Daniel A. Nkemleke, "Entry on: The Gods Are Not to Blame by Ola Rotimi", peer-reviewed by Divine Che Neba and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/218. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Ola Rotimi

The Gods Are Not to Blame

United Kingdom (1971)

TAGS: African Traditions Oedipus Sophocles





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Gods Are Not to Blame
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Nigeria; Cameroon; European universities
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1971
First Edition Details	Ola Rotimi, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, 72 pp.
ISBN	0192113585
Awards	*The Gods Are Not to Blame* has been very well-received in Africa and beyond since the 1970s when it was published in Nigeria. It was nominated for an award at the ESB Dublin Festival in 2003.
Genre	Alternative histories (Fiction), Magic realist fiction, Play*, Problem plays
Target Audience	Crossover (Young adults and adults: The play is studied in High Schools and at the same time a major play in the universities in Africa and beyond.)
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Creators



Ola Rotimi , 1938 - 2000
(Author, Director)

Olawale Gladstone Emmanuel Rotimi was born in Eastern Nigeria, and educated at the Methodist Boys' High School in Lagos, Boston University in the US, and at Yale University, where his first play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, won the Yale Major Play of the Year award in 1966. His other plays include: *Kurunmi* (1969) and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1971). They focus on the personal and political dilemmas of traditional chiefs in Nigeria in the nineteenth century in the face of European annexation of Africa.

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Additional information

Summary

A first baby, male, is born to king Adetusa and Queen Ojuola of Kutuje. As tradition demands, they take him to the shrine of Ogun for blessings and for the divination of his future. Baba Fakunle, a purblind great seer who is called in for the divination pronounces: “This boy, he will kill his father and then marry his mother”. To avoid these evil events in the land, and with the consent of the parents, the priest of Ogun ties the boy’s legs with a string of cowries and hands him to Gbonka, a royal bodyguard to take to the evil bush and abandon for death as a sacrifice to the gods.

In the bush, situated at Ipetu, Gbonka rather hands the baby to Alaka, a royal bodyguard from Ijekun who happened to have been hunting there at the time. Alaka releases the cowry strings from Odewale’s legs and takes him to his master and queen called Ogundele and Mobike. Odewale therefore is adopted and grows up in Ijekun palace taking the king and queen for his real parents. One day however, Ogundele’s brother taunts him with the words, “the butterfly thinks himself a bird”, meaning Odewale is not what he thinks he is. Odewale decides to consult an oracle to know his real identity. The bad mission he must fulfill – to kill his father and marry his mother – is revealed to him. To avoid such a deed, Odewale runs away from Ijekun urging Alaka (with whom he has grown so intimate) on oath to keep his escape secret until “his parents” are death. On escape, he settles in Ede, where he buys a farm at a place, “where three foot-paths meet”, on which he plants yams. Some years later, he surprisingly finds an old man one day on his farm, asking his servant to harvest the yams. Not only does this old man resist Odewale when the later confronts him, but he spites his tribe and tongue. Odewale is so angry and both engage in a war of charms and incantations which ends up in the old man being struck to death with a hoe. By so doing, Odewale unknowingly kills his real father (patricidal regicide), thus fulfilling the first part of the prophecy.

Scared of having shed blood, Odewale runs away from Ede, and arrives at Kutuje at the time the Kutuje people are being invaded by Ikolu. He, with his strength and courage, rallies the Kutuje people and they defeat the enemies. In gratitude, the people of Kutuje make him king- a vacancy left by the death of Kutuje’s former king. In accordance with the tradition of the people, Odewale marries the widowed queen with whom he gets four children. By so doing, he

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fulfills the second part of the second prophecy – incest.

