

# “Transgressing” Wisdom and Elderhood in Times of War? The Shifting Identity of the Elderly Queen in the Performance of *Women of Owu*

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**Abstract:** Old age is a relatively new area of critical inquiry in African literary and, particularly, theatre studies. This paper aims to explore in what ways an elderly Queen, Erelu Afin, in a 2016 University of Ibadan production of Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* is a subject of cultural and ideological debates that disrupt, supposedly, normative understandings of old age, enabling one to reflect on the assumptions embedded in gender discourse. Wisdom and experience are often interlaced with life course and, ultimately, with elderhood in such ways that a presumable absence of these factors opens up the role and status of an elderly person to interrogation. The paper engages Stuart Hall’s understanding of identity in order to reflect on the shifting potential of one’s identity when it comes to the elderly Queen in particular and gender in general. Coupled with visual elements, an exploration of speech enunciations, situations of interlocution and kinesic factors, as they are performed in collation with other characters in the performance, will allow me to explore the dynamism of gender identity as it correlates with old age in a politically turbulent environment.

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## 1. Introduction

The African woman’s right to agency and autonomy, which are interlinked with the heterogeneity of African societies and cultures, dates back centuries (Farrar 1997; Familusi 2012; Sesan 2018). The patriarchal and patrilineal norms and practices that ignite such self-determination are, of course, rooted not only in feminisms in Africa but have also projected issues concerning the African woman on the global stage. This debate flavoured the feminist discourses in their second and third waves. Nevertheless, social and cultural constructions about gender norms in a rapidly changing African/Yoruba context put the female subject under scrutiny. Marked by growing complexities and anxieties about gender and identities, which are caught in the process of “production” and discontinuity, fixated normativity is challenged and dismantled. Such complexities are further compounded by the categories of class, ethnicity, sexuality, and old age (elderhood). Coercing individuals to act in a certain way based on their age, gender, and class, usually under strict observation,

results in dislocation and crisis of identity. Enacting an identity in crisis on stage is significantly enabled by performative utterances embodied in speech acts and indices that are representational through visual elements. Utterances deliver experiences, anticipations, facts, embodied feelings and emotions through “constative” (Baumbach and Nünning 2009) enunciations. Speech acts, indices, and constative declarations propel body movement, voice, gesture, and facial expression into action (Baumbach and Nünning 2009, p. 93). Baumbach and Nünning concur that “all utterances are citations in that they connect to something familiar and are based on conventions, shared codes, or established patterns which make their understanding possible” (Baumbach and Nünning 2009, p. 93). Coupled with kinesics and the use of space on stage (proxemics), such utterances enable modes of performativity that are central to our understanding of societal norms and self-representation. This paper explores the dynamics of gender and elderhood and a shift in identity with relation to the role of the elderly queen, Erelu Afin, in a 2016 University of Ibadan production of Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* directed by Tunde Awosanmi. Staged at the Femi Osofisan, Post-Negritude Tradition and 50 Years of Literary Drama conference to celebrate the life and works of Femi Osofisan on his 70th birthday, the play captures the devastation, disillusionment, torture, and trauma experienced by victims in the wake of a military invasion. Erelu’s performance and demeanour towards the other captives, all women, allow us to reconsider societal norms associated with gender and old age (elderhood) in this paper. The Yoruba culture conceptualises old age in terms of respect, yet these perceptions are also changing because of social and economic crises rooted in rapid urbanisation processes. However, considering elderhood as the epitome of wisdom, knowledge, and reverence in most African societies, Erelu Afin—who is currently the regent—instead propels herself towards a state of indecision and disillusionment because of the military assault. While the following sections provide an overview of the play, they explore the foregone considerations by furnishing the readers with the context in which Erelu Afin operates in the 2016 Ibadan performance. An account of the role of women in Yoruba culture as a whole is enabled as a prism through which one might potentially envision the perceived expectations and role of Erelu Afin in the context of the war. In doing so, I integrate an understanding of identity that could empower a new appreciation of gender, class/status, and elderhood in their interaction with a shifting identity which is perceived as entangled in a crisis. Does Erelu, as an elder, a queen, and regent, transgress the supposedly privileged position bestowed upon her by her age, status, and society to succumb to the vagaries of the devastation and trauma of a war in which all the men and boys have been captured and slaughtered and her treasured city ransacked?

## 2. Résumé of the Play

Although Osofisan's play is a Yoruba adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, it captures historical events marking social, cultural, and political institutions that experienced alteration in the wake of wars that Yorubaland waged against one another in the 18th and 19th centuries. Set around 1821 in the Yoruba Kingdom of Owu, the performance of *Women of Owu* captures an attack on the city of Owu by the Allied Forces consisting of Ife, Ijebu, and Oyo warriors. They invade the city and execute all the men and male children "with the pretext of liberating the flourishing market of Apomu from Owu's control" (Osofisan 2006a). Oba Akinjobi, the reigning Olowu of Owu Ipole, together with his sons and grandson, is captured and summarily executed. The play also carries with it a postcolonial connotation that one would not divorce from contemporary conflicts in which a neocolonial oppressor is apparent. As Felix Budelmann has suggested, Osofisan's play "alludes to the 2003 invasion of Iraq" especially in the way it focuses on "the consequences of military aggression anytime, anywhere: in nineteenth and twentieth century Africa, in the Middle East, and wherever audiences care to make connection" (Budelmann 2006, p. 92).

