

# THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC RECESSION IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*Theatre for Development is a theatrical experiment that raises the consciousness of the people, builds confidence in them and opens their eyes to what they can do on their own towards ameliorating their unpleasant situations. Thus, TjD can be used to address societal issues like economic recession. But it has been observed, over the years, that successive governments in Nigeria have looked down on the art of theatre. This is borne out of the parochial belief that Arts have little or nothing to offer in addressing societal problems. It is assumed that Nigeria is existing recession but the indices of recession are still prevalent. It is against this background that this paper, anchoring on the Endogenous Development Theory, brings to the fore the inherent ability of TjD in eradicating economic recession. A TjD project was carried out at Osiele Community on the outskirts of Abeokuta in Odeda Local Government of Ogun State on one of the ways to solve the problem of economic recession. The project presented the locally made **adire** fabric not only as clothing materials but also as materials that can be used for the production of bags and shoes. It was obvious, from the interactions that followed the production, that the people prefer the use of locally made fabrics of **adire** to the imported materials; a proof that the masses would prefer the Nigerian made products if they are made to see their beauties. It was therefore recommended in the paper that government should engage Theatre Arts Practitioners in its quest for a complete eradication of economic recession in Nigeria.*

## **Introduction**

The uniqueness of theatre is in its ability to address issues that have direct bearing on the society. It is a medium through which profound and vital communal experiences are projected and appreciated (Umukoro 15). Theatre is not just another work of art but one with essence, purpose and drive. Theatre is a shared experience. What is put on stage, or watched live in the arena or market place, enables the people to be part of a larger engagement and discussion that uplifts the life of the community. This is in line with Jerzy Grotowski's view that, "theatre is an encounter" (55). Theatre is artistic reflection of society's values, ethics, mores and aspirations. If properly packaged therefore, theatre has the ability to shape and or re-direct the socio-political status of a society or nation. This explains why Lanrele Bamidele posits that, theatre can be used for social

investigation in social anthropology or ethno-sociology (65). The import of this is that theatre can be used to interrogate and or address issues in the society.

Theatre has always been part of human society. In supporting this, Ahmed Yerima is of the view that theatre has joined forces with culture in recent times to fit in with a function of culture which is to preserve the reconstruction of the political space where the citizens are able to accommodate the social realities of their individual and national conflicts and begin to think of ways to resolve the issue of national question (11). Addressing issues that are of national relevance with theatre, therefore, is not just to bring theatre into the front burner but much more for it to assume its fundamental role in nation building cum societal development. Theatre has, over the years, been addressing national and societal issues in Nigeria through Theatre for Development (TfD).

Theatre for Development (TfD) or Community theatre is often defined as the theatre of the people, by the people and for the people. The import of this is that, (TfD) originates or is culled from the community concerned. Every material needed for the theatre: storyline, actors, place of performance inclusive is taken from the community. The theatre is often time planned and executed by the people, though under the supervision of an experienced theatre practitioner. The theatre is originally, intentionally targeted towards every member of the community in question, rather than a group of audience(s) like in the conventional theatre. Perhaps the way it is made, and the way the community have input, differs depending on the situation.

The primary objective of TfD is to promote civic dialogue within the community in order to stimulate social debates that would lead to development. The ability of TfD to stimulate discussions is evident as audiences often engage in debates and even constructive argument surrounding sensitive topics. Over the years, in Nigeria and other countries around the world, theatre has been successfully used to initiate community engagement on issues as diverse as health, sanitation, education, HIV awareness, ending violence and child marriage. Theatre for development is a theatre for economic and socio-political information and reformation. It is a kind of theatre that aims at stimulating a process for the community or group of people to come together in solving problems and using the people to create the theatre themselves in their own language and idiom that they can understand.

