



A GAZELLE OF THE SAVANNAH

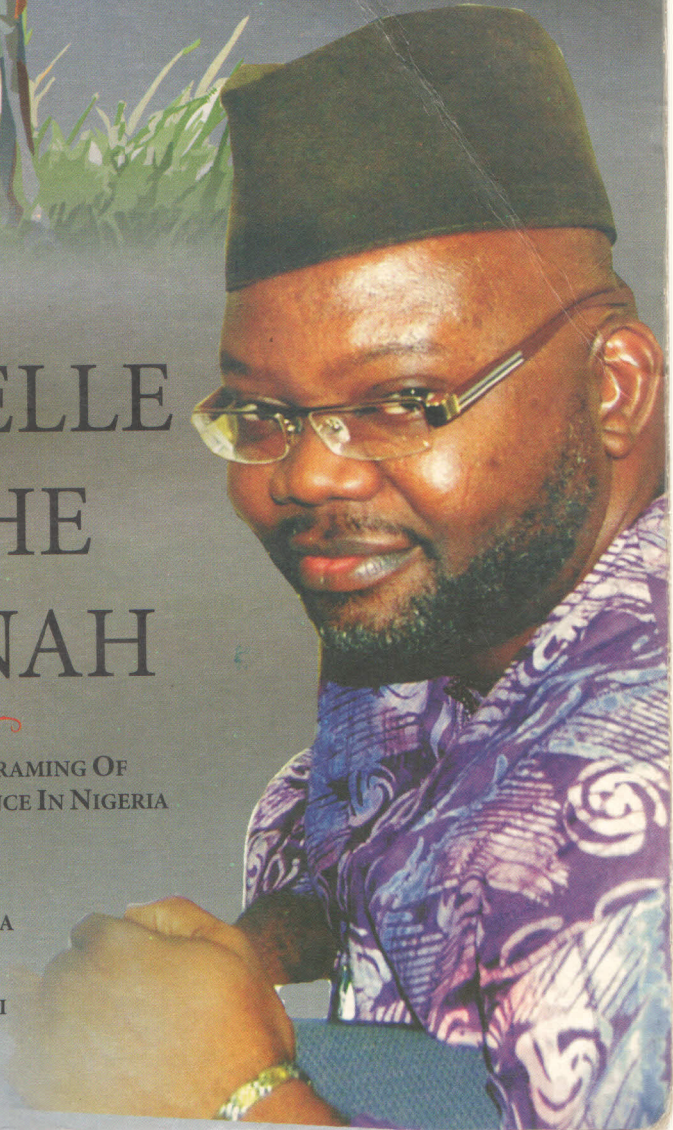
SUNDAY ODODO AND THE FRAMING OF
TECHNO-CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA

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Dedication

To
Sezuo, Dupe, Sajo

And

All constructors of knowledge
Who have painstakingly worked
To improve the lot of Africans

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Signification and Symbolism of Socio-Political Structures in Sunnie Ododo's *To Return from the Void*

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Abstract

The environment of a playwright is the source of raw materials for his work. He takes issues around him and weaves his own creative ingenuity, which in turn reflects the society and his response(s) to societal issues. Like Agero (205) opines, "plays are reflections of the originator's experience with life." This discourse views theatrical enactments as a message from the playwright to his audience, the society. Using Ododo's "To Return from the Void" as a paradigm, the focus is to analyze the opera with a view to highlighting various areas where the playwright in response, exposes the socio-political ills affecting Nigeria, and his various suggestions on how to deal with them. His uses of different semiotic indices, icons and symbols to explore the dynamics of physical/ non-physical objects in conveying meaning to his audience are also examined.

Keywords: Socio-political ills, Opera, Theatrical communication, Drama, Message, Society, Semiotics

Introduction

Whether through satire or documentary practice, the dramatist sustains his art by his consistent intermediary role between history and his society, his people. (Ameh Akoh 94)

John Fiske observes that communication is "one of those human activities that everyone recognizes but few can define satisfactorily" (1). However, various analyses by different scholars establish two standard methods of communication discourse: 'transmission' and 'interaction' models (Okoye 44). The former sees communication as a "means for moving or transmitting ideas from one person to another" (Black and Bryant 26) while the latter sees it as "an

activity concerned with the production and exchange of meanings (Fiske 2). Hence, this second model construes a variance in meaning as the manifestation of a difference in the cultural identities of sender and receiver. This may be why Scot Ober asserts that language conveys several impressions about the message it carries and then shapes such impressions. In his words, "Each person has a unique perception of reality, based on his/her individual experiences, culture, emotions at the moment, personality, knowledge, social, economic status and a host of other variants" (6).

