

The Performing Arts and Installation of Political Etiquette in Nigeria

Afolabi, John Adebayo (Ph.D)

Department of Dramatic Arts Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract: From primordial origins to contemporary times, the Performing arts have always played functional roles of education, entertainment and perpetuation of cultural norms and values of the societies in which they are set or based. Operating on both aesthetic and intellectual levels, the influence of arts on any human society has always been high and all-encapsulating, physically and psychologically. This paper traces the Arts – society synergy in the formulation of appropriate political culture for Nigeria. Hinged on a critical evaluation of what the performing arts have done politically in various parts of the world, it examines the current use of the arts in Nigeria and explores the possibilities of creative utilization of these, to teach such positive political virtues as unity and solidarity of the various ethnic nationalities, patriotism, political and religious tolerance, respect for human rights and dignity of labour. The arts could also be deployed to discourage negative political and social vices. The paper concludes by suggesting ways and thematic preoccupations that could be utilized, to bring the Nigerian nation, and indeed all developing economies, to a quintessential political (democratic) level.

I. Introduction

The choice of the word “installation” is deliberate and not fortuitous. In the spirit of the performing arts, it is a dramatic orchestration of the expected responsibilities of theatre and the related performing arts – film/music, dance etc in the role of instituting a viable political etiquette in the Nigerian society. An “installation”, rather than institution connotes a life-long reign, a ceremony, a celebration with all the attendant pomp and pageantry – a performance in which the entire society partakes. This is what the Nigerian state requires, as a young democracy, in order to survive at quintessential levels of humanity. In Nigeria’s fifty four years of political independence, she has experienced various forms of political administration – parliamentary democracy, military governance, diarchy and presidential democracy. In most of these years the country was under various military administrations, most of which are best described as maladministrations.

Military administrations in Nigeria were marked by suspension of the nation’s constitution, draconian legislations and abuse of human rights and justice. During such periods, military personnel, rather than be the public servants they were supposed to be, became lords of the land, treating the entire citizenry with contempt, instilling fear of death into the populace since they have the force of arms. Nigerians’ political experience includes a devastating and traumatic civil war that triggered and still triggers a spate of creative writings, in all the artistic genres. The political experience also includes momentary seasons of anarchy such as religious riots, operation wet e (arson and killing of opponents), coups and counter-coups, and of late, rabid terrorism, involving the most sadistic, senseless killings of helpless citizens and kidnapping of innocent teenage school girls. It also includes a spate of killings, assassinations and ritual killings. There is hardly a day that one form of calamity or the other is not in the national news!

In all these, the average citizen is traumatized, helpless and confused. While various governments make pledges of curtailing the calamities, their efforts seem to be of little or no effect, as the crises continue unabated. Government spokesmen and the National Orientation Agency have done very little to allay the fears of the citizenry. More often engaged in the defence of government actions and inactions, these agents do little to educate the citizenry about what to do in crisis situations. There is very little political tutelage or conscientization from the

agencies that are saddled with such responsibilities. For instance not until the Boko Haram crisis grew to serious proportion did the National Orientation Agency start educating the citizenry on what to do in emergencies.

Although Nigeria is blessed with abundant human and natural resources, many of her leaders have failed to utilize the resources to give the nation an all-round development. Many children and youths are left uneducated and uncatered for, some of them having to beg for alms for living. Such children grow up in harsh and inhumane conditions and are easily recruited by unscrupulous adults into criminality. Crude capitalism without its ameliorating agents such as citizen welfare packages, recycle markets etc. that make life meaningful for those on the low rungs of the social ladder in capitalist societies are absent in Nigeria. There are indeed a lot of anomalies that needs to be normalized in the Nigerian nation state. The performing arts in their multifarious roles of entertaining, educating and stabilizing are highly significant in the amelioration and obliteration of the aforesaid anomalies in the Nigerian society, and in entrenching a formidable social and political etiquette in the citizenry.

II. A Heritage of Social Functionality

In every human society, theatre and the other performing arts have always played prominent roles in the development of man in society and in the moderation of social norms and values. While all forms of artistic expression (literary, visual or performing) have functional roles in society, the performing arts are unique and tower above the other forms in certain outstanding qualities. According to Oscar Brockett (1992:16)

Within the fine arts, theatre holds a special place as the art that comes closest to life as it is lived day by day... Not only is human experience its subject, theatre uses live human beings as its primary means of communicating with an audience. Often the speech of the performers approximate that heard in real life, and the actors may wear costumes that might be seen on the street; they may perform in settings that recall actual places. Not all theatre attempts to be realistic, and at times it may approximate other arts (such as dance, music or visual arts), but it remains the art most capable of recreating typical human experience.

