
CONFLICT, CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND RELATIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA: AN APOLOGIA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to interrogate the ideal of using drama to highlight the cultural differences within the Nigerian polity and advance the argument that there is need for playwrights to creatively orchestrate this diversity and in the process examine the model of relativism and tolerance amongst the various federating units in the country and thus attempt to rebut the popular use of stereotypes. In this age of much ethnic nationalism, cultural irredentism and religious fundamentalism, the need to bring to the fore the fact that no culture or religion has the right to absolute morality and truth, becomes more compelling in our attempt to build an enduring nation and earn our place in the comity of progressive nations.

Introduction

I shall cast my search light on the critical faculty. First the critical tendency to assume that there are culturally prescribed roles for different ethnic stock. Second the observations that my students in acting always appear to have the image of the 'bent-waist and bronchitis prone' elder as a model in the portraiture of an old man and thirdly the usual design to identify certain occupations and roles with cultural kinds in dramatic literature. Stereotyped characters run the gamut of literature in Nigeria, examples such as, Soyinka's Lakunle, Ene Henshaw's Bambulu, the Teacher in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel* are all fitting

examples of creative parodies of the teacher. In this paper, our attention will be focused mainly on dramatic literature. However we may draw parallels from other creative genres such as movie and the novel if such serves to buttress our argument. Thus, we shall restrict our search for cultural stereotypes to characters that exhibit local roles or idiosyncrasies. We shall try to map out the general concept of popular portrayal of characters of cultural provenance in some Nigerian plays.

Inspiration for these prefatory statements is from Wole Soyinka's *Beautification of the Area Boy*. This play is populated with different character vignettes that form the humanity in the city of Lagos, Nigeria. Here we have characters such as Trader, Judge, Barber, Mama Put, Minstrel, Police, and Soldier. As a critic, reader or theatre audience, certain cultural motifs and persona flit across one's subconscious at the first encounter of these characters. My comprehension was perhaps mere pejorative than cognitively objective. This could be because my mental vision of the characters in the play was conditioned by their delineation in popular Nigerian fiction. This delineation often had names and occupational tags associated with them. Thus in all genres of popular Nigerian literature or entertainment, such names or occupation as trader and spare-parts dealer are often associated with the Igbo culture group. Occupations that deal with state security and political power are seen as synonymous with the Hausa-Fulani stock. By the same token the Yorubas are cast in the image of techno-revolutionaries while the Efik and Ibibio axis are most times seen through the prisms of servitude and docility. We can attempt to domesticate these popular attributes by expanding them further to character quirks often associated with these culture groups. The Igbo character for

instance is portrayed very materialistic and greedy, the Yourba very pugnacious and two-faced while the Hausa-Fulani is fatalistic and prone to violence. Of course these attributes highlighted above are the extremes of what Peter Schraeder calls the analytical tools that identify the roles and interests influencing the choices of groups and individuals (101). Yet, they command much space within the unconscious discourse of the audience and critic of a country still grappling with the ills of poverty and mutual suspicion.

Our aim here is not to urge for the rejection of stereotyping in dramatic construction. This of course is artistically impracticable as the design goes as far back as the Greco-Roman era in theatre history. Our task in this paper would be to urge for a shift in popular image, a reconstruction on the prevailing artistic cannons that have plagued the consumption and appreciation of our literature and entertainment art which has so much been shaped by stereotypes foist on us by the exigencies of colonial experience, military rule as well as poverty and political corruption. These stereotypes have persisted because they serve as veritable tools in the hands of the political class in their quest for political power. Hence they orchestrate them when it plays to their advantage but ignore them and chant the chorus of unity when it excludes them. Our polemic here hints on the need to give these stereotypes positive and global interpretations. Instead of approaching them from ethnocentric perspectives they should rather be seen as complementary. Rather than viewing inherent cultural idiosyncrasies as odious and inferior, we should rather look at them with the knowing attitude of understanding and accommodation. It is these ideals that we recommend to the art of the Nigerian playwright.