The issue of development has been of much concern to Nigerians. The income per capita is low, so is the level of industrialisation and life expectancy. Nigeria is presently experiencing economic instability. Generally known as economic recession, it is an economic situation that has weakened the purchasing power of the common man with the meagre resources available to him. This has, expectedly, led to hunger, unemployment and a high level of impoverishment in the Nigerian society. With the record of TfD as a veritable tool in addressing socio-political issues in the society, this paper is therefore aimed at presenting TfD's style and approach in addressing the raging unpleasant economic situation, known as economic recession in Nigeria.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This paper relies on the Endogenous Development Theory for its operation. The thrust of the theory is how societies can develop along the lines and pace of their historical realities. It encourages each society to harness its inherent potentials to better the well-being of its members. The theory conforms to the concept of Tfd, which emphasises active participation of the people and utilisation of their indigenous creative energies, peculiar experiences and performance modes to mobilise, entertain, educate and empower the majority (Dandaura 6). The Tfd approach used for the research is a combination of both the homestead and outside-in approaches. The homestead approach requires a temporary residence of facilitators in the host community all through the duration of the exercise to allow for a better rapport between the facilitators and the community. In the case of outside-in approach, the facilitators from outside rely on and use the people in the community for the project. The two approaches were used because the community (Osiele) where the project took place hosts the institution where the students and lecturers (the facilitators) came from. Osiele is a semi-urban community in the outskirts of Abeokuta on Abeokuta/Ibadan Road. It stands out chiefly because of the location of Federal College of Education in it. A good number of the institution's staff and students either have their personal buildings in the community or are living there; for it is directly opposite the college. It is a mixture of the enlightened and indigenes who have been living together in peace for years. It therefore portends a fertile ground for the experimentation of Tfd project on economic recession. The year three students of the Department of Theatre Arts of the institution, who were not strange to the theory and practice of Tfd, having participated in some, took up the challenge with this researcher for the project.

## **Economic Recession in Nigeria**

The National Bureau of Economic Research defines recession as,

a significance decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in a real gross domestic product (GDP), real income, employment, individual production and wholesale-retail sales (Noko 1).

It has been argued that the recession is due to policy inconsistency, the conspicuous consumption habits of the ruling elite and their appetite for imported luxury items, the removal of subsidy, the owing of salaries to millions of workers across the land, the sharp depreciation of the naira as well as the over-reliance on an exogenous source of revenue, oil. Parts of the reasons for the recession are the bad debt servicing policy, the situation of insurgency and economic instability, which is another traceable reason for the flight of foreign capital and investments in the country as well as the policy of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) by the Nigerian government which has been accounted for by many as the reason for low lending activities by commercial banks in the country (Nwankwo 2).

The economic recession in Nigeria is caused by both endogenous and exogenous factors. There have been symptoms of a recession in the Nigerian economy, just that it became full-blown under the President Muhammadu Buhari's civilian regime due to certain drastic actions taken to solve perennial domestic economic problems. The socioeconomic effects of the recession include; unemployment, inflation and loss of livelihood strategies. These have serious negative consequences on the stability of families. The standard of living, education, healthcare, infrastructure and general wellbeing are affected. People are suffering, life is tough and crime rates are on the increase as life expectancy reduces with increases in infant and maternal mortality rates. Consumer confidence is lost; there is psychological bad faith in the economy and the government, especially by the suffering aggregate households, businesses and external sectors (Agri, Mailafia & Umejiaku 7). The livelihood strategies and opportunities available to the rural and urban poor are shrinking with the recession, leaving more people in slums, squalor, darkness and hunger, thereby increasing the pressure to clear forests for food and firewood, hunting of animals for bush meat, just as a survival strategy. There are also increased militant and criminal activities, destruction of national economic assets such as petroleum pipe-lines in the Niger-Delta and electricity cables and transformers in the East. The land, air and water are being polluted. Essential natural resources and ecosystem services provided by the environment to support economic growth and sustainable livelihoods are increasingly being destroyed.

The effect of economy recession is biting hard, according to Agri, Mailafia and Umejiaku, chiefly because Nigeria has unrepentant, unpunished corrupt political class, over relies on the Federal Government revenue, over-dependes on crude oil, to a large extent, feeds on imported food, lives on foreign furnished household electronics and communication manufactures, military gadgets, transport and electricity, infrastructure inputs, cloth in imported textiles and garments and drives in 100 percent imported cars (7). The government is not faring better for the economy recession has serious negative impacts on government revenue, employment, income vulnerability, inflation, human health, infrastructural supply, poverty and natural resource management in Nigeria. The resultant effects of the recession are daily seen and manifested through the aggregate demand and supply resulting to volatile shocks in economic activities. There is scarcity of foreign exchange, few money, reduced income, decreased finances available to households and businesses. There is also weak purchasing power, reduced consumer spending and decrease in sales of goods and services. The purchase of goods and services by individuals, households and firms has drastically reduced as a result of the economic recession. Business activities are now at the low ebb, there are jobs losses and increase in unemployment rate. The reduced employment is due to decreased sales of goods and services by business owners, companies, street vendors, farmers, shop owners, retailers and wholesalers. The aggregate spending power has sharply declined. This is the unfortunate situation of things that is staring Nigeria and Nigerians in the face. Without gainsaying, there is a dire need for the country to get out of the economic mess she is presently entangled in.

