

THE ROLE OF THE THEATRE IN NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY: THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Introduction

Nigeria's Nationhood and Nascent Democracy have become interrogated by the upsurge of a febrile phrase... "The National Question..."

(SONTA 2002)

The dawn of the twenty-first century has brought and is still bringing theatre scholars and practitioners together to brainstorm and chart a way forward for the theatre in the new century. One of such conventions of scholars and stakeholders was the 16th Annual Convention of Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists tagged SONTA 2002 held at the University of Uyo, Uyo from November 25 to 29, 2002 with the theme *Culture, Theatre and the National Question*. Another was by Association of Dramatic Arts Students (ADAS) of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka on a similar theme *Theatre in the Twenty-first Century Nigeria*. The discussion in these conferences point to the enormous potentials the theatre is endowed with, but are yet untapped to contribute to the socioeconomic and political development of the nation. In each of the brainstorming, the *National Question*, left unanswered or unaddressed, was identified as being responsible for the poor socioeconomic and political development since after Independence. The seriousness of the problem informs this presentation aimed at contributing towards repositioning the theatre to face the challenges of the new millennium. This perspective brings to the fore the relevance of the extraction above from SONTA 2002, having encapsulated the direction of the present discourse and the current overheat of the nation's body politic.

The *National Question* which its chief interrogants are the national political elite and their agents, essentially borders on 'to

be' or 'not to be' of the nation, Nigeria, which many have described as a geographical expression. If Nigeria is to be one nation, the answers to the *National Question* will inform the conditionalities under which it will exist, implying the urgent need to restructure the union in the face of the reality on ground. This therefore is the truss of the Question even though it is evident that the majority of the current interrogants are self-centered, being engineered by their mad pursuance of their inordinate political ambition. In any case, it cannot be denied that there are still some who, out of genuine love for the nation's corporate existence and burning patriotic desire to have a true federalism, are interrogating the system. While deliberating on the issues, it is important to recall that after 90 years of existence as a "geographical expression" and 44 years of nationhood, Nigeria is in a transition which should be done with some caution, dedication and patience.

Historically, the *National Question* dates back to the colonization of the involved 'nations' by Britain, which arbitrarily grouped them into the Northern and the Southern Protectorates. This was done without adequate consideration to the heterogeneous nature of the 'nations' being 'forced' together. Besides, the merger without consensus conditionalities for the 'forced' union, except for maximization and protection of British socio economic and political interests, is presently instructing and instrumenting the *Question*. As if that was not enough, Lord Lugard in 1914 embarked on amalgamating the two Protectorates into what is today 'Nigeria', a time bomb. It has to be noted that whereas the Northern Protectorate occupied vast expanse of allegedly arid land with little or no economic value, the Southern Protectorate was assumed to be endowed with arable land, economic forests and potentials for mineral resources, hence, the perceivable imbalance in human and natural endowment. When it was known that the situation was brooding danger and strife, the colonial government rather than seeking to right the misdeed, tactically resorted to 'direct' and 'indirect' rule aimed at institutionalizing the 'divide and rule' politics which has caused more harm than good, recalling the experience at the 1950 Constitutional Conference in London.

However, history is yet to inform us exactly the truth surrounding the amalgamation saga which some political analysts often describe as political suicide, a keg of gun powder on which the *National Question* is inseparably tied.

Through the educational system, the colonial cabals forced down on the country, an indoctrination strategy, aimed at apparent 'perpetual' control of the country's socio-economic and political life. It was tactically exploited and perfected by Her Majesty's colonial government. The indoctrinatory strategy gave the people the impression that the North is 'more populated' than the South, thus surrounding it with mental structures that seemed to assure it of apparent 'permanent' leadership in the federalism. The kingmaker role has always remained there though the claim of being more populated is yet to be proven. In the vibrant South and Lagos colony, pursuit of education and economic power, as a necessary diversion, was seriously encouraged. Diversion in the sense that while the South was pursuing education, the colonial cabal and its agents would have more than enough time to consolidate the leadership pact in the North with little or no opposition from the dynamic South. The perceivable dividends politically motivated the tactics of Her Majesty's government in Nigeria which located education and economic power in the South and political power in the North. As a result, the North has continued to play the role of kingmaker of the nation and occupies strategic positions in Defense and Police Corps of the nation while the South dominates the Civil and Public Services.

