

Trends and Patterns of Committed Theatre in Nigeria

HAMEED OLUTOBA LAWAL

Abstract

Commitment in dramaturgical art permeates all the theatrical traditions in Nigerian theatre. The tone or degree of commitment is however dictated by the prevailing circumstances in the social reality and the ideological inclination of dramatists. Historical accounts and critical reading of the selected plays reveal promotion of culture and the articulation of political consciousness. While the community theatre makes up for the problem of accessibility in language of dramatisation in the literary drama, this study lends its voice to the call for translation of the scripts that can inculcate critical consciousness in the masses into the local languages, just as employing the audio-visual of the screen is another alternative. Acting out what the radical playwrights advocate in their script could be a morale booster to the targeted audience.

Introduction

Like in literature, commitment in Nigerian theatre can be defined from various perspectives. Some dramatists believe that their responsibility or commitment is to their art. However, a true or genuine commitment is aptly captured in these words of Achebe:

... a sense of obligation or a strong attachment to a cause. When we speak of a writer's commitment, we mean his attachment to particular social aims and the use of writing to advance these social aims. This, of course, implies a belief that literature can and should be used as force for social change and a writer has a responsibility to do so. (Achebe, 1978, p. 77).

While this postulation applies to literary drama, some levels of commitment are also discernible in the indigenous, popular and community theatre in different tones and degrees. The tones and degrees of commitment are to some extent determined by the unfolding events in the socio political history of Nigeria. The response of the

Nigerian dramatists to historical developments in Nigeria therefore fall in line with Ngugi's Wa Thiongo's observation that;

A writer responds with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of a sensible needle, he records with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. This same writer will produce different types of work, sometimes contradictory in mood, sentiment, degree of optimism, and even world view. For the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by history. (WaThiong'o, 1982, p. 24)

While the pre-independence drama manifested a tendency that supported the nationalist struggles from both cultural and political perspectives, post-independence drama expressed the new consciousness and at the same time criticised and satirised the politics of oppression and exploitation of the masses that characterised military and civilian regimes in Nigeria. In our exploration of the patterns and tones of commitment in Nigerian theatre, we shall be guided by these phases in the political development of Nigeria.

Patterns of Commitment in Nigeria Theatre

As pattern of commitment varies in traditions of Nigerian theatre, three variants of ideological inclination can be identified like in modern African literature. These are; the negritudinists, the critical realists and socialists realists. (Gbilekaa, 1997, pp. 52-66).

Negritude has two modes: the revolutionary, as in Césaire, and the mystic, as in Senghor. Senghor's brand of negritude entails myth making. He evades reality and gets pre-occupied with politics of identity. This explains why his theory of colonialism is purely cultural. He views colonial situations as cultural encounter between Africa and Europe not in terms of capitalist, economic and political exploitation. Senghor seems to be saying that all would have been well if the white imperialist left inviolate African culture.

Césaire's school of negritude, on the other hand, appeals to men of African descent to reveal, through analysis, the exploitative nature of capitalist imperialism. He wants them to highlight, through dialectical materialism, capitalist society's myth that acts as opiates and

Hameed Olutoba Lawal: Trends and Patterns of Committed Theatre in Nigeria

therefore cripples the will to revolt. He argues that, under colonialism, the coloniser behaved as if the colonised has no history. He relegates his act to the category of folklore by substituting his. The coloniser becomes the producer and the colonised the consumer. To Cesaire, the will to change this situation rests with the people's collective struggle for freedom and it is the duty of the artist to mobilise and sensitise the people for both mental, cultural, and political decolonisation.

The critical realist demands the dramatist should not merely be anthropologist, chronicler or museum curator documenting events rather they should propose a definite vision as the eyes and ears of the society. (Onoge, as cited in Gbilekaa, 1997, p. 60). In contrast, socialist realism in the artistic realm according to Fischer (1963, p. 108) implies the artists' or writers' fundamental agreement with the aims of the working class and emerging socialist world. Dramatists in this category are not merely content with testifying to the deteriorating condition of poverty, bribery, corruption and violence: in fact, the entire social crises like the critical realist but they do prescribe a panacea as well.

