

THE STATE AS TERRORIST: A PICTORIAL READING OF THE VISUAL THEATRE PLAY, “HARVEST OF GHOSTS”

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Abstract

Terrorism as a phenomenon finds expression in diverse forms and is located within varied spheres of the human population. There are contestations, however, as to what exactly qualifies as terrorism and who fits the profile of a terrorist. These contestations arise principally because of how certain acts and persons are perceived, depending on what side of the divide one stands. A terrorist to one person is a freedom fighter or social crusader to another. An act seen as terrorism by one person may be seen by another as legitimate response and protection of one’s interests/rights. Beyond all of these, however, is the perception that terrorism can only be perpetrated by individuals and groups/organisations. Many persons do not acknowledge the fact that governments and states can also be terrorists. Worse off is the fact that such governments and states may in fact carry out such terrorist acts against their own people that they swore to protect. It is this thesis that propels this study, to determine at what point the state becomes culpable of terrorism, particularly against its own people. This investigation shall be embarked upon using the instrumentality of a pictorial reading of the play, “Harvest of Ghosts”, co-written by Sam Ukala of Nigeria and Bob Frith of the United Kingdom.

Introduction

Terrorism as a phenomenon has continued to gain currency and more relevance in our contemporary existence. News about one terrorist group or the other, about one terrorist activity or the other, intrude into our otherwise tranquil lives and assault our sensibilities almost on a daily basis. From a historical perspective, terrorism has always been with the human race. This is because one can hardly reference any epoch of human evolution that terrorism (or terrorist activities) did not feature in a certain way. This is eloquently posited by Ariel Merari and Nehemia Friedland in their essay, “Social Psychological Aspects of Political Terrorism”.

At the early beginnings of human history, when man lived in wondering gangs, there was always the need to compete for space and scarce resources. In addition to this was the mutual suspicion that existed among different gangs of humanity. To survive in such an environment, therefore, it had necessitated the sabotaging of the efforts of opposing gangs. Under such circumstances, some form of crude and somewhat non-deliberate form of terrorism was perpetrated. We can say non-deliberate, in this context,

because the objective was not to deliberately cripple the opposition but to fight for more advantageous positions in order to eke out some form of existence.

When human communities became more formalised and the concept of clanhood began to take shape, which eventually led to statehood, terrorism became more advanced and began to acquire a more deliberate intent at dispossession and, ultimately, annihilation. History books and books that deal with politics, governance and inter-group relations are replete with innumerable examples of such terrorist activities. To be conceded, however, is the fact that such terrorist activities were driven more by economic considerations. The English economist and journalist, Walter Bagehot gives us an insight into inter-group terrorist acts in his book, *Physics and Politics*.

Bagehot, who was a major exponent of what came to be known as the struggle school, traces the evolution of groups on the journey to statehood or nationhood; and in this journey, different kinds of conflict arose, which were targeted mainly at sabotaging opponents with the intent of advancing one's group. Such imperialistic disposition of certain nations that led to the conquering of other people and the establishment of colonies all across the world by colonial masters is nothing short of terrorism. Till date, even after virtually all of the former colonies have gained independence, states continue to engage in terrorist acts against others with the intention of advancing their own interests even if, in most cases, such acts are not designated terrorism. This is the crux of the matter. What exactly can be termed terrorism? Who are the persons that can be called terrorists? Finding answers to these questions is not as easy as it might seem.

Conceptual Evaluation of Terrorism

Terrorism is one term that is very difficult to pigeonhole because of the many meanings and interpretations that are given to it. This difficulty arises principally because of the emotional and other lenses with which the term is viewed. We find, therefore, that a terrorist to one person may be a freedom fighter to another. In the same vein, an act viewed as terrorism by one person may be seen by another person as protecting one's interest and dignity. In this light, political, economic, social, religious and such other considerations underlie our perception of terrorism and our reaction to it. This difficulty in defining terrorism is so pervasive that even the United Nations (UN) has not been able to come to an agreement on how it should be defined, what precisely should be labelled terrorist acts, and who should be called a terrorist. Several resolutions have been taken by the General Assembly and the Security Council of the UN, as well as Conventions passed and entered into by Member Nations of the UN; but in all of these, what we find are condemnations of terrorism and resolves to protect persons affected by terrorist activities without a clear agreement on who the terrorist is. The UN is unable to reach such an agreement because virtually every country wants to protect its national interest, and so has an understanding of terrorism and who the terrorist is, different from those of other countries. In the same way, adherents of different religions also protect their religion and would not want terrorism to be associated with it.

