

## HISTORY, MYTHOLOGY AND THEATRE OF SOCIAL CONSCIENCE: AN EXAMPLE OF MEKI NZEWI'S *THE LOST FINGER*

### Introduction

The committed writer tries to expose the ills of the society to show how ugly and therefore reprehensive they are. He extols virtues and condemns vice. He seeks to make society better (Duruaku, 1996:87).

The above statement suggests that a committed playwright, like other artists of the theatre, has the potentials for stimulating people's conscience towards social emancipation. Therefore, it may be tenable to assert that theatre is a powerful weapon for creating social conscience. Focusing on Nigeria specifically and Africa in general, this paper seeks to demonstrate how theatre can exploit history and mythology, in the creation of social conscience. Meki Nzewi's folk opera drama, *The Lost Finger* is used as a major example.

### The Concept of Social Conscience

As a concept, social conscience refers to what the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines as "an awareness of and a desire to help in solving the social problems in the community" (1998:1127). The word 'conscience' has been defined as:

The highest of the governing principles... It both influences and evaluates behaviour by means of approval and disapproval (Albert *et al*, 1980:197).

The Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary defines 'conscience' as "knowledge or feeling of right and wrong; the faculty, power or principle of a person which decides on the lawfulness or unlawfulness of his actions with a compulsion to do right..." (1980:387).

In the light of these definitions, the term 'social conscience'

may be broadly conceptualized as the sensibility which predisposes a person, a class of people or members of a community towards the desire to eschew evils and extol virtues. This is manifested in various forms, including individual or group effort to eradicate socio-political evils like oppression, fraud, selfishness, corruption in high places, and other vicious behaviours. Social conscience is also obvious in selfless leadership and patriotic followership. It promotes justice, fair play and social cohesion.

### **Theatre of Social Conscience**

Theatre of social conscience as an expression, suggests a form of functional relationship between theatre and social conscience. To examine this relationship, it is pertinent, first, to appreciate what theatre stands for. Theatre may simply refer to the performance art which employs the elements of drama, music, dance, space and audience. Meki Nzewi reasserts this in his opinion that 'theatre' is used "for stage works which conceptually integrate drama, music and dance" (1981:435). In a broader perspective, Robert Cohen states that,

In its various usages, "the theatre" today may refer to a culture's entire dramatic literary heritage or it might encompass only plays or it might refer as well to mime shows, musical extravaganzas, minstrel entertainments, cabaret revues, acted out story telling, even puppet shows. By extension, the word is occasionally broadened to include motion pictures and radio and television production (1981:9).

Each of these theatre types can pass as theatre of social conscience when it portrays or dramatizes the ugly consequences of societal malaise, in order to promote social virtues. For example, as dramatic literature, theatre includes written plays, dramatic criticism, and drama reviews that inspire social conscience. Plays of this bent draw their plots and themes from sources like history, mythology and socio-political developments. Theatre of social conscience also functions as live-stage performances of the plays before an audience, using the resources of music, song, dance, speech or mime. In addition, Victor Turner notes that "by means of such genres as theatre, including puppetry and shadow theatre, dance

drama, and professional story-telling, performances are presented which probe a community's weaknesses, call its leaders to account... portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them... (1982:11).

The electronic media also rank as a theatre of social conscience if in their displays or broadcasts, they dramatize events and actions that deter evil behaviour and stimulate social conscience. In Nigeria today, such examples abound in home video films that portray the deadly consequences of election malpractice, armed robbery, fraud, etc. In certain cultures in the third world communities, indigenous art forms like the masquerade, mimetic dances, and story telling enactments still function as theatre of social conscience by employing satire, lampoon and mimicry to challenge evils and the society for the better. Describing the "Kaiko" celebration of the Tsembaga of Highland Papua New Guinea, a year-long festival, which features dances as the "chief entertainments for the celebration," Richard Schechner remarks that "the dances are points in a system transforming destructive behaviour into constructive alliances" (1977:109).

The preceding highlights demonstrate that the theatre of social conscience broadly functions as literary dramatic texts, drawing from historical, mythological and socio-political sources; or as stage performances dramatizing the above texts and other specific events. It also functions as motion pictures, radio and television drama, and traditional displays all of which are aimed at edifying the society.

