

## **Yorùbá Worldview and Context for Irony of Fate in Selected Tragic Plays**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to highlight the stylistic significance of irony of fate and establish its stylo-situational and communicative functions in selected tragic plays with the consideration of Yorùbá philosophical context as one of the factors involved in the semantic interpretations of irony of fate. This paper is divided into two major parts. The first part explores the meanings of irony, the ironic and irony of fate as they form the template for the tragic themes in the play. The summary of the tragic plays as the background to irony of fate is the focus of discussion in this paper. In the second part, we attempt an extensive discussion of irony of fate showing dilemma, bareness, frustration, malady and death that lead to tragedy in the texts. To achieve these objectives, four Yorùbá tragic plays are selected: Akínwùmí Ìsòlá's Efunsetán Aníwúrà (1970), Adébáyò Fálétì's Idààmú Páàdì (Mínkáílù) (1972), Oládèjò Òkédìjì's Réré Rún (1973) and Lávuyì Ògúnńíran's Ààrè-Àgò (Arikúyerí) (1977). Irony of fate in an ironic template with philosophical undertone is identified in all the texts chosen for this paper. This informs the reason why irony of fate, according to Yorùbá worldview, is traced to predestination as it is reflected in the condition of Èṣù and Ògúnńrìndé Ajé in Ààrè-Àgò Arikúyerí; Efunsetán in Efunsetán Aníwúrà; Lávúwo in Réré Rún; and Páàdì Mínkáílù, Jubirilu and Sètílù in Idààmú*



*Páàdì Mínkáílù. Roland Barthes' semiological theory is used as the theoretical framework in order to facilitate correct and acceptable interpretation of irony of fate through denotation and connotation, since irony is recognised as a sign standing for a particular signified within a given context.*

**Keywords:** Irony of fate, Yorùbá world view, tragedy

### **Introduction**

Yorùbá believe that some situations and circumstances of life occur naturally and present themselves in ways that are beyond human comprehension and explanation. Some irony and the ironic situations energise this Yorùbá belief about life, fate, destiny, religion and the supremacy of God. Of particular attention is the irony of fate which finds its relevance in Yorùbá worldview, which submits that 'Àyànmó ò gbóògùn' (there is no medicine to appease or revoke man's destiny). Dasylyva (1998:1-8) observes that the Yorùbá worldview on destiny, emphasises 'the irrevocability of man's pre-life choice which may either be favourable (fortune) or unfavourable (misfortune)'. The main reason for the employment of irony of fate by the authors is to urge a search after an unknown truth. It is pertinent to say that the quest to interpreting irony of fate is to be sensitive and determined not to take words, expressions and situations in tragic plays at face value. The dynamic relation of both denotation and connotation, in which both the said and the unsaid (verbal, situations, events and actions) matter, will ensure us the interpretation of irony of fate so as to get to the positive connotative meaning.



## **Irony**

The word irony has been defined by various scholars from different perspectives. Richards (1926:250) defines it as ‘the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses’ in order to achieve a ‘balanced poise’<sup>1</sup>. Muecke (1969:53) views irony and the ironic as:

a way of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc, in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with the ostensible or pretended meaning.

Muecke’s definition is broad and well applicable to this paper because we are dealing with irony of fate in the Yorùbá tragic drama texts from which we will be able to see, not only the speaking aspect, but also the ironic elements in form of behaviour, situation and events.

## **The Ironic**

The ironic arises in situations and actions. It is when a situation or an action takes the place of the expression of a language. Unlike irony which is verbal, the ironic is non-verbal. It occurs either in action of the character or in a situational context. It is a purposeful pretence by deed or fact, while verbal irony is a purposeful pretence by word. Thirwall (483-537) describes the ironic as “irony as a practice,” and is independent of all forms of speech and does not need the aid of words.<sup>2</sup> It is a practical irony.



This definition suggests that irony of fate is better understood within the framework of situations and actions in the dramatic structure or setting. As Sedgwick (1948:37) rightly asserts, ‘the dramatic words must have drama behind them: something of which the verbal device is just an audible sign’.

