

# Interview

**Interviewee:**

Yeside Dosumu-Lawal

**Interviewer:**

Olalekan Balogun

**Transcriber:**

Olalekan Balogun

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**Balogun:** Okay, hmm, good afternoon, I am here with one of Nigeria's most respected and distinguished choreographers; a dancer, actress, and lecturer, Mrs Yeside Dosumu...I don't know if I got that correctly?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Lawal (*laughs*)

**Balogun:** Mrs Yeside Dosumu-Lawal, good afternoon Ma.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Good afternoon.

**Balogun:** As a kind of introduction, this project is entitled, RETAGS, Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South, it is an Andrew W Mellon Foundation sponsored project being led by Prof Mark Fleishman, the director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies (CTDPS) University of Cape Town, South Africa. Basically, we are looking at that concept, Tragedy, the way it has been received from the Greek tradition and the way it has been reimagined over the years across so many societies including this part of the world.

So, to start with, we are looking at adaptation, the adaptation of Greek tragedy in Africa, in Nigeria in particular such as Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame*, Soyinka's *Bacchae of Euripides*, Osofisan's *Tegonni* and *Women of Owu*, and I know that, over the years, in more than two decades, you have worked on so, so many of these plays, *The Gods are not to blame*, *Women of Owu*, and so on and so forth. In fact, in the last fifteen or twenty years or so, most of the major plays, most of the plays that they have done in Nigeria both on stage and television, you have been the choreographer. Now, we are not going to come with all of those history, we can't do that, but we will just take one or two examples of the works that you've done, maybe *Women of Owu*, *The Gods are not to blame* or *Tegonni*, for instance and try to look at the...What exactly actually informs the way you pick your dances? I know you create most of the dances, but then what usually informs these dances? Maybe you can look at *Ojuola*<sup>1</sup> for example that Mr Shina Ayodele talked about. You were the choreographer and I know there was this concept, Gelede, that was really central there as the centre point of that play which actually distinguished it from Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame*. You

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<sup>1</sup> *Ojuola* by Lekan Balogun is an appropriation of Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame*, itself based on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

choreographed that particular dance and I know that a whole lot of research went into it... perhaps you can take it from that point?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yeah, thank you. Most of the works that I have done over time...I...what usually motivates me and so forth are the culture and the setting of the play itself.

**Balogun:** Can you be a bit more elaborate about that point?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** When I say culture...we have different cultures and cultures differ. We can say we are Africans but we have peculiarities in each culture: the Yoruba culture, the Igbo culture, the Hausa culture; we refer to them as culture but... for example the worship of Sango can be likened to the worship of Amadio...o

**Balogun:** Amadioha...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes, Amadioha among the Igbo, but if you look at the worship of these gods, they differ....do you understand me? The only similarity that you see is the colour of the costume...

**Balogun:** That's the red.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** That is the red, but the way we worship and the story behind that particular god differ. So in each of the plays I normally research into the culture of the people that own the dance because the history of the people is embedded in the dance. In each traditional dance, you can come across how they dress, what they eat, where they live, how they live, what they worship, the totality of their life; so I normally research into the culture of the people who own that particular dance. Then the setting itself...

**Balogun:** ...of the play...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** ...that is the locale of the play. Sometimes we make use of simultaneous set, different locale within a play with different culture. Sometimes it even depends on the concept of the director. As a choreographer definitely you have your own concept, but sometimes the director can decide to experiment. I will take Ola Rotimi as an example. I have choreographed three or four different plays by Ola Rotimi, like *Kurunmi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *The Gods are not to blame* and the...em...

**Balogun:** *Hopes...*?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Thank you. *Hopes of the Living Dead*. Although *Hopes of the Living Dead*...just a little kind of celebration dance among the inmates, it was not an elaborate dance. In each of these plays, I was able to discover the motifs behind each dance within a particular setting. Sometimes they want to portray raid, sometimes it is war, sometimes it is celebration, and sometimes it is festival, so I have to consider the motif of the dance within that particular setting at that point in time. But where you have a case of a director trying to experiment, the choreographer too must shift ground, must try and work along with the director.

