

THEATRE, RESTRUCTURING AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Given the prevailing mood of the country, the aptness of this topic for SONTA 2019 cannot be overemphasized. Recently, the concept of restructuring has dominated national discourse in the country's geo-political space. Most politicians across the political divide believe that the concept of restructuring is the most viable political option (even when they have conflicting understanding of the term) opens to Nigeria to attain peace, fairness, social justice and equity. The other alternative choice in the prevailing mood of political mistrust and misrepresentations among the ethnic nationalities, suspicions, ethno-religious conflicts, myriad of social and economic problems, is the disintegration of the country along ethnic lines. The outcome of the latter possibility to everyone is chaos, bloodshed and war. Conversely, the Nigerian theatre, one of the oldest artistic and cultural institutions, and a veritable cultural arbiter in the ongoing national conversation on restructuring, seems to be in comatose plagued by years of neglect by government and failure of practitioners to refresh and sustain the cultural past and make them relevant for today. The Nigeria theatre, because of its dialogical features and ability to facilitate resolutions and build consensus amongst people has the potential to stir Nigeria's drifting ship to safe waters. Therefore, it is imperative that as stakeholders, we rebuild our dying cultural house, and make it stronger and potent enough to contribute positively and culturally in the ongoing quest for a united and indivisible country called Nigeria. The choice of topic is also a recognition and affirmation of the fact that theatre, both as literature and performative arts, can contribute to the process of national reform, renewal, reorganization, reinvigoration and the building of national identity. To be able to do this, historicocritical and analytic methods were deployed in the paper.

Keywords: Nigerian theatre, Restructuring, National identity, Performative arts, Politics.

Introduction: Historicity, Politics and the Concept of Restructuring

"We cry theatre everywhere. But there is no theatre." Austin Asagba

"There is a federation because federating units agree to federate." Igbo Natufe

Using the above quotes as an introductory background, it will suffice to describe the social and political climate that has given impetus to the present national conversation on the concept of restructuring in Nigeria. By extension it provides a theoretical justification for the argument for the rejigging of Nigerian theatre. The concept of restructuring is derived from the word 'restructure,' and it means 'to arrange or reorganize or reshuffle or to redistribute the properties of components of a phenomenon' (Natufe 5). In theatrical and cultural terms; restructuring', denotes a process or act of renewal,' reformation and rebuilding of an existing artistic phenomenon in response to a national call for the establishment of an environment that can accommodate the multiplicity of theatrical expressions across the country, restructure our minds to accommodate other Nigerians from other linguistic and ethnic nationalities as we build one nation with a common identity. It also denotes refreshing our theatre both as literary art and theatre practice and makes it relevant to socio-political climate of the country.

After 105 years of amalgamation of the Southern protectorate and the colony of Lagos with the Northern Protectorate by the British government to form Nigeria on January 1, 1914, the country is still in a shuffling and wobbling state. It is beset by a catalogue of problems that threaten its existence politically, culturally and economically. The pre-1914 ethnic fears, suspicions and hostilities that preceded the amalgamation by Lord Lugard remain as embers that threaten its existence as one nation with a common destiny and a uniform identity. Otite has distinguished for us 389 ethnic groups in Nigeria (cited in Akpotor 3). Omoera claims that there are over 500 languages spoken by Nigeria's multiethnic and multireligious peoples (10-11). Nonetheless, there is no evidence that the country has consciously harmonized these groups, harnessed and explored the varied and multi-faceted rich cultures for national growth and development. Rather these various ethnic units are constantly engaged in a tussle for political and economic power. It is the opinion of many that the lack of a visionary leadership constitutes the bane of the country (Wali 1; Oyedepo 3; Omoera and Aiwuyo 423-424).

Despite the huge human and economic possibilities, the reality on ground is the reverse. The country has not lived up to the expectations of its founding fathers or that of the majority of its people. The economy remains in comatose, while the political leadership class struggles for credibility and relevance. The teeming population of youths and the elderly are plagued by poverty, unemployment, lack of good healthcare facilities and a stable education system. The decay in the polity and failure of the political class to arrest the drifting ship is also reflected in the on-going turbulent, horrific, catastrophic erosion of humanity and the senseless killings across the country. Nigeria's Nobel Laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka has rightly described the

prevailing social and cultural situation as “material and intellectual wastage, the impoverishment of discourse, and a retreat from true enlightenment” (10).

First, in the guise of religious dogma spearheaded by Boko Haram and their parent sponsors, al-Shabbah, Answar Dine, Da’esh or ISIS and al Queda, the Northeastern part of the country has become an amphi-theatre of war in the last few years. Second, the itinerant Fulani herdsmen kill, rape and destroy human and natural resources, across the country with impunity. Third, in the Southeastern and Niger Delta regions, echoes of the Biafran insurgency represented by IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra), youth militancy, kidnappings, destruction of oil pipelines, heritage sites and monuments under the pretext of the struggle for resource control have become the order of the day. In the west, the OPC (Odua People’s Congress) representing the voice of the Yoruba, are clamouring for an Oduduwa country in the event of the disintegration of Nigeria.