### **Irony of Fate**

Irony of fate is when a situation turns out with sharp contrast to what we expect owing to the course of events that arise naturally. It is also called cosmic irony. It is a type of irony with philosophical undertone, especially with the Yorùbá concept of destiny and pre-destination. Though, it can be expressed verbally, it is expressed mostly through situations, events and actions. In this paper, irony of fate springs up from the ironic point of view that is expressed ironically through tragic situations. Abrams and Harpham (2005:167) describe irony of fate within the literary work thus:

Irony of fate is attributed to literary work which springs up from the fact that a deity or fate is presented as though deliberately manipulating the events so as to lead the protagonist to false hopes only to frustrate and mock them.

Irony of fate depicts the life situations that are unquestionable; it goes beyond the scrutiny of our reasoning faculty. This irony seems to stem from the erosion of religious faith, whereby people believe that some situations are inexplicable and that people just have to accept that it is nothing

more than the law of nature and luck at work. Irony of fate is all about situations that just happen and for which there is no natural explanation. For example, the death of three children in one day is an irony of fate, a great calamity that is beyond human explanation.

### **Summary of the Plays**

The texts selected are Akínwùmí Ìsòlá's *Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà* (1970); Adébáyò Fálétì's *Ìdààmú Páàdì Mínkáílù* (1972); Oládèjò Òkédìjì's *Rẹ́rẹ́ Rún* (1973) and Láwuyì Ògúnníran's *Ààrẹ̀- Àgò Aríkúyẹ́rì* (1977). The summary of each of the plays will help us have an overview of the events in them. They also serve as the data through which irony of fate is employed in the Yorùbá tragic plays.

#### ***Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà* (1970)**

*Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà* is the story of a traditional chief in Ìbàdàn. The text is a reconstruction of the life and times of Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà, the Ìyálóde of Ìbàdàn, during the reign of Ààrẹ̀ Látòósà. She is a terrorist; a wealthy, strong and cruel woman. She is very wicked to both her slaves and her immediate community. She is childless, and this is one of her excuses for her wickedness and ruthlessness.

Eḡúnṣetan treats the slaves badly. She puts them through hard labour with little to eat. She also makes a law prohibiting any of her female slaves from getting pregnant for any man, either among themselves or for anybody outside, however highly placed. She kills her slaves as she pleases. She kills thirteen female slaves and twenty-eight male slaves in one day.



She represents the high-handed, wicked and the power-drunk leaders. When she reacts to Akínkúnlé's visit, she detests his talking about his sick son. This triggers her emotion about her childlessness, and she expresses how brutal, wicked and ferocious she has been and will be as far as procreation issue and her slaves are concerned. Notable among her terrific and bloody conducts is the killing of Ògúnjìnmí, a palm-fruit tapper in the farmland of Chief Olátińwó who shares boundary with her own farmland, and the killing of Adétutù, one of her female slaves, for being pregnant. The chiefs deliberate on the issue, but they could not reach a conclusion because Èfúnṣétán is too powerful and feared by all.

Ìtáwuyì decides to take vengeance with the help of Àwẹ̀ró by putting poison in Èfúnṣétán's food. However, when Èfúnṣétán detects it, she makes them eat the poisoned food that quickly results to their death. Èfúnṣétán takes the law into her own hand and behaves as a small god who owns the entire universe. The entire town, led by King Látòósà, march to Èfúnṣétán's house to arrest her. The town people surround her house, singing war songs, and then there is an exchange of verbal metaphysical words and incantation between Látòósà and Èfúnṣétán. Látòósà overpowers her. The people enter into her residence, loots her house, while Èfúnṣétán watches them. Èfúnṣétán is captured and taken to Látòósà's house. The remaining slaves are set free on the order of Látòósà. Èfúnṣétán is highly humiliated. She is so ashamed of her situation that she takes her own life by taking poison.