Inherent in the dramaturgy of the theatrical traditions in Nigeria are these ideological inclinations. While some first generation dramatists in Nigeria can be classified into two ideological camps based on the tone of their commitment as dictated by the unfolding events in their social reality, the second generation of Nigeria dramatists whose minds had been radicalised by the wartime experiences and its aftermath, of unemployment, oil boom, poverty and tyrannical tendencies in governance and who thus advocate collective resistance of the peasants, workers and traders in line with the ideologies of the socialist realism.

Trends in Theatre of Commitment in Nigeria

Theatre of commitment in Nigerian dramaturgical art is the product of colonial imperialism as well as socio-economic developments in independent Nigeria. It started as protest against the European form of cultural domination, a mental conditional system which the colonial authorities saw as necessary adjunct to the political and economic conquest of Africa. (Gbilekaa, 1989, p. 11)

From the cultural plane, the commitment to preserve and promote culture as exemplified in songs, dances, religions and languages can be traced to the masquerade festivals of different ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa. Masquerading is, generally speaking, a cult of the ancestors. During the festivals, masks of the dead fathers are brought out using theatrical effects as means of ritual celebration. The performance which encompasses the enactment of characteristic traits of the ancestral spirit is enhanced with music, chanting, singing, drumming, dancing, acrobatics and miming. In spite of the threat from Islam and Christianity, masquerading remains a veritable source of preserving culture and ancestral worship.

In furtherance of this deployment of drama to advance cultural and political ideas, Adedeji's account of *Alarinjo*, the traditional travelling theatre of the Yoruba, reveals that, the cultural performances were blended with political themes which did not go down well with the authorities. Such sketches were sometimes banned on the pretext that, they brewed trouble between government and the governed.

In modern travelling theatre, pioneered by Hubert Ogunde, the impact of cultural awareness and nationalism, coupled with the divorce of the theatre from church patronage, compelled the introduction of folk operas "to arouse the interest of his people in their tradition and cultural heritage in the 1940s" (Clark, 1979, p22). Plays that exemplified this cultural crusade include *Africa and God*, *The black forest* (1945) and *Journey to heaven* (1945).

This pioneering effort of Ogunde was later stepped up by Duro Ladipo by introducing into his historical plays new singing techniques and dance steps of Yoruba hunters, Sango worshippers and poetry. Plays that exemplified this cultural consciousness include *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja* as Ladipo attests;

I wrote these plays for the following reasons: first to ensure that Yoruba folklore and traditional stories are never forgotten, secondly, to amply demonstrate the richness and uniqueness of Yoruba culture, a culture which resisted the assault of white Christian religion; thirdly, to ensure that the dances, the music and the splendour of Yoruba as a language never become things of the past, a splendour so discernible in such

Hameed Olutoba Lawal: Trends and Patterns of Committed Theatre in Nigeria

traditional chants as ijala, ofo, ewi, oriki, used in these plays. (Ladipo as cited in Ogunbiyi 1981, p. 340).

The peak of this passion of Ladipo for cultural preservation and promotion was his interpretation of the character, Sango, in the play, *Oba Koso* (1965). Beyond the realistic interpretation of the characteristic traits of Sango and magical spectacle of spitting fire, he subsequently became a Sango worshipper.

When political and cultural nationalism, which were precursors to the agitation for independence in the colonial era, gathered momentum, the battle towards a more relevant committed popular theatre was pioneered by Hubert Ogunde. Beginning with *Strike and Hunger* which was based on the general strike by Nigerian workers in 1945, Ogunde launched a direct attack on the colonial government for her ill-treatment of Nigerian workers. Other plays that dramatise labour crisis within this period are *Tiger's Empire* (1946) and *Bread and Bullet* (1950).

After independence in 1960, Ogunde persisted in his commitment of satirising unfolding socio-political events in Nigeria. This manifested itself unambiguously in the play, *Yoruba Ronu* (1964). Though commissioned by the *Egbe Omo Olofin*, the cultural arm of Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) of which Chief Samuel Akintola was the leader, the play mounted overt attack on Chief Akintola and his government, and he promptly walked out of the show with his aides. This resulted in the official ban placed on the play.

The unhealthy political rivalry for power between the two political giants in southwest Nigeria that inspired Ogunde's *Yoruba Ronu* degenerated from the 1st republic to the present. Nigeria's political landscape is characterised by politicians with obsession for the public treasury and gullible electorates who relished crumbs from the table. They could not effectively manage the abundant human and material resources. Corruption is still rife as electoral processes are still being manipulated. Injustice permeates even the judiciary which was supposed to be independent. Political opponents are still being herded into custody by those in power.