If education, that is knowledge, is power, one may wish to question the kind of education the South was fed, with. The answer would unmistakably point at that which aimed at producing Nigerians to serve in subordinate positions under the eagle eyes of European supervisors. It was an education that aimed at preparing Nigerians for life in a stagnant social order. Besides being constructed to project European socio-cultural ideals, that education encouraged the cultivation of false values. Aware of the negative impact such anachronistic and indoctrinating form of education on the people's sensibilities, one may not wonder so much as to the

reason why the *National Question* has remained unsolved 44 years after independence.

The colonial masters thus tactically planted the seed of disunity and ethnic-nationalism, watered and nurtured it to full grown tree which is now instrumenting the prevailing incessant politically motivated inter and intra-ethnic religious crises in the country. These crises have manifested in various forms of strife traceable to beyond 1960, the year of nationhood and thereafter. Some of these are the 1929 Women's Riot at Aba; the 1953 Araba Riot, the 1962 Operation Wetie, Rasheed (2002:45) the 1964 Western Region Crisis, the 1965/66 massacre of Southerners in the North, the Civil War of 1966/67 etc. These indices are enough to show that all is not well with the nation; but rather than the stakeholders coming together to discuss and agree on the structure of the federalism, which they woke up to find themselves in, the sleeping dog has been sedated to go on sleeping while the polity is being stressfully aggravated and pressurized. To appreciate why the Question, at least since independence, has remained unaddressed, it is important to realize that, out of the forty-four (44) years of nationhood, military autocracy was the lot of the nation for twenty-two (22) years while the remaining twenty-two (22) witnessed stunted democratic rule.

In the twenty-two years of the quasi-democratic rule, the politicians could not put their heads together to attend to the Question probably due to the shortness of each period, fear of the unknown and lack of the will power to hold the bull by the horn. The military, in its twenty-two (22) years of autocracy did not either, for the basic reason that such issues can only be effectively sorted out in a democratic setting which guarantees freedom of speech and association and which, in turn, provides conducive environment for free dialogue.

It is evident from history of democracy and development worldwide that the latter can only thrive where the former exists, hence, their symbiotic relationship. Having earlier noted that democracy is a mandatory requirement for any form of development to thrive, it now becomes necessary to examine what national development is, how it relates to democracy and how much the

'lack' of it has contributed to the present stress in the body polity of the Nigerian nation. National Development, according to William Whyte (1963), an economist, is "...a synthesis of all factors that accelerate the socio-economic, religious and political growth of a nation, such factors include not only economic and technological, but also the norms, customs and modes of governance which culminate to influence man's activity". If this definition is acceptable and applied to the Nigerian present socio-economic, religious and political position, could it then be said without fear of contradiction, that the nation has developed and is developing? The answer can readily be found in the statement of Foluso Okunmadewa, a World Bank Official in Nigeria as reported in the *Nigeria Tribune* (Newspaper) publication of 18 Sept, 2002, which, in part, says "...70% of Nigerians sleep with empty stomachs and that it is thought-provoking that a sizeable proportion of Nigerians have to struggle for survival". His conclusion is that "...the poverty situation in Nigeria was the result of pervasive unemployment, low wages, low returns on investment...".

