

## LEAD PAPER

### THE PERFORMATIVE EXPRESSION IN A CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT’– AGENDA SETTING FOR THE NATIONAL TROUPE OF NIGERIA

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#### Introduction

On assumption of office as Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria, the erstwhile chief executive, Akinsola Adejuwon, in his maiden meeting with cultural journalists in his office, gave a hint at what the directive principle of what his administration would look like. Amongst other noble intentions, in his words:

Our repertoire must be organised in such a way that the policies and all the things that the Federal Government represents must be showcased in a way that will add value to government...

My vision is that in a short while we won't have to depend on funding from the Federal Government. We are going to be very proactive, very aggressive in our drive and it is my hope that as we go about generating very superior quality products that will impact the lives of our people, government and collaborators, the sky will not be the limit. (*Daily Independent*, 2014).

He further revealed that the National Troupe has designed a plan to stage productions across the 36 states and take productions outside the country. He added that plans are also underway to engage performances to resolve conflicts in the country; he dubbed that, engagement as 'Performative Expression in a Conflict Environment.' Through this effort, he hopes to "take edifying performances to conflict zones in the country. We will take performances to the barracks so that we can entertain the military when they return from the field. We are supposed to be out there [field] as often as we want, funds permitting."

From the foregoing, the overriding intention of the Artistic Director is to turn the fortunes of the National Troupe around to serve the Nigerian government and the people better. Perhaps the novel package Adejuwon is bringing to the table at the National Troupe is the outreach functions of theatre for conflict resolution and transformation. This in my view is the consciousness behind the 'Performative Expression in a Conflict Environment,' the organising theme for this forum. The Artistic Director has also with due sense of humility thrown this package open for discussion and fine-tuning which is why this stakeholders forum is convened. My role as key note speaker is to provide a conceptual framework that could guide our deliberations on this responsive idea to the Nigeria crises situations and conflict environment. As I do my best to conceptualise this idea into pathways of discussable indices of the Nigerian conflict

environment, it is hoped that the originator of this idea, Adejuwon, would bring his own perspective to bear on my submissions so that the menu would be complete for this august stakeholders to chew, digest and reinvent into a communal vision for the development of our nation.

### **Performative Expressions and Conflict**

In the creative enterprise conflict is a constant, especially in the performative genre. The preoccupation of any drama for instance is to generate conflicts and resolve them. These conflicts are also derived from human experiences and engagements with his/her environment. When conflicts are simulated or imagined, they are also placed within plausible context of human appreciation. The capacity of the performing arts to interrogate human conditions and proffer solutions is innate to drama and the art forms of music and dance can add value and substance to the conflict. No one watches a theatrical piece without taking one or two lessons home apart from its entertainment values.

In the philosophy of language and speech acts theory, **performative utterances** are sentences which are not only describing a given reality, but also changing the social reality they are describing. Verbal or none verbal language is the epicentre of performative expressions. The beauty of performative expression is its captivating intensity to hold spell bound an audience to a recreated world of imaginative reality that an audience can hardly dissociate itself from. In other words, when a performative expression is well constructed and presented it does have a hold on its audience and capable of influencing and transforming them too. It is on this count that the role the theatre can play as a change agent and as agency of mediation in conflict resolution can be understood. If a piece of drama in itself contains generated and resolved conflicts, the performing arts therefore can interrogate the reality of our environment, engage stakeholders to find workable solutions. Indeed, beyond the conventional theatre practice, there are theatre models that have emerged and successfully tested for conflict resolution and transformation.

Theatre for Development with its numerous variants remains the extant conflict resolution theatre model. Paolo Freire's work and Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre introduced and developed the modern philosophical and theoretical foundations of Theatre for Development (TfD). In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere argued the need for dialogic education as an essential element of emancipation from the oppression of hierarchical education laden with the presuppositions of prevailing power. Boal, (1985) in *Theatre for the Oppressed*, says that theatre is the first human invention and also the invention which paves the way for all other inventions and discoveries; Boal pioneered dialogic, interactive theatre. Theatre enables us to observe ourselves and by so doing to "discover what is not and imagine what we could become."(4).