### ***Ìdààmú Páàdì Mínkáílù (1972)***

In *Ìdààmú Páàdì Mínkáílù* (The Dilemma of Rev. Fr. Michael), the local government council in Èjìgbò is used as the micro-setting that represents the third arm of government. A public outcry on the cases of theft and robbery in the local government council in Èjìgbó township has reached an unbearable level to the extent that the state government is aware of it, and it decides not to allow the local government to single-handedly execute any developmental project again. The play is designed to expose two degrading acts, corruption and fraud.

A Catholic priest, Páàdì Mínkáílù, is nominated by the people and appointed by the governor into the council management board. This is done in order to put sanity into the affairs of the council and also to serve as a check to the incessant fraudulent cases recorded in the past. When invited, Páàdì Mínkáílù reluctantly agrees. He takes the appointment with mixed feeling. Súfíánù, Páàdì Mínkáílù's houseboy, warns him about the sensitivity of the post he has agreed to take without taking counsel from him.

On the other hand, there is a strategic plan on how to steal the special project fund allocated for the construction of the River Ajìngòdò's bridge by the evil men who call themselves government workers and the noble in the town. The perpetrators and the brain behind the robbery cases are the important members of the board, namely: Yúnúsà, the council secretary; Ibrahim, a chief, both are members of the council's board; and Salu, a worker in the local government council. In a desperate desire to steal the money, Sètílù, the council treasurer,



is gunned down, but they could not steal the money because Sètílù has transferred the money to Páàdì Mínkáílù's house through his wife, Saratu. The robbers are bewildered when they later see the money they have struggled to steal. It is so painful that Yúnúsà has to follow the convoy that brings the money from Ìbàdàn back to Ìbàdàn again. There are so many suspects in the robbery case: Yunusa, Ibrahim, Salu, the son of Jubirilu and Jubirilu, the king himself. Salu confesses to Páàdì Mínkáílù who, because of the tenets of his office, could not help the police. It is really a dilemma for the priest.

Different levels of interrogation and investigation methods are put into operation by the detective policemen in order to expose the culprits. With many troubles, the culprits are exposed. The truth prevails at last but with the records of the death of the innocent and the guilty as well.

### ***Réré Rún (1973)***

*Réré Rún* is a play about the worker's experience and the problem of labour union with employers. It is a reflection of the modern society in which the efforts and the struggle of the poor to improve their living and working conditions in a capitalistic society comes to nothing. Láwùwò is the labour leader who is ready to fight the course of the labour union to a logical conclusion. The workers demand for better condition of service and remuneration, but the employers and the rulers refuse to listen. Instead, they embark on various ways to frustrate, intimidate and oppress the workers.

Láwùwó, the committed union leader, proves difficult, and he is to the employers and the rulers a hindrance in the

course of the execution of their cunning plans. Lávúwo organises and prepares the workers for a confrontation with the employers. The skilful plans of the rulers to buy Lávùwó fails; then the rulers, led by Onímògún, decide to blackmail Lávùwó and also to portray him as a traitor before his loyal and faithful workers. The rulers succeed in disorganising the union, by creating sectionalism within the worker and finally replacing Lávùwó with Ìdòwú, their sponsored candidate. Ìdòwú arranges and commissions money-doublers to dupe Moréniké, Lávúwo's wife, of the money contributed by members of the union for his case.

Morénikè who realises her mistake and, knowing full well that she has become a thorn in the flesh to her husband for losing the money, commits suicide. The overall effect of this entire problem makes Lávùwò himself to lose his mind and becomes mad. With his state of mind, he is unable to lead again: so, the struggle fails; the workers have no choice but to continue working and suffering under the leadership of the callous rulers and employers.

