

## **DRAMA AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION**

**Christine Chika Ojemudia**

National Veterinary Research Institute Vom  
Plateau State, Nigeria

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### ***Abstract***

*Drama acts as a medium for information dissemination, communication, education, conscientization and entertainment. It is usually created, and its very creation determines what it is and what it does. Drama is created in such a way as to express meaning, feeling, and spirit so that the audience members will have an opportunity to experience what the actors want them to experience. Drama helps man to form a view of the world; a true and large-scale assessment of events; get a rational, reasoned orientation of the world around him; and make a true assessment of his own self. It aesthetically expresses man's emotional-intellectual world in his relationship to the environment. National or personal identity is a direct result of the presence of elements from the shared activities such as drama performances, cultural practices and other common factors in people's daily lives including language, history, culture and consciousness. In Nigeria, drama has played significant roles in forming and consolidating ethnic and national identities. Drama therefore is an effective instrument for Identity formation.*

## **Introduction**

Drama is an art form which utilizes various elements of production such as play scripts, costume and make-up, scene design and many other elements to communicate to an audience. The word Drama according to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia is

The specific mode of fiction represented in performance. The term comes from a Greek word meaning "action", which is derived from "to do". The enactment of drama in theatre, performed by actors on a stage before an audience, presupposes collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception. The structure of dramatic texts, unlike other forms of literature, is directly influenced by this collaborative production and collective reception.

Drama involves the performing arts which are art forms in which artists use their bodies and/ or voice to convey artistic expression. These art forms effectively collaborate with the plastic arts (where artists use paint, clay, metal and other materials to create physical art objects) to create spectacle on stage.

Art includes various forms of human activities, creations, and modes of expression, such as theatre performances, music, fine arts, literature, film, photography and so on. The images evoked by arts whether in writing, production or performance send powerful signals which ultimately influence people's perception of the world. The word art, for the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, means 'imitation' even though in the sense of "re-presentation" rather than of 'copying'. Plato and Aristotle spoke of mimesis as the

re-presentation of nature. According to Plato, all artistic creations are forms of imitation; the ideal form being the created forms while the concrete things man perceive in his environment are shadowy representations of this ideal type. Leon Trotsky (1981: 32) submits that

Art is always a social servant and historically utilitarian. It finds the necessary rhythm of words for dark and vague moods, it brings thought and feeling closer or contrasts them with one another, it enriches the spiritual experience of the individual and of the community, it refines.

By this definition, it becomes obvious that art is integral with the life of the society and plays diverse roles in the lives of generations. Debra Bruch observes that from the very beginning of civilization, the art of drama has helped individuals discover and understand themselves and their relationship with the society, with others and with God (or the gods.); and as such, it is and always has been an affirming force in the world. Unlike any other art, the total, intense focus of theatre is on the human person, his or her existence, and his or her relationship with life. It is a part of human nature to need to examine who we are in relationship with where we are. Consequently, basic elements of drama exist in every society.

Drama deals with creation. It creates a world unlike all the other arts. Drama as an art form, is the height of creation, where artists literally create a complete and living world which focuses on human beings and human existence. A play script could reflect the society in which the playwright exists. The dramatic experience itself, both by the artist and the audience, makes the created world appear real. And because the

experience is real and vital, drama literally creates the world in which we live. In so doing, it becomes a potential force for changing or consolidating views, conceptions, and identities in order to recreate and re-order society.

### **The Dramatic Art Form**

Drama as an art form communicates various ideas, experiences and moods. Through creating plays, stories are often generated as parables and performed in order to aid people to understand and appreciate the world and make sense of their lives. Through the enactment of plays, people are introduced to characters they have never met, places they have never visited, and ideas that may or may not have ever crossed their minds. By exposing and x-raying happenings in the society, theatre helps to shape the future of society by aiding individuals to decide what is important in their lives and what can be done to make them better. Dramatic productions act as information services, connecting people, projecting ideas and proffering solutions. They provide effective platforms for families, communities, and the nation to address the challenges of life. Drama deals with the artistic projection of the human condition on stage. It goes without saying that if the human factor were to be removed from the human existence, humanity may be confronted by total chaos, where everything is indifferent to everything else. If nature is considered in isolation from man, it may become nothing but just an empty abstraction existing in the shadowy world of dehumanized thought. This is because it is man's interaction with the world that determines his relationship with it. According to William Long (2007:7):

It is not so much what it (art) says as what it awakens in us that constitutes its charm. It is this very thing that it awakens in us that civilizes man, otherwise science will make even

unimaginable inventions, but without ‘arts’ man would destroy all and even himself.

