

# Interview

**Interviewee:**

Dr. Kayode Eesuola

**Interviewer:**

Olalekan Balogun

**Transcriber:**

Olalekan Balogun

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**Balogun:** Okay, I am here with Dr Kayode Eesuola of the Institute of Africa and Diaspora Studies (IADS) of the University of Lagos. Dr Eesuola is also one of the most important Nigerian theatre practitioners, a writer, an actor, a director, in fact, a man of so many parts, good afternoon sir.

**Eesuola:** Good afternoon, Dr Lekan Balogun.

**Balogun:** Okay, this project is tagged, RETAGS, Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South, being sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the research is being led by Prof Mark Fleishman, the director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies of the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Basically, we are looking at the concept "Tragedy" as received from its Aristotelian source and so on and so forth. What we're trying to do is to look at, to what extent can we still say Aristotle's definition of tragedy still applies to us and in what ways can we reimagine that concept of tragedy on the one hand? On the other hand, you have been one of the most important directors in Nigeria and specifically you had this wonderful work that you did on Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame*, one of those significant works. We are going to be talking about your definition of tragedy, and then, in relation to the work that you did on Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame*. But then let's start from: how would you describe tragedy?

**Eesuola:** Well, thank you very much. The concept of tragedy has been very controversial within theatre practice for a long time. There have been many Schools of Thought. These Schools of Thought are also divided into two, from my own observation.

**Balogun:** Hmm.

**Eesuola:** The first one is the School of Thought that is dominated by theatre theoreticians and the second is dominated by theatre practitioners. This is inevitably so in theatre because drama is all about the practice, writing is never in any way seen to be complete if it is not acted on the stage. So, theatre is one of the professions that will always run from the practice to the theory, and create a synergy of the two to be able to create what it is and conceptualise itself. So, the concept of tragedy from the Aristotelian perspective, is all about ending in disastrous situations in which some persons are perceived to be suffering what s/he is not suffer to suffer; people call it hero/heroine. But the idea is that, at the end of the play, you have a disastrous situation that in most cases is perceived not to be deserved. That is where it evokes pity; that is where it evokes cry, weeping and all sorts of

things. For me, this has been the interpretation that theatre theoreticians have followed over the years. However, on the other side you have the theatre performers. You will discover that during performance, the director is the master of the game. In most cases the director would not be there when the playwright conceived the idea. In most cases the director is not part of the scripting but he has the ultimate artistic power to interpret, reinterpret, to suit the peculiarity of the situation at hand. At this level, most directors begin to redefine tragedy to suit the message that they want to pass, and that then creates all sorts of things depending on the directorial creativity. And then, at this level now, the concept, the understanding, the conceptualisation of tragedy moves inevitably away from the sacrosanct, rigid, Aristotelian sense it now becomes pragmatic, it now becomes what manifest within the socio-tradition in which the play is located, based, again, on the orientation of the director.

**Balogun:** So in a way you are saying that beyond what Aristotle has provided, we should begin to locate our own idea of tragedy within socio-reality?

**Eesuola:** Not just that we should begin to locate it, I think we have started locating.

**Balogun:** Okay

**Eesuola:** And, inevitably so, we need to locate because directorial interpretation define what tragedy is. And directorial interpretation is based on 1) the orientation of the director and 2) the audience's society in which the play is meant to be received. These two things: the orientation of the director and the environment, and the ecology of the play production will inevitably reinterpret whatever play that you are having.

**Balogun:** Okay, so we are looking at directorial choice on one hand, and the audience that is receiving the performance.

**Eesuola:** You have just added the third for me.

**Balogun:** (Chuckles) The third one.

**Eesuola:** What I said was directorial orientation, his training, his tradition of training that goes beyond the choice. The choice is from him, his own creativity has been added but the orientation teleguides the choice, and the environment will now determine what the choice will be.

**Balogun:** But is it possible for us now to look at whether the director has been schooled in the Aristotelian tradition, is s/he not going to be tailoring that concept of tragedy along that Aristotelian thought?

