

NIGERIAN ECONOMY, SOCIAL UNREST AND THE NATION'S POPULAR DRAMA

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Abstract

The fact that Nigeria is one of the leading producers of oil in the world is no longer news, but what is the significance of the oil wealth to the development of the Nigerian economy? Up to the early 1980s, Nigeria's economy enjoyed the presence of both agricultural produce and the production of other consumers' goods, however for almost three decades after; petroleum has been the country's main source of revenue. What is the implication of this to the survival of the Nigerian nation? What impact does petroleum exploitation have on the local communities? Since Nigeria's attainment of political independence from Great Britain in 1960 it has been bedeviled by myriad of problems among which are ethno-religious and sectarian conflict, corruption and dilapidated infrastructure. What is the economic implication of this to the country and its citizens? To what degree has all these postcolonial problems of the nation been captured in the literature emanating from the country? These questions and many other issues affecting the socio-economic development of the country will be treated in this paper.

Keywords: Socio-economy; exploitation; representation; popular; drama; dramatists

Introduction

The post-independent Nigerian state is one faced with a lot of leadership induced poverty, corruption, religious charlatanism, war and restiveness, unstable political system, dictatorial governance, lack of adequate basic amenities etc. Despite Nigeria's obvious wealth (from oil and other natural resources), it has undergone dramatic economic deterioration, especially under military rule, which has dominated the country for the most part since independence.¹ Even before the first military incursion into Nigerian politics in 1966, the country was already experiencing severe and devastating socio-economic, political and developmental crises; excuses that the military uses whenever they usurp power from the civilian rulers.

Nigeria's developmental framework is laden with components such as consumerism, corruption, incessant military coups, failed socio-economic and political policies, and so on. According to Sunbo Odebode, "socio-economic climate in Nigeria within the past three or four decades has not promoted the kind of social and economic welfare that would insulate families from the vagaries of the market or help them to benefit from market development."ⁱⁱ Over the last 25 years, Nigeria has generated over \$300 billion from oil revenues after deducting payments to the foreign companies.ⁱⁱⁱ Oil revenue between 2004 and 2007 amount to \$112 billion, while for the single year 2008, the nation made \$57 billion from oil and gas alone.^{iv} The total oil revenues generated up to April 2008 was put at \$500 billion.^v Yet the country is marred in poverty, to the extent of its being categorized amongst the world's poorest nations. Over 70% of the nation's population lives below the poverty line due to inequitable distribution of the national resources, restricted access to social services such as education and public health care. This comes to focus due to lack of transparency in governance as well as corruption by the political class. Within the Nigerian border and among its government officials, fraud and corruption are negative Siamese-twins that are ever present among the different strata. These phenomena have bred leaders that are bereft of any noble leadership ideals. Nevertheless, these so-called 'corrupt' leaders are the one saddled with the responsibilities of channeling the nation's abundant natural and human resources for the country's development. The inability of the Nigerian corrupt leaders to judiciously utilize the nation's economic gain to the development of various communities in the country created rift among its populations, and encouraged schism within the various ethnic nationalities. The nation's inability to effectively develop an integrated population even with its enormous wealth creates defensive groups along the ethno-religious lines, in effect creating a dichotomy of 'we' against the 'others'. The dichotomy of 'we' and 'others' in many instances generate distrust among groups which make conflict inevitable.^{vi} Overtime there had developed a sense of fear among many ethnic nationalities and religious organizations within the country due to incessant conflicts along ethno-religious line. The constant ethno-religious clashes and clamour for control of either power or resources among the various Nigerian citizens have made non-sense of the nation's plan for national integration expected of its more than 150 million populations. To worsen the situation of continuous social unrest within the country, perceived disenfranchised or oppressed ethnic groups formed militia organizations in order to protect itself against the attack of the oppressing group(s). Protective ethnic militias in Nigeria include: "the

O'dua People's Congress (OPC); the Bakassi Boys; the Egbesu Boys; the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC); and the Igbo People Congress (IPC). Others include the Arewa People's Congress (APC) the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB)^{vii}, and the Ilaje Gwama Boys. These protective ethnic militia groups have overtime constituted themselves into agent of terror to the opposing groups in one way or the other.

The Nigerian Federal Governments lack of physical and economic development especially in the region where the nation's economy is derived turned the area into a theatre of war and unrest. The visible presence of abject poverty and unavailability of social and basic amenities in this area known as Niger Delta fuels a lot of unrest. This region provides the Nigerian government a whopping \$100m daily in oil revenue. However the oil producing ethnic minorities were cut from power at the national level until 2010, when the country's Vice President Goodluck Jonathan became the nation's President as a result of the sudden death of the sitting President Alhaji Umar Yar'dua.

