

DRAMA, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study examines the role of drama in formulating national identity and engendering sustainable development. The study aims at affirming the factorial attributes of drama in the formation of national identity and the transformation of any nation of the world. This is because drama expresses the feelings, thoughts, emotions, yearnings and aspirations of the people, thus, it is an appropriate mechanism for engendering development. The study uses qualitative research methodology through which content analysis approach is used for analysing Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The study finds out that the formation of a formidable national identity ultimately depends on the commitment level and the love citizens' exhibit towards the nation as a whole. The study concludes that, for good national identity to be created and sustained, a collective and decisive response to the challenges in the country must be done. The study recommends the Olunde spirit as panacea for national development and therefore encourages Nigerians to emulate the life of Olunde who demonstrates total allegiance and patriotism in order for his society to develop. The study also encourages playwrights and directors as well as other Theatre stakeholders to intensify their research into various cultural dimensions of the country and portray a good image of her.

Keywords: *Drama, National Identity and Sustainable Development*

Introduction

The development trajectories of any nation of the world to a large extent are anchored on the nature of identity collectively formulated and exhibited by the people. The feeling of belonging, patriotism, nationalism,

commitment and selflessness exhibited towards the affairs of the nation are factorial indicators that determine the development level of the nation. Countries with such predisposition among their citizens find it easy to key their citizens into the nation's agenda, articulate this agenda, push for reformations, call for referendum, return and discard erring political office holders. However, a close examination of the nation's development would reveal that, in spite of her enormous natural and human resources the country is still lagging behind. Perhaps, this has necessitated government, institutions, public spirited individuals and private organisations to examine the situation with the hope of finding lasting solution to the problem. This paper defines the role and contributions of Theatre, with special interest on drama in this regards. Drama is formidable in the formulation of a good national identity and in spurring social mobilisation and development. According to Ojemudia:

Drama helps man to form a view of the world; a true and large-scale assessment of events; get a rational, reasoned orientation of the world around him; and make a true assessment of his own self. It aesthetically expresses man's emotional-intellectual world in his relationship to the environment. National or personal identity is a direct result of the presence of elements from the shared activities such as drama performances, cultural practices and other common factors in people's daily lives including language, history, culture and consciousness. In Nigeria, drama has played significant roles in forming and consolidating ethnic and national identities. Drama therefore is an effective instrument for Identity formation. (33)

This is a clear attestation of the providence of drama in national development. As a resume of a people's culture, drama touches every aspects of human endeavour. It helps man to understand himself, formulate a self-concept, understand and be able to engage his immediate environment. It also mobilises, orients and re-orientes citizens, build their emotional and psychological power and above all teaches them how to solve their problem by themselves. It is on this pretext that this article examines the role of drama in the formulation of national identity and how it transforms into national development.

Conceptualizing Drama, National Identity and Sustainable Development

It is fundamental to note that identity is a construct. The way people conceive an individual or group of people who come to form a nation depends on the kind of image which they create for themselves. This is

reflected in their way of life; their values and norms, aesthetics, leadership, culture, law, ideology and philosophy as well as their mode of interaction with others. Concomitantly, Sieyes in Schieder conceptualizes a nation as "the totality of individuals united by living under a common law and represented by the same legislative assembly" (122). This unification leads to the establishment of a society or communities which Anderson in Dhoest refers to this as "imagined communities". Cultural diversity, multi-ethnicity and individual differences form the bases of Anderson's description of a nation. It explains a situation where commonality is placed above individual and cultural differences; where people agree to live together in spite of these differences in order to pursue set goals. Dhoest further posits that nations are not only 'imagined', but also 'imaged' (<http://www.portal.comunicacion.com>). Dhoest's position is congruent to our earlier statement on how a nation is responsible for the kind of identity they project. Suavi bifurcates identity into two thus:

The first one is recognition and identification while the second one is the sense of belonging. Recognition and identification are related to how an individual is recognized by the society and how he defines himself. The tool for this is language and culture. Belonging comes out when an individual feels included to any social group. (In Gelişli <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu>)

One's recognition within his or her immediate society coupled with his or self-concept defines the love or sense of belonging expressed towards his or her society. It also defines social roles and commitment to national agenda and subsequently national development. Erkan's conceptualises identity as:

