

THE REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH CRISES IN AFRICAN THEATRE

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Abstract

Youth crises are not only hybrid-headed but also universal. It is the situation when young people undergo difficulties beyond their control culminating to lack of hope, anxiety, confusion and desperation. Youth crises ranges from youth unemployment or underemployment, inappropriate skill or lack of it, inaccessibility to financial assistant and total absence of governmental policies for their social and economic well-being. Youth are said to be the leaders of tomorrow. But unfortunately, this axiom is far from reality in this part of the clime because no solid foundation has been laid towards its realization. Successive governments in Nigeria had only paid lip service to issues/programs that ought to avert youth crises. This has led to youth crises in Nigeria. The aim of the study, therefore, is to interrogate this situation and how these crises are represented in the African theatre using the Theatre for Development approach.

Keywords: Theatre, social order, theatre for development, youth, crisis

Introduction

Youth crises are not only hydra-headed but also a universal phenomenon. However, its intensity or occurrence differs from one clime to another, especially in the developing countries. Youth crises are situations when youths face serious obstacles beyond what they can readily solve. As Hammed submits, youth crises is "an upset in equilibrium at the failure of one's tradition problem-solving approach that, results in disorganization, hopelessness, sadness, confusion, and panic" (1). It is like a two-edged sword that can make or mar the political stability of any nation. To this end, Uzorma Nathan sees youth crises as an occasion to decide if a problem should be faced frontally, modified or allowed to continue (2). They are both critical factors of crises and inevitable solutions to the crises as well as agents of nonviolent transformation as the case may be. To him, the issue of youth crises could be double-barreled. It can be chaotic (disorderly) or cathartic – having purging and healing effects borne out prolonged discontentment against the leaders and its

policies (1). He sees in youth crises, an opportunity to display long-held discontentment inscribed on placards and parade songs of approval, demanding for change, solutions as well as restructuring.

Crisis in itself connotes a time of intense difficulty or danger, especially when it appears unexpectedly (Oxford English Dictionary, 276).

The history of youth crises in Nigeria can be traced to 1978 tagged "Ali Must Go" in which the National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS) took to the street to protest against government's inability to revert 50 kobo increase in their meal ticket from ₦1.50 to ₦2.00. Apart from increase in fee, the students had frowned at the scarcity of government-owned universities and the absence of state or private universities at the time. The medium to long terms reasons for the protest according to Wikipedia, were the demands for good governance. That protest left in its trail, the death of Akindunde and eight others at Zaria while over 26 students were injured.

The demise of the students destabilized the government as well as caused more problems as they stood their grounds. That is how "Ali Must Go" evolved Ahmadu Ali and the Olusegun Obasanjo Military Council at the time, traded blames on who was responsible for the crisis (Teslim Omipidan, 2). Though the students' Union President, Segun Okeowo was expelled after an inquest, however, "Ali Must Go" protest heralded and legitimized students' unionism that has brought swift changes to governance in Nigeria (19).

Youth crises should be avoided by any reasonable government because its occurrence may lead to a situation that may lead or upturn the well being of the citizens. The youth is the lifeblood of any nation. Thus, issues affecting this class of citizens in Africa and Nigeria in particular, amount to encumbrances to the growth and development of the society. A country that toys with her youth, as Hammed points out, "is at the peril of encumbering with her future development.

The youths as we are constantly inundated are the leaders of tomorrow. But can one proudly say so in this part of the world? Unfortunately, this long held axiom is far fetched because no concrete foundation has ever been laid towards its realization. Moreover, successive governments in Nigeria had only paid lip service to this decades-long axiom by their inability to truthfully and willingly provide the necessary policies/programmes that are of benefits to the youths. The continued disregard of the numerous social responsibilities of government and other family institutions has led to more youth crises in Nigeria. Unarguably, "a country without highly educated, highly literate, highly skilled, intellectually brilliant, and self-confident youth", according to Jaye

Gaskia, "is merely toying with its future and undermining its existential capacity" (1).

Africa and, indeed, Nigeria can, therefore, greatly boast of and greatly benefit from having a youthful population. Youths have been acknowledged as a formidable social force to reckon with. Paul Kehinde Michael citing *The Nigerian National Policy on Youth*, states that, "the youth form the bulk of the population in Africa ranging between 18 – 30 years of age. While other views shows that the youth in most African countries range between 12 – 40 years. Commonwealth of Nation on the other hand sees to youths to be those ranging from 16 – 29 years. Age range notwithstanding, Azikiwe opines that, "the dynamic nature of the youth brings progress to the society while their revolutionary aesthetics against the injustices of the older generation brings about new set of values and morality (419). Demystifying the above, Azikwe believes that, "if the youths should acquiesce in certain evils of the social order, it would become immunized and without the youthful in mind and body, the politics of the society will degenerate, contaminate, corrupt, defile, taint and pollute the African social fabrics" (420).

