Critical Perspectives On Language, Literature And Communication Studies: Festschrift In Honour of Siyan Oyeweso

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Dedication
Foreword
Profile of Professor Siyan Oyeweso
Preface

SECTION A: LANGUAGE

Introduction

Chapter One
The Creative Use of Compounding in Nigeria's Niger Delta Conflict – Kehinde A. Ayoola

Chapter Two
Critical Discourse Study of Ideologies of Threat to National Security in Wole Soyinka's You Must Set Forth at Dawn and Climate of Fear – Henry J. Hunjo

Chapter Three
Asa and the Pragmatics of Face in Yoruba Interactional Discourse – Ayo Ayodele

Chapter Four

Chapter Five
Code-Switching in Contemporary Nigerian Hip-Hop Music – Emmanuel T. Babalola and Rotimi Taiwo

Chapter Six
A Semiotic Analysis of Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman – R. O Farinde


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| Chapter Seven | Syllabic Consonants as Peaks of Unstressed Syllables in Isoko English: A Perceptual Approach | Adenike Akinjobi and Akpoghene Ilolo | 77 |
| Chapter Eight | The Category AUX in the Yorùbá Proverbs | Felix A. Fabunmi | 85 |

**SECTION B: LITERATURE**

| Chapter Ten | 'The Sheep and its Old Cloth': A Portrait of Nigeria's Post-Military Democracy in Arugba | Ghemisola Adeoti | 111 |
| Chapter Eleven | War, History and Literature: A Symbiotic Exploration | Tunji Azeez | 127 |
| Chapter Twelve | Democracy and Tenure Elongation in a 'Postcolonial State': Reflection on Femi Osofisan's Yungba-yungba and the Dance Contest | Adebola Ademeso | 143 |
| Chapter Thirteen | The Alternative Songs of Odamologbe | Fasan, Rotimi Omoyele | 153 |
| Chapter Fourteen | Familial Combat: Enduring Memories and the Antithetical Drama of War and Love in Across the Niger | Ogaga Okuyade | 161 |
| Chapter Fifteen | Traditional Music and Dance | Femi Adeledeji | 173 |
| Chapter Sixteen | Anowa's Womanist Motif: A Vindication of Some Nigerian Women | Kayode Animasaun | 181 |
CHAPTER TWELVE

DEMOCRACY AND TENURE ELONGATION IN A POSTCOLONIAL STATE: A REFLECTION ON FEMI OSOFISAN'S YUNGBA-YUNGBA AND THE DANCE CONTEST

By
Adebola Ademeso

Introduction
Beyond the surface meaning of a dramatic text or theatrical performance are the pervasive meanings engrafted in the text. Osofisan, as an African dramatist has exhibited a wide range of aesthetic, visionary and dramatic techniques in his attempt at cataloguing the myriad of sociopolitical, economic and religious upheavals in his society. He has relied on the stage as medium of communication even in the face of difficulties posed by the leaders who he sets out to criticize. A study of Osofisan's drama and theatre, as ideological ethos, provides a beyond-the-border interpretation and analysis; a clear point of comparative study in the experiences of the postcolonial states of the world, through the various dramatic techniques and the arts of the theatre, as media of expression, thereby leading to a creation of revolutionary consciousness and socialist reality in the minds of those that come in contact with his drama and theatre within and outside the shores of Nigeria.

The growth and development of postcolonial African states is bedeviled by both internal and external power-play. The internal one is represented by the African leaders trained by the imperialists, who have also understood the oppressive tools more than their masters, while the external power-play represents the former empire or the colonisers who would continue to protect their economic, religious, political and cultural interests in their former colonies. But in order to avoid direct confrontations with these internal and external power players while projecting and professing probable solution to the myriad of socio-political problems in Africa, playwrights and writers have devised the use of drama as a metaphor. This is one of the reasons why it is essential to study the thrust of drama as a literary and ideological weapon in an oppressed society. An assessment of Osofisan's ideological and revolutionary aesthetics within the ambit of his literary paradigms, as a composite response to the political, social, economic, religious and cultural needs of his society could only be exhaustively done within the ambit of the dynamic use of stage aesthetics, storyline, thematic construct, and in other dramatic and performance mechanisms like songs, music and dance.
The Postcolonial States