**Eesuola:** Well, schooling is one thing, orientation is another thing (laughs)

**Balogun:** Well, to some extent, I am not talking about schooling in terms of university education or something directly so, it could be some sort. In a way it could be a process of training as a director...

**Eesuola:** Yeah, I get what you're talking about...

**Balogun:** And, if that line of training has been Aristotelian, is it not possible for that kind of work to still tilt towards that concept of... that term... that has been so confusing like you said.

**Eesuola:** My immediate response is that it is not impossible but, sometimes it doesn't follow hook-line-and-sinker. People go in to receive training and get certified. But they have their own reservation about the training that they received some time, so when they get the certification, they begin to develop the capacity to question their training. There are many directors who received certain traditions of training within the theatre world, but as soon as they become formed, they begin to query the tradition...you know...they received, and then input their own creativity into it, to begin to create different dimensions that we could see as innovations, or radical departure from what they had. And that is how intellectualism developed; otherwise, if everybody has been following the strict Aristotelian hook-line-and-sinker, we have no business anymore as researchers and practitioners.

**Balogun:** Dr Eesuola, let us now go like this...we've talked about all these things, let's have your own personal definition of tragedy.

**Eesuola:** Em, perhaps because I have a Social Science orientation, my definition of tragedy is that which points to the evils of society and what befalls those who persist in the perpetration of that evil. In other word, my tragedy...

**Balogun:** Your concept of tragedy.

**Eesuola:** My concept, my orientation, my interpretation, especially directorial interpretation of tragedy refers to those things that are antithetical to humanity, to the development of humanity, and the eventual occurrences towards those who perpetrate such things so that they will ultimately see that evil, when allowed to operate in the society, will always stand against the entire humanity. That is the way I always define tragedy.

**Balogun:** Okay. Now, let's bring this idea that you brilliantly presented to your direction of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame*. Did you work with Ola Rotimi because I recall there was a time you were a student when he was at the University of Port-Harcourt

**Eesuola:** I never worked with him but I did Certificate in Theatre Arts at the University of Port-Harcourt where I got practical exposure in Theatre...

**Balogun:** -I knew you were...

**Eesuola:** -Yeah he was there for Sabbatical or something. He came in to give us superlative turnaround in the practice of Theatre as at that time. I never worked with him but I read his text as a child in secondary school...

**Balogun:** *The Gods are not to blame*.

**Eesuola:** Yes, and it's one of those that kept fascinating me such that if you give me the chance I will want to direct it again, and again, and again one million times if possible to explore the concept of tragedy in Ola Rotimi.

**Balogun:** ... Let us look at it...the play that you did a couple of years ago, how did you approach that play?

**Eesuola:** ... Yeah, you just reminded me...this is some twenty years ago if I am not mistaken. My approach to it...it's a long time because I have done series of directing of the same play--

**Balogun:** After that...

**Eesuola:** After that and I saw that my interpretation came out much differently. So, because I told you that my understanding of the concept of tragedy is based on the social situation I want to apply it to the social situation. It appears to me that the dominant social occurrences at the time will likely taint my interpretation of script, and then my directorial output.

**Balogun:** Yeah. Let's look at just two of those...maybe one that you did many years ago which I was part of...and another one that you did...let's look at the changes that you made, what informed the choice that you made..?

**Eesuola:** (*Chuckles*) For instance, I remember vividly during one of the rehearsals that one of the "conc" (veteran?) theatre practitioners under my directing as an actor almost accused me of turning Ola Rotimi's tragedy into a comedy at a particular point, and, eh, my response was that there was a purpose for it. After all I had my directorial power to direct the play the way I wanted to interpret it. But if you look at one thing, especially the Odewale scene, the beginning of the play when Baba Fakunle appeared on stage and was about to decide the fate of Odewale...

**Balogun:** That revelation...

**Eesuola:** That revelation. I played in the Babalawo and tried to make him to be more pragmatic because it will be very absurd for the Babalawo to just say "This child, he will sleep with his own mother and kill his own father"; there is no background to it and there's no projection towards it. To me, the interpretation will be so lucid (or simplistic?) that it will not get into the mind of the audience. So I decorated albeit, outside the script, the Babalawo's appearances and the ultimate pronouncement with certain chanting. And then, after the pronouncement, I also decorated it with certain chanting to create a connect(ion) to the social activities within the Yoruba setting.

