

SOCIAL-DARWINISM AND CHANGE IN NIGERIAN DRAMA: A STUDY OF ENI-JONES UMUKO'S *THE SCENT OF CRUDE OIL*

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Abstract

*The contemporary Nigerian nation has been in the throes of civil unrest of different kinds. This paper using Eni-Jones Umuko's play **The Scent of Crude Oil** attempts to argue that these uprisings are often aggravated by the methodologies adopted by government and other establishment apologists to quell them. These methodologies the paper argues have their roots in the engagement style of the White colonial masters with the natives in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. Specifically, it argues that social-Darwinism which draws its strength from the warped notion of superiority of idea, action and development and which defines the approach of government to these crises has engendered anarchy and more conflict rather than peace and has. Hence the paper advances for a change of approach in tackling social unrest or insurrection in the country as the method often employed by the establishment to resolve civil unrest do not yield the desired impact which is peaceful resolution.*

Theoretical Preamble

Cultural evolution theories have been used by the West since the late 19th and early 20th century to justify the expansion of their empires to Africa, the Americas and South East-Asia (Nnamele 2). They classified these regions as backward and therefore unfit for survival unless "civilized" to live and act as Europeans did." This way of seeing African and other non-Caucasian societies came to be termed 'Social-Darwinism'. In creating its complex of ideas and imagination however, Social-Darwinism did not take into consideration the survival and successes achieved by pre-colonial indigenous societies. It rather created a new system, a mixture of European and African culture which has led to the loss of significant cultural grouping and description in most African societies. (Nnamele 3). The new practices as influenced by the Europeans however, did not go down without creating new problems for the indigenous society. Besides the psychological and economic impact on the people, the physical consequences continue to be a challenge which has eluded measures taken by the emergent African leaders who often apply Western cultural approaches in solving the challenges created by

contradictions occasioned by the new highbred culture. These challenges which hitherto had been ameliorated and resolved through African cultural approaches established long before the cultural evolutionist's racial ideology had become intractable to most countries in the continent (Nnamele 4).

Maudline N. Okpara in *Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies*, points out that the African approach “differs from the Western alternative dispute resolution” (69). She explains that “In Africa there are various traditions, religious practices and belief system... and these structures are utilized as instrument of conflict resolution” (69). Corollary to our thesis of social Darwinism is the issue of anarchism. Briefly, literal anarchism is a 19th century political theory opposed to all forms of repression of the individual and his culture. It is a rebellion against force and the truncation of an individual's freedom of choice. Anarchism only allows for voluntary cooperation and rejects any form of pressure from government organizations. It emphasizes the total control of societies by voluntarily organized groups and not by the political state. It is believed to be the most effective way each individual may attain their complete development (Russell 42-44). This voluntary cooperation often arises from cultural relationships and ancestral lineage and heritage of a community. This theory could perhaps be explained as a consequence or reaction to the Social-Darwinism. Thus, anarchy and Social-Darwinism will be employed in examining European intrusion and subjugation of Africa's indigenous cultures and the resultant change and its implication in the society. Eni-Jones Umuko's *The Scent of Crude Oil* will be the focus of our analysis.

Synopsis of *The Scent of Crude Oil*

Eni-Jones Umuko's *The Scent of Crude Oil* was published in 2010` and the plot revolves around a fictional Nigerian community, Esidi, in the Niger-Delta region. The play divided into sixteen episodes opens with the “Youth Election”. Tafa, a jobless University graduate vies for the position of youth chairman against Maku-Maku, a notorious kidnapper and illegal oil bunkerer. Maku-Maku and his friends, Jugunu, Pelele and Aluta are known to have been terrorizing and bullying the community through illegal oil bunkering and kidnappings. When it became apparent that Tafa is the preferred choice of the people in the election, Jugunu instigates a revolt against the community and their leader. They fire gunshots into the air scaring the people away and declare Maku-Maku as the elected Youth Chairman. After the election, Maku-Maku and his friends continue with their bunkering plans. Jugunu expresses his fears of fire outbreak and recounts how past incidents almost consumed their community and the neighbouring one.

Maku-Maku, Pele-Pele, Juguno and Aluta finally decide to kidnap a Whiteman and succeed in kidnapping Obobo, a ‘mulato’, whom they think to be a Whiteman. Tafa is contacted since none of them could read nor write to help them draft a letter to the oil company demanding for ransom. Tafa agrees, but instead writes a letter expressing gratitude for all the company has done for the Esidi people. In a community interactive session with a development organization, Obobo comes in time to expose the deeds of Maku-Maku, Jugunu, Pelele and Aluta and how he escaped from their captivity. Tafa corroborates with his story and reveals how he with assistance from Amparo created an escape route for Obobo. In shame and humiliation, Maku-Maku and his gang leave the interactive session with the plan to return to oil bunkering.

