



Nigerian Historical Plays, Film Making and National Rebirth

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Abstract

Apparently, the Nigeria has a very rich history. The people’s history can be traced to the nation’s pre-colonial epoch which was blessed with rich culture, norms, strong sense of belongings and viable traditional leadership institutions, the colonial period which was a direct attack on the people’s indogenous system of life, and post-colonial era which has been characterized by social ills such as tribalism, nepotism, bad leadership, corruption among others. As a result of the aforementioned Nigerian cultural, socio-economic and political background, the country is currently facing different challenges raising from unemployment, economic hardship, kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism and cyber crime. However, history, when it is told through the right channel, has a great potential to regenerate the society for sustainable development. A number of Nigerian playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Ahmed Yerima, Emmy Idegue, Armstrong Adachaba, John Iwuh among other Nigerian creative artists have made great efforts in documenting the nation’s history through play texts. Obviously, film as a means of communication has certain advantages over some of the other channels of communication. Hence, this paper intends to investigate the needs for Nigerian film makers to use Nigerian historical plays as source materials for film making for national rejuvenation and progress. To this end, the work adopts content analysis of the qualitative

methodology to interrogate the aforementioned issues using some selected Nigerian play texts. Among other things, the work concludes that adaptation of Nigerian historical plays into movies can regenerate the nation’s lost glory and promote national development.

Key words: History; Play; Nation; Film making; National rebirth

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INTRODUCTION

Apparently, there is no group of people that has no history. As people live together and strives to survive, they usually take certain decisions and actions which often generate both positive and negative outcomes. These decisions and actions could be about the people’s culture, traditions, norms, economy, politics and policies. Thus, history is a product of a group of people’s past decisions and actions, and the implications of such actions. Thus, history provides the necessary facts that could guide future decisions. Therefore, history seems to be one of the essential instruments with which a nation can use to breakthrough its socio-economic and political challenges. According to Oladiti Abiodun Akeem, “history has been recognized all over the world as a source of enlightenment and development. As a collective memory of the past of a nation, history attempts to bring to the fore the salient and significant part of events that occurred in the past, which could be utilized in building a prosperous national future” (p.12). Indeed, the relevance of history to man are numerous, hence, Olamiti further argues that:

Human society, no matter the level of advancement, has placed optimum priority to the bequeathing of a “useable past” from generation to generation. For instance, in ancient cultures, every kingdom had its own history laureate whose task it was to remember the past. Modernity has also been influenced greatly by the enhanced production of history. This is assisting nations in their tasks of nation building, promoting national consciousness, the flowering of moral leadership and ensuring overall national development. (p.14)

Like other parts of the world, the Nigerian nation has a rich history raising from the people’s pre-colonial experiences through the colonial epoch to the independence era. Each of these periods created experiences that have contributed to the nation’s socio-economic and political history. On the other hand, the Nigerian history contains a full blueprint of nation’s political and socio-economic realities, hence, the relevance of its preservation can never be over emphasized. As such, many means have been used over the years to preserve Nigerian history. One of such means is play creating. A number of Nigerian playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, Emmy Edegwu, John Iwuh among others have made serious efforts in documenting Nigerian history through play creating over the ages. However, the question remains that, to what extent historical plays written by these playwrights have been read or what other mediums have been used to distribute the plays to the audience? Obviously, because of certain factors such as lack of reading culture among Nigerians and insufficient Arts Theatre across the nation, these plays seem not have reached enough audience over the years. Joe Arnott says that, “drama is an expensive art form and must please a large number of people who are prepared to pay for their pleasure” (p.27). Obviously, film is one of the ways different forms of drama has been distributed to large audience across the globe today. It is based on this backdrop that this research is undertaken.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that underpins this work is Cultivation Theory. This theory was founded by Goerge Gerbner in 1973. The theory focuses on the idea that increased exposure to television content which involves recurring themes and images, plays significant roles in shaping and enforcing audience’s views about the world. Jennings Bryant notes that, “Cultivation Theory seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics of how prolonged engagement with television programming influences collective perspectives. This theory believes that television has taken the role in which family, schools, churches, formerly played in the society, which is the function of enculturation” (14). This theory is significant for this study as it seeks to investigate the need to distribute Nigerian historical plays through filming medium for national rebirth and sustainable development. Arguably, the Nigerian historical plays such as *Women of*

Owu by Femi Osofisan, John Iwuh’s *Birtright*, Ahmed Yerima’s *Ameh Oboni the Great*, Emmy Edegwu’s *Tough Man* among others captured important historical themes that could enhance the people’s consciousness about critical national matters, and when they are communicated through proper communication channel such as film, it might go a long way in building national consciousness thereby promoting socio-economic and political development.