Corroborating above scenerio, the 2002 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report as provided by its Human Development Index (HDI) surveyors, and cited by Anyim Pius Anyim (2002:33), confirms that Nigeria is trapped at the crossroads of poverty and under-development despite its abundant rich human and natural resources, and concludes that the country is regrettably "...ranked number 148 out of the 173 countries surveyed." It is incontrovertible that Nigeria is under-developed and does not seem to be on the path of development, even without the World Bank spokesman and HDI saying so. But how else can it be, when a conducive climate for such genuine democracy does not exist but rather criminality reigns? As already implicated in this discourse, democracy allows for freedom to mobilize and exploit not only the intellectual resources of the individual but also his/her moral and physical capacity which is never possible under autocracy, be it military or civil. Not surprisingly, the generality of Nigerians, during the erstwhile military regimes, were suffering in silence, especially those who refused to join their band wagon. This also explains why,

in the present democratic dispensation, the question is aggressively being interrogated to force the rulership to a round table discourse on the modalities for consolidating the present fragile union.

The Theatre: Its Power to Influence

The *National Question*, multi-dimensional as it is, is reconcilable into the twin issues of national unity and democratization, the absence of which in a polity, would only lead to anarchy and instability which, no matter their forms do not encourage development. Anarchy and political instability are antithetical to development even when this stems from good policies. For their judicious and effective implementation, and those are the things of the mind, *Good Thinking, Good Product*, Toyota Motor Company promotion jingle, is probably derived from this line of thought. No doubt, a jaundiced or sick mind cannot but produce sick policies that would rather than advance development, militate against it. Nigerians, especially the political elite, should see the imperative of dialogue in resolving the issues tied up in the union. They should have the right frame of mind, divorced from what Olu Obafemi (2002:3) describes as: "... post-colonial crisis of identity and identify retrieval... not on macro scale of nation building but along micro-ethnic reconstruction of deferating nexus" resulting in "... the rapid erosion of certitude in the country's coherent and organic unity...".

It is evident that the theatre has enviable supreme potential for conscientising the people, instilling in them the spirit of responsibility, nationalism and patriotism through subtle entertainment under which lies the truth it is designed to propagate. Besides, the art form is endowed with the power of exposing the individual to self-examination for possible attitudinal change. The constituency of the theatre being the mind and by virtue of its being the gadfly of the society, can not sit on the fence watching its constituency being degenerated and bastardized for sheer love of materialism and its associated social vices. The relevance of the theatre in this regard is not debatable in view of its supreme persuasive power which it has to evoke, to rejuvenate, reconstruct

and re-direct the mind to positive thinking. Re-evaluating this rare endowment of the theatre, Olu Obafemi (2002:4) opines that no other cultural activity has such "...power of engagement, arrest, captivation, mobilization and conscientisation..." as theatre.

Historical antecedents reveal that the theatre has successfully employed this unique and supreme power in many other nations whose circumstances cannot be said to be more complex and agitating than Nigeria's in this transition period of her nationhood. In further interrogation of the potency of this power, inducing attitudinal change in a people, Delvin (1989) observes that "...at various times in history, groups with particular messages to teach, a sermon to preach, have the theatre as an immediate, effective and entertaining means of communication..." It therefore follows that the best of theatres, as being advocated, should be objected on imitating for the sake of initiating, not only attitudinal change but also the mood of the people, all aimed at forging sustainable national unity. This, of course, can not be achieved by proxy, hence, it presupposes that the people have to make themselves available in space and time to benefit from the magic of the theatre.

No doubt, it is this potency of the theatre to mobilize and influence sensibility that the fears of despotic rulership lie; hence, they perceive theatre as a 'whipper of emotions' and never hesitate banning its activities when seen to be critical of their despotic ideologies while on the other hand lavishing financial and moral encouragement whenever it is seen to be enhancing and advancing their philosophy and propaganda.

Pope Paul VI (1990:336), in recognition of this supreme power, gives weight to its application when, in his (*address to social communication practitioners, the theatre inclusive*), he lavishes praises on and encouragement on them thus:

It is a fact that when you writers and artists are able to reveal in human condition, however lowly or sad it may be, a spark of goodness, at that very instant, a glow of beauty prevails your whole work. We are not asking of you that you play the part of moralists. We are only asking you to have confidence in your mysterious power of opening up the glorious regions of light that lie behind the mystery of man's life.