Okoye in his semiotic approach towards defining theatrical communication also sees communication as "an activity that involves the generation and exchange of messages between performers and audience in an environment that is more or less governed by convention" (45). He mentions four significant terms in the vocabulary of semiotics: signs, codes, signifier and signified. The first indicates something that stands for another thing outside of itself, the second is the rules that govern the relationship of what it stands for, and the third is the material that functions as a sign while the fourth is the thing/concept which the signifier represents. He buttresses further, saying:

it submits that when a reader encounters the signs in the text of a message, he reads them according to the codes operative in the socio-cultural systems and derives from them a meaning coloured by his socio-cultural constitution. (Okoye 45)

This submission also applies to performances as the audience infers meanings from instances on stage based on his socio-cultural exposure, transcending the realm of illusion and reacting as though the whole performance were real by relating it to their immediate environment. Of utmost importance in theatre communication, is also the three basic forms of relationship of signifier to signified, termed the 'semiotic triad: icon, index and symbol' (Shittu 79).

...the icon, something which functions as a sign by means of features of itself which resemble its object; the index, something which functions as a sign by virtue of some sort of factual or causal connection with its object; and the symbol, something which functions as a sign because of 'rule' of conventional or habitual association between itself and its object. (Hawke 127-8)

This presupposes that the principle of icon is similitude (For instance, a



drawing of a subject is its icon); the principle of index is sequentially causal (For example, a knock at the door is an index of somebody's presence) while symbol thrives on socio-cultural conventions situated in any given dramatic discourse (e.g. nodding of head meaning agreement in a particular environment and something else in another). Hence, this triad (in mixed proportions most of the time) helps the audience in his imagination and recollection in any dramatic endeavour, making him infer the meaning intended by the playwright (and others not intended) based on his socio-cultural understanding and exposure.

The Opera: *To Return from the Void*

Ododo's *To Return from the Void* as directed by Ziky Kofoworola was performed at the Africa Hall of the University of Ilorin Mini Campus on the occasion of the 25th Convocation ceremony. This opera satirizes the socio-cultural cum political leadership tussles found in most nations across the globe, using 'Dentarea' as a microcosm. Mother Earth falls ill out of neglect and this begins a series of scheming among her three eldest children – Awotoye, Nneka and Dankwushi – over who succeeds their mother after her death. After collectively sending the Union Jack away, each engages in different methods of scheming to overthrow his/her siblings. The intrigues that follow incite their other siblings (and followers) into protest and the leaders pacify them by throwing a big bash for Mother Earth. 'Khaki' steps in at this moment to 'remedy' the situation.

This turn of events eventually throws Mother Earth in a critical condition and her children try healing her to no avail. Hope is restored as a divine force step into the situation, admonishing each faction to fight the looters among them by embracing unity and love for their mother to be sustained and live long. Nevertheless, the exit of the divine force brings another argument among the siblings on how to right the wrong. This begins another series of bickering and 'compartmentalization' among the children as each struggle to get the support of the majority. Another voice of reason, Bulldozer comes in to warn the people, who by their actions are making themselves victims of exploitation. This ushers in the 'khaki' in readiness for brutality. Chaos is however forestalled as their mother recovers in time to disarm the combat ready factions, urging them to return from the void they keep plunging themselves.

Images of Socio-political Structures in the Opera

Ododo employs various icons and symbols to pass his message across to his audience. The title *To Return from the Void* is an iconic index the playwright uses to nudge his audience's understanding to how far Nigeria has come as a nation. He explores the history of Nigeria's nationalism and independence symbolically

in the opera, awakening in the audience a nostalgic feeling of Nigeria, then and now. By examining the effects of slavery, colonialism and leadership on the African continent (and Nigeria in particular), the tableaux offers the audience a psychological awakening/understanding as to the rich assemblage of socio-cultural cum political heritage the nation had before greed and corruption of her representatives started pillaging its resources.