### **History and Theatre of Social Conscience**

The contemporary African theatre is rich in drama texts, stage productions, dramatized historical films and cultural art forms that derive their themes and structures from pre-colonial or colonial history. In Nigeria, examples include Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and *Ovonramwein Nogbaisi* (1974), Emeka Nwabueze's *Heroes of Conscience* (1998) and *Iyaye War* by Wale Ogunyemi. In Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania, instances include *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micere Mugo, *Unosilemela* by Credo

Mutwa, and *Kinjeketile* by Ibrahim Hussien. On the live-stage and over the electronic media, these texts have been severally given more life, more popularity and greater social relevance, using the facilities of music, dance and other indigenous art forms. The impact of stage dramatization of these literary texts is acknowledged by Nicholas Akwanya who opines that it is only when a play is "performed dramatically" that it becomes theatre, but "as a text it is as much language bound as an epic poem" (1998:3).

Theatre experts have tried to adduce reasons why African playwrights and stage producers dramatize history. David Kerr sees it as a means of sustaining the "Psychic roots of national pride", a way of asserting the African identity and "Legitimizing African nationalism" (1995:115). S.O. Umukoro opines that Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonranwein Nogbaisi* are 'devoted to the examination of our pre-colonial and colonial past', but he cautions that "a writer who allows his fascination with the past to distract him from the pressing needs of the present, pays the price of being without a vision" (1998:41). In affirmation of this opinion, Bakary Traore asserts that,

The present day has scant sympathy for forgotten themes. We must seek to go beyond history and myth to readjust our models to fit the needs of our own times (1995: 117).

There is urgent need to put these views in proper perspective. In many African nations today, war, corruption, oppression of the masses, bad leadership, and general insecurity, have swept the ground. These are consequences of people's greater inclination to evils at the expense of virtue. As a result, one of the exigent needs of our times is the creation of social conscience all over the continent of Africa. The potency of historical drama in achieving this need cannot be overemphasized. Through the techniques of thematic allegory, and character typification, historical plays have been able to bring their messages to bear on the contemporary society by preaching, inspiring and showing the proper route to social conscience. The play *Ovonramwein Noghaisi*, which dramatizes the resistance of Benin kingdom against European colonization and the

eventual subjugation of the great African state, provides the allegory of a modern African nation threatened by the forces of neocolonialism. Oba Ovonramwein himself typifies a conscientious modern ruler who foresees the risks of neocolonialism and resists it even to the point of self-sacrifice. His subjects - the people of Benin - signify the masses in any contemporary African society, who are divided in the levels of their loyalty to the leadership and patriotism to the nation. These significations create awareness about the gains of diligence, courage, selfless service, as well as, the dangers of evil.

Nwabueze's *Heroes of Conscience*, which dramatizes the Aba Women's War of the early twentieth century, may be interpreted as an allegorical depiction of present day African society where women have acquired the courage to fight against stereotyped male attitude against them. The play exposes all the factors that triggered the women's war, as well as, the consequences of the war. The audience is therefore left with the chance to decide on the morality of such events in the present dispensation. Space does not permit the analysis of non-Nigerian historical texts to show their obvious pertinence to the creation of social conscience.

From the above observations, it is obvious that historical drama functions by yielding itself to interpretations that may even transcend the playwright's conjecture, especially through the creative ingenuity of skilful stage directors. Such plays can have far-reaching influences on the conscience of the readers and the spectators. Historical drama reveals the antecedents of possible evils that may rear their heads in the present age, and charts a course for circumventing them through a change of social behaviour.

### **Mythology and Theatre of Social Conscience**

Mythology here refers to a collection of myths. A myth, according to Northrop Frye, is a story about a hero, who by virtue of being divine, is a god, since he is "superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men" (1957:33). G.S. Kirk, however, identifies the inadequacy of this definition, when he asserts that myths are not only stories about gods. Arguing that the Greek myths of "Perseus and Medusa (or Andromeda for that

matter), and Oedipus, Laius and Locaste" (1970:9) are not stories about gods, he asserts that myths can be stories associated with human beings who sometimes have strange powers. He further affirms that myths explain the origin of cultural or natural phenomena. The notion of myth as a story of human characters who sometimes possess strange spiritual powers is re-emphasized by Joseph Campbell who contends that "myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life" (1988:5).