He goes ahead to assert further, “All art is the expression of life in forms of truth and beauty”. History itself is replete with instances of collaboration between arts, civilization and human development. The Greek civilization produced the likes of Homer, whose poem ‘Iliad’ became Alexander the Great’s favourite and accounts have it that he placed the Iliad under his pillow as he went to sleep every night. Aristotle the Greek philosopher wrote the Poetics which is like a bible of literary criticism. Communists encouraged the arts and literature because they perceived them as the foundation for a just society. Britain remained a primitive and unstable entity until the emergence of great writers. Queen Elizabeth I who reigned from 1558-1603 did not disguise her love for the Arts as she financed and watched most of Shakespeare’s plays in the Globe Theatre. Abraham Lincoln considered as one of the greatest American Presidents read Shakespeare a lot and in fact met his tragic death in a theatre while watching a play.

In traditional African (and indeed Nigerian) society, traditional Art productions and oral literature dominate the socio-cultural landscape. Evidence of the unique artistic legacies of the traditional society could be found in the people’s pottery, sculpture, cloth-making, wall-decorations and body-adornment as well as myths, legends, folktales, folksayings, proverbs, folksongs, work songs, riddles, tongue twisters, lullabies and incantations. The African people’s very existence is indeed embedded in diverse cultural practices through which these are given exposition. Many design practices have ultimately emerged over the years as the trade – marks of the many tribes and communities found in the continent. Writing on oral literature, Joel Adedeji (1971: 134) opines that

Oral tradition is the complex corpus of verbal or spoken art created as a means of recalling the past... based on the ideas, beliefs, symbols, assumptions, attitudes and sentiments of people... through a process of learning or initiation and its purpose is to condition social action and foster social interaction.

Suffice it to say then, that drama is a vital and persistent aspect of human experience utilized as a powerful tool of socio-cultural interaction and communication. The images evoked by drama whether in writing, production or performance, send powerful signals which ultimately influence people's perception of the world. It is difficult to conceive of the development of contemporary Western culture without the life-giving rays of meditative art embodied in the works of such people as Dante, Goethe, Tolstoy, Balzac, Pushkin, Lermontov, Dostoyevsky, Tchaikovsky, and Beethoven. Or African Culture without the artistic projections of Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka, Clark, Osofisan, Abrahams, Enweonwu, Onobrakpeya, Akpabot, Nketia, Agu and others. The whole world of our thoughts and feelings would have been different and incomparably poorer and the world would have definitely had a very different history but for the brilliant minds that gave society their masterpieces of drama, painting, music, poetry and prose.

Drama has played motivational roles throughout history. Motivational purposes of drama refer to intentional conscious actions on the part of the artists or creators. These may be to bring about political, social, cultural environmental or economic change; to comment on an aspect of society; to convey a specific emotion or mood; to address personal psychology; to illustrate another discipline; to sell a product;

for social inquiry; for therapy; for entertainment; or simply as a form of communication. Drama may be utilized for propaganda and thus become a tool to subtly influence popular conceptions or mood.

### **Drama and Identity Formation**

Identity can be expressed in terms of individual, community and national identity. A nation as defined by Wikipedia refers to “a community of people who share a common language, culture, ethnicity, descent, and/or history.” National identity often goes with national pride and defines a person's identity and sense of belonging to his/her nation. This sense of belonging is usually shared with a group of people who have affinity to the same place. National identity is not an inborn trait, rather it is a direct result of the presence of elements from the shared activities, practices and other common factors in people's daily lives such as national symbols, language, colours, history, culture and consciousness; as well as ethnic bonding, music, food, arts, craft and so on. The national identity of most citizens of one state or one nation tends to strengthen when the country or the nation is threatened by any external force. The sense of belonging to the nation is essential as an external threat becomes clearer when individuals seek to unite with fellow countrymen to protect themselves and fight against the common threat.

