

Interview

Interviewee:

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Balogun: Okay so I'm here with one of the most distinguished Nigerian veteran of the stage and television and someone who worked very closely and extensively with the late Ola Rotimi, the writer of *The Gods are Not to Blame*, the adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. So I'm here with, we usually call him Uncle Gboyega Ajayi, he's a very old man and I have the very rare privilege of working with him, I think about 16 or so years ago. In another tragic play. So good afternoon sir.

Ajayi-Bembe: Good afternoon.

Balogun: Can you introduce yourself formally?

Ajayi-Bembe: I am Edward Olugboyega Ajayi-Bembe.

Balogun: Yes I'm here today sir, I'm representing the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, University of Cape Town on the project Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South – RETAGS. And what we're doing is, we're looking at from the 1960's up until now, we're looking at reimagination, adaptation of Greek Tragedies from their Greek source, Greek origin into several African cultures. And one of the most popular, the most... revered, well performed of those adaptations is Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Balogun: You worked with Ola Rotimi for many years. Can you tell us a bit about the production company and how you came to meet Ola Rotimi before we go into the play itself and its performance history?

Ajayi-Bembe: I happened to meet Prof. Olawale Rotimi... in 1968. In fact before '68 we met in Ibadan. He was introduced to me by late Pa Orlando Martins, an actor, a film star.

Balogun: The African-American, yes, actor, Orlando Martins.

Ajayi-Bembe: Film star. So... now the man called me when I went to perform at the Television House Theatre, he said Gboyega I have somebody for you because you were there to do a performance at the media house. Then I said I happened to meet the man, they said this is the man who wants to see you, I don't know him because the man was so short and I look at myself, well I'm a little taller than him. Then I said: "yes". He said: "Pele o" which means "how are you?" Then I replied in same mind:

“E pele”, then I want to go out then he said: “You are the one that this man wants to see”. I said: “Alright, yes sir”. He said: “Can you work with me?” I said: “work with you? To leave my...” he is from umm... University of Ife. Then not to- is it University of Ife or yes? I think University of Ife. Where is that then? He said: “Well he is here he wants me to come and work with him”. I said: “Sorry I’m working with my Uncle”, my late Uncle, Oyin Adejobi,¹ because he’s very popular and he has been- I’ve been with him since 1948 performing with him. So I said: “To come and work with you?” He said: “Yes”. Even Ibadan has called me to come and work with them, I said: to work with the University Theatre. What is there performance, because- then the English play-

Balogun: Was not popular.

Ajayi-Bembe: Will not tour. Even the way they stage it, they will stand rigid, talking alone, no action, nothing what-so-ever. And we used to use our body and everything. I said: “Alright I hear you”.

Balogun: So let us quickly just put some things in context for those who are listening: Oyin Adejobi was one of the pioneers of the modern Yoruba Travelling Theatre of Nigeria. He was in the same rank of Hubert Ogunde, who is regarded as the doyen of Nigerian theatre.

Ajayi-Bembe: Ogunde.

Balogun: Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo.

Ajayi-Bembe: Duro Ladipo...yes and GT Onimole-

Balogun: GT Onimole.

Ajayi-Bembe: - from Lagos. All these are the people that I worked with.

Balogun: You have had your training as a performer of Yoruba Theatre.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: Before meeting Ola Rotimi in 1968-

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course. I have been performing since 1948 with my late Uncle, Oyin Adejobi.

Balogun: So uh... Orlando Martin arranged a meeting-

Ajayi-Bembe: So then he said he wants me to see him. Then as I left... I want to leave, then Ola Rotimi said, I will take you to a cadre post. What is the meaning of cadre post? What do I care about cadre post? I’m performing, I’m acting. You want me to come and start this rigid... English version play. I said: “Alright I will see you”. Then I went out. And then I went from my rehearsal, we do the rehearsal, we did everything at WNB/WNTV then, and that’s all. But later I happened to come to Ife to meet one man. That man had to call for me because-

Balogun: What was the name?

Ajayi-Bembe: Umm... Kayode Olajuyigbe Theatre. The man was a headmaster of a school. He was then performing the whole book, *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmolè*.² So the way they performed the play-

Balogun: Yoruba version?

Ajayi-Bembe: The Yoruba version. They were- he was working on the whole book. And the way it was performed was not good all that, it had no meaning to me. Then when they came, they performed in Osogbo, I called him, I sat him down. I like you sir, you are a big man to me but I... where do you have

¹ Oyin Adejobi was one of the pioneers of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, after the trio of Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola.

² *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmolè* (1938) is an adventure novel in Yoruba language written by D.O. Fagunwa, the most distinguished novelist of the Yoruba genre. Soyinka later translated the novel as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1968).

your training? He said: “training?” He said he grabbed it because Kola Ogunmola³ was his former teacher. And he’s interested in doing- I said look this play is not the way they’re putting up a play. If you want to put a play, the most important thing you go in straight to the topic where you want people to learn. Not just... where they were cooking, where they were...all these things disturbed me. We will have to put the performance for about two and a half hours without, no stopping and has nothing. So look if you want me, I will come and help you to direct the play.

Balogun: Let’s now, after your first encounter with Ola Rotimi...

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: You left. How did you now meet him?

Ajayi-Bembe: No.

Balogun: No I’m talking about that first introduction.

Ajayi-Bembe: The first introduction...

Balogun: You left.

Ajayi-Bembe: I left him.

Balogun: Yes, so when did you meet again?

Ajayi-Bembe: No, now in Ife. This man who I said-

Balogun: Kayode Olajuyigbe?