The preceding analysis helps to indicate the diversity of mythical kinds. These include myths about gods, as exemplified by the Yoruba stories of Sango and Oduduwa. Myths about heroic characters include the stories of Shaka of Zulu, Dona Beatrice of Congo, Dedan Kimathi of Kenya and Oba Ovonramwein Nogbaisi of Benin, to mention a few. Queen Moremi of Ife and Ozidi of Ijaw were human beings whose myths tell stories of their strange powers and heroic achievements.

The relevance of myths to the theatre of social conscience may be appreciated through a quick glance at a few of their functions. Ossie Enekwe points out that myth is "for social restructuring" (1981:150). Geoffrey Parrinder claims that "myths show the values which the society holds dear" (1967:16). If the essence of myth as shown here is the preservation of important social norms and the encouragement of positive change in society, then, social conscience is fundamental to its nature and when theatre exploits these potentials, a high level of social awareness can be inspired.

African dramatists have exploited myths in their works, resulting in plays like *Oba Koso* by Duro Ladipo, *Morountodun* (the myth of Moremi) by Femi Osofisan, *Ozidi* by J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, which exploits the Greek myth of Oedipus, and transposes it to the Nigerian soil. However, the great potentials of historical and mythical sources exploited by the theatre of social conscience cannot be fully harnessed if dramatists have no effective "techniques of decoding" or interpreting their messages to the various classes of audience. David Kerr identifies an important device already employed by some African dramatists:

One way in which dramatists have attempted to broaden the appeal of history (and mythical) plays beyond the narrow constituency of intellectuals is by experimenting with African theatre forms. Several playwrights have attempted to cast their history (and mythical) plays within neo-traditional dramatic forms (1995:117).

This observation is authenticated by available examples of modern African history and mythical plays that fuse traditional theatre elements with literary forms. Ladipo's *Oba Koso*, J.P. Clark's *Ozidi*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the Kings Horseman*, all drew from the traditional elements of music, dance, song, mime and rituals

Meki Nzewi's *The Lost Finger*, may now be examined as a major textual illustration of theatrical exploitation of history and mythology for creating social conscience.

### **The Lost Finger**

The play employs traditional African theatre forms like music, song and dance in dramatizing the myth of Wentu, a seer, who sold her finger to the gods for a gift of clairvoyance. The play also dramatizes, alongside the myth, the history of a fictitious community known as Eroboland. *The Lost Finger* is set mainly in this land which is first seen as it reels under the fever of an impending war. The battle is schemed against her by Chief Jarawa of Bawaraland. The fear of war is underscored by the following statement made by Chief Ebube of Eroboland:

We of Eroboland cannot on our own, return battle to Chief Jarawa. They will crush us, and over-run our land, and make us their slaves. (Nzewi, 1979:16-17).

Consequent upon this terror, Chief Ebube invites some itinerant warriors led by Obaladike, a famous war general, and Wentu, the fortune teller. Chief Ebube gives the following reasons for these invitations:

So, after consultation with my elders, we decided to invite some itinerant warriors led by the famous general, Obaladike to come and train our young men, and take them to battle, to drive away the bandits, teach them a bitter lesson, so that they will never molest us again... (p.17).

Wentu is invited to foretell "what fortune has prescribed" for Eroboland "in the forthcoming combat" (p.20). After some divination, Wentu reveals that:

Chief Jarawa will not take your land. But there is a difficult period for you and your people... (p.22).

This observation does not, however, impress Chief Ebube. After prying further for what Wentu calls "grave trials"!, "lots of unhappiness"!, and "terrible sadness for somebody or some people"!, and receiving no reasonable clarifications, Chief Ebube dismisses Wentu brusquely and departs with his people, sad and disappointed. Because Wentu has already noticed that Chief Ebube's daughter - Oduagu - admires Obaladike and may end up getting married to him, she decides to use her preternatural power to win the hands of the warrior in marriage for her daughter Mantusi. She approaches this objective by arranging private meetings between the warrior and Mantusi in order to distract him from Oduagu. This measure fails and she decides to lure Oduagu into the hands of Jarawa, her father's enemy, with hope to achieve a permanent separation between her and Obaladike. Having achieved this, she goes further to prevaricate over Chief Ebube's anxiety about the threatening war. For instance, in the following statement she lies to the unsuspecting Chief Ebube who has been questioning the whereabouts of his daughter, and raises doubt about the honesty of Obaladike.