Conflicts as Anti-Economic Factors

Nigeria is the largest petroleum producer in Africa and the sixth largest producer of crude oil among OPEC member countries. It is the most populated African country and its size, together with its oil and gas wealth, provides it with both political and economic clout.^{viii} And with over 350 ethnic groups it remains the most diverse nation on the continent. It is a multi religious state, and its size and population makes it a melting-pot for many religions especially Christianity and Islamic faith which both account for more than 90% of the population. While the Southern populations are mostly Christians, the people in the Northern part are predominantly Muslims.^{ix} Religious intolerance in a particular part of the country and the federal government's neglect of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in 1957 are attributed as the causes of many insurgencies in the country in the recent past. Ethno-religious diversity in itself is considered as the basic cause for the country's many problems.

The Nigerian government's failure to provide infrastructural amenities such as roads, electricity, potable water, and health-care or quality education for the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta while it provides such necessities for other regions of the country with proceeds from the Niger Delta wealth presented new conflicts in itself. A trip to Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory is all the impetus needed by the youths of the region to form themselves into insurgency groups in order to secure government attention. The reason for the agitation in the

region is deprivation and poverty amidst its plenty oil and gas resources. Agitation for resource control has been on in the region since 1966, when Isaac Adaka Boro led a rebellion with his Delta Volunteer Service (DVS) against the Federal Government and formed the Niger Delta Republic. Also in 1992, Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) whose leader Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other members were murdered in 1995 came into existence because of this agitation. He asked the indigenes of Ogoni to resist the degradation of their homeland caused by operations of Shell and Chevron, the multinational oil companies. Ken Saro Wiwa sought compensation for his people's lost farmland and fisheries. He was framed up and hanged by the government of Gen. Sani Abacha for daring to accuse the government and the oil companies' of colluding to deprive the Ogoni people of their nature given resources. Balouga argues that in the last couple of years since the death of Ken Saro Wiwa, ferocious militant groups such as the "Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Martyrs Brigade, Coalition of Militant Action in the Niger Delta (CMAND), Niger Delta People's Salvation Front (NDPSF), Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC)"^x and Gwama Boys erect militant camps across the Niger Delta. They carry out violent activities against oil exploring companies, destroying their facilities and installations. Some are in the act of kidnapping expatriate oil workers, government officials and wealthy individuals within the states.

In the early 1990's petroleum production accounted for the nation's 25% of GDP, and oil exports accounted for over 95% of its total export earnings, and about 75% of government revenue. Because of the prima position of petroleum in the nation's economy, oil industry and foreign oil companies exploring in the country receive much attention from successive Nigerian governments. On the other hand the land from where the oil is being exploited and her people are neglected by the government.

Nigeria's Socio-economic and Political Issues in Popular Drama

Every work of art reflects and represents to a greater or lesser degree the society that produced it in essential aesthetic quality. To this extent majority of drama emanating from Nigeria reflects and represents to a greater degree the decay that Nigerian society of the first decade of the twenty-first century has become.^{xi} The political and socio-economic problems that bedevil Nigeria are what flesh the country's literature; virtually all notable Nigerian dramatists have treated them in their works. In most cases it is presented through satire, parody and metaphor in historical plays. Examples

abound in works like Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), which dissects the festering social and political realities of Nigeria's oil boom years.^{xii} Others are *Beatification of Area Boys* (1995), *King Baabu* (2001), as well as in his earlier plays; *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), *Kongi's Harvest* (1964), *The Trial of Brother Jero* (1964) and so on. Femi Osofisan is another notable playwright who through plays like *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1982), *Who's Afraid of Solarin* (1979), *Red is the Freedom Road* (1982), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen* (1992), *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986), and *Morountodun* satirizes and lampoons the ludicrous attitudes of the Nigerian leaders and call the masses to adopt a revolutionary approach in order to change the *status quo*. Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods* (1996), *Kaffir's Last Game* (1998), *The Sisters* (2001), *Hard Ground* (2006), *Mojagbe* (2009), and *Little Drops* (2009), are surreptitious attempt at condemning the preposterous stance of the government towards both the country's economic and human resources. The polity addressed in plays of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, and the other playwrights goes beyond post- independence Nigeria, with its unstable politics on account of prolonged military rule and dictatorial democracy. These literary icons used the medium of drama to comment on the prevailing socio-economic and political situations in their country, Nigeria. It is evident that contemporary African drama has gone beyond the border of entertainment to become issue-based, and one that can be used for the study of socio-political and socio-economic structure and issues in the continent. These plays show how societal malaise like corruption and sit-tight leadership syndrome which are the causes of Africa underdevelopment have become materials in the hands of the continent's playwrights.