One may then ask, is the youthful population a curse or blessing? The answer supposedly is in the affirmative, depending on how each society treats her youths. Taking a cue from China, Chiamaka Okolomike reiterates that, "China harnessed her youths and created labour-consuming employment to employ their youths, which in turn led to economic boom for their nation". But reverse is the case in Nigeria and some other African countries. That notwithstanding, successive Nigerian government should invest more in her youths by adapting the China model through creating massive jobs to help create robust economic and social prosperities.

No progressive and sensible government can do away with her youthful population. As a result, Azikiwe posits that, "the dynamic nature of the youth enables society to be progressive" (419). Such progress could be achieved when the youths organize a revolution against the injustices perpetuated by their predecessors. He reverberates and emphasizes that, "should the youth acquiesce in certain evils of the social order, it would become immunized and without the youthful in mind and body, the politics of society will degenerate, contaminate, corrupt, defile, taint and pollute the African social fabrics" (420).

Nwafor Orizu in support of Zik's line of postulation reasons that, "for the survival, development and progress of Africa and Nigeria in particular, the active youth population in its social and political arrangement, social order is absolutely necessary" (427 – 430).

In order to avert youth crises and other social, political, religious and even educational crises in Nigeria, there is need for a social order. Social order is a process of good governance. Social order constitutes governments' obligations to the governed and the responsibilities of the governed to the State. It ought to be a two-way traffic or a give and take position. Ujomu by this means a, "social systems and schemes of social relations that defines the political, economic, and social roles, rights and duties of people in a society" (6). This implies the totality of human arrangements, values, rules, norms, regulations and ideologies that enable the society to function optimally.

Plato in his magnum opus, *The Republic*, avers to the inalienable right of the citizens to education. He believes that, "an individual's political obligation to the state is anchored on giving the individual, especially the youths, education and training that enable them to fulfill their natural potentials for the achievement of the common good" (Michael, 531). Likewise, an individual is expected to be patriotic, obedient and be obligated to obey the state with the caveat that, the state provides for him an all-round social and economic benefits that allows for the fulfillment of his aspirations and visions. The absence of all these, creates youth restiveness, conflict, violence, armed robbery, ritual killings, kidnapping, terrorism, among other social vices. Parents and teachers, therefore, have roles to play toward averting youth crises. To this end, Plato in his "Protagoras" reasoned that, "parents should teach honor and justice to their children; teachers to instruct the young ones in knowledge, letters and character; and the government to teach them the laws of the land" (37). To what level have these institutions lived up to their responsibilities? The fact remains that, these bodies have performed abysmally low in fulfilling their social obligations to the youths. Thus, this nonchalant posture of these institutions has led to more youth restiveness in the society.

Oyindamola Adegboye adduces some factors responsible for youth crises to include: leadership gap, unemployment, inefficiency of the education and unstable economy. He reasons that the youths have ideas and creativity. They can create, innovate and uplift the society but the opportunities are not forthcoming. As the youth population increases, likewise the proportionate increase in unemployment or underemployment, thereby creating skills gap. He believes that, education system is not evolving as fast as it should be comparable to global standards. As such, young people are grossly disadvantaged in acquiring soft skills like IT, critical thinking, collaboration, time management, and communication that are propelling the world technologically

today (2). This is coupled with the unstable economy, insecurity, and youth's exclusiveness from the affairs of governments.

Youth crises at times arose out of the feeling of exclusion by the government in power and not being considered in the scheme of things. The government's inability to plan, analyze and even review existing activities and policies bordering on youths help to ignite their resentment leading to reoccurrence of youth crises in Nigeria (Nathan, 3).

The devastating effects of youth crises cannot be overemphasized. It is for this reason that government should be proactive and responsive to its obligations to the citizens, especially the youths. A youth crisis is replete with dangers, risks, possibilities, deaths, and even opportunities. Youth crises are like a time bomb waiting to explode, and when it explodes, rages like a wild fire. The last ENDSARS# protest that occurred in October 2020 is a good example, albeit, the government in power don't seem to have learnt any lesson from it neither has it addressed the problems raised by the youths to avert future reoccurrence. The most conversant danger of youth crises, according to Nathan, "is the loss of lives of the revolting youths whom being irked by the same cause of the revolt, get filled with ire and irascibility; seeing their course worthier and more valuable than their lives" (3). Up till date, the number of lives lost at the Leki Toll Gate and other parts of the country arising from the ENDSARS# protest is yet to be determined. Rather, the government is still enmeshed in denials on whether or not somebody died or whether the army ever shot at anyone.