The genesis of the prevailing political unease and national conversation, especially the clamour for restructuring of the country by politicians and ethnic nationalities into manageable and cohesive proportions, is traced to the political and cultural miscalculations and miss-steps of Nigeria’s past leadership. Specifically, the pre-independence political gladiators and negotiators failed to act decisively and fairly, especially in the consideration of the fate of the ethnic minorities. Their implementation of the Richards Constitution (named after Governor Arthur Richards) of 1946 and the post-Richards national constitutional conference of January 1950, mainly favoured the three dominant ethnicities of Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani. The two famous questions posed to the delegates by H. M. Foot, the Chief Secretary of the national conference are instructive:

- (1) Do we wish to see a fully centralised system with all legislative and executive power mainly concentrated at the centre or do we wish to develop a federal system under which each different region of the country would exercise a measure of internal autonomy?
- (2) If we favour a federal system, should we retain, the existing regions, with some modifications of existing regional boundaries or should we form regions on some new basis such as the many linguistic groups which exist in Nigeria? (cited in Ezera 110)

Natufe argues that while the delegates who were mostly from the Hausa-Yoruba-Igbo tripod hegemony adequately addressed the first item leading to the 1954 Federal Constitution (and the subsequent 1960 Independence Constitution and the 1963 Republican Constitution), they abysmally failed to address the second item vis a vis the minority groups (3).

The current agitation for restructuring and autonomy by the minority groups, especially from the middle belt and the Niger Delta regions on the basis of political marginalization and economic exploitation constitute the main threat to the nation. While the three major ethnic groups continue to benefit immensely from the 'favourable terms of federalism entrenched in the Federal Constitution', especially the revenue allocation formula employed between 1953 and 1970 "which underlined the independence of the Federating units" the alteration of this formula when crude oil emerged as the main stay of Nigeria's economy" has been the main source of anger and agitation by the people of the Niger Delta Region. This in combination with the other social and political problems identified earlier on in the paper has put the country on edge (Natufe 2), aptly summarises the problems threatening the country as follows: the contradictory views on the amalgamation of 1914; the mismanagement of ethnic and religious relations; the theft of public wealth by the political class; the impoverishment of the population; the increasing perception of discrimination and marginalization by various ethnic nationalities; the distortion of federalism; the creeping influence of disintegrative forces; the gradual Islamisation of Nigeria; and the shadow of Biafra.

It is instructive to note that Nigeria has been restructured on seven occasions in the quest for a better political order. Accordingly, "The British amalgamation in 1914 structured Nigeria into three components: the Colony of Lagos, the Southern Protectorate, and the Northern Protectorate. Following this, Nigeria has been restructured as follows:" 3 Regions (East; North; and West) from the Richards Constitution to 1963 employed between 1953 and 1970 "which underlined the independence of the Federating units". However, this formula was severely altered when crude oil emerged as the main story of Nigeria's economy" (Natufe 6).

The Present Reality

This blatant and glaring injustice has remained unaddressed by subsequent military and civilian governments. Failure by government and stakeholders to address the minority question and the political injustices inherent in the polity are the bane of the country. The country's political leadership appears to have failed to evolve a political and cultural strategy to address the myriad of problems that threaten the nation. Therefore, the processes that took place before and after the amalgamation were characterized by lack of oneness, disunity, lack of patriotism, sincerity of purpose and tribal bigotry. These negative features hang on the country like an Albatross. The present situation of mistrust is counterproductive to national integration and development, especially for a country in search of unity and

National Identity. How do we get out of this quagmire? Can a reformed, reinvigorated Nigerian Theatre serve as an arbiter, through its art, to resolve them? The Answer is 'Yes'. This paper interrogates the narrative that theatre has the inherent qualities to help Nigeria get out of the woods.

Globally, the arts, culture and tourism sectors play vital roles in building and enriching the economic, political and cultural life of nations. Great nations in classical Greek society, modern Russia, Great Britain, America, the Irish Republic etcetera are known in history to have explored the great potentials of their arts, literature and cultural heritage – including theatre to educate, entertain and galvanise their people to attain national integration, identity and development. In Latin America, theatre has been variously deployed as instrument of education, conscientization, development and the establishment of National Identity.

In Nigeria, in spite of the abundance of cultural life, arts and literature, by implication, theatre, it seems these human based sectors and resources have often been taken for granted, neglected and not explored maximally for the growth and development of the nation. In the context of the on-going national mood and the clamour for restructuring as panacea for peace and development of the country, this paper sets out to address the following: That first, the need to reposition and re-align the Nigerian Theatre through the process of renewal and rebuilding for it to be relevant in the 21st century. Second, the role of theatre in a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse nation like Nigeria. Third, how do we use theatre to forge a National Identity from the complexity of identities in Nigeria? Fourth, how we can harness the richness and positive aspects and attributes inherent in the different identities to forge oneness.