According to Brockett, other advantages which theatre has above the other artistic media include the fact that it is the most immediate of the arts, it is the most objective, since characteristically, it presents both inner and outer experiences through action and speech. Although theatre may be regarded as limited in terms of perpetuation to wider horizons, like a handcrafted product in an age of mass production by machines, it still has the advantage of three – dimensionality, above that of film (in a film you only see what the camera focuses on, in theatre you can see the entire stage or any aspect of the stage or action you choose to view).

According to Brockett (1992:19)

Art can be defended for its capacity to improve the quality of life – by increasing our sensitivity to others and our surroundings, by sharpening our perceptions, by reshaping our values so that moral and societal concerns take precedence over materialistic goals. Of all the arts, theatre has perhaps the greatest potential as a humanizing force, for much of it asks us to enter imaginatively into the lives of others, so we may understand their aspirations and motivations.

Frank Whiting (1969:3) too attests to the importance of theatre and the other performing arts, in developing the intellect and taking society to great heights of excellence:

...playwrights, actors, directors and designers have sought for the meaning of existence with the same passion and sincerity that has characterized the work of great scientists, philosophers and theologians; for in its essence, the art of the theatre rests on a common foundation with all learning: on man's capacity to explore, wonder and reflect.

To him, theatre provides a means of probing honestly and fearlessly for the meaning of life and mystery of existence (p. 4).

Our allocation of responsibility to the performing arts is not an over-ambition, as the arts have through the ages helped in inculcating the correct mores, norms and values in the citizenry of nations, from the classical to the modern periods. This is because the performing arts operate on both aesthetic and intellectual levels. While the

aesthetic aspect takes care of the natural human desire for entertainments and the beautiful in life, the intellectual takes care of education, information, conscientization and the dissemination of a society's accepted norms, values and morality.

"Etiquette," according to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005:49a)* is "the formal rules of correct or polite behavior in society or among members of a particular profession." It refers to conventions and regulations for polite and proper human behavior. Over the years, playwrights and other performing artists have made concerted efforts, like watchdogs, to "bark" society into conformity with ethical norms and values. During the Attic period Aeschylus did not just write to entertain. As a statesman he was concerned with lofty humanitarian ideas about the future of man in society. His plays therefore featured heroes, kings and gods caught up in social cataclysms. In the resolution of the crises, the audience is taught some lessons and shown the bitter realities of life, and how to survive in life's myriad of quagmires. Euripides was a nagging gadfly on the rulers of Athens, criticizing them and stinging them back into line when they derail from universally accepted etiquette. His unsparing satire against the Athenian government over the latter's very brutal military expedition on the island of Melos in 416 BC as contained in *The Trojan Women* has been regarded as "The most powerful attack ever hurled against war" (Whiting 1969:19). Even the comedians were not left out in the act of whipping society into conformity. According to Whiting (1969:20) in the hands of Aristophanes, comedy became "a powerful lash with which to attack social and political follies," as he mercilessly flayed Athenian leaders and institutions.

Although theatre and its artists were initially banned during the medieval period under the theocratic rule of the church, the same church later realized the great potentiality of theatre in nurturing human behavior and in evangelizing Christian beliefs and values, hence the church's allowance of the mystery, miracle and morality plays. Such plays as the anonymously authored medieval play *Everyman* and the similar Elizabethan era play *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe are plays that teach audience to behave well, while on earth, so as not to regret later in eternity.

In virtually every human society theatre has always naturally played roles in politics. This it does by engaging in conscientization, political tutelage and mobilization for action. The German Jacobin theatre mobilized trade unions, political clubs and associations to educate workers into recognition of their position. As early as 1847 Friedrich Engels had composed one-act plays about revolution for a Brussels club theatre, and there were in the established repertories, several plays by classical dramatists like Goethe and Schiller dealing with Hamlet-like and Robin Hood-like revolts. The Jesuit didactic theatre of the 17th century in France was instrumental to the French Revolution, while in Russia, Agit – Prop plays were used by the Russian communist Party Agency for Agitation and Propaganda to conscientize the masses and mobilize them from their acritical political stage to a stage of critical consciousness.

