

Theatre as a Tool for National Peace and Political Sustainability

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Abstract

Issue of national peace and political stability and perhaps, social transformation belong to the past, having enjoyed currency in the first decades of independent of the so-called new states that emerged from colonial act of creation fragment fragile and unstable. It would therefore interest one to ask why, after so many years of momentous transitions and transformations are we returning to old issues and challenges? Nigeria has crossed the threshold of instability, as it were, having passed many successful elections to test our democratic stability with not less than four elections. So why are we back to issues of national peace and political stability? One reason is that what happened for the most part has been motion without progress, growth without development and change without transformation. To further push home the intensions of the presenter of this paper, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* would be critically analysed and viewed with the situation in Nigeria political activities cum the insecurity that now prevail the Northern part of the country with a view to prefer necessary solution or way out. The paper intends to appeal to the conscience of our political leaders to embrace peace regardless of their political differences.

Keywords: *Peace, National Stability, Political Sustainability*

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Background to the Study

Theatre is the creation of human endeavours which is related to reproduction. Arts is the application, demonstration or expression of human creative skills and imaginations. A healthy society is the one that harbors initiative art. Art is meant to effect a change in lives of the people in the society. Art seeks to reflect life, our society, the way we think and see things. It is a potent means of communication. Arts in whatever form, interprets life. The artists choose to convey their thoughts and ideas on statements. Every artist has a statement to share. For one, it is a religious feeling, while for another, it is about societal ills, yet for another it is the beauty of life, trust and togetherness.

The artist therefore, irrespective of his product, cooperates with a given society (Bamidele, 2000). Art, being man – made, is a product of behaviour skill and expression and also as the product of the spirit based on the values of the society as opined by Adegbeye (2013). Art builds on the value system of a society, for the purpose of enlightening, educating and motivating the people. Arts present the society with a wide range of cultural influences that affect almost everything from attitude to perception.

The act of theatre practice is a means of art expression. It is the dramatization of all elements of theatre within a given space for the appreciation of a (target) audience. In other words, as explained by Omotosho (2018), theatre, as an art form, represents an experience of an event or experience which can be real or imagined and which is communicated to an audience through a medium. The purpose of this is for the artist to contact his audience through integrated manipulation of various forms of art such as music, mime, poetry, dance, painting and symbols which are directed either at the audience's auditory or visual senses.

This is achievable because theatre helps to depict social reality and encourages audience participation. As a medium of communication, theatre constantly mirrors the society. Beyond drawing its theme from the society, which varies from the historical to the present and the futuristic, it has however been argued that the shape, outlook and presentation of a people's theatre are direct reflections of the yearning of the people. As observed by Yerima (2007), these attributes bestow on the theatre, the role of a vanguard, a watchdog, the barometer of the society and a major factor in societal development.

National Peace and Political Stability in Nigeria

It is no more news that the country Nigeria got her independence as a national from the British government in 1960, and since then has witnessed series of government, be it military or civilian. There had also been series of national peace and political challenges, some of which still persist till now. The incessant attack on citizens by various pressure groups such as Boko Haram, Egbesu Boys, Militants attacks in Niger – Delta, pipeline vandalism, kidnapping and abduction of various type and so on, are enough evidences to show that the required peace and tranquility in the country is not theirs and there are serious tensions on the land.

Historically, the nation called Nigeria, can be regarded as a nation of many nations, bearing in mind the old empires and kingdoms such as the Benin Kingdom, Old Oyo Empire, Kanu Bornu Empire and Sokoto caliphate. The nation has passed through various evolutionary stages before the 1914 state of the territory which was characterized by the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates for the birth of colony and protectorate of Nigeria known as the country called Nigeria.

Any meaningful discussions on the concept of national peace and political sustainability should assume a basic understanding of what a nation is. According to Raufu (1992), a nation is a body of people recognized as an entity by virtue of their common historical and linguistic or ethnic links, usually occupying a defined territory. The implication of this definition to nation building is that a process would essentially be required for common goals and national consciousness to be created. Hence, Lawal (2000), describes nation building as “the growing and development of a nation through a very gradual process and usually by means of trial and error”. He explains further that it is equally a process usually initiated by a small group of intellectuals but directed at the social groups as a whole in form of social and political integration. This is with the ultimate aim of bringing together – socially, regionally, politically, and even institutionally divided sections of a people.

