

Theatre Arts: A Resource for National Development

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Abstract

Theatre Arts is not just an entertainment art whose only duty is to make people laugh and relax as viewed by most developing nations like Nigeria. It has a lot of bearing on national development, as it holds the power to persuade and influence the citizenry that make up a nation. This paper is an attempt at espousing the potential of Theatre Arts in national development, especially in a developing nation like Nigeria that is aspiring to be one of the most developed by year 2020. In doing this, the paper provides an overview of the nature of Arts, and its interrelation with the society bringing to the fore the symbiotic nature of their relationship in social development. Theatre Arts has been identified as a special Art that can engender national development. Thus, the exploitable potentials of the Theatre Arts in enhancing national development are highlighted. The paper concludes that Theatre Arts in whatever form has a vital role to play in creating a strong and developed nation, and as such, it should be encouraged by both the Nigerian government and private sector if we must attain the status of a developed nation by year 2020.

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“The Arts matter because they embrace, express and define the soul of a civilization. A Nation without Arts would be a nation that had stopped talking to itself, stopped dreaming and lost interest in the past and lacked curiosity about the future”. John, Tusa, *Arts Matters* (2000)

Introduction

As an expressive and symbolic aspect of human behavior, Arts like language occupies the center stage of communication and expressions. Theatre Arts is one basic unifying factor that is as old as man, of which through its conscious or unconscious existence from antiquity to the present, has played a major role in our socio-cultural development. What this paper

investigates is the importance of Theatre Arts to national development and the correction of the erroneous conception of Theatre Arts in general by the society it serves. Some members of the Nigerian society see it as an entertainment Art created from the fickle imagination of the artist just to entertain. However, the society finds in Art an effective medium to communicate messages to the people. Art is also used to cultivate new values and ideas. On the other hand, Art is inspired and influenced by culture and the society. Thus, from history, artists have always found an interesting ground of inspiration from the society. By exploring the role of Theatre Arts in national development, a series of questions have arisen concerning the power of Art and how it engenders national development.

In order to adequately evaluate the role of Theatre to national development, it is vital to understand the nature of Art and the interrelation between Art and the society. Subsequently, Theatre Arts and some of its mediatory potential towards national development will be examined.

The Nature of Arts

Defining Art is one of the most difficult of all linguistic tasks. This is because of the numerous attempts made by many scholars to find a way of describing or capturing what Art is. For Ira and Anastasia (2005:4), defining Art “is probably as complicated as defining human feelings. Everybody knows about them but not everybody understands them. Everybody experiences them but not everybody can explain them”. They further submit that “everybody has an opinion for both human feelings and Art, but only few are charged with the responsibility to provide the most comprehensive and acceptable definitions of them”.

The very notion of Art continues today to stir controversy, being so open to multiple interpretations. It can be taken to mean any human activity, or any set of rules needed to develop activity. Hence, various scholars have reiterated the fact that the definition of Art is open, subjective and debatable. For the purpose of understanding the nature of Art, some attempted definitions of Art by various scholars will be highlighted in context of how it relates to this study.

Aristotle, a great philosopher and Art critic said it first in his *Poetics* that “Art is mimetic”. He defines Art as “imitation of an action” and on the other hand; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow a modern poet as quoted by Hurberman *et al* (1997) says “Nature is produced in Arts”. A Summary of both definitions by Aristotle and Henry above, infers that: “Art is the imitation of something natural or imagined”. Art is generally understood as

any activity or product done by people with a communicative or aesthetic purpose - something that expresses an idea, an emotion or more generally a world view. According to Ira and Anastasia (2005: 5) “Art is a conscious synthesis and creation of forms, sounds, movements, colors, materials and worlds to express a human condition”. Thus, to them, these creations that we call Art or Art works can take all possible forms and express all possible conditions. Art forms vary according to the medium that is adopted by the Artist to project his idea/message. Ion Pascadi (1979: 98) attempts a simple classification of Art based on the medium one chooses to adopt. According to him, “The works of Art are more often than not objects representing or symbolizing (painting, scripture, decorative Arts), actual manifestations (music, Theatre) imagery projections with a statue of reality (film)...” thus, he concluded that in any of the forms of Art, we are facing an impact materialized in the civilization of the Epoch. In other words, these creations we call Art or Art works can take all possible forms and express all possible conditions of a period.

