

The Creative Theatrical Oeuvre of Peace in Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*

By

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Abstract

In considering a more proactive alternative peace exerting institution, this paper identifies the theatre as that alternative paradigm, typified in Sunnie Ododo's theatrical oeuvre, *Hard Choice*. For this study, an analytical literary dissection methodology of the play script, *Hard Choice* is employed. Arising from this, we assert that entertainment, using the paradigm of the theatre seems to be an alternative model and a panacea of hope to restoring peace in our crises ridden society. We also draw inspiration from William Blake's (1757-1827) philosophy when he sees "peace as the human dress". In adopting that position therefore, we recommend that theatre should be employed to exert peace, which is the human dress in our society as celebrated in Sunnie Ododo's theatrical oeuvre, *Hard Choice*.

Keywords: Peace, Conflict, Theatre for Development, Blight.

Introduction

The most sought ingredient of development in our society today is peace. Paradoxically, peace has remained an elusive phenomenon in our society. Blake (1757-1827) underscores the importance of peace to any society as "the human dress". The metaphor of dress used by Blake to describe peace therefore underlines the usefulness of dress as a protector for humanity, thereby underpinning the necessity of peace in the society. This in essence means that any society that adorns the garment of peace stands perpetually protected. This may be the reason why Rummel (1981, p. 3) describes peace as "an absence of dissension, violence, or war...concord, or harmony and tranquility... a state of justice or goodness, a balance or equilibrium of powers". The desirability of peace in the

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settlement of both the living and the non-living cannot therefore be over-emphasised.

Considering the concept of peace and its aptness to the society as enumerated above, we realise that whenever there is a breakdown of peace, questions that usually navigate peoples mind are: What is responsible for the breach of peace? Who is behind it? Who should broker peace? In finding answers to the "what" of the above highlighted concerns, one can quickly point to some high level of belligerence. This includes; cheating, imbalance in the distribution of state's wealth, self-aggrandisement, nepotism, egocentrism, ethnocentrism and many other social vices as some of the major problems that conceal peace in our society.

Having identified the above cantankerous components of the "what" that are responsible for the breakdown of peace in our society, in the same vein, we attempt to find answers to the "who" that is responsible for breakdown of peace in our society. The answer that consistently reoccurs in our minds puts the blame on all citizens. Without prejudice, majority of us if not all of us have a share in the blame. This is because, if we are not caught in the web of being despotic, we are guilty of posing uncompromising stance in our quests for power, position and fame. This then means that as long as we chase these ephemeral components of life, peace will continue to be a mirage in our societies.

The third concern bothers on identifying the authentic institution that is right in brokering peace, since the hitherto revered peace advocating institutions namely: the courts, traditional and religious organisations seems to have lost their potency. The institution that stood in a vantage position, which this paper accentuates as the preferred alternative model for achieving unmitigated peace in our society is the theatre. The effrontery behind the commendation of the theatre institution as an alternative peace-exerting paradigm is premised upon the fact that other aforementioned institutions, even though they exist in all nations of the world and indeed, in Nigeria, have lost the effectiveness in the discharge of their peace mission. The reasons being that they have in one way or the other soiled their fingers in the oil of immorality as it manifests in unending disregard for egalitarianism and flagrant pervasion of justice. This failed expectation obviously is responsible for the restiveness that the society is experiencing, which is the reason behind the continued efforts at finding alternative trusted solution to restoring peace in our the society.

The potency of the theatre as an alternative and competent medium for brokering peace in our society is what Nasiru (2013, p.1) buttresses in the paper he presented during his Inaugural lecture on the topic: *The future has long arrived: New vistas of the role of theatre in a developing Nation*. There he asserts succinctly that:

Theatre prides itself in being more than sheer entertainment, a piece of diversion to which we turn when we are tired of serious challenges of our daily existence.

Rather, an intimate part of that serious life, indeed that it is life, because it flows from and at the same time tries to address the actual experiences of our daily life.

The above submission waxes lyrically, to celebrate the potency of the theatre as a fearless institution and a violence encumbering vehicle in our society. Therefore, having considered the diverse ways in which the theatre has been employed to resolve issues of various magnitudes in the past, we bring to fore as a hypothetical example of the feat that theatre is capable of accomplishing in a crisis riddled community, Sunnie Ododo's play text; *Hard Choice*.

