

Once Upon Four Robbers: The Magic of Subversion

Introduction, *Once Upon Four Robbers* by Femi Osofisan. Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers, 2011, pp. 6-15.

Once Upon Four Robbers is the first in the series of dramas that Osofisan refers to as the ‘magic boon’ plays. Written between 1976 and 1978, the play was premiered at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan in March 1979. The other play in the series is *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*.

The central motif of the magic boon plays is borrowed or adapted from the world of folklore. A group of persons in anguish or dilemma suddenly obtains a magical power from a mysterious agent. The power is capable of changing their circumstances as long as they adhere strictly to expressed injunctions.

Osofisan confesses to be fascinated by the possibilities that magic presents in dramatising societal issues that may otherwise prove difficult to discuss, ‘especially when you are criticising the government.’ The dramatist planned ten magic boon plays but only two have been written, or produced so far.

Four Robbers is popular with students because of the topicality of the theme of armed robbery and the ability to be produced on a bare stage, without a cumbersome setting. The play is also adaptable; and though the prescribed setting is market place, producers have sometimes changed that setting to a bank, a beach or casino.

Four Robbers is set in a market square, which is a symbolic location in Yoruba worldview. Osofisan wrote the play to contribute to the debate on public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria. The play examines the moral and legal definitions of ‘robbery’ in the wider sense, and the implications of the Armed Robbery and Firearms Decree 47 of 1970 on the public psyche.

Background to the drama.

As usual with Osofisan’s drama, the sub-texts to *Four Robbers* are based on Yoruba culture and the Nigerian political situation. The dramatist uses the Yoruba storytelling tradition; he also responds to the contemporary social problem of armed robbery and the inability of the government to provide a credible solution.

Yoruba storytelling tradition features Ijapa, the tortoise, as a trickster in many stories. The particular story that Osofisan derives his play from involves the tortoise stealing from his fellow animals. Once, as the story goes, there was famine and drought in the land. All the animals decided to dig a well to provide water but the tortoise refused to join them. For his attitude, the animals banned him from using water from the well and when they finished digging, they posted a guard to secure the area. At night, the tortoise, in disguise, came singing and dancing; the guard fled and the tortoise drew as much water as he could. He continued stealing water from the well until the animals constructed a wooden figure and coated it with gum paste, which, of course, could not run away from the tortoise. Surprised at the insolence of the ‘gum-man’, the tortoise slapped and kicked the figure and became stuck. In the morning, the other animals saw that the monster was none other than the tortoise and dealt with him.

The other factor that contributed to the drama was the incidence of public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria in the 1970s. One of the major consequences of the Nigerian civil war was armed robbery, which became widespread and violent.

In the 1970s, convicted armed robbers were executed by a military firing squad and members of the public were invited to witness the event at the Lagos Bar Beach and other public places, such as the central market or the army firing range. These regular occurrences at the Lagos Bar Beach became known as the 'Bar Beach Show'. There was public condemnation of the executions, and Osofisan responded by presenting a moral argument against the practice.

Theatre and Social Change

Traditional Yoruba practices like storytelling and theatre have the capacity to produce social change. For instance, stories are told to teach morals or caution against certain anti-social acts. By combining political theatre with the art of storytelling, *Four Robbers* alters the frame through which audiences watch staged history. Osofisan turns his audience into participants in a debate on their view about armed robbery. In the programme notes to the first production, the dramatist highlighted the contradictions in the society and stated that 'armed robberies, on the scale we are witnessing, are the products of our unjust society' He wrote, he said, so as to 'shock us into a new awareness.' And he continued: 'I hope it helps to change our attitude from passive acceptance or sterile indignation into a more dynamic, more enraged determination to confront ourselves and our lives.'

Plot

The play starts with a storyteller singing a traditional song that accompanies the tortoise story told above. Instead of tortoise, his song is about four robbers whose leader has been executed and whom he is planning to assist. The storyteller serves as the Narrator of the play, until in an opening, the other actors take the narrative authority away from him. They determine the course of the play by choosing who they want him to be – a Muslim priest – and then clothe him in appropriate costume, complete with props such as praying mat, beads and a kettle of water. Soon, the priest, Aafa, adopts the cloak of a *babalawo*, to reveal the many layers of societal influence that Osofisan wants to focus on in the play. The religious significance of his mat and kettle underline piety, meaning that the Narrator will not only be truthful but will remain impartial throughout the narration.

Four Robbers features a closely knit group of individuals bound together by the shared occupation of armed robbery. It is early morning in the market and the soldiers have just executed the leader of the robbers in the presence of the whole community. The other robbers – Angola, Major, Hasan and Alhaja – ponder a future without their leader, with most of their colleagues killed and the armed robbery decree restricting their livelihood. The fraternity quickly disintegrates with that death and those of the other nine members of the gang, and as Major confirms:

Major: [...] The party's over and it's going to be every man for himself from now on.