Ajayi-Bembe: Kayode Olajuyigbe invited me. So I come to help him directing the *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmolè* because I... I told him in a plain language that this is no play. You are just trying to tell us that we should bring our *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmolè* and started reading. So that’s nothing. There’s an important thing in the play that the people want to see.

Balogun: Yes, you need to pick the plot, you need to get the theme, then you weave the story around the theme and stage it.

Ajayi-Bembe: I said alright if I can help him because doing a play, performing for two and half hours without stopping, and there’s nothing that we can grab from it...it’s nothing. He said alright. Then the man said he would like me to come. So I find a way to fight my Uncle. I fight him so when I fight him, the man said uh-huh, I train you from the beginning. I said yes but I don’t want to work with you again. And I leave him...Oyin Adejobi. Then the man (Olajuyigbe) heard that Oyin Adejobi and I...

Balogun: You had a misunderstanding?

Ajayi-Bembe: Misunderstanding. Now he sent a man to me.

Balogun: Who is that?

Ajayi-Bembe: Uh... they call him Sir James. And the man is a bricklayer but when he put up his- he always dress in a coat- suit. He will be working as if to say he’s all-in-all and he knows nothing. The man is a brick layer. Then the man now come to me in Osogbo that they want me to come and lead their group, Kola Olajuyigbe Theatre. Because the day they came to Osogbo to perform... *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmolè* I had called him and told him that the play is wishy-washy. That it should not be, even for one hour, twenty or thirty minutes. That’s the minimum time for a play and they will get the story. He said alright then the man, Olajuyigba sent him to me. And he was then the manager of Olajuyigbe Theatre, I called him to. When I get here I arranged a play and when I take the play from the beginning to the end, the man he said “look I know you are a genius. You know what you are

³ Kola Ogunmola was the third of the triumvirate of modern pioneers of Yoruba Travelling Theatre, along with Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo.

doing,” then we start. I took the play right round where they are stage it, that people keep grumbling. But immediately-

Balogun: They didn't like it.

Ajayi-Bembe: - immediately people see- saw me...that I'm the one leading the group they are interested in seeing the play.

Balogun: Because they know you are a trained performer.

Ajayi-Bembe: (*Chortles*) So we went to his hometown, Efon-Alaiye, we put up the play and this teachers-training college, Apostolic Teacher Training College, Apostolic Secondary School, we staged at Efon-Alaiye as well. We went to Aramoko. I took the play to part of Ekiti up to Ado Ekiti. When the people saw the play they said no, they have seen somebody who understands so-

Balogun: So let's now come back to Ola Rotimi.

Ajayi-Bembe: Ola Rotimi.

Balogun: How did you now meet Ola Rotimi again?

Ajayi-Bembe: Now on that day... when he has come to me in Ibadan, while I said I can't leave my-

Balogun: Job?

Ajayi-Bembe: - Uncle.

Balogun: Your Uncle.

Ajayi-Bembe: So Ola Rotimi now, and the wife were driving to Ori Olokun Arobidi.

Balogun: So where is this Ori Olokun?

Ajayi-Bembe: It's in Ife here.

Balogun: Tell us a bit about Ori Olokun because Ola Rotimi was so identified with Ori Olokun.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes, this Ori Olokun was... you know the Institute of African Studies... yeah. With Michael Crowther as the director. And Solomon Wangboje... they are doing art works, why we have Agbo Folarin, Solomon Wangboje as director of Artwork. This... all this-

Balogun: Visual craft.

Ajayi-Bembe: Visual craft.

Balogun: Fine Art.

Ajayi-Bembe: Now...Baba Fakeye was then coming and going late Lamidi Fakeye. Almost all of these people are late. So they were- they bring people together at Ori Olokun, they were training them. But I heard it, I don't want to join them, what are they doing. So on that day as I was standing outside, then Mrs Rotimi... Hazel Ola Rotimi saw me outside there where I was standing. Then she called the attention of her husband, Ola Rotimi, that I... she, they say hey hey hey, so I was looking here and there. Then the car-

Balogun: They turned the car round?

Ajayi-Bembe: No... into reverse. When they reversed, then the woman came down. Even the motor hadn't stopped before the woman come down. Even Ola Rotimi started querying the movement, why we stop, why I said no we have been looking for you. Even the woman didn't listen to the husband, come come come come. And then I saw, yes, I said: "You , are you not the man we were looking for, we came for at Ibadan?" I said: "Yes". "What are you doing here?" I said: "I come to work with somebody here to help him in directing one of his plays, *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmolè*". And Ola Rotimi and that man had known each other.

Balogun: Oh they were friends?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yeah because they staged the play *Ògbójú Ode Nínú Igbó Irúnmolè* and some other group. They are like competition.

Balogun: Oh okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: So Ola Rotimi said that he will find time to come and help him in doing the play and he will tell him the story how he should do it. So immediately they saw me uh-huh how do I come there? I said well I come to work with this man. Ah Ola Rotimi said good good. Will I come to meet him at Ori Olokun? I said... if it's possible, I'll be there. So they went... please come see us and that's all. I met Ola Rotimi, not knowing that I will work with him because-

Balogun: For how many years did you work with him?

Ajayi-Bembe: Ah, Ola Rotimi, I started since 1968 to... 'til Ola Rotimi died.

Balogun: Yeah that's in 2000 or so. I think he died in the year 2000⁴.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yeah 2000. Even the very day he died because we were staging one of his plays then... uh... none of his play that he will like to feature me. Even the one they call *Holding Talks*, with him about well three or four, five people.