Peace, Theatre and Development

It is incontrovertible that no development prone society can ever jettison the concept of peace, giving the fact that peace is a precursor that establishes communality and peaceful co-existence. In the same vein, the presence of peace in any society does not connote that conflict will be completely ridden off. A contributor to (Wikki Answer 2013, p. 1) simply referred to as Oromiselda, in his answers to the question "What is the importance of peace and harmony?" submits pungently that: "Peace is important because we need a better world for our next generations. Peace is important because we can enjoy the benefits of the latest technological and scientific advancements only in times of peace. Peace is basic requirement for our existence."

Bamidele (2010, p. 178) harps on the essence of peaceful co-existence when he submits that "in our everyday interaction we pick one thing or the other from the others who do not share the same tribal, ethnic or religious view with us and as we tolerate our differences we give fewer chances for any kind of misunderstanding to develop". To us this is the best way to promote peace and exert growth and development. This further buttress why we aver that the importance of peace to the achievement growth should be rounded and can by no means be

approached from a mono dimension. Peace, therefore, is a necessary ingredient to all human endeavours.

In the same vein, the features of the theatre that we earlier elucidate on in this work, which underscores the theatre as not only a medium of entertainment but as a didactic medium of propaganda and enlightenment. Musa (1999, p. 38) further accentuates on this fact that theatre is a tool for propagating peace. In pungently presenting his position, he identifies three performative theatre approaches; music, drama and home video and concludes that "the three will reach wider audience and make theatre popular". The popularity of theatre in this context is an exhortation of its coverage and its wider acceptance. One, therefore, requires no additional effort at this point, to conclude that the theatre is a potent medium for exerting peaceful co-existence among the people in our society. Nasiru (2013, pp. 4-9) enumerating various approaches that the theatre employs to charge and change the society identifies some of the methods it uses to include: "satirical", "expository", and "radical" approaches.

Précis of Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*

The demonstration of the saying that 'love knows no bounds' is what manifests in the love relationship between Prince Oki of Igedu Kingdom and Princess Azingae of Emepiri Kingdom. Notwithstanding, the fact that the two lovebirds come from two different ethnic backgrounds, they agree to marry with the consent of their parents. As the traditional marriage is being celebrated in the palace of Eze Okiakoh of Emepiri Kingdom, a high Chief of Emepiri Kingdom, Chief Ubanga, who has been longing to marry the princess, disrupted the marriage ceremony, realising that he has lost the princess to a Yoruba prince. He sends his thugs to snatch the Traditional Crown of King Iginla of Igedu Kingdom, a crown that must not stay outside the palace beyond seven days. Interestingly, his action enjoys the support of Amaka, the Queen of Emepiri kingdom who, unknown to Chief Ubanga, is using him to achieve her own hidden agenda. Earlier, the Queen has in her inordinate ambition to ensure that the stool of Emepiri Kingdom does not elude her husband, sacrifices her unborn child in exchange for the royal blood. To bring to fruition her earlier secret plans, she employs Chief Ubanga to hatch her plan with a promise that he will marry the princess. The princess, covertly unaware of her mother's oath at Oguguru shrine, decides to offer herself as sacrifice to avert the war that the sophisticated army of Igedu Kingdom

is planning to wage on the Emepiri Kingdom should the Eze fails to produce the stolen traditional crown within seven days. She did this to save lives of millions of Emepiri citizens.

Contextual Issues in Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*

Our societies have constantly and consistently witnessed different kinds of misnomer attitudes, which have often times posed as the bane in the way of sustenance of peace in our environment. Pathetically, we pretend to be oblivious of the negative effects of these incongruous attitudes. We also downplay the attendant harm that they bring to our society, and so like Nero we play fiddle while Rome is on fire. Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice* exhumes some of these moral inconsistencies, which we highlight as blights of peace in the play text under review. Some of these blights include: tribal sentiment/ethnicity, over-ambition, selfishness, quest for power, god-fatherism, and youthful exuberance. We examine the attendant effects that the ills brought to Emepiri Kingdom as a microcosm of our Nation, Nigeria with a view to charging our society to re-examine our actions and avoid things that can terminate peace in our various communities.