In the ensuing debate, the problem of distinguishing who is the victim becomes complicated. Osofisan introduces doubt in the audience's mind and forces them to show compassion for the robbers because of what they have suffered. The audience is compelled to wonder whether the robbers steal because 'it's hunger that drives' them or whether 'they are honest' as 'they only steal from the rich', or indeed whether they have been punished enough for their crimes by the death of their friends.

Magic formula

Aafa enters at this point and promises to give the robbers a magic formula, which they can only use three times to rob without weapons. The narrative with Aafa reveals that the robbers are all by-products of the civil war; the three male robbers are ex-soldiers and Alhaja was an 'attack trader' during the war, that is, one of the women who engaged in business by crossing the frontlines, buying and selling to both sides of the conflict.

To acquire the magic, the robbers must promise not to rob the poor, not to kill and to rob only the public places, injunctions to which the robbers at first object. Angola, who seems to be the most hot-headed of the robbers, says:

Angola: No, Aafa, too many objections. First, one sergeant owes us a debt. Then there are many citizens who must be made to account for their wealth, and the poverty of their workers.

Angola's position seems ambiguous because the robbers have been targeting the victims of the same political decadence. The planned attack on 'the sergeant' is not only misplaced, but reveals the ignorance under which the robbers operate. True, the sergeant leads the company of soldiers who execute the robbers, and he also gave the command for the leader of the robbers to be shot. But he is only performing his duty and has no obvious personal grudge against the robbers; nor is there any indication that the Sergeant is a member of the ruling cabal who promulgated the decree.

Osofisan, is adept at borrowing from myth, historical and social precedents. At the height of public trials and executions of armed robbers in Nigeria, there were instances when robbers were shown not only to be related to police officers or military men, but to have weapons 'borrowed' from government stores. A 1980s case involved one Lawrence Anini, who became notorious for killing nine policemen in revenge for the betrayal of his gang by certain policemen who were members of his armed robbery gang in Benin City, Nigeria. He was arrested in December 1986 and executed in March 1987.

Mixing religions

To reinforce the subtleties in the play, the Aafa, a Muslim Imam, brings out the paraphernalia of Ifa and divines for the robbers before teaching them the formula that will make them rich. Like the tortoise in Yoruba folktales, or like Esu the messenger god who appears everywhere and makes the market his home, Aafa embodies different and differing personas: he is a Muslim preacher, a *babalawo* and a law abiding, honest man. Yet, he condones robbery and encourages it; he dismisses the

ambiguity of his character with a proverb – ‘if only one way led to the stream, how many women would fill their pots?’. In religion, most Yoruba people are either Christians or Muslims but they also worship Yoruba deities. In essence, this character symbolises a typical Nigerian in the face of adversity who would try any means to become wealthy. In Aafa, Osofisan underscores the extent to which the characters, who are representatives of the larger society, will go to achieve their goal.

The robbers decide to use the magic formula to rob market women of their goods. They say a few words of incantation, start singing and the women all dance away, leaving their goods, which the robbers promptly appropriate. This causes an economic disaster that closes the market for two weeks. It also creates a dilemma for the robbers of how to dispose of the goods. The next time, they decide to wait until the end of the market day and rob the women of money. The women, who have sought the protection of the soldiers, fall under the spell of the magic again. As Major tries to double-cross the other robbers, the soldiers, who danced away with the women, come back. In the shootout, the soldiers wound Major before arresting him; while the other robbers escape.

Osofisan exposes the corruption in the society in the way the soldiers deal with the situation. They recover the stolen money but keep it for themselves, with the Sergeant taking charge of the distribution:

Sergeant: As far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money!... We found nothing... Let us meet later tonight, at my brother's house.

Audience involvement

Part three of the play starts with soldiers constructing a platform on which the convicted robber will be executed. Alhaja entices the soldiers away with corn, illicit gin and the promise of sexual favours to release Major from prison. The attempt is unsuccessful. The robbers then use the remaining magic to create a stalemate, but not before raising the moral question about public execution. Everybody on stage freezes when the robbers start singing. The audience, who have been encouraged to be full participants to the unfolding drama by singing along with the Narrator and responding to his questions, have to decide the outcome of the play. The robber is either freed or executed according to an audience vote. Aafa, as the Narrator, moderates the debate ‘making sure there is a full discussion, not just a gimmick’.

Whichever decision the audience reaches, the ending is pessimistic. If the robbers win, lawlessness and anarchy reign, while victory for the soldiers points to an unending darkness and the terror of military rule.

In my own personal experience with productions at Ibadan and Lagos, I recollect that in about twelve performances, the audience voted for the robbers to be executed only two times. When this happened, instead of the martial tune rising to a crescendo and then cutting off with a sharp blackout, the soldiers killed the robbers and then turned their guns on the audience, with a slow fade out. As director, I found this ending more satisfying as the audience debated the play for more than two hours after the performance with actors. Whereas on other occasions, when the robbers sang their

song among the audience and attempted to 'rob' them, the theatre quickly cleared and we had no opportunity of having a formal debate with the audience.

The questions raised

The questions raised in *Four Robbers* include how long a person can suffer trauma before it affects his humanity, or before he adapts to the suffering. There are also questions about the responsibility of government in turning people into victims, in creating the social conditions that make armed robbery possible, and in being the most accomplished armed robbers.