SYNOPSIS OF THE SELECTED PLAY TEXTS

The plays selected for this study are, John Iwuh’s *Birtright* and Emmy Edegwu’s *Beloved Odolu Kingdom*. Iwuh’s *Birtright* is set in Obodonile. Obodonile is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi geographical society. Apart from the other minor tribes, Obodonile has three major ethnic groups which include, Ndi-Ugwu, Ndi-Ala and Ndi-Nda. As a diverse society with little or no spirit of tolerance and unity, Obodonile is burdened with social problems such extreme ethnic recognition, tribalism, nepotism and many others. Because of these problems, Ndi-ala, the region of Obodonile where the major source of the land’s income is located decides to seek for self-government and Obodonile’s government says no to that. This leads to the bloody war which claims many lives in the play.

Idegwu’s *Beloved Odolu Kingdom*, on the hand tells a story of a clannish and political conflict in Odolu Kingdom. Odolu kingdom houses about six clans: Desert, Middle land, Mountain, Riverside, Forest and Erosion clans. The play opens with the news of ill health of the king, a son of Desert clan who later joins his ancestors as a result of the illness. Constitution of the kingdom states that whenever the king is indisposed his second-in-command should take over the affairs of the land pending the time, he regains his strength to carry out his responsibilities to the people. The constitution equally upholds that when the king dies, a credible citizen from any part of the kingdom should be crowned as the new king. The second-in-command to the king in the play is a son of Riverside clan. Amidst serious protests by the people of Desert clan, the rest of the clan gives their supports to the second-in-command to take care of the affairs of the land while the king is indisposed. When the king joins his ancestors, the second-in-command, among other contestants, indicates his interest for the throne, and with the full supports of majority of the clans, the second-in-command wins the race. The people of Desert clan feel bad about the whole situation and this leads t a violent protest, resulting in destruction of lives and properties in the play.

JOHN IWUH'S *BIRTHRIGHT* AND EMMY EDEGWU'S *BELOVED ODOLU KINGDOM* AS SOURCE MATERIALS FOR FILM MAKING FOR NATIONAL REBIRTH

There are many sources of play creating raising from imagination, current events, historical incidents among other things. Within the context of historical events, a writer may choose to use the political, cultural or economic history of his people as his source materials. In the case of the selected plays, Iwuh and Idegwu used the Nigerian past political situations, though, different political periods of the nation. While Iwuh's *Birthright* captures the early independence political era of Nigeria, Idegwu's *Beloved Odolu Kingdom* documents the Nigerian political history within 2007 to 2010.

Historically, ethnicity has been one of the major problems of Nigerian political space. The economic, social, policies and leadership of the nation have been influenced by tribal sentiment leading to unhealthy rivalry amongst the nation's various ethnic groups. This situation has over the ages enriched the nation's history with violent events. Kalejaiye, Peter. and Nurudeen, Abuh posit that:

Across the length and breadth of Nigeria, ethnic considerations in political, economic, social and academic matters can hardly be avoided. Politics is ethnic oriented; ethnicism is more often than not the consciousness of President, Head of States, ministers, and those on national assignments. This has been one of the major causes of social conflicts in Nigeria, especially in a situation where this consideration does not favour the minority group. This social conflict in the form of violence resulting from destruction of lives and properties has been perceived in general as a major obstacle to the overall political, social and economic development of the country (p.252).

It is important to note that aforementioned challenges started shortly after the nation's amalgamation in 1914 and independence in 1960. As a result of the amalgamation, on the independence from British colonial domination on October 1st, 1960, the nation had many ethnic groups. Among those ethnic nationalities, the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba seems to be the dominant groups in the three regions (North, East and West). The conflict amongst them for power was laced with some ethnic flavor that made it highly emotive. National issues were often interpreted along ethno-regional and sectarian divides. Perhaps, that is why Chinua Achebe says that, "the origin of the national resentment. . . is as old as Nigeria and quite as complicated" (75). Achebe further says that:

The ploy in Nigerian context was simple and crude: Get the achievers out and replace them with less qualified individuals from the desired ethnic background so as to gain access to the resources of the state. This bizarre government strategy transformed the federal civil service, corporations, and universities into centres of ethnic bigotry and petty squabbles. (77)

