one example of this simultaneous usage and undercutting of theatrical and social legacies, which are opened up to the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of the present and the future.

This tension between neo- and counter-tradition in the postcolonial situation is also relevant for the play's engagement with Sophocles' heroine. After the exposition, Antigone appears in Scene Three, disappointed that the play started without her. Òsófisan thus continues the meta-theatrical stance set up in the prologue, as Antigone watches, comments on, and directs the action. What is more, her presence on stage emphasizes the play's complex position towards the story and the protagonist of Sophocles' *Antigone*: are they to be understood as part of the colonial heritage, are they an instrument of oppression? On this trajectory, some postcolonial authors and critics have argued that not only British literature and culture, but the entire Western tradition that had been used as "educational" tools by the colonizers need to be rejected and overcome. Greek drama has often been seen as part of Western indoctrination and hence rejected as a "tragic influence" on colonial and postcolonial cultures (Gibbs, 2007: 55). Is *Antigone* just such a relic of the oppressive past that needs to be eliminated? In some respects, this view holds true for Òsófisan's play. For example, Antigone makes her guards take up the roles of mercenary colonial soldiers, demands that they speak pidgin English, and repeatedly reprimands them for not sticking to the script. In one of the scenes in which the actors rebel against the classic tradition and colonial rule, Òsófisan's simultaneous critique of the contemporary Nigerian military regime is expressed:

2nd SOLDIER:	You've got to find us another role. This one's no fun at all!
ANTIGONE:	You're tired of being soldiers?
4th SOLDIER:	Demoralised. All we do is carry corpses.
2nd SOLDIER:	Or build execution platforms —
1st SOLDIER:	Or terrorise people —
2nd SOLDIER:	Burn and plunder houses —
4th SOLDIER:	Collect bribes!
3rd SOLDIER:	We're so ashamed! Is this all that soldiers do in this country?
2nd SOLDIER:	Not even one act you could call humane?
ANTIGONE:	I know what you mean, but it's the times we've come into, my friends. It just happens that the soldiers here are trained to look upon their own people as enemies. (74–75)

For Nigerian audiences, the reference to "the times we've come into" certainly evoked the postcolonial present as much as the colonial past of the nineteenth century. At the end of this dialogue, the soldiers highlight the power of the adapters over the original, of the performers over the director, and, more obliquely, of the people over the tyrant. When Antigone demands, "You can't quit before the play ends", the soldiers answer: "When we quit, the play will end" (75), thus exposing both Antigone's and the military rulers' dependence on their performance.

Antigone's questionable status as either a representative of the repressive colonial past or a model of political independence is also discussed with reference to her physical appearance. When she first arrives, she claims a position of control and superior knowledge. For instance, she states, "I heard you were acting my story" (25) and "history [is] about to repeat itself again" (28). When Tègònni's friends dismiss her as an "impostor" (26), because she is black and hence cannot stem from Greek mythology, Antigone and her crew argue that "Antigone belongs to several incarnations" (26) and that they are "metaphors" that "always come in the colour and the shape of your imagination" (27). What is more, they claim to have had "long rehearsals" (27) about the customs of the Yoruba. In contrast to the colonial oppressors, Antigone presents herself as a cultural chameleon, whose skin colour reflects her thorough engagement with the native culture. An important part of this engagement is her knowledge of, and possibly even her conversion to, Yoruba religion.

