

TOWARDS INVIGORATING CULTURAL CENTRES IN NIGERIA

Joseph O. Umukoro

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Uyo, Nigeria
josephumukoro@uniuyo.edu.ng
Tel.: +234-8028444895

Abstract

It has been observed that the most mismanaged and most misdirected of the cultural infrastructures that have emerged since the euphoria of cultural re-awakening in Nigeria in the 1970s are the Cultural Centres (or Arts Centres) which were offshoots of the various State Arts Councils (or Councils for Arts and Cultures) established by the various State Governments. The main reason for the misdirection of the affairs of the Cultural Centres has been attributed to the lack of understanding or appreciation of the social and political roles that the institutions can play in our national development and social mobilization. Therefore, an attempt is made in this essay to put the role of Cultural Centres in a proper perspective by examining the concept and origin of the institutions. The essay concludes with the organizational framework in which the Cultural Centres can be effectively managed to achieve the desired impact as agents of community development and social mobilization.

Introduction

The idea of Cultural Centres in Nigeria was conceived in the early 1970s during the country's oil boom era. They were characterized by the magnificent arts complexes built in the state capitals with the purpose of housing the various arts forms and providing such cultural facilities that hitherto were non-existent in many of the cities. At the Federal level, the magnificent multimillion naira National Arts Theatre in Lagos was built primarily to provide a fitting venue for the Second World Festival of Black Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in 1977.

Virtually, all the state governments (beginning with the Rivers State Government in 1972) have enacted edicts establishing State Arts Councils for the purpose of preserving, promoting, propagating and fostering the arts

and culture of their various states. Other aims of an arts council are to improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts, and to make them more accessible to the public. Paradoxically, the Arts Council has been widely criticized by critics as the citadel of bureaucratic establishment art, whose objectives are too ill-defined to make evaluation possible. Most charges are those of being unrepresentative, undemocratic and irresponsible. Hence, the primary objective in this essay is to put the role of Cultural Centres in proper perspective and examine the organizational framework in which they can be effectively managed to achieve the desired impact as agents of community development and social mobilization.

Concept and Origin of Cultural Centres

The term “Arts Centre” is often used interchangeably with “Cultural Centre”; though the two terms have also been indiscriminately applied to single art organizations (with emphasis on the singular form of the word “art”) whose chief purpose is to present exhibits and provide classes in the visual and plastic arts. The modern conception of a Cultural Centre is a group of buildings in an urban area established for the purpose of presenting various arts forms, like drama, dance, music, films, fine and plastic arts. A Cultural Centre is often built around a theatre complex or concert hall with multi-purpose facilities which often include an art museum, art galleries, a library and a resident performing troupe. This concept of a Cultural Centre as an architectural entity rather than as a district is relatively modern, and it is a phenomenon of the post-war development, especially of the 1960s. Writing on “Cultural Centres and Community Development: The Nigerian Experience”, Jide Malomo identifies three types of Cultural Centres. The first type are the major cultural complexes established in large cities to provide and present various art forms and to serve as repository for the national arts and culture of the country. The second type are the community Cultural Centres established to serve specific social needs in some regions or localities. Sometimes such needs involve making the arts assessible and accessible to an area that is socially or educationally deprived. The concept behind such Cultural Centres is that of an institution capable of improving community that suffers one form of deprivation or the other. The third type are the college and university Arts Centres established through the joint co-operation of universities and the communities in which they are located. The primary

motivation for establishing Cultural Centres is the provision of cultural and artistic facilities in places where they have been inadequate or even non-existent. Although some private organizations and individuals are involved in establishing Cultural Centres, it is usually through public agencies and funding that the institutions have been created and are sustained. The basic functions of a Cultural Centre often derive from the fundamental tasks of the cultural policies of the countries which have established them. These basic tasks are (1) the preservation of cultural heritage (2) the stimulation of artistic creativity and (3) making cultural values of past and present available to the general population. Cultural Centres are therefore conceived functionally as the infrastructure for presenting and preserving the various arts forms for the appreciation and enjoyment of the citizenry.

Towards a virile Organisational Framework for Nigerian Cultural Centres

Cultural Centres in Nigeria are characterized by the magnificent architectural designs located in state capitals usually in the city centres. These institutions certainly have objectives among which are to foster, publicize encourage, develop and promote arts and culture in the state. What seems not to be definite is the extent to which they are being achieved. A fundamental question this poses is: how have they been faring in this regard? This is an area which continues to attract the attention of cultural administrators.

One of the major problems of our Cultural Centres is lack of the right leadership. This is a situation whereby civil servants not knowledgeable in the arts and administration are appointed to serve in key positions such as the Director General and Executive Secretaries. This lack of artistic sensitivity and expertise in managing artistic institutions by most leaders of the Cultural Centres has led to the absence of a virile programme by the centres. The way out, therefore, is to make sure that only knowledgeable people in the arts and administration are deployed to occupy key positions in the centres. A good example is the appointment of Prof. Sunny Ododo as the General Manager of the National Theatre, Lagos.

Poor image is another setback for Cultural Centres in Nigeria. The initial reactions and attitudes of the public that greeted the establishment of cultural institutions in the country are worthy to note. An example is the

Oyo State Council for Arts and Culture whose edifice was seen as a place of idol worship barely one year after its inception (as quoted by Umokoro). This is a reflection of the hostile relationship between the arts and society. An obvious reason is a lack of the right publicity and good public relations. Moreso, is the lack of publicity of the Cultural Policy for Nigeria with the result that the people for whom it is meant to give a sense of direction are not even aware of its existence in theory, not to talk of in practice. In other words, where to read about the Cultural Policy is unknown to a majority of the literate people and even the illiterate masses, a majority of whom are already beset by ignorance and the effect of an ingrained colonial mentality. It should be noted that Nigerian Cultural Centres are regarded as emerging from section 6.1.6 of the Cultural Policy for Nigeria. And as public institutions designed to improve the artistic and cultural life of the communities in which they are situated, our Cultural Centres should be people oriented. Therefore, the management of the centres should go all out to develop programmes in which the public can participate fully as creators and as audience members. This is the way the activities at the centre can be brought into focus to enable the culture-conscious community of the states to visit the centre, making it possible to put it into a more proper use rather than mere occasional command performances in honour of an important personality.

Insufficient fund is also a major challenge of Cultural Centres in Nigeria. There is need for improvement on release of fund to the Council by state governments. Good funding leads to artistically splendid productions which would ultimately attract appreciative and appreciable audiences. The way forward is to come to terms with the economic realities with a strong progressive national policy of funding at the governmental level of public and private productions making the National and State Arts Councils more effective and creating appropriate commissions and endowments to deal with theatre productions in particular and arts and culture in general.

Conclusion

The fact is that the whole idea of a Cultural Centre is for the development of the community to which it belongs. Having examined the concept and the social role of Cultural Centres and the problem facing them today, it is quite evident that the way to invigorate the institutions and make them

relevant to community development is to inject into them a virile administration and management which will make the centres a veritable agent of public enlightenment and social mobilization.

Works Cited

- Malomo, Jide “Cultural Centres and Community Development: The Nigerian Experience,” paper presented at the 6th National Convention of the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists held at the University of Ilorin – May 31st – June 3rd 1989.
- Umukoro, Joseph “Cultural Development and Arts Management in Nigeria: A Comparative Study of Public and Private Support for the Arts and Culture,” PhD Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, May 2002.