Tribal Sentiment and Ambition as Blight of Peace

One major aberrant that has constantly deprived our society of perfect peace is tribal sentiment. In some quarters it is refer to as ethnicity or ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism according to *Encarta Dictionaries* (2009, p. 1) is "the belief in the superiority of the social or cultural group that a person belongs to". Candidly, there is nothing wrong with holding a belief in one's culture, however, it will be considered extreme and inimical when the belief begins to infringe on the peace of others. We captured a similar scenario in *Hard Choice*.

This metaphor, Sunnie Ododo artistically weaves in *Hard Choice* when he illustrates how a well intended marriage programme could be overturned to accentuate conflict between two peaceful ethnic communities; Igedu and Emepiri Kingdoms. Eze Okiakoh, an Igbo traditional ruler, willingly consented to giving out his only daughter to a Yoruba prince, ostensibly to promote unity among the two Kingdoms; Emepiri and Igedu, the idea of unity in diversity that is being preached in Nigeria. Little do Eze, the traditional ruler of Emepiri Kingdom knows that some latently ambitious people, hiding under the cloak of tribal sentiment, are exploring his good intention to disparage his good gesture.

The action put up by these group of people shows what over-ambition and mad tribal sentiments can inflict on a peaceful nation. Mbachaga (2012, p. 126) buttresses this when he observes that "strong attachment of people to ethnic segmentation completely relegates to the background the passion and commitment to national patriotism". The dialogue in the play *Hard Choice* below sheds more light on what we try to illustrate:

JASPA: ...Is my Chief not good for her? (p. 17)

The "her" in the above statement refers to the princess whose father betroths to a Yoruba prince while the dialogue below describes the ambition and the expression of tribal sentiment in the statement of Emepiri High Chief:

CHIEF UBANGA: Ask me again. The princess thinks otherwise. More importantly, Eze doesn't see anything wrong in marrying his only child to a Yoruba prince simply because he wants to strengthen friendship ties with King Iginla

EGBESU: Friendship my foot! Has Eze lost sight of the consequences? (p. 17)

Appraising the expression by Chief Ubanga above, one can always know that his statement is not borne out of his genuine love for the princess but his ambition to be heir apparel to the royal stool of Emepiri kingdom. It will be a mistake to treat the expression above as mere complaints. This is because, Chief Ubanga marches his words with action by sending his thugs to steal the traditional crown of the Igedu Kingdom. It is not also without a threat when he promises that until the Eze revisit the matter, he "shall keep the fierce on Eze fierce and alive!" (p. 18).

As it is seen in the play, over-ambition and tribal sentiment have been some of the factors that are responsible for the erosion of peace in our society. Nigeria is not left out. In fact, many laudable programmes that ought to have brought unity to our communities, such as intra or inter-tribal marriages, ambition and tribal sentiment have eroded us of enjoying them.

Quest for Power and Fame as Blight of Peace

Another problem that has continually undermined peace and tranquility in our society is quest for power and fame. In the African society, we occupy the upper strata due to obsession for power and fame. It is also alarming to note that behind this mania are women. The case of

Turai Yar'adua, Wife of the Nigerian Late President, Shehu Musa Yar'adua was a case in point. It was insinuated that she shielded her husband from public view and declared him a fit man, even when it was evident that the man was incapable of administering the nation, due to his ill-health. Another case in point is that of the Wife of Danbaba Suntai, the Governor of Taraba State, whose Wife and some cabals also shielded from public view and members of the State Executive Council when it was evident that he suffers incapacitation to govern his State due to his state of health. This similar scenario manifests in the *Hard Choice* when Queen Amaka of Emepiri Kingdom, in her desperate bid to hold on to royal position sacrifices her unborn child before the coronation activities of her husband as we note below:

QUEEN: When your coronation activities as Eze of Emepiri Kingdom were suspended twenty one years ago, because of the sudden appearance of your step brother who was brought dead, I couldn't stand the agony and the shame it would have brought upon us not to be crowned as king, I had to do something.