A dynamic formation shaped by expectations ascribed to social roles in the process of socialization. The sense of belonging is effective on this formation to a large extent. However, when the identity is only shaped by the sense of belonging, it brings about individuals without identities. Identity and belonging are two closely related concepts full of contradictions. While revealing his identity, one does not compromise on creativity and originality, one who voice his extreme loyalty to the community that he belongs to may shift away from his identity and personality in addition to losing his creativity and originality since people who have extreme loyalty to a certain group adopt the conscious of feeling in the same way and assimilation. The necessities of individual characteristics are of secondary importance for those people. In fact, the need for the sense of belonging and individual necessities should be fulfilled equitably. (<http://kozadergisi.com>)

From another perspective, Yanik writes that:

The construction of identities uses materials from the history, geography, biology, productive and production-directed institutions, collective memory, personal fantasies, power devices, and religious revelation. However, individuals, social groups and communities process all these materials and rearrange the meaning of all these material based on the social structure in which they live, social conditions resulting from space / time frame and cultural projects. (228-229)

Herper in this regard states that, Identity is, formed by a variety of environments, and some social institutions, particularly by society and adaptation to them influences identity. For example, it is specified that by adapting to communication tools and the effects of media, we create social worlds and identity is formed in this context. Types of music people listen to, the fashion magazines they choose reflect the personality traits of those people. Herper indicates that communication, fashion magazines, other means of communication, media sources and the internet that we always encounter in the social world shape our identity in this manner. Social identities are constructed in this process (<http://www.sagepub.com>). The acclimatisation of both the old and younger generation towards social media where they assimilate and formulate new identities in dissonance to the Nigerian identity has affected the pace of development today. This is because they imbibe ways of life that are diametrically opposed to ours. In such instances there are rise in panics due to misinformation, conflicts, violence, criminality, rape and so on in the nation. These are elements and or components of underdevelopment.

According to Bellù, development:

Is a multi-dimensional concept in its nature, because any improvement of complex systems, as indeed actual socio-economic systems are, can occur in different parts or ways, at different speeds and driven by different forces. Additionally, the development of one part of the system may be detrimental to the development of other parts, giving rise to conflicting objectives (trade-offs) and conflicts. Consequently, measuring development, i.e. determining whether and to what extent a system is developing, is an intrinsically multidimensional exercise. (2)

Development applies to every aspect of human life. It applies to the physical, emotional, psychological, economic, socio-political, and cultural dimensions of human life and living. While it is difficult to achieve

equilibrium in the development of any nation of the world, societies with this understanding have thrived to balance the situation in order to avoid the rise of internal dissatisfactions among nationals leading to social instability and subsequent underdevelopment. That notwithstanding, Bellù further clarifies that:

Event constituting a new stage in a changing situation” or the process of change *per se*. Development is implicitly intended as something positive or desirable. When referring to a society or to a socio-economic system, “development” usually means improvement, either in the general situation of the system, or in some of its constituent elements. Development may occur due to some deliberate action carried out by single agents or by some authority pre-ordered to achieve improvement, to favourable circumstances in both. Development policies and private investment, in all their forms, are examples of such actions. (2)

Within the context of this paper, development is understood as a positive change in the socio-political, economic, cultural and religious aspects of the nation; a paradigmatic shift and or improvement in the life of the nation.

Synopsis of *Death and the Kingshorseman*

Soyinka’s *Death and the Kings Horseman* captures the tale of Elesin, the Horseman whose duty is to escort the Oba to the afterlife. Following the death of the King, the Yoruba culture demands that his Horseman performs the ritual of self sacrifice to continue his job of serving the Oba in the afterlife and most importantly bridge the gap created by the death of the king between the living, dead and the unborn. This duty, the Elesin carries out, but, he is trapped by the beauty of the world. Lost in the beauty of a young lady, Elesin desires to have the young lady before he transcends to the underworld. The Elesin receives series of warnings and plea from the Iyaloja, praise singers and other community members, but he never yielded. His insistent to have the young lady and other worldly pleasures delayed his transition to the underworld to the point where the British interrupted the ritual ceremony and he is stopped from committing the ritual suicide. His son who is fully aware of the tradition of his people, returned from abroad to bury his father only to discover that he is still alive. He takes the place of his father in the ritual; this act forces Elesin to kill himself. Belatedly, though, his son takes his place in the afterlife thus making his death worthless and meaningless to the entire process.