The survivors of the war are a small group of women who are led by Erelu Afin, the queen of the murdered Oba Akinjobi of Owu Ipole. The nature of the attack is captured through images of a burning Owu that not only fragments its identity as a "model city-state, one of the most prosperous and best organized of those times" (Osofisan 2006a, p. vii), but also disintegrates previously established architectural, spiritual, and human entities. Cries and screams issuing from the burning city and escaping bodies as the former is reduced into smithereens invite the spectators to live the horror and human cost of armed conflict performed on stage. Visual representations of the said horror are symbolised by tortured and desolate bodies strewn on the grounds of the open market on which the city has crumbled. This is enacted on the captured subjects with raised machetes and the use of live ammunition. The competent and authoritative deployment of objects of war (Figure 1) by the invading soldiers is telling of the devastation left behind when they retreat temporarily to their camps. Nefarious consequences of such an invasion are visible on the captives. Offering a background to the play, Azeez Akinwumi Sesan comments, "Femi Osofisan is one of the Nigerian playwrights who have shown serious concern in the re-interrogation of some of the Yoruba eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wars [ . . . ] because [*Women of Owu*] revolves around [ . . . ] historical and mythical experiences that have shaped the sociology and politics of the Yoruba nationality" (Sesan 2018, p. 184). Paralleled with the devastation of modern wars, such carnage is imagined through the words of Ndubuisi Nnanna when he states, "Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is a sordid tale of unimaginable grief. It is a story of extreme plunder, pillage, and dehumanization, especially, of womanhood.

Little wonder that its blurb is replete with dolorous reviews evoking intense images of suffering and ravishment” (Nnanna 2016, p. 57; see also Götrick 2008). The delight in causing pain to a victimised female body is highlighted in this paper as I examine the role of Erelu Afin. As an elderly queen, the rest of the captured women expect her to guide and encourage them, albeit in the wake of husbands, sons, and a grandson being overwhelmed and slaughtered, and daughters and women being raped and enslaved. These acts are rooted in what one of the Ijebu soldiers, Gesinde, describes as the logic of war in which an elderly woman, other women, and children become vulnerable sites on which brutality, vengeance, and rage are enacted.



**Figure 1.** Attack of Owu by the Ife, Oyo, and Ijebu warriors led by their general, Okunade. Photo by author.

### **3. Gender and Old Age Considerations**

Elderly women in specific African sociocultural contexts encounter insurmountable challenges related to ageism. Further challenges emerge when one explores the correlation of gender and old age, drawing from stereotypes and prejudices to which elderly women are often subjected. The ambiguity of gender and old age highlight the complexity in defining identity, which Stuart Hall effectively relates to “a distinctive type of structural change [that] is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century. This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality which gave us firm location as social individuals” (Hall 1996, p. 596). Of course, the question arises whether an identity can be fixed. And if it can, who determines the terms. In response, Hall speaks of an “individualist” conception of the subject and “his” [...] identity” (Hall 1996, p. 597). Although Hall refers to the late modernity and its accompanying hegemonic tendencies, his understanding of identity legitimately reflects the shift in the political,

social, and cultural structure in Yoruba societies before the mid-19th century as captured in the 2016 performance of *Women of Owu*. However, this depiction, according to Osofisan, legitimately enunciates any situation of war that is not strictly Yoruba. It is at the juncture of this theatrical representation of warfare and culturally constructed gender norms in Osofisan/Awosanmi's theatre that a supposedly fixed identity experiences a decentring and shifting mode. The complexity of being an elder, a grandmother, a woman, a queen and, eventually, a slave reflects the emerging tensions accompanying Erelu Afin's identity and self-determination in the performance. In association with this, Hall further asserts that

Old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This so-called "crisis of identity" is seen as part of a wider process of change which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world (Hall 1996, p. 596).

It is exactly at that interstitial space, a declining one for that matter, that we relocate Erelu, the elderly widowed queen of Oba Akinjobi, in a space that disassociates itself from the fundamental assumptions of Homi Bhabha's (Bhabha 2004) productive third space of enunciation. Buffeted, condescendingly, from nobility to victimhood as a result of war, Erelu unimaginably loses her status as a powerful woman of her kingdom as she disavows physical resistance. Warfare, in this context, is a remarkable determinant of transformation of both society and people. A looming invocation of selling the war victims to European slave traders runs deep in the discourse of modernity that is, at least partly, accountable for the transformation of society and its people, including Erelu. Foregrounding the elderly queen as the quintessence of this analysis, an understanding of old age in an African context is required as it is perceived differently in different cultures of the globe. In an African context, old age embodies both a chronological age (60+) together with the status of an individual in the community (see also Chiangong 2018). Viewed in terms of cultural representation, Friday Asiazobor Eboiyeh asserts that "[t]hey constitute systems of ideas, values, and customs related to old age that is treated by members of the society as if they were established reality" (Eboiyeh 2015, p. 3). Eboiyeh's supposition drawn from cultural representation highlights the esteem and reverence that aged individuals enjoy within their families and communities. In Botswana, old age is revered equally as seniority unsettles what Bagwasi and Sunderland term "masculine power" (Bagwasi and Sunderland 2013, p. 54). The elderly "are frequently called upon to settle disputes among younger members of the family" (Bagwasi and Sunderland 2013, p. 72) and, by extension, the community. Therefore, they are perceived as a repository of knowledge and the history of the community (Ajala 2006); they are believed to be endowed with wisdom rooted in life experiences. As traditional