### ***Ààrè-Àgò Arikúyeri (1977)***

In *Ààrè-Àgò Arikúyeri*, Ògúnrinde Ajé is the *Ààrè-Àgò*, a warlord who also has chiefs under him. Among them is Jagun who comes to pay homage to Ògúnrinde Ajé for his safe return from Àkókó region. From their meeting emerges the elaborate discussion on the concept of *Orí* among the Yorùbá. Historical facts and excerpts from the Ifá literary corpus are used as a reference-point to substantiate the fact that *Orí* is greater and more powerful than all other gods in Yorùbá land. This



discussion leads to Ogúnrindé Ajé's announcement of his plan to make sacrifice to his *Orí*. After the propitiation segment, during the time of the merriment, one after the other, each of the three wives of Ogúnrindé Ajé presents different praise names of their husband with *ràrà* chants. This is where it shows that Adépèlé does not have the ability for *ràrà* chanting like Fátólá, the second and the favourite wife, who is an expert in *ràrà* chanting both in the content and in the tone of delivery (pp 16-17).

Òbò Lágído's sarcastic comment about Adépèlé's presentation makes her angry; Ògúnrindé Ajé also frowns at Lágído's comment. This causes bitterness among the wives especially Adépèlé, the last and the youngest wife of Ògúnrindé Ajé. The first wife, Asiyanbí, seizes this opportunity of the incident to express her own grievances on Fátólá, the favourite wife, by lying against her as the murderer of Adépèlé's three children who are suspected to have been poisoned. At this point, Ògúnrindé Ajé loses control and, without further investigation, he accepts Asiyanbí's report, takes his bow and arrow in a rage and shoots Fátólá, his dearest slender wife. Although Fátólá is killed, the death of the three children still remains a riddle. Basòrun Ògúnmólá sends for Ogúnrindé Ajé. There is a clash of power, Ògúnrindé, a war-chief, sees himself as an authority that should not be challenged. Basòrun Ògúnmólá also sees himself as the general-overseer over the entire Ìbàdàn land and its environment and, as such, has full authority to challenge Ògúnrindé Ajé's office even as a war captain. Later, Ògúnrindé

Ajé is forcefully taken to Ògúnmólá's palace, and the hearing begins.

Many things about the murder case are laid bare, and the final decision that brings the tragic situation to an end comes into view. It is discovered that Asiyanbí is the culprit; she is the brain behind the report that leads to Fátólá's death. Ògúnrinde Ajé laments Fátólá's death when he sees the result of his impatience. Ògúnrinde Ajé is faced with the unexpected that must be accepted, the ironic outcome of an event that is least expected. The messengers of Ògúnrinde Ajé are presented in order to avoid uneasy interrogation and to hasten the speed of the play to safe landing. Thus, Ògúnmólá's judgment marks the climax and the tragic end of the play. However, instead of Ògúnrinde Ajé to do according to the judgment passed on him, he runs-away. It is the run-away attitude of somebody expected to commit honorary suicide, someone who has even boasted of not fearing death as the warlord, that informs the ironic title of the play. Therefore, the play presents a problem in ironic term.

All the tragic drama texts summarised above present different contending forces of order and disorder that culminate in the tragic ending of the plays. Irony and the ironic are deeply established in drama. It is in the light of the above account of each of the plays that we embark on the discussion of the irony of fate as stylo-situational elements used to draw attention to the gap between the posited truth, actions and the tragic outcome in the plays based on Yoruba worldview.



### **Irony of Fate as Reflected in the Selected Tragic Plays**

The Yorùbá strongly believe that to occupy a leadership position is good and prestigious. They also believe that there are challenges attached to every leadership position, as privilege entails responsibility. For instance, in *Ìdààmú Páàdì Mínkáílù*, Mínkáílù finds himself in a horrible situation, after Salu's confession of being a member of the cultic group, as well as his involvement in the killing of Sẹ̀tilù, the council treasurer. This connotes that uneasy lies the head that wears the crown. Leadership position is honourable, but it comes with greater responsibility and trouble of different kinds. The irony in Mínkáílù's appointment into the council's board, based on his spiritual placement in the town, which should bring honour and prestige, now brings frustration and dilemma for Mínkáílù. Páàdì Mínkáílù's involvement in the council is good; he is chosen as somebody that will definitely help to sanitise and purge the council from its corrupt practices, but the case of the Èjìgbò community fails to establish this. Mínkáílù tries to prevent the stealing of the project money by his prompt action (out of anger) and also struggles to save Sẹ̀tilù's life, but Sẹ̀tilù eventually dies. Yes, frustration is expected. He had anticipated it; hence his initial reluctance in accepting the post. But the irony in it is that much as he tries, he fails in the assignment.

