

SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY: THE THEATRE TO THE RESCUE

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Abstract

This examines some of the social problems confronting the Nigerian society presently. These social problems include among others, drug addiction, computer or internet fraud, kidnapping, cultism, examination malpractices, armed robbery as well as politico-economic problems. The Nigerian theatre has tried at all times to create plays in which these problems are dissected so as to bring about awareness to these problems. Atimes, the theatre even proffers solutions to these problems. But, the problems still persist. Who are we then to blame? The theatre or the society? Our methodology shall be the descriptive and deductive methods. We want to be able to describe fully the problems and engage in an analysis of the plays in which these problems were espoused. Our theoretical framework is Jean Duvignaud's theory: "Society in the theatre the theatre in society" (cited in Shevtsona 198). We want to examine how the populace has fared in the society and how the society itself has forced the populace to adapt to the problems under diagnosis. Our findings revealed that the Nigerian society have failed to leave up to standard when compared with the same society of two or three decades ago. The society itself has not been helpful because of the politico-economic problems that it witnessed. The technological developments that came into the nation had also been bastardised by the populace. We conclude that for us to have a change, there is a need for the government to mount a campaign on societal development and empowerment. The government should also establish more theatre buildings in order to create more employment for the populace. We hereby recommend that, it is when these problems are attacked from several spheres of life that we can begin to experience the change we are talking about among our people. This change we hope will bring about a vibrant and intellectually stable society that this nation needs.

Introduction

The theme of this conference is strictly rooted in theatre sociology, the special area of this presenter. Let us take a divergent look into what is theatre sociology. It emerged as a discipline through the efforts of pure sociologists, studying the relationship between the theatre and society. The tenets of the discipline were clearly articulated at the 1986 Annual Conference of the International Sociological Association held at the University of Rome. Gurvitch was the first to use the term in 1955 (72). He argued that because of its

functions and values in society, the theatre is both a part of social structure and a form of social interaction. He is of the opinion that theatre sociology is premised on a sociological approach to the study of the theatre.

Theatre sociology therefore, seeks to examine the theatre and society dialectics. It seeks to know the relationship between the theatre and society. In doing this, it examines the functions, uses, values and relevance of the theatre to the society. Theatre sociology views the theatre as a social institution whose existence within society is not just desirable but essential. This is because, its functions and values, its power s a weapon of mobilisation and change, its function as a medium of communication expressing feelings and ideas are indisputable. Clifford stated clearly that the theatre has appeared as, "... a teacher, communicator, philosopher, historian, social worker, literary critic and moralist" (4).

In this paper, therefore, we shall examine the role the theatre has played in exposing some of the social problems confronted by the society and how the problems either became reduced or totally eradicated. Our scope is the post-independence Nigerian society. Our focus will be on the last two decades, 1988 to 2018.

The theatre's function is also dictated by the culture in which it finds itself. This is because it does not exist alone, but within a particular culture. Culture as a word was first used by Edward B. Tylor in 1871. According to Tylor, it represents the totality of the ways of life of a people over a given period of time. Hence, culture can be divided into two broad based units: material culture and immaterial culture. Material culture refers to concrete things that we can see like architecture, utensils, dresses, and so on. The immaterial culture consists of abstract things like religion, ethics, aesthetics or sense of beauty. These two areas must be combined in every individual in a nation before growth and development can take place and be complete.

In one of her classes, late Zulu Sofola came to class and she stated: "There are two farmers. One is planting yam, the other is planting flowers. Which out of the two is relevant?" As students, we all said, "Yam". So, she said, "You mean we should go and destroy the flowers?" She then told us that both are relevant. Yam will satisfy the physical or material need of man, while flowers will satisfy the spiritual or immaterial need of man. Both must grow together to produce a complete individual. Today, does our society respect growth and development of people with a combination of the material and immaterial aspects of life and living? We shall answer this question in the presentation of this paper.

According to Olu Obafemi, "culture offers meaning, purpose and value to the socio-economic, political, and aesthetic ethos of the society. Inevitably therefore, cultural and political (in terms of nation-state) formations are inseparable" (11). Therefore, the political often determines the economic culture of a nation. And to Mabel Ewvierhoma, "culture has ethical cognitive roles contingent on morality, beliefs and even superstitions" (6).

Consequently, in this paper, we are interested in examining how the Nigerian populace have fared in recent times compared to those of about two or three decades ago. Are they where we want them to be? Has the theatre done its own duty enough in the areas of education and enlightenment? It is on record that some of those problems

highlighted by the theatre have either disappeared or at least reduced to the barest minimum. Why are these problems remaining in position? This question will be answered in this paper.