authorities and spiritual leaders, they are viewed as intermediaries of the supernatural and the human world. However, the disintegration of traditional care systems as a consequence of intergenerational conflicts, modernisation, and urbanisation has distorted the original perception of the elderly. Consequently, reverence and esteem shown towards them are sometimes marred by stereotypes, prejudices, disrespect, neglect, and abandonment, which indeed are other subjects of inquiry and critique. Germane to the status of women and elderhood in Yorubaland, Fadipe (1970) adds that

[A]fter the menopause [ . . . ] possibly because of motherly pride in adult sons and daughters who in some cases have become mothers, women progressively develop a freedom of speech and action in their husband's compound. They are in the position to speak out their minds without fear (where previously they merely deferred to others) and [ . . . ] assume arbitrary authority in the compound. (Fadipe 1970, p. 116)

Given that old age entails varied contextual definitions, how is Erelu's identity as an elderly person determined in the performance? She employs self-referential markers at scenes where she laments over her fate not only as a prisoner of war but also as an imminent elderly slave; "will they put padlocks/On these **wrinkled lips**, and chains on these **old** and/**Withered feet**?" Further, when the women insist that she leads them in a ritual to repose the souls of the men killed in the war before they (the women) are caged as slaves, she invites the women to "join these **old bones** in our ritual of valediction to the dead". Further, her daughter-in-law, Adumaadan, together with an Ijebu soldier, address her as "old woman" as a show of abhorrence towards an unfavourable decision she made both as a mother and as a queen. It is worthwhile to add that these referential markers clearly depict not only Erelu's internalisation of ageist stereotypes, but also hint at how societies across Africa sometimes view aged individuals from a similar perspective (see also Bagwasi and Sunderland 2013).

Therefore, old age and elderly womanhood in an African context are marked by chronological determinants that correspond with status and class. The normative understanding of old age is, however, mutable not only in the contemporary definition of old age—as a result of modernisation—but also in the context of the performance, thereby interrogating its very normativity. This attests that its meaning and perception are dynamic, and are experiencing a decentring that affects the established norms of representations and the value of meaning. This alteration, therefore, demands that we briefly explore the status of women in precolonial Yoruba society in a bid to understand the shift in Erelu Afin's identity—as a queen, regent, and the only surviving elder/priestess—in a precolonial context of the kingdom of Owu.

#### 4. Women's Status in Precolonial Yoruba Society

In spite of patriarchal norms, women played prominent roles in the development of Yoruba communities. Although they operated within heteronormative gender dynamic conclave, they were indeed independent and fiercely assertive when it came to economic, entrepreneurial, and political matters. In addition, gender constructions were and are fluid, aptly determined by the expectations of both men and women, highlighting the fact that “gender construct does not translate to notions of oppression and the domination of women by men as happens in other cultures, because it is mediated by the philosophy of complementary gender relations” (Olajubu 2004, p. 43; see also Oyewumi 1997). Accordingly, Oyewumi affirms that “gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society, prior to colonization of the West”, highlighting that, “the social categories “men” and “women” were non-existent, and hence no gender system was in place” (Oyewumi 1997, p. 31). Therefore, a closer look at precolonial Yoruba society informs us that gender dynamics in the theatre of Osofisan, as Tejumola Olaniyan states, “traverses and undermines our contemporary gendered absolutes and [ . . . ] reveals them as neither natural nor inevitable but as partisan, ideological constructs that can and need to be altered.” To Olaniyan, Osofisan’s theatre reveals that “the sources of many of these specific and now generalised contemporary gendered divisions are external to the societies and are to be found very often in their colonial heritage” (Olaniyan 2006, p. 144). Elsewhere, LaRay Denzer (Denzer 1994) offers a captivating account of the status of precolonial Yoruba women, showing how Nigerian women as a whole played a vital role in the development of their communities. Working within patriarchal family assemblages, Yoruba women engaged in industrial and entrepreneurial activities that impacted tremendously on their local and wider official economy (Denzer 1994, p. 3). Moreover, as wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers, they “had access to land, the use of their father’s houses, a share in the profits from their fathers’ farms and participation in the ancestral and *orisa* cults of their paternal lineage” (Denzer 1994, p. 5; see also Olasupo 2013; Law 1995). Denzer reveals how Yoruba women were indefatigable as they were deeply entrenched in trading activities, travelling often in caravans to different communities within and beyond Yorubaland in search of wealth. Their astute economic power translated into political power and leadership.

