

Theatre and Democracy in Nigeria

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Preface

Theatre and Democracy in Nigeria is a collection of essays derived substantially from the fourteenth convention of the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA) at Ilorin from 8 to 11 November 2000. Over thirty well-written papers were presented and received, and in this book you will find the chapters written by a group of the best thinkers on theatre. The chapters reflect the mood of the elusive "democratic spirit" and how it affects the different fields of theatre. The convention itself was timely as it was held at a time when after thirty-five years of military rule, Nigeria was entering into another experiment of democratic rule. It was at the convention that we realized how military rule had affected the subconscious and creative intellect of the Nigerian theatre practitioner. The spirit of the convention was therefore that of expressed freedom of the intellect, as the discussion led to acknowledgement and a stimulation of genuine interest in the future of theatre in Nigeria.

We focus here on some key areas of theatre — playwriting, directing, style and form, dramatic criticism, dance, music, among others. The issues discussed in this book apply not only to the growth and the development of culture in our social polity, but they also examine the issue of the central importance of theatre amidst its own political reality. We examine the deeply entrenched concept and understanding of the creative essence against the backdrop of the problems of self-analysis and thematic relevance and the development of the world of the creative mind within the trappings of a developing society.

The reader of this book, whose field is theatre, is lucky, because the book has been organized to satisfy him or her in the ideological, practical and formulative aspects of theatre. It will, we hope, contribute to agreements, disagreements and debates on theatre for many years to come.

We would like to express our gratitude to Karami Communications who provided the funds for this publication. We also would like to express our gratitude to all members of the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists whose papers served as materials for the fulfilment of the views expressed. And most of all to our publisher, Steve Shaba, who, in collating for publication, became the silent third editor.

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Councils can be better developed and positioned to increase the impact and popularity of the theatre in the country. As at now, they pay more attention to ethnic dances which they can perform at state functions and bring in money for the Council. One main area of developing the arts councils is to fund them properly, overhaul their management in such a way that they can now be made to have regular theatre programmes on their annual bill. This will then be a very good dividend of democracy.

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3. Saint Gbilekaa, "Theatre and Political Change in Nigeria since Independence" in *Theatre and Politics in Nigeria* (eds) Gbilekaa and Malomo (Ibadan: Caltop Publications, 1993), p. 2.
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Sustaining Nigeria's Nascent Democracy: Playwrights and the Need for Content Reappraisal

RASHEED ABIODUN MUSA

Introduction

Celebrated and denigrated speeches, genuine and thumbs up treats, innuendoes, oratorical displays, nostalgic wailings, emotional-cum-poetic renditions, terse but firm warnings by individuals and groups have characterized the political developments of the Nigerian nation. We have listened both as interested and disinterested participants to numerous political statements expressed by politically conscious individuals to represent their aspirations and that of their various ambitious ethnic nationalities all attempting to control the political power of the Nigerian nation. Of recent, there have been series of academic efforts at sustaining and defending the Nigerian nascent democracy. This trend is as a result of the turbulent democratic experience that we have had in Nigeria through frequent military intervention in the murky waters of Nigerian politics, making democracy to suffer. There is however an urgent need to defend and sustain the nascent democracy in Nigeria because there are democratic dividends that accrue to individuals and the nation in general if any nation is under democratic rule.

As there are social institutions calling for the restructuring or dismemberment of the Nigerian nation, we also have numerous social institutions that can be used to strengthen the Nigerian nation. The theatre arts institution is one of the social institutions that can be used to develop, promote and advance the ideals of federalism and democracy in Nigeria. The theatre arts lead drummer is the playwright whom this researcher believes should reappraise his work in tune with the

democratic reality in Nigeria. This is as a result of the often fragile democratic experiences that have become our lot in independent Nigeria.

We must therefore allow our creative power to sustain national ideals and foster unity among the heterogeneous tribes in Nigeria. As Femi Osofisan puts it, the task is to

Use the weapon we had — our pen, and zeal and our eloquence — to awaken in our people the song of liberation. With our writing, we would wash away the stigma of inferiority, rouse our dormant energies; unmask the pests and traitors among us, preach positive sermons. Our work would be a weapon in the struggle to bring our country to the foremost rank of modern nations. Our songs would call for radical political alternatives.¹

One is not advocating for aesthetic formalism in playwriting simply because of the numerous styles and forms available to playwrights. Our concern here is that there should be a democratic intention on the part of our playwrights so as to defend our democratic heritage. Lanrele Bamidele while expounding on the aesthetic reality of the Marxist critics as against literary formalism observes that,

The approach talks more about the content and not much about the form; it is not bothered by the aesthetic style of a work of art but rather the creative artists' intention to write about life, about society and about reality.²

The reality of the Nigerian nation is the need to defend our fledgling democracy. As such, there is the urgent need for our playwrights to reappraise the aesthetic contents of their works in tune with democratic reality.

