

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Martin Banham, 'Notes on Edá: A Nigerian Everyman', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 29 (1998), 49-53

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=124870&siloleft=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

Notes on *Edá: A Nigerian Everyman*

Martin Banham

There are various instances of modern African productions of *Everyman*, either in the original version or in translation, often encouraged by Christian Missions and schools. The distinguished Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland adapted the play in an Akan version as *Odasani* and in Zaire a Christian cultural circle led by P. Mbaya and Albert Mongita offered another adaptation – *Bisa Batu (Mister Everybody)*. Sutherland's version was originally created for the Studio Players in Accra and was then toured professionally, playing in churches and on television, by Sandy Arkhurst's *Kusum Agoromba* company. Both plays appear to have followed the original and to have been designed and performed for Christian audiences. However, in the mid-1960s, a splendid version placing the play in the context of Yoruba belief was created by the Nigerian actor-manager Duro Ladipo with his *Edá*. Ladipo was one of the main exponents of what is widely known as Yoruba Opera, and himself a distinguished playwright and actor.

The origins (and authorship) of this Yoruba Opera version are somewhat complicated, but it is likely that the distinguished Africanist Ulli Beier composed the original piece, writing under the pseudonym Obotunde Ijimere ('monkey baboon' in Yoruba). Beier worked closely with Ladipo and suggests in the introduction to the published text of the play that he (Ijimere) 'for a short time acted in Ladipo's company'. The Yoruba play is in turn adapted from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's German version. Two published versions of *Edá* exist, one in English in *The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays* by Obotunde Ijimere¹, which describes itself as a translation and which reverts to the English title *Everyman* (with its eponymous hero), and a second version offering parallel Yoruba and English texts with the translation 'of the Yoruba text by Duro Ladipo' by Val Olayemi entitled *Edá: Opera by Duro Ladipo*.² I hazard a guess at the sequence of the Yoruba and English texts – namely an original adaptation of the Hofmannsthal play *Jedermann* (1911) by Beier (Ijimere) in English, a reworking of the text into Yoruba for the purposes of production by Beier and Ladipo,

a transcription of Ladipo's Yoruba performance text by Olayemi and finally Olayemi's translation back into English.

The Ijimere text is much more formal and conservative in structure than is Olayemi's English version of what eventually happened on stage. Ladipo's staging was spectacular in costume and action, and rich in drumming, music and movement³ and the influence of Hofmannsthal's work is clear in its structure as well as in the ambitions and vitality of its performance. It will be recalled that Hofmannsthal's play was first directed by no less a figure than Max Reinhardt (in Berlin in 1912) and subsequently became established as an outdoor production at the Salzburg Festival. Reinhardt's production was clearly spectacular⁴ and Ladipo's offered the same rich theatricality. In structure, *Jedermann* introduces characters and sequences of action that are not to be found in the medieval English play and these again are either carried over into the Yoruba version or – intriguingly – reworked in Yoruba terms. Hofmannsthal, as Coghlan describes him, 'was greatly concerned by the growing materialism of the early twentieth century'⁵ and added some harsh contemporary behaviour to his Everyman. Flaunting his riches he spurns a Beggar who comes to his door, throwing a small coin at his feet; a Debtor and his Wife plead vainly for his mercy before being led off to prison; he creates for his Mistress a Garden of Pleasures to facilitate his lust; he throws a lavish banquet which eloquently expresses grossness and opulence (and upon which Reinhardt clearly went to town); Mammon, a fearsome and grotesque creature, leaps, dripping with riches, out of a chest to scorn Jedermann with his worship of the false god of money. Jedermann's Mother also comes to him, before the banquet, to plead for her son to embrace Christian virtues.