**Balogun:** So which means that at that point in time you are not going to be strict in terms of lifting the culture the way it is?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes...sometimes...

**Balogun:** You have to bend it a little bit...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Sometimes it depends on the directorial approach, because...here in Nigeria, most times when the director is in charge of the play the choreographer is just like an assistant ...because you're not just choreographing the dance, you are embellishing the play, so you're choreographing the dance within the play. So you have to work along with the director so that everything can merge as one.

**Balogun:** Let's bring this concept into the *Ojuola* that we talked about...your choreography of that Gelede...<sup>2</sup>

**Dosumu-Lawal:** That is where I am coming to...

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<sup>2</sup> Ritual dance among the Yoruba done by men in honour of women who are referred to as "Iya Mi" (Sacred Mothers).

**Balogun:** I am sure we have the real Gelede and I want to imagine it wasn't the real Gelede you presented it.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Not the real Gelede. If you go into the history of Gelede itself...Gelede represents the Woman, African woman although done by men

**Balogun:** In the form of homage...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes... I came from a lineage where I observe this...

**Balogun:** Hmmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** From my mother side...

**Balogun:** Where they practice...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** ...practice Gelede. In our compound they normally keep the Mask, like a shrine. We have a shrine.

**Balogun:**...for the Gelede...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...for the Gelede, so it's always there...for a whole year. More than a year sometimes...because it's always a command performance. It is not an annual performance...

**Balogun:** On what occasion is it performed?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** It is always within that cult...they are the ones who decide...

**Balogun:** When you said command performance...that's what I mean...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** They can decide to celebrate one of them.

**Balogun:** Oh, okay.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** You understand me? So, they always call for the performance...they are the ones who call for the performance.

**Balogun:** So you mean the occasion has to be really important.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Very important and that is why you don't see Gelede regularly. Unless it is within a setting where the shrine is well established...like a...part of Abeokuta..I can't remember...I think Yewa...

**Balogun:** Yewa...yes, Ketu, Yewa, all those areas...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yewa...the shrine, the worship of the Gelede is well established there, so definitely have the time that they pay homage, they celebrate Gelede. But what I observed from my own lineage is that, it's a cult performance, it's a command performance. So I observed that, this performance is usually done by women...

**Balogun:**...and not men...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...and not men.

**Balogun:** Hmmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Most of them; at least 90% of them are usually women.

**Balogun:** So we imagine that these are really very old women...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Very old women...

**Balogun:**...that have passed menopause...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...Yes..

**Balogun:** In Yoruba tradition such women have literally become men...in a way...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...Yes. And the story behind this...I had somebody very close to my mum and I was close to her when she was alive. She happened to be a very important person in that cult. But according to the story that I heard about her...she got married to a man. It was not six months she got before being beaten by the man and was pregnant at that time. The man kicked her tummy and she lost the only child...

**Balogun:** The baby was supposed to be her only child.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** The baby was supposed to be her only child. She lost that pregnancy, and since that time she never had any other one. So I was like...I read a lot about Gelede, that it's usually done to celebrate women. Who are these women we are talking about? They refer to them as Onile

**Balogun:** "Awon Iya a wa"

**Dosumu-Lawal:** "Awon Iya a wa" Onile.

**Balogun:** Very powerful women...the owners of the land.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Onile...and I thought maybe my Aunt was trying to look for...maybe where to rest her head, support or a kind of power just to celebrate herself. Because I observed that everyday she always celebrate herself.

**Balogun:** Hmm...hmm

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Whenever she comes back from wherever she goes to, she will call all the children, she will buy biscuits and a drink and start playing for evrybody to dance. She will sit down with a bottle of stout, she will play with us, afterwards she will enter into her room and sleep. She likes to sleep. She likes to do this everyday. So in *Ojuola*, I remembered the scenario and the way I see tragedy is this: the world itself is tragedy.

**Balogun:** Hmm...the entire world itself is tragic.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Tragic. Because each time, each day we encounter one thing or the other. It is the ability to overcome...