Balogun: Three-man characters yes.

Ajayi-Bembe: Four, five people, they meet. Even they want to travel out of Nigeria. You will see that I'm part of the play.

Balogun: Now let's now talk about the main point of *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Ajayi-Bembe: *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Balogun: Tell us a bit about the writing process, when Ola Rotimi was writing, what he was having in mind and how the entire play came about as a script before we go into the performance?

Ajayi-Bembe: You see... when Ola Rotimi brought this play, he said look I want it to be toned in Yoruba.

Balogun: Oh he actually wanted to do it in Yoruba language?

Ajayi-Bembe: No... he said he wants it to be toned-

Balogun: To be?

Ajayi-Bembe: ... in Yoruba.

Balogun: Okay okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: I said Ah, this is a play that is not Nigerian play.

Balogun: Okay he showed you Sophocles' version of *Oedipus Rex*.

Ajayi-Bembe: Now he told, he wrote it and the pamphlet, I mean the script itself shows me. I said I don't know much, I don't know-

Balogun: About scriptwriting?

Ajayi-Bembe: No I don't have interest in English play...so... this is no play. Now he analysed it, that this play... is made... there's a King who wants, who has a... diviner or something.

Balogun: There's a prophecy.

Ajayi-Bembe: The man- when they gave birth to the baby, the baby will kill...

Balogun: His father.

Ajayi-Bembe: His father and then marry his mother.

Balogun: And that interested you?

Ajayi-Bembe: I said yes. So how can we do it? Then I said, is he crazy (*laughs*)? Kill his father and marry his mother. I said it's not done in Yoruba land. Uh-huh. And they will know that, this is my real mother and then sleep with that woman? I said Oga, what you are saying is not genuine, it's not Nigerian version. He said yes. In fact... it's an inspiration... they want... how could that be? And the

⁴ 18 August 2000. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ola_Rotimi

play has been staged... uh... *Oedipus Rex* and old me something about that. I said alright let's see. Then he now write the outline, he gave me one, he gave... the outline- when I told him about my brother that I can't leave my brother to come and perform with any group because I believe I had so much trust in my brother that he's one of the best playwrights..Oyin Adejobi. He said he wants to see Oyin Adejobi. Then I took him to Oyin Adejobi.

Balogun: In Osogbo?

Ajayi-Bembe: In Osogbo. When we get there I introduced Ola Rotimi to him. Then my brother was annoyed with me that I left even without any thing, well I know that I'm the foot, I'm the hand, I'm the eye, I'm the all-in-all you know. He is working with the local government; I was taking the trip, the group outside going to anywhere to perform. My brother will not follow us. But all of a sudden I just believe, they don't pay me, I don't get kobo from them. When I go and I come back only the money stipend that they used to give, a shilling, as a food allowance that's all I always have. While he paid others like Kareem Adepoju, Akinyanju and others we paid them money. Kola Oyepo.. we'll pay them but they won't pay me. They said later later, even when we travel out, when are owing others. I'm used to representing him, and disburse the money to everybody. But... lastly... he will say when I come back from tour, when I come back from tour alright, "how is it sir...money?" He said "look, what do you mean? Had it been I'm in your own shoe, you have two foot, you have eyes, you have hand you can walk here and there, you will be asking for money from me? What do you mean?"

Balogun: So sir let's go back to because we are more interested in Ola Rotimi.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: Now so after introducing Ola Rotimi to Oyin Adejobi, you now came back to Ife for *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Ajayi-Bembe: No- Ola Rotimi started... he now gave him the...

Balogun: The synopsis?

Ajayi-Bembe: - the Synopsis, the synopsis that he gave to Oyin Adejobi...he should write his own version. Then he gave one to me to write my own version. So Olajuyigbe... whom I said-

Balogun: Kayode Olajuyigbe?

Ajayi-Bembe: Kayode Olajuyigbe. He gave him so... he gathered all the idea.

Balogun: Did you write something?

Ajayi-Bembe: I used to.

Balogun: No particularly for *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: You wrote something from what he gave you?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: Okay so Oyin Adejobi also wrote?

Ajayi-Bembe: Wrote.

Balogun: Then Kayode Olajuyigbe also wrote?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes, he did.

Balogun: So Ola Rotimi now merged everything.

Ajayi-Bembe: Everything.

Balogun: Everything. So that's actually the way *The Gods are Not to Blame* was written?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes. So when after we did all this thing, then Ola Rotimi now have to, the man that I was working with Olajuyigbe said I wanted to work with him. The man promised to be paying me because I came purposely because of money. He gave me a house.

Balogun: But sir let's go back a bit. That version that you wrote. Was it in Yoruba or English?

Ajayi-Bembe: In Yoruba.

Balogun: Yoruba.

Ajayi-Bembe: Everybody write their own in Yoruba.

Balogun: Even Kayode Olajuyigbe.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yeah.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: After write the play in Yoruba. Ola Rotimi now take it... uh... and... called me that- then you know I came back to work with Olajuyigbe.

Balogun: yes.

Ajayi-Bembe: But then there is still this Biafra War.

Balogun: Going on?

Ajayi-Bembe: Going on in 1967, '67, 60- something. I was... so the group that the man wants me to lead to be going here and there to be performing we can't go.

Balogun: Because of the War?