**Balogun:** So what sort of chanting are you talking about?

**Eesuola:** This I really cannot remember. I have one million and one that I could use.

**Balogun:** I am not saying that particular one...but chant as in...the Ifa chant..

**Eesuola:** Oh yeah, for the Babalawo...part of the research was that the Babalawo(Diviner) is different from the Onisegun (herbalist), and the Babalawo does not just predict without having some chanting

because Ifa is supposed to be an interpretative divination. There must be something that you are going to recite before you make a pronouncement. And so, I used that to correct...because you know as at that point it was beginning to get to the society that the Babalawo was equal to someone who does jazz(charms) for money, who does money ritual. The society was getting uneducated (or misinformed?). That...

**Balogun:** For you, you wanted that aspect of the play to correct the social misunderstanding...misinformation...(about the personality and role of the Babalawo)

**Eesuola:** Branding...Exactly. Which is why I said directing in my own view...beyond what we read in textbooks should be able to interpret plays toward the dominant realities of a particular time otherwise there will be miscommunication to the audience.

**Balogun:** Hm!

**Eesuola:** And that is the way I approached that play. I did series reversion (revision?) to let the people see that it wasn't just a conjure, it wasn't coming from the spirit world. It was based on...

**Balogun:** The Babalawo wasn't a magician.

**Eesuola:** He wasn't a magician...very good for choosing that word. It was based on what has been established and it is so pragmatic that what is said by one *odu* (Ifa verse) at a particular time can be verified in one other fifteen or sixteen places and you're still likely to get the same answer.

**Balogun:** Hm!

**Eesuola:** So that's one of the things that eh...

**Balogun:** But let's now look at the tragedy that the play dramatises...how do we now relate that to the society that we live in?

**Eesuola:** One, Odewale got into the flaw partly because of his strong-headedness, partly because of his over-ambition, partly because, and that is my own interpretation, again, of the thinking that the king does no wrong. And I think that is the ultimate lesson that play is trying to project to the whole world. That when you are in power...

**Balogun:** In terms of tyranny...

**Eesuola:** In terms of tyranny...you know, that when you're in power you must run away from temperament. Always want to hear people out, however irrelevant or useless you think what they want to say is, and Ifa says it: "B'Oba o ti pa ni, a maa gbo t'enu eni/O difa fun igbin ti won ni o ngbori aga yan bo ru/ B'Oba o ti pa ni, a maa gbo t'enu eni/O difa f'ejo ti won ni o ngbe 'leke Oba b'orun/ B'Oba o ti pa ni, a maa gbo tenu eni/ O difa fun adan ti won lo n d'ade oba/ B'Oba o ti pa ni, a maa gbo tenu eni"<sup>1</sup>

In the society of (wo)men, one person's interpretation must be suspected, we must hear out other people as plainly as possible. So when the king was approached, "my lord I went on the errand that I was sent but the message that I brought demands that I first converse with you"

**Balogun:** That was Aderopo.

**Eesuola:** That's Aderopo at that point now.

**Balogun:** It was a very heavy thing and he thought I shouldn't like, as a cultured Yoruba person, he should first discuss with him in private...

**Eesuola:** Even beyond Yoruba...in the international community, you don't go to a Trump and relate a message to him in the public at a press conference without first seeking with him what we call his audience for briefing. That is what we call briefing. Even in the University System if the Vice-Chancellor sent you on an errand you are not going to start discussing that at the management level before first briefing him at any point in time. I think it's only commonsensical, diplomatic, its political...but beyond that, Odewale appears to feel that his temperament at that point in time was

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<sup>1</sup> Ifa often uses the flora and fauna of a society as descriptive choice of expression in order to provide answers to supplicants' requests. These pronouncements are often highly philosophical and deep, as this one which uses animal symbols: snail, snake and bat as reference points to analyze the value of listening to other people's opinion, however irrelevant one may find them, before making an important decision.

superimposed upon what Aderopo brought and he was not going to listen to anything. A good leader must listen at any point in time. Within the context of Africa, our interpretation of tragedy is to point at that, toward leadership in Africa. Look at what is going on around the world now: Chile, in Hong Kong, Lebanon, protests everywhere. You will see that whether or not that protest or those protests would boomerang into serious disaster is primarily a function of how the leadership received it.