Nigerian federalism and democracy

In the beginning, the tones were soft but loaded with repulsive yet deliberate indifference; "that amalgamation of 1914 is a political suicide," "Our unity lies in the 1914 amalgamation" and so on. As the Nigerian federal state began to evolve, there were struggles — deliberate contests — to lead and rule the nation by Nigerian heroes of yesteryears. Then, like drowning fighters, we heard different tunes: "Nigeria is a mere geographical expression," "Nigeria is the creation of the colonialists," "the basis of unity is no longer there!", "the mistake of 1914 has come to light", "either by error of omission or commission, if the East should go, the West will follow suit", "fellow Nigerians, the Nigerian nation remains indivisible and non-negotiable", "one nation one destiny" and so on.

Nigeria and Nigerians have had their fair share of avoidable and unavoidable woes orchestrated by war and political instability. Some of these were inevitable because there has always been a grand battle between centrifugal and centripetal forces struggling to control the Nigerian government at all cost. From the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates to the 1929 Aba Women riot and the 1953 "Araba" riot in the Northern part of the country, to the 1962 wanton destruction of lives and property tagged "Operation Wetie" in the Western region and the Nigerian-Biafran civil war of 1967 to 1970 which a writer described as "Our collective misfortunes", all make the evolution of federalism in Nigerian a veritable topic for theoretical exploration. This is because the entity called Nigeria had existed before as heterogeneous nationalities with each group living with different social, political, religious and economic systems. Empires became politically strong in the defence of their territorial integrity.

Whether the Nigerian nation should be or should not be is not the preoccupation here. Our intention here is to state very frankly that in spite of our frequent ethnic tensions, religious and political wars and social inequality that have been our lot, the Nigerian nation remains unbroken. The Northerners are different people whose social world views are not the same. The people of the Eastern and Western regions are also the same brothers exploiting and marginalizing themselves. The people of the South-south region however are as heterogeneous as the Nigerian entity itself. All these diversities make the Nigerian federalism thick. Attahiru Jega, while commenting on federalism says that it is about:

... equality and equity, justice and fair-play amongst both the constituent units and the communal groups that comprise it. It is also about special mobilization and utilization of societal resources in a manner that facilitates balanced growth and development. Its operation is predicated upon constitutionalism, respect for the rule of law, and executive responsibility and lawfulness ...³

For political expedience, federalism guarantees freedom, liberty and political stability. Shridath Ramphal, the former Commonwealth Secretary-General sees federalism as a relevant political option when he posits that:

the principles of federalism are constantly becoming more relevant to our global society as interdependence passes from the realm of perception to the theatre of international actuality. The truth is that our current global international structure is acknowledged to be, makes it necessary for us to develop new

approaches (as well as perhaps new structures) responsive to our insights of interdependence. We may indeed require a system capable of maintaining philosophy of "one world" yet accommodating and giving voice to that world's complexities.⁴

Nothing is wrong with federalism in Nigeria but there are flaws in the operation of federalism in Nigeria. For federalism to succeed and "for a federation to be able to resist failure, its leaders, and their followers must "feel federal" — they must be moved with one common, self-interest — capable, where necessary of over-riding most other considerations of small group interest ..."⁵

Federalism is one of the key conceptions of democracy. There are also various integrative mechanisms designed to bring Nigerians together and promote national unity such as the establishment of unity schools, the National Youth Service Corps scheme, social infrastructures, cultural festivals and so on. However, cultural integrative mechanisms essentially depend on the creative aesthetics of writers and playwrights in ensuring cultural cohesion, harmonious interaction and national integration. For these to be achieved, the playwrights should be able to make use of democratic ideas in their creative works. Doing this will further allow their written texts to be read and performed to the Nigerian audience thereby sustaining and defending Nigerian democracy.

The Nigerian playwrights' aesthetic tenets and visions

The playwright is a creative artist who is often guided by inspiration or the environmental condition of his society to write. He is also a "visioner artist" and a creative person, an observer of things — an iconoclast. The playwright is a dogged fighter who has no claw to bite but whose pen does the biting for him. He is ever probing, intruding and a nature interpreter. The playwright who is an artist tries to create because of the following needs:

1. To heal and restore the life of a sick and battered humanity.
2. To create a new vision for growth, renewal, regeneration and edification of man for a wholesome life and a better community.
3. To mobilize a collective conscience for a particular desired objective.⁶

Bernth Lindfors also says that:

The playwright must convey a truth, a lucid social metaphor. He as a seer, must not only be able to see, he must also be able to transfer his vision to others.⁷

