

## **Redirecting the Mind for Positive Development: Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* in Performance**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of development is open to a lot of contestation. While it is generally agreed that development implies a going forward, an improvement on something from a previous state, what constitutes development, however, does not quite enjoy such a universal agreement. While some development experts and proponents view development from physical perspectives, that is the improvement in infrastructure, others have a more holistic view of the concept to include the development of the person and institutions. This essay advances that the mind and intellect of man need to be properly directed and developed before any meaningful development can take place in the realm of infrastructure and institutions. Using Sam Ukala's play *Fumes of Fuel*, we argue that a proper orientation of the mind through the instrumentality of the theatre needs to take place in order to engender positive infrastructural and institutional development. The play in performance context is used because it brings out very clearly the issues articulated in the essay.

*Key words:* Redirection of mind, positive development

### **Introduction**

The place of the humanities in the development process is a contentious one. This is because development is seen from several prisms. One's academic leaning, and world view, amongst others, usually determine how one perceives development. To some, development can only be seen in terms of physical infrastructure, by which they mean the construction of gigantic and beautiful structures. To some other persons, primacy is placed on advancement in institutions and precepts that order the conduct of man. To yet another group, emphasis is on the

development of the person as the basis for other positive advances in society. All of the above are germane in their own rights. And in reality, it is not possible to look at development without touching these various perspectives in one way or the other. However, something must be built on some other thing. It is on this premise that this essay attempts to situate the person, through the mind, as the basis for holistic and all-round beneficial development. Given this scenario, is there a place for the humanities in the development process? How can the humanities contribute to the development of the mind and the society, particularly the African society in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century realities?

### **The Concept of Development**

Development in ordinary terms implies moving from a previous state or position to a better state or position. But what precisely constitutes development? This is the question that a lot of scholars and development experts have struggled with and consequently have looked at from several perspectives. Biswajit Ghosh (2012) presents a compelling discourse to put forth the apparent confusion that attends the term development. Looking at it from historical, sociological, political and economic perspectives, Ghosh avers that there is hardly any agreement to what the term means. This is because different persons, based on their background, have different perceptions of what development should entail. Ghosh argues that discussions on development issues are likely to be complicated, diametrically opposed and discordant on account of the different perceptions that drive our understanding of the term. He posits, however, that in spite of the confusion regarding the meaning of development, the human being cannot do without it as there really is no alternative to it.

Having established that we cannot do without development, the question to ask is: what is the best approach to development? Or, is there a best approach to development? These questions are critical because a society may grow economically by which we can say there is economic development, but that development may not bring about real development in the people's quality of life. In the same way, a society may advance and develop politically without bringing significant change to the people's lives. These scenarios above are also applicable to institutional development that may not have much salutary effect on the

people. It would appear, therefore, that human development is the basis for real development across different spheres of life.

It is on the basis of the argument above that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) advocates for development that is centred on the people rather than on just infrastructure. In its 2015 Human Development Report, the UNDP posits that when development is centred on the people, the people would then strive to have a more roundly developed and inclusive society that would be beneficial to all. This is where the mind comes in.

### **The Play *Fumes of Fuel***

The play *Fumes of Fuel* by Sam Ukala is contained in the collection *Rumblings of the Niger Delta* with Sam Ukala as General Editor and Martins Tugbokorowei as Editor-In-Chief. *Fumes of Fuel* is a play about oil and the devastating effects of its exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. It is a treatise on the struggle to survive in the midst of plenty, as it were. We see Okoro, Ewari and Efe, three youths of the Niger Delta who struggle to eke out a living by engaging in the risky business of oil bunkering, even as the multinational oil companies and the Federal Government of Nigeria make so much money from their God given resource.

In the course of dialogue in the play, we get to see the contrast between the affluence in the rest of Nigeria as epitomised by Abuja and the poverty in the Niger Delta where the wealth of the nation is extracted. We are also exposed to the high level of corruption that pervades the land, high degree of incompetent leadership that the people are afflicted by, and the pretence and deceit that so many persons exhibit.

After the initial actions in the play where Okoro and Ewari welcome Efe back from Abuja, Efe is exposed to the possibilities of making money from oil bunkering to help sponsor his university education and thus resolves to join Okoro, Okoro's father and Ewari in the oil business. Despite pleas from his fiancé Timi asking him not to join, he obstinately opts to be part of the business. In the meantime, Timi is having troubles with Ebikenie, otherwise called Earthquake, the Local Government Chairman; because she says she is born again and would no longer have sexual relationship with him. Back to Okoro and his friends, in one of their oil scooping endeavours, an explosion occurs and a lot of

people are killed, including Okoro, his father and Efe who tries to save them. This sets the stage for the seeds of the revolution to be sown as Ewari confronts Ebikenie at Timi's residence and gives an ominous warning that the People's Force would spearhead a revolution and set things aright.