The above charge is directed specifically to the playwrights, and particularly his advice on the use of their mysterious power to better the lot of a people, yet not playing the part of moralists. The Nigerian playwright is then urged to use the power to open up the glorious region of light and bring about positivity in the nation's polity, as there is still hope in the nation. The playwright, as the lead drummer in the making of theatres, is challenged to employ this power to address such issues that agitate the Question such as bad leadership, hatred, rancour and disunity which are glaringly manifesting in the current polity of the nation.

The National Question: Challenge to the Theatre

The National Question constitutes a serious and frightening threat to the nation's corporate existence by agitating the nascent democracy won through painful struggles some four years ago. The National Question borders essentially on two inter-related issues, peace and national unity, which are themselves indices for national development. The issue before us now is, how the theatre can contribute towards restoring peace and unity in the body politic so that the nation can move forward. The theatre, in this sense includes the practitioners and the ideas to be presented to the community; hence, the challenge of the *National Question* is squarely on the door steps of the practitioners who invent the ideas to be packaged for the consumption of the public. In this wise, practitioners, particularly, playwrights, who initiate the ideas, as well as directors, are directly challenged to artistically confront those issues that militate against decisively addressing the Question with that supreme mysterious power that Pope Paul VI spoke about. As already implied, this has to do with the mental hygiene of the people and includes lack of:

- * Good leadership
- * Love and peace among the people
- * National patriotism
- * National unity

As can be seen, these 'lacks' are in a way, inter-related, each complementing the others thus culminating in the often negative

attitude, itself is a state of the mind. If, therefore, the theatre is endowed with the power to bring about attitudinal change in an individual through showing that man himself for self-examination, one does not see why it can not be employed to persuade and propel him to change.

A leadership that is loving and sensitive to the yearnings of the ruled, will, no doubt, generate, and nurture lasting love, peace and patriotism, known to be intangible facilitators of national unity, the lack of which is principally agitating the body politic. Nationalism is the foundation on which national unity rests and when it takes centre stage in the polity, the issue of who takes up the mantle of leadership at any level of government, a Northerner or Southerner, will completely disappear. And when the country is so sanctified, the possibility of individual and collective energies being channeled towards productive endeavors will no doubt blossom. The noble vision of sanitizing and conscientising the nation through theatric activities cannot be realized if the playwrights or initiators of drama texts and their production extensions, captained by their directors, are not fully committed to the task and lack the capacity to manipulate what is available in the system, to achieve all-important national unity. Given the socio-cultural diversity of the nation and the premise that in diversity unity exists, such practitioners are expected in their texts and productions to thoroughly emphasize those things that tend to unify the people while sufficiently playing down those that tend to cause dissatisfaction, hatred, rancour, selfdom and nepotism amongst the people.

The practitioners therefore have to investigate the spectrum of traditional theatre forms and their modes of presentation to include theatre venues, language of texts and productions, (verbal and non-verbal) rituals, folklores, myths, music, dance etc, and their roles in traditional performances. By the time they are done with the exercise, an acceptable and truly indigenous theatrics would have emerged. If the theatres have to relate to and with the society, they have to be in the circumstances and language the society understands and can easily associate and identify with. Besides,

such theatres would have the irresistible potential to attract to their performances the otherwise apathetic larger segment of the society, bearing in mind that unless the audience is in the house to effectively participate, and in sizeable numbers, substantial massive positive impact may not be realised. Moving away from the Euro-american aesthetics and standards call for inward search into indigenous traditional forms and styles to choose from and adapt to the circumstances in focus, having in mind the intention of the theatre in the nascent democracy. Agitated by the apparent imposition of Euro-american aesthetics and standards on alien materials, in this case, Nigerian, whose circumstances vary, Rasheed Abiodun (2002:44), citing Lanrele Bamidele, says that

...the approach talks more about content and not much about form; it is not bordered by the aesthetic style of a work of art but rather the creative artists' intention to write about life, about society, and about reality.