National Identity and Sustainable Development in *Death and the Kings Horseman*

The death of the Oba instantly stagnate the society. Thus, his death leaves Elesin, his horseman between the threshold of life and death. The same goes for the Oba who without his Horseman may not be able to journey to the underworld. With this, the community becomes stagnated and this point in dare need of a mediator in the death of the Elesin for it to move on. Metaphorically, for the society to move on connotes development, transformation, and continuous growth. Societal growth is deterred because the socio-economic and political activities that sustain it are put on hold still the ritual sacrifice is carried out. Therefore, the death of Elesin Oba is highly significant and symbolic within the Yoruba cosmology. Elesin's death determines whether his immediate society will move on or remain static. This is because the burden of the society lies on his shoulders. This self-sacrifice therefore, is an act of resilience and patriotism to the society that birth Elesin. Ibitokun in Dameh maintains that:

In Yoruba culture, death is not something that is feared, it moves the earthly confines of the body and soul to a better place. Death functions as a means to achieve honour in the society... but for the Yoruba, death is not annihilation of being. It is the simple rite of passage, from human to divine essence...other rites of passage include, birth, naming ceremonies, circumcision rites, conferment of chieftaincy titles, kings' installation, etc.(3).

The character of Elesin can be likened to that of armed enforcement agent who upon appointment signs his or her death warrant in defence of the territorial integrity of the nation and to ensure peace and social stability. His or her job is to make sure there is progress and total societal transformation. Without this set of people society becomes lawless and development is deterred. The seat of the Horseman is therefore, very vital to the progress or otherwise of the Yoruba society, and most insightfully, a position and civic duty that the horseman cannot escape. Elesin corroborates this point when he says that:

Elesin: I was born to keep it so. A hive is never known to wonder. An anthill does not desert its roots. We cannot see the still great womb of the world-no man beholds his mother's womb-yet who denies it's there? Coiled to the navel of the world is that endless cord that links us all to the great origin.

If I lose my way the trailing cord will bring me to the roots.
(*Death and the Kings...* 18-19)

The horseman on assumption of office instantly becomes a martyr because he gives his life for society to experience change when the need arises. He knows from the beginning that he is living for the day when he will give his life for society to move on. Dameh further maintains that “for the Yoruba’s, death is more than the termination of human breath, but the termination of the continuum that exists between the world of the living, the world of the dead and that of the unborn. This cyclical world view is interdependent and allows for the continuation of the human race. Any break, any chasm created will lead to the annihilation of the entire race (3). Elesin’s death will therefore, fill the vacuum created by the death of the king. However, trapped in the euphoria of earthly pleasures, Elesin demanded that he bed a new bride before his passage right is completed. Elesin’s request is outrageous, given the importance and immediacy of the ritual to the continuity of his society. However, the fear that he may derail from the course if his demands were ignored forced community people to grant his wishes. Also, in order to commit him to the course, they do everything humanly possible to make him commit the ritual suicide. This explains while Iyaloja had to break tradition and give Elesin a betrothed young girl

Elesin: And that radiance which so suddenly lit up this market I could boast, I know so well?

Iyaloja: Has one step already in her husband’s home. She is betrothed.

Elesin: (Imitated): Why do you tell me that? (Iyaloja falls silent. The women shuffle uneasily)

Iyaloja: Not because we dare give you offence. Elesin, today is your day and the white world is yours. Still even those who leave town to make a new dwelling elsewhere like to be remembered by what they leave behind.

Elesin: Who does not seek to be remembered? Memory is master of death, the chink in his armour of conceit. I shall leave that which makes my going the sheerest dream of an afternoon. Should voyagers not travel light? Excessive load, all that may benefit the living.

Woman (Relieved): Ah, Elesin Oja, we know you for a man of honour.

Elesin: Then honour me. I deserve a bed of honour to lie upon.

Iyaloja: the best is yours... (20)

The cynical and cocky attitude of Elesin runs him into trouble because such inappropriate actions delayed his ritual obligation. Elesin took advantage of the situation to demand for the things he yearned for but did not have the opportunity to get. His hunger for flesh demonstrates his short sightedness and uncontrolled appetite over the course which society depends on. Iyaloja sensed neglect in his action and even though she puts her concerns to him politely, he did not listen.