Tafa finds out their plan and alerts the community chief, the community members and the security agents. The school pupils are evacuated to Warri as they all prepare to stop the gang. Unfortunately, Tafa and his followers did not succeed in their attempt to stop Maku-Maku and his men. The bunkering leads to fire outbreak that engulfs Maku-Maku and his men except Pelele who left the crime scene after hearing the sound of a gunshot before the fire outbreak. The inferno razes down the entire Esidi community leaving just few survivors. After the incident, the survivors including those living on the outskirts of Esidi such as Keni, his wife Tahisha and Mama Jugunu return to the land of Esidi to rebuild it and start a new life. They gather all the dead from the inferno for a mass burial. Tombrifa, who is the chief priest of the community, first offers the traditional rites for the dead and the community, then teacher Johnson concludes the gathering with a Christian prayer as they all respond “Amen” to bring the play to an end.

Social-Darwinism in *The Scent of Crude Oil*

The issue of Social-Darwinism in *The Scent of Crude Oil* revolves around African traditional norms and value system and the use of force to achieve desired objectives as a result of Western influence in the society. The contention in the play appears more to be focused on communal responsibilities and peaceful existence rather than the devastating effect of oil exploration by companies in the region and government negligence (Nnamele, 23). Maku-Maku, Jugunu and their followers display gross disrespect for the tradition of the land and its constituted authority. This is perhaps as a result of defamation and subjection of African traditions by Western powers. The playwright reveals the first instance of such disregard for tradition through Jugunu in the election scene.

CHIEF HURI-HURI: From what my eyes witness, I
announce Tafa as Youth Chairman of Esidi community.

JUGUNU: Stop am! (*Brandishing an Ak-47rifle.*) Stop the nonsense at once! Na we dey on ground. Pelele! (18)

Being an accepted traditional ruler, Chief Huri-Huri embodies the customs and tradition of the people as ordained by the ancestors. It is through Western influences that most of these sacred African beliefs lost their relevance especially among the youths as portrayed in the characters of Jugunu and his cohorts. In terms of combat, the bandits also proved to be the stronger team as they are all armed with guns to withstand any form of opposition. Tafa who suffers the loss in the election attests to this thus,

TAFA: It would have been madness to stay back, unarmed, to engage a band of drug addicts, cultists and rapists who are armed to the teeth and ready to kill. (19)

The Esidi community through the activities of these few youths becomes a community where only the strong survives at the detriment of the weak majority. Chief Huri-Huri also affirms this state of helplessness in the hands of Jugunu and his gang when he says,

CHIEF HURI-HURI: No be lie even the youths get power pass me wey be them chief. Imagine the other time wey NDDC carry big generator come dash us Kamala, the youths drive the contractor wey e bring am. Dem say contractor must give dem ₦250,000.00 as “deve” before dem go allow am install the generator for our community. We beg dem tire say the generator go improve our lives but dem no gree! (61)

The proliferation of arms in contemporary Nigeria has led to an increase of armed minority groups terrorizing majority of the people as witnessed in the play.

The Scent of Crude Oil is an abiding statement on anarchism engendered by social Darwinism cast in vivid images of the insurgency that ravaged the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The characters in the play are individuals that find relevance in our thesis of the evolution of social Darwinism into anarchism. Their motivations and actions also bear eloquent testimony to the argument of cultural hybridity that has ravaged the contemporary Nigerian state. The template for these conclusions could be found in the youths’ brazen disrespect for tradition and recourse to use of terror and violence. A surface reading of the play might create

the façade of young people fighting with a tradition that is not favourable to their plights of unemployment and poverty. A deeper probing of the texts however, throws up disturbing images of individuals buffeted by avarice, hubris and other besetting evil proclivities.

Change and Traditionl Ethos

Change and traditional ethos here are used literarily to highlight the feature of mediating modern and Western methods of conflict engagement and resolution with a measure of traditional African lore. As a result of social Darwinism, much of the indigenous system of conflict resolution has been discarded as archaic or primitive. However, Umuko's play seems to suggest a recourse to these indigenous methods as the Western oriented ones merely proved inadequate and contentious. The initial attempts in the play to employ the mechanisms of government and the contemporary political class proved abortive. It was only a resort to the traditional structures of mediation that leant success to the war against brigandage in the creeks. In the words of Uche-chinemere Nwaozuzu, these traditional tokens "form part of the indigenous lore and way of doing things by the people" (14). By engaging the warped social system and government which we have classified as a variant of social Darwinism with tokens of tradition and culture, the playwright suggests a synthesis between what we have learnt from the West and what we have in our indigenous culture.