In Nigeria, the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NTPA) is the foremost outfit that has carried out good number of development centred projects in many Nigerian poverty stricken and crises ridden communities. Across the globe today, arts-based projects are increasingly being accommodated to address

conflicts and transform them from negative to positive contexts (see Ifa, 2011, Arbeitsgruppe Kultur und Entwicklung, 2011).

John Paul Lederach is the exponent of “conflict transformation” and allocates a role for the arts in his comprehensive framework for peace building (Lederach, 2005a; Lederach, 2005b; Lederach/Appleby, 2010). This potential is further recognised and given weight in the discussion of ritual and peace building (Schirch 2005). Other scholars, such as Premaratna and Bleiker, have argued that theatre, as one specific art form, can help foster community dialogue and make an important contribution to peace building by changing conflict attitudes at the personal, emotional and societal level (2010, 377; 384). Interactive theatre is used to foster social change and empowerment in many countries, including in conflict regions (Bteich/Reich, 2009; Joffre-Eichhorn, 2011; Premaratna/Bleiker, 2010; Thompson et al, 2009).

In the context of conflict it helps to distinguish the general use of interactive theatre for social change and development from its specific use in constructively addressing conflict. Jonathan Goodhand (2006) distinguishes between working in conflict and working on conflict, and this distinction can be applied to arts-based work in conflict regions.

In 2012, for instance, as part of the Youth and Creative Conflict Transformation project, youth groups across Nepal wrote and performed street theatre productions which aimed to identify local conflict issues and to explore the role which youth can play in their non-violent transformation. The drama productions were delivered to over 3,500 local people, including stakeholders involved in local development who were invited to watch the plays and to participate in public dialogues to discuss the issues raised. Analysing local conflicts and working within groups to develop possible approaches for change strengthened the skills and confidence of the youth, enabling them to envision a future where youths play an important role in the peace building process within their own communities. According to a Youth participant in this project:

Conflict is present in every section of society. There are many types of conflict such as social, political, domestic, etc. Conflict cannot be ended but could be transformed creatively from negative to positive. This will help in developing our nation. (Theatre in Conflict Zones, Street Theatre).

An earlier model is “forum theatre”. It is a genre of workshop and performance practice developed by the Brazilian theatre practitioner and erstwhile Member of Parliament, Augusto Boal (1931-2009), who founded the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro (Boal, 2000). Forum theatre is an elicitive method guided by the participants’ inputs which has gained considerable acceptance in many places in the world. Traditionally, forum theatre aimed at empowering marginalised groups, but forum theatre groups and trainers have advanced and adapted the method to different contexts. The force inherent in the embodied, sensual communication enabled through the “aesthetic space” (Boal, 1992) in

the participatory group work of interactive theatre has inspired practitioners and researchers to use this format for conflict transformation (Bleich/Reich, 2009; Joffe-Eichhorn, 2011; Werner, 2009). Its potential as a tool for building relationships after violent conflict, however, has yet to be fully explored (Hamelink, 1981). To accomplish this, the “classical” method of forum theatre, which itself is being constantly developed and adapted, has to be modified in certain ways to fulfil the state-of-the-art criteria for post-war peace building: in other words, not merely working in the conflict, but specifically on it.

In contrast, the intents of TfD and what I may call Performance for Conflict Transformation (PCT) are to incorporate democratic shared control, mutuality of participation, dialectic generation of knowledge, and egalitarian communication. (Habermas 1978; Amollo, 2002:4). In order to pursue and incorporate this alternate paradigm, TfD and PCT emphasize understanding through dialogue and the co-construction of new realities through creative co-learning. In essentially all cultures other than those at the top of today’s power ladder, knowledge and education have been traditionally developed and passed on via experience-respecting and community-based dialectic.

The evolution of drama for conflict transformation from its origins in TfD has involved the continuing development of dramatic dialectic and specific indigenous modes of communication, the linkage of social injustice with conflict, and the application of the creative potential of drama to the cultures of powerless victimization and impotent anger that characterize communities in conflict.