Ajayi-Bembe: Because of the War we can't move around. So the man said alright when he can move around we should stay and the money that he promised that he will be paying me he can't pay me! You know I have a wife. Then, he used to give me a stipend, like he gave me one... uh... five shillings. Five shillings, you know five shillings is a lot of money when I got it. I will give it to my wife. So to buy what we can, just to have, just to have something for our stomach.

Balogun: Okay Sir. So now let's now go back so after those four versions. You wrote one, Olajuyigbe wrote his own, Oyin Adejobi wrote his own, then those three versions in Yoruba you gave them to Ola Rotimi.

Ajayi-Bembe: We gave it to him.

Balogun: Then Ola Rotimi now merged-

Ajayi-Bembe: Merged everything.

Balogun: And wrote his English version?

Ajayi-Bembe: Now... now... look at the idea that well, the idea is... the Yoruba way of performing. Then I was working with him when he doesn't understand. When I read and he read interprets then he said alright. Then he took from this, that and merged everything. And then used it to-

Balogun: Write his version?

Ajayi-Bembe: - his own version.

Balogun: Okay.

Balogun: Now that first version was performed in 19- what?

Ajayi-Bembe: 19...umm... I think 1968 December.

Balogun: December of 1968.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yeah.

Balogun: Where was it? Where was this?

Ajayi-Bembe: Here in Ife.

Balogun: Which place?

Ajayi-Bembe: Ori Olokun.

Balogun: Ori Olokun.

Ajayi-Bembe: That was the first time the place they called it Ori Olokun Cultural Centre. Because Institute of African Studies got- this place is a hotel.

Balogun: Okay. Ori Olokun is a hotel or was a hotel?

Ajayi-Bembe: It was a hotel. Owned by one famous, notorious politician, they called him Pedro.

Balogun: Pedro.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes, he's an AG, Action Group member.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: So he was working for AG, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. So with the hotel where they lodged... all those radicals.

Balogun: Politicians?

Ajayi-Bembe: The thugs and everything. Because...Oba Adesoji Aderemi, Pedro, Ife and Oba Adeesoji Aderemi....Pedro they were all one, together, so nobody, nobody can trample on them, what they call it, this man.

Balogun: So sir, that venue, the performance venue that hotel was it a hall or the open air outside?

Ajayi-Bembe: Open.

Balogun: It was an open air performance.

Ajayi-Bembe: You see it is like courtyard.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: You see. Now like this place, see this house, how it was built, this is where we call gallery.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: In the play where the art works... they used to hang artwork... and the stuff all these things in there. There are there working. Alright at the same time... we are teaching people how to do Fine Arts, you see. The Fine Art something... everybody who comes here will be learning how to draw, you see. All these things are there. So they grabbed people, they make it town and gown which means part of the University Student uh... and... people from town they are there like a workshop. You see. And it's just like the way my house was built. This is gallery... that's.... we have that place as bar, then here we have it as... hostel for people. Then the outside like this is meant for... what they call it... meant for acting.

Balogun: Okay so what you did was that the hotel was practically converted into a theatre.

Ajayi-Bembe: A theatre.

Balogun: So when you have the opening air where you had the performance, you have the side like wings where the audience sat down to watch.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes they'll sit around.

Balogun: Okay it was more like a theatre in the round.

Ajayi-Bembe: The theatre in the round.

Balogun: The first performance?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: Okay now sir let's look at it. So what you are saying is that in a way you were the first person that Ola Rotimi will give a role, will cast in that original version of *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Ajayi-Bembe: He gave me a part but you know the part that was given to me-

Balogun: What was the role that was given to you initially?

Ajayi-Bembe: It's one of the guards.

Balogun: One of the guards mmm.

Ajayi-Bembe: But Femi Robinson is the one who acted-

Balogun: Odewale?

Ajayi-Bembe: Odewale.

Balogun: So how did these people coming into the ... how did they get the actor?

Ajayi-Bembe: Femi Robinson is working with the uh... University, the Agriculture Dept.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: Department. He brought people from Campus. He collect people- there is this flyers.

Balogun: Okay he made the flyers that he was looking for actors?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes that we wanted to organise-

Balogun: A performance.

Ajayi-Bembe: - a performance uh *The Gods are Not to Blame*.

Balogun: Okay so-

Ajayi-Bembe: Then at the Ori Olokun Centre, the Centre of acting and everything.

Balogun: Where is that Ori Olokun today in Ife?

Ajayi-Bembe: It's still in Ife, Arobidi.

Balogun: Arobidi?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: How far away from the University campus?

Ajayi-Bembe: Ah... (*laughs*) it's just... look when we are saying on the way to Ondo.

Balogun: Oh.

Ajayi-Bembe: You see, it's inside the town. But it's almost outskirts. When... this Ife Grammar School...umm... there is Ife Grammar School, St. Phillips and all these things is like this. Then Ori Olokun is just before getting to all these schools, Ife Grams'.

Balogun: So sir you mean that Ola Rotimi actually... printed a notice, gave a notice as a kind of a casting call for-

Ajayi-Bembe: For the University.

Balogun: - to the University community?

Ajayi-Bembe: Even... I... for one... I went around to be announcing it. Even to part of...Efon Alaiye... uh to come, who wants to join-

Balogun: For actors who are interested?

Ajayi-Bembe: Who are interested...

Balogun: Now let's look at it. Eventually what you are saying is that Ola Rotimi used the Yoruba idea that you, Oyin Adejobi and Kayode Olajuyigbe suggested with the writing.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: Now, so he's able to set the play in a specific Yoruba-

Ajayi-Bembe: Yoruba

Balogun: - environment.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: So what are the choices that he made in terms of maybe...chants and so on and so forth?