Another instance of an irony of fate in *Ìdààmú Páàdì Mínkáílù* is the death of the children, while the parents are still alive; it is a bad situation, not to even talk of children dying at the parent's old age. It is contrary to the wish of the parent, an irreparable loss and a bad omen in the Yorùbá worldview and



cultural contexts. This, as we have seen from King Jubirilu's experiences, can be traced to irony of fate. According to him, the few children he has die while he is still alive:

Jubirilu: *Àyípo àyípo n'ile aiye!*  
*Nibi tẹ'lẹkun gbe nfi gbogbo ẹnu sunkun*  
*Nibe l'alawada gbe nd'erin pàlẹ nibikan*  
*Ọkọ ọlọkọ kú, ọkọ ọlọkọ tún jí*  
*Tal'oólóògùn ti yio ba mi jí*  
*Rafilu ọmọ temi?*  
*Ogbó dé, ọmọ ti mo bi kò to nkan*  
*Gbogbo wọn ti lọ...*  
*Ìpàdé d'òdò Èdùmare*  
*Hùn-un... Ìdààmú Páàdì, (p. 82)*

Jubirilu: Life is not static, always turning round and round  
 Where the sorrowful are crying with mouths wide open  
 There also gathered together are the joyous who laugh heartily  
 Someone's husband dies and rises again,  
 Who is the doctor that will revive Rafilu, my own daughter?  
 Now I am old, my children are few and all have died  
 Till we meet before the Almighty God...  
 Hun-un...

The tragedy that befalls King Jubirilu is not something that any human being can explain and nobody can find the right word to console him; it is a serious situation. He concludes that he can only know the reason behind the tragedy that befalls him at his old age when he meets with Olódùmarè, his creator. His



conclusion confirms irony of fate as the origin of his tragedy. Oládíípò's assertion (2005:4-5) corroborates this:

Human life is an unusual undertaking because it is not fully comprehensible and it is uncertain...The Yorùbá believe that human beings are fully in control of their destinies even though they believe that an individual has a crucial role to play in directing her own affairs. After all, there are serious situations over which they do not seem to have control - hopeless situation, so to say<sup>3</sup>

The connotative meaning of this tragic incident is that destiny forms the bedrock for all the tragic occurrences in *Ìdààmú Páàdì Mínkáìlù*. The intention behind every move towards the development of Èjìgbò town is good on the part of Páàdì Minkailu but it turns out to be tragic. The playwright uses irony and the ironic as stylo-functional device to bring to fore the unexpected that only fate can explain.

Instances of irony of fate also abound in Ògúnníran's *Ààrẹ̀ Àgò Àríkúyẹ̀rí*. Irony of fate in *Ààrẹ̀ Àgò* also reflects the Yorùbá belief and thought that, to be hardworking is good, and it is well appreciated, but destiny (*Ori*) has the final say in one's success and blessing. The submission of Chief Jagùn in the beginning of the play about Èṣù's poverty-stricken condition after so much toil and hard work is an instance of irony of fate based on his choice of *Ori* (the inner head); it is the foreknowledge and the anchor to which the other instances of irony of fate in the play stand. Jagun comments that:



Jagun: Hun-ùn-ùn! Ejò Èsù kọ-ọ!  
 Hun---un—un! Ejò Èsù kọ-ọ  
 Kì i kúkú s'ejò Èsù rára  
 Àyànmọ l'ó n ẹ bẹ̀ọjàre  
 Ẹ́nit'ó gbọ̀n,  
 Orí rẹ̀ ló pé kó gbọ̀n;  
 Èyàn tí kò gbọ̀n  
 Orí 'ẹ̀ l'ó ní ó gò ju 'su lọ  
 B'áa m'ẹ̀wúré nílá s'onígbòwọ ifá,  
 Ifá ní n gbewúré  
 Kádàrá kò gba nkànkán.  
 B'áa mágùntàn bọ̀lọ̀jọ̀ s'onígbòwọ ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀,  
 Ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ là n s'apónlẹ̀ fún,  
 Kádàrá kò gba nkànkán.  
 À bá kúkú bọ 'rí  
 Ká má wulẹ̀ bọ 'òògùn;  
 Nítórí oògùn ló l'ojó kanipónjú,  
 Orí a gbé w'áyé ló l'ojó gbogbo  
 Ẹ́nití 'ó s'ẹ̀bọ k'ó máa s'ẹ̀bọ  
 Ẹ́nití 'o s'òògùn, k'o maa s'òògùn  
 Iṣẹ̀bọ, iṣòògùn  
 B'aa ti w'aye wá rí l'áa rí  
 Àìgbọ̀n Èsù kọ  
 Ejò kádàrá 'ẹ̀ ni.  
*Ààrẹ̀ Àgò (p. 4)*

Jagun: Not Esu's fault  
 Not Esu's fault at all  
 But the workings of destiny  
 For the wise ones  
 It is to the praise of their destiny  
 For the foolish ones  
 The destiny caused their foolishness to be  
 greater than that of yam



When we take a big goat to appease Ifá  
Ifá will willingly accept it,  
When we take a big sheep to appease  
òpèlè,  
It is òpèlè we appreciate,  
Destiny will not make any requests  
We should just make sacrifice to *Ori*  
And also neglect medicine  
Medicine is only useful on a rare trouble  
situation  
But *Ori* is in charge all the time  
Those who like sacrifice should continue  
to make sacrifice.  
Those who prefer medicine should  
continue to do medicine.  
Whether sacrifice or medicine  
It is what we are destined to be on earth  
that we live to become

The above is an example of a life full of irony of fate with philosophical undertone. It is an example of irony of fate in which the experience of man in life does not mean that man is indolent, but it is his destiny that works in contradiction to his expected reward of hard work. Jagun's submission shows that Èṣù's choice of *Ori* (the inner head) is responsible for his abject poverty even with evidence of hard work. He adds that there is no solution to any issue pertaining to destiny, which is in line with man's choice of *Ori*; only the gods can accept sacrifice; *Ori* or *kádàrá* (divine share for man) does not need any appeasement. Therefore, Èṣù's predicament, though unknown to him, is as a result of his choice.



The ironic outcome of Èṣù's condition will now be applicable to Ògúnrìndé's situation. When things work out well for man, they make sacrifice to thank their *Orí*, so as to record more success. It is this Yorùbá worldview of showing gratitude that prompts Ògúnrìndé Ajé to make propitiation to his own *Orí*, after recording so many successes of conquest from battles. The playwright builds Ògúnrìndé Ajé's misfortune on the Yorùbá worldview about *àyànmó* (choice) or *ìpín* (predestined share). Dasylyva (1998:4) refers to *àyànmó* as 'that which is chosen and sticks', Ironically, the steps taken by Ògúnrìndé Ajé does not work, showing that, no matter how much one tries, the destiny, in line with one's choice of *Orí* will still prevail. Ògúnrìndé Ajé's situation is another instance of irony of fate because it is after he has made sacrifice to his *Orí* (the inner head), that he records the death of his three children in one day. Based on this philosophical stand, one can conclude that it all happened to Ògúnrìndé Ajé according to the destiny he had chosen from heaven even before he was born; when coming down to earth.

It should be reiterated that irony of fate, according to Yorùbá worldview, can be traced to the Yorùbá belief in predestination. Abimbólá (1976:113) gives a clear explanation on predestination based on Yorùbá worldview. He says;

Predestination among the Yorùbá is known by different names. Sometimes it is known as *àyànmó* (choice) or *ìpín* (predestined share) or *kádàrá* (divine share for man) or *ìpòrí* (inner head). Whatever the name by which predestination is known. It is always associated with *Orí* (the inner head). It is believed that the



Symbol of free choice is *Orí* (inner head) which everyone received in heaven. A man's destiny, that is to say his success or failure in life, depends to a large extent on the type of head he chose in heaven.