The challenges pointed out by Achebe above have led to a number of challenges over the years. In other words, issues of resentment among the nation's ethnic groups have over the ages fueled conflicts of different forms. Good examples of such violent conflicts include the January 15, 1966 coup d'état and the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970. The January 15, 1966 coup d'état led to the death of prominent Nigerian founding fathers like Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sir. Ahmadu Bello, Chief S.L Akintola among others. In the same vein, Odigwe A. Nwaokocha who writes about the Nigeria-Biafra war says that:

Many issues contributed to the outbreak of the war. These include the inter-ethnic tensions provoked by the struggle for power among Nigeria's ethnic groups. The immediate sparks which produced the war can be located in the two military coups of 1966 and their consequences for a society torn along ethnic and sectarian lines. (190)

Many unarmed civilians including women and children were killed during the war. In fact, Nigeria-Biafra war remains the most gruesome violent conflict in the history of the nation. However, Iwuh uses this history to realize his work. He adopts the metaphor of Obodonile community to recast the history of the Nigeria-Biafra war and blends it with important messages that could make Nigerians to realize the importance of peace. Apparently, some of the factors that contributed to the war include the inter-ethnic tensions provoked by the struggle for power among Nigeria's ethnic groups. In the play, due to the aforementioned issues, Ndi-Ala people, prematurely seeks for self-government rather than nationalism forgetting the fact that such motion can lead to nothing but national woes just as it is captured from the play thus:

Sentiment, sentiment! Ndi-Ala wants government, not so? Government is death. Death is government. Each time you desire government then you desire death. Government is power: with it twin can clutch on the mother's breast while other suckling the other. His twin will either fight or starves to death. What do we want, freedom or power? Either way it is war. Unfortunately, war is death. (Iwuh, 2016, p.21).

The above lines contain historical items and pedantic information for Nigerians. Nigerians' failures to embrace unity has on several occasions brought harrowing experiences on the nation. This is one of the roles of an artist. No matter the source of the work, current happenings, imagination or history, the artist owns the society the obligations to warn the society against social ills. As such, Iwuh do not only show how the Nigerian civil war started in the play as it is a captured above, but he also reflects the consequences of the war through one of his characters who reports thus:

Darkness falls; people fall. They fall as leaves from withering trees. It is war. Look into homes; someone is missing. Is it the head of a family, the youth of tomorrow, or could it be the tree trunk of those falling leaves? (p.13)

Indeed, that was one of the consequences of the Nigerian civil war. Many lives were lost and a lot of property were destroyed. Chinua Achebe reports on the Calabar massacre during the war saying, “the Nigerian forces overran Calabar in early 1968 without much resistance. They shot at least 1,000 and perhaps, 2,000 Ibos, most of them civilians” (p.137). Like Calabar, many other parts of the nation experienced the harsh and ugly side of the war. Thus, Iwuh’s *Birthright* advocates for a way forward as thus:

What belongs to my father belongs to all his children... Let Ndi Ugwu dream, let Ndi-nda dream, let Ndi-ala join in the dream... Let everyone’s dream take his brother into account. That is important (p.57).

When it comes to national issues in a plural society like Nigeria, unity of purpose ought to be the watchword. Perhaps, the same inspiration occurs to Idegue when he writes *Beloved Odolu Kingdom*. Like it has been mentioned earlier, the play records the political experiences in Nigeria within 2007-2010. The era where Late President Musa Yaradua was the Nigerian president. The president fell sick and the sickness became critical. A number of Nigerians proposed that the vice president, Dr. Ebele Jonathan, should take over the mantle of leadership from his boast. But issues of ethnic identity dominated the ideal thinking of the people then; there was serious tension over this as Idegue reflects in his play:

There is nothing under the sun that eyes have not seen. We are talking about the wellbeing of the entire Odolu kingdom and some people are still dragging us into the mud of clan dichotomy. A look at the face of a juvenile makes one think that he would never grow beards. Odolu Kingdom has grown beyond which clan anybody comes from before he can be our king. (Idegue, 2011, p.76)

Idegue through the play recasts Nigerian history and as an artist, suggest from the above lines that Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, Igala and the other ethnic groups in Nigeria should be allowed and given genuine equal opportunities to have a share in the nation’s politics, social and economic programs. The aforementioned ideas without doubt have the power to rehabilitate the nation’s political structure which has been bedeviled with ethnic sentiments. Indeed, the dialogues can awaken the consciousness of the people towards nation building thereby providing solutions to the problem of instability resulting from agitations for equal opportunities. Like in Nigeria, Odolu Kingdom, is a plural society with its diverse clans blinded by extreme clannish recognition. In the play, the king is sick. For peace, stability and development, Odolu promulgates a law that when the king is indisposed, he should be duely represented by his second-in-command until the king is able and capable to rule again. This law with all sense of sane reasoning is for the good of all the people of Odolu kingdom. The continuity of the kingdom’s growth and development are not meant to be paralyzed as a result of the king’s ill

health, when he has a credible second in command to pilot the affairs of the kingdom until he regains his strength. But because the second in command is not from Desert clan, 1st Elder who is the representative of Desert clan protests against the installation of the second in command as acting the king saying:

I speak both for myself and the clan that I represent here that it will never happen. We shall resist all the clandestine plans to usurp the throne from us... I say again, your plans will surely fail. We shall fight till the last drop of our blood to make sure all enemies of my people are brought to shame... (Idegue, 2013, p.28)

Amidst tension and huge amount of conflict, with the supports of majority of the clans, the second in command takes over the affairs of Odolu kingdom. And when the king eventually joins his ancestors, an election is conducted and the second in command again wins the throne with the support of most of the clans. The Desert clan who is -not satisfied with the outcome begins a violent protest that destroys many lives and property as captured thus:

There is absolute breakdown of law and order in the Desert and Mountain clans with massive uncoordinated movements of people... Heavy conflagration. Thick engulfing dark smoke. Fire engulfs some parts while banging, cracks and smashing permeate other areas. In the midst of these, voices of protest rage the entire atmosphere with more destruction of lives and property going on rather unabated. Many youths are seen with guns, bows, arrows, cutlasses, swords knives, sticks and other weapons causing reckless attacks to lives and properties. In this confusion, people are heard crying, wailing, weeping, groaning and cursing. Some run out of burning houses only to be caught and thrown backalive into fire... (Idegue, 2013, p.67)

Obviously, Nigeria needs a rebirth in order to achieve national development. This can never be achieved unless Nigerians choose to love one another irrespective of their ethnic and tribal differences, and work together as one. The diverse nature of the country could be used as a strength rather than reasons to fight one another over ethnic politics as it has been over the years just as Iwuh affirms:

Leadership is exercising authority with commonsense of the good of all. There can’t be progress without peace, and there can’t be peace without love. Who is your enemy? Is he the person who dresses differently from the way you do? Is he the person who speaks a language different from yours? Or is he the person who lives several miles away from your village... (p.24).

Idegue supports that:

What we eat, what we wear and other things must never be allowed to swing us away from the truth that we are all children of the same parents, from the same lions and womb, fed from the same breasts. No matter our differences, one camel does not make fun of the other camel’s hump. Every citizen is as important as the other. None of us can live alone. We need each other because one foot isn’t enough to walk with. (p.52)

Honestly, the selected plays have not only recast the Nigerian history, but they have also to some extent suggested ways forward for us; but to what extent have

Nigerians used the plays over the years? Undoubtedly, due to certain factors seventy, percent of Nigerians may not have come across these plays before. However, Cultivation Theory opines that television has great potentials to hold audience attentions and change people's perspective about worldview. In this context, perhaps, film could be used to distribute these plays for wider audience. Apparently, film is one of the viable means of communication. Most times, audiences react to filming stories due to the sequential visual projection of the story which replicates the events identifiable around them. Thus, they get emotionally involved with what they see on screen, due to the careful crafting of images with the help of technical elements such as costumes, sets, shots, sound effects, music among others to give convincing and appropriate representations. According to Ekwuazi Nwosu:

Visual image is made of all or some of the following nine intra-structure: persons, object ideas, filmic space, filmic time, visual composition, audio composition editing; and conflict and resolution. This implies that visual elements and other intra-structures are vital to the credit of the filmmaker. On this note, the filmmaker makes use of appropriate materials and visual techniques for the story. Communication is effective with the use of appropriate visual elements harnessed with sound effects, actors and shots. It is based on the total ensemble elements of film that given meaning or message is gotten. (p.8)

From the above, one can argue that by communicating the contents of the selected plays through video-films with the aid of carefully selected technical elements such as costumes, sets, shots, sound effects, music among others, the messages of the plays will not only get to a large number of audience but will equally create random impacts on the issues under discuss.

CONCLUSION

The work to some extent has examined the roles Nigerian playwrights have played over the years in documenting

the nation's history through their creative works. Content analysis of the qualitative research methodology was used to examine the content of the selected texts, and it was discovered that Nigerian historical plays have not only employed the nation's history to craft their works, but they have also suggested feasible way out for national rebirth and development. However, play texts' audience seems to be limited in this part of the world where there is no serious reading culture. Similarly, we are living in a technological era where stories could be told through technological means such as television among many other channels. The adaption of the Nigerian historical plays into movies could never be a bad idea due to the huge influence film has on the audience.

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