Analysis of Selected Dramas

In Ahmed Yerima's *Little Drops* the terror activities of the various militant groups are not shrouded in metaphor like we have in his earlier play on the Nigerian Niger Delta struggle *Hard Ground* or Akpos Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors*, but similar in realistic portrayal of the nation's socio-political landscape in characters and language like we have in Bunmi Julius-Adeoye's *War at Peace*. In *Little Drops*, the playwright through the ideology of socio-realism made the lines between illusion and reality very thin through the use of language, images and character that are very vivid in the representation of contemporary situations in the Niger Delta. It is worthy to note that "without notice, the boys blew up oil refineries, and kill their own people including leaders."^{xiii} This has a lot of implication on the Nigerian economy, because the blowing-up of oil

refineries and installations drastically affects the country's oil production and subsequently, the revenue. Attacks in the delta by armed groups including MEND cut more than 28% of the country's oil output between 2006 and 2009.^{xiv} When in October 2004, the NDPVF declared a military offensive against the oil multinationals and the Nigerian security forces in response to the alleged aerial bombing of its bases with chemicals by military helicopters, the action led to temporary cessation in oil production. This temporary cessation in oil production led to a sharp and immediate rise in oil prices on international markets. This rise in oil prices brought the Niger Delta insurgency to global attention in level unprecedented in the history of the region. The NDPVF, like MEND and other local insurgent groups are accused of financing their operations through the practice of "bunkering," a euphemism for oil theft from the pipelines that cross the Delta region.^{xv} Bunkering as an illegal activity cost the Nigerian government loss in hundreds of million dollars annually. For the many days that oil workers are kidnapped, exploitation often ceased by the exploring companies involved. This also means a drop in the country's earnings. In Femi Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin* we have gross misrule, massive plundering of the Local Government Council treasury, and lack of concern for the populace. The play also report on the governments disregard for human life, lack of basic social amenities and insensitivity towards the plight of the people of the council as a plunge for the play.^{xvi} Corruption, negligence of duty and hypocrisy permeate the life of virtually all the characters in the play. The public officers in the play exude characters that can be summed up in the words of Polycap, the Chairman's houseboy:

Polycap: Them be thieves proper! That is what they were discussing. How them go deceive you so you no go find out before you go away! ...in the name of God no spare these wicked robbers at all at all.^{xvii}

The word 'Them' spoken in a synthesized English language common among lower class Nigeria society, refers in a collective term to the people in government, especially those whose responsibility it is that the masses are adequately represented and cared for in government. 'Them' is ambiguous and represents a group of people, what native English speakers will write as 'They'. This ambiguity is for identification purpose, it specifies that there are more people involved. The character Polycap, represents, the working class of the society, working daily for a group of corrupt leaders which he regards as "...thieves proper!".^{xviii} The sordid and corrupt attitudes of the politicians are ably captured by the play as they tried to use a metaphysical means

to cover their failure by disbursing state resources to an Ifa Priest before a well-known upright auditor arrives:

Councillor for Cooperatives: One fat goat, Baba, from our best OFN farm. To be delivered today at dusk.

Councillor for Education: Ten, no, fifteen percent of the contract to be awarded next week for the proposed Cultural Centre.

Doctor: Free vaccination for you and your family against whatever disease is in vogue (*Coughs*). And for future epidemics in the development plan.

Chief Magistrate: One year's pardon in advance. For all crimes including murder. And the promise of a life term for all mischievous witness.

Price Control Officer: first choice over any goods seized this month from hoarders. All tobacco you can have, you alone. If only you can stop the Public Complaints Commissioner from coming here and-^{xix}

The dubious Ifa Priest accepted all the gifts:

Baba Fawomi: (*Angrily*) I told you to be quiet! (*Throws seeds again with great solemnity*). Ifa accepts the gift. Professional fees will be settled later...^{xx}

The politicians in Osofisan's *Who's Afraid of Solarin*, are the same we have in the Nigerian political landscape of 1999 to 2010, the period of civilian government. This situation is not different from what obtained since independence in 1960. There is no distinction between the well-educated and the less-educated politicians, they all struggle to outdo one another in grounding the nation's economy. Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* criticizes and ridicule the capitalist system that concentrates the wealth of the nation in the hands of a few profit-oriented, wicked and selfish individuals.^{xxi} The market women who are conscious of the deprivation the political class with their oppressive nature visited on them, sing out in an attempt to collectively transform their society:

The lure of profit has conquered our souls and changed us into cannibals ...we make inflation and hoard away ...essential commodities like sugar and salt like milk and oil ...^{xxii}

Commodities hoarding by those licensed by government to import consumers' goods causes inflation, a situation which drastically cut the masses' purchasing power. This artificial scarcity allows the government to unnecessarily channel money meant for physical infrastructure towards

importation of this societal needed consumables. The protest of the market women in *Once Upon Four Robber* by paralyzing market activities creates in itself a collapse in the grassroots economy. This collapse in the grassroots economy is also witnessed in *Little Drops*. In a revolutionary circumstance there will be paralytic market activities.