As a point of fact, culture is dynamic. As the nation in which it exists continues to change, cultural values also continue to change. That is why baggy trousers was the in-thing in the post-Independence era; but it is no more today. Wives were dragged to any husband that was the wish of their parents. But, today, it is no longer fashionable. Our growth as it is today, in terms of GDP, does not compare with what it used to be. Our economy too has not helped the matter. But how have the people fared during this harrowing experience? It is our belief that this paper will have the necessary impact on our populace, so that they too can revisit their contributions to the nation. We have stated elsewhere that,

Culture is something that is to be learnt from one generation to the other. We have political culture, economic, social and religious culture. The media culture is one through which our children and generations yet unborn can learn about our past, the present, and make projections into the future (Akinwale, *And the Journey Begins...* 17).

Our methodology in this paper will be the descriptive and deductive methods. We shall attempt to describe fully some of the problems facing the Nigerian people and then analyse the plays that raised these problems and how they were received in performance. The problems of the society will be examined under the following areas: the Educational, the Social, the Political and the Economic. It is our belief that a paper of this nature will be significant to both theatre scholars, students and the general public.

Literature Review

Several problems affecting the society have become national problems. The problem of cultural neglect and diplomacy seems to be found rampant in the Nigerian society. Cultural diplomacy in this paper will be taken to mean, according to Segun Oyewo "...a structured relationship between culture and its manifestations and international relations. It is the use of cultural expressions and activities in the conduct of official relations among nations" (106).

Because culture is dynamic and can influence people from far and near, our people seem to have imbibed foreign culture at the expense of home grown culture. John Michel maintained that, cultural diplomacy is "...the involvement of culture in international agreements; the application of culture to the direct support of a country's political and economic diplomacy". Also, Frank Aig-Imoukhuede sees cultural diplomacy as a concept that seeks to "... establish the atmosphere of friendly persuasion and to use the attraction of the arts to win people over" (41).

The argument here is that members of our society today are refusing to move close to the nation's cultural development. If you do not have a clear cultural growth the other areas of existence like the political, the religious, the economic and the educational will be eroded. Several African scholars too have made statements on the sociology of

the theatre in Africa and indeed in Nigeria. They include among others, Bakare Traore, Theo Vincent, Mineke Schipper, Jide Malomo and Uwa Hunwick. We shall try and examine their postulations on the sociology of the theatre as it existed within the Nigerian society. Let us now consider the works of theatre sociologists across Europe. One of the founding fathers of Theatre Sociology in Europe is Gramsci, who saw the society as a political construction (Shevtsova, *Gramsci...* 46). Raymond Williams gave the base and superstructure theory of theatre sociology in 1977 (67). He believed that the theatre is the commodity of rulers who dictate the form and content of it while the performers form the base of its existence.

Within African societies too, the ruling classes are the custodians of the people's art and religion. But, their dominance does not exist in the same oppressive manner that is postulated by Williams whose theory was anchored on the European society, to which he belonged. Traore in his book, translated by late Dapo Adelugba, wrote about the social functions of African Theatre. He believed that theatre and sociology should have adequate rapport. According to him, "...in so far as theatre is a permanent feature of society, the study of its function is the most important branch of theatre sociology" (10).

Mineke Schipper believed that it is simply Eurocentric to consider oral tradition in which the total theatre of African's exist as not being theatre. She stated that most of the travelling theatre troupes of the Yoruba as well as the theatre of English expression, and all popular theatre across West Africa, focused on certain sociological issues that helped in the development of the theatre along the West African sub region. Furthermore, Theo Vincent stated clearly that some of the sociological issues that made the audience of the Yoruba travelling theatre bigger than that of the theatre of English expression include the language of performance, their itinerary nature and their simple plot. He stated that the theatre of English expression is elitist, making a serious intellectual demand on the audience. This was before independence and a few years after independence (23-25). Uwa Hunwick also wrote on the impact of contemporary modern Nigerian theatre on the society. She stated that the Yoruba travelling theatre performances are popular because the plays show themes that are "...built on operating attitudes, vices, prejudices and fads. They give the masses what they want" (18). Unfortunately, today, the tropes are no more in existence.