Conceptual Framework / Definition of Terms

In order to gain a better understanding and clarification of the arguments canvassed in the paper, it is important to define the key terms and concepts of national identity and theatre:

National Identity

National Identity is construed to mean the integration of the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups in Nigeria into one indivisible entity called Nigeria. According to Wikipedia, "National identity is the sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics". From Nigeria's experience so far, the country's quest for a cohesive National Identity the symbol of unity that can bind the multiplicity of ethnic nationalities, with diverse tongues together in one unified whole cannot be said with all sincerity, to fully exist. The struggle or journey towards proper uniformity, where peace and stability, trust and consensus, justice and

fair play, rule of law and security are the order of the day, appears a mirage. To sustain this struggle and realize the dreams of our nationalists, the country's political leadership must exhibit exemplary national commitment and patriotism, create the atmosphere, for national dialogue and consensus building at all times. Learning from our historical past, the country's leadership must be role models in matters of state, and morality. When good governance is engrained in the polity, then we are on the path of proper unification and oneness. Theatre, by virtue of its dialogical features and as a strong instrument of communication can provide the medium or platform for continual national engagement and in the end can facilitate unification and National Identity.

Definition of Theatre

Defining theatre can be herculean, complex and complicated. Over the ages theatre has been subjected to various definitions and associated with different meanings depending on who is applying the terminology and in what context of usage. While it is a popular concept in the medical and military circles, to the ordinary man on the street theatre is also an "auditorium or any space where human beings gather to watch an act". The terminology of theatre has strong ties with classico-Greek society where religious rites and dramatic arts reflective of the gods, the lives, belief systems and cultural world-views of the people were re-enacted and performed on stage. These festival celebrations were characterized by dramatic, music and dance performances. To them, just as in other traditional cultures of the world, Nigeria inclusive, the theatrical performances were explorations of the human experience on stage. Also, because the acts are human based, they carry a universal message which has no geographical boundaries. It is this quality and ability to convey a universal message on humanity in a practical manner that makes theatre unique and differentiates it from the other genres of literature. Therefore, theatre from a universal understanding of the concept is an artistic expression of the life of man in a given community. Another important aspect of theatre is that, it can be seen as an embodiment of the history, literature, lores and the metaphysical and spiritual life of a given people at a particular point in time. In performance it aggregates the history, belief-systems, morality and culture of the people.

To the professional artist the term theatre which can also mean drama (derived from the Greek word 'dran' meaning 'action' or "to do"), "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 with an audience" (Ojemudia 33). As an art form in the platonic and Aristotelian definition of the term, theatre is hinged on the art of imitation and

representation of nature in its attempt to educate and communicate the lessons of life. Equally, according to (Nwamuo 3) "theatre refers to collaborative form of arts concerned with life performances by actors to represent the experience of a real or imagined event to a specific audience at a specific place. As drama, its characteristics are that it is temporal, it is mimetic, it is interpretative and it is a synthesis".

The mimetic, interpretative and synthesis feature of theatre are realized in the creative dynamics that unfolds in a performance situation. At such moments the dialogical sequences and the human emotions released by characters as they seek to resolve conflicts combine vigorously to create new perceptions for man. For man, theatre is one of the means he uses to represent reality or express his perception of life. In performance, theatre provides the platform for man to see himself, interrogate his actions and make decisions favourable to his existence. The end goal is self-purgation, renewal and restoration. As Sofola opines that:

Theatre is the medium of artistic expression where societal happenings are mirrored in a dynamic living form. A metaphysical image of reality, it reflects the total cosmic moral and metaphysical order of the life of the people. It is an arena where human beings are presented in a cosmic totality, acting and reacting to forces around them and within them, perceiving and being perceived by those integrating with them, and those in the audience who experience with them the enigma that is common of humanity. (124)

The functional and utilitarian nature of theatre is underscored in the ability to communicate, educate and affirm the spiritual essence of man as he strives to build a better country. Theatre, like all art forms, is intrinsically tied to society. Like Siamese twins, both are bonded. In this eternal marriage, a symbiotic relationship exists, in which the theatre serves the society diligently as the eye of society, while the latter provides the raw material for the former. As Leon Trotsky writes 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, if refines (32). Following the above definitions and perspectives, on the meaning of the concept of theatre, it is evidently clear that Nigeria is naturally endowed and well blessed with various and varied forms of theatre, which exist in our multi-faceted and diverse cultures and are reflected in the abundance of articulate, visionary and creative writers and artists in the country. However, how have we deployed theatre for national reconstruction, revivalism and development?

