

CHAPTER TEN

The Theatre Sociologist in Ayò Akínwálé: A Study of "Mountains of Wealth"

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Introduction

The relationship between theatre and sociology requires a much more elaborate exposition than it has been treated in the past. If not for any reason, but, to put paid to many controversies that have beclouded the relevance of sociology to theatre practice. We have, therefore, attempted to elucidate on the two concepts, examine their meeting and departure points while using one of the literary works of a Theatre Sociologist, Ayo Akinwale's "Mountains of Wealth" as a case study. We also examine ways that the theatre has been used as a sociological weapon to mediate peace in a troubled society.

In this direction, the play, "Mountains of Wealth" shall be analysed, using the participant-observation instrument. This is because the present writer was part of the production when the play was first performed for the Society of Science and Religion at its Conference held at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria in year 2001.

Literature Review

Theatre Sociology as a course is a new discipline in theatre practice, when compared to other arts of the theatre such as Directing, Acting, Stage Management, Scenic Design, Costume and Make-up, Dance and Music. Shevtsova (1989, p. 24) expresses that "the sociology of theatre has not clearly defined its objectives with respect to the research and theories of people working in the theatre", and that the: "role, purpose, meaning and potential of theatre in society" is not properly delineated. We seem to differ from this position if not in the case of the former but of the latter about the role, purpose, meaning and potential of theatre in the society. The role of theatre in the society is not a subject of any debate because it is unambiguous.

Taking a cue from these expressed concerns and the interrogations, with regard to the concept of sociology and the theatre and the marriage between them, we made bold to express that the two concepts joined together makes a perfect complimentary artistic phenomenon. Funny enough, Shevtsova (1998, p. 27) is later to affirm rather curiously that "performance-spectator dialogue is nothing if not social". Arising from this, Goldman, (1975) cited in Bamidele, (2000, p. 1) put paid to all insinuations regarding the relevance or otherwise of sociology to theatre practice and literature when he avers that: "literature in its literariness is an incomplete method of studying

literature without a consideration of the social value and context of text.” Here he submits that no discipline, especially in the field of the Arts, can stand alone when the concept of sociology is jettisoned. Emerging from this, Bamidele (2000, p. 4) describes sociology in literature as “a discipline that examines social institutions of the religious, the economic and the political, which together constitute what is called the social structure.” That in essence is an affirmation that Theatre sociology has been accepted as a theatre discipline. This fact has also been undisputedly confirmed by Akinwale (2010, p. 11) when he observes that in 1986, “at the Annual Conference of Pure Sociologists... at the University of Rome, Theatre Sociology has been accepted as a theatre discipline”. Meaning that, theatre and sociology are now seen as complimentary partners and in theatre discipline.

If theatre and sociology are truly entwined, how do we appreciate them contextually and understand their interconnectedness? How do they function for the benefit of our society? A subtle way to answer these questions to examine what ‘sociology’ is, understand what ‘theatre’ means and who a ‘theatre sociologist’ is, then match them together and see how they are relevant to theatre practice and our society. On our part, we try to provide answers to the concerns by illuminating on each of the concepts; examine their interconnectivity and their relevance to theatre and in turn to the society. We also examine Akinwale’s sociological contributions to his society as reflected in the practical presentation of the play under examination.

The concept of Sociology, which was advanced by Auguste Comte in 1838 emphasises “positivism”, as the promotion of “socially beneficial behaviour” amongst people in a given community. Interestingly, since the concept was conceived, it has been defined and redefined by various scholars in different fields of endeavours such as: politics, economic, medicine, religion, industrial and others. These various redefinitions did not exclude other interdisciplinary fields which describe the concept in different metaphors, such as: sociology of religion, of history, of psychology, of medicine, of theatre etc. In whichever field it is adopted and whichever appellation it is given, one clear notion is that it is the art of promoting social interactions among people within a community. This is why we consider apt, Wrong’s, (2009) definition of sociology (in the Encarta DVD). as: “the scientific study of human social relations or group life.”

A critical analysis of the above definition gives credence to the perception of the fathers of sociology; Herbert Spencer, (1820-1903), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Max Weber (1864-1920) whose ideological dispositions are based on “survival”, “stability”, and “development” of human being in his immediate environment. Examining theatre on the other hand, from Etherton’s (1982, p. 19) two dimensional descriptions have emerged.

One, the theatre is seen as: “the circumstances of a live dramatic performance”; and two, as “a building for live dramatic performances”. However, Sofola’s (1994, p. 21) description seems to present the theatre on a wider scope. She defines theatre holistically as: “a place where all people, regardless of their status in life, their education, their religion, and their race visit to see human experience through the objectified vision of the artist for a better understanding of life and for man’s own edification”. Brecht’s (1982, p. 180) definition which describes the theatre as “making live representations of reported or invented happenings between human beings and doing so with a view to entertain”, is also apt and reasonable.