The play *Fumes of Fuel* exposes the fact that different strata of society contributed to the mess that the country is currently enmeshed in. In the words of Ewari,

Ewari: Now that the white man has struck us with fires of affliction, why do our political leaders stab us the more with corruption and insensitivity...? Why do our intellectual leaders feed everyone with deceit because of the crumbs they expect from the politician's table? ... (108)

In another breath, he says,

Ewari: Why do they rob us with their pens instead of using their intellect to educate us on our rights and how to decently ask for them? Why is there no Nathan among our religious leaders to tell King David that he has sinned? ... (108-109)

These show that collectively, we are all responsible for the situation we find ourselves. Beyond these, even Okoro and Efe acknowledge the fact that oil bunkering is not right even as it is a sort of protest against the injustice of the state. Timi and Preye are not left out of the moral decadence afflicting the society. If all of the characters in the play were properly orientated, perhaps some form of positive development could have come the way of the people and the society.

### **Evaluation of Play and Performance**

*Fumes of Fuel* has had two command performances. One was performed by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Delta State Chapter on February 24, 2010 as part of the Delta State Culture Week with Chukwuma Anyanwu as Director while Martins Tugbokorowei was Assistant Director. The other performance was by The People's Theatre

as part of the activities for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Delta State on August 30, 2011. This performance had Martins Tugbokorowei as Director while Chukwuma Anyanwu was Assistant Director. Martins Tugbokorowei was also Designer/Technical Director of the two performances which were staged at the Unity Hall, Government House, Asaba.

The two performances were well received by the audiences that saw them, including top government functionaries, captains of industry and the general public. It is instructive to note that the Deputy Governor of the state attended both performances which created the enabling environment to talk to power, as it were. The play used the Jesse fire incident of 1998 as the impetus to discuss a number of issues bedeviling the Niger Delta and the complicity of the Nigerian state in all of it. Issues of infrastructural decay, deprivation experienced by Niger Deltans, poverty, oppression by instruments of state apparatus, the insensitivity of the multinational oil companies, insincerity and deceit exhibited by Niger Delta leaders, insecurity and bad governance, to mention a few, all come to the fore in the play. The issues raised in the play are in tandem with the views expressed by G. G. Darah in *The Niger Delta: Resource Control and the Quest for Justice* (2014) where he critically analyses how the Federal Government of Nigeria steals the oil resources of the Niger Delta to develop the rest of Nigeria while the region is impoverished, oppressed and dehumanized. Beyond putting all of these on the front burner, however, conscious mechanisms are put into the play as a script, and were deployed in the performance to redirect the minds of the audience in such a manner that they can contribute to the positive development of the society. An example of this is when Okoro, Ewari, Efe and Timi are discussing the hegemonistic deceit of the Federal Government of Nigeria and how the Niger Delta is milked to develop the rest of Nigeria as exemplified by Abuja. Okoro tells Efe thus:

Okoro: Leave that to us, the home guys. You go to university and learn big, big book, so you can graduate and lead us. We need another Ken Saro-Wiwa (87).

This shows in very clear terms that improvement in intellect and the development of the mind would go a long way in creating the kind of

society that we deserve. This is more so when we recall how Ken Saro-Wiwa gave intellectual bent to the Ogoni struggle and almost singlehandedly internationalised it.

The final scene of the play is a veritable treatise on how to redirect the mind for positive impact on the society. Ewari, who survives the fire incident, turns an advocate for change as he pursues the actualisation of the People's Force as a way of bringing about a better society.

Ewari: [To Ebikenie] ... I like you to introduce your boys to me. We need them in the People's Force. They have a more honourable duty to secure the people's future than to protect you from your own evils ... (108)

This is a classic case of redirecting the minds of the youth from violence and criminality towards the positive development of the society. This resonates very eloquently with the amnesty programme instituted by the administration of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua for repentant Niger Delta militants. Indeed, there is ample testimony that a number of these ex militants have embraced intellectual development and are contributing greatly to the positive changes that are beginning to manifest in the Niger Delta.

To cap up the script of the play, Ebikenie, also known as Earthquake, acknowledges that there is need to have an attitudinal change as a precursor to creating the kind of society we desire, even if he betrays some apprehension that things may have gone too bad for any kind of repair to take place. "Ebi: I know he's right. We all know. But we've gone too far afield. Can we come back? ... (109)". But Preye responds to his pessimism by saying that things can still turn around for the good of the society,

Preye: It is possible to drop the evil baton, Chairman ... What Ewari is saying is that we need to break the cycle of evil. I think we need a true leadership workshop in the Niger Delta. All the leaders need to come together and workshop on the kind of people-centred leadership that we need. (110)

With such a workshop, attended with open minds, a re-orientation of the mind can take place that would conduce the kind of leadership and followership that we need, which would in turn bring about the society of our dreams.

This play in performance was quite evocative and it connected with the audience in such a manner that they became involved in the dialogue and actions of the play, empathised with the characters and commented freely on how things could be done better than as portrayed in the world of the play. Such a re-orientation of the mind is what Austin Asagba (2014) discusses in his essay on how theatre can be used to tackle the challenges confronting Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Asagba gives graphic illustrations of how theatre was, and is used, to change people's perceptions from the negative to the positive and thus bring about a new and better society.