Art cannot be separated from the society because the society to a large extent is defined by and identified with Art works that bear imprint of their core values and belief system. For Fischer Ernst (1963:35), “Art was a magic tool and it served man in mastering nature and developing social relationship”. It is a form of expression that seeks to entertain, inform, enlighten and educate man on social living. In other words, the purpose of Art is communication as expressed by humans through their creative instinct. Ira and Anastasia (2005:5), observe that Art is characterized by its quality to carry messages; messages that are either clearly stated or deeply hidden. These messages might be conveyed consciously by the Artist or might be completely unintentional. They might be imposed on or projected to the Art works by the audience. Nicolae Moraru (1976:76) submits: “The work of Art becomes far more than reflection. It is real triumph of man over the world, a proof of his ability to understand this world, to probe its significant depth, to discover the lines of its development, and its future evolution”. This assertion brings us to the point of identifying the interrelations between Art and the society.

INTERELATION BETWEEN ART AND THE SOCIETY

From these definitions, which suggest that art is an expressive medium of human conditions through creative works at a point in time, it is obvious that the interrelation between Art and the society is one that cannot be easily separated. Fischer Ernst (1963:14) asserts: Art is necessary in order that man

should be able to recognize and change the world”. Thus, how beneficial is Art to the society?

Frank Gormile (2009) as well as other scholars and critics of Art have reiterated the fact that the Artist create Art but not out of thin air, but within a societal context, supported and buffeted by the conditions of the time, resources and the technology, the intelligence, the knowledge, the economic/philosophical social, cultural and religious/philosophical conditions of the moment of creation. Therefore, Art cannot be separated from the society as every society is to a large extent defined by and identified with works of Art that bear imprint of their core values and beliefs. As a form of expression that seeks to entertain, inform, enlighten and educate, it finds its means of communication from the modes that identify with the socio cultural milieu that inspired it. Nicolae Moraru (1976:79) attests to the fact that “Art has become part and parcel of man’s life; it has become one of his current requirements and manifestation, (and) it has become a never failing aspect of his way of life.” In other words, Art is a core aspect of culture manifested through the way of life of the people. Thus, the society influences the Artist and in turn, the Artist Influences the society with his Art. George Wills Cooke, in a comment in Odonwald–Unger’s *The fine Art as a Dynamic factor in Society* (1907: 665), observed that “in all phases of society, from the clan to the international social life of today, Art has found expression, not in individual genius, but in the social demand of the people whose life it manifests” Thus, corroborating that Art is a product of the society, he submits that “the Art impulse is essentially a social impulse, (and) all the great Art of the world in the various Art forms has been of the nature of social expression or social interpretation”. Thus, the Artist through his human instinct to express himself and communicate a certain ideology or perhaps just to entertain the society creates a work through his creative power, which is later transformed into Art. Therefore, we can say that the relationship between Art and society is such that, Art exemplifies what the society is going through at any given moment.

Art is moulded by society and how people that make up the society are willing to express themselves. Consequently, (Nicolae 1976:77) concludes that, “all works of Art always bear the imprint of their creators’ thinking; the entire and complex network of his mood, his élans and his grief, his sentiments for his fellow creature and his attitude to events of the time”. The society influences the Artist, the creator of Arts and in turn, the Artist influences the society with his Art. Art in itself is a social reality as the Artist acts as a social mirror who reflects society with his Art. Duvignaud as

cited by Lanrele Bamidele (2003:29) asserts that in African society, “the resulting alliance between Art and society is so close that during festivals or seasonal rituals, a unique and constant identification between the two (Art and Society) is noticed” Bamidele also observes that, the role of Art in the society cuts across the sustainer of the community and its institutions, to a prophet or seer, redeemer, healer; enlightening and educating mankind, which he describes as a socio-political role.