Looking at all these definitions, we summarise that theatre is the medium that encourage interaction among people of various shades in life. This explains why we unequivocally affirm that every live performance be it; dramatic or oral, is process of social interface which is complete if it involves interaction. How then, did sociology become a bedfellow of the theatre to bear the appellation ‘theatre sociology’? Our simple answer is that both ‘Theatre’ and ‘Sociology’ enacts peoples’ way of life and the response of the people to the phenomenon within their environment as well as the examination of the social behaviour of the people and impart social norms on the behavioural pattern of the people in the society. This explains why Akinwale, (2010, p. 11) describes it as an “aspect of the theatre that examines the theatre and society dialectics”. Considering the role of a theatre sociologist, he can be described as a theatre person who examines, identify and strives to bridge the gap or act as a missing link between the theatre on one hand, practitioners and the society on the other.

A Synopsis of “Mountains of Wealth”

Surrounding the Community of Okegbile, are mountains, from which the community derived its name ‘Okegbile’, which literally mean a town surrounded by mountains. In the mountains are large deposits of diamonds and other mineral resources, but not known to the people of the community. The community rather sees the mountains as sacred monuments, to which they offer sacrifices annually. One year after the annual festival of Okegbile, Government sent groups of Geo-Scientist led by an illustrious son of the community to inform the King and the Chiefs of government decision to bring down the mountains which they discover have mineral resources deeply seated in them. After due consultations with his Chiefs and having been convinced about what the community stands to gain from the government decision, the king gives a go ahead to the Geo-scientists. But Aboke, the Chief Priest and a few other Chiefs vehemently opposed this, describing the attempt as sacrilege against their Orisa who dwells in the mountains. To drive home his disapproval, Aboke attack the group of scientists working at the project

site. His attitude angers the King and some Chiefs who see Aboke's action as retrogressive and a revolt against royal authority. The matter brews lot of furore; with Aboke on one side and the people of the village on the other. Eventually, the love relationship between Aboke's son and the Professor's daughter becomes the *Dues ex Machina* that restored peace back to the land of Okegbile.

The Sociological Potentials in the "Mountains of Wealth"

Analysing the play literarily, we observe that Akinwale brings to bear the sociological potentials embedded in the play; "Mountains of Wealth", from exposition through the various dramatic actions to the final resolution of dramatic conflicts in the play; the Orisa-Oke festival being the expository part.

During the festival, sons and daughters of the community congregate in a joyous mood to offer sacrifices to their ancestral gods (Orisa-Oke) that dwells in the mountains. The festival, which is celebrated at the bottom of the mountains, has the King, the Chiefs and people of the community as participants. The festival commemorates the period when the people of the community show appreciation to their ancestors for his care towards them during the year ending, as well as to a time to seek favour and blessing during the ensuing year. The ritual festival, which is celebrated amidst pomp and pageantry with all professional groups paying obeisance to King, is usually led by Chief Priest, (Aboke).

Panegyrically, the festivity reveals an aural of peace, tranquility and a scenario of oneness that exists among the people of Okegbile. It also shows how the people demonstrate respect to their King, who in the Yoruba pantheons is regarded as the second in command to the gods. Aboke's dialogue is an epitome of this when after his obeisance to the King seeks his permission before embarking on this ritual assignment thus: "K-a-bi-ye-si-o-o-o., we are here once again to carry our sacrifice to Orisa-Oke, so that our lives can be preserved in the coming year. Pray for me and Arugba, the carrier that we will go in peace, and come back in peace." (p.4). The king reciprocate the gesture by giving his royal approval thus: "Aboke, when the bird flies in the sky, it does not bump into a tree, you will go in peace and come back in peace." (p.4).

Ironically, as we strive to live in peace in life, skirmishes here and there creep into our relationship, and oftentimes we witness uncontrollable anger. This is the unfortunate situation that Okegbile finds itself in no sooner the Orisa-Oke festival is concluded. The crisis is as a result of the arrival of some Geo-scientists sent by the Government to commence the falling of the mountains to extract mineral resources that are earlier found at the bottom of the mountains. When they arrived at the King's palace where they meet the Chiefs-in-Council, the following dialogue ensues:

- Kabiyesi: You are welcome Kofeso, what is the news from the capital? (p.5).
- Fabiyi: Kabiyesi, I shall be brief. The Federal Government sent a team of Geo-Scientist here last year to carry out a geo-chemical survey on our soil and rocks. Their findings are that at the bottom of our rocks, there are mineral deposits. We are here to bring down the rocks and get all the minerals at the bottom, Kabiyesi o (p.6).