Nigeria's national and cultural identity is defined by the people's sense of place, sense of history and sense of self. It is defined by what it means to be a Nigerian from a particular ethnic group or tribe. It is the tie that binds people together. The Nigerian people's culture and cultural activities including oral and traditional performances are testaments to the people's heritage and are bound to restore dignity, respect and

self-pride when enacted. A person's experiences usually shape his identity. Drama stimulates people's thoughts, emotions, beliefs, or ideas through the senses. They express ideas and these can take many different forms and may serve many different purposes. Through the developed and efficient use of words, symbols, images and other mediums such as vocal and physical conduct to convey meaning with immediacy and depth on stage, theatre acts as a vehicle for the expression of feelings, thoughts, and observations and the formation of personal identity.

The intellectual atmosphere that surrounds people from childhood; the style of thinking that permeates folk sayings, tales and songs; the dramas that have been watched, the play scripts that have been read; the scenery, costumes and make-up that have been admired; the music that have been heard; the view of the world and humanity that have been absorbed and so on, are all thanks to humanity's contact with the treasures of the dramatic arts which has contributed to the formation of the individual self. These encounters no doubt, teach individuals, communities and the entire society to perceive and transform the world aesthetically.

Drama is ideal for the initiation of change and the formation of identity especially in the Nigerian society. In these troubled times when the nation is in a state of anomy where individuals have lost their moral bearings and find themselves adrift in the flotsam of moral wreckage because of the mad rush for power and material wealth, the best hope for the redemption of the nation from its present moral bankruptcy, lies in the positive creation of national image and identity. By consuming and contemplating theatre, people would cultivate great values geared towards developing self and others. Through them, society could be recreated, beautified and sustained. Drama performances imbue individuals and societies with the rationality to express life as



it is and most importantly, as it should be. Drama easily lends itself to wide patronage because of its creative and intellectual appeal. Obviously, one may be to some extent indifferent to some highly specialized science, but it is almost impossible for an emotionally developed person to remain indifferent to drama, poetry, music, painting, sculpture, and other art forms. The person who is indifferent to these spheres deliberately condemns himself or herself to a depressing narrowness of outlook and an intellectually unfulfilling life.

The message of drama helps man to form a view of the world; a true and large-scale assessment of events; get a rational, reasoning orientation of the world around him; and make a true assessment of his own self. Drama utilizes varied mediums such as stage performances of plays, dances, musicals, mimes, dramatic presentations, films and so on, to depict man, his spiritual world, and the relationship between him and others in their interaction with the world. It also gives voice to feelings and artistic shape to experiences, balancing passion and rationality and exploring issues of morality and value. (Lyn White, 1997:263)

Drama fills a part of human need to explore and discover the self, and then express that discovery. It acts as a medium which specifically engages a person in positive discovery and expression of the self. Every human being has an artistic sense and this is easily evident when we observe healthy young children at play, engaging in highly intriguing imagination. A dramatist has a highly developed artistic sense which helps him or her to transform his or her work into a cultural or universal symbol. This provides the basic impetus for expressing national identity.

## **Conclusion**

Drama has continued to play a significant role in history as an agent of self and societal development. From the Pre-literary Period, through the Classical Period to the Post-Modern Era, drama has functioned effectively as the signature of civilization, identity and character formation. Drama utilizes diverse mediums to reflect and transform society. It attempts to depict man in relation to his environment, his spiritual world, and in relation to other members of the society. Drama offers models and methods for addressing diverse human conditions and dilemmas, as well as acknowledging ambiguities and paradoxes. It has over the ages helped man to face the tension between personal needs and group concerns in a bid to promote civil and informed discussion about issues of conflicts.

Drama through the use of images, symbols and words, gives voice to feelings, and artistic shape to experiences, balancing passion and rationality and exploring issues of morality and value. These are essential objectives for a society striving towards identity formation. Drama illuminates society by painting pictures of life as it is and as it could be. By so doing, it highlights life's contradictions such as beauty and ugliness; truthfulness and corruption; greed and honesty; and many other values, with the aim of improving, sanitizing and/or rebuilding society and forming individual and societal identity.

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