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Diedre Badejo. Òsun Sèègèsí: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power and Femininity

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Badejo, Diedre L., *Òsun Sèègèsí: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power and Femininity*. Africa World Press, Inc., 1996. ISBN 0-86543-355-0. xvii + 217 pages. \$18.95 paper.

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If you do not know the name of something, you cannot presume to understand it.

The advocacy for African mother tongue source texts, translated or otherwise, has gone long unheeded and has been mired in a decade of academic debates about "privileged insider/arrogant outsider" approaches to and judgment of African literature in European languages. The Western feminist knowledge naming and claiming prerogative which has characterized much of feminist praxis in the seventies and eighties, especially in its self-assigned mandate to "speak" for "Third World" women, has forced the discursive territory to yet another level. The "damned-if-you-do/damned-if-you-don't" mediating position African feminist voices find themselves in lately is forcing a text/context-conscious criticism of modern African literature in European languages. The inherent naming-what-you-do-not-know challenge implicit in this approach to the criticism of African literary texts speaks to not just the need for major epistemological and pedagogical overhaul of the hitherto feminist practice of "usurpation" (as feminist critic, Obioma Nnaemeka puts it) but also to the challenge to African feminist voices to produce the much-needed source texts needed for this major overhaul. The "privileged insider/ignorant outsider" debates have run their course as scholarly, source-text informed studies by scholars (Karin Barber, Phaniel Egejuru, Obioma Nnaemeka, Diedre Badejo, Akinwumi Isola) and English translations of mother tongue African texts by competent

translators (Daniel Kunene, Ousseynou Traore, Pamela Olubunmi Smith, Janis Meyes, etc.) begin to appear. The review of one such study follows.

Òsun Sèègèsí, the result of a decade of research, interviews, fieldwork, affinity with and intensive study of the Yoruba language and culture, is a well-guided scholarly work which illuminates the oral historiography and philosophy of the Yoruba. The essence of this acclaimed philosophy is found in the dense but polished idiom of the Ifa divination corpus and its mediation of renowned, time-honored wisdom. Ifa, with its complex network of 401 *orisa* or deities, is the repository of Yoruba beliefs and moral values. It is the encyclopedia of Yoruba knowledge, the oral repository of myths, symbols and icons which constitute the basis for Yoruba cultural literacy. In choosing to investigate the nature of Yoruba thought system and worldview as revealed in this vast Ifa divination system, Badejo could not have opted for a wiser approach to her inquiry into and definition of an *African feminist* theory. To this end, she has used appropriately her study of the Ifa corpus and the Osun festival drama discourse both as the requisite foundation and organizing principle for contextualizing Yoruba cosmology and engaging Yoruba thought.

Òsun Sèègèsí is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one showcases the *oriki* (praise name)—with an able English translation—that establishes Osun's status as woman, mother, power broker and deity. Chapters two and three focus on the Yoruba cosmology, pantheon, worldview and Osun's significant creative, regenerative role in this anthropomorphic cosmos. Chapters four to six examine the structure, meaning, and social vision of Osun ritual drama and its place in Yoruba cosmic ethos and ethnic consciousness. These six chapters deftly lead to the seventh chapter, the core of the study: an African feminist theory that challenges the hegemony of Western social order.

Òsun Sèègèsí deals with festival discourse, again emphasizing its communal and spiritual basis in four of its seven chapters. The Osun festival, with its ritual drama, exemplifies a context for social discourse and an enactment and ritualization of Yoruba cosmological belief. It engages, hence ensures, an active discourse between *eniyàn* (human beings) and *orisa* (deities), between human beings and nature, and among humans themselves. The annual Osun festival is indeed the context for re-enactment of the cosmic presence—a pivotal point in the larger sense of Yoruba spatial relationships.

Badejo couches her definition of African feminism(s) in the cyclical rather than lineal, binary perspective in which social orders are juxtaposed and interactive rather than one superimposed over the other. From her delineation of the dynamic cyclical nature of Yoruba cosmology and the role of Osun, goddess of fertility, in the perpetuation of this cosmic cycle, a definition of African feminism(s) of inclusiveness as distinct from western feminism of exclusiveness, emerges. Over and over, in her explication of Osun's role in the intricate anthropomorphism of Yoruba cosmology especially, Badejo attempts to "speak in Osun's voice," that is, in the regenerative voice which "strives to keep the spiritual and mundane worlds in balance . . . its myriad forces harmonized . . . [and] humanity attuned to its own potentialities and pitfalls."

Regeneration, unity, harmony, reciprocity and balance (of power), complementarity of the female principle and the male principle, and synergy are dominant themes in Osun's *oriki* (praise name)—themes which pervade the literature of the festival discourse, which itself is communal. Essential balance and reciprocity, twin principles which dominate the premise and complexity of the orisa system, define the Yoruba cosmic sensibility. As in traditional African thought, women's power, like men's power, evolves from *the* divine Source of all power, and women are born with *ase* (power). To understand these most significant pieces of knowledge is to understand the essence of Yoruba cosmic sensibility as re-enacted in the festival drama and as mediated by sacrifice. Undergirding the message of the festival drama is the sanctity of gender roles as embodied and enacted by Osun, goddess, woman. This makes all the more important consideration of the genderless linguistic constructs in African languages—a pivotal but often overlooked factor in existing feminist theorizing of African feminisms—which, coupled with the reciprocal and interdependent nature/structure of African women's institutions, "underscores an inclusive, humanistic African feminism" the theorizing of which must necessarily be drawn from and include "a spiritual, cosmic and sociolinguistic premise," Badejo writes. She further argues that Osun, as goddess, woman, mother, and her corresponding position in the "political, economic, social and religious spheres," make her a model of this humanistic feminism.

Osun Sèègèsí lays the groundwork for understanding the nature and complexity of theorizing Africa eurocentrically, especially the study of

female institutions. It suggests that feminist analyses of the state of Yoruba (read African) women which fail to understand the hallmark elements of individual African cosmologies and worldviews must be judged flawed at best. The work is therefore offered as a viable interpretive source text for writing a theory of African feminism(s) which is historically, culturally and linguistically informed.

Certainly not a definitive work, a claim that Badejo does not make, *Osun Sèègèsí* can however claim to be a modest but well-informed first by a competent scholar. *Osun Sèègèsí* follows published essays on paradigms for African feminist criticism, and provides a strong, fertile basis for further detailed studies, some already in progress on Osun oral literature and more extensively on Yoruba orature.

For all its many good points, the work must be faulted on a very important and compelling linguistic point: inconsistent accenting/tonal markings on Yoruba words, incorrect on some and completely omitted on others. Certainly a point not to be overlooked on account of the effects of tonal changes on word meaning in a language as tonally sensitive as Yoruba. Yet the noted flaws, some probably due to variations in ethnic pronunciation and the resulting difficulty of transcription, are not serious enough to affect the overall credibility of the work. Also, the photographic illustrations, vital to a study of this nature, are rather poor.

Nonetheless, *Osun Sèègèsí* is to be lauded for its valuable epistemological and pedagogical approach. It is an example of a bold attempt by a competent, "foreign outsider" scholar who entered the hallowed ground of the "other" not with preconceived "exotic baggage" or arrogance, but with the due humility and open-minded yearning of the uninitiated, asking to speak, not journalistically, but to engage and articulate the mysteries of the cosmic and academic knowledge encased in the Osun narrative store house. Badejo sought to "know" and "understand" the name of the "something-knowledge" Osun held in the sacred grove; she asked to be taught how to "speak/name" it once she began to "understand" it; and she "articulated" it, thus inspired.