

NIGERIA AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVE

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Abstract

Indices of development begin with the development of human beings; human beings that will later develop other facets of the society such as the economy, natural, mineral and all other resources available in the country. Hence education is of paramount importance in any nation. The globalization of nations in the close of the 21st century further attests to this reality. It is however sad that while the 'so called developed countries' of the West are fast accelerating in terms of development, the same can not be said about majority of the 'Third World Countries'. What then are the problems facing such an oil-rich country as Nigeria that has remained practically stagnant in the face of development? This paper therefore seeks to explore some of the reasons for the backwardness and the near stagnation of the country 51 years after attaining political independence.

The paper argues that the Top-bottom developmental policies rather than the Bottom-top policies are largely responsible for this. We conclude that using the Theatre-for -Development alternative which encompasses the traditional nuances of communication; to conscientize, promote dialogue, conduct research and encourage

participation and awareness, sustainable development would be attained.

Introduction

Despite the attainment of political independence in 1960, Nigeria is still practically stagnant. This has led to her being described variously as a "developing nation", "Third World", "African sleeping giant". It is indeed a beggar sleeping on a throne of gold. Such clichés are borne out of absolute lack of socio-economic and political development in the oil-rich nation. Reasons for the nations' backwardness and little or no human development are multifarious and complex, but the often patronized is the over thirty-years of her military rule. From the 'Operation Feed the Nation' (OFN) of the late 70s, to the 'Austerity Measures' of the early 1980s, 'Structural Adjustment Program' (SAP) of the 1990s, to the third wave of democratic rule beginning in 1999, the nation can only boast of poverty, oppression, repression, unemployment, socio-political and religious conflicts. Wars, genocide and more recently, the spate of kidnapping in the Niger-Delta region; as major indices of development in her 51 years of independence.

The hope at independence and during the democratic periods have suddenly given way to despair in the closing hours of the 20th century. The much talked about democratic dividends is a sad commentary and a total paradox to the reality on ground. This essay explores a problem solving alternative strategy to development. Its major contribution lies in reversing the hitherto top-down approach towards development which the nation has had to grapple with since independence. Theatre -for -Development

(TFD), understood as a problem-solving performance-oriented form of art is a process used in educating and conscientising both the young and old and unifying and articulating the community on socio-economic, political, environmental and religious problems. To achieve this objective, TFD works on the emotions, feelings, aspirations and the sensibilities to arouse and galvanize the public who unfortunately are in the majority towards taking decisive actions on the direction of development within the polity. Babarinsa Dare, (2003: xviii) sums it up when he declared that; "Nigeria's inability to manage her wealth is not the cause of her problem, but the consequences of her inability to manage her political fortune. Unlike the Noah's ark". The Nigerian leadership is laden with corrupt, greedy and megalomaniac captains while the passengers consider themselves as being fated in the hands of God

Theoretical Consideration

Whereas Plato in his treatise cited in Bernard Dukore (1974), *The Republic*, postulated that art, theatre in particular, is nothing but an imitation, which should be discouraged. According to Plato, "All poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers." (19) He went further by declaring that: "The tragic poet is an imitator and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the truth" (19). Thus, posing a question, "Is there any invention of his applicable to human life?" (19). Likewise, the formalist school of thought will have us believe that art is not a means to an end since their major concern lies in the aesthetics of art as can be perceived in terms of form, structure and language. The perception in Africa, and Nigeria in particular by parents is

that Theatre Arts in particular is the art of dancing, clapping and singing and therefore, they deny their wards the opportunity to venture into such terrain as the creative, performing, dramatic and theatre arts respectively. However, Plekhanov debunks such stereotype when he asserts that art being a part of society becomes an element in the complex structure of social perception to the extent that one social class has power over the other. He opines that: "The belief in art for art sake arises wherever the artist is at odds with his social environment" (12).

Arts are forms of perceptions in which the society's aspirations, yearnings and struggles are interpreted. This perhaps explains why Ogunde's theatre was banned in the Western Region in the 60s because of its commentary on the political imbroglio that rocked the Action Group (AG) party led then by Chief Obafemi Awolowo on one hand and Chief S.L Akintola the ambitious politician on the other. Thus, art, and literature in particular cannot afford to be neutral. Ngugi Wa' Thiongo, (1981) is uncompromising when he emphatically asserts that:

Literature as a creative process and as an end is conditioned by historical forces and pressures. It cannot elect to stand above or to transcend economics, politics, class, race, or what Achebe calls the burning issues of the day because those very burning issues with which it deals take place within an economic, politics, class and race (6).

It is in line with this that Ross Kid, (2002) defines Theatre for Development as:

A problem-solving performance oriented process in a specific society. This could be socio-economic, environmental and religious problems. It is a means of expression, which is traditionally being used to educate the young, unify the community and articulate the community felt concerns and aspirations of the people(204).