**Balogun:** ...that is now...Everyone now has different capacity to...to contain...hmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** To me, everybody came into this world as...how would I put it...just like Odewale, hero but he has tragic flaw; each of us has tragic flaw. If you look at institutions now...let's say the marriage institution, we have many cases of divorce, why? We must have encountered different challenges but the inability to overcome, at the end of the day, that union, the relationship became tragic. A man...a woman lost their lives maybe after stabbing because of argument or whatever that they could not...you know...control the anger, at the end of the day it became tragic. In this our institution we are just trying to get over the tragic event...

**Balogun:**...murder of the young girl...student...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** That's apart. The system itself...how are we coping? With the situation now, is it not tragic? Are we really getting what we envisage?

**Balogun:** Hmm...these are very significant questions.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** To me, I look at everyday. My Bible...eh, my Bible tells me...I don't really know the portion now but I normally remember that...that everyday is full of its own tragedy, prayer is the only thing that you need to avert them. Each of us are tragic heroes too, but, according to that passage, according to the line in Ola Rotimi..."Stay where you are" ; "ikilo", warning, had it been he listened to that warning maybe he would have averted the (tragedy). "Mr Man you're getting angry too much now, calm down...no, no...no leave me alone!" At the end of the day...

**Balogun:**...something terrible happened...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...something will happen...

**Balogun:**...and then he is forced to calm down...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...at the end of the day...tragedy. Now, going back to *Ojuola*...

**Balogun:**...that play...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...challenging...being a woman first, a queen, a mother...

**Balogun:**...now a widow...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...now a widow, but a queen and a mother; a queen to a man and a mother to her child; a queen to a man and a mother to her own son. But at the same time she was able to even stand, she did not decide to...

**Balogun:** I saw that performance... so from the story that you gave about your aunt, in designing the step you were saying what type of steps will fit, you were trying to...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...I was playing...trying to...

**Balogun:**...look at that *Ojuola* character through the eye of that your...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...that my aunt...the emotion within her.

**Balogun:** Hmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Because I normally sit with her...because...even if I want to trace my love for music and dance, it will be through her.

**Balogun:** Hmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Because she was the first person that normally play this...eh, Ogunde track; she had all the tracks.

**Balogun:** So, let me ask you a question, so what it means is that your own idea of what you said about tragedy in the context of that play...you are looking at how the tragedy that we dramatise on stage actually connects with the ones that happen real-life.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes, that is why I said the world is full of tragedy. Before, now...it will continue. To me, it's like you have to prepare yourself. What is the next thing?; it's happened, fine, but I have to move on. Do I lose my life for it or I have to move on. She has to move on. My own resolution there, for Ojuola, is she had to move on.

**Balogun:**...she had to move on...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** There are images and symbols...the use of contrast symbols. For example I used the "oja"

**Balogun:** The "oja"...the girdle...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...yes, it's a symbol of womanhood, you understand me? If you see the way I moved the hand, around the waist...okay, let me prepare for the journey, it has happened. So, how do I move...my next step? Do I allow this to crush me?

**Balogun:**...fold my arms...?

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...or should I move on..?

**Balogun:**...move on...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** I have to be bold. So, after being bold, that was when I brought in the guys to give the women the strength...

**Balogun:** But the women actually started it...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...yes they started it...

**Balogun:**...but they are moving whether with men or not...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...or not...so to celebrate woman despite the challenges. The woman must find her feet. The woman must discover herself. The woman must continue to move. We...we are soft but at the same time we are strong.

**Balogun:** That...that song...the music I know it was only one, slow esoteric piece...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...yes...

**Balogun:** Was it part of the real Gelede rite that you witnessed or the song was merely composed?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** The funny thing is that I never took notice of the song then because whenever the....

**Balogun:**...you were concerned with the steps primarily...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** No...whenever they want to do their ritual they dont normally allow us to observe the ritual, so lock us up; the next thing you hear is their rattles from their movement, so it is when they now go out into the open field we now come out to see them from afar, you see them perform.

**Balogun:** So what people see is actually the secular aspect of it, the ritualistic they cover that.

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...they cover that.

**Balogun:**...why? If you look at it from your explanation, you know...it's really very deep...I was part of that production but I really didn't get the way you are explaining, so that also means that the movement that you choreographed represents that esoteric part, you have to "be there" to understand it.