Therefore, after a lot of criticisms and arguments over a case, one will have to resort to fate and submit to the workings of his *Orí*, the choice of *Orí* in the house of Àjàlá-the maker of heads<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, irony of fate is a sharp contrast between human intention and the actual result since the choice is already made by man.

In Ìṣòlá's play, *Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà*, the Ìyálóde Eḡúnṣetán's barrenness and the consequence of childlessness is a clear example of irony of fate. This is because only God grants or gives the blessing of 'child' to a person. She accuses the Almighty God for being cruel in his dealing with her, when one can actually say that her childlessness can be traced to her choice of *Orí*. However, she laments as if God only should be held responsible:

Eḡúnṣetán: ...Ṣùgbón rírò ni ti èniyàn  
Ṣiṣe mbe lówó Olórún Oba  
Èmi kò mọ ohun tí mo fí ṣe Elédùwà  
Tí ó fí fọmọ lá mi lójú bayi...  
*Eḡúnṣetán Aníwúrà* (p. 9)

Eḡúnṣetán: ...But man proposes  
God disposes  
I don't know my offence to God  
To have rendered me childless....

Èfúnsetán's expression of her condition connotes many things. It means that God is wicked, and he punishes without a cause. In Yorùbá culture, it is a stigma to be barren. The people place a high value on having children, and, if there is none, it therefore means that there will be nobody to continue her generation after her, and she sees no reason for her childlessness. Despite Èfúnsetán's social status as Ìyálóde, her wealth and affluence, the irony of fate in her life is that she is childless. The author uses this irony to explain the reasons for her callousness, wickedness and her penchant for killing her slaves who dare to become pregnant.

An instance of irony of fate based on the Yorùbá worldview about destiny is also found in Oládèjọ̀ Òkédìjì's *Rẹ̀rẹ̀ Rún*. The Yorùbá believe that nothing happens to a person without a reason and everything that happens to one in life can still be traced to one's fate or destiny. For example, Láwúwo recounts the tragic events in his genealogy and ties his present misfortune to his family background. He believes that hard work and selfless attitude, for him, is a good heritage from his parents. He equally believes that toiling without gain is not a new thing because it has been so right from the time of his fathers. Therefore, his view towards his own personal matter is not borne out of a non-chalant and careless attitude as his wife (Morèniké) and his auntie (Wúràolá) have taken it to be at the denotative level of meaning but as destiny has designed it for him, the selfless leadership trait has been in his family history. Hence, Láwúwo, the chief character, in the text talks about his



pedigree as a hard-working family with yet very little or nothing to show for the industry at the end of the day:

Láwúwo: Ìsinmi! Ìsinmi! Mo sinmi irúu rẹ̀ rí lójúú ẹ̀ láti ojú ti o ti mo mi? Mọ̀lẹ̀mọ̀lẹ̀ ni mi, mọ̀lẹ̀mọ̀lẹ̀ ni baba to bi mi. Àjogúnbá ilée wa ni. Nínú ilé tí ọ̀mọ̀lẹ̀ e mọ, méléó ni ti ọ̀un fúnraa rẹ̀ níbẹ̀? O gbàgbé pé ilé onílẹ̀ ni babaa mi n mọ ní òkè ọ̀jà tí ogiri fí wó pa á? ... Ìyaa mi àbẹ̀jẹ̀ ọ̀kín, ó ọ̀sẹ̀, ọ̀sẹ̀ bí ẹ̀ni máa kú, kí á ba lẹ̀ máa róúnjẹ̀ jẹ! Ọ̀bíbí ẹ̀yí ló dà á lórí rú, to fi bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí sínwín...Ìṣẹ̀dálẹ̀ ilé e wa ni, ká máa ọ̀sẹ̀, láìro wàhálà tó wà níbẹ̀, láìro nípa èrè gúnmọ̀ kan fún araa wa.