Postcolonial states refer to states formerly ruled by the colonial powers and whose socio-political orientation and cultural identity have been affected as a result of the socio-religious and economic policies of the imperialists which sought to absorb, through assimilation, the entire “being” of the colonies by making them “see” themselves as an adjunct of their cultural enclave” (Ashcroft et al. 1989:1-2). For a state to pass for a postcolonial state, it must have possessed a status of being a former colony, and it must also have been affected, culturally, by the imperialist politics, economy, religion and culture. According to Moore-Gilbert et al. (1997), it is not enough to use the concept of periodisation to classify a state as a postcolonial but more importantly, it is necessary to examine the social, political and historical landscape of a state in order to determine her national consciousness and culture, as prescribed by Fanon (1963:166-199).

Moore-Gilbert et al (1997) and Loomba (1998) conclude that mental and racial difference, a discourse on race, class consciousness, gender issues, sexuality, feminism, nationalisms and pan nationalisms, must be examined in any attempt at categorising a state as postcolonial. A postcolonial state, therefore, is a state with a wide range of sociopolitical, economic and religious experiences that are instigated by both the imperialists and the leadership of the people themselves. The cultural and political identities may be a stronghold in the evaluation of a postcolonial state but the issues of social and economic marginalisation, the impact of colonialism on the history and science of the people colonised and the colonisers themselves form a point of discourse in a postcolonial state.

Postcolonialism as a field of study has come to be associated with the studies in “Commonwealth”, “Third World” literatures that were used to describe the literatures of the former colonies of European countries. Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) as the foundation for the study of postcolonial discourse foreshadowed other postcolonial works such as Bill Ashcroft et al, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures (1989) and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1982), which sought to evaluate the identity of the postcolonial states within the space of culture, history, politics, economy and nationalism.

Also, postcolonial discourse allows for a wide range of investigation into power relations in various contexts and it reflects itself in the formation of the empire, the impact of colonisation on the postcolonial history, economy, science, and culture, the cultural production of colonised societies, feminism and postcolonialism and the state of the postcolony in contemporary economic and cultural contexts.

African Leaders and Tenure Elongation


Masouya Ould Ahmed Taya of Mauritania (1984 – 2005), Denis Sassou-Ngesso of Republic of Congo (1979 – 1992; 1997 to date), and a host of others. The Nigerian nation almost followed suit with the attempt by a former military head of state and later democratically elected president, Olusegun Obasanjo, to remain in power with his now infamous, “Third Term” agenda. The Obasanjo example is one in the people’s resistance to “sit-tightism” or tenure elongation.

Interestingly, all these leaders have common patterns and trends of leadership; they evolved ambitious political and historical features which would make their respective countries to remember them for good or otherwise; they came into power either through the ballot boxes (especially in massively rigged elections) or coup d’état (Kasfir, 2006:23) with the attendant dictatorial tendencies and high-handedness in policy formulation and implementation. Constitutions are either set aside or altered just to satisfy their ambitions. Many of these leaders chose the option of being at the helm of affairs for life as in the case of Idi Amin Dada of Uganda whose brutality and disregard for the rule of law led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and plunged the (his) country into chaos and poverty. (Kasfir, 2006:8)

The Nigerian Experience

The sit-tight syndrome associated with political leadership in Africa could also be traced to the political landscape of Nigeria, especially since independence, in 1960, and it is usually caused by a multiplicity of factors that have been highlighted by several scholars and writers. For instance, the major factor has been that every political leader, in Nigeria, sees himself as the saviour of his immediate constituency, especially within the confines of his ethnic divide. The innate tendency of man to want to subordinate other people is another factor. In Clark’s The Raft (1964), the Lumbermen - Ogro, Kende, Ibobo and Olotu – may be regarded as symbolic of the regions in Nigeria in the early 1960s – North, West, East and Mid-west who were always at loggerheads for political power. Perhaps J.P. Clark was ahead of his time. There was no Mid-West, as such when the play was first written. These four characters, apart from being the symbols of their respective regions, also possess personal ambition. Ososifan, in Another Raft (1988), provides graphic details of the “fictional reinterpretation of the social scours” (Amuta, 1982:168) of corruption, bureaucratic ineptitude and oppressive antics of the Nigerian leaders at independence. The contrasting and dialectical obsessions in Clark’s The Raft (1964) and Ososifan’s Another Raft (1988) may have been instigated by the attempt to catalogue historical events and also to evolve and project the revolutionary ethos for the purpose of forging a new nation.

