Interrogating Corruption in Nigeria Development through Drama: A Synergistic Approach

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Abstract

Corruption in Nigeria has almost become a totem. It has reached such a proportion that even Nigerian children are cynical of any light at the end of the tunnel. Every dramatist of note in Nigeria, even foreign ones, have at one time or the other periscoped corruption in their works. With the firm belief that Theatre and Society share a symbiotic relationship, Drama and dramatists have continued to mirror the ecclectic dimensions in the corruption profile of the Nigerian society. This paper attempts to trace the development of corruption in Nigeria from D.O Olagoke's Age of Innocence play – The Incorruptible Judge (1962) bringing out major conclusions before Kolade Segun Okeowo's cataclysmic pronouncement that the gods are really to blame, proposing an alignment between physical and spiritual forces of human nature to bring about the much desired change. The conclusion of the paper

now being that eradication of corruption in Nigeria is both plausible and possible.

Key Words: ***Corruption, Development, Drama and Change.***

Introduction

Corruption in Nigeria has reached an alarming proportion that it has become synonymous with Nigeria's identity. It has become even a totem of sort. It is so bad that a former President, labelled his Vice-President, a thief! (Obasanjo, P. 32-33), it is so bad that Chief Olusegun Obasanjo also once remarked in his independence Day Anniversary celebration speech at Abuja in the year 2000 that…

> Corruption in the greatest single impediment to our National aspiration to enter into a new millennium with confidence… it is not only illegal but bad because it corrupts the very soul of our community… it makes nonsense of all budgeting and wastefully depletes our resources. It breeds cynicism and promotes inequality… (Obasanjo, 2000)

What exactly is corruption?

Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of English Language (2013) defines corruption as "a destruction of fidelity or integrity of a person through bribery". The limitation of this definition is in its emphasis on bribery. Though bribery is a serious factor in corruption cases in Nigeria but it is not the only one.

Dong (cited in Ajayi, 33) gives it a more encompassing definition when he says "corruption is any use of official position, resources or facilities for personal benefit". Transparency International agrees with it when it defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. This body goes on to identify three categories of corruption depending on

the amount of money and the official involved. The Wikipedia Online Dictionary sees political corruption as the most viral in the Nigerian Society. Today, Nigeria occupies the unenviable position of being the most corrupt country of the world (Ajayi, 15). Senator Remi Okunrinboye reiterated the corruption index of Nigeria in a public forum at Akure recently. He pontificated that as at 1960 when Europeans departed the shores of Nigeria, corruption was below one digit. As at 1979, when Shehu Shagari was president, corruption has reached one digit, by then Nigerians were talking about corruption in thousands of Naira. By the time Ibrahim Babanjida left office by stepping aside in 1998, corruption has become the accepted currency in official transactions, the index jumped to billions of Naira. Today, the index is in the trillions of Naira. It is in this climes that snakes swallowed trillions of dollars in a public office, and trillions of money was buried in a cemetery. One wonders what the situation will look like in the next 10years or 20years. No wonder, a student was asked in a banal joke in the class in an online article:

In future, "Corruption will be a thing of the past in Nigeria".

What tense in this?

The student responded that "it is a future impossible tense."

Development

Development implies progress in a given continuum. If may also be described as growth.

Development is a specified state of growth or advancement, a new and advanced product or idea; an event constituting a new stage in a changing situation (Oxford Dictionary.com). It can also be a change in human standard that allows individuals to attain their full potential in a given direction. But the definition differs as there are many interests or groups. It could be defined in terms of growth in the economy, education or political systems. The Human Development index (HDI) developed by Indian Nobel Prize Winner, Amartya Sen and Pakistan economist Mahubub ul Hag is "an index based on life expectancy of human beings, development

in education and the per capital income of a particular country". With this index, countries are categorized as developed, developing or underdeveloped. Nigeria is currently a developing country by this index.

'Though there are many varied problem besetting the Nigerian Nation, corruption is the most basic and it is the foundation of all other problems'. One thing that History teaches us is that corruption was imported to Nigeria through the civilizing mission of the colonists, either as trade Voyagers or evangelists (Osae & Nwabara, 3). They all bribed the unwary citizens with pedestrian gifts and drafted them to church. The traders offered stupid gifts as umbrella, towel or even gin while casting away their Agricultural products. There and then the seed has been sown – you can always get what you need if you know whom to see and what to give. In Nigeria political parlance, popularized by Ibrahim Babanjida, everyman has his own price. Corruption became a directive policy of State administration and development has continued on a downward spiral ever since.