The causes of anguish in *Four Robbers* are multifarious, ranging from economic exploitation, to social deprivation, social injustice, gross poverty and ignorance. The robbers feel deprived either because of the lack of opportunities, or because the ones available are insufficient for them to make a decent livelihood. They view lowly paid jobs with derision and mockingly sing to Aafa that they are not stupid enough to be exploited when those who are privileged use their positions to benefit through corruption and greed.

Osofisan teases out the corruption prevalent in the society. The market women sing to expose their own corruptibility and to express the fact that they are in business to make profit, by any means necessary, greedily cheating and hoarding, for:

the lure of profit
has conquered our souls
and changed us into cannibals.

Hasan buttresses the idea of cannibalism:

The world is a market, we come to slaughter one another and
sell the parts... [...] Ask these women. They'll chop each other
to bits at the jingle of coins.

This 'lure of profit' causes great anguish for the market women, the robbers and the other members of the society. It led the four robbers to robbery, to be like the corrupt politicians they envy:

Major: [...] No more scurrying in the smell of back streets. A
house the size of palace! The law, tamed with my bank
account! And children! ... I'll own the main streets, six, no,...
ten Mercedes, the neon lights, the supermarkets... (p. 52)

Osofisan poses a critique of materialism common among most Nigerians with this speech. The robbers want to be masters; they do not want to serve under anyone or have social responsibility. The market women list a catalogue of causes and reasons to justify their lust for profit, including the incessant harassment from robbers, excessive taxation, school fees, family responsibility and bribes for the Price Control Officer and the soldiers, for protection.

But the truth is that they also seek to be rich themselves; for only then will they be able to buy privileges and change laws as they wish. Even when Major double-crosses the robbers, Alhaja believes that the action makes him more valuable because his

riches will make him accepted at the 'other side', with the rich and influential people, where he will be in a position to help the rest of the robbers.

Social injustice and the erosion of moral values

Osofisan lists these points of debate to underline the erosion of moral ambience in the society. The complacent view of life, the unquestioning acceptance of authoritarian rule and the loyalty to riches instead of ideas creates social injustice as people are flogged in school, brainwashed in the church and spanked at home to build docile human beings who recognise injustice but are incapable of challenging it. They spend their days hiding from the sirens, according to Osofisan, a reference to the military practice of driving recklessly on public roads. In their search for justice, they are likely to meet the Aafa type who doubles as a *babalawo* and commits, in both garbs, spiritual exploitation. The harsh depiction of Aafa in *Four Robbers* is to emphasise the inadequacy of religion in confronting the contemporary anomie caused by neo-colonialism and technological development in the same way public executions have proved inadequate to reduce armed robbery:

Osofisan also raises the issue of betrayal and corruption among the oppressed; Major betrays the others and wants all the loot for himself, yet the robbers still attempt to rescue him from the firing squad. The major paradox lies in the relationship between Hasan and Ahmed, the sergeant; they are brothers who have chosen opposite spheres of existence – one, armed robbery and the other, law enforcement – but they remain practically the same. Ahmed shares the loot left behind by the robbers with his subordinates, in his brother's house. Despite the attempts of Hasan and Ahmed, or the market women, to humanise themselves and justify their actions by blaming the rulers, the overarching argument is that greed seems to be the dehumanising factor.

Crime and rebellion

Four Robbers is the play in which Osofisan comes closest to displaying his ideological position as commentator whose main interest is not to indoctrinate the people or re-present history, but as one who wants to probe his audience and make them uncomfortable. He presents choices and encourages his audience to commit themselves to an ideological perspective: 'If we sit on the fence, life is bound to pass us by, on both sides.'

In this play, the debate is centred on the issue of the public execution of armed robbers in Nigeria and the contributory role of the society in fostering the conditions that breed criminality. Osofisan advances the argument that it is really everybody who is criminal in intent and act and who therefore needs to be re-membered to a society that is just. He contends that the root cause of the endemic criminality of the people lies in the three symbols of authority and influence in the society – school, church and the home.

Hasan: Teacher flogged us at the writing desk... Reverend flogged us with divine curses at the pulpit, the light glinting on his mango cheeks like Christmas lanterns... and poor Mama, she laid it into us routinely behind the locked door, her work-hardened palm stinging even sharper than whips... So that afterwards the grown man can crawl the street from month to

month on his belly, begging for work, for a decent pay, for a roof, for a shelter from the pursuit of sirens?

The main consequence of this three-pronged oppression is to defeat and permanently keep the people ‘**colonised**’, preventing them from gaining knowledge and power and ultimately pushing them to revolt. Osofisan’s suggestion in this play is that criminality, including armed robbery, is a form of rebellion against the colonising effect of the authority symbols. He proposes that there is no rationale behind executing armed robbers while neglecting fraudulent civil servants, corrupt law officers, politicians and profiteers. Instead, a social environment that will make criminality unattractive must be engendered.

DR SOLA ADEYEMI.