

THEATRE, A VERITABLE TOOL FOR MOBILIZING YOUTHS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Recent developments in the political climate of Nigeria signalize a seeming conspiracy of consigning the youth to absolute impertinence, with the youth themselves as collaborators. Over the years, neglect, and nonchalance emanating from government and the general society toward the youth, who left alone are confronted with their problems of exuberance and adolescent propensities, which they arduously try to curb, has curtailed their contributions in the strive for a credible democratic culture, to a meagre degree. This attitude of neglect has attendant consequences of cultism, thuggery, drug abuse, careless living, prostitution or transactional sex and so on. Yet, the youth remain priceless assets any society can have for its continuity and preservation, i.e. if these assets are sufficiently mobilized and harnessed. This paper conceptualises the youth and their participation in the Nigerian democratic experiment. It also attempts a prognosis of where the youth and indeed Nigeria will be in the nearest future given the present experiences. The paper also unveils theatre as a veritable tool for mobilizing these teeming youths as partners in the sustainability of democracy and the future of Nigeria. The paper concludes that the strand of theatre known as Theatre for Development and which has constituents of “New Nigerian” theatre can become an anchorage. This is because it is characterised with multiple fields that have challenged individualist and politicised ideology of creativity to provide alternative account to pedagogy as social change.

Keywords: Youth, Democracy, Theatre, Participation, Mobilization

Introduction

The youth are known and said to be leaders of tomorrow. This is indicative that they have a crucial role to play in national development generally, and in the politics of democratic sustenance in particular; they are also a great investment for a country's development as conceived by Nigeria's National Policy on Youth, Final Draft of 2000. The National Policy on Youth of 1983 was also formulated in recognition of the aforementioned functional instrumentality of the youth which cannot be overemphasized. To Ajayi as cited in Asen R. (2002:62) “there is a more glowing realization of the place of the youths not only in building an advanced and sustainable society, but also in forging international integration, peace, mutual understanding and the health of the international community”.

More so, the involvement of the youth in national issues like those of democracy, (probably because of conscientization and agitations from civil society organizations, and other bodies with the youth agenda) in recent years cannot equally be paralleled with what was obtainable three decades ago. There has as well been a proliferation of youth groups recently, be they for pertinent causes or not. Nigeria as a country with a faltering democratic experiment needs to integrate all social facets if this experiment must work and be sustained. This paper looks at the interconnectivity of the youths and democracy especially as it regards the question of sustainability; and it uses Theatre to orchestrate the analytical concerns herein.

Conceptual Clarifications

Youth: The sandwich years of childhood and adulthood is what is referred to as youth i.e. when one is young; the ages between being a child and being fully grown. However, diverse nations, world over, in accordance to the socio-economic and political priorities have set age brackets for youthfulness. The United Nations organization has it as those between the ages of 15 and 24 while the Commonwealth of Nations holds it to be under the age category of 29. To Nigeria, as enshrined in the National Policy on Youth, they are those between 13 and 30 years living in the country. For the singular purpose of issues raised in this paper, we shall be using the Nigerian concept of a youth as a paradigm; more so being that the paper treats an issue completely Nigerian.

Theatre: Theatre is a structured performance before an audience. It is an instructional medium that entertains, informs and educates the people. Its popular genre deals with “speaking to the common man in his language and idiom and dealing with problems of direct relevance to this situation” (Kid R. 1980:11). This theatre uses local languages and participatory styles and attempts to reflect the audience’s own situation from their perspective.

Democracy: The Latin words of “Demos” and “Kratia” are the parent-words that begot democracy. A literal translation will mean “people’s rule”. This probably informed Abraham Lincoln’s conception of democracy as “a government of the people, by the people and for the people”. The Encyclopedia Americana (1981) provides a functional definition of democracy as “a form of government in which the major decisions or direction of policies behind the decisions rest directly or indirectly on the freely given consent of the majority of the adults governed”. This means the “ultimate authority in political affairs and the emanating policies rightly belong to the people”.

The term democracy has a universal appeal and its historicity becomes equivocal. It may, however have been more successful in some quarters of the world than others. McPherson as cited in Doki (2004) confirms this when he avers that:

Although the world democracy has its origins in ancient Greece, Western societies have no exclusive right to the term as a label for their own version of “rule by the people or government in accordance with the will of the bulk of the people”. The historical claim of democracy’s title has been liberally given equal status to all societies by scholars of democracy (P. 64).

Mukubwa in Nasidi and Igoil (1997) opines that:

...all social and political ideas have their roots in the historical circumstances of a particular period. It is not surprising therefore that modern African political thought deals mainly with the historical experiences of colonialism. However, African reactions against the debilitating effects of foreign rule cannot be seen as the adoption of imported ideas (P. 21).

Be that as it may, this paper anchors its concerns on the definition of democracy offered by Sani in Nasidi and Igoil (1997:72) where he avers that “democracy is a particular type of political process in which power, its conduct and the limitations are determined by the majority of the citizens of the state through the established political institutions”.

