

## Theatre and Development: Opportunities and Challenges in a Developing World

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**ABSTRACT** This paper is an attempt at espousing the pertinence of theatre in national development, especially in a developing African nation-state like Nigeria. In doing this, the paper identifies and discusses the exploitable opportunities that go along with the deployment of theatre in enhancing national development. The paper concludes that theatre, in whatever form, has a vital role to play towards creating a strong, responsive and effective representative institution and in advancing the frontiers of development in any society, particularly in the African context.

### INTRODUCTION

Several attempts have been made by theatre scholars to link theatre and development. Indeed the attempt to link theatre and the concept of development whether local, national or global, has a long history. Presently there exists an obsession among theatre and literary scholars to prove, outside the attempts by great philosophers like Aristotle and Plato Pupil, that theatre, whether in the literary or performative form has a contribution to make to the development of the society. Obafemi (2003) asserts that theatre and development has a twin existence. He observes that like development, theatre 'derives from source-people, the community, playing roles and finding expressions and solutions to life threatening problems'. It is for that reason that Obafemi contends that those in search of the link should take a more cursory view of Shakespeare's famous characterization of the world as a stage.

But one of the most referenced (earliest) attempt at linking theatre and development is the explanation offered by the Greek Philosopher Plato who argued, (as cited in Onukaba-Ojo 2003) that the 'disposition of citizens has a great impact on the social, political, economical and even technological advancement of any society'. Plato as well as the political philosopher, Machiavelli further contended that how a country is perceived in terms of its level of development is a function of the character of its citizens, their civic virtue such as commitment to equality,

justice, freedom, honesty, trust, stability and tolerance. Theatre which is viewed in purely instrumental or transitive terms as a passage way to something more desirable, or what Nasidi (2003) described as 'something to be pulled beyond its turf to some promised land-the promised land of development', has proven to be very valuable in raising and nurturing a civic-minded populace which is necessary for development. Through songs, dances, music, mimes and dramatic enactments, theatre can be deployed to help people internalize core values and beliefs that are germane to development (Nasidi 2003).

In his work on oramedia as part of the traditional communication system, Ngwainmbi (2004) identifies the theatre as a useful media for development. Ngwainmbi contended that the theatre serves a social function by educating community members. Besides, theatre, he argued conscientizes and mobilizes groups within a society because Africa has a rich and vibrant performing tradition. Theatre as he further asserts, also helps to depict social reality and encourages audience participation, a reason he maintained that there exist a strong relationship between theatre and development.

In order to adequately evaluate the role of theatre in development, it is vital to understand the nature of the theatre and the concept of development. We shall in the section after that examine a few mediatory efforts of Nigerian Theatre arts practitioners in the development process.

### NATURE OF THEATRE

In his book *Theatre: An Introduction*, Cassady (1984) defines theatre as 'imagination...emotions and intellects... (which) embraces all the world cultures and perspective, answers questions, predicts our tomorrows and mirrors our today'. Bernard Beckerman offered a broader definition when he said that 'theatre occurs when one or more persons, isolated in time and or space, present themselves to another or others' (Cassady 1984). For Shakespeare, 'theatre is a mirror for highlighting man's humanity and also a tool for understanding why man also finds it so easy to transgress that same humanity' (Yerima 2007). In his own view, Oduneye (1996) asserts that theatre is 'the stepping stone through which anthropologist, sociologists, historian, ethnographers et al have given identity, meaning and interpretations to people, period/dates and societies'. Oduneye, a foremost theatre director and former Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria further posited that theatre could be seen as the index of every civilization and cultural identity. Indeed for the septuagenarian, theatre constitutes the heartbeats of a people or a nation.

Though definitions abound, practitioners seem to be in unison in what constitutes the nature and very essence of the theatre. They also seem to be in agreement that theatre is a highly collaborative endeavour and that it takes the form of drama, comedy or musical theatre. It is also widely held that theatre, with its artistic content emanating from the dramatist to the producing artistes to the audience through an ever widening and deepening symbol, is essentially symbolic in nature. As an art form, theatre represents an experience of an event or experience which can be real or imagined and which is communicated to an audience through a medium. Theatre can also be dramatic and non-dramatic. When it is dramatic, it is imagined and representational whereas when it is non-dramatic, theatre is real and presentational in form and characters. Asomba (1986) asserts that in the dramatic form, the performer's roles are always mimetic and that is what characterizes an actor's role in a performance. So whether it is in a dramatic or non-dramatic form, what the artiste seeks, as Nasidi (2003) alludes is to contact his audience through integrated manipulation of various forms of art such as music, mime, poetry, dance, painting and symbols which are