On the political level, Yoruba women are known to have founded and ruled kingdoms, for example, Madame Efunroye Tinubu, the *Iyalode* (title of recognition conferred on her for her wealth and standing) of Abeokuta, *Iyalode* Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, and Madam Omosa, who was an influential Ibadan trader. These nineteenth century economic and politically influential Yoruba women not only provided weapons and ammunition during enemy attack and warfare but accumulated ample wealth and power which “rested on prosperous trade in arms, ammunition, slaves, palm oil and locally produced food and manufactures” (Denzer

1994, p. 12). For instance, Madam Omosa was the first to purchase sophisticated weapons which she employed to “mobilise and lead a defensive force that defeated and thwarted the attack when Ijebu forces threatened her city, Ibadan” (Denzer 1994, p. 13). Interestingly, even within the royal palaces, the *ayaba*, as Denzer observes, formed what she describes as an intricate system of female officers which included

the *iya afin* (wives of the preceding oba), followed by the *ayaba* of the reigning oba, the female *ilari* (female officials), and last, ordinary slave women [who] ... served as advisers, priestesses presiding over the shrines inside and outside the palace, protectors of the oba [the King], influence-bookers between the commoners and the oba, intelligence agents, and domestic servants. (Denzer 1994, p. 9)

Besides, “Queen mothers, king’s sisters, King’s wives, priestesses, and market women’s leaders occupied a variety of titled offices through which they influenced domestic politics and foreign affairs either directly or indirectly” (Denzer 1994, p. 11). Concerning leadership and chieftaincy, women may seem not to be prioritised because of gender norms and the socially constructed regulations around gender, sociopolitical status, ability, and age that precisely determine a male child’s claim to such positions. Fadipe emphasises that such claims are made based on “hereditary and elective principles of succession” which are rigorously restricted by customary norms. In spite of this restriction which may speak of specific enclaves of the Yoruba society, it is known that women have been enthroned as traditional leaders of their communities—for example, in Ijesaland—and correspondingly engaged in the religious, economic, spiritual welfare, and development of their communities like male leaders (Trager 2001, p. 92; see also McIntosh 2009). Capturing the political status of the Yoruba women, which was disrupted during colonial and missionary intrusion, Fadipe (1970) states that women in colonial Yoruba towns who belonged to political associations such as *Egbe Iyalode* were invested with the power to discuss business with the council that managed the affairs of the state. In addition, “any representation[s] made [ ... ] are listened to with respect whether they are concerned with their trading interests or with some broader political issue” (Fadipe 1970, p. 253). However, the leader of the women’s political association used their status to enact what Fadipe describes as “the superior judgement of the males” (Fadipe 1970, p. 253). Credible accounts that inform on Yoruba society up to the 19th century allow us to imagine the power conferred on Erelu Afin in *Women of Owu* before the war breaks out. Bearing in mind that Owu was a prosperous kingdom at this time, Erelu’s status of royalty/nobility and her advanced age logically positioned her as a woman to whom subordinates would turn to for leadership precisely in times of crisis. But would Erelu, in spite of her economic and political power, provide the leadership expected of her?



## 5. Enacting Negation of Resilience

The study argues that Erelu Afin experiences and enacts physical and psychological distress in the situation of war explored earlier. This does not undermine her political strength because in the face of adversity, she summons resilience through her performance of the senselessness of warfare. In enacting agony, she protests against the attack of Ijebu, Oyo, and Ife warriors, making her resilience seemingly internal. Her act contributes a different understanding to African feminist discourse as it rewrites her identity as a powerful elderly queen transformed to a victim of war. This transition marks her state of victimhood, which indirectly frames her sentiment as an active political act. She supports African feminist discourse which is not bound to confront patriarchal norms and social constructions of gender roles (see Atanga 2013), but also creates a site on which pain and despondency are given agency through self-reflexivity. However, the paper chose to focus on her externalisation of pain, which, in my view, affects her status as an elderly queen. Significant emblems of self-worthlessness and lack of motivation mark Erelu's performance. Physical, emotional, and psychological pain shatter her sense of worth and well-being as an elderly leader. For the majority of the Ibadan performance, she mourns, wails, and sprawls in the dust in dejection. She often either throws her arms helplessly in the air or folds them to her chest. Her reluctant exploration of the performance space is discernible in her uncertain movements.

She is often seen taking despondent body postures in which her head is bent towards her chest or shoulders (Figure 2), contributing to an atmosphere of empathy in the auditorium.



**Figure 2.** Erelu in a standing position that expresses desolation. Photo by author.

She frequently employs her hand to support her bent head, which summons the audience to share in her ordeal. While Erelu narrates the travails imposed by the war, the spectator constantly decodes pain and trauma in her sombre facial expressions as the auditorium is enveloped in silence at those moments. Such gestures and body positions clearly articulate grief, vulnerability, and resignation.