Classification of Nigerian Theatre and Restructuring

The classification of Nigerian theatre is not cast in stone. The types of theatres in Nigeria from the traditional to the modern forms, are as numerous and varied in relation to the diverse and multi-faceted ethno-linguistic and cultural groups in the country. Because of the multiplicity of traditional forms of festival performances found in different communities, and performed for varied functions and purposes, there are evidences of similarities and thin line divide amongst them and therefore difficult to differentiate easily. With modern forms of theatre, apart from the known formal types, new entrants are becoming well established in the corpus of theatre studies and practice in the country. For instance, Theatre for Development (TfD) or Applied Theatre, as an academic theatre programme and community theatre practice has become popular and well entrenched in most universities' Theatre Arts Departments across the country. For these reasons one should be cautious in drawing up hard delineations on Nigerian theatre types.

Therefore, the classification of Nigerian theatre into a nationally acceptable format using a template relevant for such delineation is imperative. The appropriate classification and standardization of the Nigerian theatre types will not only improve research in Nigerian drama and theatre, but could also serve as a tool for government policy formulation and cultural advocacy. We strongly recommend that scholars and researchers in the discipline should evolve new template for the classification of Nigerian drama and theatre as we build and re-brand the theatre discipline. For the purpose of this discourse Nigerian theatre has been classified into two broad categories - Festival or Indigenous Theatres and Contemporary Theatres.

In the Nigerian experience, Indigenous festival performances and contemporary theatre in combination with other forms of Arts, like Fine and Applied Arts, constitute the cultural life of the Nigerian. The contribution of the Nigerian performative and culture industry from the time preceding Amalgamation to the present in the building of the nation, cannot be underestimated. Significantly, cultural nationalism that paved way for the country's independence gained impetus from the dramatic and cultural activities of people like the late Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and the late Duro Ladipo, and the crop of Nigeria's first generation of literary dramatists - Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, Bekederemo Clark, among others.

Festival or Indigenous Theatre, Restructuring and National Identity

It is the position of this paper that the process of the restructuring of Nigerian theatre should start from a proper re-evaluation, rebuilding and repositioning of the Festival theatre tradition in the country. The reason for this is not farfetched. The festival theatre tradition is the nexus of Nigerian theatre,

and it is a cultural resource that has been literally taken for granted. We revert to it only when it is convenient for us to do so especially for political and commercial reasons. In the past the festival tradition constituted the basis of society, culturally and politically. The proponents for the argument for the political restructuring of the country can give credence and credibility to their case and win more support for their cause if they explore the festival environment or platform for purposes of community outreach, education, national awareness and consensus building.

Festival or Indigenous dramas describe all traditional or indigenous performances that preceded colonialism. As most studies by Nigerian and African scholars like Oyin Ogunba, Joel Adedeji, Yemi Ogunbiyi, Olu Obafemi and the present writer have shown, traditional festival celebrations and performances literally dominate the geographical space of Nigeria, and are mainly rooted in the peoples' culture, predominantly domiciled in the villages. Nigerian festival performances are varied, with diverse content and different intriguing performative styles. In general terms, the pattern and context of performance can be similar in all the communities and villages where they are found. Also, the motive(s) for their performances or celebration differ from one locality (community) to another but are basically associated with religious rites and socio-cultural activities. The motives can range from rites of passage, worship of ancestors and gods, celebration of harvest, re-enactment of history and origin of the community.

There is no community in Nigeria, whether it is the Okpe, Urhobo, Benin, Ijaw, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Igbo, Efik and the Tiv of the middle belt that do not have in their rich folktales, myths, history and legends accounts of heroes and heroines who brought the community into being, or saved the community in times of peril or threat to their existence. On festival occasion, amidst pomp and pageantry, music, dance and merriment the people re-enact stories, or incident to commemorate the lives and times of these heroes. Although, these festival performances were localized or ethnically based, the motivating need to use the atmosphere of festival celebration to create or promote village and community awareness, moral education for both young and old, political consciousness and economic well-being are instructive and still valid to today's society.

The corpus of the different traditional festival performances of the various ethnic groups that make up the country represents the cultural reservoir of the nation. They also represent the image and symbol of our oneness and national identity, if properly harnessed. Contemporary writers, artists and Theatre practitioners draw from this reservoir for their creative and literary works. Nigerian indigenous festival theatre as oral literature and performative art embodies the norms, lores, history, myths, and folktales of

the people. On festival occasions, through performative rites of passage, children, youths and adults are inducted into the secrets and world of the community. Also, these ceremonies are occasions for instilling community awareness, consciousness, and solidarity. The end goal is for community stability, peace and well-being. The healthy competitive spirit among celebrants, dancers, and performers in an attempt to showcase their best in a convivial manner are strong features of the festival tradition that the country should encourage and explore for national integration and Identity formation.