The above definition expresses the power of theatre -for -development as a tool for human development. However, Mude Iortion (2002) on the other hand views theatre for development as:

Praxis for challenging noxious policies, and the culture of silence, as well as challenging the existing structures in an environment, which hinder self-development. It takes into consideration the development of the community. It therefore seeks to unveil the society so that its occupants see its nakedness (229-230).

Gbilekaa Saint (1990) on the hand perceives of theatre -for -development as:

Tele-guided performance(s) aimed at conscientizing the working class and the peasants by first seeking dialogue with them instead of taking to them finished theatrical products as is common with traditional western drama. The aim is to mobilize them for socio-political, economic objective and development (27) (emphasis mine)

These definitions takes the same stand point with the argument of this essay because theatre -for -development aims to challenge reactionary forces against development and seeks dialogue with the masses rather than providing ready-made packages.

Development on the other hand is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Various societies have attained various levels of development and so, the approaches and levels must differ from one society to another based on concrete realities of the peasant population who are always in the majority. Walter Rodney also shares the notion of development as many-sided. According to him: at the individual level, "It implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being (9). Chris Nwamuo considers development from the rural point of view when he posits that:

Rural development is a process designed to create condition of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and fullest possible reliance upon the community's initiative. It is stimulation of communities to change their own affairs constructively(75).

Contrary to the above is the western, bourgeoisie and government's concept of development, which sees development in the context of per capital income. Development from this perspective is defined in terms of provision of infrastructures such as hospitals, electricity, pipe-borne water, airports and express roads. Again, Chris Nwamuo's and Rodney's analysis on

development meets our requirement vis-à-vis the bed rock of theatre -for -development. This is because development of, and, at any level must start with the individual who in turn translates development into concrete visible areas for the society. Put in another form, human development is the bedrock of all other spheres of development - economic, political, social and environmental development. The bourgeoisie and indeed the Nigerian government concept of development as seen above neither reflects nor improves the lives of the masses. This warped concept of development is responsible for the widening of the intellectual participation and, the raising of consciousness through the encouragement of dialogue. Jerry Gana once noted that development starts with the; "...development of man, the unfolding and realization of living through the use of resources available to him" (1).

The Argument

Why have all the developmental programmes introduced by the Nigerian government remained counter productive and outright failures? What really is responsible for the fact that despite the abundance of oil, mineral and agricultural resources in the nation, Nigeria and her citizenry are still underdeveloped, unemployed and lacking?. Goddy Onuoha, Director-General of Projects Development Institute (PRODA) in Enugu submits that; "Nigeria's low level of scientific and technological development is responsible for its poverty" (7). He regretted that; "Nigeria would continue to be ravaged by poverty despite her abundant resources." (7) He lamented that "Nigeria is ranked among the sixteen (16)

poorest nations of the world in spite of her abundant human and natural resources." This is indeed sad but true. The reasons for these are not far-fetched, Nigerian government with its Top-bottom policy formulation has refused to learn from mistakes of the past. This is because, very often, the identification and final developmental project to be constructed becomes the exclusive prerogative of bureaucrats and technocrat in the urban centres who are alienated from the masses. The bureaucrats, following official laid-down criteria are removed from the realities of rural poverty. Thus, consultation and importantly too, participation in decision making by the rural dwellers are consequently lost. Abah once observed this lacuna when he declared that:

The success or failure of any one project hinges on proper identification and the choice of the most biting problem for attention. The issue of 'properness' also raises the question of who identifies the problems and finally decides what development a particular community needs. (15)

It is in this light that theatre -for -development becomes relevant. Facilitators and resource personnel go into the various communities to interact with community heads, leaders and ward heads, otherwise known as gatekeepers. They seek permission to conduct interviews with the community members on their felt needs since 'it is he who wears the shoe that can tell where it pinches'. This enhances dialogue and participation, which are instrumental to any meaningful developmental program. This gesture promotes fairness, openness and above all, participation on the part of the

community. This is even more so in Nigeria where conflicts, religious, ethnic and communal intolerance in the past, have stunted her developmental growth. Theatre -for -development as a problem-solving process through its use of traditional machinery such as folk songs, folktales, folklore, drumming, dancing, story telling and most importantly, its participatory and communicative prowess can be used to harness the various resources that had hitherto been neglected. Apart from this, its mode of operation is in total contrast to the Top-bottom government attitude of policy imposition and implementation as a result of the gulf between the palaces, mansions, penthouses and the ghettos, shacks and slums of the masses. The obvious anomaly becomes transparent in the implementation of the Bottom-Top policy since it operates on a participatory level.