Now, workers are owed 7 months arrears of salaries in a country that exports Petroleum product to other countries. This is largely because the oil wealth is cornered by a few individuals. A good example is the personal emolument of the members of the National Assembly that has now become public knowledge. An average senator goes home with an average of ₦30m a month while a member of the House of Representatives takes ₦25m every month yet, the country cannot afford to pay her workers ₦30, 000 in a month? The immediate fallout of this would be that every politician is ready to do everything to get to the National Assembly, either fair or foul. The desperate, hungry electorates will be ready to have their 'take' upfront from the politicians before the election, hence the prevalent 'vote-buying' syndrome in the country today. If this is not corruption per excellence, what else is?

The educational sector is not spared by this virus of corruption that has eaten deeply into the fabric of Nigerian Nation. All levels of the educational system has been bastardized by this warped morality. Public

examinations in primary and secondary schools are now teachers' examination. Tertiary Institutions may be a little different in the sense that academics are still largely put off by the practice of 'marks for money' or 'marks for sex'. However, the fact is that the practice that 'you can determine your own grade in any examination' is fast gaining ground.

Ironically, Nigeria, has a population of 186M which places her 7th largest Nation in the world. Yet, Britain, with a meagre population of 66.5M and Japan with a population of 126.3M are world powers and are classified as developed economies by the Human Development index. North Korea with a population of 24.7M and South Korea with a population of 48.9M have made themselves a force to reckon with in world economy. The only thing Nigeria can boast of is that the world richest pastor is a Nigerian with a net assets of $200M. This is the more worrisome aspect of the whole issue. If there is anything Nigeria exports to the world, it is Religion. Nigerian Pastors are in different parts of the world showing people the way to heaven while this apparent religious clout has failed to make any appreciable impact on the average Nigerian. Nigeria is a country with the richest church but poor members! What went wrong with this 'innocent' nation where sales were conducted in days of yore without even seeing the seller? All that needed to be done is that the seller indicates the price by a code, recognized by all. The buyer will take the material and have the money there. Nobody steals. Are we not paying too high a price for modernization and Western civilization?

Corruption and Nigerian Drama

The theoretical framework of this study is utilitarianism that is the function of art in the society.

The research design is to use Drama to interrogate corruption in Nigerian society and expose the probable causes of this social menace called 'corruption and also navigate a probable way out.' Since Drama could be taken as social history of a group of people. Drama and Society in Nigeria have shared a symbiotic relationship. While Drama reflects the realities of

the Nigerian Society, the society too informs the content of Nigerian Drama. Hence, an average Nigeria dramatist writes about the Nigerian situation in his plays as seen through his own eyes and the eyes of others around him.

What this study seeks to do is to select some plays dealing with different periods of the Nigerian history in her march to development. This parallels, roughly, movements of transition of sorts but not to the complexities of the work itself. The paradigms are:

(i) The Age of Innocence – The Incorruptible Judge by D. Olu Olagoke's Incorruptible judge (1962)
(ii) The Age of Infatuation – The Lion and the Jewel by W. Soyinka (1960)
(iii) The Age of Protest – The Gods are not to blame by Ola Rotimi (1971)
(iv) The Age of Disillusionment – Dark Times Are Over? by Olu Obafemi (2005)
(v) The Age of Hope – Kolade Okeowo's The Gods are to blame (2009)

Of course, there are plethora of plays in each category listed above. The choice here is deliberate for the purpose of the argument for or against corruption.

The Incorruptible Judge by D. Olu Olagoke is one of the earliest Nigerian Drama that deals with corruption. The storyline is simple enough. A young school leaver looks for a job in an establishment. The boss requested for bribe before employment. The job-seeker reported to the police. The police gave him marked money and a sign. The boss was arrested and charged to court for asking and receiving bribe. The boss approached the court Judge with the intent of turning the case in his favor. Alas, the judge was incorruptible. Chief Agbalowomeri was jailed. This is the Nigeria our independence leaders left us, the legacy some of the great minds in the Theatre want to protect. But Nigeria of today is clearly different.

Mrs. Funke Adekoya, SAN has this to say during an interview with the Tribune as published on Monday, 13 May 2013:

Interviewer: There is a general belief that the Nigerian Judiciary is corrupt. Is this impression correct?

Mrs. Adekoya: Unfortunately, I think the allegation is substantially true… when it touches election petitions and political matters (p.28)

The 'mustard seed' of Chief Agbalowomeri has grown to a frightful proportion.

The Age of Infatuation is represented by Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the* Jewel (1972) Here, the storyline is very familiar. Sidi, the Village belle was the paramour of the village teacher until the photographer (a kind of press man) come to expose her enchanting beauty to the world. Here comes in Baroka, the village Head who desired to have her as part of his harem. Sidi was already infatuated with Lakunle, the village teacher only insisting in the way of the land – a cross between traditionalism and modernity. It was the press man that exposed her to the vagaries of Western Civilization, Baroka's seduction is less than honest. The seed of corruption planted by Agbalowomeri was steadily germinating into a sapling of corruption. We see Baroka bribing the officials to divert the railway line from his community. At this stage it was an innocent beginning that later flourished.