Nigeria’s political development, from 1960, has witnessed series of leaders who would rather sit-tight in power. For instance, when General Yakubu Gowon took over the reins of leadership in Nigeria, on July 29, 1966, from Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who himself took over from a democratically elected leader, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa on January 15, 1966, he promised Nigeria economic and political stability. But with a prolonged transition to civil rule for nine years, the then Brigadier, Murtala Ramat Muhammad overthrew him on July 29, 1975, in a bloodless coup. General Murtala Muhammad was noted for his reforms and the promise he made to Nigerians that he would hand over power in 1979 through popular elections. However, he was assassinated in a coup attempt on February 13, 1976. His successor, Lieutenant
General Olusegun Obasanjo ruled between 1976 and 1979 before he handed over power to Alhaji Shehu Shagari in 1979 who was later overthrown by Major General Muhammad Buhari on December 31, 1983.

Because of his rigid programme of economic austerity and instituted repressive policies that included a sweeping campaign against 'indiscipline,' a prohibition against discussing the country's political future and the detention of journalists and others critical of the government, Major General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida took this opportunity to overthrow Buhari's government in August 1985. (Stock, 2006)

The Nigerian constitution of 1979 that was reviewed and adopted in 1999 provided a four-year term for the post of President, and an individual may be elected for another four-year term, and because of this provision, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was re-elected in 2003 for another four years. Towards the expiration of Obasanjo's second tenure, he set up a constitution review panel, through his loyalists in the Nigerian National Assembly, with a view to making an individual be elected as a President for three terms. By this proposal, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo would have been the first beneficiary of this constitutional amendment. He would have ruled Nigeria for another four years. His ambition was later botched by the National Assembly headed by Chief Kenneth Nnamani, who threw the amended constitution away and then opted for the 1999 constitution which provides for an individual to rule Nigeria for a maximum of eight years.

However, it must be noted that General Ibrahim Babangida and Chief Olusegun Obasanjo have had to play the same game of shifting the 'goal post' just for their personal ambitions to materialize for while Obasanjo sought tenure elongation through constitutional amendment designed to subvert the two terms of four years each in the 1999 constitution, Babangida sought his through the annulment of the June 12 1993 elections believed to have been won by Late M.K.O. Abiola,. The sit-tight syndrome could be explored in their modes of operation in government, and it is on this premise that Ososifian's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993) will be studied. The dialectical constructs in the play can best be understood within the confines of the Nigerian political historical landscape, and how democracy and social justice have all prevailed against the sit-tight syndrome and tenure elongation in Nigerian politics.

**Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest**

Osofisan wrote the play at the heat of the political tumult in Nigeria, as a metaphorical prophecy that could guide African leaders against long stay in power, using the Nigerian traditional and cultural orientation as basis for his dialectical constructs. The Nigerian political and social terrain serves as a leading example for the black race, and Ososifian saw the need to remind the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida that his ambition of staying put in power may lead to people taking to arms in order to liberate themselves from his dictatorial stranglehold.

According to Ososifian (1993), in his notes on the play, he was contacted by the Babangida regime, through the Directorate of Social Mobilization (MAMSER) headed by Professor Jerry Gana, to write “A play in support of the political transition programme...But my response at that time was rather lukewarm, partly because normally I find it hard to write to commissions” (Ososifian, 1993: xiv). Perhaps, if he had accepted the offer, his vision would have been altered by the government. He would not have had a free mind to express his opinions about the style of leadership evoked by the Babangida government then; he would have been made to sing praises of the government transition programme that was planned to fail. His refusal to write a play for the government posed a great challenge to his vision and to the tenacity of purpose in his works. His ideological tenets soon found an ally in “the upsurge of democratic forces,” (Ososifian: 1983: XIV), that had found their ways into the policy of the contemporary world politics.