**Dosumu-Lawal:**... to understand it...at the same time, when you look at the choreographic instrument....the choreographic instrument is divided into the movement of the body, the music, the use of space, costume and other adornment...to enhance it. Bringing all these together is to make a statement. The movement is not just movement for its sake, the movement is saying something because its like combining...merging two worlds together; the physical and the spiritual.

**Balogun:** Okay whay you are saying now is that, if you look at tragedy from this specific African context, such rituals actually provide people with the mechanism to deal with tragic situation. Is that an example of what you are saying? Look at the example of the late aunt, in spite of the tragedy, okay she lost the baby and she realised that she cant have another, it doesnt matter, sdhe celebrated

herself everyday, she was part of the people who practised the Gelede, so in a way, are you saying that kind of a ritual practise provides people with the mechanism to deal with tragic situation especially something that you cannot help anyway like in her circumstance?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Well, I can't say much about that because I never observed the ritualistic aspect of the performance.

**Balogun:** But the way the way that you have used it in *Ojuola*...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...I saw their movement, their body gesture, and from there I created my own movement out of it. It is not their real movement, I made....

**Balogun:**...yes, I understand...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...but they have basic movement...Gelede...every dance, every traditional dance has its own basic movement. So from the basic you create movement as contrast, create movement as variety, then you merge everything together to make a statement.

**Balogun:** Now, that day you were sitting in the hall, in the theatre, how did you feel...think the audience were feeling because at that p[oint, people have seen the tragedy revealed..."Okay, this guy is actually this woman's son", unlike Ola Rotimi's play where Ojuola goes in, kills herself, they still find this woman sitting graciously and then the Gelede performance starts. How do you see the reaction from the audience...because it was a very significant break away from Ola Rotimi's version of the play in terms of the capacity to bear tragedy; how do you...let's say, first and foremost, you choreographed it, you have these dancers, how did you see the movement on stage first, then, in relation to the audience that saw the performance, two questions?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Well, from my own perspective, the dance was like giving strength to the woman.

**Balogun:** Yeah, I know that, I am saying that...were you really satisfied with the way those dancers were...taking the movement in terms of what you gave them?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yeah, they tried their best. They tried their best b[ecause they are not initiates...

**Balogun:** Of course...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** We can...they were able to move close to it...what I gave them.

**Balogun:** What I am trying to...my question is that, in terms of using that...its a very significant point that the director actually gave you that chance to end the play the way you would want to end it. So, how do you see that, being the choreographer to put in that significant part that ends the play.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** To me, it was an accomplishment.

**Balogun:** Okay...hmmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...to celebrate a woman...

**Balogun:**...waoh...hmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...its...your ability to give strength to somebody that has lost everything.

**Balogun:** Yeah because that was what happened. But did she lose everything?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes...so bringing that person back alive though dead...

**Balogun:**...hmmm..literally... or metaphorically...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** So she need to get back on her feet as a woman. And not just as a woman alone, life is for the living.

**Balogun:** Yes, but did you envisage that kind of...eh...why you thinking about how fitting it would be for the play, that the dance have to lift Ojuola up?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes...yes...

**Balogun:**...because that's what the dance does...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** That was my...that was what I envisaged at the end of the day...something that will... let's say...hang...

**Balogun:**...yes...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...just put it there...

**Balogun:**...yeah because I realise...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...for somebody...

**Balogun:**...after even the lights faded very slowly I noticed the audience were there for about 15 seconds, nobody could move, it was just like...what did we really see just now...? You know, in a way...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...my...you got it. That was what I packaged. Because one thing about that dance...you know when you keep having sleepless nights about a particular dance...it was not the dance, not that particular piece alone, but that message...I was like...okay, let me celebrate a woman. Women...we do go through a lot, but for this, I decided to use Ojuola as any other woman, any African woman that might be passing through challenges. Okay, fine, let me give them life again. You can still be alive, though dead. You can. You can still move on. You can. So I tried to play on the audience's emotion too.

**Balogun:** That's the question I was asking in terms of...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...play on the audiences' emotion...