There is no doubt that these festivals are gradually dying or going into extinction because of factors of modernity, religion, the dwindling economy, lackadaisical attitude of the younger generation and poor government response to the culture industry. Through cultural synergy and partnership between government (at the local government level and the community), these festival celebrations can be rebranded, documented and digitalized exploring modern and innovative technological advancement. This vital cultural resource can be resuscitated and developed for national development. One shudders to think at what will happen to the nation's cultural heritage fifty years from now if these festivals, traditions are allowed to fizzle out and go into extinction. A radical approach is required to stem this possibility. It is imperative that government, through appropriate cultural legislations should set the tone for the rehabilitation, revival and sustenance of these festival performances in the various villages and communities, where they are found.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the popular Annual Festival of the Arts and Culture under the aegis of the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, provided the national atmosphere for all the states to show case and celebrate the diverse artistic and cultural richness of the country. It also provided the platform for participants, and the audience from different ethnic and linguistic background to know and understand one another. At such occasions, personal and collective trust, friendship and oneness are formed that endure over time. These are moments for re-awakening national consciousness and forging national integration and Identity. These festival celebrations bring people of different linguistic and cultural background together across the country, and have the capacity to unite people, state and country.

It is interesting to note that while these arts and cultural festivals are still being organized annually on rotational basis amongst the states of the federation, they seem to have lost the drive, verve, camaraderie and spirit of national togetherness and patriotism that hitherto characterized past celebrations and meetings. In recent times the organization and hosting of carnival celebrations have become popular in the country, especially in Abuja, Lagos and Calabar. These artistic and cultural fiestas should be encouraged and properly funded. They largely represent the face of the nation and could

provide employment for youths and adults alike in the cultural sector. However, the carnivals should transcend fanfares and economic gains, and be refocused for national rebranding and regeneration of our dying cultures and ethical values. They should serve as occasions for the gathering of Nigerian diverse and multi-ethnic nationalities. They should serve as platforms for Nigerians to understand themselves, believe in themselves and act together in one voice. That is the import and impact culture and theatre can make on the polity. The custodians of our national cultural heritage and monuments under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of Information, Art and Culture have not done well over the years. Factors of poor funding, bureaucracy, untrained manpower and corruption have combined to turn the cultural institutions and parastatals that are statutorily meant to facilitate and deploy culture and theatre as instruments for national consciousness and development, into ineffective organs and institutions.

Virtually, all the arts councils, (including the establishments in Abuja) lack functional buildings and theatres to function appropriately and maximally. Such a situation has created disconnect between government and the people. The National theatre building in the 1970s primarily built to host the first World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (popularly tagged FESTAC '77) was once the pride of the nation. It was famously described as the beauty and symbol of the best our architecture could provide. For many years, the National theatre continued to serve as the face of culture and theatre in the country, and indeed, the world. Today, the cultural edifice has been turned into a den for animals, petty traders and the dredge of society. While rumours of privatization persist, artists, performers, culture enthusiasts, etcetera, have no space to function and carry out their professional callings. Globally, national theatres especially in developed countries of the world do not only represent great and magnificent cultural buildings where plays and performances of national colourations are performed, but they are also symbols of national artistic and creative movements built and sustained for the preservation and promotion of the nation's cultural heritage and as symbols of unity and national identity. Good examples are the classic cases of the Russian, British and Irish National Theatres. The classic case of the role of the Irish theatre in reviving Irish culture and establishing a dependent Irish Identity is noteworthy. In this case dramatists, like W.B. Yeats deployed his art in creating "nationalism-oriented plays that aroused the sense of national feelings of audiences and created a National Identity as well" (Kitishat 83). Therefore, it is imperative that the Federal Government should do a re-think on its policy on the National theatre, rehabilitate and restructure the activities of the National theatre, and hand it back to its rightful owners the artists and creative

performers to manage and carry out the business of theatre and culture on behalf of the nation.

Furthermore, the country needs a vibrant, dynamic and radical approach to the management, utilization and deployment of the artistic and cultural resources of the country. The diverse cultural and artistic resources reflected in the indigenous festival repertoires are avenues for economic gains, especially as cultural tourism. Also, the varied and diverse festival celebrations found in the multi-faceted ethnic cultural setting of the country if effectively reformed and managed can form the face and pride of the nation. The promotion, preservation and sustenance of our cultural past should form the mainstream of government actions and business. This could be done through the formulation of dynamic, well thought out and pragmatic cultural policy. The present cultural policy suffers from inadequate publicity and implementation strategies. Mere legislations and policies on paper are not adequate enough. Since 1988, the cultural policy document has remained in the archives. What the country needs, is the practical implementation of the content of the cultural document, and make them impact on the teaching, management and celebration of extant indigenous festival performances and traditions across the country. Also, the implementation of the policy document as it affects Actor welfare, endowment for the arts and promotion of the arts through the establishment of a National Academy of the Arts are critical to the survival of the artists. Paying mere lip service and occasional financial gestures to artists will not resuscitate and refocus our dying cultural house.

Equally, government should provide a secured environment in the communities, and proper funding of the culture sector so that the various local governments in the country could encourage and partner with their citizens in the reinvigoration and rebranding of their cultural past and make them centre piece for the nation's development. These policies and measures if properly implemented can ignite and provide positive images and platform for the country's development and promotion of National Identity.