Ajayi-Bembe: You know all these chants was recorded.

Balogun: Oh, they actually got people who knew the chants?

Ajayi-Bembe: Not really. You know for instance, after the play has been written, now invited people.

Balogun: To read it?

Ajayi-Bembe: To read. When they were reading, then invite the chanting people.

Balogun: The chanters, can you even remember any of them?

Ajayi-Bembe: Well...

Balogun: Maybe one person?

Ajayi-Bembe: I... I... you see it's a long time.

Balogun: It's a long time yeah I know.

Ajayi-Bembe: Because people from, you know... Gbongan, eh? There is a village, along that area, Gbongan. There is somebody who came from there. Umm... this uh... Baba...uh... what they call him, he's a magician... Baba-

Balogun: Peller?

Ajayi-Bembe: Not Peller. This is Yoruba magician... Baba... uh.... from Ikirun. Uh... Adeogun... the man in the olden days when you held like this. When he will just drop, when he will drop his hand will pull off.

Balogun: Oh.

Ajayi-Bembe: Then you said "Heeey, he has killed me o!" Blood will be rushing, the hand will be with the one who held him.

Balogun: (*Laughs*).

Ajayi-Bembe: So there will be begging him so he will collect money before putting the... hand back. You will see his teeth come out from his mouth.

Balogun: hmm.

Ajayi-Bembe: Aladokun...he was one of the chanters. We invited him to take part. They were the dancers.

Balogun: For that first performance Ola Rotimi actually got experts in their own right, the chanter was a real-life chanter.

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course.

Balogun: And then the magicians. Just to give... you know the audience-

Ajayi-Bembe: They called it town and gown.

Balogun: hmm. Okay so the first performance was done in the mode of a town and gown.

Ajayi-Bembe: Even with the students and everything.

Balogun: So what was the response of the audience that first performance?

Ajayi-Bembe: Ah! They really enjoy it. That this is not common because he used all the avenue that he had. To bring people together, not the University staff or the University students alone. Because when they're chanting, the Adeogun...Aladokun's son will be chanting in Yoruba... (*singing in Yoruba and then making percussive sounds to sound like drums beating rhythmically*). Then they start the drum by the... *bàtá koto*. Then we then dance, or you know was mixed.

Balogun: So it has a whole lot of traditional flair. The traditional Yoruba performance.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: So the first *Gods are Not to Blame* was in the mode of a Yoruba performance? Although it was done in English. But all the elements were in-

Ajayi-Bembe: Yoruba.

Balogun: Then the choreography. How was it done? I mean the dance step and everything?

Ajayi-Bembe: Ola Rotimi you know is very good.

Balogun: He choreographed the dance?

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course. He has the words, rehearsals or the script...dancing part, the music part. When he do everything, then later he will...

Balogun: Okay so he works separately with the dancers.

Ajayi-Bembe: Uh-huh.

Balogun: Works separately with the musicians.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes

Balogun: The chanters-

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: - the chorus.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: Then he works separately with the actors.

Ajayi-Bembe: Actors.

Balogun: Then he will fuse everything together.

Ajayi-Bembe: First and fore mostly, when he gave you the script, after reading the script.

Balogun: That reading, yes.

Ajayi-Bembe: Then alright we'll give two people or three...

Balogun: The same role?

Ajayi-Bembe: Role. The best out of the best.

Balogun: He tries them out.

Ajayi-Bembe: Then... he too will be doing, rehearse it, the major line. He too will be rehearsing the major line. Because if you want to make... a fool of him... well he has to be... uh... worshipping you. He will tell you that to hell with you. What is it? He will come onstage and start doing his thing. Because when he gave you a major part he knows that well he too have to work on it. So Ola Rotimi is very versatile in all things.

Balogun: Now what particular thing can you still remember to tell us about that first performance? Something that was really unique about it?

Ajayi-Bembe: What... you see... everybody that watched the play... was very very keen in watching the play. No play that Ola Rotimi will grab... eh? He will try to put all efforts. Even there is one play... we staged this play, it was French Play. The play was so dry... Ola Rotimi turned the play... even the French man who is part of a...the play... let me remember.... the play, I will remember the play before finishing. You know...he turned it to another thing because the man uh... this man... uh... is a doctor, is a Yoruba man but he teaches French because African stories we have French, German and-

Balogun: Are you talking about Abiola Irele?

Ajayi-Bembe: Abiola Irele. I don't know where the man is now?

Balogun: He's late now.

Ajayi-Bembe: Oh God.

Balogun: He died last year.

Ajayi-Bembe: Abiola Irele... really? (*whistles in disbelief*). Abiola Irele was saying... this Rotimi is no more, not just an ordinary person, he's a play itself. Because when we staged any play... Rotimi do everything to make it possible.

Balogun: To really come out well.

Ajayi-Bembe: To make it really...

Balogun: Really good.

Balogun: Sir let's now talk about after that... December 1968 premiere.

Ajayi-Bembe: 1968.

Balogun: *The Gods are Not* – 1968. December 1968.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: That was the first time *The Gods are Not to Blame* was performed. Now do you recall subsequent performances that happen? Was it still inside that same venue, the Ori Olokun?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: Or you moved to- because that was more like a make-shift stage.

Ajayi-Bembe: Look most of the play that during Ola Rotimi's period, eh...

Balogun: Happened at Ori Olokun?

Ajayi-Bembe: We always have Festival, Ife Festival at Ori Olokun (*Gboyega's phone begins to ring*)
Sorry.