Addressing the economic recession requires a shift from a mono-product economy structure, overdependence on imports and diversification of the economy. In

other words, there is need to move away from the norm, away from the hitherto means of finding solution(s) to the Nigerian ailing economy. A lot of ideas cum solutions have been proffered by the government with the exception of arts or theatre. But if the wheel of theatre is adequately oiled, it has the ability to bring about change in the socio-economic situation of the Nigerian state. One of the ways of doing this is through Tfd.

### **Features and Effects of Theatre for Development**

Theatre for Development is a theatre for economic and socio-political information and reformation. It is a viable instrument of conscientisation and mobilisation. Its primary aim is empowering the disempowered people. The common feature of Tfd is that the theatre, in its various forms, is used to entertain people and make them think and act on their problems. In this way, it is expected that the life of the community is changed. Tfd has always been concerned about problems of poverty, development and underdevelopment. It has raised the issues of “who controls the resources of a nation or community?” Or “How can those resources best be used or shared in an equitable manner for the benefit of all?” (Illah 7). Tfd helps the people to see what they can jettison in their old way(s), why they need to adopt a new method. Lanrele Bamidele posits that it is a process of involving individuals in a community to examine the factors that contribute to his own level of development along-side the development of his community (in Akoh 107). The whole idea of Tfd in spurring the people or community towards a participatory dialogue, especially in Nigeria and other African countries is to sow an integrated development strategy in which all sectors in the society that have a direct bearing on the society work and are regarded as an integrated package.

The campaign of Theatre for Development is basically on how a people, community or nation can look within to solve their problems with no interference from the outside world. It is a type of theatre that is devoid of glamour, sophisticated costume or props. The important thing in Tfd is the simplicity of the message for a better understanding by the audience. The form is not as important as the content in Tfd. This goes to show that the work of the artist is incomplete, unless it bears directly on the life of the community. This is in line with Jerzy Grotowski’s idea of “Poor Theatre”. It is Grotowski’s opinion that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage) without lighting and sound, and so on. However, theatre cannot exist without the actor-audience relationship of perpetual, direct, “live” communion. He submits that,

we abandoned make-up, face noses, pillow stuffed bellies-everything that the actor puts on in the dressing room before performance. We found that it was consummately theatrical for the actor to transform from type to type, character to character-while the audience watched-in a poor manner, using only his own body and craft (Grotowski 20).

In Grotowski’s “Poor Theatre” and Theatre for Development, the actor makes a total gift of himself. Adopting this method and the idea of stripping theatre of all that is not

essential to it, in the real sense of it, reveals to us not only the effectiveness of the idea but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art form.

Theatre for Development is participatory. As Lee Bill puts it, it is part of a family of approaches and techniques that enable community or groups to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to formulate appropriate and empowering action (20). It does not require formal education in a university or major levels of technical knowledge of the arts of theatre. Rather, the practice of Tfd indicates a strong belief in the creative capacity of every individual. It seeks to make theatre a really popular art, which people can easily understand, since it relies on already existing indigenous local materials. It is a theatre practice that builds on or integrates indigenous popular forms in democratising systems and structures of communication. The play-making process is improvisational, not inherently literary, and it is about a community and people-centred problems. The performance is in the open and open-ended, to allow for meaningful intervention by the audience. It is a process of collective problem identification, scenario/playmaking, rehearsals, performance and discussions which often lead to community action or positive behavioural change amongst the people.

The idea of solving societal problems through art or theatre can only be regarded as one of the several approaches to solving human problems. None of the ideas that are being experimented in solving the problem of economic recession is art or theatre oriented. This is because the Nigerian society has not been convinced of the potentials of theatre. The parochial belief that theatre has little or nothing to contribute in the amelioration of societal problems still persists in Nigeria. This is sheer ignorance for theatre has been used as a tool or instrument in search for a people-oriented development for over three decades. In the 1960s, travelling theatre experiments of several African Universities, such as Ibadan, Makerere, Nairobi, Lusaka and Yaounde flourished. Groups of students and teachers, for instance, took plays depicting the clash between traditional and modern society to rural and semi-urban communities, as a form of “cultural democratisation”. In the 1970s, the Laedza Batanani experiments in Botswana provided a forum for communities to come together and critically assess their situation and discuss plans of action. In Nigeria, theatre has been used as a catalyst in community action, through the “Theatre Collective” projects of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and the “Theatre Collective” projects of the University of Jos. In these instances, villagers were involved in the development process, from the point of in-depth analyses of their immediate community situation, to concrete follow-up action as a part of the development process. The examples cited are a proof that in solving the societal problems, the development and or solution has to be engineered and sustained by the people themselves, through their full and active participation. A far reaching and sustainable development should not be undertaken on behalf of a people; rather, it should be their organic concern and endeavour. This will not only give them a sense of belonging but also a sense of self-worth and bring out their creative ability.