**Balogun:** And responds to it.

**Eesuola:** And responds to it. So, Odewale, perhaps... forgetting that we are doing a drama and the fate is determined ab initio, in real-life situation which I think drama would always address, Odewale perhaps would not get into that disaster if he had been more sensitive toward listening to people, whether we talk about tyranny, and you know... many other things. That perhaps influenced the way I directed it.

**Balogun:** So you think...okay I am getting a sense that your approach now is to look at that play in terms of the leader/citizen/follower relationship, there is that disconnect(ion) between those giving out the rule and those following it.

**Eesuola:** Yes, because there was absolute disconnect between Odewale's leadership and the following: the following was under suspicion but the following meant well for him, he kept suspecting. That is what you get from a group of citizens who gather in a place to demand change for a better society.

**Balogun:** (*Chuckles*) In the Nigerian context

**Eesuola:** In the Nigeria context and globally. But the govt, rather than look at their demands and yearnings and aspirations critically to say how they can look use them to improve the system, the govt will grow hostile if not ruthless toward such people. That often leads to tragedy, and that is a redefinition of tragedy.

**Balogun:** Hm...

**Eesuola:** You won't see that in the Aristotelian sense...

**Balogun:** In the modern time...

**Eesuola:** In the modern time. Perhaps, not even modern...historically...every leader that would always drive his people into disaster will first start from that lack of regard for second opinion.

**Balogun:** Hm...

**Eesuola:** And that is why again, Ifa will say "Osa wo, iworiwo/Ohun taa ba jijo wo gigan nii gun/Adia fun Peregun tii s'aya Orunmila..." There is a reason. I think it is high time we began to revisit African Philosophy, African Thought, to redefine, and probably reconfigure our concept of dramatic terms, dramatic ideologies starting from tragedy which we are trying to revisit now, and even Comedy because they are not rigid, they are not sacrosanct. They respond, and should respond ideally toward the movement of the society at any point in time.

**Balogun:** Now, we come back to your direction of the play, it means in handling that play, in putting it on stage you were very sensitive to the social environment, you were very sensitive to how the play can actually speak to the audience (*sound of phone ringing*) than just entertaining them.

**Eesuola:** Yes...

**Balogun:** Let's look at another thing. You emphasised so much about Ifa, the role of Ifa...to what extent was Ifa central to your work on *The Gods are not to blame*?

**Eesuola:** Well, my directorial interpretation of *The Gods are not to blame* had a very thick involvement of Ifa. Ifa was very central to it...

**Balogun:** Why was that so?

**Eesuola:** It is because the dramatic direction itself was dictated by Ifa. The first stage opened with the birth of child, and then, with the birth of the child comes in a Babalawo who sets the agenda for the play. "Baba Fakunle, oldest and most knowing Ifa Priest in this world, it is you I greet. Mother waits. Father waits and then...bla tatatata" Until Baba Fakunle made an Ifa declaration and pronouncement, the play never had a direction. So it was Baba Fakunle's Ifa direction, as pronouncement, that gave the play its plot, its setting and every other thing. To me, that play is an

Ifa play because, within the context of Yoruba cosmology, Ifa is perceived as “Eleri Ipin” (Witness to Individual Destiny). That play is a manifestation of destiny. That play is an Ifa play because as the Yoruba believe in Africa, Ifa is the only person who determines what each person’s destiny is and how it manifests. That is why I involved a lot of Ifa and also explain to people, as you insinuated the other time, that Ifa is not magic, it is interpretative; it is philosophical, it is like a scripture and when it makes its predictions and statements human beings should tread cautiously so that they won’t go against their own destiny, as the case maybe.

**Balogun:** Hm...

**Eesuola:** So I feel it’s an Ifa play because it plays out all about destiny. What will happen, will happen.

**Balogun:** Hmm...what will happen will happen. Okay, let’s look at...I know...another thing that is close to Ifa is talking about language on one hand, we have music. What kind of music did you use?

