

Issues and Development in Contemporary Nigerian Drama and Theatre Practice

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The development of theatre in any country takes a certain pattern. It is up to historians to falsify or report truthfully on the various threads that make up this pattern. The Nigerian theatre stands in a lucky position because it has the benefit of the written histories of other theatres. In this sense the political development stands in very close analogy to the theatrical. For Nigeria has had the benefit in politics of the established democracies of the world, and also of examining the ideologies of countries with political systems other than democratic. In evolving a national theatre we hope the same breath of perspective, which has been manifested on the political sphere, would be brought to bear on the artistic.

– Dapo Adelugba, 1964.

The quotation above is the total content of the ‘Abstract’ of the 1964 Master of Art in Theatre Arts thesis of the University of California, Los Angeles, titled *Nationalism and the Awakening National Theatre of Nigeria*, of Adedapo Abayomi Olorunfemi Adelugba. In his abstract, Adelugba sets the tone for the theatre he desired in 1964 and still dreams for Nigeria today. The type that, because of its closeness to other theatre practices all over the world, will be relevant to its immediate audience; be ideologically meaningful to those who would practice it and those who would watch it; and finally, a theatre that would document the history of his people, while at the same time pointing towards a better socio-political alternative for his people’s future. Adelugba has adopted this philosophy to motivate him in his teaching, ministering, inspiring, leading, and mentoring students throughout his career.

The questions that form the thematic preoccupation of this paper are: how well have Nigerian dramatists and theatre practitioners measured up to this vision/philosophy? How can one measure the stages of development of contemporary Nigerian theatre? Where do we fuse the line between theatre and the political reality of a developing country? Have we failed in our attempts at creating a theatre practice that will survive generations to come, or have we lost the focus of our theatre history, and the theatrical traditions and the performative, theoretical and practical achievements which the early practitioners, writers and scholars such as Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola, James Ene-Henshaw, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, Oyin Ogunba, Joel Adedeji, Ola Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi, Bayo Oduneye, Tunji Oyelana, and Dapo Adelugba handed down to us?

Nigeria is the largest post-colonial country in West Africa. It has through the accident of history, size and number found itself adorned with the vestige of leadership in both the historical, political and economic spheres of the lives of the African peoples. Yet the historical reality of Nigeria is often shaded with the abuse of the opportunity which fate presents her to be the leader of Africa. Sometimes, it too grapples with the loss of ideological perception such as which characters should inhabit our literature and what they should say. Why they should say it and what the resultant effect of what they say to the Nigerian society continue to task the minds of writers and the reading public.

Before embarking on the argument of this paper, one must examine the relationship between theatre and politics, because Adelugba hinged the future of the development of Nigerian theatre on the political development in Nigeria. Adelugba, in the earlier quotation, states that:

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The closeness in the analogy between theatre and society which Adelugba mentions, allows and endows theatre with the functions of mirroring society's actions while critically examining the challenges of existence and co-existence, and while also purging, and suggesting a better alternative or resolution to the problems of society. In contemporary terms, the relationship which theatre has with politics steps slightly beyond being in 'close analogy'; it has moved to becoming a relationship of interdependency. Politics and the people who live it remain the providers of materials for drama and theatre to feed on. Drama selects content from the materials provided and fuses it with the story, the characters, the language, the

symbols and the images, and finally, theatre practice turns the story into action, into movement, into a reflection... into visual art in transient movement.

'Event in Literature is experienced according to the scale of its treatment' (Soyinka 2005: 43), the scale upon which a society's truthfulness and readiness is set to confront and resolve its social developmental problems, so that it can become a peaceful, fruitful and prosperous society. The perfection of the creator of literature in the treatment of a societal event is how well the subject matter is presented so that members of the society do not see it as an abstract work, but instead find the thematic message of the work of art relevant to their collective reality. This is why in contemporary society, the art it gives birth to could not be for art's sake, it must speak to society while at the same time point to an alternative solution to society's problem.

Apart from the relationship theatre has with the politics of the period, Adelugba believes that a good polity must grow along with its art. Femi Osofisan (2001: 110) believes that the relationship between art and politics in contemporary times must go beyond this when he states that:

Drama in particular, no doubt because it is the most social of the arts, provides the site in which this inherent menace is most strident. In whatever country in black Africa that you open the curtain, you will find that in the absence of genuine democracy, the life of drama is lived on the edge of the cliff... The stark reality impresses itself upon us; all dramatists with a conscience know that when they play, they play dangerously.