### **Theatre for Development and Economic Recession**

The Nigerian nation has enormous human, material and natural resources, yet about only 20 percent of her population benefit from her natural resources. This is one of the

unfortunate paradoxes the Nigerian economy exhibits (Agri, Mailafia & Umejiaku 9). The country has over 250 ethnic groups and hundreds of languages; but the advantage of unity in diversity had eluded the country. Today, millions of Nigerians owe allegiance to their ethnic/tribal groups more than they do to the Nigerian nation. The country has not had it so good. She fought a three year civil war but seems to have taken for granted the blood shed by many Nigerians during the struggle for independence and the civil war. The various military regimes looted and ravaged the commonwealth at a time when oil-revenue windfalls would have developed the nation's much needed infrastructure.

The Nigeria has remained backward and underdeveloped with poverty increasing over time. From the 1970s to the middle of 1980s, there appeared to be an emerging middle class as reflected by the quality and provision of social services, the rate of unemployment, the rate of inflation and the provision of social amenities to the majority of people. During periods of decline in oil revenues, the government borrowed to spend on consumption, hence, fiscal rascality permeated all facets of government business. There was no accountability, transparency or comprehensiveness in the conduct of government business. The effect of all of this has been on the hapless masses. The import of this is that the successive governments in Nigeria have not been sensitive to the plight of the masses but preoccupied with mismanagement of the resources of the nation which had resulted in economic recession.

Nigeria is said to be existing recession, this is debatable as the indices of economic recession are still prevalent. The Nigerian masses are still feeling its pang and are thus in search of answer(s) to the question of economic recession. How can the economy completely exit the recession? What is the outlook for the Nigerian economy, particularly for households and their families as well as businesses? A lot of suggestions have come up from different quarters as likely ways out of the economic recession, but none has looked the way of theatre. This is due chiefly to the fact that theatre, as we all know, is mainly treated as an entertainment material, whereas the society thinks of development in terms of economic, social, political and technological advancement. But the function of theatre has always gone beyond entertainment. Both theatre makers and development workers have come to appreciate and access the impact and educative value of theatre in engineering social change. It is no longer the issue of popular theatre as it were drums, song and dance for sensuous representation but theatre that is focused on developmental goals be it on social, health, politics, technology, agriculture, and even in recent preoccupation with human rights, environmental studies and conflict resolution (Bamidele, in Akoh 106).

Thus, the style and methods of carrying out theatre for development can be applied to solve the Nigerian economic problem. A good number of suggestions that have been offered pointed to the importance of searching within in the course of tackling the issue. This is in conformity with the technique of theatre for development, that is usually unstructured and spontaneous but which feeds on the existing issues in the locality for its operations. The performances do represent the factual living situations of the community. The import of this is for the Nigerians to embrace everything local and Nigerian made products instead of relying on foreign goods and materials for sustenance. It is a known fact that Nigeria is a blessed country with abundant human and

natural resources, just as it is obtainable in theatre for development, where the people's eyes are opened to the resources that each community is blessed with, the resources that the Nigerian nation is blessed with can also be harnessed, galvanised and explored in solving her economic issues. Why is the country relying almost entirely on foreign foods to feed her citizens in spite of the abundant arable lands that the country is blessed with? There is a need to look within to increase agriculture produce and export, if possible. In the 1960s, agriculture was the main base of Nigeria, in terms of GDP, foreign exchange earnings and employment.

Today and sadly, Nigeria spends about 10 billion dollar a year on the importation of agricultural products Noko (1). One can only hope that the idea of exporting yam, as initiated by the Buhari administration, would be sustained and complement with other farm produce. Why is it that the country is not developing her arts, culture and artefacts that would attract tourists and make money from there? It should be stressed that if properly harnessed, encouraged and sustained over the years, arts and culture can fetch the country enough earnings more than what the country is presently earning from oil. It would be good and profitable if the country can "stoop low" and live by the principle of Grotowski's "poor theatre" and theatre for development, disrobe herself of glamour, sophisticated lifestyles and maintain a low profile that could help in saving some money for the country.