The courtesy here shows the line of communication between the ruler and the ruled. The King, like any progressive and dynamic leader after receiving the message from the representative of the Government, requested that he be given some days to consult with his chiefs, the result which is the consent given to the Government's proposal. However, the decision did not go down well with some Chiefs and particularly Chief Priest (Aboke), who vehemently opposes the bringing down of their mountains, describing the attempt as an abomination, and a debasement to the god, Orisa-Oke. Abese, another Chief submits that:

Abese: My advice is, let them look for their own mountain elsewhere. Nobody should disturb Orisa-Oke. This impertinence must stop (p. 10).

We cannot but regard Aboke and a few other Chiefs' reactions as a clear display of ignorance. But on a second thought, shouldn't they be commended for protecting their cultural heritage? As it is constantly witnessed in our societies, the Okegbile community's episode only reminds us of how peace amongst people always nosesives. If Wrong's (2009) proposition on the tenet of sociology, which he describes as "social stability" is anything to go by, that is lost in Okegbile during the impasse, which has Aboke on one side, the King, and a few other Chiefs on the other side.

Beyond mere expression of disapproval, Aboke physically goes to attack Professor Fabiyi (himself a son of the community) who leads the Geo-scientists team, at the site of the mountains where the project work is going on. There he uses supernatural powers to enter one of the trees at the foot of the mountain and begins to chase the Geo-scientists around. Thereafter, he boastfully tells them; "that is just a sample. I give you three days to vacate these premises or else!" (p.8). Much as one will be well to describe Aboke's display as a demonstration of Africa's rich culture, one cannot but condemn, in clear terms, such attitude as negative show of traditional prowess to defenseless fellow beings.

In the same direction, the roles of the Narrator in this play also admonish us to be weary of attitude of some shrewd individual in our society. Although in this play, she is introduced as that necessary character within the concept of epic theatre and the story-telling theatre tradition, and more

importantly to serve as the bridge between the actors and the audience, Akinwale also presents her as one who is responsible for adding fuels to the crisis that ranges in Okegbile as seen in the following dialogues of the Narrator to Aboke and the Professor respectively:

Narrator: Now the soldiers, their weapons- can it hurt a fly?
(p.16)...

Narrator: Come Aboke, I learnt they are bringing heavy guns
from the city... (p.16).

To Professor Fabiyi:

Narrator: ...My people pray. Pray. Blood will spill here today.
Oh! Kofeso, welcome. Is all well with you? (p. 17).

Narrator: Are you still going to fall the mountain? (p.17).

The philosophy behind the action and roles of the Narrator as Akinwale presents her (to our mind) calls our attention to the kinds of characters that our society parades. Not oblivious of the fact that in life, human beings can never co-exist without skirmishes. Therefore, complete aversion is not possible but we should try to avoid the kind of reactions that ensure in the dialogues between Aboke and Fadele when Fadele meets Aboke traditionally 'dealing' with his son professor Fabiyi and his team:

Fadele: Aboke, this to me?

Aboke: Yes, Fadele, why did you not warn your son?"

Fadele: At least you would have reported him to me.

Aboke: It is war. Such reports have no place in war.

Fadele: So you have forgotten who I am?

Aboke: Who are you? (p.14).

This situation presents the impatient attitudes of human beings that when people are at dagger drawn, they loose their sense of reasoning.

Commendably, Akinwale, in this play, celebrates the fact that occurrences such as the one that we witness literally in Okegbile cannot be averted as long as we interact on daily basis. His explicit analysis of the riddles of life as in a period when we shall be happy and celebrate together, moments when crisis shall occur, as well as ways by which we can resolve them, endear us to his sociological inclination. We observe succinctly too that Akinwale in teaching us methods of resolving crisis introduced us to one pragmatic modem; the application of the metaphor of love in resolving crisis. The stage instructions below show the high level of the crisis.

Aboke comes in with his warriors. They take position. Security agents come in with martial Music. They take position. Aboke's people are busy saying incantations to their charms. Prof. Fabiyi follows them with his workers. He steps forward. Just then, townspeople move in. they are many. They join the

professor's group. Music continues. Just then Folabi runs in. Debisi follows suit (p.17).

The dialogue that ensues is of interest and the thrust of the sociological message of this drama, which eventually is what put an end to the war.

Folabi: Stop! Stop this nonsense I say.

Debisi: Yes. Enough of this enmity. Shelve your weapons all of you.

Aboke: Folabi! What are you doing here?