The inability of the Nigerian government to provide the right institutional framework and opportunity that will enable the youths to have access to education and training to courses of their choice is one of the major reasons that cause apathy, unemployment, and unemployability. Every year thousands of Nigerian youths apply to tertiary institutions for admission but only few get admitted. Those who are lucky to be admitted hardly know when to graduate due to incessant strikes nor do they get proper training due to poor learning environment, facility, and personnel. Those who eventually graduate are either not employed or are unemployable. These lead to frustration, hopelessness, and the attendant urge by some of them to go into criminality.

Every problem has a solution and the youth crises are not an exception. If the successive governments in Nigeria had mustered the political will to address most of the myriad problems facing the country in relation to education, unemployment, good governance, insecurity, restructuring, equity,

justice, among others, the issue of youth crises would have ameliorated to the barest minimum.

Social order is key to solving youth crises and other problems facing the nation. Social order, according to Michael, "is the sum of all the human arrangements, values, rules, norms, regulations, ideologies and institutions that enhance the proper functioning of the entire society" (528). It is those arrangements, be it social, political, cultural, religious, economic, among others assembled not only to attain vital ends but also to achieve equity, justice and peace as well as general well being of all in the society.

Investment in human capital is another key factor to avoiding youth crises. This can be achieved through offering quality education to the young ones who on graduation are offered decent jobs. Through this process, the youths become useful to themselves, their families and to the nation. They become more responsible, pre-occupied, obedient and patriotic to the Nigerian state.

Subsequently, investment in material capital will equally help to solve youth restiveness. To keep them in check, government needs to create numerous entrepreneurial skills by making sure they have access to capital. Youth inclusiveness in the political equation of the country is germane to peaceful co-existence. The government should ensure that the youth population is included in their day to day policies and programmes. They should be made active partners and not mere beneficiaries of government. It is through such inclusiveness that the youths will become truly leaders of tomorrow through such engagement for apprenticeship.

Two wrongs they say do not make a right. Hence, youths during crises should not be seen as an enemy to be crushed. Rather they should be treated as agents of nonviolent and social change that have suffered from the absence of developments in the political, social, economic and environmental problems of their society. Therefore, governments should not wait for the youths to take to the street before doing the needful like the "Ali Must Go" scenario. There should be periodic dialogues between the youth leaders and organs of government in the form of national conference under which issues concerning them and the wider society can be tackled. The recommendations of the 2014 National Conference, according to Nathan, should be implemented for constitutional review. The reason being that, the conference touched in details most of the issues causing crisis, industrial action, and other agitations in most part of the country (5).

The Concept of Theatre (Development for Development) in Addressing Youth Crises

Theatre, especially Theatre for Development (TfD) approach is a veritable tool by its practitioners and other stakeholders in solving youth crises in particular and societal development objectives in general. The deployment of theatre in combating social problems including youth crises in the society has a long history. The adoption of Theatre for Development in addressing youth restiveness and other community development initiatives has become imperative considering the fact that the conventional theatre, and indeed, the mass media of communication has proved inadequate in addressing the problems inherent in the society due to their alienating influence. In the contemporary society, it is no longer fashionable for people, especially the rural folks to go to the theatre (where available) to watch plays that would conscientize, sensitize, inform, encourage, and mobilize them on how to tackle the myriads of problems within their environment. Apart from time constraint, the cost of acquiring or accessing radio, television, and newspapers on one hand, and going to the theatre, on the other hand, is far fetched. It is for this reason that the adoption of theatre, especially Theatre for Development (TfD) in reaching the rural communities who form the majority of the nation's population has become critical.

Unlike the conventional theatre and the mass media of communication with their limited impact in concrete terms to conscientize, mobilize and empower the locals (the youths in particular) Theatre for Development offers an opportunity to this group of the population to receive assistance in solving their development needs through theatre professionals. In fact, through Theatre for Development, theatre is taken to the people at their comfort zones as against the conventional theatre, which requires them to come to the theatre.