**Eesuola:** Yeah, thank you very much. Because I gave that play a very thick Ifa interpretation in terms of the conception, in terms of the interpretation, even the plotting, I used a lot of Ifa songs during the play. For instance, ah...well, I am talking about the one that I did in 1999, I did another one at Osogbo in one secondary school that was commissioned, and then, Sahara energy...I really can’t remember but I know that I bring in a lot of Ifa songs which would teach certain lessons or create certain narratives in line with the theme of the play at any point in time. But I remember the “Eleko Idere”...my memory doesn’t fail me with that.

**Balogun:** So what is that song about?

**Eesuola:** (*Sings*) “Eleko Idere se bo loo jere 2x/ Oro so didu oro so pupa, o f’apoti tidi o lekeenka” I remember used that song as a background to usher in some of Odewale’s lines toward the tragic flaw but that particular part I cannot remember. But that “Eleko Idere”...you know...”Se bo loo jere/Oro so dudu oro so pupa/O f’apoti tidi o le keenka” is a way, it’s an Ifa song, it’s simply saying “What you have been accused of but you denied it and saying that you were not part of”; but you are the culprit and you keep pointing at the people. “Eleko idere, se bo loo jere ni”<sup>2</sup> that is, “You denied that you never had profit”; With your aso dudu and aso pupa, o f’apoti tidi but the whole sees you.

**Balogun:** In your full glory...king of.

**Eesuola:** In your full regalia but you see yourself in a different way and that’s about what is played around when the whole world...after Odewale’s denial (refusal ?) to be spoken to in public, the whole world knew what was happening....the whole world knew he was the cause of the problem but he kept seeing himself as another thing, and then kept pointing accusing finger toward another person. That’s one of the reasons we used that song. Then, I also remember...em...that at a point we used...em...you know, to call to order a particular scene where important messages were going to come up, I used the beginning of an Ifa song; “Olotoo e ku oo oraolufe o pele o Babalawo o” it’s a way of calling to order a particular scene at any point in time. In other word, when I pick a play and I want to direct the play, I first give the play a thematic interpretation: is it based on religion, destiny, education, art & aesthetics, or is it based on culture, so, once I have an interpretation of the theme of the play post-directorial analysis, I mean, post-playwright analysis, I then create songs, dances, and ad-libs that would be used to make that play an artistic reality, knowing full-well that the main role of the director is to create artistic reality of the concept that the playwright has put in the play.

**Balogun:** Now, let’s look at...perhaps on a final note, can we still imagine that *The Gods*...is a play that actually dramatizes that kind of intense tragedy, can we still see that play in light of some of those social dislocation that we are experiencing in Nigeria for example, just like every other African country?

**Eesuola:** Absolutely. Plays don’t die in terms of the themes. The setting can get old, but plays never get old in terms of the theme, even the subject matter doesn’t get old. If you look at Odewale’s

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<sup>2</sup> Metaphors are often the mode of expression in Ifa poetry, the purposes located in both an understanding of the worldview and the people’s awareness and the influence of same on their lives. This type of Ifa poetry is also thought to be historical in some sense.

scenario in *The Gods are not to blame*, the key issue is destiny. But destiny itself, as perceived by the Yoruba, is dialectical. Dialectical in the sense that it will almost always manifest but there are always rooms provided to reduce the ultimate tragedy...