Fabiya: Debisi! You and Aboke's son?

Debisi: Yes! Father he is my husband.

Folabi: Father! Why are you fighting a useless war?

Aboke: Folabi! Go home now.

Folabi: Listen to me father. There is no argument or dissention between your religion and the scientific knowledge of Professor Fabiya. They complement each other... (p.17).

Like an antidote that neutralises chemical reaction, the intervention of these two young lovers pacifies the two warring sides that Aboke, who is the most aggrieved has to surrender when his son Folabi asks:

Folabi: Baba Aboke! Can they now go ahead with their job?

Aboke: If they want to. (p.18).

So, a community that is thrown into confusion is also brought back to its peaceful coast. This goes to say that where love thrives, crises will be limited. This no doubt is Akinwale's subtle way of showcasing the didactic and eclectic powers of theatre sociology.

The Sociologist in Ayo Akinwale

Obviously, we have had a feel of the historical overview of how crisis ensued in our literary examination of the play "Mountains of Wealth" and the way the crisis develops using Okegbile's paradigm. This goes to prove that theatre has been used in various dimensions to address educational, cultural, political, communal and economic problems. This is why the theatre is described as a sociological weapon. How Akinwale has put to bare his theatre sociology prowess in the directing and production of the play, "Mountains of Wealth", (a play in ten scenes), a conventional play for that matter, is what we shall examine next.

Even though the original intention for which the play was written (as we gathered) is to expound that all disciplines exist to compliment one another as Sofola (1994, p. 6) would always want to describe the relationship as: "harmony for the edification of man." We noted that even though Akinwale's initial intention is to use this theatrical medium to channel an appeal to those in the disciplines of Science and Arts to see the two disciplines as complimentary; and not see one as superior to the other, it also played the didactic role of resolving some other communal problems such as the one in

Okegbile, where he adopted sociology of theatre to mediate the spirit of 'give and take' as the basic principle in peaceful co-habitation.

Akinwale, also displays theatre sociology tact by employing the metaphor of 'mountains' to admonish the society of the fact that man cannot co-exist on earth without conflict, crisis and problems describing them as mountains, overtly using the biblical meaning representation of problems as contained in (Mathew, 17, p. 20).

Another sociological prowess that Akinwale display is the promotion of 'town and gown', using the Brooks method in directing 'Ubu', which (Shevtsova 1998, p. 293) describes as "Hyperbole...mass entertainment – form." We recalled that Akinwale invited professional drummers from the town mostly from the Kwara State Arts and Culture and Ibadan. He made then performed together with the University students' drummers to the admiration of all the conference participants. In the same direction, he introduces 'Agemo Masquerade' during the performance of the play. As an advocate of total theatre, Akinwale use songs that cut across many ethnic diversities. We recalled that Ekiti/Ondo traditional songs (the Obitun songs), Egba songs, such as 'Ewe so eeku oodun o', blended with some Ibadan songs one of which is; Eban gbomo oke lanti lanti, atage olomu oru' etc.

All the artistic tact employed by Akinwale in this play, attests to his sociological deftness, and disposition to the promotion of peace by showing the path through which the society can achieve unity in diversity.

Findings and Deductions

Our findings reveal that, Theatre Sociology as a course is very important. It has shown considerable effectiveness in exciting peaceful co-existence among the people in any given community, as seen in Akinwale's sociological play "Mountains of Wealth". Certainly, this important disciple has also shown that theatre sociologists are using their works to resolve problems in our society.

It has also come to the fore in this study that the situation in Okegbile cannot be averted in a developing economy. We also note that a character like Aboke, who represents some individuals in the conservative class, exists in our society. So also are the characters of the Professor, representing very few individuals, who even in the face of intimidation will stand firm. Where we have dynamic leaders in the kind that the King of Okegbile demonstrates, whose mind is receptive to change, then our society will develop.

However, we should not be oblivious of the fact that there will be people like the Narrator, in the habit of fanny embers of discord, and pretending to be enlightening the society. They represent the double sided societal coins. The society cannot completely do away with them, because

they have significant roles to play. But it must be appreciated that their role, even if it is immediately unappreciated, the society needs them.

Conclusion

Candidly, the importance of theatre sociology to our society cannot be underestimated. Therefore, need to explore and sustain its potentials by integrating theatre sociology as a course into our educational curriculum; not only at the university level, but even at the secondary school level is crucial. This is because it is a good medium that has been used to teach moral and the ideology of harmonious co-existence among people in any community.

Association of Theatre Sociologists should be established in Africa as well so as to give more power to the discipline. Through this, the essentials of theatre sociology can be harnessed and for the development of humanity.

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