Iyaloja: (Smiling broadly, completely reconciled): Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back and sigh a last regret for the flesh that fleshed pest your spirit in flight... You wish to travel light. Well, the earth is yours. But be sure the seed you leave in it attracts no curse. (23-22)

It is difficult to correlate and or decipher the connection between committing ritual suicide and developing an instantaneous feeling to bed a young lady who just passes by. Elesin's uncontrolled conjugal appetite demonstrates his less concern and or commitment to the progress of his community and a great pointer to why he jettisoned the process at the end. He does not care if the girl is betrothed or not, as the high power of the society, following the death of the ruling Oba and his critical position as the horseman whose ritual death will bring about continuity and social stability, he leveraged on this to exploit the people and more provokingly to commit an act of abomination. Despite the warning that the girl is betrothed, he resented the caution and asked that she be brought to him. The major implication of this delay is the reproach he gets from the British officers domicile in the region.

Pilkings: Amusa's report. Listen. 'I have to report that it come to my information that one prominent chief, namely, the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a result of native custom. Because this is criminal offence I await further instruction at charge offence. Sergeant Amusa... (Jane comes out onto the veranda while he is reading)

Jane: Dad I hear you say commit death?

Pilkings: Obviously he means murder

Jane: You mean a ritual murder

Pilkings: Must be. You think you've stamped it all out but it's always lurking under the surface somewhere.

Jane: Oh. Does it mean we are not getting to the ball at all?

Pilking: No. I'll have the man arrested. Everyone remotely involved. In any case there may be working to it. Just rumours. (26)

Ironically, local people who have the knowledge of the custom and traditions are used as instrument to stop Elesin from carrying out this ritual rite. Such locals are converted from the known traditional religion to Christianity. A worrisome attitude of these converts is how they suddenly turn a blind eye on their ancestral religion and contribute in no small measure to prevent Elesin from carrying out his civic duty. Amusa in this light maintains thus:

Amusa: Madam Iyaloga, I am glad you came. You know me. I no like trouble but duty is duty. I am here to arrest Elesin for criminal intent. Tell these women to stop obstructing me in the performance of my duty.

Iyaloja: And you? What gives you the right to obstruct our leader of men in the performance of his duty? (36)

It is unacceptable to the people for an unbeliever, an outsider to take over their land and determine what happens in their society. The impunity of the Whiteman on the cultural practice of the people, more that it is perpetrated by indigenes is tantamount to the destruction of the society itself. The magnitude of destruction that is likely going to take place in the society informs Iyaloja's outburst.

Woman: You ignorant man. It is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba, it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him and will to his son after him: and that is in spite of everything your white man can do. (35)

The thinking is that, indigenes who work with the British government should be the ones educating them on the essence of the ritual death to the existence of the society and not the arms men used in deterring the Elesin from exercising his civic duty. In no instance did the society prevent patriotic individuals from exercising their civic rights except such act or action contravenes societal rules and regulations. Olunde saw as thus, every member of the society that his father's action is heroic and a course that will move the society forward. While the Whiteman's moves to

prevent Elesin from performing the ritual death lingers, Olunde only returns from the Whiteman's land to bury his father. He expresses his anger when he heard of the attempt to stop his father from performance the ritual suicide thus:

Olunde: (Mildly): And that is the good cause for which you desecrate and ancestral mask?

Jane: Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing.

Olunde: Oh I am not shocked Mrs. Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand.

Jane: Oh, so you've returned with a chip on your shoulder. That's a pity Olunde. I am sorry. (An uncomfortable silence follows) I take it then that you did not find your stay in England altogether edifying.

It is the expectation of Mrs. Jane that Olunde's stay in England would change his thinking and belief in his culture. However, he still holds his cultural practices dearly and ready to take over the seat as the next horseman to the next king. However, Olunde who is kept in the dark on the state of his father is questioned on how he got wind of the situation and has returned to the land in such hast. In his response he maintains thus:

Olunde: A relation sent it weeks ago, and it said nothing about my father. All it said was, our king is dead. But I knew I had to return home at once so as to bury my father i understand that. (52)

Jane: But you don't think your father is also entitled to whatever protection is available to him?