This fever of freedom, which first erupted in Eastern Europe, finally spread to Africa, starting from Benin Republic, next door to Nigeria, then moving rapidly to Gabon, Togo, Ivory Coast, and so on.

The political and social environment in Nigeria, as it is in some other parts of the world, provided an instigating factor for a metaphorical construct which later became one of the most celebrated statements of Ososifian. He enthused that:

> We in Nigeria have tried to distort the issue, by framing it into an opposition between soldiers and civilians. But this is a false dichotomy. Indeed, in most parts of Africa the longest and most vicious governments are the one-party states run by civilians. And all of them have piled up a record of massive foreign debt; of mass poverty, as contrasted to the opulent lives of small, super-rich elite; of inept and corrupt bureaucracies; failures and failures everywhere... (Ososifian, 1999: xiv-xv)

**Of Prophecy and History**

The prophecy of Ososifian on the issue of tenure elongation in Africa, in 1990, when he wrote *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest*, later manifested in Nigeria, in 1993 when General Babangida conducted and annulled an election that was believed to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola, in his bid to elongate his tenure. He was eventually forced out of power through unprecedented civil disorder, violence, and the pressure from the international community.

**Principles of Democracy and Revolution**

In *Yungba-Yungba...*, Ososifian paints a graphic picture of how a state's happiness, development and growth should be based on the amount of trust and tolerance one could give to a democratic order that is all embracing and inclusive, especially where people can freely determine their fate; where governance is based on the rule of law and social justice; where freedom of choice and representation is respected and preserved.

Ayoka, the radical symbol in the play gets to know that the festival of dance is not only the avenue for picking husbands, by the young girls, in the community but that it is also an avenue to select a new priestess who is the custodian of the oracle, tradition and culture. And in anger, Iyeneri, the priestess who has perpetuated herself in power for ten years, instead of one year, invokes evil spirits on Ayoka for revealing her secret.

But, with the help of Aperin, the interpreter at the shrine, the evil spirits invoked on Ayoka through Aroorisaa, do not have any serious effect on her and Iyeneri does not have any other option than to step down from power:
It's all right... I accept my guilt! I have sucked from the succulent breast of power, and you're right, the milk has poisoned me, and made me giddy... I must pay the price, I won't complain... it is a burden which I moulded with my own fingers, and which I must now carry myself... (Yungba-Yungba..., 1993:104-105)

From the above, it should be noted that it is when the people realise their right to the throne, and that they have been performing their democratic responsibility, that Iyeneri is ready to step down for democracy to prevail.

Tomorrow, you will have your competition, and the winner... the winner shall be installed as the new priestess as you want it!

But not without a caveat;
But I warn you, you must take care to dance only in joy, without acrimony... without any songs of abuse, no cheating, and no violence of any kind...
(Yungba-Yungba..., 1993:105)

Ayoka is a link between the two sides of the world, the despotic leaders and the ruled. She aims at reconciling them for a better tomorrow. The motivating factors for Ayoka's combative disposition against the ruling class is not for her to take over from them, as she is not qualified to do so, but for social justice and the rule of law to prevail. She is even from a family that could be regarded as downtrodden. But she is inspired by the need to free her people from the historical and traditional despotism as represented by Iyeneri. According to Ayoka:

That is what we want! What we demand! For several years now, against the rules of our tradition, Iyeneri has enunciated herself in the shrine, greedily and selfishly soaking herself in its privileges. But this must end. And we are the only ones who can end it, we the young ones, if we stand together.

....The issue of freedom of choice must not be negotiated. Iyeneri must step down now, this season! We must reclaim our right, re-establish the principles of merit and of free choice!
(Yungba-Yungba..., 1993:26)

From the above speech of Ayoka, it is crystal clear that Ososisan sees the fight for liberty and freedom as a collective one; every member of the radical wing must have the same goal, and this goal should be propelled by true conscience. This is the reason why Ayoka goes to align herself with Dunbarin and Labopo whose parents command some influence in this society. The action, of course, has a multiplier effect on The Maybegege, The Jeosunwone and the Aruroton Girls. Their collective voice lends a helping hand towards achieving their common goal, knowing well that their parents have benefited from the decadence of the past and that is why they remain silent in the face of corruption and tyranny. It is a move towards emphasising the need of the people, their welfare that must be achieved through collective will, love, collaboration, self-determination, self-awareness, self-realisation, and self-preservation. The most fundamental period in life, to them, is the future. As Ayoka says:

Our voice! Our voice! My sisters, weighty things are happening in the land: The world is moving, and rapidly, too, all around us. Nothing is standing still!... The affairs of our state, don't they concern us too? After we shall have danced and been applauded, shall we return home to find food cheaper in the market, and abundant in our kitchens? Is it the husbands we choose whom we shall now cook to tame our raging stomachs? Or will our parents now cease to die in their numbers as they do now; in great poverty, and of diseases which have long been wiped out in other lands?
(Yungba-Yungba..., 1993:29-30)

It must also be noted that a true revolutionary does not consider the negative impact of his action on himself as long as the majority of the people benefit greatly from the outcome. Some may consider paying the supreme price just to liberate their people from all forms of historical and material hindrance inflicted on them by a few ruling elite.

This is our chance, now let us not be afraid to pay the price!
It will only be for a while, you'll see! Just a little while.
(Yungba-Yungba..., 1993:30)

Ayoka's commitment to positive change, as reflected in this speech, is strong against all odds, in order to put a stop to the incessant intrusion of power mongers in the body polity.

Metaphor as Aesthetics and Philosophy
Ososisan's poetics in Yungba-Yungba... could be described as a search for the sociopolitical order that will transform his immediate society (Nigeria and Africa) into a democratic state, where the people can freely determine their existence through their elected representatives. Since the clamour for democracy through civil rule is the order of the day in Africa and beyond, the Yungba-Yungba Group, the Masesoge Girls, the Jeosunwon Girls, and the Aruroton Girls are the symbolic political parties that the tight and despotic leaders in Africa, like Iyeneri, dribble at the political arena just as President Babangida did to M.K.O. Abiola who was said to have won the June 12, 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria. However, Iyeneri may be seen as Babangida and Ayoka could be considered as Abiola. The play attempts to catalogue the political history of Africa through the prism of Nigeria's electoral process using traditional metaphors. It also explores the forms and patterns of culture and traditions as means through which the modern democracy can borrow in a bid to transform to a better society where the rule of law and constitutional democracy will prevail. Ayoka, though a Marxist symbol, reflects the need for modern democracy to welcome the positive nature of tradition and culture for the progress of humanity.

Yungba-Yungba... exhibits the paradox of ideologies that show the sociopolitical terrain of African states and the contradictions inherent in human nature, especially in the arena of power and wealth acquisition. The dialectics of this paradox and contradiction makes a strong vocal point for the relevance of Yungba-Yungba... to the modern society. The need to find a common ground among the best ideological aesthetics within the confines of the developing state is also demonstrated in this play in order to
lend a strong voice to a search for a true democratic order, and a total rejection of the one-party states run by civilians (Yungba-Yungba..., 1999: xv), just as the metaphor of the dance contest signifies the electoral process that is usually fraught with corruption, rigging, violence and all manners of political and ethnic maneuvering.

The union of song, drum and dance is also stressed in Yungba-Yungba... to give strength to the philosophy behind harmonious existence of life. The unity that exists among these fundamental elements of festivity in the African society and in the field of politics should be emulated in order to forge a better future of a society in transition. This is a passionate position of Osofisan in this play. The metaphor inherent in the philosophy of song, drum and dance as the three sisters may also be applied to the corporate and harmonious existence that should be with the three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria so that development and progress can be forged from the relics of her past.

Yes, three sisters, called song, drum and dance.
The three lived together long ago, with their mother, a woman called Felicity.
(Yungba-Yungba..., 1993: Xvii)

The Politics of the Play
However, a play like Yungba-Yungba..., that is political in content and form may not be too pleasant for a society where a dictator reigns especially at the time when the play was written. It was written when Nigeria was in the grip of military dictatorship, and when the attempt to transit from military regime to democratic rule was frustrated by the few powerful people in government. The play became a strong voice of Osofisan's against the military regime in Nigeria and other dictators in Africa at that time. Yungba-Yungba... is one of the most rebellious and subversive plays of Osofisan, it enjoys infrequent performance and production on the Nigerian stage. It is radical and revolutionary in dramaturgy and language. It plays on symbols and imageries using history, myths and legends drawn from the Yoruba ethnic nationality of Nigeria. Because of the direct confrontation with the status quo as reflected in the play, and the harsh sociopolitical environment in Nigeria and Africa, Osofisan's metaphor in this play may not enjoy as frequent performances as his other plays. If Osofisan and the first cast of the play were almost "apprehensive of repression from the state" at the time it was directed by Sunbo Marinho for the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre stage, from 18th to the 28th July 1990, then the play is highly critical of the state and its leadership.