**Balogun:**...you anticipated...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes, I want to carry them along. I want them to feel the pain of that woman...you feel the pain of womanhood...

**Balogun:** I was there that day...I saw that it was really, really...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...very moving...

**Balogun:**...yeah it was a very emotionally..because...eh, yeah a whole lot of people who saw the play, at least about 90% of people who saw the play were familiar with *The Gods are not to blame*...it was a very significant turn, at first they were thinking is it *The Gods*, but all of a sudden...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...it changed...

**Balogun:** Rather than see a woman who breaks down saying "Ifa what have you done to me and goes in to kill herself?" They see a woman who says "Well, okay...it has happened....okay we are going on." And then, the dance will give us that sense of where we are going.

**Balogun:** But, I want to ask; compared to a play like *Ajagun Nla* which you also directed, what was the choice like...you know, creating the movement compared to what you did in *Ojuola*? Both plays are tragedy, anyway.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Both plays are tragedy but I tried to mix traditional concept with contemporary concept in...

**Balogun:** ...*Ajagun Nla*...

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes...because at the beginning it was just praise...worship...of the past heroes...how do we bring them back on stage using the contemporary form? I used contemporary dance to do that. Then, we later went back into the play itself which is traditional. So, like I said earlier, the setting of the play is one; the period of the play is two; then, the thematic preoccupation of the play itself because one must not move away from that. So choreographing that...eh...*Ajagun Nla* was not as tasking as *Ojuola*...

**Balogun:**...*Ojuola*...em...why?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** *Ojuola* made me to go back...

**Balogun:** ...into your past...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...research...what I observed. If my aunt's story was not the first...not the last, I observed other Gelede performances because I normally attended the festival and have seen them...you know...they are not common. But that story of my aunt came back...

**Balogun:**...it was more central to...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...yes...

**Balogun:**...you saw a little bit of her in that character...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...character...

**Balogun:**...hmmm...so does that really make it more personal for you...kind of?

**Dosumu-Lawal:** No, it just gave me a motif to work with.

**Balogun:**...hmm... and a very strong one, anyway.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** A motif to work with...and I strongly believe in a woman's power, anyway. I believe a woman must be strong. For her man, a woman must be strong for her community; a woman must be strong for the society.

**Balogun:**...hmm, interesting.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** They call us mothers, why? Why? Because we are the ones that...eh... I am really concerned about the word itself. So we need to protect the woman. We need to uplift her. We need to help her to discover herself.

**Balogun:** So art is a way of projecting all of these.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes...to me it was...not an easy thing...that particular dance.

**Balogun:** Now, let's look at colour in terms of...the costume, the colours...they had thi...that *oja*<sup>3</sup> and they were holding something again...I think brooms...?

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...in the last performance I was not there...it was the rehearsals that I observed. But when I choreograph any dance I normally look around, at it from the audiences' perspective, to see...okay...are they getting the message. I am always concerned about that. They must get the message.

**Balogun:** So when you choreographed *Ojuola* you were also conscious of how to connect the performance to the audience...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...yes, I must. Yes, that is very major to me. I must connect. I must communicate. If I fail to communicate then I have done nothing because communication is central in dance. No matter how you can manoeuvre or create spectacle, at the end of the day if the message...

**Balogun:**...is lost...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...no...no, you've not achieved anything.

**Balogun:**...hmmm...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...no, I really thank God for that particular dance because it really got to my audience.

**Balogun:** Yeah.

**Dosumu-Lawal:** They got the message and they were...they became performers too...

**Balogun:** Yeah, because...I saw..saw..

**Dosumu-Lawal:** They became performers too...

**Balogun:** Like 15 mins or seconds later, I noticed that everybody was silent...like..."what just happened..."

**Dosumu-Lawal:** Yes, my intention was for them to meditate...

**Balogun:**...yeah, reflect about it...

**Dosumu-Lawal:**...reflect about it...that truly this woman has been revived.

**Balogun:** Hm...so thank you so much for this wonderful interview.

*Balogun turns off the audio recorder*

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<sup>3</sup> "Girdle", made from shawl or clothing materials, and worn by African women to strap babies to their back. In the play, it is symbolic.