

AFRREV IJAH  
An International Journal of Arts and Humanities  
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia  
Vol. 1 (3), August, 2012:20-29

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print)

ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

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## **The Theatre Artiste as Agent of Development**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the Theatre Artiste and his functions that contribute to societal development. Qualitative analysis method was used in examining the relevant of the theatre in achieving developmental goals. The author observed that the theatre plays crucial roles in mass mobilization for rural urban development. The artist is considered as someone with special 'calling' to uplift the people by creating awareness which motivates them to initiate actions that enable them take active roles in determining what happens in their society. It is also observed that the theatre artist is creatively involved in the exploration of the attributes of his environment interpreted in various forms through acting, criticism, dance and music. To this extent, the theatre artist should be co-opted into the programmes of national interest and funded since he has the potentials to mobilize the people towards the execution of developmental projects.*

## Introduction

The need to ascertain who the theatre artiste is, what he does that makes him relevant and contributes to societal development has prompted this writing. The people who live in a community have ways of realising their aspirations for maximum benefits through the activities of some individuals especially the artistes. It is in this capacity that this writer looks at the artiste and what he does with the environment on the right side while on the left, he examines what the environment does to the psyche of the artiste that shapes his personality and creativity as well as contributes to societal advancement.

Let us begin by looking at the artiste from this context as one who is involved in the creation of the arts. According to Zulu Sofola in *The Artist and the Tragedy of a Nation*, the artiste is "a Seer, a Visioner, a Thinker, a Creator, the Conscience of the society, a Gadfly, a Prophet, a Town Crier, a Teacher and a Revealer of the Divine Mind" (2) In this regard, it is then taken that an artiste is that personality who spends time to write, fashion, design or produce a non existing text, objects or performance which benefit the society in terms of entertainment, education and information. This is because he does not create for nothing but is taken to share in the task of creativity with God-the Omnipotent Artist. He creates through his writings, performances and provides other services that bring joy to the society. The theatre artiste is an activist involved in the daily affairs of his society which implies that the artiste is a participant in the events of his society and is affected by the same. He is often interested in bringing changes which impact positively on the society. The exploration and interpretation of the essence of human environment is usually his concern. This essence is often interpreted in various forms through acting, criticising, dancing, singing and reciting. The artiste will then be examined from the various perspectives through which his functions contribute to the progress and development of the society but before this let us clarify some basic concepts.

## Conceptual Framework

### Agent

It has become imperative to define the key words such as agent and development within the context of our study. Agent, according to *New Collegiate Dictionary* is "something that produces or is capable of producing an effect by its action ". It goes further to say that it is "a means or instrument by which a guiding intelligence achieves a result or one that acts or exerts

power"(163) From the above, it could be seen that the theatre artiste as an agent of change has the capacity or power to influence his audience to take a particular action or change their views on issues or behaviour for the well being of the society. Here, the artiste serves as a vehicle through which the society redirects its activities for survival.

### **Development**

Development concerns man and his welfare in society in relation to the environment. It also examines how man has been able to harness the human as well as the natural resources available in the society for his well being. It has been observed that man is at the centre of every developmental effort because it is designed to benefit him. In the views of Okereke and Ekpe:

Development implies the qualitative change, not only in the standard of living of the members of the society but also the transformation of the society, in all its ramifications. Thus, the availability of such development indicators as high literacy rate, good road network, constant supply of electricity; improved medical facilities, decent housing as well as equitable distribution of income are indicative of a developed society and is a manifestation of and capacity to induce social change by use of labour, power and available resources to improve the living standard of the citizens. (12-13)

It has been observed that development within a given society facilitates learning, interaction, exchange of ideas and redistribution of wealth among citizens to enable them make meaningful living. It enables the people to think positively about themselves, others, their community and country in relation to what should be done to benefit all. True development empowers the people and makes them aware of how best to harness and utilise the resources of their environment. It is in the quest to bring about development in the society that the theatre artiste serves as an agent or facilitator on whom developmental activities revolve. The above seems to be in agreement with the Marxist's concept of development which in Okereke and Ekpe's views:

....should take into account not only economic and political factors alone, but also social indicators as well. In specific terms, such an approach should see development as people inspired, human centred and citizen anchored....People

should be seen as agents of change and development should directly affect the quality of life and well-being of mankind. (47)

From the above, it could be seen that development entails social, political, economic, religious, educational, as well as agricultural changes and the elimination of poverty in the society. Having defined these terms in the context of this paper, we can now go on to discuss the various activities through which the theatre artiste contributes to societal development.

### **The Artiste as a Social and Political Activist**

The theatre artiste is a conscious being who acts in accordance with the culture of the environment where he operates. The artiste, in order to make useful contributions as well as become relevant makes effort to be conversant with the aspirations of his society which he attempts to project in his arts. He cannot act in isolation as he is affected by the events and circumstances of the moment where he lives. He champions the cause of his calling and the communal essence in accordance with the cultural expectations of the people within his environment. The artiste first captures the events in his mind and then projects them with his voice on stage as well as on paper as a writer. This situation compels the artiste to be committed to his art and society. This also prompted Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his book entitled *Home Coming* to emphasise that the artiste as a "writer responds with his total personality to a social environment which changes all time. Being a kind of a sensible needle, he records with varying degrees of accuracy and success the conflicts and tension in his changing society" (47) Thus, it could be seen that the artist does not operate in a vacuum but rather uses the events that take place in his society to formulate his arts.