Some empirical works also exist from Nigerian theatre scholars, especially Malomo (117). He studied the audience that attended the National Theatre of Nigeria to watch both a Yoruba travelling theatre production and a literary theatre production. He was able to discover the demographic nature of the audience. He found out that the theatre was patronised by educated people predominantly the middle class. The people in the upper class seldom attend the National Theatre, Nigeria's premiere theatre. Therefore, the theatre is making an impact on those who are educated enough to be aware of the social influence of the theatre. It was found out that 39% prefer comedies, 25% musicals and 17% tragedies, 28% prefer plays in English language, 5% plays in Yoruba and 67% would rather prefer plays written in both languages. A higher percentage of the respondents to his questionnaire resided in planned housing estates like Surulere 37%, Apapa 5%, Ikeja 15%, Victoria Island 23%, others 19%; 40% of total respondents came to the theatre by commercial bus. This means that the theatre has not been properly

located in a residential area. Economically, Malomo also concluded that the theatre was not economically viable, a position which this writer also subscribes to with a little variation though.

In this study, therefore, we shall try to examine if this data is still applicable or not or whether the social problems within the society have not entirely killed the theatre completely. Malomo's conclusion with this data becomes relevant to us here because he claimed that the theatre makes more impact in an educationally alive region. Thus, we can now define drama and theatre from a sociological point of view. According to Agyeman-Wetey,

Socially, drama (theatre) has brought so many people together for a common purpose of production. It has fostered relevance, love, patience, and understanding among other things. It has broken new grounds of shyness, inhibition, speech communication, diction, and respect for each other. It has prompted popularity and opened doors to important places for some people. People practice virtues of discipline, dedication, humility, generosity, human feelings, carefulness, truthfulness, responsibility and others. These good human qualities are the things that make a man human (537).

The presenter agrees with this statement having been in the industry for sometimes and one has watched the trend of events in the theatre industry.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is Jean Duvignaud's theory that, "society in the theatre, the theatre in society". Duvignaud stated that as the theatre seeks to reflect societal problems, the society also forces the theatre to change in terms of its content and modus operandi. According to him, industrialisation was one of the factors which brought innovations into the world and hence to the theatrical world. The theory also aided the growth and development of many forms of theatre in Europe. Hence, as the theatre is impacting on the society, the society also strives to make a considerable impact on the theatre. The two way dialectics is our main concern in this presentation.

The Educational

The educational system of the country was all encompassing after independence. Then came the new system the 6-3-3-4, which is currently in vogue. Youths and elders alike were filled with passion and commitment going to school. There was no other way, especially for those of us who were born with no silver or spoons in our mouth. Education was the answer to all problems of empowerment. Most of the parents were civil servants, teachers, or traders. The school certificate was a paramount thing because that is what you need to step into the world. The whole area waited patiently for your result.

The university was a place where we all want to be, school certificate was just a promotion examination into higher school or the university directly. Our teachers were held in high esteem. At that that time at all levels, there were no way examinations

questions can leak before the examinations, students were ready to read heavily and prepare for the examinations. At that time too no parent will want to buy examination question for the children. Gradually, the face of education continued to change. Today, we have a lot of misbehaviour among students, examination malpractices, well criticism and a lot of irresponsible behaviour.

The theatre rose quickly to the challenge of this educational crisis. In Wole Soyinka's *Child Internationale*, he showed the attitude of a student to her studies. The student does not even remember whether she got a report or not for the term. All she was interested in was the visit of her boyfriend. Soyinka's play *The Lion and the Jewel* peached the village teacher against Baroka, the Chief, in a contest for Sidi, the village beauty. Baroka won against all the knowledge and intellect of the headmaster. His love of education does not count.

In just two or three decades, therefore, the preference for education had dwindled. It is now a matter of take it or leave it for the society. As a matter of fact, you don't have to read to make it in our nation today. The place of education and its budget in the federal government annual budget is as low as seven percent.

However, the point had been made that: "education breeds awareness. Once a people within a society are highly educated, they will be aware of the theatre, they will also know its intrinsic values and functions" (Akinwale, *And the Journey Begins...* 11). This goes a long way to show the need for artist in the various regions in Nigeria, to preach the value of education so that the people's appreciation of the theatre can increase.

The Political

Between 1960 and now, we have witnessed a lot of political problems and crisis. It is often an acceptable statement that, once the political situation of a nation is correct, the economic will automatically fall in place. This is because the government will take major political decisions that will affect the economy and all the other facets of life. If the reverse is the case, as we have in our nation then the worst will continue to happen to the nation on several fronts. Political instability was witnessed in Nigeria for long. A long stretch of military rule did not solve the problem. Our recourse to democratic government and party politics has tried to ameliorate some of the problems but yet we are not politically stable.

The theatre rose quite early to address the issues of political instability and the need for us to have some kind of clean political atmosphere. Presently we now have a lot of political misbehaviour cross carpeting and so on. Cases of corruption and nepotism in high places are well known in our society. In 1971, Wole Soyinka wrote the play, *A Dance of the Forests*. Here, his main concern was that a nation whose past has nothing to write home about, the present is chaotic, the future is bleak. This prophetic statement came about because the past, the present and the future are but one continuum.