Her body, with those of the other captured women, is smeared in soot, illustrative of the fact that the victims are caught in a smouldering site. Apropos experiencing war and human loss, her testimony and those of the other women negate the accolades of royalty and nobility that come with Erelu's status and advanced age. Ultimately, she laments over the loss of her political status and the soldiers' derision over her mother—and woman—hood. Erelu Afin does not engage in most of the songs and dances performed by the women. Presumably, these songs privilege the remembrance of a stable community life before the invasion, but also inadvertently enable the women to gain and maintain unity and strength in captivity. But as Budelmann (2006, p. 93) adds, the songs and dances, also articulated in one of the women's remarks, are performed in times of calamity, bearing with it a tradition handed down to them by their ancestors. Therefore, one of the women states "so let us dance my friends as we wait, as our mothers taught us to do at such moments. Dance the Dance of the Days of Woe!" (Osofisan 2006b, p.17) and "Sing my friends! Let us celebrate/Our new-worn freedom of chains!" (Osofisan 2006b, p.13) (Figure 3). Have they, the women, not emerged from the war "with our spirits broken and our faces swollen waiting to be turned into whores and housemaids in your [*implying the Allied Forces*] towns?" (Osofisan 2006b, p. 12). The women perform the dances and songs to intense drumming, which are an enactment of Yoruba oral aesthetic patterns and rooted in the community as a Yoruba cultural element. Although the dances import satirical connotations that critique dictatorship and political callousness, they are obviously an enactment of the continuity and emerging trends of such oral performance in the communities in which these women will ultimately be in servitude.

Erelu performs the dirge "*Atupa gbepo nle felepo* (lamp, yield your oil to the oil seller)" (Osofisan 2006b, p. 69). As the women, including Erelu, perform the dance in a circle each holding a lit lamp, they energetically push their torsos in and out to the rhythm of the dirge and drumming, as if to build up an energetic tempo and momentum to engage an action that is yet to be revealed to the audience. While the dancing women, who also perform using complex dance movements, exit stage left with their lit lamps, Erelu moves to centre stage and crumbles to the ground once again. Throughout the entire performance, she is often seen standing aloof and away from the rest of the other women as a symbol of hopelessness and misery (Figure 4). However, ambiguity shrouds this aloofness which one could connect to her majestic status. But, as mentioned earlier, grief overwhelms her efforts to maintain her status of royalty.



**Figure 3.** One of the dances performed by the women without Erelu to celebrate their new-worn freedom of chains. Photo by author.



**Figure 4.** Erelu is often seen standing aloof from the rest of the women. Photo by author.

The following utterances, which Erelu makes in the performance, capture her state of devastation, indignation, and ultimate defeat from the war, and probably inform the audience of her loss of leadership in the kingdom.

**Ah, am I** the one sprawled on the ground like this, In the dust, like a common mongrel! Me!  
But what's the use getting up? **To go where,**  
Or to achieve **what purpose?** Of course **I am sorry for myself,** But so what?  
When fate has decided to strike you down,  
What amount of crying can help?  
That's what **I keep telling myself. I say-Resign yourself, Erelu Afin, and accept it all with forbearance!**  
But nature is weak: my tears pour out nevertheless! [...]  
**Who will look at me now, and remember I was once a queen here, in this broken city,**  
**Or that in that palace over there, now burning to ashes I gave my husband five splendid sons?**  
**And my daughters, dear women! These** same eyes saw my daughters  
**Seized by their hair, their clothes ripped off their bodies By brutal men, and their innocence shredded forever**  
In an orgy of senseless rapine [ . . . ] Now those laughing girls  
Are going into the kitchens of uncultured louts! [...]  
**Oh I wish I could die, die! Or fall silent**  
**In a hole where sorrow can no longer reach me! Who will save Erelu Afin? Who can save me now?[...]**

Erelu's performance in this scene is analysed using indexical components and speech acts that communicate action and knowledge, in a specific context, as strategies to articulate the progress of her decentring identity. Her utterances are accompanied by actions of distress as the spectators watch her sprawling in the dust. Her position is constant as her motivation to embrace her state with perseverance and self-control is thwarted by the destruction of her city and her status as its queen. When she finally moves from her position on the ground, she engages almost quick seemingly seditious steps towards downstage left only to be entrapped by sorrow as she taps her palms several times on her abdomen as an index to emphasise the "five splendid sons" that she gave her husband and who have been killed in the war. Incessant mourning and the wish for death to end her suffering is a recurrent desire. Her constant use of the personal pronoun "I", which she utters while directing her fingers towards her chest (Figure 5), refers to her status as a queen in the former wealthy Kingdom of Owu and to her wish to not move, but rather to die: "I keep telling myself. I say—Resign yourself [ . . . ] I was once a queen here, in this broken city [ . . . ] Oh I wish I could die, die!" (Osofisan 2006b, p. 10).



**Figure 5.** Erelu enacting the “I” pronoun and the “my” as she refers to the consequence of the war on her being. Photo by author.