Contemporary Theatre, Restructuring and National Identity

Nigerian Contemporary Theatre describes modern Nigerian Theatre. Primarily, it exists, and is represented in the teaching and practice of drama and Theatre in Higher and Tertiary institutions across the country, the efforts of private theatre companies, radio and television dramas, film and Nollywood productions. In all, one could find the face of modern Nigerian Theatre. A feature common to all of them is that, they were all inspired and nurtured either before or after colonialism. Since 1960, postcolonial drama and theatre have contributed to nation building especially in the context of

correcting and checkmating the excesses of both military and civilian administrations and identity formation. Also, through the years, various trends of drama and theatre have emerged portraying different socio-political and ideological strands. These are reflected more in the area of dramaturgy, language and stagecraft experimentations. In this context, one could say that Nigerian Drama and Theatre has gone through various stages of restructuring, either in form, content and practice.

From a critical standpoint and with all sense of professionalism and commitment to the theatre discipline, one can say that, contemporary Nigerian theatre from the perspectives of pedagogy, theorization and practice, seems to have nose-dived from the era of sheer excellence, creativity, commitment to national cause to a new era where productions of plays are scarce and far between; where theatre exists but are not seen; where books on theatre are conceived but not published. Where drama and theatre are taught and practiced under the trees, and in abandoned buildings, our new age of theatre is typified by 'copycatism'. Copycatism is a new wave of a creative disorder or bug that has crept brazenly into our creative milieu. It sets out to distort and mimic an original creative work, in an attempt to make it look new and authentic. In spite of all efforts to make the creative work original, the fakeness or falsity of the work is not hard to detect. The implication for the present creative efforts is that most of our voices are not refreshing, incisive and poignant, especially in confronting the establishment that appears to be derailing and ineffective. Also, from one's teaching, association and participation in theatre activities across the country, one could glean cases of cronyism, godfatherism, corruption in the management, distribution and utilization of creative opportunities in the discipline and business of Nigerian theatre establishments. In our desire to restructure and make our arts relevant to National discourse, we should discountenance negative values and drive for excellence so that we can be relevant and taken seriously as a discipline. That is not to say that we have not made progress since 1960. It is just the case that theatre has achieved so much but too little. New voices, new directors and playwrights, actors, technicians, have been discovered and are flourishing but our mark on the nation and the polity is infinitesimal. As a discipline, we must evolve innovative theatre method and techniques that can best represent our age and time, especially in the area of national renewal and development. Therefore, Nigeria is challenged to deploy theatre to resolve the controversies surrounding the clamor for the restructuring of the country.

What is germane and imperative at the moment is how, Nigerian theatre can be refocused and repositioned for appropriate and effective contribution to the process of nation building and identity formation. Building a nation through theatre means, using theatre to raise awareness, forge

national consciousness, conscientize the people to see themselves, that in spite of the differences in language, religion and culture, we are one, brought together by facts of history and geography. Building a nation through theatre also means the rejection of obsolete values, creation of moral codes and role models in line with the present socio-political needs of the country. It also means writing plays and presenting theatre productions in the language the old and the young can comprehend. It means using our dramaturgy and theatre as medium to educate our people on the need to imbibe the spirit of patriotism and seek peace and stability, rather than chaos and war. It means deploying dramas and theatres as instrument of dialogue, consensus building and the resolution of conflict in society. Indeed, what kind of theatre do we need to encourage and deploy for our 21st century social and political needs?

University Theatres and National Identity

The university theatre is the prime artistic, cultural and intellectual platform that gave birth to, and nurtured modern Nigerian Theatre. As a colonial formulation, it gained inspiration and impetus from the theatrical and dramatic activities organized in schools and colleges across the country and the university college Ibadan in the 1950's and early 1960s. These activities were organized to ginger national awareness and promote the educational policy of the period. The efforts of notable colonial expatriate teachers and scholars like Geofrey Axworthy, Ken Post and Martin Banham are noteworthy. Their dramatic and theatrical activities largely inspired and encouraged the emergence of Nigeria's first crop of Nigerian dramatists and theatre practitioners like the late Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Ogunmola. As referenced earlier, these dramatists deployed their plays and theatrical activities to the cause of national unification and independence from the British colonial rule. Though their plays were rooted and motivated by Yoruba folk theatre, history, myths and the need for the survival of the race, they had national appeal that cut across tribe and language. For example, Hubert Ogunde's popular plays like, *Strike and Hunger*, and *Yoruba Ronu* are memorable for their incisive treatment of political, and nationalistic themes and subjects.

Equally, the plays and theatrical activities of Nigeria's pioneer literary dramatists like Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka and Bekederemo Clark - (all products of the Nigerian University theatre tradition), set the stage for the growth and development of post-colonial drama and theatre. Though, their dramaturgy and theatre activism reflected individual social and ideological differences, nevertheless, they were committed in their own rights to promoting national consciousness and the need to build a better society. Ene Henshaw, a medical doctor by professional calling, is reputed to tour the

eastern part of Nigeria and environ with his amateur travelling theatre troupe based in Calabar at this period. The influence of Ene Henshaw's light-hearted plays like, *This Is Our Chance* on budding Nigerian dramatists was infectious. His plays which were widely read in schools and colleges popularized the performing arts, and were the precursor of literary drama and theatre practice in the country.