Given the scenario above, and in spite of resolutions, such as, *Res. 49/60 – Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1994; *Res. 54/109 – International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of*

Terrorism, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1999; and *Security Council Resolution 1566* of 2004, which essentially was a call on Member countries to cooperate in the war against terrorism, amongst many others, the UN has failed to be clear cut in agreement on who the terrorist is. Scholars of terrorism themselves have battled the issue of definition and what precisely terrorism means.

We can refer to Alex Schmid, who gives a compendium of definitions and comes up with 109 ways in which terrorism may be defined, as gleaned from questionnaires he sent out. This gives credence to the belief of lack of consensus of what the term actually means. In “The Challenges of Conceptualising Terrorism”, Weinberg, Pedahzur and Hirsch-Hoefler discuss the difficulty in defining the concept terrorism. They posit that this difficulty arises on account of a number of factors: What parameter(s) does one use in labelling someone as either a terrorist or a freedom fighter? How does one draw the line between terrorism and other forms of violence, like guerrilla warfare, assassinations, etc.? What is the physical and emotional distance between the act of violence and the observer? (Weinberg, Pedahzur and Hirsch-Hoefler 778-779). These factors, and others, make the attempt to define terrorism not very easy. To help surmount this challenge, Weinberg et al. have recourse to Alex Schmid’s discussion of terrorism in which it is broken down into four arenas: academic, state views, public and media views, and views by outlaws and anarchists (779). Dwelling on the academic arena, they attempt to construct a modest definition of terrorism thus: “Terrorism is a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role” (782).

This modest definition, however, does not seem to cover the whole gamut of the concept as some components are not captured. Other scholars have also looked at the term from several other perspectives in order to attempt an understanding of terrorism. Richard Couto, in making reference to Brian Jenkins, notes that violence is an inevitable component of terrorism, even if this violence could simply be a threat or the actual perpetration of it. Couto also refers to Walter Laqueur, who avers that the threatened or actual violence as pointed out by Jenkins above is usually deliberately targeted at civilians (72); because they are usually easier to hit and such hit would inevitably draw great weepy and psychological response from the citizenry. The objective then is to instil fear in the populace as a way of drawing attention to a course championed by the perpetrators of the violence.

The discussion thus far appears to convey the impression that violence associated with terrorism is usually, or only, carried out by non-state groups that are out to destabilise a country with the aim of compelling the state to do their bidding. Available information, however, does not support this view as there is ample evidence of terrorist acts linked to particular governments. These are done either directly by agents of the state or by groups that enjoy official or clandestine support from a country. Officially, every country can be said to engage in one form of terrorism or the other through their different intelligence organisations. In the same way, these terrorist acts are either done on an international level, which is one country against another, or domestically, that is, against its own citizens. Our focus in this essay is the terrorism that a state carries out against its own citizens.

A number of studies have documented such domestic terrorist acts. Indeed, history is replete with documentations of how states use terror to hold their people hostage. The story of Josef Stalin and his co-travellers in the defunct Soviet Union is quite popular. In several publications, among which we have *Terror and Progress USSR...* by Barrington Moor, *How Russia is Ruled* by Merle Fainsod, and *Political Terror in Communist Systems* by Alexander Dallin and George W. Breslauer, we are given excellent exposé of the terror that the Soviet Union and other Communist states unleashed on their own people. This state of internal terrorism was undeniably accentuated by the Cold War between the East and the West that existed then. But it was not just the Cold War that helped to breed authoritarian governments, nor were authoritarian regimes restricted to communist countries, regimes which turned around to harass their own citizens. Joseph L. Scarpali and Lessie Jo Frazier, in their essay, “State Terror: Ideology, Protest and the Gendering of Landscapes”, discuss the suppression of citizens by authoritarian regimes in the Latin American countries of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, what they call the Southern Cone, between the late 1950s and the early 1990s. They posit that state terror was used by the regimes to try to legitimise their hold onto power, to keep the citizens in perpetual state of fear and subject them to the whims of the regimes.