There have been instances where the playwright is

influenced by these stereotypes in creating his dramatic characters. While this feature may not be pervasive in dramatic literature, it commands much visibility in our indigenous entertainment media such as the home video. The extreme of this compartmentalization of characters based on cultural stock also manifests by way of impugning moral and ethical values to their actions and beliefs. We urge for a method that diffuses the strict delineation of characters based on the efficacies of popular socio-cultural classification of kinds as this most times obfuscate objective critical appreciation. Why a new approach to cultural types and roles one may ask? In the following pages, we shall try to highlight the advantages of a creative and critical approach to character portraiture which hinges on relativism and accommodation. A kind of creation and appreciation that stems from a knowing consciousness of cultural and moral relativism whose social roles are not strictly defined by where a dramatic character comes from, his religion or sex.

I shall start by first reminding ourselves of the kind of objection to authority in culture and morals that we will put into question here. The kind of relativism of culture and roles that we advocate here can be expressed in any of the following statements; that everyone is entitled to his own point of view or way of doing things; that all cultural and moral convictions are only selective; that what is right for culture group may be wrong for another; that no one culture has a right to lecture others on moral and ethical matters. As we shall try to argue, each of these assumptions makes a distinct point that needs separate investigation. One influential doctrine to which such assumption of cultural plurality is likely to appeal is cultural relativism. Strictly speaking however, there is more than one way of understanding this claim.

The doctrine of cultural relativism was first articulated by the Greek sophist Protagoras. It received a revival following the scientific discoveries of the late nineteenth century. It was an outcrop from their idea of moral relativism. Its guiding principle is that there is more than just one true morality. They argued that different systems of ethics, which appear to be in conflict, can claim to be true. For instance we can say that there is no one systems of morality say Christian or Islamic which is binding at all times and in all places. Different cultures, at different times and places, have different ways of life and moral practices. It is equally possible that all such practices are socially positive and healthy. Having said this, it is important to stress that ordinarily, people have no trouble distinguishing between real things and happenings on the one hand and figments of the imagination and make belief on the other hand. Roughly speaking, the former are what they are regardless of what we believe them to be or would like them to be. Changing real things takes real effort and is possible to only a limited extent. In contrast, stories which we make up and characters which we invent are what we want them to be and can be changed at will. For instance most people tend to think that there are cultural traits that are just hard to change. Many ordinary men and women still hold these beliefs, but for some others, cultural skepticism, unlike skepticism with respect to the external world, has become part of the intellectual baggage of contemporary society. Let us however, ignore for a while the possibility of the skepticism associated with cultural traits and look at ideals of fact and relativism. We can begin by saying that not all facts are as hard as say the wrongness of committing murder. However, we can cite an example from dramatic dialogue and speeches where creative relativism manifests. For instance, a Nigerian playwright may be prepared to

contrast the goodness of say, honesty with the goodness of palm-wine. Honesty, they believe is good whether or not we find it easy or prudent to be honest and even if the ideal to be honest conflicts at times with other moral issues. In contrast, the goodness of palm-wine is simply a matter of people's liking for palm wine. It is through this analogy that we may question the 'objective fact' that the Igbos, for instance are economically aggressive and widely dispersed in Nigeria?. Here dispersal, on reflection turns out to be a relative rather than an absolute ideal and facts involving economic aggressiveness turns out to be rather more complex than one might have thought at first. We can take another example from the portrayal of Hausa-Fulanis in popular dramatic works in Nigeria which presents them as very fatalistic or the petulant and boastful nature often attributed to the Yorubas. These cultural traits could be argued to be universal and very visible to varying degrees in other ethnic groups in the country, some critics may argue. Nonetheless it is often quite convenient to always ascribe those traits to them in dramatic works. For fear of sounding vague and illusive here, I shall at this point attempt to state the theoretical construct that we are striving for. This construct revolves around what we may term the objectivity of real collective character and the subjectivity of collective assumptions. The essence of this construct is to show that highlighting cultural differences positively, should not undermine objectivity in dramatic portraiture of different culture groups in Nigeria. We can therefore surmise that the spine of our thesis here is not to dwell on the objectivity or otherwise associated with these character portraiture or their perverseness, rather we shall try to examine how these cultural images could be given more relative and positive reading within the crucible of a multicultural environment ridden with

ethno/ethnic and religious conflict. As Achebe observes, "Prejudice against "outsiders" or "strangers" is an attitude one finds everywhere. But no modern state can lend its support to such prejudice without undermining its own progress and civilization" (9). We shall attempt to sketch out some dramatic texts that exhibit the kind of cultural stereotyping based on social role or ethnicity.

Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* uses sculptural and kinetic motifs common with the cultural milieu of his characters to orchestrate their personality. Sikira for example is cast in the mould of a termagant and petulant woman; a common feature of Yoruba women very visible in popular Nigerian entertainment genres. By the same token, Lejoka-Brown is presented as the boastful braggart also associated with his kind in literature and entertainment arts in Nigeria.

LEJOKA-BROWN: Here I am running up and down, renting a flat, getting restless, going crazy! Just because...I mean, I whose grandfather had a hundred and fifteen wives, I tell you... one hundred plus ten plus five breathing wives all at once under his very roof! But here I am with only two little crickets, (27-28).

These lines paint the picture of a loquacious and flamboyant character, two qualities which are often associated with the Yoruba culture group in dramatic works. We can cite another example from Rotimi's play. The character Sikira presents a vivid model of the petulant and termagant woman that is often the lot of the Yoruba female character in Nigerian drama. This exchange between her, LIZA and MAMA says that much,

SIKIRA: Ehen? Therefore!
(Singing in the tune of Bobby Benson's Taxi Driver highlife)
If you marry in Magistrate Court nko?
I don't care
If you marry in American Toronto!
I don't care
Whether you wear all rings in this world o,
I don't care
Whether you know book *tele* you tire o
I don't care

MAMARASHIDA: Sikira!

SIKIRA: I've slept more nights with the master than you have, therefore...

LIZA: More what?

SIKIRA: more nights; therefore, by native law and custom, I hold a senior place in his house ...whether you like it or not (25).

Rotimi paints the picture of an Amazon in the character of Sikira. It may not then be too farfetched to see in this play the young Yoruba women of the 'Ramota' kind popularized by the television series *The New Masquerade.*, or the boastful and flamboyant Prince Jegede Shokoya of the same soap.

We can cite another example from Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*. Here, we shall beam our attention on the typed Hausa-Fulani characters namely, Edon Awodo and The Adjutant. The slangs and character nuances with which the playwright portrays them easily suggest that they are from the Northern part of the country. In their encounter with Nwokedi at the Orientation Camp, they reproduce the knowing idiosyncrasies of men of the Nigerian armed forces for which most Nigerian plays cast their members in the mould of the

Hausa-Fulani ethnic stock.

AWADO: Nyarinya, why you no dey am for parade?

HABIB: (Pointing at her bandaged leg) I have a bad leg...

AWADO: Sharrap, And doesn't deny! Na me, regiment Seargent Major Edon Awado alias Hannibal you dey call a tin of mentholatum? (*Strikes his chest*) Hannibal, I don chop cattle dung! (26)

Irobi in this scene employs sprinkling of vernacular to reinforce the cultural background of the military men Edon Awado and Adjutant. Although the names might not sound Hausa-Fulani yet the playwright perhaps feels that such characters are better served using Hausa-Fulani sculptural and cultural idioms. In *Idemili*, Ahmed Yerima presents Emeka in the light of a very materialist priest who staked his priestly duties and integrity for material acquisitions; a very fitting common image of Igbo characters in contemporary Nigerian drama. Emeka Nwabueze in *The Dragon's Funeral* brings to life this 'famed' materialism and greed of the Igbo in popular Nigerian culture. In this play we have characters such as Adaka Idike and Okeosisi cast in the image of leaders who for personal gains are ready to sell their people to the white colonial officials.

IDIKE: We should count everybody. If possible, we should even count children. The more people we count the more tax money we collect. We should insist that we be allowed to collect the tax ourselves. In that case we stand to benefit from it because he who blows the horn also wipes his mouth. After all, the man that eats eggs does not know whether the hen that laid the egg has a diseased anus (48-49).