QUEEN: I went to Oguguru shrine to secure the throne for you and for us with her pregnancy (p. 45).

By this display of desperation, one can establish that inordinate quest for power and fame is one of the blight of peace in our society.

God-Fatherism as a Blight of Peace

God-fatherism is a common phenomenon in African and especially the Nigerian polity. It has been a style that has brewed the larger proportion of the political crises being witnessed in almost all Africa societies. The arrangement was responsible for most of the mayhem that our politics have witnessed in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Ododo also brought to light this cantankerous disposition in *Hard Choice* when he presents in Chief Ubanga, the metaphor of god-father in politics. He highlights how he (Chief Ubanga) flaunts his god-father status in the master-thug relationship:

MEN: Yes Sir, Egbesu Baba (Chief Ubanga *enters and he is hailed*).

CHIEF UBANGA: Well done boys, well done! We're on course. Now the dice is cast, the battle line is drawn. Are we all together? (*Thunderous 'yes' is replied*) Look I 'm proud of you guys.

It was a clinically executed operation. (*Brings out the bulky envelope and hands it over to JASPA*) That is half a million, more would follow shortly. Always do your own bit and be rest assured that I won't fail you (p. 16).

The above dialogue opens our understanding to how god-fathers display their overbearing tendencies over their subjects and how their instructions accelerate conflicts.

Youthful Exuberance as a Blight of Peace

The slogan that youth are the pride of all nations and tomorrow leaders is by no means an understatement, but the truth is that our youths have failed to live to that expectation as they treat this genuine responsibility with disdain. More often than not, youths in Nigeria surrender themselves as willing tools in the hands of political money bags. They throw caution to the winds to perpetrate various kinds of heinous crimes and at times engage in most unforgivable anti-social vices. Painfully, they surrender themselves at the promise of payment of a pittance to be used as agents of destruction. An example of this is contained in the one of the stage direction and dialogues in the play text under examination, which ensued at the hideout of the perpetrators who stole King Iginla's Crown:

In a groove, JASPA and EGBESU, tough-looking young men with guns and machetes, are agitated, prancing up and down. Three masked men rushed in with King Iginla's crown and handed it over to JASPA as they unmask.

JASPA: Welcome, boys. Any hitch?

MEN: None!

CHIEF UBANGA: Well done boys, well done! We are on course.

Now the dice is cast, the battle line is drawn...look I am proud of you guys. It is a clinically executed operation. (*Brings out a bulky envelop and hands over to JASPA*) That's half a million, more will follow shortly. Always do your own bit and be rest assured that I won't fail you (p. 16).

Today, youthful exuberance and love of money have cowed our youths and turned them to major encumbrances to peaceful existence in our society.

Panacea for Peace in Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*

Some researchers have identified a number of principles as panacea for resolution of conflict, based on the degree and the dimension of the conflict. Rummel (1981, pp. 3-24) identifies a wide range of such principles, which we paraphrased to include the followings: clarification of conflict situation, defining "yesable" situation, invoking overriding interests, focusing on exchange, emphasizing legitimacy, keeping issue and power proportional displaying commitment, creating distance and resisting aggression. Just as Rummel opines, we are also of the opinion that all the principles enumerated above are capable of ameliorating most conflict situations, definitely, however, not all. A couple of such principles, such as "Resistance of aggression", self sacrifice, which are contained in *Hard Choice* that we consider apt to our discourse are enumerated below.

Resistance of Aggression

Of all the above enumerated peace fostering principles, we observe that resistance of aggression approach is capable of producing quick result. We could attest to this in the use of the method in the dialogue that ensued between Eze Okiakoh and King Iginla when Eze surrenders his royal authority to embrace jaw-jaw as opposed to war-war.

In another research submission drawn from the wiki.answer.com (2013, p. 3), five different skills/models of conflict resolution strategies were enumerated. They include: compromise, competing, accommodation (or cooperation), collaboration, or avoidance. Features of each of the skills are highlighted as follows:

Compromise: each party gives up a want. Can create a win-win, lose-lose, or win-lose situation. Competing: one party pursues what it wants at the expense of the other party. Creates a win-lose situation. Cooperating or accommodating: one party gives up allowing the other party to win, but the actual problem is not resolved.