The expected concomitants of democratic rule are more often than not exaggerated and often times, this leads to misconceptions probably consequential of the electioneering manifestoes of contestants and political parties on the dividends they will deliver; an artificially created mirage though. To this, Saint Gbilekaa (1997) records Femi Osofisan’s warning:

That although it may sound like a contradiction or paradox, democracy is not synonymous with freedom, and that the customary coupling of the two words is a fallacious expedient. That democracy is in fact not normal to us, nor to any traditional culture ... and has become suddenly fashionable here, only because of Abacha, and ... as the memory of that infamous regime recedes, there is a real danger that the passion for democracy among the populace will correspondingly dwindle... (P. 79).

Extrapolating from the above therefore, the question of sustainability becomes germane. However, democracy cannot be denied as having the following features:

- i. Fundamental human rights recognition by the constitution and respect by the state. These rights include that to life, liberty and property; freedom of speech, the press, movement, association, religion and of thought; equality before the law, the right to criticize government, to privacy and family life.
- ii. Free and fair elections held periodically as prescribed by the law.
- iii. Consultation by government with the populace before major national decisions taken.
- iv. Respect for the rule of law particularly equity before the law.
- v. The judicial process ensuring that individual’s rights are not violated by the state or its agents.
- vi. A fearless judiciary which is independent of the legislature and executive; among others.

Democratic Culture

Culture, world over, is recognized as the sum total of a people’s way of life. The common orientation acquired by an individual in the course of social intercourse with members of an identified community is the culture of that particular group. Our discourse here is democratic culture, which having established earlier what democracy is and now culture; the concept becomes pellucid. It is also referred to as “political culture”. To Parsons and Shils (1951) and Almond and Verba in their study of the political culture of Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy and Mexico, as cited in Olurode (1999) and quoted by Doki, in Ashiko (2004):

Political culture is specifically the pattern of individual political orientations, the attitudes towards the political system and its various parts and to the role of the self in the political system. It is a subjective realm which underlies and gives meaning to political activities (P. 65).

Verba argues further that it “is a system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols and values which define the situation in which political action takes place” (Olurode, 1999:95). Doki in Ashiko (2004:66) sums it up that “the attitudinal dispositions, patterned psychological orientations, visionary projections and social realities that give meaning to political activities thus constitute a culture of its own”. Thus, a democratic culture is attained at that level of communal participation where the ordinary citizen is presumed rational enough to participate in the process of governance, where governors derive their mandate to govern through legitimate endorsement by majority of the people and the relationship between the governors and the governed is based on trust rather than contempt.

Regrettably enough, this much desired culture is encumbered by a host of problems in Nigeria. It is no gainsaying that what is obtainable today is a bastardization of the idea of “freely given consent of the majority” since a minority of the people actually formulate and execute policies. Not only that, voluntary elections by the governed adult is substituted for coercion and threat against the expression of opinions, speech and/or assembly. Nevertheless, nobody quarrels with the concept of democracy per se. the discrepancies lie in the distinction between theory and practice vis-à-vis impacted development.

Youth and Mobilisation

The youth, a teeming segment of the Nigerian population are an integral facet of the Nigerian democratic experiment, they represent the future and must be bequeathed with the right culture which they will practice and propagate. However, this can be effectively handled when one understands their strengths, peculiarities and problems confronting them.

Particularly youths have been recognized to be sensitive, energetic, active and in the most productive phase of their lives and if adequately guided, their great reservoir of energy, resourcefulness, creativity, efficiency and dynamism will be easily harnessed to enhance democratic sustenance in particular and national development in general.

Asen (2002:69) recognises that the youth possess the following characteristics:

- i. Positive dreams: Youths possess the ability for fantastic dreams which hold the potential for a successful and prosperous life. If well motivated and guided therefore, their dreams can become realities for the development of themselves and society.
- ii. Exhilaration and Enthusiasm: the energetic nature of youths gives them an unrestrained eagerness and pragmatic faith for exploits. The rightful channeling of their minds can yield great results in various fields of endeavour.

- iii. Flexibility: The youths are indubitably more flexible than the adults. They can be more easily activated and directed towards definable goals.
- iv. Physical fitness and rejuvenation: These attributes can be harnessed for sports, social works and spiritual goals, indeed an engagement which achieves a catharsis in their restive nature thus allowing for democratic sustenance.
- v. Time – Most youths are unmarried and without occupations yet with an effervescence of intelligence freshly acquired from school. Therefore, they have a lot of time and intellectual resources at their disposal. When mobilized, a good use of their time can achieve a lot.

The Youth and Democracy

The Federal Government's Policy on Youth (2000) contains laudable objectives such as to:

- i. make the youths responsible citizens and future of the country.
- ii. inculcate good moral character, the right type of values and spirit of national unity among the youth.
- iii. encourage active youth participation in community and national development through voluntary youth associations.

Nevertheless, government's attempt at achieving the above has been mainly in rhetoric and insignificant actions. There is inadequate funding of youth programmes. Generally, the socio-political and economic terrains in Nigeria have hindered the needs and aspirations of the youth being met. Interestingly also, where some youths have been involved in governance, the quantum of aberrations recorded is overwhelming; this too casts doubt as to whether it is actually the question of non-inclusion.