Faced with calamity, Erelu is obviously caught in a crisis of identity, manifest by ambivalences and contradictions, which demands that she either succumb to the disaster or embrace it with strength. In an attempt to negotiate these new developments of her identity, Erelu—the queen, mother, grandmother and wife—ultimately resigns herself to her fate because her “tears pour out nevertheless!” Further, her use of demonstrative pronouns invites the audience’s gaze towards the subjects that she is referring to, “**These** same eyes saw my daughters/ Seized by their hair, their clothes ripped off their bodies [ . . . ] **That’s** what I keep telling myself. I say—Resign yourself [ . . . ] Or that in **that** palace over there, now burning to ashes/I gave my husband five splendid sons?” Serving as indexical signs, these pronouns, according to Johansen and Larsen, ensure designations “that signify by pointing to something [ . . . ] point us to an object, drawing our intention to it, as if urging us to ‘take a look at that’” (Johansen and Larsen 2002, p. 35; see also West 2014). Erelu’s eyes, to which “these” point, invite the audience to imagine and share in her testimony, specifically watching her daughters brutalised through the act of rape by Ijebu, Oyo, and Ife soldiers. Such a scene does not require a stage enactment since Erelu’s deportment, as narrated by her, transmits the lived trauma of the incident to the audience. Further, resigning to fate is “that” decision she is willing

to embrace because “that” city, now smouldering, is the site where she conceived her now slaughtered five sons and lost her husband. These designations direct the audience’s eye and imagination towards the physical, psychological, and emotional torture of war. Further, these indexical elements describe her current state and the events that goaded her into such episodes now unfolding in her life. The “I” and “me” designations localise her in the spotlight vis-à-vis the women, as the audience is constantly reminded of her destroyed kingdom and the violent usurpation of her political authority. She has, of course, been rendered a homeless, vanquished and childless widow/queen, and grandmother.

The demonstrative and personal pronouns—“that”, “these”, “those”, “I”—that she utilises in the above utterances relate to those elements that do not only form the core of her identity constructed by Yoruba perception of royalty, but also reference her dislocation to what she describes as “a common mongrel”. The deaths, together with the devastation inflicted by the war, have shifted her identity to a pitiful state in which she chooses to cry, wail, and scream as she elects, frequently, to express self-pity. Worse still, her imagination of her future state exacerbates her current state of grief.

The thought of being sold into slavery in Kano, Abomey, or to the Europeans who are currently settled at the Cape Coast in Ghana provokes further enactment of melancholy. If her destination is the Cape Coast, her thoughts of being silenced with a padlock put on her wrinkled lips and chains bounded on her old feet, or perhaps being branded with a hot iron, will annihilate her humanity. Such a predictable outcome, of course, engenders panic as she exclaims; “Me! I am going to be maid to some foreign matron:/I will watch night and day over her brats,/Or slog away in her kitchen, picking vegetables,/My body covered in sores! Me, the Erelu of Owu!” Erelu raises ethical questions about the slave trade and draws the audience’s attention to the illogicality of slavery that affected people irrespective of status and age. Erelu’s language in this circumstance can be associated with Makoni and Stroeken’s supposition that “[t]he language spoken by older persons in both illness and health [encapsulate] an older person’s experience and recollections of the past, as well as vision and hopes for the future in the current political reality” (Makoni and Stroeken 2002, p. 1). In Erelu’s mind, however, she would rather die than submit herself to any of the situations prescribed by the war, which also encompasses serving as a concubine to any of the Allied Forces. Hence, in her state of disillusionment, she encourages the women to wail via a cadence of a dirge.

Her internalised resilience, expression of silent protest, and non-confrontational approach in the performance are also captured in her interrogation of the abstention of the gods in preventing the war. The ancestor Anlugba arrives only after the city of Owu has been destroyed. As he simultaneously chastises humans for their incessant thirst for calamity and blood, the women—whom he blames for not summoning

him—ironically interrogate his relevance as a god and ancestor in the life of the kingdom. They demand Anlugba’s whereabouts when they, the women, performed sacrifices at his shrine to invoke his protection during the war. Correspondingly, Erelu insists on the gods’ detachment from the people when she pronounces,

The gods are not worth much! They lie and lie all the time and deceive us!  
They will take all our sacrifices,

Wear us down in supplication, but they have their own designs on us all the time!  
Did we not pray enough? Did we not offer sacrifice upon sacrifice! Yet see what they have made of our city! The gods are not worth much respect!

The women are convinced that the intervention of the gods would have precluded the war, the devastation and, specifically, the execution of Erelu’s baby grandson by the Allied Forces. When the baby’s head is bashed against a tree and its remains brought to Erelu to be buried (Figure 6), the elderly queen is, of course, inconsolable.



**Figure 6.** Enactment of grief as the lifeless body of Erelu’s grandson arrives. Photo by author.

Dazed, she cuddles his lifeless body in the cloth of her dead son and wanders aimlessly across the stage as she sings a dirge pervaded with praises to his departed soul. Shrouded in angst, some of the women clutch their heads and bosoms with their hands. Others, as a grieving gesture and questioning the gods, direct their raised arms to the heavens.