As explains by Darah (2003), the refusal to accommodate the divergent voices and people in the process of governance as well as the blocking of avenues for popular participation have all disabled the various trans – ethnic organizations and their cadres. Consequently, there has been an upsurge of ethnic platforms. These nationality associations and their militias have therefore ended up in articulating many of the resolved contradictions at the level of the economy and social life.

A review of the activities of groups like the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Ijaw National Congress (INC), Odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) and the somewhat conservative Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), the Afenifere and Ohaneze can confirm the desperacy of ethnic organization in articulating the demands and aspirations of groups and peoples are seemingly marginalized.

Unfortunately, all these have not really helped to move the nation forward. Rather, it is a cry of murder today, clashes, arsons or arrests / detention of leader's tomorrow. The question now is that when will Nigeria know peace if all these continue? People have argued that things are the way they are in Nigeria today because of bad leadership. While one would not want to totally agree with their view point, it is important to observe that Nigerian leaders over the past years particularly those that came after the first republic have been too insensitive and insincere to the plight of the average Nigerian citizen.

Our leaders engage themselves in political “warfare” purposely to gain power and probably to retain such for life at the peril of the masses of Nigerian people. This high level of insincerity and insensitivity is influenced by their recognition of the importance of maximizing the payoff of the political sector which they have involved themselves in:

The result of this has been an unstable system where a number of citizens are either subdued or cajoled regularly to play along. The over – dependence on oil revenues has created less concentration on domestic economic activities thereby making such sectors remaining rather epileptic. This state of economic disequilibrium has been further compounded by a multitude of external debts that have been incurred by past leaders.

Bribery and corruption is another cankerworm that one might not need to say so much about since it is a very visible issue in every nook and cranny of the Nigerian environment. The incumbent President of Nigeria, Mohammadu Buhari government has zero tolerance for corruption as he is seriously fighting corruption both at the high and low levels of human endeavours.

According to Igbuzor (2005), corruption in Nigeria has manifested in inflation of contracts, receiving kickbacks, falsification of accounts and records, examination malpractice, taking of bribes and perversion of justice among the law enforcement agencies and organs administering justice.

Considering the above mentioned irregularities, one can say that Nigerians have become more involved in crimes such as advance – fee – fraud, drug trafficking, armed robbery, hired assassins and so on in the name of “survival”. Consequently, daily living has become hazardous. The reputation of Nigeria in international existence is now becoming highly threatened, particularly with the emergence of militia groups including Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen, and faceless kidnappers and so on whose mission is to main and kill or vandalize public infrastructure.

Development has become retrogressive and wobbling. It is now a case of what Aderinwale (2003) called “Alice in the wonderland”, where we are running as twice as hard only to remain on the same spot that we have been. The text *Once Upon Four Robbers* written by Femi Osofisan would also be x-rayed to drive home the political and security challenges in the country.

Synopsis of the play: *Once upon Four Robbers*

The play *Once upon Four Robbers* written by that erudite scholar and many award recipients who is also Emeritus Profession of Theatre in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Professor Femi Osofisan is a satire where the playwright tries to mirror the society from the angle of in-equality where the rich oppressed the poor. There are five major characters in the play, they are the four robber's majors, Hassan, Angola, Alhaja and the Aafa. The four notorious armed robbers went to seek protective charm from Aafa in order for them to always have remarkable and problem – free outings.

The playwright also identified that there is hunger in the land. This was explained in pages 21 and 23 of the play text:

Aafa: So why not give up? There's enough employment in the country
Major: Yes. The rich also own the servants.

Aafa: And you cannot be servants? You? You? (looks at them in turn) And you self – styled Alhaja?

Alhaja: (in “illiterate” accent) 'wanted urgently; four boys and a one girl. Standard six an advantage but not compulsory position.

Hassan: 'service boys, waiter! Attractive salary

Major: Five naira per week!

Alhaja: (Reading off Aafas bald head) 'vacancy. Fast – growing company, excellent opportunities for ambitious young men willing to work with their position.

Angola: “Cleaner”

Hassan: “Cook”

Alhaja: “House maid, part – time, Mistress!”

Major: “Washerman!”

Angola: Like dogs. To lap up the excrement.

The above dialogue among the characters was created by the playwright to further emphasize that menial jobs are meant for the poor in the society. Professor Osofisan also tries to explain protests from the poor against the rich as this is seen on pages 27 and 28 of the play.

Aafa: Promise!

Angola: (amidst the general exclamation) I beg your pardon?

Aafa: If you want to leave your poverty behind, on the dung heap of this day, promise me.

