

THE THEATRE ARTIST'S DILEMMA IN THE TASK OF REBRANDING NIGERIA: DEFINING THE MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

OZOBEME, CECIL &
EREGARE, EMMANUEL A.

Abstract

The project of re-branding Nigeria for positive development places the artist in a great dilemma seeing that the happenings in society form the content and subject matter of his/her work. Where the events in society are aberrant, these events will of necessity be reflected in the artist's work. Consequently, the artist inadvertently helps in brandishing the negative traits in society for the world to see and form impressions. Here lies the dilemma of the artist. How the artist can effectively contribute to the re-branding project without undermining his/her profession is the focus of this paper that attempts proffering a solution to this impasse by defining new modes of engagement in the artist's trade so as to effectively contribute to laundering the country's image without the risk of jeopardizing his/her profession. The paper advocates the employment of several strategies which include "fictional presentations of the ideal" and others which have the potentials of bailing the artist out of his/her dilemma and make effectual his contributions to re-branding society for meaning development to occur, especially in this era of global economic melt down.

Introduction

Re-branding Nigeria for positive development as mooted by Dora Akinyuli has become a very polemical issue drawing comments both negative and positive about the feasibility of the project in the face of several aberrant social conditions. This paper which pitches its tent with neither of the camps in the controversy not only sees the significant need for re-branding in order to speed up national development but also observes that the call for multi-faceted effort at re-branding Nigeria places the artist, whose profession falls within the purview of an image maker, in a very great dilemma. An examination of the task of re-branding and the artist's preoccupation will elucidate this claim. In this paper we shall concentrate on the playwright more than the other artists because the time he takes to conceive his work and execute and the tendency for him to be more of a critic than a praise singer.

The Task

The task before us is that of re-branding the nation to ensure speedy development in the face of the global economic melt down. The negative impressions held about Nigeria, has indeed impeded collaborative work with the outside world hence the need for re-branding which as the *Collins English Dictionary* (1991) puts it: is "to

change or update the image of something". The question that tops the controversy in the re-branding issue has to do with the mode of engagement. The nature or process of re-branding can be done purposely (for example as a result of a deliberate change in strategy), or result from unplanned, emergent, or reactive dynamics (for example out of necessity following corporate restructuring). In the case of Nigeria the call for re-branding was occasioned by the fact that we currently have an unpalatable brand borne out of several social malaise like the peaking level of corruption that has eaten deep into the fabric of the society, evident in the notorious cyber fraud and corruption in high places and the seeming lack of administrative focus. Others are the current epileptic power supply, deplorable state of several social amenities, high level of social and political instability traceable to frequent violent ethnic, social, political and religious crisis amongst which the Niger-Delta crisis ranks high. The prevailing cases of armed robbery, kidnapping and ritual murders only make the picture scarier. For a nation endowed with several natural, material and human resources to be running a monolithic oil dependant economy paints a vivid picture of the situation. Added to this is the fact that as a major oil producing nation, Nigeria still experiences observable biting fuel scarcity and the harrowing pangs of poverty. The above picture no doubt earns the nation a negative brand that does not conduce to meaningful national development. This makes the call for multidisciplinary efforts at re-branding not only necessary but exigent. It is this state of affairs that poses a Herculean task for the playwright as an artist.

What is Re-Branding?

Before there is a re-branding there must first of all be a brand because the affix "re" is a prefix that means "again". This implies whatever it is joined to needs to be repeated. Here, branding needs to be done again; it goes to say that there was a brand that needed re-branding. In effect what is branding that the Nation of Nigeria needed to be re done? Branding as a culture is a very old practice. It is the searing of flesh with hot iron to leave a mark (Encarta, 2007). It was first done on livestock to mark their ownership, later prisoners and slaves were branded. Branding is a form of mark of identity, however, in today's commercial world of advertising it has come to mean a means of identifying a product with a particular company. Close up and MacLean are two brands of toothpastes that are in competition with each other, therefore the owners of these brands must do something to keep the brand on the mind of the consumers all the time. That is why from time to time the image of the products is re-branded with various jingles and promotions. This is called brand management: the way that a company tries to use and control its brand and the way that the people perceive them (Encarta). Uche Nworah (2006) aptly says that:

Branding has traditionally been associated with products and services, rather than with countries, places and cities. Global companies and corporations and their marketing communications agencies have continued to create and use branding as a distinguishing and strategic competitive factor in the market place, and also in the fierce market drive for consumers (Re- branding Nigeria)

A brand is a form of identity, an image which is in the perception of the consumer of the product carrying that name. In this wise Nigeria is product in competition with other countries for favourable identity in the international community. These days what one hear about Nigeria are cyber crimes, advanced free fraud (popularly called 419) armed robbery and other forms of corruption. This is bad that foreigners feel the country is a bad place to do business in. Citizens who travel abroad are subjected to all forms of humiliation and travel restrictions. The brand Nigeria is in dire need of a boost, a re-branding many seem to agree. Segun Imohiosen (2009) says that there is no better time than now to embark on such a project because "Re-branding at any point in time has at the heart of it the purpose of giving a new look to anything and change whatever is the wrong perception hitherto experienced". She believes that the international community has had this negative perception about Nigeria which is not fully true because other countries are also bad even worse than Nigeria but the image they portray is positive and the world see them as such.

The negative perception about this dear nation is sometimes so savagery that you wonder if there could ever be a way out. Mind you, sometimes those terrible things they say about Nigeria and do to Nigerians are baseless because from experience it is discovered that the perception of these people is a case of the "kettle calling the pot black."

In the past the Nigerian government had undergone an image laundering project called "Heart of Africa" because of the way it was handled it could not achieve its desired objectives; Nigerians are still seen as corrupt as before if not worse. This could be seen in the recent controversy about Sony Corporations advert castigating Nigeria as a place where fraud thrives thought they were forced to apologize by the Federal Government of Nigeria the damage had been done. Another noteworthy at the same time is the portrayal of Nigeria and Nigerians as corrupt in the film *District Nine* (2009) produced in South Africa.

The Playwrights' Challenge

To appreciate the dilemma of playwrights in the re-branding project will require an understanding of artists, their preoccupations, and the implications of all of these on the society and the re-branding project. This will help pave the way for resolving this impasse so as to make effectual the contribution of the artist.

The *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary* (2006) is in tandem with the Wikipedia Encyclopaedia in defining a playwright as a dramatist who writes dramatic literature or a play meant for performance by actor either for stage, screen or radio. This literary or dramatic composition as Anigala (1994) rightly puts it "is an inventive and artistic expression of selected and salient aspect of men's actions....involving a selective reconstruction of events in life to represent total human experience" This implies that the artist work is a composition of plays

representative of real life events or situations. This means that the artist's works are a constructive, systematic and schematic synthesis of life experiences in artistic or dramatic forms. He/she makes the events in society the content and subject matter of his/her work. Through the application of their skills the playwrights serves several functions for society. To Duruaku (1997) the playwrights attempts to prescribe solutions to human problems. Similarly, Effiong (2000) views the playwright as one who expresses the pricking of the buffeting circumstances in which he finds himself cobwebbed." Soyinka sees the artist is a chronicler of his people's history. From the above submissions it is clear what the playwright's preoccupation is. He serves as a mirror of the society, a critic of social aberrations and provider of solutions that will make his society a better place. Through the application of his skills in the art of playwriting where the content and context of society forms the basis of his work, the artist aptly and honestly mirrors society. His image of society projected in form of plays and performances helps the world to form impressions and make valued judgement.