Bertolt Brecht's Epic theatre in which he deployed the concept of "Alienation" is a theatre of politics and commitment. Alienation effect is created in the theatre to alienate or distance the audience emotionally from the dramatic actions going on, on stage. This is to enable the audience to watch and evaluate the plays critically with their full mental acumen, instead of being emotionally hypnotized and passive observers of the actions. Many of the issues raised in Brecht's plays are critical evaluations and solutions to problems of man in society.

One of Nigeria's literary giants – Late Professor Chinua Achebe, commenting on the roles of writers in transformation of society asserts that

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done. In fact he should march right in front. For he is after all – as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his African image – the sensitive point of his community. (Achebe in Olaniyan Tejumola *African Literature* (p. 105).

Talking in the same paper, Achebe quotes William Abrahams, a Ghanaian professor of Philosophy who asserts that just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, historians go into the history of Africa, African political scientists concern themselves with the politics of Africa, African literary creators should not be exempted from the services that they themselves recognize as genuine for Africa (Ibid).

Akanji Nasiru, Professor of Performing Arts, in an inaugural lecture in June 2013 examined new vistas of the role of theatre in a developing nation. In an introduction that deals with Theatre and Commitment, he examined the modern Nigerian drama and its perceived socio-political roles. He traced the roles of the oral performer in Africa as "a revered member of society, transmitting its mores and values, and thereby helping to ensure its social, political and spiritual well-being" (p.2).

According to him, no matter how pleasing his compositions were, the artist has a responsibility to inject into them a moralistic and didactic concern for the edification of his audience. And if there were contemporary

matters that bothered society or the state at large, he was looked upon as one of the means by which danger could be averted and normalcy restored (p.2).

In praising the roles of Hubert Ogunde – doyen of Nigerian theatre Nasiru identified both traditional theatre as practiced by Ogunde, and modern – day theatre which employs English language and explores theatre traditions beyond the popular and well-known African ones (p.3) He identified three approaches in the Nigerian theatre of social commitment. These include the Satirical Approach as championed by Wole Soyinka, the Expository approach as championed by writers like J.P. Clark and Ola Rotimi and the Radical Approach often used by artists in the Radical Alternative school, such as Femi Osofisan and Bode Sowande. It is our view that writers are of course free to adopt or adapt any of the approaches or a combination of these. Nasiru advocates for the use of community theatres and Theatre for Development projects and concludes that physically and psychologically, theatre can change society and make it a better place to live in.

Dele Layiwola, Professor of Performance and Cultural Studies in another inaugural lecture critically examines the inextricability of literature, culture and society. He affirms their complementary and functional nature and concludes with their usefulness to society:

What remains for the audience of the theatre is to aggregate the potentials of this new form and consolidate its rigours for the reformulation of society at large. Thereafter, literature and the dramatization of language, in tongue and as a collective voice will seek to take us beyond the post-colony and back again from the past to the future (p. 31).

Niyi Osundare, accomplished writer and Professor of English, in a highly cerebral treatise *The Writer as Righter* talks about the “African Literature Artist and his social obligations”.

According to him the artist has a responsibility to put right the wrong things in his society and make his society a better place to live in:

So the writer by virtue of his ability to transcend quotidian reality, has a duty to relate not only how things are, but how they could or should be. He must not only lead the people to the top of the mountain and point out the promised land; he must also show them how to get there (p. 12).

This according to him has been the tradition through the ages:

Confident of their power, or rather, the power of their pens, writers down the ages have made extensive claims for the transforming capability of art (p.8).

He identified the classical and romantic image of the artist as a priest in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Healers* where the healer symbolizes the artist.

...the embodiment of the creative essence whose power over societal ills range from the preventive to the curative (p. 9).

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in *Writers in Politics* affirms that “the writer should not only explain the world; he should change it.” In his highly political and conscientizing *Devil on the Cross* he emblemizes the writer in the image of the Gicandi player, who is psychologically lifted up to the rooftop, from where he sees and criticizes all.

Breyten Breytenbach (1986:98 – 106) writing on “The Writer and responsibility” opines that any writer has at least two tasks:

...Sometimes overlapping; he is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society, but he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people. In the poor and colonized countries the writer plays a more visible role: faced with acute social and economic iniquities he is called upon to articulate the dreams and the demands of his people.