Wentu: Wentu\*has been in consultation.

Wentu doubts the sincerity of your warrior leader, General Obaladike. The chief may be disappointed with his role at this late hour. He may be called upon to defend his honesty (p.66).

The confused atmosphere is shortly compounded by the arrival of a messenger from Bawaraland, requesting Chief Ebube to surrender his throne and land, failing which the land will be defiled and a lot of mischief visited on the people. Compelled by the exigency of the circumstance, Chief Ebube decides, irrespective of Obaladike and Wentu, to lead his people to war in order to save the



land.

It is with the combined forces of his group and that of Obaladike who attacks Bawara land from a different destination that Eroboland suppresses Chief Jarawa's attack. Consequently, Wentu, for her misbehaviour, loses her gift of clairvoyance, gets back her lost finger and becomes cursed with a painful and restless death. Her daughter becomes conscience-stricken for her contributions to her mother's misdemeanor and takes her own life.

In this play, Nzewi exploits the power of mythology in steering the thought of the redears or the audience towards admirable virtues like good leadership, patriotism, loyalty, civic responsibility, heroism and love for one's family. The myth scares the mind away from debasing vices like dishonesty, deceit, covetousness and treachery. Furthermore, in the play, the author presents the picture of a peace-loving society groaning under the combined stress of internal and external crises. The domestic conflicts nearly fertilize the ground for alien powers to take root and subjugate the land to perpetual servitude. But this fate is averted through the deep sense of civil responsibility of both the leadership in the society, and loyal followers. A deep sense of commitment and loyalty is demonstrated by Chief Ebube's head counsellor - Tangban - who even at the most critical stage of the battle, vows:

I wili rather die fighting than slave for a Bawara bandit (p.81).

This is reminiscent of Oba Ovonramwein's determination to continue fighting the white men who were intruding into his kingdom.

Eroboland, therefore, becomes a prototype and an allegory of many contemporary African nations in which domestic socio-political defects like corruption, selfishness, election malpractice and murder, have allied together to cripple the wheel of progress and render the land vulnerable to external adversaries, such as neocolonialism and imperialism. Drawing attention to these vices, the play persuades contemporary African nations to be cognizant of their insidious foes, eradicate them and confront their foreign detractors with thunderous vigour. This call to social awareness

and corrective action is further reflected in Chief Ebube's statement when he discovers that the only possible salvation to his land, in the face of domestic sabotage and external threat, is to mobilize his loyal citizens and lead them to war himself. He, thus, orders his counsellor.

Go and organize the young men of this land, to gather in the village square with every weapon at their disposal. We will march south to the Yellow River by dusk. I will lead the attack myself. Every able-bodied son of this land must come out to fight, or be a slave and a curse to his family for generations to come (pp. 69-70).

In this conscience-stimulating expression, one feels a touch of the author's clarion call to civic responsibility, failing which humiliation and incessant suffering will persist in the society. *The Lost Finger* portrays man as an entity immersed in a hot soup of intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts which are ominously threatening his dignity. But man is urged, in the face of such omens, to brace up to the challenge with good moral sense. Man is expected to rise up like Chief Ebube, who, while his aides - Obaladike and Wentu - are no more handy as the enemy approaches with complacent ego, can still muster courage to say:

So I will abandon my throne and my people without a struggle?  
The gods forbid. I will rather die fighting (p.69).

For this courage, bravery, self-esteem and above all, social conscience, Chief Ebube is an admirable character, worthy of emulation by national leaders and patriotic citizens. His moral sense urges him to make a difficult choice, and be ready to sacrifice his own life to save the dignity of his land. Wentu's role in the play portrays her as a criminal who is given to treason, rebellion, jealousy, covetousness and guile. She places her personal interest above communal commitment and survival. She is not worthy of the trust reposed on her by the entire community as she hoards information and misuses her spiritual power. In this position, Wentu becomes an archetype of contemporary enemies of progress in society and selfish opportunists who lack moral sense.

The play caricatures these evils before the culprits and clearly indicates the inevitable nemesis that awaits them. Wentu's fate is an eye-opener and a call on evil men to purge themselves of vices, in the interest of societal cohesion.