Theatre for Development according to Abah, "is a methodology that takes into consideration the varied backgrounds of the audience, the situation on the ground, the culture and language of the people and other factors that facilitate effective communication through a participatory approach". To him, it is a theatre that, "speaks to the people in their own language and idiom, and deals with issues of direct relevance to their own lives" (17). Theatre for Development is a kind of theatre that recognizes the people's traditional mode of express such as songs, dances, music, mimes, drumming, etc. in the process of relating, associating, discussion, analyzing in order to solve community problems through performances. With the application of these traditional

elements, Theatre for Development (Abah, 18) "does not require any formal literacy, nor does it demand professional skills to be able to perform this kind of theatre because these traditional elements are already familiar to the people". Exemplifying the appropriateness of Theatre for Development in combating societal ills, he further reasons that, "even the local farmers in the village or the ordinary laborers in the street are put in the 'driving seat' of the drama." This implies that these people are allowed to control the dramaturgical process by providing materials for drama and isolate through discussion and analysis the issues the drama will focus on. Hence, Theatre for Development contrast itself markedly from the Western or modern dramaturgy that seems to be cold, mechanical, alienating, commercializing, and detached from the warmth of the audience.

As a unique methodology and theatre approach, Theatre for Development as a form of language and instrument of communication, appeals to all manner of people: the lettered or unlettered; illiterates or illiterates; and formal or informal which enable them to find solution to their problems. Asiama describes this theatre approach as, "theatre for the people by the people" (abstract). While Abah sees it as, "theatre of the people, for the people and by the people" (17). As one of the trending fields in drama and theatre, Theatre for Development (TfD) is geared towards solving the socio-economic problems of the down-trodden members of the society who had long been neglected by the establishment.

From foregoing, Theatre for Development negates the western theatrics which seem to alienate the audience and make them mere passive receivers or spectators. Whereas Abah puts the same audience (community members and in this case the youths), at the driving seat of the drama, which automatically see them as partners in progress. This makes the process democratic as the people are involved in the whole rungs of a development process from the point of conception to the implementation stage. In addition, the use of the traditional art forms as Abah noted, is germane to Theatre for Development because it not only enable community members to deal with what they are familiar with but also help to accelerate the process of acclimatization in the dramatic experience.

In his book entitled *Beyond the Forth Wall: Theatre at the Frontier of Human Development*, Obadiogwu views Theatre for Development as "basically the theatre of ideas and cognitive classification with its focus on researching into communal problems" (ix). He contends that this theatre genre not only opposes the age long Aristotelian theatrics with its anti-dialogical matrix and

fatalistic acceptance of the world and offers a dialogical cultural action for the emancipation of the oppressed masses. But also a theatre practice that, is placed at the services of the people to solve their immediate problems. Theatre for Development as an interventionist theatre aims at solving specific problems amongst the rural populace. By its adoption, people no longer need to go to theatre as in conventional or Western theatrics but rather partake in the storytelling and in the enactment of the story in which dialogue is basically the medium of communication.

Many scholars have attempted to make analogies between theatre and development. In the process, they have cited great philosophers Aristotle and Plato Pupil. Both have shown that without doubt that, theatre have a lot to contribute to the development of the society. Citing Obafemi, Kamla-Raj posits that, "theatre and development has a twin existence because both deal with people and how these people tend to develop their environment" (107). In linking theatre with development, Kamla-Raj re-echoes the opinion of Plato that, "the disposition of citizens has a great impact on the social, political, economic, and even technological advancement of any society" (108). Similarly, Plato and Machiavelli also argue that, "how a country is perceived in terms of its level of development is a function of the character of its citizens, their civic virtue such as commitment to equality, justice, freedom, honesty, trust, stability, and tolerance" (Plato, 108). For theatre, to play these roles, the people must be accessible, available and committed to issues pertaining to development. To this end, theatre has been conceived by Nasidi as:

Something to be pulled beyond its turf to some promised land – the promised land of development which has proven to be very valuable in raising and nurturing a civic minded populace which is necessary for development (108).

Participation is also a key element and an invaluable factor in Theatre for Development. It is participatory because it demands the active participation of the target community who with the facilitators make Theatre for Development a meaningful venture. It also encourages a 'bottom-up' approach for development which enables community members to actively partake in a programme or project necessary to improve their standard of living from its conception to the execution. Participation argues Sloman help, "build a stronger society through equipping them to act by keeping their individual autonomy and the needs of the community in a creative manner" (1). Participation as a political tool is democratic in nature for it helps to build a

strong community where the people can achieve self-development without waiting for the government. The underlying fact is that for any meaningful development to take place, the people should be actively involved. For theatre to be successful too, in supporting social change and development participation must be at its core (Sloman, 1).