directed either at our auditory or visual senses. This makes diversity of appeal inevitable in theatre and it is on this premise that Theo Vincent stresses that the 'theatre has the capacity to engage and appeal to all the senses at the same time' (Vincent 1980). It is the power of the theatre to engage and appeal to all the human senses and its ability to influence and affect through the effective use of images, what Asomba (1986) calls the 'photosensitive minds of the members of an audience during a performance', that makes it an obvious pivot in the building of communities, nay nations. It is that causal relationship between theatre and development that is our concern here. Perhaps then we should progress by taking a look at the term 'development'.

### WHAT THEN IS DEVELOPMENT?

'Development' is one term that has become very difficult to define. The various attempts at defining the concept have left the definers at the door step of subjectivity and or political and ideological coloration. As a concept that is broad, the term development as observed by Adesiyun and Arulogun (2005), has not subjected itself to a single definition. The authors, with these line of thought, seem to have alluded that because development covers a wide spectrum of human endeavor it has largely been difficult to offer an objective definition of the concept. Indeed what exist as we have identified earlier are basic differences of opinion about the goals of development. While some see development as a state or condition that is static, others see it as process or course of change. Economists, politicians and others freely use the term especially when discussion borders on state of growth of a given society, place or thing. The term which is somewhat closely bound with the evolution of capitalism and the demise of feudalism has many meanings such as there are numerous clashing perspectives, theories and deep differences of opinion. Indeed contradictions and ambiguity have characterized the many attempts to define the concept. The meaning a particular person attaches to the term depends on his or her subjective view of the word.

But broadly speaking, development represents ideas and practices designed to bring about positive change in human societies. Gene Shackman et al say it is a function of society's capacity to organize human energies and produc-

tive resources to respond to opportunities and challenges. The Mexican Nobel prize winner Octavio Paz shares in this thinking when he described development as an act of opening out 'that which is rolled up, to unfold, to grow freely and harmoniously'. Rodney (1972) sees development as a many-sided process in which material well being is the ultimate goal at the level of individual, the achievement of which is very much tied to the state of society as a whole.

Further conceptualization of development includes that of Schiavo-Campo and Singer (1970) who considers development in terms of better nutrition, low mortality rate, broad choice of consumption, capital accumulation, skilled labour formation and technological progress. Udoakah (1998) notes that some African leaders, at a farmhouse dialogue convened by former Nigeria President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, defined development as 'a process concerned with people's capacity, period, to manage and induce change'. That is to predict, plan, understand and monitor change and reduce or eliminate unwanted change. Like most economist, the African leaders at the dialogue alluded that increases in GDP, improved health, housing, and employment opportunities as well as knowledge, information and technological creativity are keys to development.

But Todaro (1997) provides what we consider a concise description of development when he says that 'development is not purely an economic phenomenon but rather a multi-dimensional process involving reorganization and reorientation of entire economic and social system'. Todaro offers three objectives of development and argues that development involves the process of improving the quality of all human lives with three equally important aspects. First he identifies raising peoples living levels, *viz.* incomes and consumption, level of food, medical services and education through relevant growth processes as one of the fundamental indices of development. Todaro cites creating conditions conducive to the growth of people's self esteem through the establishment of social, political and economic systems and institutions which promotes human dignity and respect as the second objective of development while the third borders on increasing people's freedom to choose by enlarging the range of their choice variables, for instance varieties of goods and services.

These are no doubt considerable and significant definitions of development. Common to all

these definitions however are the desire for changes that will affect citizens welfare positively and or liberate them from poverty and inequality. This makes development an act of freedom, just like the theatre.

### EXPLICATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEATRE AND DEVELOPMENT

Development media theory which relates to media structures and performance in developing societies provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding the relationship between theatre and development. This is because the theory encompasses what Folarin (1998) described as a great variety of socio-cultural, economic and political condition which borders on the effective use of the media for development purpose. Specifically, the theory considers the role of the media in society as essential target at stimulating and sustaining societal development in such area as cultural, social economic, political and technological development. The theory also advocates a situation where the media (theatre as one) should accept and help in carrying out the special development task of national integration, socio-economic modernization, promotion of illiteracy and cultural creativity (Folarin 1998). The 'Reflective-Projective' theory of Broadcasting and Mass Communication by Leo Loevinger presents a similar position. The theory provides yet another basis for understanding the relationship of theatre and development. Leovinger position is that the media 'mirrors the society' and that while the media themselves reflects society as organized group, individual audience members project their own individual reflections into images presented. This is where the saying among theatre scholars that 'theatre is a creator's mirror of the whole universe' and the popular dictum 'the world is a stage where everyone plays his or her own part and leaves' finds justification.

Indeed the theatre as a media of communication constantly mirrors and reflects the society. Beyond drawing its theme from the society, which varies from the historical to the present and the futuristic, it has been argued and rightly too that the shape, outlook and presentation of a country's theatre are direct reflections of the yearning of the people. It is these attributes that bestow on the theatre the role of a vanguard, a watchdog, the barometer of the society and a major factor in nation building (Yerima 2007).

## DISCUSSION

This section of the paper is treated under two themes; Theatre and Development and Theatre for Development.

### Theatre and Development

Those in search of a sort of paradigm of the relationship between theatre and development should consider the whole history of modern theatre in Nigeria as dating back to the period of the Yoruba travelling theatre which the late Hubert Ogunde pioneered and which was a fused tradition of the indigenous Alarinjo masquerade itinerant performance and the church developed open air opera (Obafemi 2003). This was the period when Ogunde, the acclaimed doyen of Nigerian theatre and pioneer consultant cum Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria was actively involved in the struggle for self rule and the fight against oppression and tyranny, an involvement which was evident in the subject and themes of some of his works like *Strike and Hunger*, *Bread and Bullet* and *Yoruba Ronu*—a work which resulted in his company being banned in Western Region by the Akintola led NNPP government. Indeed Ogunde led the pack of practitioners of that period to perform works that in the estimation of theatre going audience's denounced falsehood, tyranny and extolled the virtues of truth, justice and equity in our national life. Practitioners of this era also used theatre effectively to dramatize issues bordering on national development and to re-invent and reshape the drift in the nation's polity. Even Jeyifo (1989) underscored the view that the progenitors of the modern theatre in Nigeria were very powerful. He asserts that the impact of their plays during the colonial era and way after the period of the struggle for self rule were great and could better be measured by the large turn-out of people at their performances.

The period of the literary theatre in Nigeria which Obafemi (2003) also landmarked as dating back to the late 50's with dramatic works of James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and much later Ben Tomolaju, Ahmed Yerima and Felix Okolo among others provides another avenue for the consideration of paradigm of the relationship between theatre and development. Nasidi (2003) observes that the works of Femi Osofisan, an accomplished playwright,

author, poet, essayist and theatre director, offers the keenest example of how theatre can be used not just to reshape traditional culture but to reshape it in the service of contemporary reality and to make it communicate a new problem or a new meaning. The main message in most works by Femi Osofisan like *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *No More a Wasted Breed*, *Who is Afraid of Solarin* is that no society can thrive in an atmosphere of injustice and inequality. In fact in *Once Upon four Robbers* for example, a play that was first staged in the 70's but which still finds contemporary relevance, Osofisan who leads the pack of what can be described as mediatory theatre practitioners that have in their works explored and have continued to examine both urgent and topical matters that plague society, posits that as a product of an unequal social system, the solution to the menace of robbery can be found in a radical redefinition of production and distribution of natural resources, otherwise violence will continually ravage the land. In a play like *No More a Wasted Breed*, Osofisan advocates for the continued existence of qualitative individuals in the society, while the corrupt and filthy rogues should be unmasked and discarded.

Examples abound on how dramatists have linked theatre with the pressing issues of the day such as political oppression, economic deprivation, illiteracy, poor health care and so on. Even during the period of military rule, plays like Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba* were used to reflect on the democratic aspirations of Nigerians and the need to guard it through educating both the politicians and the populace. Also Soyinka's satire *From Zia with Love* and later *King Baabu* dwelt on the ferocious violation of civil liberty by the military regimes of General Mohammed Buhari and later the late General Sanni Abacha. The play posited that the elimination of repressive forces is a precondition for the emergence of an enduring democracy.