Yoruba religion is crucial for understanding Òsófisan's postcolonial engagement with *Antigone* in terms of content and form, of his modification of the story and the theatrical aesthetics that he creates.[7] Several features of the play highlight the importance of Yoruba religion. The metatheatrical prologue itself can be related to Yoruba rituals in which whiteface is used, as Margaret Thompson Drewal (2015) has shown in her ethnographic research. For instance, while wearing white masks, Yoruba ritual performers enacted parodies of British behaviour, such as the display of affection in public which was unusual in Yoruba society (Thompson Drewal, 2015: 4). In *Tègònni*'s prologue, the black actors are not given white masks but wigs to signal their whiteface, and the portrayal of the British governor which follows, akin to the Yoruba ritual, is a parody of the ignorant, cruel, cynical, racist, and sexist colonizer. In the play's main action, ritual masks appear. When Tègònni's friends try to scare away the soldiers, they put on masks of deified ancestors, *egúngún* masks. The colonizers and their soldiers cannot differentiate these bronze masks made by the women from the original *egúngún* masks (Nwankwo, 2016: 118) and react to the assumed ritual power of the masks. This strategy breaks religious rules, as women are neither meant to create nor to wear the masks of the ancestors, which involves the ritualistic embodiment of the deceased (see Balme, 1999: 183). To find a safe retreat from the colonizers, the women flee to *òsùgbó*, the sacred grove of *egúngún* that has traditionally been reserved for men. As the town elders acknowledge, with the women's transgressive acts the "world is changing, even faster than we feared" (112). In this way, the employment and modification of Yoruba religion is connected to female emancipation in Òsófisan's play.

This focus on female emancipation involves a rewriting of Ismene's role. In contrast to the usual reception of Antigone as a solitary, heroic martyr who scorns her sister's apolitical cowardice, Òsófisan presents Tègònni's rebellion as a collective female

movement (Owoeye, 2013: 127). Tègònni's burial of her brother, her imprisonment and eventual execution are all accompanied by a group of women that are characterized in the dramatis personae as "her sisters and friends", of whom three are named as individuals: Kunbi, Yemisi, and Faderera (6). These women repeatedly emphasize their solidarity with Tègònni in her fight against the British governor and the collaborating Yoruba men: "fate has bound us together like threads in a web" (77–78). To them, rebellion offers "redemption" from colonial "humiliation" (78). Like the Sophoclean Antigone, "the anti-mother of Greek tragedy" (Taxidou, 2017: 46), Tègònni and her sisterly friends explicitly reject their roles as mothers and opt for the "male" concept of honour: "of what use is life anyway, without honor? Are we here just to breed children, and children who would be cowards, too?" (79).

In contrast to Sophocles' play, where we "have no definite answer to the question whether Antigone's act of defying Creon is motivated by the desire for social change or whether it primarily stems from individual […] interest", in Òsófisan's rewriting, the protagonist "succeeds in unifying a group of women and her private act of defiance acquires collective relevance" (van Weyenberg, 2010: 371). As Òsófisan has pointed out in an interview, the "lone hero" of Sophocles' drama did not seem fit for the Yoruban context (Òsófisan, 2013: 34). According to Òsófisan, Tègònni is

> heroic *because* of others, because she was surrounded by her friends who urged her on or tried to discourage her, but who are always there anywhere by her side. The sheer visual picture of all of them together, even when many of them have nothing to say is important to me. It is a statement with wider connotations. (Òsófisan, 2013: 34; emphasis in original)

Òsófisan's portrayal of a collective female rebellion and sisterly solidarity is paralleled in recent feminist readings of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which seek to redeem Ismene as a political agent and to explore interpretations beyond the rejection of female commonality that had been taken as typical of Antigone the character and the play itself (Goldhill, 2012). For instance, Bonnie Honig (2011: 31) has argued for a counter-reading of Ismene's role that aims "to intervene not only in the play's philosophical and philological reception history but also in its dramaturgical reception" by discussing the possibility that Ismene rather than Antigone undertook the first, secret burial of Polyneices. Honig sees Ismene's claim "I did this deed — if she will allow me that — | And I too take the blame for my part in it" (Sophocles, 2003: 77) as a plausible option. In Honig's view, Ismene qualifies as a "partisan sororal actor" in Antigone's rebellion (2011: 34). Òsófisan's play can be seen as just such a dramatic intervention in the reception history of Ismene, as he privileges female collective agency, or, in Honig's words, "an agonistic sorority that is solidaristic, not merely subject to male exchange" (2011: 51). More recently, other dramatists and authors have focused their attention on Ismene, the shadow figure of the myth and play. For instance, Flemish playwright Lot Vekemans has dedicated a monologue entitled *Zus van* / *Sister of* (2005) to the character, in which Ismene, as in Sophocles' play, claims to have buried Polyneices together with Antigone.[8] *The Children of Jocasta* (2017), a novel by the English author Natalie Haynes, makes Ismene the one who secretly buries her brother while Antigone, as newly crowned queen, accepts the people's praise for the deed. Kamila Shamsie's