Art is characterized by its quality to carry messages that are either clearly stated or deeply hidden. These messages may be conveyed consciously by the Artist or might be completely unintentional. They may also be imposed on or projected to the Art work by the audience. An Artist is an impact maker, visionary and a messenger. He observes his environment, and projects what he sees in order to inform, entertain, educate and correct ills in the society through Art. Milton Albrecht (1980:393) strongly affirms that, “Art meets not just one but many “Basic needs” psychologically and socially. As an institution, it has a multiplicity of functions in society, not least those of fostering social stability and enriching our culture”. Fischer E. (1963:46) on his own part affirms that: “Art enables man to comprehend (social) reality, and not only helps him to bear it but increases his determination to make it more human and more worthy of mankind”. Art as a significant aspect of culture gives it the power to influence the society by touching the life space of the people that identify with it. Veretchangin, a Russian Painter submits that, Art does more than just arousing of people’s conscience. It can help to solve social problems and to save the people from destruction. If we consider Art as merely a gratification of the aesthetic sense, we dethrone it from its important position as a core factor of social stability and development.

Art has now become universal with a meaning that is being projected round the world. (Milton C. A. 1980:393). Like any sort of thought, Art contributes to the transformation of the world. A good work of Art outlives the Artist and its generation because as the society develops, the sense of appreciation and relevance of a good work of Art continues to advance. Time however passes; generations succeed one another while the works of Art remain living presences in the heritage of world culture. As the society advances and bows to the forces of civilization and modernization, as the taste of the moment changes in reaction to aesthetic appeal and relevance to happenings, the value of a good work of Art increases. For example, paintings and carvings of the Igbo Uku, Nok Terracotta and the Bronze head of the ancient Benin Kingdom and the famous Monalisa Art is of more value

today than when it was made; the music of great Artists like Bob-Marley, Lucky Dube, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Sunny Okosun and the likes, still tell the story of today and tomorrow. Hence its value cannot be under estimated. The works of great Theatre Artists & Literary giants, such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Wale Ogunyemi, Dapo Adelugba, Demas Nwoko, Sumbo Murino, Zulu Sofola, Niyi Osundare and others, are still appreciated today despite the fact that some of their works are as old as the Nigerian nation. The value of Art is limitless. Its impact on the society is not contestable. Nicolae Moraru (1976:80), attest to this when he states: “After centuries, Art still arouses echoes in the minds and hearts of readers and spectators even if the latter know nothing about the past time or only the little they gathered from history textbook”. Art as an aspect of material culture is the basic means and mode through which the cultures of the society are sustained and transferred from one generation to another. That is why its role in the society and the influence it has on the people cannot be over emphasized.

THEATRE ARTS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Theatre is a major component of performance Art and a direct product of society, which to a great extent is completely dependent on society. Theatre Arts is an offspring of culture which reflects the life and reality of a society on stage (Dare 2008). Theatre Arts thrives on performances that encompass the activities of an individual or group, during a period marked by their continuous presence before a particular set of observers. Theatre Arts entails the Art of mimesis. That is, imitation as stated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The actions imitated, are the happenings around Man, his political, economic, and religious environment. The Theatre Artist like every other Artist does not create his Art out of a vacuum, but out of his life experiences and happenings around him. The Theatre as an Art is a strong force in social engineering because as clearly stated by Olalekan G. A *et al* (2010: 108) “The Theatre has the capacity to engage and appeal to all the human senses at the same time due to its ability to influence and affect (man) through the effective use of images”. Thus, the Theatre acts as a mirror that reflects and refracts the reality of life (Dare 2008: 14). According to Frank Gormile (2009): “one way it achieves this, is to reflect on awareness and understanding of our own humanity, to remind us of our beauty, our fragility, our limitations, our temporal experiences, our strengths, our fears, dreams etc” there by, enabling us to evaluate our lives in order to effect the needed changes. Therefore, it will not be out of place to say that, the Theatre

is one means by which man has been able to re-examine his life, dissect and arrive at a definite decision on how to improve and make life better. However, just as Ogu-Raphael (2009) and other Theatre scholars in Nigeria have observed, the medium of Theatre like other Art forms has never received any considerable measure of attention from government and its agencies; perhaps because, it is considered as an ‘unserious business’ and ‘time waster’ and therefore not capable of engendering development in the Nigerian society. Defending the Theatre, Hugh Hunt as cited by Bamidele (2003:71), regards Theatre Arts as a ‘Hybrid Art’ because it entrenches itself fully into the Humanities, the Sciences and the Social Sciences. This makes it a special Art whose importance to social development cannot be contested. The Theatre involves three basic elements – The performance space (the stage), the performer(s) and observers (audience) which on the other hand are also social elements. A good understanding of these three elements reveals the relationship between the Theatre and the society. Theatre helps to depict social reality and encourages audience participation; serving a social function of educating members of the society. Consequently, in the opinion of Dare S. O. (2008:14), “The Theatre cannot be divorced from the society as it functions as its “numero-metre” measuring its temperature and weight, its humidity and size and gauging its tensility and durability”. Therefore, the Theatre functions for the good and development of the society. Ogu-Raphael (2009:2) in the same vein, asserts that “the functions and manifestation of the Theatre in our society today, has taken a very radical dimension, such that, the entertainment value has received some kind of de-emphasis. Its role now is to serve a more constructive purpose: one that will contribute to social and revolutionary change in society”.