Balogun turns off the audio recorder

Balogun: Okay, it's okay. So Ori Olokun was actually the main... venue of the performances?

Ajayi-Bembe: For all our performances.

Balogun: Even for the tragedy, another tragedy that Rotimi wrote after *The Gods*...?

Ajayi-Bembe: *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi...Kurunmi...*

Balogun: *Grip Am?*

Ajayi-Bembe: Ah no, I mean *Gbe 'Ku De*. I am the one they call *Gbe 'Ku De*. They have to write...I think Kayode Awe was an editor of a...*Daily Sketch, Tribune* or what- a *Sketch* or *Tribune* in Ibadan...said *Gbe 'Ku De* watching in every village, because of the way it was written... and the way we performed the play, I mean was very very interesting. Everybody... no play that Ola Rotimi will grip like this. He will see that he put all... all... all avenue, all things-

Balogun: Okay sir let's now look at it. Ola Rotimi said in one interview that he wrote *The Gods are Not to Blame* to talk about the Nigerian Civil War. You know the play itself-

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: - was first performed-

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes yes during the War.

Balogun: - when the Civil War was going on. He said he was trying to look at, how the War was caused by our tribal sentiment.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: That's why somewhere in the play Odewale says he killed a man because the man called his tribe Bush.

Ajayi-Bembe: Bushman.

Balogun: So do you believe in that? Did you think that tragedy was actually reflecting the Nigerian society of that time?

Ajayi-Bembe: Well you know... as a writer... what you have in mind may not be what I have in mind. Everybody has his own idea. So... Ola Rotimi... his thinking, he used to think deep.

Balogun: So you believe what he said by the play being a reflection of the Nigerian...

Ajayi-Bembe: Civil War.

Balogun: So what was it like at that time? Was it that tribal- because it is even now that people are saying this is Igbo, this is Yoruba. So are you saying that tribal thing that caused the Civil War was really really prominent even at that time?

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course. Because what I mean by saying is forming it. Now... what could have been the cause of the War? Alright I could tell you. This War is not supposed to be but what happens then

if we should go into the story because I could remember vividly. Now... Aguiyi Ironsi took power after killing Sardauna

Balogun: Ahmadu Bello.

Ajayi-Bembe: Ahmadu Bello.

Balogun: Okotie Eboh.

Ajayi-Bembe: Okotie Eboh.

Balogun: Akintola.

Ajayi-Bembe: Akintola...and none of the Igbos was killed ...

Balogun: Was killed.

Ajayi-Bembe: Was killed. And in the North I remember quite alright in Kaduna. They... uh... Igbo, eh? Was all the administrative area, eh? Was in the offices. Igbo was fixed here. In the North. Even in the West too.

Balogun: So the military actually-

Ajayi-Bembe: Now...

Balogun: - were tribalistic...

Ajayi-Bembe: Aguiyi Ironsi did it, none of those Igbos was killed. Zik masterminded it.

Balogun: mmm.

Ajayi-Bembe: So when the thing was to happen Zik travelled out-

Balogun: Travelled out.

Ajayi-Bembe: Travelled out. Awolowo was in prison. Now the Igbos were singing in... in Hausa language, that "*Hausa wa de Yorubawa bawa Igbo*" Do you know what that means?

Balogun: No, what does it mean?

Ajayi-Bembe: (*Chuckle*) Hausa and Yoruba are slaves to Igbo. Even in the North, singing, dancing. This Korean thing... music (*mimics a rhythmical instrument sound*) and where they used to take this *burukutu*.⁵

Balogun: In the hotels, in the bar-

Ajayi-Bembe: In the bar. They will be singing "*Hausa wa de Yorubawa bawa Igbo*" Which means Hausa and Yoruba are slaves to Igbo. They'll be dancing, rejoicing. So... and they are doing it in the Western region here. But nobody you know, when you are talking with people will just... they will say "*Nworanwon*" "*Anofia*" You this slave. They'll be abusing you.

Balogun: So Ola Rotimi was actually looking at all of those things. Then he thought Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* would be a very good material to discuss that situation of hatred in Nigeria.

Ajayi-Bembe: Hatred.

Balogun: That eventually led to the Civil War.

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course. So because these Igbo people... they are not, they don't care. What they have in mind is, they are so self-centred. If they have the opport- you will see since they- aside from the military head of States. An Igbo, this is Aguiyi Ironsi.

Balogun: Aguiyi Ironsi.

Ajayi-Bembe: Have you ever seen any Igbo person to rule us?

Balogun: Again?

Ajayi-Bembe: No, because the Igbos are so tribalism. When... if this man, let's say...

Balogun: In this compound?

⁵ Locally made gin.

Ajayi-Bembe: In this compound. When Igbo wants to come in, eh? They'll be begging you just give us a room, eh? They will meet the landlord, give us a room we will abide with it. When he comes in, I and my wife or I and my brother then...he won't bring wife. Later he'll bring, later he will say I'll want to get mally...which means I want to get married. Let me bring- my wife will be coming. When the wife come, you know, he- the man and his brother- is here the wife come. Then he will say we need another room because me and my brother and my wife cannot be sleeping in this... room. The wife will bring another person, her own brother or sister. Then if they are paying 10 naira for a room, the Igbo will increase it. He will say let me put more money, then you give them

Balogun: 30.

Ajayi-Bembe: 30 Naira. Now he'll be looking for another room. Then there are only three there. Now the wife will go and bring somebody, the brother will go and bring somebody, then... the place is... you see, the place is too small for us.... then you'll give them another room.