The Nigerian movie industry provides template for furthering this discourse. Since the artists' works are oftentimes culturally, socially and geographically bound, we find that the subject matter, themes, content of most Nigerian movies had scenes bizarre happenings such as ritual murders as evident in the film Blood Money. Isakaba is another film based on the activities of the so called "Bakassi Boys" (indigenous vigilantes and exponents of jungle justice) that had scenes of the gory fights against armed robbery. They employ the barbaric method of publicly killing and burning of apprehended armed robbery suspects. Epileptic power supply, bad roads, greed and financial profligacy prevalent in the society also find their way into the contents of several other films. It is in this way that the artist serves to project globally the self projected image of his society. Where this image is aberrant, the artist inadvertently helps in further battering an already distorted image.

Process of Re-branding

In an age where convergence of, and exchange of technological, economical, intellectual and other capital building resources hold sway between countries and continent, to further societal development an unpalatable brand will of course retard development. That Nigeria needs re-branding is unquestionable. The hallmark of events in nearly all facets of the nation can only earn for it a notorious and unpalatable image. What else can the nation deserve when it is glaring that the nation is befuddled several negative and criminal activities like cyber crimes, drug and human trafficking, piracy, money laundering, embezzlement, kidnapping, civil and religious crises. There is the Niger delta question; epileptic power supply, high rate of human right abuse, armed robbery, bunkering, treasury looting, dilapidated social infrastructure, the list is endless.

With this gory picture of the state of affairs of the nation one can appreciate the dilemma of the artist in the re-branding project taking into cognisance the fact that the happenings in the society forms the bedrock of his/her work. The question now is how the artist can effectually contribute to the re-branding project without actually jeopardising his profession. To turn a blind eye will amount to a loss of essence and a gross dereliction of his

social responsibilities. To harp on the near inconsequential landmarks in the face of mammoth social abnormalities is tantamount to professional hypocrisy and a death of the of the artists' profession which is congruent with Soyinka (1973) philosophical postulation that the man dies who keeps quiet in the face of tyranny.

Taking tabs of the artists preoccupation before and after the inception of literary documentation neither of the above mentioned stance will be condoned. The artist at every point in time, have risen up with pen and paper, hammer and chisel to the wood, paint on canvas and bodies on stage even at the risk of their lives to protest against several social shortcomings. History is replete with such examples. During the struggle for independence it is on record that the likes of Wole Soyinka , Athol Fugard and Ngugi wa Thiongo and others were key players in the nationalistic struggles in their respective countries with works like *A Dance of the Forest* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and others. After independence, when the succeeding African rulers unleashed dictatorial and fraud infested regimes the artist also rose up in literary protest. Unpopular government policies and corruption were not spared the scathing and vituperative protest and criticism of the artists' pen. Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (2003) is an example of the artists criticism of the death penalties meted out to robbers who were seen as the victims of a draconic economic situation caused by maladministration and corruption in high places. Osofisan argues that the government had no justification for meting the death sentence when they are fully involved in looting the national treasury with their pen. *Eshu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, another play by the same author also lambasted the wrong social values prevalent at that time. The guerrilla theatre operated by Wole Soyinka in the 60s to protest government excesses are also testimonies of the artist struggles. It is on record too that these theatrical productions provoked government attacks on the artists. *Bread and bullet* by Hubert Ogunde (Clark, 2009), *Water Nor Get Enemy* and *No More Oil Boom* by Tunde Fatunde (1985) are other examples. While the above goes to show that the artist cannot but respond to the issues in society it also reveals the manner in which they carry on this response, one of outright criticism, condemnation, ridicule and confrontation. The consequence of this mode of response is that in an attempt to correct societal shortcomings through mirroring of the society and portrayal of negative events the artist becomes guilty of further tarnishing the image of the nation it sets out to correct. Since the playwright's work reaches out to several parts of the world negative traits in the society that are reflected in his or her work influences the way his or her society is perceived. For the writers works to have positive reflections of his society it means that there has to be a change in the status quo anti; which means a change in the values, the prevailing negative attitudes and actions of the public. So the writer's immediate responsibility will be how to evoke behavioural change in the Nigerian public.