Theatre practice today is committed to social development through entertainment modes that appeal to the senses of people. That is, through; Dance, Music, Festivals, Drama, Carnival, Film and others. In the words of (Nasidi: 2003) as cited by Olalekan G. A *et al* (2010:107), “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”. Henry Bell-Gam (2005:99) records thus

...theatre has admirable potentials for the development of a nation or state. In the first instance, it possesses pedagogic quality, which projects teaching and learning as well as entertainment quality, enlightens the society and also affords

entertainment. Theatre reforms the society and creates an ideal environment for the benefit of mankind. It is an agent of political agitation, social and economic reformation. The role of theatre in dislodging apartheid in South Africa through the performances of Ipitombi Theatre Company is evidence. In Nigeria, Hubert Ogunde effectively used theatre to fight British colonization...

The potency of Theatre Arts in the transformation of the society lies in its power to influence the thought and opinion of the people while treating issues that bear on social development. No wonder it seems as a popular and effective means of political and religious propagation, economic empowerment and cultural diffusion as employed in rural development program termed 'Theatre for Development', 'Community Theatre' or 'Peoples Theatre' as it is seldom called which has recorded huge success in Rwanda, Kenya and some parts of northern Nigeria. It acts as an interventionist tool and facilitator to peace, social stability and development. The numerous potentials of Theatre Arts in social development and cultural propagation, preservation and promotion cannot be overemphasized. The *cultural policy for Nigeria* corroborates this assertion as it identifies the power of the Performing Arts and encourages it with the establishment of a National Troup of Nigeria as a part of the National Arts Theatre, which is also duplicated in all the 36 states including the FCT as Art Councils to preserve the Arts and culture of the nation through theatrical performances. The *cultural policy of Nigeria* also promotes the establishment of Theatres which shall be sources of education, leisure, and entertainment to the people through presentation of concerts, revues, musicals, operas, plays, film shows, etc. As a nation that is undergoing numerous challenges at this point in time when it is aspiring to be among the most developed by year 2020 some eight years from now, it is pertinent to examine the potentials of Theatre Arts in the actualization of that dream. Below are some of the potentials of the Theatre to national development.

POTENTIALS OF THEATRE ARTS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Economic Development:

According to Musa R. A. (2006:17), "Theatre Arts can revitalize the economy through employment generation, revenue generation, educational

development, social engineering, and political socialization...” The Entertainment industry in Nigeria is one that is second to Oil in terms of foreign exchange generation for the country. This to a great extent has boosted the Nigerian economy as we no longer export Oil alone but our Arts through Drama and Film. This industry can only thrive and be sustained if Theatre Arts is well encouraged by the government and the private sector through adequate funding and constitutional implementations of laws guiding the industry to enable it thrive. As a nation grappling with unemployment, if the entertainment industry and Theatre practice is well developed, it will be able to employ a good number of unemployed graduates roaming the streets as it needs all the hands it can get to handle the various aspects.

Cultural Preservation

The culture of every society is its uniqueness. The Nigerian society is one that has veered off its part of cultural history, giving way to modern civilization that is perhaps detrimental to our Arts and culture. Notable Theatre Artists, Playwrights, Poets and Novelists like; Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Ahmed Yerima, Femi Osofisan, Don Pedro Obaseki, Niyi Osundare, Chinu Achebe and others, through their works have in no small measure contributed to promotion, preservation and propagation of our culture and national history through documentation. They draw inspiration from, myths, folk tales, and legends that were only preserved through oral traditions. Today, through Theatre practice, and the performance of these works, it has given the younger generation opportunity to appreciate their past and know how to go about the future thereby bridging the gap in their social history.