Nasiru Akanji's observation is worth mentioning here:

When we think of theatre as a relevant tool in the task of community development, we must understand that we are asking for theatre and theatre personnel to place themselves at the disposal of government and for achieving objectives and goals that have been defined as matters of policy (49).

More positive is Etherton's observations when theatre -for -development plays the role of media and the channel of information dissemination because:

... drama in the context of these development programmes is like any other communication

medium. It is objectively neutral. Drama will reinforce the ultimate aims of the development programmes in which it is being used. Theatres will not, ipsofacto, transform the development programme either into what its superficial rhetoric declares it to be on into something else (320).

The poverty alleviation programme introduced by the Obasanjo regime is a failure today not because the policy is bad but because of Government's failure to approach it from bottom-Top perspective. For example, the massive purchase of the tri-cycles and the payment of stipends to unemployed masses ended up in the wrong hands. In the first place, who determined the fact that the purchase of tri-cycles correspond to the developmental needs, aspirations and yearnings of the people? Can the masses afford the initial down payment and subsequent payments? Can these tri-cycles withstand the erosion-infested roads at the rural communities? These are questions that theatre -for -development would have been able to address and provide realistic answers to, had it been used. Theatre -for -development would have deployed catalyst groups or personnel to every community and through interactions, interviews, and focus group discussions, highlight and prioritized the various problems ,concerns and the needs of the masses to ascertain their immediate needs. The scenario formulations and eventual performance would have stripped 'naked' and made vivid the problems of the community. This kind of theatre speaks to the people in their own language and idioms that deal with issues of direct relevance to their own lives. Thus, development is achieved by, with, and for the community through

dialogue. Once the awareness is created and the community in question is involved, their fate lies in their hands. Theatre -for -development performs a dual role, the awareness which makes them see themselves as they are and as they ought to be thereby taking the bull by the horn. The theatre is the state, the place, the point where we can get hold of man's anatomy and through it, heal and dominate his life.

The theatre -for -development project at Iseyin, Oyo State of Nigeria in 1988 by Iyorwuese Hagher, John Illah, Femi Osofisan, Dapo Adelugba and a host of other seasoned theatre practitioners attest to the argument of this essay. The acknowledgement note by the author Iyorwuese Hagher deserves a second look:

As members of the team of UNICEF/TFD. Practitioners, we sought to establish dialogue with the people of Iseyin on some harmful traditional practices. These were: female genital mutilation, scarification, child labour, and teenage sexuality. We became drawn into the vortex of crisis of family and leadership values, pitted against the needs of urbanization, change and... (1)

The above scenario typifies the modus operandi of theatre -for -development. It seeks dialogue with the people concerned through a round table discussion on the needs of the community and how best to approach these issues. A play is then built around the highlighted areas of need that emanates from the round table discussion with members of the community constituting the majority of the actors and players with the employment of

traditional elements of performance to sustain the play.

The second example is the experience and Theatre -for -Development project of Tor Iorapuu which eventually metamorphosed into a play titled; Had I Known... (2004). According to Iorapuu:

Had I Known... is a product of three years of field research (1996-1999) in the essential area of conscientisation and of the promotion of knowledge, including knowledge of self, among adolescents and young adult women and men. (viii)

The 'finished theatre practice' was jettisoned. Theatre was taken to the masses, a research was properly conducted and a people's oriented theatre there from emanated. It expresses their aspirations, fears, sorrows, hopes and frustrations. Since it was the story of their lives, genuine contributions were made and possible and feasible solutions were proffered. Thus, a theatre of the people, a theatre -for -development will usually embark on research work, which will consider the people's contributions and their plight. This is the bottom- top approach rather than the hitherto; top-bottom approach solutions to problems of development which had failed and will likely continue to fail.

conclusion

As we are trying to consolidate a democratic government, the government of the day should, as a matter of urgency concentrate more on the third tier of government. The various Local Governments are closer to the masses and therefore a more realistic situation is bound to be on ground. Secondly, human development

should be the focus of any government of the day. Creating awareness within the rank and files of the masses would engender development because conscientisation breeds orientation and enlightenment. This will in turn create the atmosphere for dialogue and the need to harness the vast human, material and natural resources for all spheres of development. Non-governmental organizations and the private sector should see themselves as stakeholders in the developmental process of this great nation. Nigeria was once great and can still be greater than she was in the 60s and 70s.

Finally, the neglect of the arts in favor of the sciences needs to be re-visited. The Humanities deals with human beings and human beings are the most complex beings of all mammals. With adequate funding and a detailed prioritized developmental plan, theatre -for- development might just be that alternative to the long and series of pit-falls Nigeria has been experiencing. All the above considered, with corruption out of the picture, Nigeria stands to gain a lot as most of the cases of looted and stashed money in the various banks in Europe may have occurred out of ignorance. Nigeria was once great she can be great again.

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