Youths have a very great role in the sustenance of our democracy; they have the ample potential for forging greater integration and in creating peace and mutual understanding among the various groups that make up the nation. All across the nation, there have been many ethnic clashes and the youth are usually the instruments of prosecution. Youths can effectively contribute to good governance by supporting credible candidates, as against the present scenario of interests that are altogether selfish and individualistic. The youths could be mobilized against involvement in anti-democratic activities like assassinations, thuggery and membership of groups with heinous and nefarious agenda.

Theatre and the Way Forward

The way forward in any situation or circumstance is a lee way out of a seemingly complicated and complex situation. The democratic era of governance is usually surrounded by a myriad of civil unrest buoyed by a selfish desire to superimpose private personal and/or group interests.

Interestingly, theatre as an instructional medium becomes highly instrumental at such crossroads. The thrust of the theatre as an art is play. A play thus is a dramatic action that seeks to communicate with an identifiable audience. Essentially, a play employs dramatic aesthetics to put across lessons of note to the

public. Cultural, social and psychological aesthetics are employed by theatrical performances to induce taste and quality appreciation in the intended recipients of such messages. When the people identify with the heroes and myths of a play, they are more likely to grasp and remember more easily messages and lessons accompanying such performance. The grace for the theatre as an instrument in dealing with this social problem is perhaps anchored on the weight and strength of play as observed by Stanton and Banham (1996:288) where they submit that: "Play is central to the health and growth of the individual and the community; for it is through play that human beings celebrate and shape their world".

Nevertheless, it is however the vehicle of the "popular theatre" that must carry this play to the people; reason being that:

- i. It is entertaining and entertainment generally appeals to more to the youths than adults.
- ii. Time factor: Youths have more time at their disposal than the adults and so can give time to the theatre.
- iii. Youths make use of their imaginations a great deal. This quality is present in theatrical works.
- iv. The flexibility of the youths can be exploited to reach out to them in the messages contained in theatrical works.
- v. Youths usually engage in hero worship and have role models. This can also be exploited by making heroes in the dramatic works have qualities the youths need to imbibe.

Furthermore, popular theatre can enable youths see themselves and their situation in a fresh way and want to talk about these problems with others. This can lead to practical action of changing from negative norms when necessary or encouragement for self-development.

The popular theatre for development can also serve as a very constructive leisure time for youths as they would be allowed to participate in the writing of scripts that would reflect their life, would also take part in the performances and discussions to find solution to problems raised.

Since its evolution, the popular theatre has been used in third world countries as a tool for mobilization, sensitization and a vehicle for education, awareness creation, information and entertainment and expressing of popular views and building of self-confidence. This is justified by a popular theatre activist, August Boal who posits "that all revolution theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theatre is a weapon and it is the people who should wield it" (Angya, 2000)

Examples where this popular theatre for development has succeeded abound. The women's street theatre group in India with their productions on rape, dowry, death, widowhood and other issues of female oppression; the university travelling theatre of Algeria, Kenya, Northern Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe whose aim was to mobilize people for community development (Angya, 2000); The Benue State University Popular Theatre for Development projects over the years in several Benue communities such as

Katsina-Ala, Gondoza, Buruku, Wannune, Naka, Otukpo, Ohimini, Ijigban, Gbajimba and so on, are equally great examples. It is also advantageous that this popular theatre projects can be taken to schools, youths in the neighbourhood, churches, motor parks, market, and village areas and where else the youth can be found.

The mutual flexible characteristic of language this theatre uses is also an added advantage. The Tiv language and Pidgin English can be used for such groups like dropouts and illiterates in rural and semi urban areas.

Conclusion

Inarguably, the youth have a sizeable quota to contribute in the drive for democratic sustenance, but this is only when they are positively mobilized. The Theatre veritably presents itself as one of the most effective ways of mobilizing them. It can be used to make the youth's gain better understanding of themselves and overcome the problems of social vices which make them enemies of democracy's sustainability. If the government of the day is serious about the sustenance of democracy, they must mobilize the use as partners for this arduous task through the theatre, rather than devoting our meagre resources to the gratification of "political bootlickers" or minions which its personnel are no better.

There is also a need to fashion out a peculiar theatre for development that will appeal to the youths and at the same time inculcate positive values. Such a theatre must have thrilling stories, youth language and culture, romance, good use of songs, music and dance, as its characteristics.

Recommendations

- i. The government must engage community based theatre groups to help in this mobilization task
- ii. Theatre practitioners should be encouraged to take up challenges of mobilizing the youth for the sustenance of democracy.
- iii. Government should make youth development a priority. Scholarships given to students, self-employment encourage youth activities like sports competitions, cultural festivals, etc. be organized as such things keep them engaged meaningfully.
- iv. The youths and their initiative be respected and supported than condemned.
- v. The elderly should show good examples in their democratic pursuits, speeches, and should be genuinely interested in the youths.

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