Balogun: So gradually-

Ajayi-Bembe: They will occupy the house.

Balogun: - the whole place.

Ajayi-Bembe: Then later they won't pay you.

Balogun: They will stop paying and then- there will be trouble.

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: So Ola Rotimi was kind of terrified and he thought drama, *The Gods are Not to Blame*, was a very-

Ajayi-Bembe: A message.

Balogun: - of talking about it. Now those who saw the play when that performance at Ori Olokun....were they able to get that message?

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course some people got it.

Balogun: mmm mmm.

Ajayi-Bembe: But you know it's very difficult to say.

Balogun: mmm. So it's a very difficult thing to acknowledge that this is what he is talking about-

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes.

Balogun: -or people got the message.

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course.

Balogun: Why was it difficult?

Ajayi-Bembe: Because they know Nigeria. Within that time you know... If you heard about- you'd be hearing about Ore.

Balogun: Yes.

Ajayi-Bembe: Maybe I don't know-

Balogun: *Óle kú ìjà òrè.*⁶

Ajayi-Bembe: You heard about Ore. Do you know what really happened there?

Balogun: No.

⁶ Statement that describes the fierceness of the historic battle at Ore, a small community in the then Western Region of Nigeria, between the Federal Forces and Igbo secessionist army during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967--1970

Ajayi-Bembe: Ore... it's a village... it's a village... the people, the Eastern people. Alright, only Awolowo saved us, if not so. The Igbo people knows that the headquarters of Nigeria then was Lagos. Instead of staying... when they want to cross, you know. They want to go straight.

Balogun: Through Ore to Lagos?

Ajayi-Bembe: To Lagos.

Balogun: To take over power.

Ajayi-Bembe: To take power. If not Benjamin Adekunle.

Balogun: So Benjamin Adekunle led the Federal troop that stopped them at Ore?

Ajayi-Bembe: Uh...

Balogun: Okay sir, so let's come back to *The Gods are Not to Blame*. Now look at this what you talk about, you know in *The Gods are Not to Blame* we have the people of Ikolu.

Ajayi-Bembe: Ikolu.

Balogun: Ikolu

Ajayi-Bembe: Ikolu

Balogun: Ikolu

Ajayi-Bembe: Ikolu

Balogun: and then Kutuje

Ajayi-Bembe: Kutuje

Balogun: Kutuje

Ajayi-Bembe: Ikutuje

Balogun: Kutuje

Ajayi-Bembe: Kutuje

Balogun: Kutuje.

Ajayi-Bembe: You know, not... it is just...imagination name.

Balogun: Just imaginary names... yes. But (*laughs*) good that's where I'm going. The play itself is a work of imagination. But Ola Rotimi mentioned specific locations around this place. He mentioned Osogbo, Ede, and then we know of course Ife. And then he mentioned Ilorin, Atakumosa. Why did he have to do that?

Ajayi-Bembe: Now... to let the people know that we worked within-

Balogun: This environment?

Ajayi-Bembe: This environment. That... all these people are... same people.

Balogun: So he wanted to bring some kind of reality into the play, so that the people can see okay he's telling our story. The story actually happened in our-

Ajayi-Bembe: In our environment.

Balogun: Where we know. Okay that's the choice of the setting, the locations?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yeah.

Balogun: Okay now. All of these people, I know they are all Yorubas. Was it in the performance, did he decide to pick maybe dances that are being done in Ede, the dance of Ondo people, the dance of Ondo people, Ekiti, Ife and Ijebu. Or he just, the dance was just one Yoruba known dance?

Ajayi-Bembe: Just... the lady who choreographed-

Balogun: Who was that?

Ajayi-Bembe: Peggy Harper.

Balogun: Peggy Harper.

Ajayi-Bembe: You see when they want to form this Ori Olokun, Peggy Harper happens to be... a dancer.

Balogun: The dance instructor?

Ajayi-Bembe: Instructor. Akin Euba is into music you see.

Balogun: mmm.

Ajayi-Bembe: And knowing each other for the first time mmm everywhere...

Balogun: They came together?

Ajayi-Bembe: Uh... Michael Crowther which was a director have to call them together. That they have to work...

Balogun: Together?

Ajayi-Bembe: Hand in hand. So that- to make things easy.

Balogun: Okay, so Ola Rotimi wrote and directed the play. Akin Euba composed the music.

Ajayi-Bembe: Uh... no.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: You see. He asked that I want to use this music, please. Everybody is doing his own thing then. Because Ife Festival, they used to call it, that was first Ife, eh, Festival of Arts. So everybody was busy doing his own thing. But you know I can come to you that I want to use- I'm using this music how do this music sound?

Balogun: mmm.

Ajayi-Bembe: Well when he said yes, it's good. Then- but no-one, he didn't give them chance. Everybody use his- what he has in mind... Because Sam Akpabot...

Balogun: Sam Akpabot...yes.

Ajayi-Bembe: He's there, he's doing his own thing. Akin Euba was doing his own thing. Uh... Peggy Harper was doing her own thing. Uh... Akinola Lasekan...Baba Akinola Lasekan is doing his own thing, Isaac Delano was doing his own thing. Everybody was busy doing something that... will make the Festival.

Balogun: Okay so different music, dance... all of these things.

Ajayi-Bembe: Everybody has its own.

Balogun: So it means that it's actually the songs and the dances were all done by the crop of performers in the play?