Olunde: How can I make you understand? He has protection. No one can undertake what he does to night without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What would you think of your prince if he had refused to accept the risk of losing his life on his voyage? This... showing the flag tour of colonial precessions (53)

Olunde's disposition is that, the Whiteman has no right to stop his father from carrying out his obligation. This act of self suicide gives Elesin eternal veneration. Without his completion of the ritual, the connection

between the living, dead and the unborn is perpetually broken. Olunde further notes that:

Olunde: Don't think it was just the war. Before that even started i had plenty of time to study your people. I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to press judgement on the peoples and their ways. Nothing at all. (54)

Again his contention is that, every human culture has their peculiar practices. In such circumstances, no culture is above the other, no culture has the right to regard other cultures as savage or barbaric. The Whiteman's culture is also fraught with issues and ill practices as well. His point is that the ritual is indispensable and must therefore be carried out to the later. This explains why the death of his father is not considered tragic, but a heroic death that enables society to move on.

Olunde: Yes Mrs pilkins, my father is dead. His will-power has always been enormous. I know he is dead.

Jane: (screams): How can you be so callous! So unfeeling! You announce your father's own death like a stranger's body! You're past a savage like all the rest. (55)

Olunde: I have a funeral to arrange. Excuse me (Going)

One thing Jane failed to understand is that once you are Elesin Oba, your faith is already decided and known by the people. That is why the people celebrates the Horseman as he journey to the afterlife rather than grieving. Olunde further expatiates this:

Olunde: All these things are part of it. And any body, my father has been dead in my mind for nearly a month. Ever since I learnt of the kings death. I've lived with my bereavement so long now that i cannot think of him alive. On that journey on the one who must perform the rites over his body. I went through it all again and again in my mind as he himself had taught me. I didn't want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people (57).

Olunde knew the calamity that will befall his community following his father's dalliance in committing himself to the afterlife. As a son who understands his culture and societal need, he gave his own life in place of his father for his society to grow.

Nigeria undoubtedly needs leaders with the character disposition of Olunde; leaders who are willing to place national interest above personal

interest; patriots who are capable setting formidable goals and are able to commit and or key their followers into actualising such goals. Unfortunately, such kind of leaders are merely found today, even the few who are willing to work are deterred by the existing political ideology of “it is our turn to chop”. In this instance, cultural and religious affiliations as well and “who knows who” become the criterion for election leaders and offering of political appointments. This explains why it has become very difficult for Nigeria to develop. In Soyinka’s *Death and the Kings Horseman*, every community member commits themselves to the course of social transformation; they ensured that Elesin pulled through with the ritual sacrifice. This is a virtue the contemporary voters must imbibe; leaders must be made to deliver on their campaign promises for it is the only way that development can be guaranteed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Soyinka’s *Death and the Kings Horseman* has not only critically examined the question of national identity and development in Nigeria but has more fundamentally offered tangle solutions on the problematics. On this premise this paper encourages playwrights and directors as well as other theatre stakeholders to intensify research into various cultural dimensions of the country and portray a good image of the nation. When this is done, Nigeria’s image would be appreciable and her diplomatic and or international relations would be strengthened and in turn would bring about development in the country.

Nigerians must be encouraged to emulate the life of Olunde who demonstrates total allegiance and patriotism to his society. Olunde knowing full well that it is not yet time for him to commit death for his society to move on did so in place of his father who failed his society. Elesin’s character typifies a greedy and selfish human being who is only interested in himself than the good of the larger society. His unpatriotic attitude held the entire society to a standstill. Such individuals are capable of destroying the society and must therefore, be expunged for society to be controlled by reasonable people who will drive the society to greater heights. Olunde is one of such persons whose love for his society outweighs his personal interest. He scarified himself for the cyclical nature of the living, dead and the unborn to be sustained. This is a rare sacrifice given the nature and calibre of people we have in our society today. That notwithstanding, the presence of the likes of Olunde in the Nigerian society will go a long way in enhancing the development of the country.

Finally, our cultural heritage must be revived. It is the responsibility of all cultural stakeholders in the nation to revitalise, promote and strengthen our cultural heritage for posterity. We must together hold and develop our culture and pass it on from one generation to the other. The understanding of our cultural heritage and how to apply its norms and values in our daily life and living is a bold step towards development.

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