As it is obtainable in theatre for development where the people, the rural men, are given opportunities to participate and portrays the real situations of life, it would be good if the Nigerian government see and appreciate the talents, gifts and creative abilities of her citizens and tap them in attacking the economic issue and for the overall development of the country. The country is blessed with men and women of outstanding talents in every area of human endeavour. But sadly, most of these talents and gifts are wasting away, whilst those who can are trading with them abroad; boosting the economy of other countries. Theatre for development is an approach which is committed to using theatre as a relevant medium and language in mobilising people, particularly those in rural communities, towards self-reliance and development. There is no other time for the Nigerian nation to embrace this style than now, if not for anything but for the purpose of solving her present economic problem. It would be appreciated if the people are brought together to solve their problems by themselves, this has a way of instilling in them a sense of value and self-worth. As it is in theatre for development, where most of the hitherto age long myths and beliefs that are retrogressive are dispelled, it is high time for the Nigerian nation to realise that her problems are man-made and it would take man, committed Nigerians and not foreigners, to solve them.

Another good thing about theatre for development is its ability to bring about unity, team work and oneness amongst the people; where people come together, irrespective of status, to face the challenges confronting them headlong. There is no gainsaying the fact that lack of unity is one of the major problems facing the Nigerian nation. And where there is no love, unity and oneness progress or development in any form would be a mirage. If the idea of team work, cooperation and love can be taken from theatre for development and consciously embraced by the government and people

of Nigeria, the developmental opportunities that the country would be exposed to will not only be in economy but also in all areas of human endeavour.

### **Theatre for Development Experiment in Osiele Community**

This researcher and students, (Lecturer and students of the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria) who served as facilitators for the project are well familiar with the terrains of Osiele community which is just a five minute walk away from the college's main gate. And having taken part in some Theatre for Development projects in the past, putting up a drama sketch on economic recession was not a problem. The drama focused on the use of locally made fabric of *Adire*, which is locally produced by the people of Abeokuta. The idea was to discourage the use of imported materials as a way of appreciating the locally made products. The open field of St. Mary Primary School, that is located within the community, was chosen for the performance. Mobilising audience for the performance was easy as the students are directly or indirectly part of the community. A large number of people in the community came out, in the evening of the day set aside for the performance, mainly to enjoy the free and unhindered show.

The fact that a good number of members of the cast (fifteen in number) are known to them was also good bait that drew them to the show. The play that used Yoruba language and Abeokuta dialect (*Egba*) as means of communication dramatised how *Adire* fabric can be used to make school bags, shoes and clothes. The twenty five minutes performance received applause and responses from members of the audience, who engaged the facilitators during interactive session after the performance, on what they need to know further on what had been staged. The performance turned out to be an eye-opener as the beauty of using locally made materials was not only shown but was also seen as a viable means of employment for the youths. The main message in the performance was to encourage production and purchase of Nigerian made products as a way of discouraging importation of items that can be produced locally; as a way of strengthening Nigerian economy. This is because, as it has been posited in the paper, conspicuous consumption habits of the ruling elite and their appetite for imported luxury items is one of the reasons for economic recession.

### **Recommendations**

From the Osiele Tfd experiment, it was obvious that Tfd can be used to address not only the issue of economic recession but other issues that have direct bearings with the people. Concerted efforts should therefore be made by the government to engage Theatre Arts practitioners in its bid to completely wipe out economic recession. Thus, the people and governments, in all tiers, should embrace arts, give it attention and learn from its inherent abilities. The present situation where the governments from local, states and federal delight in supporting science and technology at the expense of arts is not only discouraging but also detrimental. As clapping with one hand to create sound may be somewhat impossible, the idea of thinking and behaving as if the Nigerian nation can only develop solely through science and technology is doing more harm than good to the country. Where all the theories and economic policies have failed, arts may

be the solution and the hitherto neglected stone may be the pillar that would sustain the building.

## Conclusion

The thesis of this paper has been the use of Tfd as a panacea to the perennial economic recession that the Nigerian nation is somewhat battling with. In doing this, the concepts of economic recession and Tfd were brought to the fore. Attention was also given to the impacts cum effects of the recession on the country and the masses. Efforts were made to establish the fact that theatre for development, with its features and style of operation with a practical experience in Osiele community, has all it takes to completely take Nigeria out of recession. As it has been pointed out, in the paper, theatre for development is a theatrical practice that utilises the existing theatrical forms within and available to a targeted community in a creative and participatory manner, to highlight awareness of factors and forces militating against the community and hindering its development and growth. Thus, the paper has been able to (re)direct all stakeholders in the Nigerian project to the participatory methodology of theatre for development for it encourages the people themselves to take part in identifying their problems and to proffer solutions to those problems through team work. It is the position of this paper that the Nigerian nation will be totally out of recession if the country can embrace the idea, theory and practices of theatre for development in solving her economic problem.

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