Several other plays have focused on the political rivalry both within the traditional society and contemporary times. In Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*, he made it clear that tradition is tradition. On no account should we forget tradition and begin to usher in a new political atmosphere that is not traditional. Ayo Akinwale's *This King must Die* shows the lop-sidedness of our political system, parties and leadership. The play then

advocates for a seeming political set up that is hardly known to the populace. This is because the existing political parties are a mere rejuvenation of the older order in different forms and nomenclature. Emmy Idegu's *Ata Igala the Great* shows the indigenous resistance of the Igala people to European invasion into their country. A dynamic, development-oriented Ata Igala welcomed the modernity of the colonialists but rejected anything that contravened the Igala belief system and mode of worship.

Similarly, Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is a story of an Oba who refused to bow down for the British, who were supposed to be the major traders with the Benin people. In a similar manner, Wale Ogunyemi's *Kiriji War* brought into limelight the excess of the "Ajele's" District Officers imposed on the people of Imesi-Ile to see to the political problems of the area. These Ajele's rape women, seize farmlands as well as farm produce. Their behaviour led to one of the longest Yoruba inter-tribal wars in history. Whether in the past or the present the Nigerian theatre had been aware to the various political problems. But, has it succeeded in driving away the problem? Or did the society's reaction not reject all these moves by the theatre? "Society in the theatre, the theatre in society". This is where our theoretical framework comes in. We can see how the society has moved from one major political crisis to another. We should however remember that the theatre is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.

The Social

A lot of social vices have bedevilled our society for long. For the purpose of this paper we shall divide the vices into three broad based categories. These are culture conflict, urbanisation and its attendant problems and the social problems of a dwindling economy. These problems could be found in the following specific categories armed robbery, kidnapping, corruption, people getting rich quickly through an ill-gotten wealth, marital problems and so on. We have moved away from the post-independence period of culture conflict into an era of cultural rejuvenation. We are now enjoying the dynamism of cultural proliferation. However, in a bid to manage the new status a lot of other new problems are re-awakened. For example, the new trend in music composition such that harmony becomes more important than the lyrics is the order of the day.

One major problem we want to discuss here is the issue of marital problems and its attendant, the divorce. The relationship between husband and wife has changed. Their understanding of the word love has also changed. In *King Emene*, Zulu Sofola gave her own philosophy of marriage which she upheld until her demise. According to her, in the play, "the god of the husband is the god of the wife. Destroy the god of the husband, and the god of the wife is destroyed" (7). In another vein, she stated in the same play that, "a parcel is like a wife, while the chord used to tie the parcel is like a husband. If the chord breaks, the parcel falls into pieces" (25). These philosophies are no longer true in the contemporary Nigerian society.

Marital procedures are no longer what they used to be. In a recent publication edited by Oludolapo Ojediran and Olurotimi Adeoti, Ekpe argues that Sofola was a traditionalist. According to her:

Sofola writes from the perspective of a traditionalist; her plays overwhelm and enchant the sacredness of traditions, and her dramaturgy undermines any of her characters that goes against tradition. From her portrayal, the inviolability of tradition must be maintained and respected at all cost even in the face of its inertness and retrogressive nature (131).

This is a brilliant submission true only of the early plays of Zulu Sofola, especially *Wedlock of the Gods* and *The Sweet-Trap*. But in her later plays, such as, *The Ivory Tower* and *Song of a Maiden*, Sofola upgrades the role of female characters. This can also be seen in her last play, *Queen Omu Ako of Oligbo*, where the queen led the war and brought victory to her own people.

One of the problems of our civil war was the incursion of armed robbery into the country. The nation became besieged even up till presently by several robbery incidences. Femi Osofisan's play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, which was published in 1978, focuses on the issue of armed robbery. In the play, Osofisan states clearly that unless we address the issue of corruption, ethnicity, nepotism and unemployment, the society will continue to manufacture its own assassins, the death penalty imposed by government through enabling decrees notwithstanding.

The Boko Haram Sect also came out as a social problem that is still bedeviling the nation. Political thugs in the North-East region of the country, who lost their source of funds, became terrorists terrorising the society. Again, the theatre responded to the issue of terrorism in Nigeria. Ahmed Yerima's play, *Pari*, gives a good account of a family thrown into despair by the loss of their only daughter during a Boko-Haram raid. The play moved on further to examine the complicity of religion, government and individuals in the harrowing experience of losing one's daughter to a group of terrorists. In a production of the play by the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, the motives of the terrorist groups terrorising many parts of the country was clearly revealed.