The Ijimere/Ladipo version retains the Beggar, the Debtor and the banquet but, as Beier comments in the introduction to the play, it has been '*rethought* entirely in Yoruba'.⁶ Wittily and appropriately, their Everyman refuses his poor neighbour charity on the grounds of a rich man's necessary expenses:

His lorries break down
And want to be mended.
One's children go to school
They study abroad [. . .]
Do you think it is easy to maintain
All these houses and cars and farms
The children the wives the servants?⁷

His mistress too has to be lavished with gifts:

[. . .] these independent women and
Lip-painted ladies have many needs
And great pride [. . .]
[. . .] This money
Will get her velvet cloth, rekyi rekyi,
Sarasobia scent, fine pomade, gold and silver,
Headtie, handkerchiefs, umbrella, shoes,
Shirt and blouse, iron bed, blanket and
Bed sheets [. . .]
Sewing machine, portmanteaux, trunk box,
Bicycle, gramophone and so many other
Things a woman could use.⁸

The banquet scene is made thoroughly familiar to its Yoruba audience with a 'highlife' band, singing and dancing. Mammon is represented by Owo (literally 'money') 'beautifully dressed in very rich cloth and [holding] a grinning mask in front of his face'.⁹ But a number of the reworkings into Yoruba idiom are more fundamental. The Mother in *Jedermann* is replaced in *Everyman/Edá* by Babalawo, the traditional priest, who both warns Edá about his impending death and pleads with him to reform:

[. . .] Everyman!
Listen to my final warning:
When the banana dies – its children succeed it.
But when the fire dies – it covers its face with ashes.¹⁰

In Hofmannsthal's play *Everyman* senses Death approaching during the banquet almost as if seeing a ghost, disconcerting his friends by his strange behaviour. In the Yoruba version *Everyman/Edá* (and, of course, the audience) hear ominous drums. *Everyman/Edá* is overcome with fear whilst the others party on, only to flee screaming from the scene when Death (Iku – a fearful creature in black covered with white spots) emerges amongst them.

But the most fundamental shift between the European versions of the play and *Everyman/Edá* is in its final resolution. Whereas in the former, *Everyman*, though repenting, goes off into eternity, in the Yoruba world such a possibility is ruled out. In the pattern of the Mobius strip where various surfaces resolve themselves into one continuous plane, in Yoruba belief the worlds of the living, the dead (the ancestors) and the unborn co-exist. At the end of *Everyman/Edá*, therefore, the 'hero's' daughter

appears with a new-born baby in her arms. The Babalowo predicts that the child will have none of the riches of Everyman/Edá but that he will not be ashamed of that 'for he has come to choose wisdom – the pride of man'¹¹ and that he is indeed 'Babatunde' ('father has come again'), the grandfather reborn in the grandson. The play ends in rejoicing and celebration.

This brief note invites others to explore the fascinating Nigerian versions in more detail, but also celebrates Peter Meredith's major contribution to our understanding of the medieval theatre. Coghlan observes that in writing *Jedermann* Hofmannsthal wanted to make *Everyman* a living experience rather than to let it, in his own words 'wash around in the dead waters of scholarly ownership!'¹² Peter Meredith's work as a scholar has always seen the experience of performance on the public stage to be as vital as textual research, the stage the necessary complement to the study, and thus provided us with unique, authoritative insights. He will enjoy the thought of *Everyman* alive and well in Nigeria!¹³

NOTES

¹ Obotunde Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays*, African Writers Series, 18 (London: Heinemann E.P., 1966), pp. 45-78.

² *Edá: Opera* by Duro Ladipo, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan Occasional Publications, 24 (Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 1970).

³ I had the opportunity to see this in performance at Ladipo's *Mbari* venue in Oshogbo, Nigeria in the mid-1960s.

⁴ I am greatly indebted to Brian Coghlan's analytical commentary on *Jedermann* in his *Hofmannsthal's Festival Dramas* (Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1964). I have drawn widely on this source.

⁵ Coghlan, *Hofmannsthal's Festival Dramas*, p. 18.

⁶ Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, Introduction p. [viii].

⁷ Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, p. 53.

⁸ Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, p. 51.

⁹ Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, p. 70.

¹⁰ Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, p. 58.

¹¹ Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, p. 77.

¹² Coghlan, *Hofmannsthal's Festival Dramas*, p. 21.

¹³ A final footnote. So famous became the actor in Ladipo's company who played Edá (Lere Paimo) that when he went on to form his own theatre company he called it the *Edá Theatre Group*. See *West African Popular Theatre*, ed. by Karin Barber, John Collins and Alain Ricard (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 1997).