

AHMED YERIMA & AYO AKINWALE (eds.)

Theatre and Democracy in Nigeria

The theme which the essays here explore is a timely one. And even more stimulating is the richness of the collection, evidenced in the variety of perspectives through which the essayists approach the central concern. But beyond theory, the work gives practical hints on how theatre can and should mediate in the affairs of society. Indeed, some of the papers are actually accounts, and with good results, of such mediations.

Theatre and Democracy... is a sociology of art that seeks not just to mirror society but to participate in its very life. Its aim transcends mere "ballot" democracy and reaches to the inner springs of social organization and survival. The work covers areas such as arts administration and policy, cultural and international diplomacy, playwriting, dance, music, children's theatre, community theatre (TFD), feminism, and the problem of illiteracy.

The book is therefore, a ready and handy reference for students of theatre and communication, the humanities in general and everyone who bothers about what role the arts can play in the life of the community.

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Literary Drama, Literacy and the Quest for Democracy in Nigeria: An Appraisal

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Introduction

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has been pursuing with little success, the goals of enthroning good governance and a stable democratic order based on the principles of freedom, open and collective participation in government as well as equitable distribution of responsibilities, resources and rewards among the component parts of the federation. These aspirations are demonstrably articulated in the Nigerian drama,¹ both in its textual and performative forms. But it is more fervidly registered in plays written and produced in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The period marks a major crossroad in Nigerian political history when the urge to democratize is enormously pressing. It witnesses the country's desperate attempts to construct those unifying and consensual values that could avert political crises, stem military incursion into politics and prevent another civil war.

The upsurge of interest in democracy can easily be rationalized. First, the post-cold war era has veered the focus of international politics away from communism toward democratization and democratic reforms as an alternative and/or acceptable mode of governance. The global wave of democracy, thus, becomes too overwhelming for Nigeria to ignore. Second, as a political system, democracy has its innate allure. Its egalitarian codes and communal participation in the public sphere among others, recommend it for practice in nations searching for socio-political and economic development. Third, about three decades of military rule in Nigeria have ironically witnessed an exacerbation, rather than elimination of illiteracy, mass poverty, corrupt enrichment of a few, nepotism, human rights abuse, alienation of the majority from government and other familiar failings of military rule.

This paper, therefore, appraises Nigeria's literary engagement in drama with the democratic imperative. Specifically, it discusses the genre's efforts at information (especially political) dissemination — a cardinal goal of literacy — toward democratic changes. The discussion is done within the context of a perceived convergence of interest in the interface of literacy, drama and democracy.

Literacy and democracy

Literacy and democracy are key concepts in the modern scholarship of nationhood and development. Democracy has survived several generations and has manifested in a wide variety of ways across cultures. Yet, whether it is the 'consociational liberal democracy' model of the West, the socialist democracy of Russia and China, or the traditional (communal) politics in African societies, what is common to them is the notion of people's popular participation in the affairs of the state. From its classical Athenian mode described by Pericles, democracy is a political system in which "the administration is in the hands of the many and not few." Aristotle contrasts this with 'Oligarchy' whereby participation is restricted to only the few (Cohen, 1974, 3). A citizen in a truly democratic society is guaranteed the right of participation either directly or indirectly in decision-making. In this regard, democracy provides an enabling environment for the mobilization of human potentials towards social, economic and political advancement of a nation. Power in a democratic order lies with the people. Leaders derive their mandate and legitimacy from the people on behalf of whom they exercise power toward the well-being of the collective (see Oyovbaire, 1987). The consequences of autocracy are gravely painted by Wole Soyinka: "To exclude the sentient plurality of any society from the right of decision in the structuring of their own lives is an attempt to anaesthetize, turn comatose, indeed, idiotize society (Soyinka: 1996, 138-39).

Because of practical problems presented by the Athenian models in which political participation is a general civic duty, modern democracies have resorted to "representative", "consociational", "majority rule", "polyarchy" and other forms of democracy. These involve election and party system, through which periodic contests for power among individuals and/or collectives are organized. In such an exercise, all eligible persons and contending ideologies are usually free to partake (see Olowu et al, 1995).