Other scholars such as Cheetham, Abah, Obadiogwu, Midgley, etc. had lent credence to the inalienable importance of participation in development. Community participation, they contend, "occurs when a community organizes itself and takes responsibility for managing its problems, by taking responsibilities which includes identifying the problems, developing actions, putting into place, and following through" (2). Theatre for Development approach is a participatory theatre at the service of the people for their socio-political development whose existence borders on dialogue and action, which leads to critical consciousness and emancipation of the society (Obadiogwu, ix). To Abah, Theatre for Development is a theatre of action whose output results from participation (122). Participation in the opinion of Medgley also, "requires the direct face-to-face involvement of citizens in social development and ultimately has control over decision that affects their own welfare" (2). The implication of all these is the fact that participation is germane to Theatre for Development and without it, Tfd loses its potency.

A major key component of Theatre for Development is that it awakens some level of consciousness on the rural people using the instruments of local structures and materials which they are already conversant with. This form of theatre, according to Inyang, is increasingly becoming a predominant tool for sensitization and mobilization of the local communities for economic, political and environmental development. The resultant effect, therefore, is that it affords the rural people – the voiceless and the powerless the chances to express themselves and act in a way that can contribute meaningfully to the betterment of their community and the society as a whole (2). As a tool for conscientization, Theatre for Development uses the process of demystification in stimulating the youths as a community or group problem-solving and action, bringing them together by building a platform for identifying, collating, analyzing and finding solutions for their common problems. Through conscientization too, Gbilekaa reasons that, "community members begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves" (29). From lesson learnt the people begin to reject the fatalistic view of life as well as reject the culture of silence syndrome and rather imbibe what Paulo Freire had referred to as "the banking system of education."

Politically, theatre artists in Nigeria like Fela Anikulapo Kuti and Sonny Okosun among others has proved their patriotic engagements to their fatherland through the indomitable spirit of the theatre. Hubert Ogunde was also at the forefront of the nationalist movement who fought tooth and nail to wrestle power from the colonial government in order to gain independence (Hagher, 10). In like manner, the late sage, Nnamdi Azikiwe and other media proprietors at the time also used their subversive editorials to subjugate the power of colonialism.

This kind of theatre, Ahura contends, is used basically as a rehearsal for revolution by instilling in the minds of the people the great need for change. Such a change could be political, social, or economic. It could also be violent or non-violent; and it may at the extreme entail a change in leadership. The good news of this development is that the leadership now realizes and accepts that the deprived rural man is also human and should be accorded his human dignity (56). Hence, through theatre, social justice has been established as in law and the judiciary.

Theatre for Development is regarded as a development tool outside its traditional functions of entertainment, information and education. It creates avenues for socio-economic and historical development as well as drive development among the hapless, helpless, hopeless, and disadvantaged members of the society (Yerima and Okwori, 27).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The issue of youth crises has been at the front burner of many discourses in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Many of these discourses have identified causes, effects and possible solutions to avert or ameliorate youth crises but to no avail. However, the solutions have not yielded the desired result because the political will to change these dynamics have not been properly or adequately deployed by the major stakeholders to these crises, hence, the resurgence. This paper advances and argues in favour of a paradigm shift using Theatre for Development as catalytic to combating youth crises. The aim being that Theatre for Development (TfD) recognizes the diverse background of the youth; the problem at hand - causes and effects of youth crises; culture and language of the people (best communication approach to assuage their grievances) and the method to deal with the problems (participatory approach). A strong point of Theatre for Development is its use of praxis to appeal to the conscience and morals of the youths that, nonviolent approach to issues is the best option to solving any problem. This is the hallmark of Theatre for

Development as it considers the audience (the youths) as active partners in the dramatic events that will lead to finding solutions to their needs in the Nigerian project(s).

In finding lasting solutions to youth crises, therefore, the paper recommends that the youths should be totally included in the policies/programmes of government at all levels. There should be level playing ground for all Nigerian youths in terms of admission into tertiary institutions, education, training, employment, politics, and all other opportunities. Nigeria is a homogenous society and political leaders should endeavor to create peace and unity out of our diversity instead of indulging in brazen ethnic, nepotic and religious bigotries that has left the country more divided, more hatred and more skeptical of one. The implication is that these divisive and lopsided tendencies rather culminate into marginalization that leads to bitterness, agitations, and perhaps, insurgency.

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