According to Kwakye-Opong and Dennis (2014), the performance of a play makes it possible for a larger number of persons to access it. In accessing the play through performance, it should be noted that the audience is not there simply to be entertained but also to be instructed and to be guided to better appreciate the issues raised in the play as a way of overcoming such issues in life or at least having a better understanding of them. This appreciation of issues is possible because of the experiential communication that takes place between the actor and the audience. Again, as Kwakye-Opong and Dennis (2014) put it while making reference to Arnold (2001), the world created by the actor on stage is such that the audience is able to relate to it, inhabit it and experience it because of the character that the actor is able to project to the audience.

In specific terms, we can refer to the scenic design created for the second performance particularly, that made use of multimedia effect. This was achieved by designing the down stage right end of the scenery with the incorporation of foliage to simulate the effect of a bushy environment. This was supplemented with liquid scenery in the form of fire effect that was projected on the set. This created a realistic illusion of the actual fire incident on which the play is based. With the members of

the community running into the fire with its crackling sound and getting “burnt”, quite a few audience members were brought to tears and they better appreciated what the people go through on a daily basis as their lives are burnt by the fire of poor governance. Before the fire incident, we see Ewari and Efe bringing in a consignment of scooped petrol that looked every inch like the real product such that some members of the audience were actually apprehensive that the performance venue was at risk of being accidentally burnt.

The setting as a whole clearly exposed the inequality that pervades the Nigerian space. On one side, we see in physical terms the squalor that attends the living conditions of the owners of Nigeria’s crude oil. This is exemplified by Okoro’s father’s house. On the other side we see the modest living quarters of Timi with the basic comforts of life provided by the thieving Chairman of Muroni Local Government, Ebikenie, who maintains her as a mistress. Collectively, these show the disparity that signposts the living conditions of Nigerians.

The performance also deployed sound effects very effectively to capture different situations and actions in the lay. There were sounds of motorbikes arriving and taking off at different times, sounds of different types of gun shots, sound of the major explosion, sounds of the crackling fire and mini explosions as the fire ravaged the community. In addition to these were different songs that helped to accentuate the performance at different points. These aided the understanding of the performance by the audience in no small measure.

Different properties that were utilised also helped to carry the import of the actions and dialogue deployed in the performance to the audience. Properties such as the jerry cans of petrol, bowls of food, guns, canes (walking stick) used by Ebikenie, buckets of water brought to quench the raging inferno, which was rather ironic in the circumstance, handcuffs and a host of other properties. These were very significant in projecting the message of the performance to the audience.

The acting displayed by the actors was quite realistic. From the acting by Okoro, Ewari and Efe, which vividly showed the struggles faced by young people in the Niger Delta. Okoro’s mother and Potokiri



at the fire scene were superlative in their performances as they succeeded in eliciting a lot of sympathy from the audience. Of course we cannot but mention Ewari who tried to prevent Efe from dashing into the raging fire to save Okoro and his father, only for Efe to be consumed also. This, plus his altercation with the police, spurred Ewari to take the fight to Ebikenie at Timi's residence. Indeed, the verbal exchanges that took place at Timi's residence could be said to be icing on the cake as far as acting in the production is concerned. The acting elicited so much response from the audience that some persons were gearing up right there for the revolution proposed by Ewari.

On the whole, one can say that the performances in question were well delivered and they spoke to authority, as it were. The Deputy Governor of the State was present at both performances and, contrary to expectations; he was quite receptive to the messages passed across by the play. In his comments after the performances, he showed solidarity with the issues raised in the play and identified with the manner in which they were presented in the performances. He was of the view that the government needed to be reminded of happenings in the society through such performances because government is very often insulated from the true realities on ground by officials who may think they are doing their job in the right way. Indeed, the Deputy Governor promised to take a lot of the issues raised to his principal and also see how a number of the recommendations proffered could be adopted by the government. It remains to be seen how far these promises have been fulfilled, but one can say without equivocation that a process of redirecting the mind was initiated and a paradigm shift is bound to be experienced whether it is consciously done or not

Following are few pictorial illustrations of the play in performance showing happenings in the production and how the dialogue and actions contributed to the enlightenment of the audience and, in consequence, an attempt to redirect their minds towards more salutary endeavours.



Plate 1: Ewari and Efe bringing home a consignment of petrol



Plate 2: Fire from the burst pipeline that engulfs the community, kills people and destroys property



Plate 3: Members of the community bemoaning their loss as the pipeline fire rages on.



Plate 4: Ewari holding Ebikenie (Earthquake) at gun point and telling him that the People's Force will set things aright.



Plate 5: Ebikeni lamenting that perhaps it is too late to turn back and change things.



Plate 6: Preye making Ebikeni, and by extension other politicians and leaders, know that it is possible to make a fresh start and work towards having a better society.

## Conclusion

Given the foregoing discourse, it is evident that the theatre is a veritable means of re-orientating the mind towards bringing about a better society, a society that is in tandem with our aspirations for equity and egalitarianism. This is because as a largely visual medium, the theatre can penetrate the minds of the audience, pass across useful messages and educate them sufficiently to want to work towards creating a more humane society that would benefit all.

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