The potency of these models of interactive theatre is even recognised by the International Theatre Institute, so much so that the institute created the “Centre for Theatre in Conflict Zones”. It was first created as a cooperation project of ITI Germany and ITI Sudan (as decided and signed by Ali Mahdi and Thomas Engel in an agreement in Khartoum in December 2004). The project was founded by Sudanese and German public funds, plus support from the Anna-Lindh Foundation and Prins Claus Fund. The concept was developed from the methods of Ali Mahdi’s Al Bugaa Theatre “Theatre between frontiers” and SOS-Children Villages project in different areas of the Sudan and the international workshop series of the German ITI/CIDC “My unknown enemy” starting in 2002. Theatre in Conflict Zones has been designed by the German ITI and has been developed in different modules with the Sudanese ITI between 2005 and 2007. ITI Germany initiated and coordinated the partnership with international trainers and workshop leaders and provided necessary tools for documentation and technical theatre equipment. ITI Sudan organized several workshops in different areas of the Sudan, where the trainers used and improved the knowledge learnt in the international modules. (ITI, Theatre in Conflict Zone).

Also in late 2004, a group of graduate students at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, United States, faced the difficult task of understandably presenting the complex history of the recent Sierra Leone civil war, during which a variety of important actors shifted roles, even to the point of changing sides. Rather than rely on a cascade of words and the polished technology of PowerPoint, the students surprised their

colleagues and professor with a dramatized narrative of the war's history, replete with costumes, character-identifying hats, and toy weapons representing active violence. Their presentation mixed comic caricature with a didactic analysis of the grisly Sierra Leone conflict, and left an indelible mental picture in the minds of their audience. (**Arendshorst**, *Drama in Conflict Transformation*),

In Sri Lanka, there is The Centre for Performing Arts committed to peace building. Founded in Jaffna in 1965, the centre focuses on the performing arts as a method for conflict resolution, healing and promoting co-existence and mutual cooperation between people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Because of their unique method of approaching peace building, the Centre was able to spread from Jaffna to all other areas of the country. At present there are more than 25 centres in different parts of the Sri Lanka, speaking both Sinhala and Tamil.

The Centre has different peace building programmes designed for different age groups, addressing the main issues felt under each age bracket. For example, they encourage women to use performance as a way of expressing their unique experiences of conflict. With children, they use more games and music to get them together with other children from different ethnic and religious origins. The Centre makes use of music, dancing and drama to support people's expression of conflict, facilitate healing and encourage them to listen to each other. Another approach of theirs is to re-tell historic stories according to the present context. They relate old epics like Ashoka and Ramayanaya which Sri Lanka people are very familiar with, to current realities in a way that brings out the destruction of war and the suffering of people belonging to all races as a result. The Centre promotes human rights and democracy through their practices. (Insight on Conflict).

We have given these models and corresponding examples of utility to demonstrate that performative expressions have the potentials to open insights and avenues for learning for conflict transformation that the didactic presentation of information often cannot. Through drama, one can readily approach the precise problems that can lock people in conflict – intolerance, the inability to perceive an adversary's point of view, and the blindness to one's own contributions to antagonism.

The performing arts can also provide us unique opportunity to participate in conflict narratives *outside* the burdening constraints and risks of real-life. Players and spectators both are enabled to step outside themselves, outside of their personal angers and insecurities, outside of their concerns and entrenched positions – and into dramatic roles that may allow them to try different alternatives and even appreciate the point-of-view of “the enemy.” The safety of “make-believe,” the suspension of “reality,” together with the safety of the facilitated group environment, empowers creative understanding and problem-solving.

Theatre also provides a group venue for the operation of collective thought, judgment, and application of cultural values. Through their participation in dramatic workshops and presentations, participants gain

insight into their own feelings and perceptions and community structures that inhibit positive change (Amollo, 2002:13-17). Amollo cites the power of a people-centred approach: “The more a community gets deeply involved in the creation and implementation of any form of development in their area of occupation, the more likely it is to receive the mandate of popular approval.” (19) By valuing and concentrating on the primacy of narrative, and by seeking to help people to realize their own strengths and to appreciate others’ points of view, PCT can combine powerful attributes of narrative and conflict transformative mediation.