Ajayi-Bembe: Ola Rotimi knows what he wants.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: He use what he want. He do it on his own. Sam Akpabot was doing music, now... he's doing... uh... story and music. Then Akin Euba too was doing his own thing. Uh... music and chanting. Umm... Peggy Harper was doing dancing alone... what do they call this dancing... choreograph... dance drama.

Balogun: mmm.

Ajayi-Bembe: So everybody then do his own thing you know. When they sit down, this wants to lapse they bring-

Balogun: Something else into it.

Ajayi-Bembe: They bring them... let's join this and this together to make the people happy that we are doing something.

Balogun: So, sir the costume. How were they able to get the costume for the performance?

Ajayi-Bembe: You see... you know there are research grant.

Balogun: Okay, Ola Rotimi got a research grant?

Ajayi-Bembe: Akin Euba got research grant. Peggy Harper got research grant. Everybody got his own grant.

Balogun: So Rotimi uses his own research grant to produce the play?

Ajayi-Bembe: Yeah, even... the money is not enough you see. Have to scout around.

Balogun: To get more money?

Ajayi-Bembe: To get more money. From the Ford Foundation. You know, I remember that I... I used to... because I used to be Ola Rotimi's errand boy.

Balogun: mmm like his PA?⁷

Ajayi-Bembe: He would say... alright go to this place, give me letter to Lagos to... USAIS to... I want this, I want that. And being that the people... there is this garlic or what do they call it, the White people who live in Lagos like the race course area. I will go there and give them letter and... they put cheque. They give me cheque in an envelope. So I'll keep it alright, goodbye. I take my- leave. I come back to give him the letter. Then when he... open the letter he said alright. He was using everything to see that-

Balogun: To get it done.

Ajayi-Bembe: To get it done, yes.

Balogun: Now... after that Ori Olokun performance of December 1968, the play was subsequently performed even in the Pit Theatre, Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife-

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course at Fajuyi Hall.

Balogun: Okay. When it moved inside the University campus-

Ajayi-Bembe: Yes after- they come to- from the University. They come to watch the...

Balogun: The performance at Ori Olokun.

Ajayi-Bembe: At Ori Olokun or because they are doing the performance because of the staff of the University.

Balogun: Okay.

Ajayi-Bembe: But they want the student too.

Balogun: To participate-

Ajayi-Bembe: To enjoy it. Then we go to Fajuyi Hall.

Balogun: Okay so because they want the student audience to also enjoy the play, they now move it from Ori Olokun-

Ajayi-Bembe: Even most of them they will bring buses.

Balogun: From the University?

Ajayi-Bembe: From the University-

Balogun: To Ori Olokun?

Ajayi-Bembe: - to Ori Olokun.

Balogun: But what I'm saying is that-

Ajayi-Bembe: Then after the... Festival then they'll still like to watch the-

Balogun: Watch the performance?

Ajayi-Bembe: Performance. Then-

Balogun: Okay they now requested that you took it into the University?

Ajayi-Bembe: Or like the student wants to do their... what they call it... student uh... Union's...

⁷ Personal Assistant

Balogun: Week or something?

Ajayi-Bembe: - week. They tried to fix a play. Prof Ola Rotimi, we want to watch this your play to be done inside Fajuyi Hall.

Balogun: So then Rotimi will move the play from Ori Olokun-

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course.

Balogun: - to Fajuyi Hall.

Ajayi-Bembe: Well yes.

Balogun: With the same cast who performed it?

Ajayi-Bembe: With the same cast. Both the student and the lecturers.

Balogun: So how many times did you do that performance? Before Ola Rotimi went to do another play like you know after that I think he did *Kurunmi*.

Ajayi-Bembe: Look, yearly.

Balogun: Oh. So the performance of *The Gods are Not to Blame* became a yearly occurrence?

Ajayi-Bembe: Of course. Uh... *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*... yearly. They used to do it for annual something. At time eh, they may request for it at Ibadan. They may request for it at Lagos. We'll go out to perform. You see. Even at times the student will request for it and we perform at Fajuyi or Awolowo Hall.

Balogun: Okay sir what was the process of rehearsal like for the performance of *The Gods are Not to Blame*? How often did you rehearse? Every day? Or once in a week?

Ajayi-Bembe: Eh?! Once in a week? (*Laughs*) we have our rehearsals every day. Now the music we can- will be at the Centre. But we the... uh... regular artists we have to be there in the morning.

Balogun: Like what time?

Ajayi-Bembe: Now for the first time we have to attend Peggy Harper's rehearsal.

Balogun: Dance rehearsal.

Ajayi-Bembe: Dance rehearsal by 7-

Balogun: AM?

Ajayi-Bembe: To 9 in the morning...eh...

Balogun: The music?

Ajayi-Bembe: The music...

Balogun: Would go for his own rehearsals.

Ajayi-Bembe: Will go for his own rehearsal from... 11 to 2. Or maybe Sam Akpabot.

Balogun: Would be the one that'll take music-

Ajayi-Bembe: Who'll take over maybe some...Sam Akpabot his own rehearsal is from 11 to 2. Alright, then...

Balogun: Ola Rotimi?

Ajayi-Bembe: Umm... what was it... Ola Rotimi rehearsals goes from 4... eh... 4 to 7. Or 4 to 8. You see we always have rehearsals throughout the day.

Balogun: Okay. Thank you so very much sir I really appreciate it. I know I've taken your time, you were actually planning to go to the hospital. And I really really really really appreciate the time that you have given for this interview. Thank you so much sir.

Ajayi-Bembe: Thank you.

Balogun turns off the audio recorder