Tourism Development

Theatre Arts can revitalize the economy through the promotion of Tourism. This can be achieved through the organization of carnivals, festivals, concerts etc that will attract tourists from all over the world to Nigeria, as the largest black nation in the world. With over 360 tribes, Nigeria is one of the African countries blessed with lots of cultural Arts to showcase to the world. The success story of the yearly Abuja carnival, National Arts Festival, and other state carnivals as organized by Cross River, Rivers, Lagos and other states, has gone a long way to show that we are ready to tap from the rich potential of tourism. The Nigerian government needs to do more to encourage and develop this aspect. Countries like Brazil, India, and

Malaysia, earn large foreign exchange from tourism by simply showcasing their Arts. This to a great extent can boost the economy of Nigeria and provide job opportunity for her citizens. We have what it takes in terms of cultural heritage; we have various types and forms of festivals that we need to showcase to the world. Arts Festivals attract tourist, educational development, social engineering and political socialization.

Peace and Conflict Resolution

At present, the Nigeria nation is plagued with lots of communal unrest and social insecurity arising from youth restiveness and ethnic disagreement as in the case of Jos, Plateau state, and conflict of ideology as in the case of 'Boko-Haram' which is said to be against modern civilization. This, to a great extent is threatening the social stability of the nation. The performing Art as a participatory Art, has various ways and techniques to provide pathways to solving violent issues in society and advocate for peace. The Theatre as attested by Ogu Raphael (2009) can act as a stimulant or tranquilizer for a people to understand their individual self and to harness their potentials towards a collective social development. He projects the Theatre as an alternative conflict resolution mechanism as it can bring about peace and calm in conflict situations. Theatre Arts in its various performance modes of songs, dances, music and dramatic enactments can always appeal to our sense of shared values for tolerance and social equality, so as to prevent violence. This can be achieved through the adoption of the developmental program known as Theatre for Development (TFD) designed to conscientize the people on specific issues in a community or the nation as the case may be. It is a process of stimulating and sustaining participation through a people oriented program of play production. It is aimed at identifying the problems in a community, dramatize the problems of the community and at the end identify the best approach towards solving them. It is a program that thrives on the direct involvement of members of the community enabling them to realize their potentials and the need for united action in improving the quality of their lives (Nwamuo 1996:13). The Strategy Theatre Arts provides in global peace are through words, humour and satire in performances which at the end of the day wield positive impact on the people. Ohiri (2006: 132) observes that: "a depressed economy produces depressed minds which are very easily susceptible to antagonism. Hence, the Theatre through festivals and inter-state or inter-community drama competitions and presentation provide avenues for people from different background to meet and interact" of which at the end will foster

peace and development. This type of program has helped several countries in Africa which include South Africa, Kenya, and Rwanda.

Sensitization Mechanism

The Theatre is one that functions as a competent strategy for mass sensitization. Its power of persuasion is put to use through the medium of television and radio to reach a wide audience. They employ dramatic programs which have proven to have wide audience acceptance as it has the ability to entertain while passing its message(s) across. Notable world organizations like WHO and UNICEF have used such dramatic programs on Radio and Television to pass several messages across the world that has yielded positive results. On the other hand, various companies and service providers acknowledge Theatre's power of sensitization, and have engaged the medium of dramatic presentations to advertise and promote their goods and services as it has the power to persuade the people to patronize them. Various NGOS and government ministries in Nigeria have also adopted this means of sensitization to influence the people's attitude towards some governmental programs, of which it has yielded good results as seen during Election period.

Conclusion

Developed countries in the world use their Arts as a propelling force to the actualization of their dreams. They listen to their Artist, develop their Art and understand their country through their Art. This is because they are able to identify the power of Arts and to harness it to social development. Theatre Arts is one that has been identified to have unlimited influence on social development as it encompasses the power of all other Arts, Science, and Social sciences. This accords it the position of a formidable tool for social development and nation building. Thus, it is imperative to agree with Olaekan G. A *et al* (2010:112) that: "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 to mould the mind while still entertaining and developing the society". Therefore, it is recommend that the government supports the Theatre, because ignoring its potency in promoting economic and social development from the grass root in the midst of vision 2020 is at its own peril. It is hoped that the functional importance which the Theatre has assumed in recent times will be sustained through the involvement of government and the private sector.

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