A playwright is a creator whose play represents a vision, an ideology. Even if buffoons take the central part of a play, it has a message to pass across to the audience because "... a play is an exact representation of reality which obeys the same law of reality and to which we can apply the same rules for interpretation that we would apply in real life."⁸

A candid examination of the works of celebrated and foremost Nigerian playwrights will show that there is an urgent need for Nigerian playwrights to join the voice of democracy and national unity. For obvious reasons, it is imperative to start from Wole Soyinka. Akanji Nasiru in his article, "Beyond Jargons and Cliches: A Re-Appraisal of Nigerian Committed Drama" says of Wole Soyinka that he:

... creates his own gods and fashions his own myths and thus satisfies his own intellectual (or academic?) preoccupations without seeming to care that he sing his own song all alone.⁹

Apart from this, most of Wole Soyinka's works treat the individuals as the propelling forces of the society. Individual heroism thus becomes the central preoccupation in his works. He makes these characters to develop, triumph against the collective will of the society and destroy themselves.

For example, Kongi — the hero of *Ismaland* in *Kongi's Harvest*, Elesin Oba, the horseman of *Death and the King's Horseman*, Brother Jero — the fortune-seeking pastor of *The Trial of Brother Jero*, Kamini — the leader of the maximum rulers in *A Play of Giants* and many more are hybrid species that have destroyed the tenets of democracy or subverted the traditional institution for their own selfish ends. Yet, the society needs to be liberated through man's collective struggle and will.

Most of Ola Rotimi's works also celebrate legendary individuals. Ola Rotimi succeeds in recreating the larger than life situations of most of these gods and semi-gods. Most of them however represent their ethnic folks. What Kurunmi of Ijaye is to the Ijaye and Yoruba people cannot be linked with what Uthman Danfodio is to the Hausa people. The price that Ovonramwen paid while trying to salvage the Benin heritage and culture cannot be linked with the life and time of Queen Amina of Zaria. Even when Femi Osofisan through his radical Marxist and alternative plays tries to rewrite the mytho-historical tales of his people by asking them to struggle collectively, most of the settings and locales of his works and the contents of his works make him a custodian of the "Orunmila motif" and this tribal identity of his has robbed him of national identity. Same can be said of J.P. Clark, Olu Obafemi, Bode Sowande and so on.

Nigerian playwrights have also made use of various writing forms in their works. Initially most of them made use of the conventional form

of writing and later they started experimenting and they have come "home" with folkism, the narrative technique, the total theatre conception and while trying to be at home with their audience, they lost the national identity and pathetically they became champions of myths, rituals and tradition and they incidentally brought the lost and forgotten gods and goddesses back to the stage and to their people, although there are a few exceptions among them who see the Nigerian society as their immediate society.

If they can be pardoned for considering their local audience while writing they should also realize that Nigerians of all walks of life are their larger audience who must at least be partially represented in their creative commitments because theatre as stated earlier is a social institution which can be used to promote, develop and educate the society especially in an environment dominated by disunity and ethnic suspicion as ours.

Attempts at content reappraisal

Various erudite scholars have spoken on the need for theatre artists to reassess their theatrical and dramatic works with a view to making sure that their works conform to the reality of salvaging the society. Akanji Nasiru incisively propounds "A new philosophy of aesthetics" which he says, means,

an aesthetics dictated by the needs of the moment and the realities of present-day Nigeria. It means knowledge of the willingness to accommodate the playwright's art within the facilities that exist and can be utilized for the greater purpose of changing society ... where popular audience can be reached.¹⁰

The society that needs to be urgently changed is Nigeria and the 'popular audience' envisaged are Nigerians.

Another scholar, Mode Lortium in his article "The Nigerian Playwright and Committed Dramatics" writes on the importance of

... the role of committed playwrights to recreate imaginatively the history of the struggle of the oppressed people of Nigeria. In order to do this, he needs to draw inspiration from what is capable of improving the social life of the people.¹¹

Good democratic culture through the projections in writings of democratic values will go a long way in improving the social life of the people.

Eman Dandaura also projects the theatre of democracy through his article, "Theatre and the Democratic Culture in Nigeria" when he says that:

Thus, for democracy to return to Nigeria, theatre needs to be employed as a political tool to re-acculture Nigerians on their traditional virtues of mutual respect and co-existence based on the freedom and the equality of all citizens: the bedrock of a democratic culture.¹²

In all the above, there have always been a call from the playwrights and the dramatists on the need to evolve the theatre of unity and democracy especially on a fragile and heterogeneous country like Nigeria.