Furthermore, the post-war years of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1970s and 1980s) produced new crop of Nigerian dramatists who are often described as the second generation of literary dramatists. Again, they all emerged and blossomed from the University theatre tradition and belonged to creative associations and companies where they honed their skills before becoming global celebrities. They include the late Ola Rotimi, the late Wale Ogunyemi and the late Zulu Sofola, the first female Nigerian dramatist of great repute. A more radical segment of the group was pioneered by playwrights like Bode Sowande, Femi Osofisan and Kole Omotosho and others. A common feature of their plays was commitment to the recreation and adaptation of the traditional cultural repertoire as basis for exploring present social vision of society. Their choice of dramatic subjects and deployment of theatre craft revealed the need to use theatre as communication and interrogation of a political system that needed reformation. It was the age of experimentation with ideas and language. For instance, Ola Rotimi in his plays like, *The Gods Are Not To Blame* and *Kurunmi* experimented with simplicity of language as a mode of reaching a wider audience. The more radical ones like Bode Sowande and Femi Osofisan, engaged in the re-creation and 'vandalization' of traditional myths, history and elements of music, dance, poetry and theatre to question the status quo and the political leadership of the time. The periods from 1960 to the late 1980s could arguably be described as the golden age of Nigerian theatre. Even though the practice of theatre and the watching of good plays was more visible and felt in the university community, the impact of theatre practice on the populace was palpable and infectious. The flip side of these developments is that Nigerian theatre since independence has continued to remain in the hands of the elites, intelligentsia and the academia. They appear to dictate the trend of theatre and how it should be practiced. Now, I ask, is it not time we allow the people to own the theatre process and practice?

Apart from the above developments and trends in the world of Nigerian theatre, the late 1970s and early eighties also witnessed the emergence of a new type of theatre now variously described as community theatre or popular theatre for integrated development. Under the banner of applied theatre, the community theatre practice movement has grown from its early beginnings in Samaru, at the Ahmadu Bello University to become an integral and compulsory theatre course entrenched in the theatre arts

curriculum, approved by the Nigeria University Commission – the prime regulator of academic programmes on behalf of the Federal Government of Nigeria. It is gladdening to note that the community theatre course is taught and practiced in various forms in all the departments of theatre arts in the country. Also, the activities of the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA), the national umbrella organization that was formed in the early 1990s, to propagate the ideas and popularize the community theatre practice and other related community theatre formations across the country has boosted and entrenched theatre for development techniques and practice as a viable theatre method in the creation of national consciousness and development.

In practice, the community through proper facilitations and research techniques by amateurs is actively involved in the process of problem identification. Through dialogical processes involving series of discussions and consensus building the finished play and production activities are basically dictated by community feelings and choices. Equally, the post-performance activities involving the analysis of issues and evaluation of decisions on development strategies, roles and responsibilities of different parties are activities and actions that bind the community together. They pursue their goals and objectives collectively, not allowing personal needs, or cultural differences to stand in the way of evolving a better society. Going by the present state of the nation, especially faced with myriad of developmental challenges, where bigotry, suspicion and ethnic sentiment prevail, the country can benefit from the formal adoption of the community theatre method as a strategic government cultural instrument for initiating national dialogue and the resolution of conflicts. The success of the community theatre method, globally, is that it draws from, and it's hinged on the traditional culture of the people. This includes their way of life, problems, language, music, dance, songs and festival celebrations.

Challenges

Further to some of the challenges already raised in the course of this paper, other factors identified as militating against the proper growth and functioning of the Nigerian theatre, especially our desire to deploy and refocus theatre for purposes of national development and identity formation in the 21st century include:

Death of literature, documentation and data on the indigenous forms of theatre and major cultural celebrations in the country. SONTA (Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists) can complement government efforts by starting a radical assemblage of data on Nigerian theatre for purposes of information gathering, planning and projections.

Failure of government to fully implement the country's cultural policy document since 1988 through the proper legislations is a major challenge to the culture sector as a whole. Key issues of Actor Welfare, Endowment for the Arts and promotion of the Arts are left unaddressed. It is the view of many stakeholders in the culture sector that the present cultural policy is obsolete and out of touch with the dynamic cultural changes in the country, especially against the backdrop of globalization and, current technological and scientific development.

Lack of adequate funding and resources, provision of proper facilities, infrastructure and fit-for-purpose programme formulation and content for the training of theatre artists and other relevant manpower for the theatre industry.

Presently, the National Theatre Associations in Nigeria operate more at cross purposes. Because of the lack of unity and oneness amongst them, especially in their mode of operation and vision for the industry, they are unable to pursue the cause of the Artists holistically and effectively. There is also the tendency for them to be pawns in the hands of the establishment. Individual groups pursue their self-interest thereby jeopardizing the fortunes and prospects of the others, in matters of actor welfare, code of conduct for practitioners, government funding and patronage of the industry.