## 6. Performing Normativity

Normativity is perceived here as the antithesis of Erelu's denial of confrontation and internalised resilience. Normativity's internal logic in the play is conceived, distinctively, to establish certain moral and ethical values in the community. Therefore, the normative category that espouses the perception of correctness as wrong is eloquently chastised. Symptomatic of respect and deference in the Yoruba community, perceived correctness is enacted in the performance with specific voice intonations, costumes, body positions, and gestures. Based on veneration addressed to individuals with political authority, economic power, and elderhood, the women in the performance underscore that Erelu poses as a source of physical resilience in the aftermath of the war. Their accentuation is rooted in respect for elders and royalty which Tejumola Olaniyan affirms is relevant to Yoruba culture; "[t]he story of the engendering of Yoruba culture [ . . . ] which autochthonously privileges age and not sex/gender as mode of assigning hierarchy [ . . . ]" (Olaniyan 2006, p. 144). Such reverence is traded with guidance and responsibility expected of the elderly individuals. The women simulate gestures of prostration—bows, respectful clasping of hands and kneeling—while addressing Erelu. Specific modes of the usage of space that separates the women from Erelu also signal their esteem of the elderly queen. Respect for old age is an integral code of the Yoruba culture within which gender relations are fluid; hence, in this context, they create a backdrop against which economically and politically influential women emerged to contribute to the economic and political development of their society. Women's affiliation to royalty commanded respect from the populace since regents and priestesses were expected to rule and perform important rituals. Erelu's status in the performance and, by implication, in the Kingdom of Owu is modelled on the preceding precepts.

Since the costume of the Yoruba women, visually and symbolically, authenticates their different statuses in the society, Erelu's costume—which is a handwoven fabric, *Aso-oke*—is mostly worn at exclusive traditional ceremonies and festivals, signifying her status. The string of coral beads that adorns her wrist are worn during important celebrations across communities in Nigeria as a symbol of royalty and a unique marker of traditional titleholders. Their use within the context of royalty presupposes that the coral beads are endowed with supernatural powers and thus used as ritual objects. The rest of the women wear locally dyed fabrics known among the Yoruba people as the *adire*. The *adire* is quite common and more affordable than the *Aso-oke* and coral beads. Together with the difference in costume, the women, as depicted in all the pictures embedded in this paper, adopt positions indicative of reverence and loyalty towards Erelu Afin. Sometimes they create respectful distances from her (Figure 4) or kneel (Figures 2, 7 and 8). These acts are also gestures of subordination, which in some scenes are performed by firmly clasping their hands while addressing Erelu. Grief, portrayed through their facial expressions and songs, is the major factor



that homogenises the group. It therefore comes as no surprise that the women seek counsel from the eldest and leader among them.



**Figure 7.** The women beseech Erelu to perform the ritual of valediction. Photo by author.

Adherence to the norms of Yoruba culture defines the women’s interactions with Erelu in the performance. They clearly empathise with her and attempt to assuage her distress. However, in spite of the devastation caused by the war, the women remind Erelu of her duties as the queen, the regent, and the only elderly individual left to lead them in political and spiritual matters. By implication, she has to contribute her quota of responsibility in return for the veneration conferred on her by her society. That said, they begin by rebuking Erelu for her total submission to distress that often interrupts the performance of their dances and songs, “Your cries of anguish, Erelu Afin/Are like the talons of a hawk clawing at our breasts/They pierce our ears with terror. But we have been /Defeated [ ... ]”. In spite of their reprove, the women nevertheless encourage her to “preserve your strength so that we too can preserve ours” (Osofisan 2006b, p.13) and Erelu, of course, retorts with a lamentation. In their efforts to uplift the vanquished queen, the women are persistent in seeking Erelu’s leadership when they seek her advice and her suggestion of actions that must be taken to avert the impending enslavement. As we would imagine, Erelu again responds by wailing. But, according to the women, Erelu must lead the ritual of valediction, an act deemed necessary to cleanse their community of the lingering

negativity of the war as the souls of the victims are equally reposed. The ritual, they believe, will protect the future of the dispersed survivors in captivity. Caught in uncertainty, Erelu's wish to die is as strong as the thought of leaving with Allied Forces who arrive on stage to take the women away. As she attempts to bid farewell to the rest of the women, there is also the immediate need to perform the ritual. The deposed queen's refusal to comply for lack of strength impels all the women to sink to their knees (Figure 7), imploring her to execute her functions. They express that Erelu is the only surviving elder and spiritual leader, and also "the mother of the city, the only/Mouth we [the women] have left now to speak to our ancestors" (Osofisan 2006b, p. 62), with directives speech acts, but the leader of the women is resolute:



**Figure 8.** Women's show of allegiance to Erelu who, traumatised, is unable to advise and lead the women. Photo by author.