Within the African continent, and particularly in Nigeria, we have had our own share of dictatorial and terrorist regimes that promoted free reign of terror on the citizens. In fact, for the better part of the 1960s, virtually the whole of the 1970s, most of the 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria was held hostage by a succession of dictatorial military regimes. Of the lot, perhaps two stand out as the most brutal and terrorist inclined: the General Muhammadu Buhari regime between 1983 and 1985, and the General Sani Abacha regime between 1993 and 1998. These regimes could be compared to those of Augusto Pinoche of Chile between 1973 and 1990; Francois Duvalier (Papa Doc) of Haiti between 1957 and 1971; Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc) also of Haiti between 1971 and 1986; Manuel Antonio Noriega of Panama between 1983 and 1989; Mobutu Sese Seko of Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) between 1965 and 1997; Hissene Habre of Chad between 1982 and 1990; and Charles Taylor of Liberia between 1997 and 2003, amongst others.

The Buhari and Abacha regimes prided themselves in unleashing the utmost terror against the Nigerian populace. Journalists and human rights activists were indiscriminately arrested and killed; the judiciary was muzzled; critics of the government simply disappeared or were brazenly killed; and communities were indiscriminately razed down. Indeed, these two regimes could be considered the darkest in Nigeria’s checkered history. This essay draws inspiration from and focuses on the fallouts of the activities of one of these regimes: the Sani Abacha regime with regards to its terrorist activities in the Niger Delta, as captured in the play, “Harvest of Ghosts”.

The Play, “Harvest of Ghosts”

The play, “Harvest of Ghosts”, was given birth to at the Horse and Bamboo Theatre, Waterfoot, Lancashire, England, in 1998, when Sam Ukala, who was then a Commonwealth Fellow, collaborated with Bob Frith to co-write and co-direct it. The play

toured England, Ireland and Holland in 1999. It was reworked and produced as part of the activities of the 21st International Convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), at Grand Hotel, Asaba, Delta State; and then at the Theatre Arts Studio, Delta State University, Abraka, all in 2002.

“Harvest of Ghosts” dwells on the sorry state of the Niger Delta as the region that produces the bulk of the financial resources that keep the wheel of Nigeria running, yet gets next to nothing from her God-given resources while at the same time suffers deprivation and despoliation of the environment. It chronicles the reprehensible actions of the Nigerian state and the International Oil Companies that exploit the oil and gas resources of the region. The play uses the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight Ogoni compatriots by the General Sani Abacha regime in 1995, as paradigm to discuss the wider Niger Delta question.

In specific terms, the play starts with a festival, a festival that has spirits, ancestors and humans involved in one huge communal engagement of togetherness, merriment and propitiation of the elemental forces. In the midst of this festival, however, Kika, an environmentalist and writer, is bitter about the destruction of the environment as a result of oil exploration and exploitation. These oil exploitation activities, of course, lead to ill-health, poor agricultural harvest and ultimately poverty and death in the land. Kika writes and campaigns to change the course of the tide. Meanwhile, the façade of a festival procession re-appears and this time the king is in attendance. A sacrifice is conducted as part of the festival but the gods reject it and rather pitch their tent with Kika. This sets the stage for the first confrontation as Kika takes the complaints of the people against Shellbottom and the activities of his company to the king. Shellbottom, however, bribes the king, urges him to discountenance the complaints and, in fact, to transform himself into a military Head of State.

The problems do not abate; Shellbottom and his company continue to destroy the environment and impoverish the people, and Kika is further drawn into the plight of his peoples. He writes and takes their complaints to the newly transformed military President, but Shellbottom is ever there to bribe and turn the king against his people. Issues come to a head when Kika mobilises and goes to stop the drilling of oil that ironically impoverishes his people and destroys the environment. In the melee that follows, Kika is killed and his blood flows into the earth which sprouts ghosts to continue the struggle. These ghosts whip the President and Shellbottom until they capitulate.