*Réré Rùn* (pp. 41-42)

Láwúwo: ... Rest! Rest! Have I observed that kind of rest since you've known me? I am a builder, my father is a builder. It's our family work. Out of all the houses the builder builds, how many belongs to him. Have you forgotten that it was the collapsed building that killed my father beside the market? ...My mother, offspring of peacock, she worked tirelessly so that we the children could eat! She became insane owing to the burden of the hard work. ... It is common in our own lineage, to work without minding the trouble involved, without expecting any gain or dividend for ourselves.

Láwúwò's explanation (rhetoric) to his wife about his own biodata and family history is full of ironies. For instance,



he is a workaholic, he never rests; yet he has nothing to show for it in terms of property and good living standard. Like his father, he is a builder, who builds houses for others, yet, none is built for himself neither did his father own a house. Futhermore, as a builder, his father died under a collapsed building beside the market while building. His mother worked tirelessly so that the children could be well fed, yet they found it difficult to eat. More pathetic, and a case of irony of fate, is the fact that as hard working as Lávúwò's lineage is, they worked tirelessly, and they all died of the hazard of the job. In Yorùbá worldview, it is believed that what you know best to do may be the source of your death. This is applicable to Lávúwò's lineage according to his account. Yorùbá have this saying that: 'Orí iṣé laago n kú sí' (clock dies at work). Therefore, what they know best to do happens to be the cause of their destruction, as these Yorùbá proverbs confirm it thus:

‘Ikú ogun ní pakíkanjú  
 Ikú odò ní pòmùwẹ̀  
 Ikú ẹ̀wà ní pòkín  
 Ikú ara ríre ní poóde  
 Òwò àdá bá mò ní pàdá  
 T’òkó ní ya òkó lẹ̀nu

Warriors die in the battle field  
 Swimmers die in the river  
 Beauty causes the death of peacock  
 Fastidiousness causes the death of parrot.  
 The trade a cutlass knows kills the cutlass.  
 That of the hoe destroys its edge



With such an account as this, full of ironies, the author has prepared the readers well ahead that the workers' struggle for better working conditions and life more abound led by Lávúwò, a union leader with family history of trials, failures and long list of unfavourable ironies of fate is going to end in a deadlock, with no gains but many losses.

### **Conclusion**

Irony of fate serve as tool in the hand of the playwright in the working out of tragedy in the Yorùbá tragic plays. With the employment of irony of fate by a playwright as stylo-functional device, it is not in all cases that when things are done the way it should be done, that the result turn out to be what it should be or what is expected. When event and situation turn contrary and are beyond human explanation, we cannot but apply the Yorùbá worldview as the factor for its interpretation so that it can be well done. Irony of fate constitute the most veritable stylistic tool (used by authors) for the Yorùbá tragic plays to achieve the tragic themes of death, escapism and malady. Irony of fate presented in an ironic situations and events challenge the Yorùbá adage which says that; 'È jẹ ká ẹ é bí wón ti ń ẹ é, kó lè ba à rí bó ti yẹ kó rí' meaning 'Lets do it the way it should be done so that things can turn out well and as expected'. Suffice to say that irony of fate serves as pre-destination cues, and counter dogmatism as they are presented within the Yorùbá worldview in the tragic plays selected for this paper.



### End Notes

1. Richard's definition of irony is quoted from Muecke 1970:26. "Irony and the Ironic", *Critical Idiom Series*, Vol.13. Methuen&Co Ltd. London.
2. See Hutchens E.N, in *The Identification of Irony* ELH Vol. 27, No 4, Dec.1960, pg 352-363. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872064>, 05/01/2012.
3. See Oládipò (2005, pp 4-5) on 'Yoruba philosophy'. Keynote address at the YSAN Conference at Adéyemí College of Education. Oñdó.
4. See Abimbólá. W., *Sixteen great poems of Ifá* (UNESCO, 1975:178), *Àwọn Ojú Odù Mèrìndínlógún*. Ibadan: O.U.P ., 1977: xiii)

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