The Age of Protest is represented by Ola Rotimi's ***God's Are not to blame***

Again the storyline is familiar. The tragedy of Odewale is the tragedy of the Nigerian elites at the time in their quest for National identity.

Rotimi refused to take that simplistic approach to the problem of emerging Nationhood in Africa and Nigeria in particular that her problems are caused by the departing Europeans. Rotimi would rather

we look inwards to the emerging elites in the Nigerian Society that are already on the vice- like grip of greed and associated emotion in their desire for power. This is a protest against shift in blame for political corruption in Nigeria.

The Age of Disillusionment is represented by Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times Are Over**?*** (2005)

This drama is one of the most vitriolic treatment of corruption on the Nigerian stage. The storyline again should be fairly familiar since it was gestated and premiered in this same department (Department of Performing Arts, University of Ilorin). The drama makes no pretense of seeing any ray of hope from any organ of state enterprise, be it religious, political, judicial or social; they are all condemned to the cesspit of powerlessness to alter the status quo. The recourse to the people's court is the dramatic equivalent of deux ex machina to resolve a knotty issue. But the big question hovers in the play, can the people really take the baton and opt out of the pit of hopelessness the nation has plunged them into? This waits to be seen, hence the categorization.

The Age of Hope is represented by another play on the gods in Nigerian Drama. But it is in Home video format. *The gods are to blame* by Kolade – Segun Okeowo. A short synopsis of the play may be in order here:

The Drama is set in the palace of Ejiworo where the kings have been dying in succession. Within a space of 10 years, they have had seven different kings. The cause of the deaths was put at a curse in the king's palace. This not only affected the kings but the whole community lies in palpable despair. Adeoye, a lecturer by profession decided to put a stop to this untimely deaths. He obeyed the call of the people in spite of entreaties by his mother, his wife and his uncle who happened to be the chief king maker. At last he became king and was sick unto death as previous kings. But the turning point came when he was visited by a Youth Corp member, who was formerly a student in his department.

The Youth Corp member was told about the problem faced by the king and other pervious kings. This young man now told the dying king that the solution to his ailment is not in any ritual of appeasement which he has done several times to no avail but in a person – Jesus Christ.

The king, who was ready to try just anything at this point agreed to a prayer and he was healed. Though the change in him was gradual but it was total, radiating from him to his household and to the community at large. Of course this is another deux-ex machina but one that flows naturally from the inner forces of the drama.

The point here is that change can only come from inside to the outward parts to bring about any lasting effect. The example of the outward change is the conglomerate of strange bed fellows calling for change in the Nigeria election of 2015. Now, most of them are back at their natural habitat because the leopard cannot really change its own skin (HB, Jeremiah 13:23).

As Isaac Oni pointed out long ago that:

> The political class has usually been much better concerned with what it wants for itself from the National Purse, without the love, concern and self-identification with the masses, most of whom are suffering from hand to mouth. This basic self-centeredness and apathy to the state of the masses has been made manifest in the ignoble activities of our democratically elected law-makers and decision takers both at the National and state level (35).

This underlines the sacrificial step taken by Adeoye in becoming the king of Ejiworo when it was apparent that death awaits him in the palace. He succeeded where others have failed. This is the message of hope offered to the Nigerian Society at any level of leadership.

The synergy here is that there is no single or simple solution to the problem of corruption in the Nigerian Society. Each play selected here contributed something to the solution while driving towards a

cumulative experience of hope at the end. On the social plane, sacrificial leadership is the only thing that can offer any hope to the Nigerian society. At the spiritual, metaphysical level, inward change produces a lasting outward change.

Conclusion

This study will like to conclude that there is hope for the underdeveloped state of the Nigerian economy in spite of the oil wealth that has been flowing for more than 6 decades, without any appreciable impact on the average people of the country as a result of ravaging corruption in the system. While one may not make religion a directive aspect of state policy in a pluralistic society as ours, it is obvious that the only way to get out of this moral quagmire that has plagued and continue to plaque the Nigerian State is a drastic turning around which can only be achieved through a spiritual operation of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The moral universe envisaged in Olu Olagoke's *The Incorruptible Judge* can only remain a mirage. Otherwise, every leader – political, public service, judiciary, military, economy and business needs to have an encounter with the Jesus persona who alone can redeem humanity. One may ask if we don't have Christian in the leadership positions of the country. Why, then is the country like this? If at least, for example, the Christian members of the National Assembly can say 'No' to the National looting in the name of service to the Nation, then there will be hope.

Wlibur, O' Donovan (12) provided clues when he observed that majority of the so-called Christians are either 'Nominal Christians' or backslider Christians. The implication of this is that the corruption that has retarded Nigerian progress has even blinded Christians to their duty, probably because of the need for self/class survival. This must have been the reason Bunmi Ajayi surmised that ….it will take God's intervention to solve the problem of corruption in Nigeria (3).

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