**Balogun:** If there is one...

**Eesuola:** If there is one when we are talking about destiny. Odewale's situation in that play would still ultimately end badly, he would still kill his father and marry his mother. But then, the punishment would have been limited to him as a person, not his children, not his wife, not the disaster that it caused upon the society where children started dying and people started getting mad at any point in time, and that's the dialectical nature of destiny within the Yoruba cosmology. That destiny will always occur...ok? A King who has been enthroned to fail will always fail, but how do we ensure that that failure does not lead the society into disaster? And that is the situation. So, applying to social reality of today's world, a president that comes to throne will ultimately fail or pass and that could be the destiny which we don't have power over. But what the play should teach us is that there are some certain regulations and social construct that will, while not preventing the ultimate destiny and destination, regulate everything in such a way that disaster does not come to the entire humanity as a result of the error of one person. I think if there's anything that we want to apply to today's reality, that's actually the point when it comes to a play like Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to blame*. Because the ultimate questions that drive toward anybody who reads that play or directs that play is that, if the gods are not to blame who then is to blame? It has been a big debate. Some people keep telling you the gods are to blame because they invoke that kind of destiny upon Ola Rotimi (Odewale actually!) because they have the capacity not to, you know, allow that destiny to go, but, I feel, as a director and my interpretation of that play is that, the gods are not to blame. The blame should go to Ola Rotimi...I mean to Odewale, because of bad leadership...

**Balogun:** What about Gbonka that was given the baby to go and slaughter and never did that?

**Eesuola:** Gbonka was just human and natural.

**Balogun:** Isn't Odewale like that?

**Eesuola:** Odewale wasn't like.

**Balogun:** In what sense?

**Eesuola:** Gbonka...okay, there are two dimensions to it. Gbonka was a servant. Yorubas have a proverb, they say "Taa ba ran ni nise eru, a fi t'omo je"

**Balogun:** So he was playing his role as a Yoruba person.

**Eesuola:** He was playing his role as a Yoruba person and there's a philosophical underpinning for that...that's one. Two, apart from that role that Gbonka was playing [an interview is going on at this point time (meant for a student who entered the office while the interview session was on)] apart from that role that Gbonka was playing, Odewale was not a servant, he was a king.

**Balogun:**...Now you see the...the...situation changed if you look at it. Odewale was born in the palace, but taken away into the bush, raised by commoners, the roles have been reversed. Gbonka is a servant but works in the palace; don't you think that it's possible for us to look at the reversal of role? Gbonka is a servant, a nobody, but he's lived in the palace, has imbibed the "culture" of the palace...you know, that ethical standard

**Eesuola:** A very beautiful way of interpreting it in another dimension.

**Balogun:**...in another dimension...

**Eesuola:** But also don't forget that you are using the Social Learning Theory to interpret it now, that it is not what you are born with or how you are born, kit is the circumstances around you when you are growing up that define your character. That's a partial way of looking at it; there is also another explanation that is more autochthonous ... that kings are made from heaven. That's Yoruba conception; for him to come out from a royal family it flows in almost everything in you even when you are among prisoners and warders, you know, kings are made from heaven. So, if you are a child of a king, you are a Prince, your aura, your charisma, would show at any point in time that you have royalty in your blood. So while we are using Social Learning Theory, we should not also forget the

Nature/Nurture Theory which means that, what you are is in your being, not where you are raised as the case may be. There are many theoretical postulations that we can use to approach it. But the case is that Odewale was a son of a king

**Balogun:** Hmm.

**Eesuola:** That aura would be in him naturally and, after being raised within the bush by a commoner as we perceive it, he came back to the palace to become a king. It's a two-against-one situation: born of a king, went into the bush...

**Balogun:** Thrown away...

**Eesuola:** Thrown away and then found his way back. For any reason with that two-over-one dichotomy we should know that there is another dimension to that explanation. Do what we should expect an Odewale to do in terms of behaviour, we don't expect a Gbonka to do it. Gbonka was a servant, Odewale was a king. A King is a leader; he is accountable to the people and that is why we can still apply it to the current socio-reality of our country and African countries. You are accountable to the people. When a servant takes a decision, who cares? The best you can do is take decision and nobody says you are right or wrong, but one million and one people, institutions and structures will interpret and analyse the decisions of a king, so you need to be more thorough, diplomatic, and assertive, you know, sensitive, too many other words can be used to do this before you ultimately take decisions. I think it has a socio-reality to what is going on around us today.

**Balogun:** Hmm...that's a very deep one.

**Eesuola:** Hmm.

**Balogun:** Thank you so very much Dr Kayode Eesuola...

**Eesuola:** Thank you Dr Lekan Balogun...

**Balogun:** ... this has been a very wonderful...

**Eesuola:** I mean it's a good reflection over...

*(Audio stops)*