Conclusion

Democracy is about equity, the rule by the majority, civilian control, devolution of power, social and political freedom all of which guarantee political stability. These democratic dividends make it mandatory for all to guard, sustain and defend the Nigerian nascent democracy jealously. In this paper, we have traced the evolution of Nigerian federalism and democracy, the Nigerian playwrights' aesthetic tenets and visions and examined the various attempts that have been made on content reappraisal which have assisted us in drawing out some suggestions and recommendations.

Suggestions and recommendations

As Funsho Aina objectively posits, "Nigeria, as in the political and economic spheres cannot be said to have fully utilized its artistic potentials since independence, 40 years ago."¹³ One of the reasons for the underutilization of artistic potentials has to do with a misdirection of aesthetic values. There should be a gradual movement from ethnic identity to national identity which in turn must give birth to international or global identity in artistic works. These states are crucial because "the artists are the antennae of the race ..."¹⁴

The use of national values, ideals and interests in drama with a view to sustaining and defending the Nigerian federalism and nascent democracy is however the call that we are making here. This can be achieved through the change of content and form in our play texts. The following are some possible alternatives for content reappraisal.

The need to change from extremely fictional writing to semi-fictional writing comes in here as another suggestion on the issue under focus. Nigerian playwrights have hidden too much under dense metaphors which often end up as mere intellectual exercises. We should now write or say things a little bit directly as some playwrights are trying to do. Wole Soyinka sees the relevance of this position when he submits in the introductory notes to *A Play of Giants* that:

No serious effort is made to hide the identities of the Real-life actors who have served as models for *A Play of Giants*. They are none other than: President for life Macias Nguema (late) of Equatorial Guinea, Emperor for life (ex) Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central Africa Republic, life President Mobutu Sese Seko etc. of Congo Kinshasa; and — the HERO of HEROES in the person of life President (ex), the Field Marshal Elo Haji, Dr. Idi Amin of Uganda, DSC, DSO, VC etc., who still dreams, according to latest reports of being recalled to be the saviour of Uganda once again.¹⁵

Although there is the likelihood of artistic restriction on the part of the new Nigerian democratic playwrights because of their focus on democratic tenets, still the dramatic content of their metaphors would be understood easily through semi-fictional and quasi-realistic play texts.

Our recent or contemporary national heroes and heroines must also be recognized in our plays thereby shifting focus from local gods and heroes and legends to national heroes. Plays on the lives and times of Tafawa Balewa, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Shehu Shagari are desirable. Although there have been plays that condemn military leaders in Nigeria, there should also be documentary evidences about our past political leaders through play texts.

Our collective struggle should also be dramatized by the new Nigerian playwrights. National events such as the Aba women riot and the Araba riot of 1929 and 1953 respectively should be dramatized. Equally too, the Nigerian collective struggle and mass protests and the Nigerian-Biafran civil war and numerous coup d'etat are long overdue to be subject matters of play texts. The political consequence of these events may be grave but they are the reality of the evolution of the Nigerian state and must thus be exploited through playwriting.

Also, more Nigerian playwrights should depict national problems in their writings rather than championing sectional feelings — a stereotype that is capable of creating disunity. National problems such as political instability, economic disparity, ethnic tension and war, religious disharmony, inadequate social infrastructure, educational imbalance and so on are veritable national problems which deserve urgent attention more than before from Nigerian playwrights.

The themes from the new Nigerian playwrights should include national rebirth, social integration and cultural unity instead of promoting ethnic agenda. An Hausa character in a play should not be made a caricature, or, a visionless and uneducated political power-seeker by a Yoruba playwright. So also, a Yoruba central character in a play should not look a doubtful and never-to-be-trusted character by an

Hausa playwright. The Igbo character should not be condemned as a thief and a '419' by an Hausa or Yoruba playwright. Instead, good qualities and progressive values about the Nigerian major tribes should be written on, while attempts should be made to represent the feelings of the minority ethnic groups through playwriting.

Importantly, the new Nigerian playwrights are equally free to experiment with many writing forms. However, the language of such plays should be simple and reflective of Nigerian voices and the figurative expressions should also be simple and direct. The playwright's stage instructions should be simple and reflective of the playwright's intentions. This is with a view to allowing the prospective producers and directors understand and interpret the play text easily. Local idioms and musical compositions in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be directly interpreted into English language, this with a view to making the Nigerian audience identify easily with the dramatic piece and its subsequent dramatization.

We want to conclude that the Nigerian playwright should identify with national interests in his dramatic work. This is the challenge we hope the new Nigerian playwright must face in his creative work because "as politics must teach people the ways and give them the means to take control over their own lives, art must teach people, in the most vivid and imaginative ways possible, how to take control over their own experience and observations."¹⁶ This is a task that must be accomplished.

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