Moreover, the artist performs in conjunction with the patterns set by the society and is influenced by its demands. This basic function of the artiste has also been buttressed by Nzimiro in *The Political System of the Igbo* when he notes that what the artiste "tries to express or communicate is an emotional response to his environment.-the surrounding objects, people, conditions, influences or behaviours and attitude" (169) These imply that most of the art works carried out by the artiste often have relevance to the cultural environment where he operates.

The theatre artiste is an activist who works for the general interest of the society. He delves into politics or religious activities when the situation beckons. He uses the theatre as an instrument to fight against social ills such as oppressive leadership, child abuse or child trafficking. This has led many artistes to come in conflict with many dictatorial regimes especially in Africa and other parts of the world. This could be seen during the colonial and military era in Nigeria as well as South Africa in shades of apartheid. It has been observed that the artiste often supports the people in their struggle for emancipation by creating awareness during theatrical performances and writings that ridicule as well as castigate the leadership. An example could be seen during the oppressive government of the colonial administration in Nigeria when the late artiste Hubert Ogunde was motivated to write and perform some of his plays which were entitled "Opera Worse Than Crime"(1945) and "Strike and Hunger" (1946) in condemnation of the negative impact of colonialism. These performances gingered support for the political emancipation and the struggle for independence in many African countries especially in Nigeria where most of his performances took place. This created awareness among the people to the extent that many who were initially lukewarm became interested and eventually joined the struggle against colonialism. The achievement of independence brought about political, social and economic development in the country.

It is also on record that many of our artistes had at different times involved themselves in the struggle against retrogressive forces in the society for the enthronement of justice which they hope will bring peace and stability to the country. A typical example that readily comes to mind is Wole Soyinka's opposition to the military during the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970) which eventually led to his forceful detention. Another example is seen in Kenya, where Ngugi Wa Thiongo was also detained due to his opposition against an oppressive government. Again a theatre artiste from South Africa, Athol Fugard calls attention to the effects of apartheid on the masses in his drama entitled *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Here, we are shown how the urge to acquire work permit forces Bansi to change his name to Robert Zwelanzima to facilitate his using the dead man's passport to search for a job and means of livelihood. This is one of the survival mechanisms adopted by the oppressed which captured the attention of the artiste. Experience has also shown that the artiste is often in the vanguard of leading the people to champion the cause of societal emancipation and progress.

The theatre artiste is an activist who does not sit laughing or drinking wine when the society goes amok as he often stands and shouts against the injustices perpetrated against the people so as to usher in a better one. This forces him to confront the situation and challenge the leadership and their collaborators. It has been observed that the artiste often seems to be complaining and even sometimes quarrelling with everyone especially those he considers involved in the oppression of the masses. The above situation has also been expressed by Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micere Mugo in their drama entitled *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in which the struggle of the masses against colonial oppression in Kenya is highlighted. It was through the leadership of Dedan Kimathi that the members of the Mau Mau were able to organise to fight injustices perpetrated against the Kenyan people. This is seen from the conflict involving land ownership between the indigenous people and the British colonialists. Through the struggle, the people were able to force the colonialists to hand over some parcels of land and even political power to them.

This struggle and commitment is often considered fundamental to the artiste in relation to his functions in the society through the theatre. This seems to be the opinion expressed by Ngugi and Mugo in their introduction to the above play where they wrote "we believe good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weakness gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation" (viii-ix) This awareness created by these dramatists enabled the people to become conscious and eager to control their resources which eventually brought freedom as well as development to the entire country. Amuta in *The Theory of African Literature* seems to have made similar observation concerning the artiste's ability to inspire the people when he postulates that Ngugi and Micere in the above "play do not lament the tragedy of the oppressed but inspire them to challenge the condition of their oppression" (159)

It is observed that the artiste in venturing into political drama has helped in creating awareness as well as mobilising agitation that eventually brought an end to some of the most oppressive governments in many parts of the world especially in Africa. The artiste is able to do this because he identifies with the people and share their aspirations. Through the theatre, the people are made aware and even charged to the point that they are willing to take arms against the oppressors. At this juncture, they come to the realisation that there is need for change in the society which the people hope will bring better

future. It is on record that the theatre artiste plays this fundamental role of galvanizing the people in their struggle for change through protest as was the case even during the classical Greek period when the artistes were there as the voice of the people. This could be seen in the plays of their dramatists such as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* which highlights the negative effects of the Peloponnesian Wars on the people especially on women and children. Through the able leadership of Lysistrata and other women leaders they were able to mobilise and force the men to sign a truce to end the war. The artistes were then revered and seen as the mirror through which the society examines itself as well as motivated to work for progress collectively.