### **The Nigerian Conflict Environment**

Nigeria has become a conflict zone, a theatre of crises and geography of fear. In 2002 the former Executive Governor of Nasarawa State, Alhaji Abdullahi Adamu, now a Senator, observed:

No part of Nigeria can consider itself safe when other parts are burning. The threat of anarchy in any part of our country is the threat of anarchy in the entire nation. Our nation can develop meaningfully and nurture its democracy only in a peaceful atmosphere in which respect for human lives and property is a fundamental article of our national faith. (*Speeches*)

The above assertion adequately captures the geography of fear that Nigeria has become and a pronounced conflict zone more than ever before. In actual fact, the country has experienced different internal conflicts since independence ranging from many coups, general strikes and a civil war to religious crises, political disturbances, boundary disputes, communal clashes, herdsmen and farmers conflict, environmental conflict and the politics of oil in the Niger delta, and more recently the brazen attacks of Boko Haram Islamic sect. Estimated, about 20,000 Nigerians have died in Boko Haram attacks.

Many have attributed the current spate of crises and conflicts in Nigeria not to religious but to political, ethnic or economic issues; while some others believe that our current crises, conflicts and violence are politically, ethnically and economically induced. It is inconceivable that often people are afraid to assess the place of religion in our current crises when in truth, religion dominates our life. Underlining all of these issues are the nagging questions of ethical decay, social injustice, inequality and false sense of nationalism. All these questions require urgent attention if contemporary Nigeria is to be reoriented with fair sense of socio-political relationships, distribution of national resources and reward system by all levels of Government in Nigeria.

Even though it is not within the purview of this paper to elaborate on the character and causes of the Nigerian conflict environment, it is worth noting that the Nigerian conflict situation has not been properly diagnosed. To do this, we need to locate all the socio-historical factors and core values that have over the years contributed immensely towards the development of some of Nigeria’s negative heritage upon which our national conflicts, violence and insecurity are founded.

The short but complex Nigerian conflict environment we narrated above is what the National Theatre of Nigeria must diagnose and interrogate before arriving at workable design on how to intervene with performative expressions on the Nigerian crises.

### **NTN and the New Performative Expression**

According to the 1991 act of 29th October, that established the National Troup of Nigeria, her main objectives shall be to

- (a) encourage the discovery and development of talent in the performing arts;
- (b) achieve high artistic productions specifically designed for national and inter-national tours;
- (c) ensure that productions of the Troupe are geared towards national aspirations;
- (d) encourage the development of children's theatre;
- (e) ensure the preservation of the repertoire of the Troupe; and
- (f) ensure that the National Theatre is efficiently managed as a commercial concern.

Mr Artistic Director, my assignment here today is not to assess the score card of NTN as a troupe but it is expedient for NTN to take stock of her activities within the last five years or so and self-evaluate her own performance before you move to the next critical phase of the proposed outreach programme of performative expressions for conflict transformation and resolution. This self-evaluation exercise would help the troupe to rejuvenate herself for the task ahead.

Going through the highlight of activities of your troupe between January 2013 and September 2014 (see appendix), it occurs to me that the troupe when not on international circuit is more in Lagos and Abuja, especially the Presidential Villa. This to me does not sufficiently represent national tours. Besides, these outings are also mainly dance performances to entertain some dignitaries and not the generality of Nigerian people. I doubt also if these dance performances are packaged to tell the occupiers of the presidential villa some home truth about the Nigerian reality of unemployment, lack of portable water, irregular electricity supply, hunger and poverty, high cost of living and the agony of frustrated living in country that is purportedly the largest economy in Africa and No 25th in the world. Until the NTN begin to package productions that genuinely interrogate our socio-political system, leadership and followership, national questions and integration, denied freedom and injustice in this country, and presented to the generality of Nigerians, NTN would be failing in her mandate to “ensure that productions of the Troupe are geared towards national aspirations”. It is only with good knowledge of our present reality that we can aspire to be something greater.

The NTN most certainly has her challenges and constraints and has proven her mettle within them, but there is a lot of work to be done. And we have been assured by Mr Adejuwon that there is the required specialist human capital on ground to stimulate the desired actions.

It also appears to me that the new Artistic Director shares my anxiety and that is why he is thinking out of the box; to embark on this performative expression in conflict environment to resolve crises; to raise his own funds and not depend solely on inadequate government fund; to register NTN presence in the three major regions of Nigeria; to tour the 36 states of the federation with productions; to take the annual creative workshop of NTN to the three regions of the country in order to expand its scope of participation. I must say this is a tall order but attainable. If you are able to accomplish these lofty agenda, the NTN would have lived her name as a troupe. Mobility is the defining character of any performing troupe, until your national touring circuit covers the 36 states of the federation with instructive performances, NTN may not pass for more than a Resident Theatre Group.