Besides liberating, themselves, the playwrights in particular, should be democratic in their ideas as it is clear that autocratic and magisterial ideas and approaches tend to work against set goals. The public is an indispensable participatory component of any theatre presentation; hence, some allowance will have to be integrated in the drama text and in its packaging to permit it play that role. Persuasion is the only edge and has to be subtly employed to lure the theatre public to the artist's point of view thus giving it the opportunity of effective participation. This can be done by democratizing the process of theatre making, by having such exercises as script meetings and play readings in which suggestions are freely given to improve on a text. Besides, the text can be built to involve the audience in the actual performance through consciously breaking the physical distance between the stage and the audience by pushing the action into the audience. This was experimented on, with positive results, in the productions of Athol Fugard's, *Siwze Bansi Is Dead*, Meki Nzewi's *Drop of Honey* and more recently, Femi's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, all at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Of course, it is needless to say that a de-tribalised production team will be in a better position to perceive and engage issues from national perspectives rather than from ethnic and/ or regional nationalism angle which does not and can never pave the road to love, peace and unity. Production energies, whether in building texts or in making them live on stage, should therefore be directed towards issues in the national polity that seem to be rocking the system. In any case, while pursuing national issues, sight should not be lost of some local ones that are tied up in the threat of corporate existence of the nation. In this regard, the problem of language of the text and its production, comes into question. Language, in the context of the theatre, includes verbal, the domain of a playwright, and non-verbal which is shared responsibility of the director and his team.

The issue of language of the theatre has, for some time now, been a contentious one as there does not exist what one can comfortably call a national language at the moment, except the English language, which the majority of the masses are illiterate in. Achebe (1962) describes language as a technique of communication that embodies people's civilization which represents and dramatizes their modes of perception within their cultural grouping.⁹ Samovar (1976), corroborating Achebe, sees language as:

...a symbolic representation of a people that includes its historical and cultural background as well as its approach to life and its way of living and thinking.

If Achebe and Samovar are right as to what language is and includes, then it logically follows that the English language or any other foreign one for that matter, would be inappropriate in addressing the peculiar societal ills entrenched in the socio-cultural propensities of the Nigerian society. Besides, such languages are not predicated on the socio-cultural history of Nigeria, and a sizable majority of the hundred million or more Nigerians are not literate in them. This situation is aggravated if, as in Nigeria, the country is heterogeneous, with two to three hundred ethno-linguistic groups.

The problem is in which foreign language or local language(s) would the dramas be constructed, and packaged for presentation to this multi-lingual society for effective perception and appreciation. Though by no means easy, a balance can be struck between the English language, which only the literate minority can speak and understand, and the local vernacular/s, which the majority of the society can associate with. If the essence of language (verbal or non-verbal), is effective communication, and if the theatre seeks to communicate through entertainment, a communicable medium has to be used, in whatever form it is contrived.

Considering the multi-media nature of the art form, the 'pigin' English, which is widely used in most parts of the country provides a solution. When this is effectively exploited and blended with comprehensible elementary language of sign, sound and movement (non-verbal language), the audience will have no problem understanding and participating in the performance. Sub-texts, either in English or local vernacular, blended with the above, would go further in making the presentation comprehensible and appreciable to a larger segment of the population. However, where the vernacular is preferred, it has to be ensured that the essence of the theatre is captured to the extent that such a text confronts the root of the society in its current circumstances and stereotypes, showing it, its 'today' in perspective with its 'yesterday', and the 'yesterday' with 'today'. In this way, texts would become rather artistic realities existing only in the objective sense. Such scripts, whether in the English language or that of the theatre's community, when proved to be successful in production in terms of their relevance to forging national unity based on love, should be translated and adapted for performances in communities other than those of their birth. What is crucially important here is to ensure that in form, content and production modes, they have a national outlook