The Artist's Mode of Engagement

The artists' mode of engagement in the bid to correct societal foibles can be categorised as confrontational, highly critical, ridiculing and often times an open attack on the erring public or government of the day. In being the

mirror, watch dog of society and chronicler of societal actions and inactions, the writers, draw the anger and hatred of those being attacked. Consequently, many have been brutalised, incarcerated, and sometimes forced to flee for safety because the object of their attacks often find their works too bitter a pill to swallow. The likes of Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Augusto Boal were victims of military and government “gangsterism”. The reason for this attack is not far fetched. Calling a blind “man a blind bat” might be true but you won't expect a pat on the back for your effort. If attitudinal change is the goal of the artists work, the target audience must first listen in order to get the message which opens room for acceptance. Unless we can capture the attention of the target audience how do we hope to change them?

It is in the light of the above that this paper proposes a new strategy that can arrest the attention of the erring target audience and achieve the desired goal of change by a new approach to the presentation of the writer's message. This strategy we choose to call “proactive presentation of fictional ideals”. What this strategy entails is simply the presentation of an ideal situation that is quite opposite to the situation being criticised. Where corruption among public official is the vice being criticised and the goal is a change to incorruptibility, rather than focusing on enacting the gory scenes of corruption, the writer can compose a very challenging scene of incorruptibility involving public officials who against all odds sticks to incorruptibility. By so doing we are building a hybrid culture amongst corrupt officials. This is capable of achieving the following:

- i Projecting an ideal worthy of emulation against the backdrop of prevailing vices.
- ii Challenge corrupt officials to stand out and emulate good virtues having created a worthy model in characters in the same circumstance.
- iii Systematically creating a culture of incorruptibility since the general public will overtime begin to see incorruptibility as a societal norm which will make defaulters suffer psychological isolations.
- iv Gradual change in the projection of the negative image of societal vices to the world.
- v. Achieving overtime the set goals of changing the mindset of the society which consequently will bring about national growth.

Using the above strategies the playwright can bend his rules without jeopardising his profession and still achieve positive results in the area of societal change without inadvertently branding society negatively. The second point to note is that the artist would be able through employment of the above strategies, return the society to the desired status that will give free rein to unconditional expression of ideas because he/she would have contributed and perhaps succeeded in changing the root cause of negative branding.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper has tried to prove that the artist has a challenge which needs to be surmounted in his/her bid to contribute to the re-branding project. Since societal happenings form the basis of the subject matter and content of his work only a change in social situations will enable full functionality of the artist for progress to occur. A situation where the adverse conditions that earned the nation a negative image still persists, only a change in the artists' mode of engagement will help resolve the impasse. The paper goes on to suggest proactive fictional presentation of the ideal as the panacea to the impasse as this will help achieve attitudinal change in the audience that will make for positive branding. Also suggested was the adoption of the legislative.

For the artist to achieve success in his bid to change society and give it a better brand a more people-sensitive, proactive and audience-friendly approaches need be researched and applied. The artist should note also that their profession is like a two edged sword. Just as their scathing attacks on societal shortcomings are deemed to be corrective, they tend to paint a negative image of society that they strive to improve thus contributing to further battering the image we all clamour to re-brand. Lastly the government of the day should encourage more collaborative work with the artist taking into cognisance their roles and functions in the society, so that tolerance and harmony can exist for them to reap the full benefit of the artists' contribution. In conclusion, one can say that there is an urgent need for artist for artist especially the playwright to research more on positive means of executing the strategies without further tarnishing the nation's image. The long held notion that confrontation, outright criticism of societal vices is the way to change society may need an alteration if the target audiences' attention must be got. It is only by so doing will the artist works will be effectual in an era of global convergence of intellectual, scientific, social and other resources for societal development and progress.

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