All of the foregoing in performance was achieved through visual means, the performance of which was accompanied by instrumental music and some dance steps as the occasion demanded. In the Nigerian version of the play, this writer was Scenic/Technical Director and the aesthetics of that production have been well documented in the essay, “A Tidal Wave of Ghosts?: A Reading of Sam Ukala’s ‘Harvest of Ghosts’”. We shall, therefore, not go into a detailed discussion of that production here. However, as pointed out in “A Tidal Wave of Ghosts?..”, apart from the very evocative visual background that was designed and executed, other visual elements deployed included puppets, letterings and icons in the form of characters and props (124-126). These helped to convey the message of the play in very clear and graphic terms to the audience. This is because the visual elements deployed clearly represented identifiable

signposts of the travails associated with oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta, and the attendant destruction of the environment, coupled with the poverty foisted on the people.

The play is quite paradigmatic of the Niger Delta situation and in particular of the events that led to the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his compatriots. It mirrors very eloquently the terrorist disposition of the General Sani Abacha administration and the Nigerian state against the Ogoni people in particular and the Niger Delta as a whole. This terrorism against the Niger Delta is very evident in the seizure of the oil found in the region for the development of the rest of the country while the region suffers. It is instructive to note that of all the mineral resources (solid, liquid and gas) found all over Nigeria, only the oil and gas found in the Niger Delta region have been so seized by the Federal Government and jealously guarded with all the crude instruments of state power. This situation, inevitably, led to agitations and resistance by the Niger Delta people, which the Federal Government of Nigeria has always quelled with utmost terror.

G. G. Darah, in *The Niger Delta: Resource Control and the Quest for Justice*, gives a graphic narrative of the Niger Delta deprivation story and the brutal way the Federal Government of Nigeria has responded to agitations coming from the region. Darah paints a picture of the Federal Government of Nigeria as a thief, whose sole aim, as it were, is to deprive the Niger Delta of the benefits of her resources. He argues that the quest for justice by the Niger Delta has been met with terror and bloodshed (31, 35). To give fillip to our discussion, it might be enlightening to make this extensive quote from the book:

All the regimes have employed violent means to terrorise and brutalise innocent people in the oil-rich states in order to ensure the continuous flow of oil and dollar revenue. The ferocious manner the Nigerian government responds to oil-induced protests and complaints shows that the country is more interested in the oil money than in the welfare and safety of the people. It is instructive to note that the government never employs similar hard tactics against the oil companies even when they commit atrocities against the communities and the environment. The companies are never held to account for their actions that cause wanton abuse of human rights (19).

The scenario painted above is nothing short of terrorism against the very people that the government owes a duty to protect.

Pictorial Reading of the Play

As we had advanced earlier in this essay, visual theatre is a wordless performance that makes use of mime-like actions accompanied by music. It uses a generous dose of puppets and icons that the audience can identify with to pass across its message in a lively manner. Thomas Butler Garret, in an attempt to define visual theatre, traces the evolution of that form of theatre practice from avant-garde performances, to puppetry and physical theatre. He argues that visual theatre is a mixture of mime, puppetry and cinema. This is so, he says, because, unlike mime in which the actor is animated against a more or less

static environment, the visual theatre actor lives his/her life in an animated environment where the scenery and props can come to life. Garret says in this shared animation between the actor, scenic environment and props, puppets also play significant roles because they assume lives of their own and also interact with the human actors, the environment, the props and the audience. The interplay of all of these elements, he says, gives the performance a cinematic quality (66-80). Of course, in all of this, the absence of verbal language is conspicuously noticed. Music takes its place and accompanies the action of the performance from beginning to the end.

Dean Robert Wilcox discusses the symbolic value of visual images in a performance and contends that such signs, symbols and icons, are able to convey specific messages to the audience, particularly if they are able to make emotional connections with the visual images principally on account of such images being familiar (143-147). Familiar in this context refers to being able to identify with the images and what they symbolise. Focusing on the works of Robert Wilson, Wilcox argues that Wilson relies extensively on articles and images in his performances because the performances are inherently visual. Going further, Wilcox posits that Wilson structures his performances around visual codes because linguistic communication is only one way of perceiving the world around us (214-216); and this may not carry the right emotional impact for the specific message(s) intended for the audience. This point gives validity to the relevance of visual theatre in contemporary theatre practice.

A pictorial essay is a piece of writing that combines textual and pictorial elements in the discussion and presentation of a particular subject. It is akin to the visual essay. The visual essay, however, has a broader scope in that it embraces a wide variety of media, including pictures, drawings, slides and films and can be presented in text based format with generous dose of media content or in a filmic context also with other media and text content. The pictorial essay, on the other hand, is essentially text based but with a good dose of pictures and other drawings.