For its success, democracy, whether popular or elitist in nature, requires the free flow of divergent views and information about and among contenders on the one hand, and among the group that

constitutes the choosing constituency on the other (Oyovbaire; Cohen). The latter, to freely express its preference requires adequate awareness of the vying alternatives and their implications. It also must be aware of rules and procedures governing the process of democratic choice. Literacy, it must be pointed out, is a major means of cultivating this awareness.² It facilitates effective flow of accurate and adequate information across social strata. Such unimpaired exchange of information increases the chance of success of democracy. Hence, literacy is a determinative factor in the empirical and theoretical conception of modern democracy.

Unfortunately, the practical significance of literacy in erecting an enduring democratic culture has not secured more than a passing reference in many scholarly studies on democratization in Nigeria and indeed Africa. This is an area which deserves more attention if we are to fully appreciate the dynamics of this mode of governance as manifested in the continent.

Literacy sharpens the discriminating capacities of man and this is brought to bear on the processes of democratic participation and choice. It empowers the citizen to understand the condition of his being, question it and seek to change it when necessary. It is, therefore, a potential check against tyranny and underdevelopment.³ Illiteracy facilitates minority domination of government and inhibits mass participation. This is because the factor is usually explored by the minority ruling elite who, in the words of Soyinka, "constantly play up innately innocuous differences, be they ethnicity or religion in order to set one against another and thus assure itself of political control" (1996, 28). This is done in a manner that obstructs objective appreciation of genuine national political interests especially in a plural, multiethnic and multicultural nation like Nigeria. Distrust, suspicion and violence are the natural consequences (and impediments) rather than lubricants of democracy.

The art of drama is well-disposed to the targets of literacy and democracy as identified above. The focus, locus and essence of drama are man and his universe. It is an apt forum through which ideas can be exchanged and social awareness disseminated. It can stimulate national discourse on crucial political issues. Indeed, some issues which may not find expedient expression through conventional political fora may be articulated through drama (Devlin, 1989). Because it is a social art that inherently thrives on collaboration, interest harmonization and collective participation — between the playwright, actors and spectators — drama itself, is a veritable trope for democracy. It is instructive to note that Nigeria's changing political realities have found

expression in its drama. This we shall examine in due course, limiting our focus to the genre of literary drama.

Dramatic interventions

Nigeria at independence adopted what could be described as a liberal Westminster democracy. But the system for a number of reasons already identified by scholars, did not survive beyond half of a decade (see Lijphart, 1989, 161-64), giving way to a cycle of military rule. Efforts to restore democracy since then have become a kind of Sisyphean task characterized by predictable futility.⁴ Expectedly, Nigerian literary drama has both predicted and adequately documented the travails of the political system.

Soyinka's numerous satirical sketches of the sixties — "Before the Blackout" — commonly denounce the mindless assault on democratic norms and values by first republic politicians. The playwright also dramatizes the contraction of opportunities for popular participation in governance against the backdrop of protracted military rule in *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1974) and *Opera Wonyosi* (1977). With glaring distaste, Femi Osofisan exposes the attenuation of democratic prospects through greed, corruption and other social ills in *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (1978).

It is worth reiterating, however, that the democratic ferment is more earnestly dramatized in plays produced from 1980 to the present. Apart from displaying social flaccidity in artistically permissible forms, these plays strive to generate new insights and perceptions that can ensure the success of democratic agenda. Some of the plays also try to question, subvert and show the way for dismantling and replacing the existing fascistic political structure. They include Soyinka's *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985), *From Zia with Love* (1992) and *The Beautification of Area Boy* (1995); Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* (1982), *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen* (1992) and *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1992); Rotimi's *If ... A Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983). Others include Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* (1991); Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1992); Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju's *Awaiting Trouble* (1993) and Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods* (1996).

In the brief space available, we shall instantiate the democratic concerns of these plays through *From Zia with Love* and *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* by Soyinka and Osofisan respectively.⁵ These concerns are evident not only in the plays' subject, but also in the dramaturgical techniques adopted.

*From Zia with Love*⁶ (hereafter referred to as *From Zia*) posits that the elimination of repressive forces is a precondition for the emergence

of democracy. Its polemics are presented in a theatrical 're-presentation' of actual events under the military rule of Generals Muhammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon from 1984 to 1985. This abrasive, virulent satire censures the regime's violations of civil liberties through arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, prosecution of War Against Indiscipline (WAI) with punitive ferocity⁷ and conviction of suspected hard drug traffickers by a military tribunal under a retroactive decree which comes into effect well after the offence. The mock-heroic tenor of its discourse, the incongruity of its shifting characters and the burlesque situation show military rule as a disease, 'an epidemic' gnawing at the country's heart, impeding its growth. The needed therapy is therefore, democratic freedom, "Maximum fresh-air security by the door" (2).