We have gone into all these explications to show that throughout the ages, artists and their arts have always been expected to be instrumental to social development. Indeed many artists have lived up to this expectation with their arts. The literary and the performing art forms have been pace-setters in this. Whether in the functionalist school or the school of Aesthetics, art has always performed certain regulatory roles in society. Our desire therefore that theatre and the other performing arts should install a political etiquette in Nigerians is not a fatuous or impossible ambition for the arts. Indeed some African writers and performing artists have done it, and some are still doing it. In Nigeria, Hubert Ogunde set the pace even during the colonial years with performances that mobilized the masses and sought to check the excesses and misdemeanor of the colonial masters. Such plays include amongst others “*Strike and Hunger* (1945), *Worse than Crime* (1945), *Tiger’s empire* (1946) and *Bread and Bullet* (1950). In

the post-independence years, he wrote “Yoruba Ronu” and “Otito Koro in 1964. These are highly reprimanding satires about the crisis in western Nigerian, appealing to the sense of reasoning of the Yoruba leaders. The effect of the plays was so high that Yoruba Ronu was banned by the premier of the then western Nigeria Chief of S.L. A. Akintola.

Soyinka’s satirical plays, especially the revues were stingers to the military governments in Nigeria and must have checked some of their excesses while in power. Fela Anikulapo’s running battles with military governments in Nigeria is also worthy of note. The plays of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Micere Mugo and Ebraim Hussein in East Africa contributed a lot to the re-education of their people about their past heritage and the dynamic nature of the African culture which extraneous forces tried to discredit. Such works include Ngugi and Mugo’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi’s *I will marry when I want*, and *Kinjeketile* by Ebraim Hussein. In diametrical opposition to the jaundiced presentation of the Mau-Mau and Maji Maji uprisings in Kenya and Tanzania by Colonial historians and eurocentric critics, these playwrights have re-presented the historical events as they were – evidence of heroic resistance of indignity by people of valour.

Even government and corporate industries have realized the importance of the performing arts and their extensive capability to educate and/or influence the minds of the citizens. Governments now use actors and actresses to dramatize government projects and policies on screen. Examples include the National Health Insurance Scheme that features comic actor Hafiz Oyetoro.

Corporate bodies and advertising agencies too are not left out. The list includes Mobile Telecommunications of Nigeria (MTN), Global Communications (Glo) Etisalat Company, Airtel. Nigerian performing artists that are utilized in promotion and corporate image making of companies include Hafiz Oyetoro, Ramsey Noah, Funke Akindele, Nkem Owoh, Genevive Nnamji, Liza Linda, Wasiu Alabi Pasuma and Joke Silva, amongst others.

The performing arts are so popular that Nigeria’s Nollywood film industry is reputed to be the second or third largest in the world, coming only after the American Hollywood industry. It is one of the biggest foreign exchange earners for the Nigerian economy. Nigerian video films are very popular, not only in Africa but all over the world. Nigeria’s soap operas attract huge audiences, as proved by an audience survey questionnaire on audience response to soap operas in Nigeria. This is why such films would be ready purveyors of culture and social cum political tutelage.

The performing arts permeates all sectors of Nigeria’s national life, irrespective of tribe, sex or religion, like national football, theatre, film and music are some of the few areas in which the entire Nigerian nation is completely united.

III. Installing Political Etiquette

Having established that the performing arts are uniquely relevant in political tutelage and even in a general education of the masses, there is need to identify some of the areas in which there is need for dynamic political etiquette and how film, theatre and the other performing arts could be made use of, to install a hegemony of vibrant political etiquette.

Although abundantly blessed with vast natural and human resources, more than some of the nations regarded as “advanced,” Nigeria is still among the underdeveloped nations, euphemistically classified as “developing” nations. Her current status is occasioned by some corrupt, inept, poor and irresponsible leadership which mismanage the resources. One of the major reasons why the looting of the nation over the years has been easy is because there is poor political education among the citizenry. The performing arts could to a large extent normalize this anomaly. Here are some suggestions:

a. Script Writers’ Responsibility

writers of play and movie scripts have a responsibility to write scripts that teach correct political and moral values, values that will have positive and lasting impressions on the minds of the citizenry. Some of the issues that could be taught include:

1. that military governance is an aberration, as nobody has the right to impose himself/herself on others as ruler, except by the express permission of the ruled.
2. that those in governance are volunteered public servants, meant to serve the people. Although given certain rights, privileges, opportunities, immunity, respect and authority, in order to make them function well, they are not (to be treated as) immortal gods or goddesses.
3. that once elected or appointed by popular consensus, political leaders are to be respected, supported, obeyed and cooperated with, as long as this does not go against the interest of the nation.
4. that citizens should not expect their political leaders to get rich on state funds.