A major glaring challenge facing the theatre industry is inadequate participation and investment by the private sector, especially the banking and business sectors.

The climate of insecurity, kidnapping and youth militancy prevent people from attending plays, especially in the evenings.

Theatre in Nigeria operates more on the amateurish level, and the higher and tertiary institutions produce the playwrights, the creative artists and other workers for the industry. Ultimately, the general problems affecting these institutions are made to bear on the proper training and production of quality actors and creative experts for the theatre industry. These problems include; lack of proper funding, weak programme formulation, government control through Nigeria University Commission (NUC), lack of infrastructures or absence of them etcetera, affect the growth of theatre in the country. Even though these institutions produce theatre graduates every year, they end up working in unrelated theatre environment. The implication is that the nation

cannot benefit from their theatre training, especially the skills and abilities that can engender national development and integration.

Professional theatre exists more in the Non organizational groups like the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP), Radio, Television and Theatre Arts Workers Union (RATTAWU) and Film (Nollywood), their impact on society are enormous. However, the problems of poor scripting and technical efficiency persist. The films, plays and other productions have helped the employment industry, and brought youths together from different part of the country to work as Nigerians. Also, the successes of Nollywood films have put Nigeria on the world map. The films have become attractions to diverse audiences, both at home and abroad. If they tailor their scripts to patriotic subjects, they could serve as unifying platforms for Nigerians to think Nigeria.

Recommendations

For the theatre industry to thrive, flourish and effectively contribute to National Development and Identity Formation, the following are recommended: The country must have the political will to implement the strategic plan for culture and by implication the theatre industry, which has constitutional backing. The main driver or focal point for the sensitization and realization of this should be the relevant cultural parastatals or unit specifically created for the rebirth of the culture and theatre industry. This unit will have the mandate to vigorously promote Nigerian theatre industry as an embodiment of our culture. The government of the day should provide adequate funding via constitutional means for the proper development and sustenance of the Nigerian theatre industry. The federal government, through its security outfits, should guarantee security and create the enabling environment for the cultural sector to thrive. The newly created parastatal of the cultural sector, working in concert with its network of sub units, with branches in all the states, should have the mandate to implement the highpoints of the cultural policy that affects the growth of the Nigerian theatre especially, the endowment for the arts and welfare of the artists.

It's in this vein that the paper also recommends that the federal government deploys culture as instrument for national development, image laundering, business, entertainment and cultural tourism. The federal government in its mandate to the new cultural organization earlier suggested should eradicate bureaucracy in arts promotion, administration and business, integrate cultural industries, by implication theatre into national planning and budgeting process. Ordinarily, the growth of cyber technology is expected to be an advantage to theatre, however, there seems to be limited evidence that theatre has caught up with modern technology. This paper implores theatre practitioners to be at par with cyber technology by exploiting the cyber space

to showcase plays that depicts society in perspective. This responsibility and initiative should be driven by official theatre organizations such as SONTA, NANTAP, and others working collaboratively and with commitment, to achieve the goal of making theatre ICT and Cyber space compliant.

Conclusion

Nigeria is blessed with abundant natural, human and cultural resources. Its pluralistic nature has been a blessing but has also posed political and cultural challenges to the country's past and present leadership. The present structural imbalance in the configuration and administration of the country especially in the management of the oil resource, has created room for fear, mistrust, suspicion, agitation, corruption and other social problems. Therefore, the call for restructuring is a legitimate demand, especially by the minority groups in the country. The end goal of the agitation for restructuring is national stability, equity, peace and justice. However, for this call to be meaningful, patriotic and achievable, there is need for proper education, awareness, information and consensus on the notion of restructuring. The Nigerian theatre because of its special features and capacity to enhance communication, dialogue and conflict resolution can provide the platform for raising awareness, building national consciousness and facilitating unity and oneness. Hence, we have argued in this paper that for theatre to effectively carry out its role as a cultural arbiter, and be part of the process of nation building, it must be repositioned, refocused and reinvigorated. For too long, this vital human based cultural resource, has been neglected and not explored maximally for nation building and development.

Specifically, the paper has recommended that the indigenous festival celebrations and performances be re-energized, preserved and deployed for proper communication and engagement between the various communities and the government. They could also be explored for entertainment, tourism and nation building. In line with the global reality and developments, the paper suggests that the technique and practice of Theatre for Development (TfD) should be adopted by government as a cultural policy instrument for purposes of conflict resolution and national development. Finally, we affirm that theatre has a role to play in national discourse and development. Therefore, as theatre artists, practitioners, stakeholders and government, we must all work in concert to restructure, refocus and rebuild our theatre for the twenty first century. As stakeholders and players in the theatre industry we have the opportunity for self-assessment, and in the process see what we have done in the past and what we ought to do now for the future to be better. In the end, we must all agree to this renewal process so that theatre can be an affirmative and active contributor to the political process of our country.

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