In the discussion so far, concentration has been on debilitating artistic related factors. However, there exist some non-artistic constraints that practitioners, meanwhile, have to contend with in their bid to play their supreme role while pressure is mounted on

the powers that be, interest groups, corporate bodies and stakeholders, for assistance, in the areas of provision of adequate environment and the ways and means of capacity building. They include:

- * Moral and financial sponsorships to execute selected theatre projects;
- * Provision of adequate theatre infrastructures, at least one in each Local Government Area in the Federation, including Abuja;
- * Many more theatre troupes/ companies to be established and due recognition accorded existing ones for capacity building;
- * Theatre festivals to be organized on annual basis with empowerment and encouragements to Local Governments to organize mini-festivals;
- * Encouragement to secondary schools and tertiary institutions for capacity building and for institutionalizing theatre clubs;
- * School curricula to give prominence to theatre education;
- * Aggressive sensitization of the public as to the imperative of theatre in maintaining good mental hygiene;
- * Institutionalization of children's theatre in primary schools.

Conclusion

In this paper, some measure of liberty has been taken to interrogate the seemingly intractable *National Question*, tracing its genesis from before the 1884-1885 Scramble for Africa to the 1914 Amalgamation saga. In doing that, attempt has been made to identify why the Question seems to be intractable despite the various Constitutions experimented since 1950. Through the interrogation, it becomes obvious that the British colonialists have not actually left the country as the seeds of the discord they planted and nurtured during protectorate annexations and the Amalgamation of 1914 are now yielding them and their allies bountiful economic harvests. It is also seen that conceptually, the Amalgamation was a tactful device

by Her Majesty's colonial government aimed at constantly agitating and causing strife in the polity, to her calculated benefit. This she achieved through the anachronistic educational system forced down on the nation on one the hand, and the tactful indoctrination of the people, on the other. All this has resulted in the tendency for the average Western educated Nigerian to accept anything British, and, by extension, Euro-american superior to Nigerian, and as the standard that ought to be religiously followed. Sustainable development, as can be seen from the indices of the society, has eluded the country. And so, the theatre is being urged to employ its supreme and mysterious power to enthrone love, peace and unity in the body politic of the nation. To perform this task effectively, theatre practitioners, playwrights and production teams have to properly position themselves through reconstructing and liberating their minds from the clutches of imperialist education. If this is not done, they will continue to see the prevailing harsh socio-economic and political climate from a jaundiced point of view, and this will lead them to ape Euro-american aesthetics and standards. Besides, the practitioners have to be democratic to be able to democratize the process of theatre making and through being patriotic, they will shun ethnicity in all its ramifications.

Above all, traditional modes of presentation are recommended for adoption in constructing and presenting such works, mindless of the Euro-american aesthetics and standards. Such traditional forms as folkloric approach wherein music, dance and drama are fused, moderated, possibly by a narrator, to achieve cohesion in the presentation can be adopted. Total theatre technique, being part and parcel of the nation's traditional form, is not only appropriate but likely to pull crowds. The theatre of this vision, pivoted on conscientisation to bring about change of attitude, love, peace and unity amongst the people, is to be contrived from materials with potentials to extol virtue and condemn vices in all their forms. In doing so, the theatre is expected to play up those things that unite the people while those divisive ones are played down. No doubt, that much has been done in this respect; however, playwrights are urged to do more because present happenings in the society are

laddened with potentials capable of derailing the nascent democracy, if caution is not exercised particularly by the political elite. To this end, such extant dramas as Meki Nzewi's *Ordeal For Regeneration* and *The Moonsage Hero* (musicals), Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Emeka Nwabueze's *Parliament Of Vultures* and, more recently, Soyinka's *King Baabu* which confront rulerships that are autocratic, complacent and insensitive to the plight of the ruled, are suggested. *The Ordeal*, *The Moonsage*, *Parliament* and *King Baabu*, in particular, are most relevant to the present situation in the country as they boldly and subtly, (except for probably, *King Baabu*), throw searchlight on misdeeds of the insensitive rulers and their instruments of rulership.

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