novel *Home Fire* (2017) gives Ismene (here a young British-Pakistani woman called Isma) a dominant, common-sense voice amid a migrant family's tragedy during a time of intense fear of fundamentalist terrorism.

This focus on female commonality is an important difference from the earlier well-known African version of *Antigone*, *The Island*, in which the all-male cast repeatedly express their misogyny and in the end appeal to the "Gods of our *fathers*" only (Fugard et al., 1999: 227; emphasis added). Very much to the contrary, a female mother goddess is privileged in Òsófisan's take on *Antigone*: Yemoja, Yoruba goddess of the ocean and patron deity of women. After the prologue, when a second frame is established, the richly dressed Yemoja is rowed in, in a splendidly decorated boat, accompanied by her female attendants, who sing and dance. Once the play's action starts, the goddess and her attendants freeze in motion and silently observe. In the third scene, Antigone disembarks from Yemoja's boat and after the tragic catastrophe, when Tègònni, her British bridegroom, and her female friends were all killed, lights come up again on Yemoja's boat in the epilogue. Antigone, in a symbolic dance, wakes Tègònni and her friends from the dead and leads them to the boat in a mood of "immediate, visible joy" (141), thus returning to the elated anticipation of the interrupted bridal procession. At the end of the play, the boat leaves with Yemoja, Antigone, and Tègònni.

This framing of the play's action in its prologue and epilogue has several implications. By having Antigone emanate from Yemoja's boat and return to the goddess in the end, Antigone is featured as Yemoja's representative. Hence, the play sets up a complex and contested structure of identification. First, audiences have to resolve to which degree they identify Tègònni with Antigone. Second, Tègònni and Antigone negotiate how closely they identify themselves with each other. Finally, audiences have to decide whether they understand Antigone — and by extension Tègònni — as a representative or even an incarnation of the goddess Yemoja. Indeed, Isokun (here as a combination of a Sophoclean chorus member and Tiresias) suggests that Tègònni has always been a "problem child", because she is "a gift from our Mother, Yemoja, and such children are never bound by the rules the rest of us live by. It's the goddess inside them, they can't be controlled" (85). The suggestion that human beings can incarnate mythic figures and the gods is not only a literary and theatrical device used by Òsófisan for a specific political concern, but it is also in tune with the basic beliefs of the Yoruba religion.[9] Similar to Greek mythology, there is a thin line between gods and human beings as well as between the living and the dead in Yoruba belief. Deified ancestors can be reborn as human beings and they can temporarily possess the living. This bond between the dead and the living, between the divine and the mortal, is of the utmost importance for both sides. It is only by their reincarnations and embodiments that Yoruba gods and goddesses survive. They are not absolute entities independent of humankind, but they rely on the interaction with the human sphere. One such field of interactions are ritual performances in which the gods come to possess the performers; as in the framed action of *Tègònni*, gods are brought to this world and sent away again at the end of the ritual (Thompson Drewal, 2015: xiii). As Thompson Drewal (2015) has argued, Yoruba rituals are far from rigid scripts, but are open to improvisation and frequently adapted in order to speak to topical concerns.[10] Hence, much like the play *Tègònni*, Yoruba rituals repeat the past with a difference, they reactivate myth in the light of the present,

they are collective acts that involve trained performers and spectators, music, dance, masks, and elaborate costumes.