A wild collection of citizens from various socioeconomic backgrounds are trapped in a maximum security prison. They are mostly victims of a high-handed penology of the government. Under the 'directorship' of Commodore Hyacinth (also called Cell Commandant or Commander-in-Chief), inmates of the General cell transform the setting into a theatre-within-the theatre. In that theatre, corruption, power abuse and other obstacles to democracy are exhibited, through a series of play-within-the play. Fiction admirably merges with reality in the prison cells, which are euphemistically referred to as local governments. The prison provides a replication of power structure outside, complete with cabinet ministers holding conventional portfolios under the absolute authority of Cell-Commandant (C.C.). The censure of authoritarianism is played out against the backdrop of seeming cohesion, community solidarity, mutual participation and other democratic variables exhibited by the inmates. This apparent contradiction is to reinforce how far removed from democracy the dramatized (and the real) power structure is.

Emuke, Detiba and Minguel — sentenced to death for drug-trafficking and awaiting execution — enunciate the characteristic arbitrariness of the reigning political order in their dialogue.

EMUKE: Soja man say "come", man say "go" ... everything confuse! You no fit say ... A ah, but na sojaman say make I come. The Soja-man wey tell you "Go" done finish you because you obey Soja-man come. And if you try Go-come-come-go, both of them go shoot you together. Den leave your body for checkpoint to show example (29-30).

Beside, lyrics of songs used in the play (intertextual echoes of *Opera Wonyosi*) also expose the excesses and limitations of the current political culture: "Don't mess with the military or we'll write your obituary ..." (78).

On the whole, *From Zia* confronts the audience with a risqué caricature of a personalist military dictatorship. Embedded in the picture is an invitation to them to detect the familiar phenomenon of attaining and sustaining political power not by consensus, but by sheer brute force. To change this reality, people need to recover their democratic will. One significant way to achieve that recovery is to “demystify” the uniform. Satire in the play fulfils such a demystifying mission.

A similar point is made in a different but equally engaging manner in Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (subsequently referred to as *Yungba Yungba*). Through the anti-illusionistic appeals of Brechtian epic theatre and the participatory aesthetic of indigenous African (Yoruba) theatrical elements like song, dance, music and story-telling, the play reflects the democratic aspiration in Nigeria as in other parts of Africa.

Set in an unnamed African community (and as such, universal) a repressive hegemonic order represented by Iyeneri is confronted, routed, displaced and replaced by democratic voices coalesced under the *Yungba Yungba* dance group. Beneath the overt generational conflict and gender predilection of the play, therefore, is a battle for democracy. Making women the catalysts of sociopolitical engineering as Osofisan does here, is quite apt, especially when the *raison d'être* of the drama is to challenge in all its ramifications, the ruling power configuration outside the stage.

A community is preparing for its annual festival in honour of a river goddess. But the celebration is being threatened by a group of youths (*Yungba Yungba* dance group) which demands that Iyeneri, the incumbent priestess should abdicate and allow free competition to replace her as the representative of women in the assembly of elders. Iyeneri declines and herein lies the conflict of *Yungba Yungba*:

Osingin: That is why we are here. You must yield and let us assume our own responsibilities ourselves. The burden of the state is one that everybody ought to have a right to share. (43)

With the aid of Aro-Orisa, Iyeneri schemes to perpetuate herself in an office she has usurped for over a decade. The conventional tenure is one year. However, the youths with enlightenment, co-operation and determination, effectively resist her plot. They are not deterred by the induced insanity of Ayoka who is the plinth of the revolution or by the exacerbation of primordial cleavages among the people, both master-minded by Iyeneri. The *Yungba Yungba* youths frontally challenge Iyeneri and overcome her machination to induce violent confrontation

among the contestants — an abomination during the community's week of peace. The purpose is to have a ready excuse to intervene as a fair umpire in the conflict, demonstrate the people's unreadiness for positive change, justify her suspension of the competition, hold on to power and thereby further keep the movement toward democracy in abeyance. Reluctantly, however, Iyeneri concedes defeat and vacates power. Her exit witnesses the restoration of democratic norms as expressed in the open, free and fair dance contest at the end of the play. The youths' deserved triumph is, therefore, well-registered in the carnivalesque atmosphere that overwhelms the stage and auditorium, just as a genuine dance competition is restored once again, with its attendant civil responsibilities and gains for the polity.