### **Agenda Setting**

To achieve this laudable vision envisioned by the Artistic Director, we offer the following suggestions to the National Troupe.

1. NTN Performative expression for conflict resolution and transformation must address the structural injustice and structural oppression that underlie people's misery and powerlessness in Nigeria.
2. Beyond the present stakeholders' forum, bring experts in Theatre for Development and Conflict Transformation to articulate for NTN a realistic and result oriented blueprint of action.
3. Performative expression for conflict resolution is not the conventional type the artistes of NTN are used to. It has its *modus operandi*. Workshops must be organized to train the artists who are going to act as change agents. They must be motivated too and emboldened to key into their new role as change agents.
4. For effective result, constitute inter-professional facilitator teams consisting of artists and peace activists or conflict managers. Mixed teams of artists and peace activists offer a lot of potential for generating practices which emphasise reflective, relational and practical knowledge by employing artistic means in their contribution to conflict transformation/resolution. Conflict transformation provides a set of modes of conduct, tools and experience based knowledge on how to intervene in a conflict system to calm tensions and create trust and safety. For such inter-professional collaboration, it might be meaningful to conceptualise conflict transformation not simply as particular skills and techniques, but more as an "art of relationship-building", which can be inserted into the artistic group process and production.
5. Theatre for conflict resolution and transformation is a very attractive project to many international agencies committed to peace building. Once your intentions are genuine and your



programme of action with its derivable benefits are well articulated, it would not be difficult to find sponsors. The TfD experts and peace activists will be able to advise you better on this.

6. The stakeholder's forum is a welcome idea that must be sustained. I suggest a biannual meeting for the forum to make relevant input to the programmes and activities of the National Troupe of Nigeria.
7. NTN should return to mobile open auditions for the recruitment of artists in order to boost confidence in your recruitment process. Besides, NTN should maintain linkages with all theatre arts departments in Nigeria; engage staff students in training workshops, internship and also put in place a reward system for deserving student participant annually. Ditto too for practitioners.
8. NTN should begin to develop performances in Nigerian languages and through them connect with grassroots indigenous artistes.
9. The Creative Workshops for children should also be developed to competitive level involving schools across the country in order to stimulate and explode the creative potentials of our children. This way the scope of participation outside Lagos and those who can afford to register for the workshop would have been expanded.
10. It is important that NTN in all her activities keeps faith with the Nigerian people and should be careful not to become a propagandist agency for government. Wherever the government is doing well, tell us; wherever they are failing, tell them; if they refuse to listen and change, tell us.
11. NTN should also be run as a laboratory of artistic experimentation that should yield something new for the Nigerian theatre and indeed the world theatre.

## **Conclusion**

I have in this study recalled the mandate of the National Troupe of Nigeria, captured the good intentions of the new Artistic Director (AD) for the troupe and conceptualised the centerpiece of his vision, which is performative expression in a conflict environment. In doing this, we are careful not to be prescriptive but give options that could guide our discussions at this forum. In other words, our presentation is not by any means exhaustive but leaves plenty of room for quality gap filling with the best of intentions.

We should however note that it is in the opening dance of a masquerade that its character and strength are registered and the audience gets ready to correspondingly complement the masquerade's next move.

Beyond rhetoric, there is a lot of work to be done and it is evident that critical stakeholders in the performative industry will be relevant here. As the National Troupe is being repositioned, let me remind us of an aphorism: 'And God promised men that good and obedient wives would be found in all corners of the earth. Then He made the earth round and laughed and laughed'. The challenge clearly therefore is for men to find these corners in an earth that is round. We may never find them but we can cut them. Cutting positive corners for the success of the National Troupe of Nigeria is very attainable.