Who's Afraid of Solarin which talks about the need of a public complaint commissioner to check the graft and corrupt attitude of people in government, got the Nigerian governments' attention when in 2003, it set-up the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independence Corrupt Practices and other Financial Crimes Commission (ICPC). The anti-graft agencies were established to arrest and prosecute public officers found guilty of fraudulently enriching themselves. These bodies are set-up with the sole aim of prosecution of both serving public officers and citizens of the country found engaging in any form of corruption. Between the year 2003 when the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission was established to the present, the anti-graft body has succeeded in prosecuting more than five former governors of the federal republic, a serving Inspector General of Police and a member of the National Assembly, and the National Vice Chairman of the ruling political party of the country. These governors are known to have defrauded their states of more than N20Billion. The EFCC under the Chairmanship of Alhaji Nuhu Ribadu succeeded in prosecuting some notable politician and government officers. Though Ribadu's critics are quick to point out that he is used by the serving President Olusegun Obasanjo to hound his perceived enemies, yet simple logic has it that those arrested by this anti-graft body are corrupt and guilty of the charges levied against them. In 2009, after the global recession EFCC under new Chairmanship, clamp down on some selected bank executives in the country for fraudulently appropriating the money of their banks to personal business.

Mismanagement of Nigerian economy accounted for the underdevelopment of the nation, the issue of brain drain occasioned in Nigerian tertiary institutions prior to year 2000. This issue is ably captures in Yerima's *Kaffir's Last Game*. These situations are vividly revealed in the play when Professor tries to explain to Mbulelo why he is relocating from Nigeria to South Africa to take up an appointment at University of Cape Town:

Professor: ...Do you know that right now, I am richer than two Universities' vote put together? Do you know that for the past two years after the so called review of University teaching staff salaries, I have been earning ten thousand naira a month.

One hundred and sixteen miserable dollars for a Professor of twenty-five years and still counting? Do you know that as a Dean, all I was given was ten thousand naira to run the faculty, with researches, conferences and all?^{xxiii}

Education which plays a key role in driving the Nigerian economy is neglected by successive government. According to Reuben Embu:

Generally education has not been accorded the necessary attention in Nigeria. Governments at all levels have been paying lip service to the educational sector. This is reflected in the primary, secondary and higher institutions including the universities that are considered the highest citadel of learning. The story is usually the same from the elected civilian government to dictatorial military regimes over the years.^{xxiv}

Apart from the political situation in Nigeria, which was not pleasant and thereby necessitate brain drain, there are other factors like the inadequate salary paid to the academics, incessant closure of the universities and infrastructural decay in the various institutions of higher learning. Actually, ten thousand naira is equivalent to sixty-six US dollar and twelve cents.

In *Who's Afraid of Solarin* and *Kaffir's Last Game*, there are similarities in themes, especially in the face of the incessant impoverishment that the masses are subjected to by those in the position of governance. It also beams a searchlight on the celebrated corrupt practices of the nation's leaders, a factor which impede development of both economic and physical structure of the nation, and the psychological development of the ordinary citizens.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how the socio-economic issues in Nigeria have turned out to be veritable materials for dramatic construction; drawing attentions to the various fraudulent and corrupt practices of Nigerian leaders ably captured in some of the dramatic works emanating from the country. I have also drawn a parallel line between the position of Nigerian economy and the Niger Delta pugnacious activities. Nigeria's micro economy which is grassroots market driven is often disturbed by incessant conflicts along ethno-religious lines. These conflicts have greatly affected the development of the grassroots market to properly provide insulation for the vagaries affecting market performances on the national level. Another issue raised in the paper is the paralyzing effect of the Niger Delta insurgency. The militancy activities had not only

crippled exploration activities by oil multi-nationals but of the fishing economy as well for almost a decade. In conclusion, to effect necessary change in leadership perception in Nigeria, those in position of authority should endeavour to be receptive to external ideas emanating from their followers, and embracing the culture of societal leadership which works for the common good of the society. One only hopes that the election in April 2011 of President Goodluck Jonathan, a member of the Niger Delta region will finally bring the needed development to the area, and put an end to decades of impoverishment in the region. And that the change in political governance from military to democracy will reduce to the barest minimum the issue of official corruption in the country. Finally, Nigerian dramatists should not shy away from appropriating in their dramatic creations salient issues of economic and politics in their immediate environment, and endeavour to proffer solution to some knotty problems within the state.

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ⁱⁱ Odebode, *Husbands are Crowns*, 12

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