Òsófisan's appropriation of myth for current concerns is a strategy akin to ritual practice; just as the actors protest against acting out a prescribed, well-rehearsed performance under Antigone's supervision, Yoruba ritual performers are experts in oscillating between set form and free play to make ritual lively and effective. As Thompson Drewal remarks,

> It is in play that ritual's very efficacy resides. Indeed, play is the integrative mechanism driving Yoruba ritual action, thus introducing contingency into ritual process. Continuously under revision, Yoruba ritual is molded and remolded by creative performers/interpreters who, acting both independently and in concert, reformulate it. In this, Yoruba performances diverge radically from scholars' traditional assumptions about ritual's rigidity, stereotypy, conventionality, conformity, uniformity, predictability, invariance, structural stasis, and redundancy. (2015: 28)

Òsófisan's play applies this performative stance to Sophocles' material. When Antigone initially claims that history is about to repeat itself, this does not mean that audiences witness a mere reproduction of Sophocles' action in slightly changed circumstances, which Antigone can easily supervise. Instead, audiences see a creative adaptation — in a more anarchic form than Antigone herself at first realizes. One of the core scenes of the play concerns the issue of repetition with a difference. Here, Tègònni discusses her options with Antigone after having been confronted with the expectation of her bridegroom, his colonial superior, and the Yoruba town elders that she should apologize for having buried her dead brother. In this conversation, Antigone initially distances herself from Tègònni's story: "It's not my story. […] I'm just a metaphor. From the past —" (125). Tègònni's reply, "So why didn't you just stay where you were, a relic in the memory of poets?" (125), highlights their mutual dependence, which resembles that of human beings and Yoruba gods: just as Tègònni is in need of a model for her fight for freedom, Yemoja's/Antigone's survival depends on re-enactments.

However, the conversation between Antigone and Tègònni makes clear that creative change also involves the risk of abandoning the core meaning of the adapted material. In Antigone's case, this essential feature that should not be violated, as the play suggests, is her relentless fight for freedom. Accordingly, Antigone shocks Tègònni when she suggests that Tègònni should learn from history and give up her resistance: "Freedom is a myth which human beings invent as a torch to kindle their egos" (126); "Human beings throw off their yokes, only for themselves to turn into oppressors. They struggle valiantly for freedom, and in the process acquire the terrible knowledge of how to deny it to others" (126). Is this the lesson audiences are to learn from the blending of Greek myth, colonial history, and the Nigerian situation of the 1990s? Have the rebels, once they became the new rulers, adopted the oppressive mechanisms of their colonial predecessors? Is Tègònni's stance a non-realistic, extreme position that needs to be moderated to be politically successful in the given circumstances? Tègònni is not seduced by Antigone's rhetoric and rejects her: "Go back to legend, or wherever you've come from. […] Leave my story, you and I, we have nothing to share. You say freedom is a myth. But where do you think we'd be without such myths? Will our humanity not lose all its meaning?"

(126–27). It is after this confession that Antigone reveals that she was only testing Tègònni and celebrates both of them as "true believer[s]" in the "undying faith" in freedom (127). Likewise, Tègònni acknowledges Antigone as her "sister" and as an encouraging role model (127). Even though the play here rather quickly resolves Antigone's renunciation of her revolutionary spirit, it is nonetheless decisive that this option is introduced at the play's climax. With a view to Nigeria's postcolonial history, Antigone's position does have force and is worth considering. It is also taken up by Isokun, who argues that "the greater challenge before your generation […] is to live, and become engaged" (108), which envisions political agency beyond martyrdom. Akin to Anouilh's rewriting, Òsófisan here questions the impact of a single heroic sacrifice in the light of the oppressive colonial and postcolonial political structures.