5. that the issues of the electorate demanding for monetary and other forms of gratification from their political leaders is wrong, as many leaders, in order to satisfy such demands, have dipped their hands illegally into public funds, thus impoverishing the nation. Benefitting from such money is like digging one's own grave.
6. that when public funds are stolen or diversified into illegal sources, it is the entire nation, and even posterity that will suffer.
7. that there is need to promote tolerance in politics, in religion and in tribal relations. Such plays will preach respect and tolerance for other people's contrary views and opinions, even when such views appear stupid. Nigeria's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural nature is her own "coat of many colours". As B.M. Ibitokun (2008:12) observes, rather than divide the nation, it should be a unifying factor. Plays should show the beauty of this coat, as a thing to be cherished.
8. that citizens ought to eschew selfishness, and greed in everything, and instead promote selfless service to humanity.
9. that people should see governance as the responsibility of every citizen, to which they have to contribute their own quota. There is presently an attitude of non-challance, as people see it as the duty of only those in power. This attitude is more pronounced in security issues. Plays should emphasize the power of the vote.
10. that will teach people to develop the habit of querying (sudden) wealth. Rather than hero-worship rich people, people should query the source of their wealth. This will make it difficult for criminals to display their ill-gotten wealth, and even discourage their going into it.
11. that will seek to reform the police, tame the aggressive, trigger-happy military and paramilitary personnel, and make the public have love and confidence in them.
12. that will urge governments to hold parents responsible for the lives and upbringing of the children they bring into the world. Plays should criticize parents who abdicate their responsibilities and leave others to train (and thus indoctrinate) their children.
13. that will encourage governments to have welfare/palliative measures for certain categories of citizens such as the handicapped, the sick, the pregnant, the jobless, children and the aged.
14. that will tell governments the truth, for instance that employing university graduates of various professional fields as road sweepers, grass cutters and female bus conductors, on peanut wages is a serious aberration and an irresponsible misplacement of priorities. These are plays that will criticize governments constructively and maturedly, guided by the spirit of patriotism and zeal for improvement of society.
15. that will promote patriotic zeal in citizens, that will give value to the country, say positive things about her, show respect to national symbols and icons – such as heroic individuals, the national anthem, the flag and national teams in sports.
16. that will teach the citizens their fundamental human rights, accepted norms and values, that will promote the language of civility, maturity and discipline. Such plays would show the repercussions of crime, thuggery and violence.

These are some of the major thematic preoccupations we have identified that could help in installing a long-lasting political etiquette in the Nigerian citizenry. We have no doubts that any competent playwright would be able to make use of any of these preoccupations, and integrate them into scripts for stage or media performances either as major or minor themes. We have identified some of the required themes, leaving the aesthetic devices to playwrights' artistry and creative endeavours. When themes like these are projected regularly, it has a hypodermic syringe effect on the psyche of the audience, who then consciously or unconsciously imbibe them. Thus, a correct political etiquette is established.

IV. Other Areas

In the designing of theatre/media/performing arts programmes/curriculum for schools, such courses as Sociology of Art, the value of Art, Art as cultural diplomacy and other related topics should be included, to make practitioners hone their focus on the functional capabilities of the performing arts.

Film Directors and Producers should select materials that will help society to develop, to unite, to be enlightened, rather than those that destroy society. They should be aware of the capacity of arts to make or mar society. The image portrayed, of a country should be considered, in the selection of materials for films, knowing that this may be exposed to the entire world through modern technology. We have had cause to complain about the vice of sexploitation in the performing arts of Nigeria before (Afolabi in *The Performer*, 2000), and we feel there is no

need for repetition here. Film makers should not consider profit alone in selecting materials; they should consider the overall effects and the possibility of permanent or lasting existence of their works, just like the works of William Shakespeare and other veterans of the arts.

Institutional theatrical organizations, educational institutions, media houses, Arts councils and others should be pace-setters in promoting performances that are useful to the needs, yearnings and aspirations of audiences. These include political tutelage and an installation of political etiquette in the people's psyche.

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