After eleven years of reign, a plague befalls the land. The people confront their king for action. Aderopo, the second son of Odewale, an heir apparent, is sent on mission to go and consult Orumila, an all-knowing god, to find out the cause of the calamity and suffering in the land. Aderopo returns from this important mission with the news that the land is suffering because the murderer of the former king is among them and must be gotten rid of. Odewale swears by Ogun (the traditional Yoruba god) that he must trace the murderer and bring him to slow death. Thus, begins the big search, ironically of himself. Aderopo volunteers to call Baba Fakunle, the all-knowing seer to help them with the details. When Baba Fakunle comes, he reveals that Odewale is not only the murderer but also a "bed-sharer". Odewale reacts rudely to the seer, and later is suspicious of Aderopo and Baba Fakunle for plotting to humiliate and see him who is "a stranger off their throne". Queen Ojuola tries to console her husband by revealing that the same seer had himself revealed that the former king was killed by one of his own blood, and thus is a liar. Odewale feels freer with this piece of information and gets added confidence when his childhood friend, Alaka, visits him to report the death of his "father". Gbonka, who had also been sent for, as the one time royal guard who was with the former king of Kutuje when he was killed, arrives to reveal the truth about the circumstances under which King Adetusa died. His arrival is even more timely as he confirms having handed Odewale to Alaka at Ipetu bush many years ago. Gbonka's account of where Adetusa was killed makes things clearer in Odewale's mind. He had indeed killed his father and his wife is indeed his mother. Queen Ojuola hurries into the bedroom and commits suicide with a dagger; Odewale blinds himself with the same dagger and is led away by his children to the unknown in keeping with his oath at the start of the search. His people watch him sorrowfully but respectfully as he leaves. They are said to: "…kneel or crouch in final deference to the man whose tragedy is also their own".

Analysis

The play, *The Gods are not to Blame*, chronicles the life of a king who, from birth, has been ill-fated by the gods, who prophesied patricide and incest for him. There is no particular reason for this curse. Nonetheless, what the gods of the land have decreed must come to pass. Thus despite Odewale's attempts to avoid the fulfillment of this

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prophecy, by running away from his supposed home and seeking refuge in a foreign land, events still work to ensure its fulfillment. He unknowingly kills his father and inherits his mother as wife.

The play is an adaptation from Sophocles' classic play *Oedipus Rex* for an African audience, though the events are also true of the Yoruba cosmogony from which it emanates. It is common in this tradition to consult the oracles to reveal the futures of children especially those of royal birth, most often to determine the successor to the throne. This tradition is similar to that of the Greeks in terms of its extensive system of divination. In replaying Sophocles' piece, Ola Rotimi narrates the events as they occur in *Oedipus Rex* apart from a few changes (for example, the sphinx riddle is replaced by Odewale rescuing the people of Kutuje) but uses African names for the characters who, nonetheless, have their counterparts in Sophocles' play. The pairs are: Laius/Adetusa, Oedipus/Odewale, Jocasta/Ojoula, Teiresias/Baba Fakunle and Creon/Adeporo.

Though both plays underscore the fact that the gods have their own shortcomings (they prophesy ill for no just cause), they nonetheless present humans as helpless in front of the gods, thus confirming the Yoruba belief that we are all playthings in the hands of the gods. This therefore sets fate/destiny as the major theme in the plays. Other themes include: mistaken identity and unwarranted heroism.

The play can be read as an allegory of colonization and decolonization (see Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson)*. For example, when the old man takes over Odewale's land, it is a metaphor of colonialism. It is about having power over the land and Odewale no longer has the power because the old man takes it from him. This is why he turns a hoe, which is a gardening tool, into a sword. The old man happens to also be his father, though Odewale is not aware of this at the time. His father does to Odewale what European colonizers did to Africa.

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* Note that "colonization" is a universal human tendency (i.e. the strong seek to control the week). This is different from "colonialism", which was a historical event (European annexation of Africa).

African Traditions Oedipus Sophocles

Classical, Mythological,

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Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Murder Parents (and children) Prediction/prophecy Religious beliefs Society Suicide Theatre Violence

Further Reading

Akefor, Chinyere, “Ola Rotimi: The Man, The Playwright, and The Producer on the Nigerian Theatre Scene”, *World Literature Today* 64.1 (1990), 24–29.

Arambe Productions “The Gods Are Not to Blame”, O'Reilly Theatre, Belvedere College, Dublin Ireland, Feb. 2004.

Che Neba, Divine and Daniel A. Nkemleke, “Revisioning Classical Mythology in African Dramaturgy: A Study of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*”, in Lisa Maurice, ed., *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900–2020*, Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2021, 399–418.

Goff, Barbara and Michael Simpson, *Crossroads in Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and dramas of the African Diaspora*, Oxford: OUP, 2007.

Njoku, Teresa U., "Influence of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* on Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame*", *Nigeria Magazine* 151 (1984): 88–92.

Odebunmi, Askin, “Pragmatic Functions of Crisis: Motivated Proverbs in Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*”, Ibadan, Jan. 2008.

Preview: “The Gods Are Not to Blame”, Arcola Theatre, London, *The Independent*.

Addenda

The Gods Are Not to Blame was also performed at the Arcola Theatre

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in London in 2005. It has been performed in several countries (universities) and public theaters in Africa, including in the University of Yaoundé 1, in the early 1990s.

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