'They play dangerously' because it is often difficult for society or even an individual within society to face the critical analysis theatre presents. This is why it is important to note that the criticism theatre makes of society is sometimes too bitter for society to accept, yet it is important that they co-exist in order to stabilize society against its own excesses, and in order for drama and theatre to grow. Adelugba's observation of theatre and politics being in close analogy, especially for a developing country like Nigeria, therefore is correct. Man is paired with culture, for culture is the totality of his life. Politics is the art of man finding a suitable way to inter-relate or co-exist with other peoples and their cultures. And theatre is the arbiter of reflection, correction, and presentation of alternative ways towards solving issues and problems that will emerge during the period of societal cohesion.

One major point to note is that contemporary Nigeria since 1964 has outgrown the country that Adelugba refers to in the opening quotation; it

has gone through the process of historical development. It has had a civil war; it has had several years of military rule; it has passed through a cultural hegemonic process of cultural fusion and interacted with other cultural consciousness of the world. The performance culture has moved from the traditional story-telling practices to professional dramatic performances. It has moved from pre-colonial and nationalist experiences, from the original traditional serious, sacred concepts and practices of ritual and social entertainment forms to postcolonial thoughts of dramatic and creative processes. Nigeria has since lost its age of innocence; indeed, the country has become a mature country, constantly demanding its own form and type of politics and more importantly its own type of drama and theatre practice.

Because of changes in socio-economic and political development, new demands have been made on the type of drama and theatrical practices that must emerge to satisfy contemporary audience. The demand goes beyond the basic functions of the theatre, which are to entertain, educate and inform; it goes beyond a representation of a particular culture and political history; beyond even chants, poetry, acrobatic displays, dances and songs and all such creative embellishments which often raise the aesthetic level of performances. It has given drama and theatre a more critical stance towards confronting contemporary challenges of existence and humanity.

This is why the first major challenge for drama and theatre development in Nigeria is its dramaturgy; this has to do with the functionality, the composition and structure of plays in performances. This also refers to the type of old and new theatre writing and performances that exist. Historically, despite the very important early efforts of James Ene-Henshaw, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Browson Dede, Frank Aig Imoukuede, Mac Akpoyoware, Demas Nwoko and Yetunde Esan, it was the introduction from England of the two plays of Wole Soyinka, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* in 1959, that served as the catalyst for the emergence of serious dramatic works in the English language in Nigeria. These plays and the ones that were to follow started to confront the people and the politics of the society that was giving birth to it. They started to recreate the characters that inhabit our physical reality; to question the social reality of our cultural environment, the issue of power and greed, the domestic issues of ethnicity, cultural diversity and survival became the dominating themes. The playwrights started to recognize the ethos of the ancestral gods, erstwhile used just as character-links in traditional stories and playmaking into figures of humanity within the very contradictions of our modern reality. The second generation playwrights – including Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Bode

Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Tunde Fatunde – had to feel the new anger and fire which forced them to tell their stories with an analytical zest propelled by an inner drive to be relevant to their immediate society.

Irrespective of Nigeria's adaptations to Eurocentric priorities, influences and dominant culture, new and contemporary demands on Nigerian drama continue to force the playwrights to go beyond ancestral memory, from individual messages, communal issues of ethnic reaffirmation, to assessment of Nigeria within the new global reality and the domestic issues of existence and humanity. Because of this demand on contemporary playwrights, there have also been shifts in the structure and themes of new plays. Secular and sacred mythologies now question new symbols and drama and theatre dislocate old beliefs and fixations which hinder societal development. It must be noted that experience is not monolithic, but must take its roots in the cultural diversity of the Nigerian nation and weave it into a collective consciousness that strives binding of the people's consciousness. It is important to note that dramaturgy is an integral part of the development of a people's drama and theatre; it grows with the consciousness of a people, while taking into cognizance, developments in other countries and societies. So in the case of Nigeria, we see the development of a people from traditional entertainment forms, to the Greek theatre which we meet in the works of J. P. Clark-Bekeredemo and Ola Rotimi, from Shakespeare to Brecht's epic theatre and its influences in the works of Soyinka and Osofisan. It must be noted that contemporary theatre is hybrid, because it draws influences from different schools of thought to constantly shift 'between the dramatic, the epic and the lyric, the high and the low, tragic and comic, theatrical and extra-theatrical a dynamic montage' (Turner & Behrndt 2008:190). It is important to pay special attention to the dramaturgy of a developing theatre experience because the theatrical works that emerge are brought closer in meaning to the audience. The playwrights themselves are able to find the type of style and structure, even to the use of modern technologies in the process of play writing.