Self-sacrifice as Princess Azingae's Peace Approach in the *Hard Choice*

It is incontrovertible that the approach to exerting peace in any society is not an easy burden to shoulder. This is because, compromise exert self sacrifice, which is means surrendering one's freedom. It requires

a lot of give-and-take and shift in one's position. This Princess Azingae demonstrates in the play text under review, which we shall elucidate on in the following paragraph.

The principles highlighted in the works of some of the researchers that we had earlier examined speak volume about the implications of adopting any of the remedies. Princess Azingae in *Hard Choice* observes this but still goes ahead to offer herself as the sacrificial lamb to bring a lasting peace to her fatherland. No doubt her position underscore the fact that first and foremost, individual willingness to offer oneself as sacrifice is the greatest compromise that far outweighs all other approaches for achieving peace in any society. That perhaps explains why the former American President, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) advises that: "far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they lie in the gray twilight that know not victory nor defeat" (*Microsoft Encarta Premium* 2009, p. 1). This statement underscores the fact that fostering peace in any society requires self-sacrifice.

Interestingly, Princess Azingae adopts this method in the play, *Hard Choice*. This singular act averts an imminent war, which the sophisticated Igedu army intends to launch against the Emepiri Kingdom. Princess Azingae, even giving the fact that she is the only child of her parents and the one whose husband would be heir apparent to the throne, agreed, contrary to her parent's wish to be sacrificed to Oguguru in return for King Iginla's Crown. She demonstrates this in her declaration:

PRINCESS: (*Breaks the silence and steps forward*) Father, I followed your argument carefully and I can understand the difficult turf on which you both tread. I am resolved to face the worst. If offering me as a sacrifice to Oguguru would avert the imminent war and save the lives of millions, then I am ready to be sacrificed (pp. 43-44).

Her mother who masterminded the plan retorts emphatically that:

QUEEN: Never, you won't be sacrificed. Not my only child (p. 44).

While the Princess simply affirms her resort that:

PRINCESS: I shall be sacrificed; my mind is made up about this (p. 44).

The boldness that the Princess demonstrates and the passion she exhibits in the context of the protracted crisis in Emepiri Kingdom underscores her burning desire to broker peace in her fatherland. Such an unquantifiable heroic disposition W.B. Yeast (1865-1939), an Irish poet and a playwright poetically orchestrates in his work, *The Green Helmet* "No Second Troy" in *Microsoft Encarta* (2009, p. 1) that:

What could have made her peaceful with a mind that nobleness made simple as a fire, with beauty like a tightened bow, a kind that is not natural in an age like this, being high and solitary and most stern?

No doubt, the feat demonstrated by Princess Azingae is a rare position, and indeed, a collaborative one for that matter. This is one of the position for achieving peace in any given society that *wikianswers.com* recommends. The Princess action also underscores the bold initiative that a Chinese Diplomat and a Military leader, Ban Chao (AD.32-102) *Microsoft Encarta* (2009, p. 1) advises boldly that: "How can one catch a Tiger Cub without entering the Tiger lair". This exactly is the bold peace initiative that Princess Azingae takes to restore peace to Emepiri Kingdom by offering herself as the living sacrifice to Oguguru.

Conclusion

We have so far examined various panaceas that can always make peace prosecution easy in our society. We have buttressed our proposition that theatre is an alternative peace fostering institution, using the play, *Hard Choice* as a case study and the model used to resolve communal crisis between two kingdoms. We come to the conclusion that it is only through collective effort and sacrifice that the society inhabitants can promote peaceful co-existence and as well as achieve development, as shown in the theatrical piece under review. We find that being genuinely bold to offer oneself as self sacrifice is a precursor to peace process, a position that is in tandem with the bold initiative suggested by Propertius (50? BC- 15? BC) that: "Even if strength fails, boldness at least will deserve praise, in great endeavours even to have had the will is enough" (*Microsoft Encarta Premium* 2009, p. 1)

In the same dimension, we advise that the society should chastise, rebuke erring citizens, praise gallant innovative strides and reward those who have been found to be worthy in character and actions. Through this, achievement of peace will be a natural happening in the land.

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