

The Women of Troy ... and Syria, and Nigeria

We start with a foil: Ellen McLaughlin's 1996 adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, a project she saw as a response to the ongoing war in the Balkans. McLaughlin asked refugees from Balkan countries living in New York to take part in a staged reading. She chose a Greek tragedy since, as she says, that "would connect everyone in the project because we share in them equally as members of Western culture." And she found that "Not a single person I worked with over the years needed to be told the story of the Trojan War, much less who Euripides was." All were familiar with the "basic notions of Greek tragedy".

That raises questions, and not just what she means by 'Western'. Is she suggesting that the project wouldn't work with communities that might not be familiar with the story or those basic notions? This paper will consider two recent adaptations of Euripides' tragedy: the 2013 film *Queens of Syria*, directed by Yasmin Fedda, and *The Women of Owu* by Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan, first staged in 2003 and published in 2006. These two adaptations, come from 'non-Western' communities and, I will argue, do work. Far from being antiquarian attempts to recover the alien look of some imagined original performance, they use the essence of the story to comment on their own worlds.

First, *Queens of Syria*. In 2013, British filmmakers Charlotte Eagar and William Stirling went to Amman, Jordan, and worked there with local theater producers on a version of *Trojan Women* with a cast consisting entirely of refugee women from neighboring Syria. That seven-week project was filmed, from start to finish, resulting in the documentary entitled *Queens of Syria*. Some 50 refugees took part in the project, all Muslim women, performing the play in Arabic, but interspersing narratives of their own experiences in the civil war in Syria. None of

the participants had any prior familiarity with Greek tragedy or the Trojan War. That context was imported, brought in by the British filmmaker/classicists. The women speak individually of the violence they have suffered and witnessed, at the hands of the Assad regime as well as the militias: husbands, fathers, and sons murdered; their cities in flames; their own futures uncertain. As one woman says to the camera: “This is real ... it’s not just in Troy. This has happened for real. It has happened to us.” The play allowed these refugees a chance to address their own fears and anxieties at least in part through the distant filter of Euripides and the Trojan War.

Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* follows Euripides more closely in terms of characters, the order of scenes, and even specific language. But all is translated into the early 19th century, into the land of the Yoruba, in the southwest of what is now known as Nigeria. Owu, Osofisan explains, was attacked and utterly destroyed by an army made up of forces from three other Yoruba kingdoms. “They slaughtered all the males, adult and children, and carried away the females into slavery.” Osofisan comments that it was quite logical, then, to make the connection to Euripides’ play.

But where is the logic in returning to a literary model that was forced on him and his countrymen by colonial forces, forces that had been gone from the country (politically at least) for some 40 years? While some might point to the clear anti-colonial sentiment in the play, and find here an example of canonical counter-discourse, the emphasis in this play, and the primary blame for the destruction of Owu falls not on the non-Africans, but on the Yoruba people themselves. The suggestion here, made explicit in the commentaries of Osofisan and his contemporaries, is that it is time to stop the focus on colonizers, and to look within Africa for solutions. Yes, the disparate tribes were all thrown together by the British, with disastrous

consequences, but now they can decide to get along. Euripides' play, then, alien import that it is, serves as the basis for immediate and contemporary commentary.

These two versions use Euripides' model differently: *Queens of Syria* gives voice to the unheard, using the play and the film to delve more deeply into their own suffering, and also to bring worldwide attention to that suffering. *The Women of Owu* is a plea for reform, a commentary on 21st century political problems that draws on both 19th century Africa and classical Athens. Together the two versions serve as testament that *Trojan Women*, like the best of our old texts, is far from being the exclusive property of Europe or of the West, however we choose to define that.

Bibliography

Ellen McLaughlin, *The Greek Plays* (New York, 2005).

Femi Osofisan, *The Women of Owu* (Ibadan, 2006).