No, Erelu not yet! In spite of your bitterness,  
I beg you, remember who you are, what you still have to do,  
[ . . . ]  
I know how you feel, Erelu, but Kabiyesi  
Your husband is no longer here. All our priests and  
Princes have been turned to corpses. Their bodies lie around [ . . . ] unburied.  
They and other victims  
Need someone to release their spirits and send them back Safely home  
to the ancestors. Someone trained in the task. Among us there's no such  
person left now.  
Except you.

The women are aware that tradition forbids them from performing such a ritual of valediction given that an elder and queen is present. However, the war and its consequences have sapped the queen of her strength and motivation and, in the process, decentred her identity of royalty, divination, economic strength, and elderhood to an overwhelmed and traumatised childless widow. Embracing her new identity, she informs the women and the audience of her current psychological state, "This is no longer/The Erelu you knew, but just another corpse still talking./Grief has drained out my powers" (Osofisan 2006b, p. 62). While making these utterances, she seeks support from the women who, in turn, hold her and each other's hands (Figures 7 and 8).

Not yielding to Erelu's physical and psychological state, the women's persistence ultimately results in Erelu agreeing to perform the ritual. As the ritual of invocation is in progress, the women summon Anlugba the ancestor with lit lamps through a performance of the dirge. Anlugba appears on stage in the form of a masquerade. Possessed by the spirit of the ancestor, an entranced Erelu and Anlugba interlock their bodies in a backward grip. In this physical and spiritual embodiment, both personae rebuke humans for their role in igniting the war. However, they refer to the formation of the African/Yoruba diaspora from the enslaved and dispersed survivors of the war. Before Anlugba ascends to heaven in a backward movement from the stage, both disengage as the play ends with Erelu collapsing to the ground and remaining motionless.

## 7. Conclusion

The paper illustrates that Erelu's political authority in the kingdom of Owu is reminiscent of the powerful women of 19th century Yorubaland discussed earlier. Endowed with such trappings of power together with elderhood and royalty, Erelu relinquishes these elements to narrate a human story that is wrought from the trauma of war. Although the community that surrounds her insists that she perform her duties in accordance with her age and status in the kingdom, she, rather, enacts angst and distress, to which all humans, irrespective of these elements, are susceptible during wartime. Therefore, the category of age, power, and royalty are not relevant to the playwright and director as both artists seek to highlight humanitarian concerns that emerged in warfare. It is, therefore, difficult to muster the thought that Osofisan reproduces prejudicial representation of female characters in *Women of Owu* like early male African authors (Achebe, Ngugi wa'Thiongo, Okot p'Bitek etc . . . ) if one perceives Erelu as a subordinate emotional woman, mother, widow, grandmother, and wife. In addition, the study does not undermine her role by assigning pervasive ageist stereotypes such as the doddering and complaining old woman to her identity. Victimhood as well as collective and individual trauma become the playwright and director's subjects of exploration and critique. It is along this line of argument that

Erelu performs self-worthlessness as she transgresses the norms of her privileged status, mainly to enunciate and denounce the devastation of war. In doing so, she questions the rationale behind warfare, in which humans are decimated. At no point in the performance does Erelu attempt to utilise coercion against the Allied Forces except in a string of curses in which she verbally lashes out against them from a distance. Perhaps, in transgressing wisdom, one could argue that the ritual of valediction that she finally leads serves as a symbolic transition into the ancestral realm as she lays motionless on stage when the play ends. Her current state is one of the resolutions she had echoed to “fall silent/In a hole where sorrow can no longer reach me!” (Osofisan 2006b, p.11). While this symbolic transition precludes us from the imaginations of Erelu’s life in servitude, it gives equal agency to the other women. The women’s persistence does not only enable the continuity of traditional values, but inadvertently protects Erelu from her fate as a slave by way of maintaining that she performs the ritual. Her “death” in the end therefore highlights the relevance of valorising certain traditional practices and their role in preserving certain cultural, ethical, and moral codes that include reverence and responsibility. Further, it is via the technique of spirit possession that both the transfigured Erelu/Anlugba blame humans for their atrocious role in causing wars and human disasters. The spiritual and physical embodiment of both personae further elucidate the previously mentioned fluidity of gender roles in Yoruba society, in which gender relations are not strictly defined along patriarchal lines. Thematising the transatlantic slave trade and warfare over which Erelu laments serves as a useful reminder of core Yoruba/African values annihilated by slavery, colonialism, and Christianity. Extant Yoruba and African Diaspora traditions, I argue, can be traced to resistant acts like those performed by the women in the play who insist that their queen and spiritual leader must perform those traditions that unify the community before their forceful dispersion. Such a strategy of ensuring the survival of culture results in indigenous knowledge production reinvigorated by a group of grassroots women who are generally a site of agency, resilience, and empowerment across Africa. These grassroots values make an equally powerful statement about African feminisms (see Steady 1994; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Nfah-Abbenyi 1997; Oyewumi 1997; Hudson-Weems 2004; Walker 2005, for a selection), which are not only rooted in concepts developed by African feminist theorists, but also allow us to rethink how they correlate, historically, with feminisms emerging from the African Diaspora.

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