The open-ended denouement shows that democracy, like social forces, is dynamic. It is always in a state of being. It is never fully completed or realized with finality.

The dance contest in the play is a metaphor for democratic competition for power. The contending dance groups — *Mayesoge*, *Jeosunwon* and *Arooroton* — represent political parties in a representative multi-party democracy. *Yungba Yungba* group — ‘a gospel of sweetness’ — represents the democratic ideals towards which postcolonial African states constantly aspire. The youths demonstrate the zest, ebullience and energy needed for a revolutionary political change. Their intervention ends virulent antagonism and hostilities which have replaced what ordinarily would have been a free, orderly contest. Ayoka cogently states the play's political lesson:

AYOKA: ... A tyrant triumphs only on our own errors, if we insist always on anarchy, on tearing one another apart on the smallest disagreement, or in needless clashes, then someone is bound to come who will want to profit on it, by imposing his power on us, in the name of peace. And gratefully, oh so gratefully we will accept his coming, till he has trapped us in his net ... (108)

Evidently, it takes an enlightened literate group of youths led by Ayoka, Dunbarin and Laboopo to challenge the old despotism and champion the restitution of an eroded democratic ethos. The play thereby underscores the importance of education and literacy in the pursuit of democratization.

The participatory dramaturgical techniques adopted depend for their success on active and mutual collaboration between the stage, the backstage and the auditorium. Song, music, dance and story-telling upon which the play's aesthetics subsist are traditional theatrical elements which thrive in the atmosphere of spirited intimacy and

participation of players and spectators. Thus, *Yungba Yungba* clearly exemplifies how indigenous artistic resources can be placed in the service of modern popular democratic quest, notwithstanding the apparent self-indulgence of the play's resolution.

Quite evident from the foregoing is the fact that both Soyinka and Osofisan in the two plays examined (and like many others in the genre) engage the audience in a dialogic experience towards creating new insights into the perception of politics. They propagate fundamental ideals of democracy, either through execration of perceived subversion of these ideals as illustrated in *From Zia* or through their positive affirmation as dramatized in *Yungba Yungba*. Military autocracy is the human and floral 'Hyacinth' or 'Iyeneri' that *must* be eliminated if democracy is to emerge and endure. The spirit of collective participation and unifying consensus which the plays in performance evince can nurture democratization, if embraced.

Conclusions

We have examined how literary drama, a product of literacy and creativity, has articulated the nation's quest for democratization in the country's bid for development. We have also demonstrated how this quest is registered in the genre through its subjects, forms and theatrical devices.

Nonetheless, it is lamentable that the encoded messages in this genre, are not accessible to majority of Nigerians both as rulers and the ruled. One of the reasons for this is that the plays are written in the English language which, according to widely quoted UNESCO statistics, is limited to only 30 percent of the total population. Another is that play-reading and theatre-going are habits which still have a great room for improvement among the people. It is observable that film, television and home video entertainment culture, whose primary motivations are purely commercial rather than political, now enjoy much patronage than both live theatre performance and the drama text. Thus, most of those (Nigerians) who could benefit from literary drama are not being reached.

Considering the importance of the relationship between text, performance and the audience in appreciating the dialogic experience of drama and in view of the import of drama as a communicative tool in promoting consciousness and equipping citizens for participation in public affairs, one is of the opinion that literacy programmes in the country need to, as a matter of urgency, be reassessed, toward their ultimate improvement. One step in this direction is to democratize literacy. In place of the current restricted, and formalized participation, literacy programmes should target the family as the primary focus. The

family is the nucleus of the nation. To make the family literate is to make the whole nation literate. The family has a great role to play in shaping the life of individuals who are its members and who are, in turn, members of a larger family, the nation. Literacy should be taught in both English language (as a second language) and local languages *pari passu*. This will make it easier to have wider access to the plays, either in their original or in translation into indigenous languages — a task which may be undertaken later.