These anti-democratic vices coupled with harsh economic environment that deprived the electorate of dividends of democracy are vividly captured in Nigerian literary drama. This growing sense of political commitment are the thematic pre-occupation of Wole Soyinka's plays of the 1960s that include satirical sketches and revues, *Before the Blackout* (1965) and later a full-length satirical play, *Kongi's Harvest*.

Like *Yoruba Ronu*, *Kongi's Harvest* satirises the tyrannical tendencies that characterised the toppling of civilian regimes in Nigeria by the military. The play is set in Isma, an imaginary African country undergoing a transition in which a traditional monarchical system is giving way to a modern dictatorship. For the modern dictator, Kongi, to be recognised, the traditional ruler, Oba Danlola will have to hand over to him, the new yam, symbol of authority. Since Oba Danlola would not like to do that willingly, a way has to be contrived to force him.

Blended with this satiric dramatisation of political events are cultural ethos as portrayed in metaphoric use of history, myth, legend, language, songs, and dances. A manifestation of this creative reconstruction of cultural materials is discernible in other plays like; *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Strong Breed*, *The Swamp Dwellers*, *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman*. While in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka enacts the conflict between tradition and modernity on the one hand and that of the old and new generations in transition, on the other, *Death and The King's Horseman* dramatises the ritual supreme sacrifice for a smooth transition of an Alaafin, which is based on an actual event in ancient Oyo on 14th December, 1944.

In addition to the above, Ogunba (1975, p. 8) observes that;

In each of these plays, the prevailing mood is that of preparation for or celebration of a great event with much excitement and tension as typified in the gathering of the tribes, preparation for harvest and purification rites interspersed with bustling and drumming.

However, from the 1970s to date, the civil war experiences of 1967 to 1970 and the socio-economic problems that trailed it changed the tone and degree of commitment of the new generation of

playwrights in Nigeria. Generally, Gowon's reign marked a corresponding increase in crime, corruption, injustice, oppression and social decadence. For this new generation of playwrights, the unfolding events necessitate a re-examination of the dramatic mode, the socio-political and economic structures of Nigeria and their implications for the downtrodden. Playwrights that exhibit these tendencies in their dramaturgy include: Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Iyorwuese Hagher, Tunde Fatunde, Ben Tomoloju, Ola Rotimi and Rasaq Ojo Bakare.

These second generation of playwrights adopts socio-historical method in examining events in the society by going to the roots in order to establish the causative factors before prescribing an appropriate cure. Using dance as a metaphor in *Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993), Osofisan creatively, re-creates African political scene, whereby political rivalry that is the common trait of African polity is depicted with a dance contest to select a new princess from the winning group. Political intrigues and strategies are captured in rehearsals that precede the dance contest. This traditional process of selection is later suppressed by an incumbent dictator. Subsequently, Ayoka a militant young girl, spearheads the struggle for the restoration of democratic and open competition. The real point of *Yungba Yungba* is that "in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular, the revolutionary forces are fast gathering momentum and set to reverse iniquitous socio-political order by teaching the hitherto oppressed populace the new dance steps of democracy. (Umukoro 2011, p. 105).

While Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba* satirises manipulation of democratic process, Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1991) sensitises the need for unity of purpose by the electorates against oppression and exploitation. In this metaphoric enactment, lepers led by Harcourt Ikoli Whyte mobilise themselves to resist the attempt of the government and hospital authorities to relocate them to the bush. *Hopes* therefore is neither merely a play about leprosy nor the disabled. As Rotimi has noted in 'Notes to the premiere production', "the imagery of disability supplies the metaphor for the socio-economic disabilities of contemporary African nations." (Rotimi, 1983: viii.).

“The play therefore serves as a pedagogical lesson in national solidarity, self-reliance and purposeful leadership which emerges from the turmoils of that struggle”. (Gbilekaa, 1997, p. 164).

A fallout of siphoning of the public treasury to oppress and pauperise the less privileged in the society is the focus of Kole Omotoso’s *Shadows in the Horizon* (1977). Each character exhibits in the dramatic universe, models of their property, houses and cars as status symbols. While the business man has a fleet of cars and houses, the retired army officer has few cars and houses while the professor has an uncompleted house and a Volkswagen car. What these portend is a politico-economic system that has elevated the corrupt ones above the hard-working and brainy ones. The working class is thereafter sensitised against the employers in dialogue, spectacle and mime to redress the imbalances in distribution of common wealth.