Obaladike exhibits social conscience through his faithfulness to the cause of Eroboland, as shown through his devotion to Chief Ebube and her daughter, Oduagu. He understands his mission in Eroboland, and in spite of odds, he emerges victorious. As a conscientious leader, he conforms with the terms of his contract. For example, when Chief Ebube requests that Obaladike waits for a "victory feast" in his (Obaladike's) honour and a "settlement" to him and his warriors (p.96), the war leader responds as follows:

Thank you Chief... Obaladike fights for a just purpose and not for a settlement. As for my men, they have taken their settlement from Bawaraland, in accordance with the code I laid down for them. Pardon me if I cannot accept your kind and complimentary offers (p.96).

All this constitutes a good lesson to people of this age who are hereby gingered to be steadfast in any course of justice that they undertake, especially if, like Chief Ebube, their leaders are committed to the welfare of the land. As one can visualize, Obaladike is not like some leaders of the contemporary society, who are exploitative, arrogant and unfaithful to the terms of their election to office.

Chief Jarawa, like Wentu, has a dead conscience, and instigates misfortune through his attempts to dislodge the moral, spiritual and physical strength of a peaceful and orderly society like Eroboland. His actions engender great disaster for his people and Erobo citizens. He therefore represents a quality that should be eschewed by all conscientious people. He is a trouble shooter who reaps where he has not sown. His plight at the end of the battle serves as a deterrent force to leaders like him, who lack the moral strength to work for peace.

Nzewi's craftsmanship is further accentuated by his adroit combination of music and dance in clarifying the intention of this 'folk opera drama'. Music and dance in drama function in various

capacities to create social awareness. Frederic Fay Swift and Willard I. Musser have posited that "music lends its emotional art to the art of acting out a play", while "songs usually have a very lovely melody" (1960:108). These writers also opine that "in opera, as in our present day motion pictures, the orchestra is used to depict many moods or scenes, such as a rising storm, an attack, a rough sea, etc. (108). Citing Richard Wagner, Oscar Brockett affirms that "music can dictate the pitch, duration and tempo of the words (1976:189). These opinions vindicate the expressive power of music and corroborate its captivating current on the feelings of the audience.

These artistic devices help to vivify the intentions, lesson and vision of the *Lost Finger*. The capacity of music in establishing the events and carrying "psychological tension" is also highlighted by Meki Nzewi in his clarification that,

In the stage productions of the *Lost Finger* we find that specific music sketches (music motifs) in the written music score have been used to depict and announce the dominating character - Wentu the Fortune Teller; to establish environments like court, as effects to enhance psychological situation "crashes and clashes of weird music" (1981:451).

These observations further point at the place of music in sketching the theme of the *Lost Finger*, which turns out to be: the need for perseverance, selfless service and diligence towards civic responsibility.

It may be inferred from the above, that the play, in inspiring social conscience, invites leaders, youths and all citizens to eschew social evils and opt for virtuous behaviour. The play teaches and equips readers, as well as theatre audience, with important hallmarks for social behaviour. Thus, through its structure, theme, characterization, diction, music, dance, and spectacle, the play represents a commendable dramatic model for achieving social conscience.

## Conclusion

In this paper, effort has been expended in showing how theatre can successfully exploit the resources of history and myth to address

an issue of great contemporary relevance - social conscience. The concept of social conscience has been used here to imply the ideals of patriotism, civic responsibility, justice, moral rectitude, social awareness, and zeal to perpetuate all this for the advancement of the society. For theatre to merit the name, 'Theatre of Social Conscience', it must satisfactorily preach, inspire and give direction for acquiring social conscience. This paper has argued that in exploiting the elements of history and myth, theatre should device ways of relating the events of drama symbolically or allegorically to issues of the present age. Thus, the appropriate theatre aesthetics should be employed to clarify both theme, plot and message for all classes of audience - literate and non-literate.

Meki Nzewi's *The Lost Finger* is an appropriate example of a theatre of social conscience which successfully employs history and mythology. The play's message is that good virtues should be allowed to override the evil forces in the society. This is one of the basic tenets of social conscience. The play exposes the possibilities of failure and calamity in any community or country where the citizens lack unity of purpose, honesty, courage, and justice. People in all communities are therefore urged to be upright, trustworthy, diligent, and dedicated towards the proper development of the society.

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