Lastly, theatre-going and play-reading should be encouraged at the family level across various strata of the nation in a bid to inculcate democratic culture in the democratization process. Parents need to realize and should let their children realize too, that drama, apart from the entertainment it proffers, is fundamentally invaluable in the propagation of knowledge about the universe beyond what is taught in the classroom. With adequate incentives, children's interest in reading, watching and even in creation, production and appreciation of plays would be developed. A child whose interest in drama is already kindled will want to read and watch the canons of Nigerian literary drama and others, when she finally acquires a reasonable level of literacy.

Apart from this, educational authorities who are in charge of propagating literacy should recognize the efficacy of drama and find a new engagement for it. The utilitarian value of drama as an agelong instructional medium has been established by critics, theorists and practitioners of the art across cultures and ages.

If effectively employed, drama is capable of stirring and sustaining interest in learning among students in schools, colleges and various levels of informal education. Role-playing as a tool of instruction in the learning process enhances knowledge acquisition. Thus, if injected into the teaching of content areas of different subjects including reading and writing, imitation can improve learners' understanding of the concerned subjects and also kindle their interests in the art of drama as well as its messages.

Besides, in the teaching of drama as literature in schools and colleges, the emphasis should be on a perception of drama as a social praxis and a mode of discourse that stimulates critical thinking and problem solving attitude among learners and teachers. Drama should be presented to students, not as a spiritless, mechanical enterprise but as a vivacious communal activity which encourages the habit of co-operation and is ever receptive to all issues affecting the life of man in his society including the political and not so political ones.

On the whole, there is no doubt that in this regard, a review of the attitude of government at all levels, especially the federal government, to education is imperative. Education should be prioritized above any

other state commitment. An open democratic society, the type which Nigeria is still in the process of becoming cannot afford to "illiterate" its citizens through inadequate attention to education, as witnessed under successive military regimes. An authoritarian regime can put up with low literacy level, but certainly not a democratic government especially in the modern era of vanishing frontiers under globalization.

With a considerably improved literacy rate and enhanced interest in drama, democratic values and ideas expressed through literary drama will be accessible to a broad spectrum of the populace. The consequent awareness will definitely contribute to the emergence and development of a genuinely democratic order in Nigeria.

Notes

1. Nigerian drama has been severally categorized by scholars into the 'Traditional' and the 'Modern' (Ogunbiyi: 1981, 3-74; 1988: 53-59). However, we are concerned in this paper with the 'modern' category, which embraces the 'literary drama' and the 'folk theatre'. Literary drama refers to the category of plays which are written in English, published and/or produced by university based dramatists, dramatists associated with the university or even outside the university. Though primarily textual, such plays are written with a keen eye for the stage.
2. Our understanding and usage of the word 'literacy' here go beyond its widely cited UNESCO (1990) definition as the ability of a person to 'read and write with understanding, a short simple sentence on his everyday life.' Rather, it embraces 'oracy', i.e., the ability to listen, to watch and speak with a similar level of understanding.
3. Autocratic regimes usually hold literate/educated minds in suspicion and sometimes persecute them. This is partly because their knowledge and questioning tendencies are not compatible with the unquestioning obedience that autocracy demands. For instance, when the constitution was altered to officially proclaim Kenya a one-party state in June 1982, the Arap Moi government zeroed in on academics who did not support the step, accusing them of poisoning the minds of youths and teaching them "the politics of subversion through books advocating violence." See Ingrid Bjorkman, *Mother Sing for Me: People's Theatre in Kenya*. New Jersey: Zed Books, 1989, p. 6.
4. Post-independence Nigeria for instance, has witnessed three futile attempts at democratic rule: 1960-1966, 1979-1983 and 1987-1993. The transition programme of the Abacha regime 1994-1998 was much shrouded in manipulation and uncertainty. It did not show any fundamental departure, in conception and execution, from the earlier 'failed democracies' hence, its ultimate termination with the demise of General Sanni Abacha on June 8, 1998.
5. These two playwrights apart from being the most prolific, explore the

major aesthetic possibilities in the theatrical discourse of politics, within the period. These include 'satire' and 'epic'. The two texts analyzed are representative samples of these aesthetic possibilities respectively.

6. The play derives its title from Late Zia-ul-Haq, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan. It is noteworthy that Zia's tenure in Pakistan is usually associated with hard-drug-trafficking and gross abuse of fundamental liberties.
7. War Against Indiscipline (WAI) is parodied in the play as Battle Against Indiscipline (BAI).

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