The lines of Chief Idike to most who are non Igbo is reflective of the mindset of their kind in a lot of popular Nigerian drama and other entertainment genre. This phenomenon is quite pervasive that one finds them in occupational types and names. Thus, it may not surprise us to find a cultural pattern in Soyinka's *Mad men and Specialist*; Aafaa, Bode Sowande's *Flamingo* Aafaa, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*. There is a marked stereotyping of these mendicant characters in these plays that betray a culture of fatalism and submissiveness. By the same token, characters presented as cunning Prophets and Divines are often seen to be synonymous with personages often found in the southern parts of the country. Good examples here are Prophet Jeroboam in Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*, The Prophet In Esiaba Irobi's *The Fronded Circle*.

We recommend a dramaturgy that not only highlights these prototypes and stereotypes but goes beyond that to experiment with bold tokens of cross-cultural delineation of popular kinds. Simply put we argue that there should be a conscious effort to employ this style of orchestrating cultural difference in the country giving it a positive and global identity. It may prove quite creative and engaging to highlight these cultural types in a way that would give vibrancy and variety to the Nigerian art. In the introduction we cited the example of Soyinka's *Beautification of the Area Boy* as providing the germinal idea for the explication of our thesis. Soyinka's play succeeds in applying typed characters as habitués found in the Nigerian polity instead of situating them within the narrow confines of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Two essential positive effects of our design are that it removes negativism from the perception of others who are different from us. Secondly, it enriches our understanding of our

corporate existence as that built on mutual differences and homomorphism. It is in this sense that a Hausa-Fulani female character could be created with the same kind of cultural stereotypes often associated with the Yorubas, while, a Yoruba character could be portrayed as materialistic and as relentless as the Igbo trader. We advance these views because most socio-political conflicts are created and fostered by cultural irredentism, group suspicion and the art of constant and most times deliberate distortion of cultural ethos different from ours.

So far we have tried to examine the need to write about difference in our dramas from a relative and universal perspective. We have drawn our theoretical support from the ideals of cultural relativism and the notion that all cultures are innately good. Thus, that the view among most audience that some cultural idiosyncrasies or social roles are the preserve of characters from a certain part of the country should be re-examined and given a more relative and less rigid interpretation. By the same token, the assumption in character portraiture in dramatic literature or popular media performance that some culture traits more than the others are inferior, superior, good or odious, borders on fact-inference confusion. Our thesis in this paper draws more value from what Levis and Thompson describes as “de-education of the public mind” which alludes to the conscious effort of artists and other creators of information to change and shaped popular thought and vision.(138). As Chinua Achebe posits,

Everyone agrees that there are manifestations of tribal cultures which we cannot condemn; for example, particular habits of dress, food, language, music etc. in fact many of these manifestations are positive and desirable and confer richness on our national culture (8).

John Storey describes this phenomenon that Achebe comments on above as “cultural traffic” (6). While Antonio Gramsci defines it as “culture compromise equilibrium”(161).

Our polemics in this paper have not been against using cultural types in dramatic writing but rather in rebutting acritical cultural parodies in Nigerian drama and other media of entertainment. It is a residual but profound use of popular cultural motifs associated with different groups in Nigeria. We feel the need to toe this path because we think that most creators of these dramatic works perhaps have taken it to be a norm given our multicultural set up. However taking a cue from some of our arguments above, we think that being satisfied with a certain state of affairs (as some may feel that it is the creative and cultural norm) may not be equivalent to preferring it to the others. If an individual is faced with a choice between less and more of something desirable, then it would be irrational for him to prefer that less. But a person may be satisfied without having made any such comparison at all. This we think may explain the state of tacit acceptance of cultural role types in contemporary Nigerian drama. It is equally not necessarily irrational or unreasonable for a person to omit or decline to make comparisons because his own state of affairs is perhaps stable, thus he sees no possible alternatives. This is most likely because making such comparisons may be too costly, and against popular view, thus if someone is satisfied with the way things are, he may have no motive to consider how else they might be. In this paper we have tried to make comparisons because we feel that Nigerian plays that highlight individuals or occupations of indigenous provenance often cast them as stereotypes with predictable actions and moral persuasions informed by popular visions and assumptions. We have also elected to chart an alternate view by suggesting that

some of these typed roles could be diffused cross-culturally where a particular occupation or behavior is not often associated with a particular culture group in the country. Finally when they are portrayed, they should be cast in positive and profound ways that promotes the unity and complementarity within the diversity of cultures that is the Nigerian nation.

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