To endorse and celebrate their decision for a reunited fight against oppression, the sisterly freedom fighters begin to recite a slightly shortened version of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias", which famously reflects on the transience of political power and on art's role at times of political tyranny. Shelley's sonnet has a twofold function here. On the one hand, it comments on the temporal power of tyrants like Creon, who will fade and die, as Antigone, our "traveller from an antique land" (128; Shelley, 1977/1818: 103, l. 1) tells us (see van Weyenberg, 2013: 34).[11] That the relics of Ozymandias's statue are found in a lonely desert underlines the relevance of Shelley's scenario for the Antigone story, as Haemon in Sophocles' version concludes that Creon ought to rule a desert because he is unwilling to listen to his people: "You'd do well as the single ruler of some deserted place" (Sophocles, 2003: 85). The poem thus repeats the "lesson" that the Yoruba tale of the tiger and the frog related in an earlier scene:

> the one who was swallowed gained the throne, while the one who usurped power fell to disgrace — oh yes, that is always the end of those who come to rule by force, when the light of freedom shines again, and the people regain their rights! (100)

Given that Shelley himself fought for social reform against Britain's political establishment and that his poem has been read as a response to nineteenth-century British imperialism (D'haen, 2007: 112), his work is an apt choice. What is more, two years after the publication of "Ozymandias", Shelley wrote his own version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the "prequel" to *Antigone*, and turned the tragedy into a satirical verse play to mock the newly crowned King George IV. *Swellfoot the Tyrant* is part of a series of plays by Shelley that "deconstruct displays of power as masquerades and encourage audiences to abandon the imaginative paralysis that fed despair and rendered the future nothing more than a mirror of the past", as Dana Van Kooy (2016: 21) has recently concluded in her study of *Shelley's Radical Stages.* Jared Hickman (2017) has likewise argued in his recent book *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* , "[t]he Romantic recourse to mythic fantasy […] might […] be recovered not as eschewal or indirection in relation to politics but as an attempt to intervene in a political situation given a mythic totality" (2017: 232–33). This political approach to myth resembles Òsófisan's, who, in his own words, has "recourse to myth to counter myth" (Òsófisan, 2013: 44). He dramatizes the recontextualization described in Shelley's poem as the art piece at a later historical stage and in a different spatial frame transports a new meaning. Just as the statue in its new context of the desert and in its disarrayed state speaks of the

transitoriness rather than the potency of political power, the British Romantic sonnet inspired by an Egyptian statue fuels the fight for freedom in colonial Yorubaland witnessed by an ancient Greek character.

Read in the context of Òsófisan's merging of the Antigone myth with Yoruba ritual, the poem has a second meaning. Antigone herself is at risk of decay. She might become an abandoned "colossal wreck" herself, her "passions" might be forgotten, if her fate is not remembered and re-enacted by the living. Situated in a group of dedicated friends and sisters, Tègònni might be less in need of Antigone than the other way around. As Antigone herself acknowledges when she first enters, "It's a very long way, through the channels of history. The road at many points is unsafe" (25). The guards who are accompanying Antigone and who are playing mercenary soldiers for the re-enactment of her story introduce themselves as figures in between life and death. When Antigone orders one of them to play the corpse of Tègònni's brother, he replies:

> 4th SOLDIER: Me! But I just woke up, fresh from the grave!
> ANTIGONE: Good! So you'll know how to die again. (29)

In his account of Yoruba belief, Soyinka (1969) has described this liminal, intermediary state between the future of the unborn, the present of the living, and the past of the dead, as "the fourth stage". The fourth stage is the matrix for all Yoruba tragedy according to Soyinka: "the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition […] is […] the vortex of archetypes and home of the tragic spirit" (1969: 125), which the modern dramatist tries to recreate. Even though Òsófisan departed in many ways from Soyinka's approach to theatre and ritual, as discussed above, he recurrently — if less mystically — employs this notion of an intermediary state between life and death as the origin of his Sophoclean Antigone, who can only be revived in Tègònni's own drama. The playwright (Òsófisan, 2011: 213) has described his rewriting of *Antigone* as a "quasi-traditional purgatory rite". *Tègònni* is another example of Òsófisan's "dialectical engagement" with Yoruban myth and ritual, which he generally reads "with a specifically ideological slant, arguing that recourse to mythology can merely mystify present social relations unless the narratives and rituals invoked are critically reinterpreted" (Gilbert, 2011: 70).[12]