The extension of these corruptive tendencies and mismanagement of human and material resources into the universities established to mould future leaders is what Ojo Rasaki’s *Once Upon A Tower* (2000) dramatises. The rot and decay in some higher institutions in Nigeria is characterised by Vice-Chancellor’s desperation to renew his tenure, Dr. Kurumbete’s self-preservation instincts and misappropriation of funds by associates of the Council members. Omowaye Pedro, a victim of the inadequacies in the university that made him a half-baked graduate, resolves to fight by embarking on a strike with his gang at the peak of the convocation ceremony. The return of Pedro to avenge the destruction of his future is a sensitisation of the youth to always mobilise to defend their rights and future when the situation demands it.

The limitations of literary drama in terms of language and accessibility to targeted audience is made up for in Community Theatre. This theatre is rooted in an ideology that can be classified under socialist realism because of its methodology that is people-oriented. Unlike the conventional drama, collective sensitisation and mobilisation for change of the status quo entails involvement of the people in the conception and production of the play using their artistic idiom of local language, dances and songs.

Hameed Olutoba Lawal: Trends and Patterns of Committed Theatre in Nigeria

Conclusion

Based on this exploration, we can state without fear of contradiction that commitment permeates all the theatrical traditions in Nigeria, namely the indigenous, popular and literary. The degree and the tone of commitment is also determined by the unfolding events in the social reality and the ideological inclination of the dramatists.

Historical accounts and critical reading of some of the plays place some of the first generation dramatists in the group of negritudists and critical realists. Dramatists that exemplify this trend include Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Wole Soyinka. On the other hand the aggressive clamour for social change in the dramaturgy of the second generation dramatists qualifies them as social realists. These radical playwrights include Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Bode Sowande, Iyorwuese Hagher, Kole Omotoso, Tunde Fatunde and Rasaki Ojo Bakare.

However, while some of these playwrights and dramatists are committed in condemning social decadence and clamouring for egalitarian society in their dramatisation, their personal lifestyles do not reflect their ideology. The only exception here is Soyinka who has successfully blended artistic creativity with political activism. We therefore agree with Gbileka (1989, p. 9) that with "some of the so-called writers, the penchant to articulate a Marxist vision of society in their works is often to catch up with the literary fashion of the times and not out of genuine commitment."

Closely allied to this, is the problem of accessibility and impact of this advocacy aimed at sensitising the targeted audience who are mostly illiterate peasants, workers and traders. To break this barrier of language and access, there is the need to translate some of these plays to local languages and adapt them into films to reach out to the grassroots.

References

- Achebe, C. (1978). 'Commitment and African Writer' In *Readings in African humanities*. Ogbu U. Kalu (ed). Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers Limited.

- Bakare, O. R. (2000) *Once Upon A Tower*. Uyo: Afahaide Publishing Company.
- Clark, E. (1979). *Hubert Ogunde: The making of Nigerian theatre*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Fischer, E. (1963). *The necessity of arts*. London: Pengium Books.
- Gbilekaa, S.E.T. (1989). 'The emergence of a new radical drama in Nigeria (1970-1986). In: *Nigeria Magazine*. 57(3 and 4) pp 1-13.
- Gbilekaa, S.E.T. (1997). *Radical Theatre in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications (Nigeria) Limited.
- Ogunbiyi, S. (1981). The popular theatre: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo'. In: *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A critical source book*.(ed) Yemi Ogunbiyi. Pp.332-352.
- Ogunba, O. (1975). *The Movement of Transition*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Omotoso, K. (1977). *Shadows in the Horizon*. Ibadan: The Sketch Publishing Company.
- Osofisan, F. (1993). *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Rotimi, O. (1983). *If..... a tragedy of the ruled*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Rotimi, O. (1975). *Hopes of the Living Dead*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Soyinka, W. (1975). *Kongi's Harvest*. Oxford : University Press.
- Umukoro, M.M. (2011). *The art of scholarship and the scholarship of art*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Printery.
- WaThiong'o. N. (1982). *Homecoming*, London: Heinemann.