Major: We do not understand

Aafa: Three promises, and you will be on the highway to riches

Major: The first?

Aafa: Never to rob the poor

Angola: But we've just told you

Aafa: Promise! (holds out his 'tiras”) I know the poor, they do not love each other.

Furthermore, in the play, Prof. Femi Osofisan through the speech of (Major) a character on page 51 of the text which goes thus:

Major: Yes? And now what?

..... when the man walking in front stumble into a pit, what should those behind do? Loyalty? Affection? Love? Should they because of these passions follow him into the pit?

Talks about the sycophancy of human beings and possibly their unfaithfulness. This he expresses further on page 55 when the soldiers killed Major (one of the robbers) and takes away their (robbers) money.

Sergeant: And listen, you dog who may have been cursed to eternal poverty! As far as we know, the robbers ran away with the money! Is that clear? We found nothing. O kay?

....

The playwright was trying to talk about the unfaithfulness of even the law enforcement agents who are saddled with the responsibility of ensuring safety of lives and property of the citizenry. All these and many more as enumerated by the playwright are pointer to the insecurity in the land and its multiple implications on the political stability and national peace in the country.

The role of theatre in the effort of National Peace and Political Sustainability

Arts builds on the value system of a society, for the purpose of enlightening, educating and motivating the people. Arts presents the society with a wide range of cultural influences that affect almost everything from attitude to perception. The arts represent an outlet of expression that is usually influenced by the society and which in turn helps to change the society. Thus, art plays a part in shaping and molding individuals to the expected mode of conduct in the society. The act of theatre practice is a means of art expression. It is the dramatization of all elements of theatre within a given space for the appreciation of a (target) audience. The purpose of this is for the artist to contact his audience through integrated manipulation of various forms of art such as music, songs, mime, poetry, dance and so on. This is achievable because theatre helps to depict social reality and encourages audience participation. As a means of communication, theatre constantly mirrors and reflects the society.

It has been argued that the shape outlook and presentation of a people's theatre are direct reflection of the yearnings of the people. These attributes bestow on the theatre the role of a vanguard, a watchdog, the barometer of the society and a major factor in societal development. (Yerima, 2007). Examples abound on how dramatists in Nigeria have hiked theatre with the pressing issues in the society such as political oppression, economic deprivation, illiteracy, poor health care and so on.

Art is a product of society, and it is concerned with everything about the society, and gives expression to the activities in the society. It is form art that we get the most intimate feel and the most profound understanding of a society. The socio – political challenges which face society force it to grow beyond its past and present and prepares it for the future.

The pre occupation of the playwright is to unfold, interpret and re-present life in all fronts. The playwright selects from bits and pieces of the activities in life and weaves them together in tune with his artistic vision and brings out a play which allows society to see itself. Each play is written for an occasion, for a purpose. Every play has a message, depending on how you do it, and when you are fighting to change or improve the society, you must understand that there are a number of ways you can do it as observed by Osofisan (2001) whichever, way it is done, the playwright as an artist should strive for the ideal of human perfection. He should function towards a revolution for life. (Bamidele, 2000)

However, the obvious function of play and the playwright lies in the playwright's way of exploring the particular possibilities of the role he performs in the society in which he acts. The import is that the playwright's responsibility depends on the values of the times and era in which he exists. The playwright must have sympathetic interest in human beings and not just use it for their own psychic self – cure. Theatre is therefore established in and or originated from a particular society and culture. Theatre can change human thought, actions and social orders. It is a discipline that is capable of meeting all challenges of life, social, cultural religions, political economic and so on.

Conclusion

Conversely, some believe that the theatre is not important because it is a mere immediate form of entertainment. But whilst researching on the theatrical culture of a particular period, one can draw conclusion about the specified era, people, social and national identities and issues. This makes theatre an important part of the culture of any country. Theatre holds an important position in investigating the culture of any country and significantly expands the knowledge of that country and its identity. Theatre has been a prime institution in preserving, not only the cultural ethics and heritage of a nation but plays a healthy and key role in shaping the mental state of a nation.

In support of this, plays like Rotimis' *If... and Hopes of the Living Dead*, Sowande's *Circus of Freedom Road*, Obafemi's *Night of the Mystical Beast*, Okediji's *Rere Run* Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers, Another Raft, Aringindin and Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* were intended to investigate the socio – political situation of the Nigerian state.

There is also that urgent need for Nigerians to decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the global as well as our local communities. We should not underrate our capacity as ordinary Nigerians to bring about positive change.

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