Fig. 1: A Drummer during the Festival

The pictorial essay has its roots in journalism, in photo essays published by magazines and newspapers. Of late, it has started to make inroads into the academia as a way of visually discussing and presenting works of art and other sociological issues. Admittedly, its potentials have not been fully appreciated in academic circles because of a somewhat lack of understanding of its form and style. A number of academics also query its perceived lack of theoretical depth, although this accusation is not altogether correct.

Scholars would generally want to see a more robust discussion of concepts before an essay is illustrated with pictures and drawings. It is on account of this that this essay has not adopted the more common format for the pictorial essay of a brief introduction followed by the presentation and discussion of pictures. We have opted for a detailed discussion of the conceptual ingredients of the topic in order to more properly situate our observations and findings and to give the essay a truly academic quality. Having done that, we now present the pictorial illustrations for this essay.

The opening montage of the play is a festival procession that involves the living members of the community, spirits and ancestors. It is a pulsating and engrossing festival as can be seen in the countenance of this drummer who is completely drawn into the spirit of his drumming and of the festival. The festival is supposed to be a communal affair that is meant to promote harmony and wellbeing in the community. This is exemplified by the sacrifice that is conducted to appease the forces that control the elements. This sacrificial exercise, however, does not go as planned because the gods reject the sacrifice and the chief of the sacrificial rites, the king, and rather show inclination to identifying with the struggle of Kika. This sets the stage for the crises in the play.



Fig. 2: The King Sitting in State

The king in full regalia sitting in a state organised function. He is ostentatiously dressed in a manner that belies the suffering of his people. His countenance also shows that he does not care about the predicament that his people go through because of the God-given resources of their land. He typifies a leader who would rather terrorise his people than to seek for ways to improve their lives.



Fig. 3: Destroyed Environment

The picture above depicts an environment that has been destroyed by oil exploration and exploitation. The destruction is so pervasive that farmlands are damaged and rivers polluted. Because of this, the farmlands cannot bear produce and the rivers do not have fishes. This translates to poverty. The poverty is worsened by health complications that result from polluted sources of drinking water, polluted agricultural produce, acid rain, heat from gas flaring among other aberrations that arise from oil production activities in the Niger Delta.



Fig. 4: Boma and Destroyed Fish

Boma is seen in the picture above holding a fish whose flesh has been eaten up by the oil that spilled into the rivers. The fish has no flesh again, only a bony head. This symbolises the complete devastation of the land such that it can no longer sustain the people. What we have left are bones that may end up hurting the people even. The symbolism of the fish goes even beyond the agricultural sustenance of the people. Looking closely at the fish would reveal a human leg attached to it. This shows that humanity, as it were, is being destroyed. And this is the reality in the Niger Delta. Lives are wasted because of the evil manner in which oil is exploited in the region.



Fig. 5: The Mother Icon

The Mother icon represents not only the human beings in the land but the Niger Delta itself as a mother that is supposed to nurture her children. The reverse is, however, the case as she watches helplessly as her children are maimed and killed. She supervises the burial of her children against the natural order providing for their sustenance. The Mother icon is depicted here wailing and shouting for the whole world to hear about the plight of her children even as she holds yet another one that has been killed at the prime of youth and is in procession for the burial.

Conclusion

The essay has brought to the fore the reality that terrorism is not an activity that is associated with non-state groups only, that governments all over the world engage in one form of terrorism or the other, but most painfully, that many governments engage in terrorist actions against their own people, people that they swore to protect and to provide for. We have thus far tried to show that the Nigerian state is equally guilty in this regard. Given that scenario, we tried to construct a narrative of the terrorism that is carried out against the people of the Niger Delta. We have shown that the Nigerian state is more

interested in the wealth that it can make from the Niger Delta, and that because of this interest and greed, it has seized the oil and gas resources of the region. We have also shown how with the aid of the visual theatre performance, “Harvest of Ghosts”, this terrorist disposition of the Federal Government of Nigeria is made manifest. More significantly, we have demonstrated that visual theatre is a veritable means of presenting and discussing issues that are of relevance to us because pictures tell more than words and the audience is able to relate emotionally with scenarios depicted in visual form, particularly if those visual stimuli are such that they can identify with and that reverberate with their sensibilities.

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