In many occasions, the theatre artiste seems to be complaining especially when the situation tends to become unbearable for the people. At this point, he may be referred to as a "complainant" by those who do not understand his personality and calling as the people's "voice". In most cases, those who benefit from the situation are not always comfortable with his remarks and criticisms. As a matter of fact, some see him as a 'trouble maker' who creates trouble with his mouth on stage during performances and also invites the audience to read them as drama texts.

### **Ideological Influence**

The ideological perception of the people living within a cultural environment influences the theatre artiste as an active member of that society. As he participates in their daily activities with other members, he is affected by whatever happens. It is the above ideology that he struggles to either live with or attempts to change depending on the situation which favours the people. The artiste is usually seen struggling with the people to bring positive development within his society. This could be seen from the works of dramatists such as Walcott in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* where he also shows the political as well as the social condition of the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean islands and their nostalgia for Africa after the emancipation proclamation in America. The forceful movement of the people from Africa to the West and their eventual abandonment in the Caribbean plantations created hardship which led to loss of self identity as Africans as well as their humanness. The situation prompted many of the freed slaves to contemplate returning to Africa for resettlement. This also galvanized them into the formation of many organisations with the aim of agitating for fare treatment, self identity and nationhood. It gladdens the hearts of many to note that African- Americans are celebrating the ascension of Barrack Obama as

president of United States of America and other gains they made as a result of this remarkable struggle.

Moreover, the theatre artiste makes the people conscious to understand the fact that it is only through the collective struggle that their emancipation will be actualised. In this regard, the artiste places emphasis on man and his ability to use his brain to solve problems that affect society. Through the theatre, the people come to understand that as long as they rely on the gods and refuse to use their human initiatives, they will continue to experience failures. Based on the effort of the artiste to mobilise the people, it is then realised that the collective action will lead to the achievement of their desired aspirations and usher in progress. It is clear from the above that the artiste redirects the course of history and challenges the people to struggle for the betterment of their society. The conscious artiste never sleeps when the society is going amok as he mobilises the people for collective action. The artiste creates awareness that instils hope and courage in the people which enables them to realise their potentials and ability to determine their fate in relation to the development of the society.

### **The Artist as a Promoter of Good Health**

On the other spheres, the theatre artiste is an activist who works for the general good of the society as he creates social consciousness and makes the people aware of their responsibilities through the performances. When the benefits of some developmental projects are dramatised in the theatre, there is the tendency that the people will want such unique projects to take place in their locality. This will ginger interest and propel them to embark on similar developmental projects in their areas. The artiste also uses the theatre as an avenue through which he informs the people on the dangers of some dreadful diseases such as acquired immune deficiency syndrome, tuberculosis, diabetes or cancer. He creates awareness which helps in the effort to eradicate the above diseases. It is observed that a society inhabited by healthy people stands the chance of witnessing developmental initiatives which will benefit everyone.

Through the theatre, it is seen that the artiste creates awareness which improves human health and the environment. He is able to reach the audience and inform them on some important environmental issues such as the need to keep their surroundings clean. He does this effectively by highlighting in his drama the risks inherent in living in dirty environment. When the risks associated with issues such as drinking of unclean water are carefully



dramatised, it has the ability to influence the audience positively. Again, vital information is given by the artiste through the performances on development programmes initiated by the government and other agencies such as World Health Organisation, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation. As the benefits of these projects are dramatised, there is the tendency that the people will accept to work for their execution and implementation. The above seems to be the view of Bata in his article on "Harnessing the Performing and Communication Arts for Sustainable Development in Africa" when he made a similar observation on the power of the theatre as an instrument for the mobilisation of the people by postulating that:

This involvement of the spectator clearly shows the power of drama to affect behaviour or induce action. The problem of development in Africa can be ingeniously dramatised in a way as to awaken the consciousness of the people, individuals, groups, communities, civil society, institutions and government to work for the reduction of poverty, promotion of food security, reduction of maternal and child mortality, respect for human rights, facilitation of good governance, and promotion of literacy and gender equity. (52)

This shows that the theatre artiste has the ability to influence people's attitude on developmental issues. For example, when the effects of the dreadful diseases are dramatised in the theatre the audience tend to be more conscious in their dealings with the environment in order to avoid being contaminated. The drama can influence their lives to the extent that most of them will do everything possible to remain healthy.

### **Conclusion**

The concern of this paper has been to portray the theatre artist in the light of the fundamental works he does which promote development in the society. The artiste is seen as an agent who through the theatre creates awareness which motivates the people towards the realisation of their aspirations. This is undertaken through performances such as acting, dancing and criticizing based on the cultural perception of the people. This enables the artist to create the consciousness which prompts the people to initiate developmental programmes in their society as well as encourages them to work with government and other agencies concerned. From this experience, it is

observed that development occurs in society when the people are well informed and aware of their responsibilities especially when they are properly mobilized. It is in this vein that the theatre artiste is seen as agent who facilitates development initiatives in the society. Having shared in this experience, the writer recommends that the artiste should be empowered to discharge his duties and play his role effectively through proper funding. In connection to this, the establishment of endowment funds becomes appropriate to enable the artiste carry out his functions efficiently. The availability of funds will facilitate the productions of well researched performances which will inform the people and motivate them to embark on development programmes for the benefit of the society.

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