Mother Earth: We have come a long way/2x
Our country Nigeria is a melting pot
Here we are connected...
The Benin Empire of ancient civilization
The Oyo and Ife model of civil culture...
The colonial masters came/2x...
They forced them to sign their own treaties
They exploited and vandalized our treasures
Our youths and able-bodied enslaved
Across the oceans to Diaspora. (20)

The Colonial Master and the Union Jack are icons for Britain's colonization and her rule till the nationalists fight for independence. The three protagonists – Nneka, Awotoye and Dankwushi represent the three major tribes of Nigeria: Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa, while their other siblings and followers are symbols for the almost two hundred and fifty other tribes in the country. Here, Ododo's exploration of familiar names evokes a feeling of identification in the audience who easily grasp the geographical location of such names. This corroborates Musa's assertion that common behavioural patterns should enhance audience perception (79). He affirms that "tendencies noted of the Nigerian ethnic groups should form part of the character portrayal and development of multicultural performer". Therefore, Ododo's symbolic use of life-like characters that the audience readily visualizes sustains his (audience's) interest in determining distinctive personalities being focused on stage. We infer from the performance leaders overtaken by the desires to satisfy personal interest at the detriment of the society. Through the three siblings, we see how our leaders enrich and enhance themselves at the expense of the majority. They take supervisory roles and get the bulk of the gains when returns come:

Narrator: Dis na the clear case of
monkey dey work o
Baboon dey chop o



God bless Dentarea family. (*To Return*...39)

This type of situation still prevails, and in higher magnitude to how it is portrayed in Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977) where the protagonist, Lejoka Brown goes into politics to accumulate as much wealth as he could garner: "wait and see... we will stuff ourselves with huge mouthful of national chin-chin..." (4). He goes further to marry Sikira, the daughter of the President of the Nigerian Union of Market Women, to get the vote of women. Earlier, Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) has emphasized this same trend in which politicians who are supposed to influence the people towards improving their lots manipulate government resources for personal use. Therefore, Nneka, Awotoye and Dankwushi are also icons of betrayal of trust as is pertinent among our leaders who would promise 'heaven on earth' when canvassing for people's votes but would sing another tune immediately they assume position of authority, most of the time taking decision without consulting the people they claim to represent:

Nneka: What about the traditional rulers?

Dankwushi: I'm still trying to get their support

Awotoye: They have no choice. (29)

However, this tends to bring negative results as people may challenge such authority whenever they (the people) are pushed to the wall. Thus, the society represented by the other siblings could protest harmful policies and agenda of their so-called representatives like the recent fuel subsidy removal experienced in the nation:

Protesters: Oyinbo servant
Go tell your master
We no go gree oh
Iya yi ti poju...;
We protest/3x
People of Nigeria,
Against exorbitant taxes... resource
exploitation...oppression of slavery... (30)

Another pointer to indirect societal protest is the 'Boko Haram' syndrome that has claimed so many innocent lives with its spate of terrorism. Aside exposing leadership, Ododo also presents his audience inkling into the followership system inherent in Nigeria. He analyses two types of followership: the follower ready to move the nation forward positively if led aright:

Nneka: Family members
Forgive our failings
Now that we know
What to do, let's begin.

Children: Yes, yes
Let's begin.

Awotoye: To fish out the thieves
A confession session
Is my suggestion.

Children: Yes, yes
Let's begin. (54)

Then there is the follower who would not mind manipulations if there is a personal gain in it. Nneka speaks the mind of this set of people:

Nneka: I'm the bride
Of every age
Not the sage
With all pride

So my people
Why worry about
Family's field
When the logic
Of the ever rich
Is at your reach? (56)

Here, this is another indexical symbol used by Ododo that it takes the collective efforts of all to work development as those in this second category of followers would always constitute a hindrance to the efforts of the first set. He therefore chastises these 'prostitute followers' through the mouth of Bulldozer to think and make necessary amendment before all hope is lost:



Bulldozer: All of you no dey shame? You still dey follow
all dis myopic leaders wey dey spoil our
country. Anyway sha... shame on you all!
(56-57)

The dialogue and musical rendition utilized are down to earth, sometimes coded but logical; and they help to elucidate past events in relation to the present. Mother Earth's frailty indicates how much she has been 'dented' in Dentaria and through her children who make life miserable for her:

Mother: ...here I am
Empty in pains.
Your greed
Your recklessness
Your avarice
your senselessness... melting the shine of my 'morrow'.
Another life I cannot borrow. (48-49)

"Technical aids are elements used in theatrical presentation usually to give depth and meaning to the artistic fare (Ododo 1). He further submits that:

they are either manually, electronically or mechanically employed:
They include stage set and property, lighting, sound effects, costume and make up. Though essentially visual elements, when meaningfully handled with the oral aspects of theatre production they help to aid the understanding of the audience. (1)

The costumes displayed establish each of the characters' appearances - mother's green and white apparel signify Nigeria, her three eldest children are robed in the ethnic apparels of the three major tribes in Nigeria while their other siblings don the attires of the various ethnic groups scattered all over the nation. The set design is worthy of mention here as the designer has to employ cyclorama to aid his portrayal of multiple scenes. The flats constituting the major scenic background has a large drawing of the Nigerian map at the centre, giving the audience a hint about the geographical area in focus. Also, the painting of a gallows upstage right (USR) and the use of a dangling rope that is already tied into a noose are iconic symbols indicating the punishment to be meted out to 'offenders' of the government - the hangman's noose (6). In addition, the torches used by the three protagonists in Movement II Scene are

indexical icon revealing the nature of their clandestine activities.

Lighting and sound effect also went a long way in enhancing the audience's understanding as they help in depicting the mood of the opera. For instance, the tableaux expresses a combination of happy and melancholy mood, with the light and sound declining from bright to eerie as the mood of Mother Earth regresses (2). Further, the gay music and the bright light employed in the celebration scene (16 - 21) are symbolic indices to happiness while the solemnity of music and dimness of light in Movement IV Scene 1 (27) indicates the distress the characters are going through at that point in time. Likewise, the martial music/rhythm used as sound effect in movement III scene 2 consolidates the fact that the 'khaki' is about to take over. This is a replica of how military drill parlance was used in Kole Omotosho's *Shadows in the Horizon* (1977) and Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1991) to usher the 'armed forces' on stage. Hence, one can confidently admit that Ododo has passed his message across effectively not only with the use of language but also the combination of the basic artistic design elements in the theatre. As he opines, "every artistic idea also has its technical angle and this is what necessitates the collaborative relationship that exists" (3).

All in all, The opera's thematic relevance cannot be over-emphasized in the face of the current socio-political travails the country is passing through, what with the different faces of corruption emerging daily among citizens. By various acts of selfishness, over ambition, self-aggrandizement, we keep plunging the country into deeper socio-political abyss while blaming others for the negative resultant effects of our acts.

Conclusion

Just like Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) presents the filth in our society and suggests a purge, Ododo stirs his audience to identify the root cause of the socio-political brouhaha in Nigeria. He advocates that people see bad leadership and followership as the bane to socioeconomic cum political development. He also exposes the dire consequence of corruption and personal aggrandizement against the background of national development. He then moves that each would do his part to bring sanity to the deterioration that has woven itself into the depth of our existence as a nation instead, of passing the buck:

Angelis Spirit: To return from the void,
Stop sowing among the thorns,
Let love be bore aloft,



Let common sense prevail
In all your actions
And your goals you shall reach. (53-54)

The thematic injunction of the opera serves as a reminder to the existing warnings from other playwrights of note who have treated the problems associated with corrupt governance in Nigeria. Through the opera, Ododo proffers a non-violent approach to solving our leadership/political problems. This is aptly necessary to dissipate the wave of violence raging across the country at present – intra/inter-ethnic mayhem, religious/ideological wars, among others. Hitherto, Ododo brings to the fore the role of theatre as a tool of social reconstruction by suing for peace in these times of constant chaos and threats of war. He uses the opera to corroborate the fact that a writer is, and must be the only sane person when/where it seems all others have lost sanity in any given society. He (the writer) then should be able to point the way out of any predicament the society might find itself by 'channelling the thoughts of his society towards the fact that he is the architect of his destiny' (Yerima 1). This he acquires through the use of different indices, icons and symbols to rouse his audience consciousness about the state of the nation, thus passing across his message to his audience who may now interpret any way he deems fit.

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