The application of both traditional lore and Western methods of conflict resolution presents Eni-Jones Umuko's play as unique in its ability to bring all conflict into a peaceful resolution irrespective of the magnitude of the disaster created as a result of differences between parties. The vandals in the play were illiterate outlaws who had no regard for their traditional system or their educated elite. They were at a stage where survival was all they craved for, without considering the consequences of their actions. Several factors can be deduced from what brought about the peaceful resolution in the play. First, is the ability of the development organizations and companies to approach the communities through their traditional ruler Chief Huri-Huri and the elders.

ZIK, FECO AND ISI: (*To Huri-Huri, Sensecolo and the wives respectively*). Good morning, Chief. Good morning, Sir. Good Morning, Madam!

CHIEF HURI-HURI/SENSECOLO: Good morning, my children

ZIK: We are NGO officials. We are here to meet members of this community today as scheduled. (70)

By going through the traditional chief and elder, the members of the NGO were able to get the attention of the entire community and their approval. There was no further need to engage in any form of confrontations with the vandals who attempted to disrupt their purpose of visit. Also, the NGO members rather than employing the government security forces to force their aim down the throat of the community, gave room for Tombrifa, the Chief Priest of the community to carry on with his divination to ascertain if their mission is for good or evil, thus employing his services.

TOMBRIFA: Esidi! Eside! Esidiii!!! Na three times I call your name! Come see how they wan take your name do boju-boju good face and decide our communities O! as Chief Priest of Esidi, I must throw oracle first to know whether na wayo una come play us! Abi no be so, my people?

TOWN PEOPLE: Na so o!

TOMBRIFA: (*Brings out divination cowries and throws them*) kere eru be mimi-korubememe! Esidi say all go good. Itako meme-itako meme! Esidi say their message good, too. Gbesekokomeme! Make we listen to them. Karu koro Gbesengbese-gbese! Make the meeting start. The message na the same we dey preach since olden days. Esidi and SCD na the same message dem carry. So my people, make we listen to them because when good meet good na in good go happen. Esidi! Esidi!! Esidi!!!

ALL: Eeeeeiiii! (74)

The decision is unanimously accepted by the community as their chief priest announces that the intentions of the NGO members were good. Amr Abdalla, recommends this type of engagement when he avers that “A successful conflict intervention will also benefit from the strength associated with “the culture of relatedness” by drawing upon the community to get involved in the process of conflict intervention and resolution” (146-147). It is instructive that the conflict resolved when all parties in the community ranging from Tafa, Emma, Teacher Johnson and their co-Christians to Pelele; the only survivor among his friends that went for bunkering and Tombrifa the traditionalist come together under a united voice. Respect was given to culture and tradition when Emma and Tahisha who are Christians made it clear to Teacher Johnson a fellow Christian that their traditional authority must be acknowledged.

TOMBRIFA: Yes, even before we do the youth executing, one thing dey wey we must do to cleanse our community. Everybody wey survive this fire go go river where we go do the ceremony.

TEACHER JOHNSON: What mumbo-jumbo rites are you planning now? We must be and act as Christians or another pipeline fire will strike you heathen...

EMMA: Sorry, Teacher, but it won't be proper to start opposing the new traditional authority of Esidi at this time.

KENI: I am of the same opinion. Tai and I will like to understand the traditional cleansing rites; we are both Dada from birth and wish to cut off our dreads and make a clean break from the past.

TOMBRIFA: Yes, Keni and lolo Papingo, sorry Tai. Dem don follow me discuss their own before. Dem be strong breed and if dem marry the woman go die when she wan born pikin.

TEACHER JOHNSON: With all your university education, Keni...I'm alarmed!

TAHISHA: Our university education is not meant to cut us from our roots but to make us appreciate them better and probably improve on them for the good of all.

TAFIA: I cannot agree with you more. Chief Tombrifa, you can start the cleansing rites. (121).

The playwright here, suggests that despite the excessive quest for Western civilization and modernization, we must not lose our roots nor jeopardize our traditional system. We may perhaps toe the line of Ifeoma and Ifeanyi Odiye's submission thus, "the surprising thing about the effect of imperialism on China is that modern Chinese society in transforming into the Western political world and civilization still retains its traditional values" (15). And China despite sticking to their traditional values has been able to rise even above her imperialist masters in world economy. In Umuko's play, although the actions of government agents compounded the problem of the community, it was through voluntary cooperation by the community that a resolution was finally reached and all parties to the conflict appeased.

Conclusion

The Scent of Crude Oil speaks eloquently on the mantra of change in Nigeria today. It recommends the recognition of local peculiarities in the application of political and economic ideals fashioned in the West. It identifies with the need to harness the rich vein of traditional lore in tackling some of the intractable social and political problems that confront our nation. Arguing that most of the structures and ideologies we have borrowed from the West at the dawn of independence were foisted on us with the erroneous view that our ways still needed to evolve along the lines of the West. It recommends a tacit return to our roots for the solution of some of the socio-political problems we find ourselves as a nation today.

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