That Òsófisan uses a British sonnet to achieve this effect fits the flexibility of Yoruba ritual, which includes foreign and modern props to adapt the tradition to present concerns. For example, tennis shoes, gas masks, and plastic dolls have been used in Yoruba rituals. As Thompson Drewal observes, "The deities themselves keep up-to-date, now demanding Gordon's gin and Beefeaters as libations, instead of the local brew" (2015: 8). Likewise, Greek and British literatures have become an integral part of African heritage due to the long history of colonial education, and the texts have been changed by their integration into this new cultural, religious, and historical context. Therefore, the choice of Antigone and the recital of "Ozymandias" exceed gestures of canonical counter-discourse, which use the literature of the colonizer to fuel anti-colonial, and more broadly, anti-dictatorial resistance. They rather reactivate and change part of the shared British and African heritage for a specific purpose that goes beyond writing against colonialism (van Weyenberg, 2013: 35–36).

Òsófisan blends Greek tragedy, a colonial historical setting, metatheatrical features, and the ritual framing of the play for a critical topical commentary.[13] The ritual framing,

which has Antigone emanate from Yemoja's boat and casts her as a reincarnation of the goddess, is also relevant for the play's attitude towards its European "original": inverting the original–imitation relationship, the frame suggests that Antigone is derived from Yoruban culture.[14] As Òsófisan himself playfully points out in a later article:

> Antigone could now be readily unmasked, and identified as she has always truly been, beyond the wilful obfuscations that Western theatrical traditions have conspired to lay across our vision. Quite obviously she is nobody else than an incarnation of the pristine Yoruba goddess Yemoja. And her various re-appearances in history are nothing other than the periodic extensions of the goddess-mother into particular moments of conflagration when the issue of liberty from despotism has kindled the tinder of revolt among the human population. […] Antigones that have walked down the stage of history are, unknown to Steiner and other scholars, only masked metamorphoses of Yeye Yemoja, strategically self-reincarnating in the shape of her "daughters", as she chooses to re-immerse herself in human politics, and consequently, renew herself and relieve the suffering human community. (2011: 212–13)

In line with other postcolonial rewritings of Greek tragedy, the play thus suggests multiple traditions of Greek tragedy that "include the rewriting of existing traditions and the invention of new ones" (Hardwick, 2007: 47). This multiplicity undercuts any straightforward notion of cultural tradition via the transmission of "narrative DNA".

Just as Yoruba ritual remains relevant not despite modern developments and foreign influences but because it is flexible enough to integrate them, Òsófisan's theatre does not uphold a "pure" Nigerian or Yoruba tradition independent from colonial history and globalization. Instead, his aesthetics of an African "total theatre" (2011: 206)[15] that combines song, dance, and speech adopts the materials brought to his homeland by the colonizers and creates a performance that links Yoruba ritual, Greek tragedy, and British Romantic poetry, that brings together myth, history, and present political concerns to ensure that Antigone and Ismene are more than "relic[s] in the memory of poets" (125).