Other challenges include the belief and negative attitude to drama and theatre practitioners by the society that the bohemian attitude of most actors and theatre practitioners was a sign that the profession was not a good one and children and youths should not be encouraged to go into it. This has led to the dearth in the number of practitioners and also hindered the development of theatre in Nigeria. Although over twenty universities offer drama and theatre courses at degree level, most of theatre arts graduates go into other professions like law and banking.

Another challenge is training. At the secondary school level, theatre and drama are not included in the curriculum for Ordinary and Advanced level qualifications in Nigeria. There is also no government funding for the performing arts or to maintain existing infrastructure. There are also inadequate forums such as seminars, conferences, workshops, residences, internships, festivals and networking amongst drama and theatre professionals and practitioners. This has also led to the shortage of fresh research, experiments, writings and scholarly publications on drama and theatre studies.

No legal framework was given for the implementation of the 1988 Cultural Policy for Arts, and no proper implementation statute was set for the National Endowment for the Arts. These two aspects of government policies would have helped to assist the development of drama and theatre in contemporary Nigeria. This has also led to the lull in local and international collaborations and exchanges in training. The non-articulation of Nigerian policy towards the arts has also contributed to the way sponsors such as multi-nationals and banks in the private sector view the arts.

But the greatest challenge in the development of drama and theatre is in the preference for trans-national media, electronic media and the internet over live theatre practice. Nollywood, which is the product of new technology to Nigeria entertainment practice, is the major concern here. The glamour, money, fame, and the short time within which trained and untrained actors become successful lure theatre practitioners from the stage; the ease and security through which audiences can sit in the comfort of their homes lures the society from the theatres. Contemporary Nigerian society is not as safe as the society of 1964. Amidst instances of armed robberies, car-jacking, pick pockets and even police harassment, live theatre has lost most of its audience.

We also need to define a new role for the National Theatre and National Troupe of Nigeria in the development of drama and theatre practice in Nigeria. The National Theatre is an architectural masterpiece copied and shaped like a horse's saddle from Bulgaria in 1975 by the Federal military government, for Nigeria's hosting of the Second World Black and African Festival of Black Arts and Civilization (FESTAC '77). Auditions for the Nigerian troupe that would represent Nigeria at the 1977 festival and also honour numerous invitations to Nigeria to attend other festivals all over the world led to the decision to form a cultural troupe of dancers, actors, musicians from the whole country which will celebrate the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria, and also show-case the unity in our cultural diversity through representative dances from the different ethnic groups of Nigeria. The major problem has been that most

scholars see the National Theatre as a place that should evolve a national culture for a culturally diversified country like Nigeria. Adelugba sees both the National theatre and the National culture playing complementary roles. In a recent interview, he says that, 'the theatre and the culture, should see each other as partners. The theatre is going to be based on an understanding of and a profound response to the national culture' (Dasylva 2003: 67). But the more disconcerting issue is that practitioners see the National theatre as their 'home' – the place for art, and should be part of the programming and administrative considerations, but government sees it differently. Both the National Theatre and the National Troupe are organs of government set up by decree 47 of 1991 to carry out the objectives of government and conform to the rules of government. Consequently, there is bound to be friction between the owners and those who feel the organs were set up for them. The relationship has to be properly streamlined in order to allow the National Theatre and the National Troupe to contribute more to the growth and development of drama and theatre practice in Nigeria. Perhaps there is a need for the artistes to look beyond these two government agencies, and set up private troupes, and build private theatre halls, which will provide avenues for more development.

It is right then to make suggestions and recommendations for the further development of drama and theatre practice in Nigeria: Nigeria should have a focused and stable polity which will provide appropriate government policies, infrastructure, and institutions for drama and theatre development. And the dramaturgy must appeal to the commonality and communality of emotions, feelings, and realisation of the shared values and interests of the peoples of a country even when they live in a culturally diversified society like Nigeria. Additionally, theatre should be allowed to diversify in form and in practice. It should also take development trends all over the world into consideration in order to be in tune with global developments. This will increase the interest of the audience, and increase audience attendance. Furthermore, the private sector should be encouraged by both government and theatre practitioners to invest in the arts and professional theatre bodies should intervene to regulate, profile, and offer continuing training and advocacy in the industry. Finally, Drama and Theatre curriculum should be improved upon to provide educational focus for proper professional training.

In conclusion, the pattern of development of theatre of Nigeria and the *knitting threads*, which have evolved into what is referred to as Nigerian theatre continues to grow, and must adjust generation to generation as society demands. And despite the challenges of development ahead, it is comforting to note that theatres all over the world have gone through

these stages of development. Nigerian theatre practitioners can therefore be said to be on the right path.

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