... I wrote Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest to hail the dawn of a coming new age. Directed by Sunbo Marinho for the Arts Theatre Stage, the rehearsals turned into a drama of their own as actresses increasingly became apprehensive of repression from the state. It was quite a struggle then, to carry on in the face of these palpable anxieties. But Marinho was courageous and, in the end, the production proved to be such a success that it was even commissioned, in the euphoric days of the election campaigns, by MAMSER, an organ of the Federal Military government. (Osofisan, Insidious Treasons..., 2001: 47-48)

However, Osofisan's metaphor in this play is a clear indicator to the aesthetics and philosophy of human nature in the search for a good life and good governance in a socially and politically changing world.

Metaphorical Aesthetics of Characters' Names
One of the most compelling trends in Osofisan's dramaturgy is the creative and philosophical essence of the names of characters in his plays. The names are deliberately contrived to give strength to his ideological and revolutionary pursuit. In Yoruba culture, a name given to an individual tells a lot about the attitude and the spiritual nature of that person. Beyond the descriptive function that names perform, they reflect the fortune and the failure in the life of people. Name may also be regarded as a form of prayer; positive wishes, and sources of strength at moments of crises, and a fulcrum for positive aspirations. Names in the African society are very significant in determining the behavioural pattern of the people, and Osofisan finds this ideal useful in his plays, with a blend of radical consciousness. It is also a way of motivating the people towards emulating or rejecting certain characters in his plays with good virtues or otherwise. However, the names of the major groups in Yungba-Yungba... are metaphorical in nature. They signify the virtues needed by a society, and it is only when these virtues are brought together that progress and development could be achieved.

The Yungba-Yungba Group which Ayoka, the Marxist and Hegelian figure, Dunbarin and Laboopo belong to could be regarded as a symbol of a bountiful blessing and sweetness; a harvest of favours, love and commitment. The Mayesoge is a symbol of elegance, pride, dignity; a metaphor for making the world a beautiful place to live in. The Jeosunwon represents peace; the harbinger of good life that is suitable and worth living, making the world a better place for all, while the Arooroton Group is a metaphor for an endearing vibrant talking and replenishment, a motivating and nourishing source of life. To Osofisan, when all these virtues are allowed to have their roots firmly in a society, development and growth are inevitable. Just as in Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels (1998), Omole, Epo Oyinbo, Sisins, Jigi and Redio represent the various symbols relevant to the existence of humanity, it is the virtues in these names that provide a dialectical material for the projection of Osofisan's radical and revolutionary viewpoint.

The existentialist philosophy in Yungba-Yungba..., is further strengthened by the various names given to the dance groups and the individual characters that exemplify the metaphor of freedom and true democracy. It also reflects the historical and material freedom and dignity of humanity in the culture and tradition of the African people which have been abused by leaders over the ages. It is an affirmation of the good quality of life which a society should be built upon. To Osofisan, like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, freedom is an integral part of democracy, and democracy itself is a philosophy based on human representation and choice.

What Osofisan shares with Sartre and Camus is that human beings as individuals hold the responsibility for self-actualisation and self-fulfilment because their universe and being are defined by choices and actions. (Ukpokodu, 2001: 23)
Conclusion
Apart from the paradox of freedom and choice in *Yungba-Yungba*..., Osofisan sees the stage as a metaphor for the field of natural and international diplomacy and integration. It is an avenue through which the principle of corporate existence among the diverse ethnic nationalities and interests can be brought together for the common good especially in the area of participatory democracy through peaceful negotiation, policy formulation and implementation. Therefore, Osofisan's metaphor is projected through the names of the characters' groups in *Yungba-Yungba*..., in order to emphasise his existentialist ideology.

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