The Economic

It is also very necessary for us to look at the nature of our economy in the past few decades and how a dwindling in the economic downturn of the nation has affected the theatre and society dialectics. We shall examine a few theories which we find useful to this examination.

Three major theories form the focus of our examination of the theatre and the economy relationships. Bomul and Bowen state that an economically active area is an oyster for the performing artist (82). This is because, in such areas there is a high frequency of performance, new theatre forms are developed and new theatre buildings erected. Blaug also states that the theatre also thrives during a process of economic recession (117). He explains that during such periods people see the theatre as a place of escape. They patronise the theatre heavily so as to release tension and stress created by the economy. Janet Wolf states that, in a place where demand is high for theatre productions, the supply is also high (24). Where it is low, supply is also low; thus, obeying the demand and supply principle. However, because these theories are

Eurocentric, we must remember that our situation could be different as a result of our difference in culture. This explains the exodus of artists especially musicians to Lagos.

Using certain economic indices, level of the exchange rate, balance of payments, level of foreign debts, import and export earnings as well as inflated rates, we can state clearly that Nigeria experienced a period of buoyancy in the economy and also one of recession. The artist and the arts have weathered it through both periods of seeming buoyancy and depression. Just after independence we enjoyed a period of seeming buoyancy. Three decades later until a few months ago, we faced a period of depression. Feeding became difficult, foreign exchange rose very high, there was a high rate of inflation and several systems within the nation including manufacturing outfits all collapsed. Again, if we remember our earlier statement of our theoretical framework, theatre in society, society in the theatre, the artist had to find some ways of existing, despite the harsh economic conditions.

The Yoruba travelling theatre troupes which were purely economic ventures collapsed. The actors drifted away and faced video productions. The English actors also left most of those institutions housing them such as the University Theatres as well as States Arts Councils. They encouraged the growth of Nollywood Industry along with actors of the various Nigerian languages. The economy drove them into owing personal artistic companies and corporations.

The theatre also rose to the defence of the economic situation in the country. Two plays, Ayo Akinwale's *This King Must Die* and *Hello Prisoners*, show clearly the periods of economic depression in the country. The first play shows a society moving from its traditional base to modernity. At the traditional point, most of the ailments of society could be solved by Ifa and Orunmila solved the problems and saved the society from collapse. In its modernity, several new diseases have taken over. Orunmila could no longer recognise his people with such diseases as political charlatanism, corruption, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank loans and so on. He therefore left without being able to solve these problems. The second play, *Hello Prisoners*, shows five prison inmates who come out of prison to tell their stories. The characters are a Professor who became a minister. He was imprisoned for taking bribe. The second, an armed robber, became a robber because he could not gain admission to the university despite the fact that he had the required qualification. The third, a union leader, was imprisoned because he led a protest. A politician who was a spend thrift, spending government money in government house. Finally, two women selling *akara* who later became drug pushers when they met their classmate who had made it economically. These characters represent the larger society, because what happened to them has happened to several others within the society. They then resolved to break the prison walls and go out there to preach for a change from what the society turned them into. They all believed that it is the society that brought them to a point of elevation that also conspired to bring them down.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to describe a few societal ills and how the theatre responded to them both as scripts and in performance. We have seen how the theatre

responded to these problems; but the problems seem to defy any possible solution. First and foremost, we must credit the theatre artists for responding quickly to societal problems and creating awareness for them. But, for some of these problems to be completely removed from our society certain recommendations given below must be fulfilled.

1. There is a need to overhaul our political system so that the economic can be resolved.
2. More theatre productions and centred are needed all over the country where there could be regular productions on an annual basis. This will also provide employment for the large number of theatre graduates being produced annually.
3. More organisations should come out to sponsor theatrical productions both in the country and abroad. This will give our theatre the international deserves. We must look inwards to correct our mistakes.
4. The old sponsors such as banks, state and federal government should participate actively in the sponsorship of theatre productions across the country.
5. The society needs to change its perception of the theatre artists. Theatre artists too need to present themselves as disciplined people which the profession inspires.
6. The Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA) bill which is about to be promulgated into law, should be vigorously pursued. This will make the profession stand side by side with all other professions in the country.
7. Government should allow a lot of theatre companies to travel out of the country as it was in the 1960s and 1970s until around 1980. This is because the Public Relations job of the theatre is incomparable to others.
8. The government should build one theatre building in every Local Government Area of the country. After all, if it could build two party offices per local government, it could also build a theatre house per local government. This will aid the empowerment programme of the government.

As we plan our productions for the year, let us remember that the society is out there waiting for what we have to offer. Some of our social problems can be cured by the theatre if it is properly harnessed.

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