

**Theatre, Class Struggle, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: An Analysis of Salifu
Musa's *The Rebel Soldiers and Femi Osofisan's
Once Upon Four Robbers***

Oja Paul Egwemi, *PhD*
Department of Theatre Arts,
Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria
Email: egwemi.op@ksu.edu.ng
Cell: +2348069603924

Abstract

The gap between the rich and the poor in Nigeria due to the high level of corruption among the Nigerian ruling class is wide. This has been made worse by the poor quality of political leadership and the manner in which Nigeria's political economy and socio-cultural landscape have been managed in recent years. This has therefore, encouraged a disdain for the security and rights of the dominated, be they groups or individuals. The result is that over the decades, the lower class of the country has chosen anti-social activities such as kidnapping, armed robbery and terrorism as means to gain economic freedom. This situation has over the years created violent scenes across the nation. The paper however, adopts the instrument of content analysis of the qualitative research methodology. The paper delves into *The Rebel Soldiers and Once Upon Four Robbers*, analyses their contents and addresses the issue. The result shows that apart from the military option, several means including drama have been used to counter terrorism in the country for national peace and development.

Key words: Theatre, Class Struggle, Terrorism, Counter-terrorism.

Introduction

Nigeria has been bedevilled with a number of socioeconomic challenges over the ages. Some of these challenges are poverty and unemployment. This is as a result of the socio-political menaces such as "god-fatherism" and nepotism that have eaten deep into the fabric of the nation. The country, according to Amirikpa Oyigbenu," is replete with the culture of "god-fatherism", and "nepotism". As a result of these negative tendencies, Nigerian graduates roam the streets for an upward of ten years without securing employment" (61).

However, the aforementioned social realities have generated security challenges across the country over the years. In other words, poverty and high rate of unemployment have been identified as some of the major factors responsible for most of the violent cases that had over the years led to the loss of lives and destruction of properties in the country. That is why Chinua Achebe has say this

when he talks about the factors responsible for the violent activities of the Nigerian Islamist sect, Boko Haram:

Economic deprivation and corruption produce and exacerbate financial and social inequities in a population, which in turn fuel political instability. Within this environment, extremists of all kinds particularly religious zealots and other political mischief makers find a foothold to recruit supporters and sympathisers to help them launch terrorist attacks and wreak havoc in the lives of ordinary citizens. (250)

For national peace and development, many means have over the ages been used to counter the Nigeria's security challenges. The Nigerian government on her own part has spent a huge amount of money in order to curtail this ugly situation. The Nigerian Armed

Forces have used many counter terrorism strategies among which is “*Operation Lafiya Dole*” in order to curtail terrorist attack in country.

However, Nigerian theatre artists are not left out in the fight against terrorist attacks in the country. Movie producers, choreographers and Nigerian playwrights like Femi Osofisan, John Iwuh, Salifu Musa and many others have over the years portrayed the issue of Nigerian security challenges such as kidnapping, armed robbery and terrorism in their various works. It is based on this that the paper examines the roles of the Nigerian dramatists in the fight against the security challenges facing the nation using Salifu Musa's *The Rebel Soldiers* and Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* as paradigms.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on *Marxist theory*. *Marxist theory* is a method of socioeconomic analysis that views class relations and takes a dialectical view of social transformation. It originated from the works of 19th century's philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The theory exposes the relationship between the individual and the society in which he lives. It focuses on the economic realities of the society and how they affect people's relationship to one another.

The society houses three classes of people, the poor, the middle-class and the rich. While the poor focuses on basic survival, the rich is concerned with acquiring more wealth. The theory upholds that the struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat defines the position of the state. It is of the opinion that the inherent inequality among the people causes tension resulting to conflict which leads to a revolution that often puts an end to the reign of oppression. This theory is relevant to the focus of this paper because it reveals that class struggle is one of the reasons

behind instability in any society which Nigeria is not an exception.