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## Appendix

### HIGHLIGHT OF ACTIVITIES

#### BETWEEN JANUARY 2013 – SEPTEMBER 2014.

- **NATIONAL DANCE INVITATIONS (January 2013- September 2014)**

The National Troupe of Nigeria within this period serviced a number of dance invitations within and outside Nigeria. The Productions include-

1. Dance performance of 'The Bridge' at the Banquet Hall of the Presidential Villa on the invitation of the President (February 2013)
2. Dance performance at the Investiture of Cultural and Broadcasting Icons by the Entertainment and Broadcasting Hall of Fame, National Theatre. (March 2013)
3. Dance performance at the PDP Dinner Night hosted by the President and Commander in Chief at the Banquet Hall of the Presidential Villa, Abuja. (March 2013)
4. Dance performance at the maiden Nigerian Dance Scholars Roundtable held as part of the 2013 edition of the World Dance Day, National Theatre, Iganmu, Lagos (April 2012)
5. Dance drama performance at the launch of 'Fascinating Nigeria' brand by the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism held at the Presidential Villa, Abuja (July 2013)
6. Dance performance at the African Union Summit, Abuja (July 2013)
7. Dance performance at the Rockefeller Foundation Summit, Abuja (July 2013)
8. Dance performance at the Celebration of the Nigerian Women for Peace and Empowerment, International Conference Centre, Abuja.

- **INTERNATIONAL DANCE INVITATIONS (January 2013 – October 2013)**

The National Troupe within this period serviced the following international invitations-

1. International Festival for Drums and Traditional Arts- Cairo, Egypt (April 2013)
2. International Festival of the Arts- The Democratic Republic of Congo (July 2013)
3. Commemoration of Nigeria's 53<sup>rd</sup> Independence Anniversary by the Embassy of Nigeria in Greece (October 2013)
4. Celebration of Nigeria Culture Week in NANJING, China (October 2013)
5. Dance performance at the Kennedy Centre, Washington D.C, USA (JUNE 2014)

- **2<sup>nd</sup> NATIONAL SCHOOLS DRAMATIZED STORY TELLING COMPETITION 2013 (May 2013)**

As part of its mandate to encourage the development of Children Theatre and to creatively engage children and youths of Nigeria, the National Troupe held the second edition of its National Schools dramatized story telling competition under the theme- Nigeria: A Hundred Years of Existence- Our Story so far. The competition was held among schools of two zones- Abuja and Lagos. The Abuja final was held at the National Centre for Women Development, Garki, Abuja on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2013 while the Lagos finale was held on June 5 at the National Theatre, Lagos. There are plans to hold the 2014 finals in the six geo-political zones.

- **4<sup>TH</sup> EDITION OF THE CHILDREN'S CREATIVE STATION PROJECT (August 2013)**

Also as part of its mandate to encourage the development of children's theatre and in line with its objective to discover talents and to engage children creatively during the long vacation, the National Troupe held the fourth edition of its month long flagship programme The Children's Creative Station project. The workshop held between August 1 and August 31, 2013 while the participating children took part in the command performance of *The River Between*, a dance drama written by Mike Anyanwu (a Deputy Director with the National Troupe) and directed by Josephine Igberaease (Director in charge of drama of the National Troupe and Coordinator of the workshop). The fifth edition will hold in August 2014.

- Commemoration of the World Music Day 2013
- Highlife Extravaganza (A musical for Easter 2014)
- Commemoration of World Music Day 2014 (June 2014)
- Staging of 'One Legend, Many Season' a play by Femi Osofisan as directed by Josephine Igberaease (December 2013)
- Play Reading Session- 'One Kingdom, One Monarch' by Engr. Solomon Uwaifo (March 2014)
- **5<sup>TH</sup> EDITION OF THE CHILDREN'S CREATIVE STATION PROJECT (August 2014)**

The National Troupe held the fifth edition of its month long flagship programme The Children's Creative Station project. The workshop held between August 1 and August 31, 2014 while the participating children took part in the command performance of 'Erii', a play written by Mike Anyanwu (a Deputy Director with the National Troupe) and directed by Josephine Igberase (Director in charge of drama of the National Troupe and Coordinator of the workshop). The sixth edition will hold in August 2015.

\* Among several other productions.

(see [http://wofod.org/ntn/?page\\_id=57#sthash.pNGVXjBU.dpuf](http://wofod.org/ntn/?page_id=57#sthash.pNGVXjBU.dpuf))