Such has been the power of the theatre especially its role as a social mobilizer and if you like conscientizer. In fact at a time, the issue was not in the number of plays that have been written or that are socially committed to driving socio-political change, but the concern among dramatist became how these plays can speak more directly to those most hit by these problems particularly in the language they can understand. The product of these concerns was the adoption

of the participatory or popular theatre approach called Theatre for Development (TFD), Community Theatre (CT) or Theatre for Integrated Development (TFID) which we shall examine shortly.

### Theatre for Development

Theatre for Development aims to offer an alternative approach and medium by which theatre can be of direct service to the marginalized urban and rural peasant masses. The TFD approach which is gaining slow ascendancy in Nigeria emphasizes collectivism and participation. It stresses community and inter-personal participation in self realization and uses existing and familiar performance forms in the various communities such as songs, dances, music, storytelling, puppetry and mime to either validate those cultural forms or serve as an adequate instrument to bring about social change in those communities.

Dale Byam records that Nigeria's effort at creating theatre for development began during its post colonial period starting in 1977 when it was first adopted as an academic activity at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The project gained wide acceptance soon as it was adopted, a reason the organizers of the popular MAMSER campaign adopted it as a mobilization technology. *Wasan Samaru* and *Wasan Manoma* were projects that originated from the community play-making project of the Ahmadu Bello University which were more communal in style. The process according to Byam involved information gathering, interviews and discussions, play making, presentation of the play and after presentation discussion. Both *Wasan Manoma* and *Wasan Samaru* were classic example of theatre as an instrument of social mobilization and conscientization.

For instance *Wasan Manoma*- a Hausa phrase for play for farmers was used to examine daily problems encountered by Soba farmers who lived at the outskirts of Zaria. The opportunities for dialogue between the farmers and university students, created by the University staff brings the students close to issues and vices like poor health care, education and corruption. A play is then developed and presented before the people. Here theatre essentially tries to make people more aware of their situation and commits them to want to do something about it.

There has been many other initiatives in the past like plays that focused on government programmes such as the national food production initiative dubbed Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) and the Green Revolution programme of the Federal Government, although underscoring the role of theatre in identifying and analyzing societal problems and in mobilizing target audiences particularly the grass root towards addressing developmental issues.

### RECOMMENDATION

To round up the focal point of our discussion, we shall recommend four approaches which Nasidi (2003) says demonstrates the potency of theatre as a tool of development.

The first approach is theatre as entertainment in which case it can engage and hold the interest of large numbers of people, many of whom have been alienated by traditional approaches to adult education and development.

The second approach is theatre as an oral medium. Here, it can involve many people who are left out of development activities because of their illiteracy or lack of understanding of the official lingua franca.

The third approach is theatre as a means of cultural expression which everyone in the community is capable of and which can be kept within the control and use of the local people.

The fourth approach is theatre as public or social activity which brings a community together and creates the context for cooperative thinking and action.

### CONCLUSION

So far, an attempt has been made to establish theatre's attempts to contribute to development. Our view is that theatre, in any society, should be considered a simple activity concerned with people trying to understand their world. We similarly posited that it is an activity of consciousness designed to influence minds, and to either change or maintain their perception of the world. This is why we strongly hold that a government can only ignore the potency of the theatre in promoting development especially at the grass-root level at its own peril. We must be quick to observe, however, that, from the African perspective, and more specifically from the Nigerian perspective, that the once vibrant Nigerian

theatre has somewhat walked into deep slumber. Some scholars have cited the lack of funds and the lack of an enabling environment needed for the theatre to thrive as reasons for its slipping into coma in Nigeria as well as in most other countries in the continent of Africa. But the theatre needs to be urgently re-invigorated so that it can continue to play its role of nation building and government has a role to play in this direction. The problem of a lack of active government participation in cultural empowerment and promotion has assumed a very worrisome dimension. African governments and leaders must therefore show more than a passive interest in the affairs of the industry and they must begin to recognize the place of theatre as a mobilization technology. It is theatre's ability to break through language and cultural barriers; ask its audience to think about what they have seen; challenge them to face up to aspects of their lives that they try to ignore; challenge societal beliefs and forces and to mould the mind while still entertaining that makes it such a vital medium for conscientization, mobilization and communication. We surmise that theatre should be viewed as a relational means in coordinated programmes targeted at sustainable development. We make this assertion because it is the basic role of the theatre, be it in the literal and or performing arts, to give form, order and expression to our collective socio-cultural and political sensibilities.

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