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Notes

1. As Astrid van Weyenberg (2013: xxxii) elaborates, Greek tragedy is doubly implicated in colonialism: "Not only was colonialism the decisive factor in Greek tragedy's migration to the African continent, it also informed the society from which Greek tragedy sprang".
2. See Òsófisan (2011: 213−15). Òsófisan draws on a historical incident which he rather freely adapts. See also Raji (2016: 105–06) and Òsófisan (2013: 35–36).
3. As Awam Amkpa (2004: 49) states in his chapter on Òsófisan, "Like his fellow Marxists, Osofisan held a deterministic view of class and cultural identities that left little room for Soyinka's insistence on the fluidity of identity formation. If, for Soyinka, the essence of postcolonial desire lay in communal consciousness of oppression and the aspiration for change, irrespective of the precise ideological direction of that change, for Osofisan such desire, in order to be effective, had to fructify in the establishment of a socialist political entity. It was in this ideological context that Osofisan's dramaturgy entered into an oppositional dialogue with that of his senior compatriot". Amkpa (2004: 49–50) also notes, however, that the aesthetics of the playwrights are similar: "Ultimately, the creative techniques of Osofisan and

Soyinka — the parodic mimicry of history, the appropriation of Yoruba storytelling models where divine voices dialogue with humans and animal trickster figures tell parables — go a long way in bridging whatever ideological differences may exist between them".

4. Òsófisan recast *Antigone* as "a play that re-examines the issue of race relations and personal courage", as he explains in the programme notes (2007: 11). See also Òsófisan (2016).
5. As Sandra Richards (1996: 73) has pointed out, Brecht's plays are themselves transnational: "Obviously, intertextuality also operates within the terrain of American and European dramatic production and response. First, it reminds the Western critic of the important fact that Brecht "borrowed" from the traditional theatres of China and Japan, fabricating a preindustrialized, exotic world in order to critique the bourgeois assumptions of his day".
6. Subsequent references are to this (2007) edition of Fémi Òsófisan's *Tègònni: An African Antigone* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
7. Some of Òsófisan's other plays are highly critical of local indigenous religions as much as of Christianity and Islam, all of which are practiced in Nigeria and all of which have been used as instruments of corruption and oppression; in *Tègònni*, however, Òsófisan employs Yoruba religion in a rather affirmative manner for specific aesthetic and political means.
8. See Pewny (2014), who uses Vekemans' play to elaborate her idea of a "theatre of the other", based on the theoretical concepts of de Beauvoir, Butler, and Lévinas.
9. See also Òsófisan's dissertation *The Origins of Drama in West Africa: A Study of the Development of Drama from the Traditional Forms to the Modern Theatre in English and French*, which has shown how rituals of traditional cosmology inform the structures of contemporary theatre (Götrick, 1984: 16).
10. As Thompson Drewal (2015: 8) recounts, "[p]ractitioners of Yoruba religion are aware that when ritual becomes static, when it ceases to adjust and adapt, it becomes obsolete, empty of meaning, and eventually dies out. They often express the need to modify rituals to address current social conditions".
11. "Ozymandias" was inspired by the exhibit of a statue of Ramses II in London. See Moses' (1998) *Afrotopia* for a detailed discussion of how African Americans have engaged with ancient Egypt as a source of cultural identity, a relation which might have been significant for the play's premiere in the US: "Ethiopia and Egypt, thus associated, were soon merged in the consciousness of many black Christians. Ethiopia was interpreted to mean not only the ancient kingdom by that name, but all of Africa and the African race" (Moses, 1998: 51). Moses (1998: 51–52) links Shelley's poem to statements by a member of Boston's African Society.
12. Having written his dissertation on the connections between ritual and modern drama, Òsófisan's use of ritualistic elements is highly reflective.
13. His play is thus representative of the postcolonial trend for theatrical syncretism that has been influentially outlined in Christopher Balme's (1999) study *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama*.
14. By playfully inverting the original–remake relationship, Òsófisan here in my view goes further than demanding "shared ownership" by "[p]resenting his Antigone as a particular variation on a universal concept", as van Weyenberg (2010: 378) argues.
15. See also Sowande's definition: "Total theatre is a well-integrated craft of dialogue, song, dance, narration and movement typical of Yoruba dramatic art" (1996: 22).

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