Overview of Nigerian Theatre and Drama

Many scholars have proven that theatre and drama existed in Nigeria before the advent of colonial activities in the country. The early Nigerian theatre and drama have been observed as the nation's indigenous kind of theatre which is seen in the country's cultural activities such as festival, myth, storytelling and ritual. Like in other parts of Africa, pre-colonial Nigeria had numerous traditional religions and functional rituals which the nation's indigenous theatre and drama are said to have emanated from. That is why Yemi Ogunbiyi says that:

The specific origins of Nigerian theatre and drama are speculative. What is however, not speculative... is the existence, in many Nigerian societies, of a robust theatrical tradition. The primitive root of that tradition must be sought in the numerous religious rituals and festival that exist in many Nigerian communities... as an expression of the relationship between man, society and nature; drama arose out of fundamental human needs in dawn of human civilization and has continued to express those needs ever since: which is to say that Nigerian theatre and drama originated with the Nigerian himself. (2)

However, the advent of modern Nigerian theatre and drama is a product of colonial activities in the nation. That is why Oyigbenu says that:

The movement from the traditional ritual masquerade festival theatre to the modern theatrical art form has been informed by a number of factors such as the advent of colonial rule, the introduction of

western education, the incursion of Christianity and Islam and the money economy which promoted material values over and above the hitherto cherished traditional values and morality of old... (44)

The British alongside other things brought the idea of western education and modern form of theatre to Nigeria from which early Nigerian artists like Hubert Ogunde, E.K. Ogunmola, James Ene Henshaw, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka and many others acquired the knowledge of modern theatre practice.

The role of theatre in the society can never be over emphasized. Human beings have a natural pleasure in watching drama. Therefore, the first and fundamental purpose of theatre and drama is for entertainment. It is during the course of this entertainment that theatre can move into other purposes which may be didactic, political and moralistic. Clive Barker argues that:

There is no simple way of defining the social purpose of the theatre, although people continually go on trying to rely on simplistic definitions like "the purpose of theatre is to educate", "the purpose of the theatre is to divert-to entertain" and more recently "the purpose of theatre is to disturb". (144, 150)

The last phrase in Clive's argument contains the real social purpose of the theatre. Theatre and drama serve as agents of social change. This is where the giant purpose of theatre and drama is seen. Theatre serves as a mirror of the society. According to Akorede:

The dramatist is the watchman in his society. He is the people's secret police; his duty is to sift out information, to bring the culprits to the people's court; the concealed and the guarded are exposed not

for people's pleasure but for necessary action. (56)

Theatre analyses the state of man in relation to his society. It discusses many social issues leading to peaceful co-existence of man, societal peace and development. That is why Saviour Agoro says that: "theatre can be seen as a means of interpreting all our common experiences. It can teach us more about the ways in which people live... through drama, a group can create and explore a different society with norms and values" (51).

In Nigeria, right from the pre-colonial days till date, theatre has been an important vehicle for political and social transformation. During the colonial days, Nigeria was faced with many issues among which was cultural imperialism and Nigerian theatre artists like Hubert Ogunde and the others used their works to address the issues to some extent. At the dawn of independence the nation has been bedevilled with corruption, tribalism, nepotism, religious bigotries, terrorism etc. Nigerian theatre has equally been used to address these social ills.

Theatre, Class Struggle and Terrorism: The Nigerian Experience

Terrorism is the use of violent acts as a means to create fear among the masses in order to achieve a financial, political, religious and ideological aim. According to Michael Walzer, "terrorism is the deliberate killing of innocent people at random to spread fear through a whole population and force the hand of its political leaders" (8). In the same vein, Fortna affirms that, "terrorism is, in the broadest sense, the use of intentionally indiscriminate violence as a means to create terror among masses of people; or fear to achieve a financial, political, religious or ideological aim"(520).

Over the years, the Nigerian nation has experienced religious, political, ethnic

and socio-economic motivated terrorism which have led to loss of many lives and destruction of properties as a result of the nation's corrupt socio-political structure. It has been viewed that the nation has been characterised by elements of dictatorship, human rights violations, corruption and extreme poverty. Right from the early independence days till date, corruption has been embraced by political leaders upon which the present political leaders built their ideologies of absolute monarchy and dictatorship. For instance, the military took over the leadership of the nation because of corruption but alas, the level of corruption witnessed during the military regime cannot be over mentioned. Chudi posits that:

...the criminalisation of the state and pollution of civil society must be squarely laid at the doorsteps of the political military whose members saw political office as a short route to riches, they set the tone, and the rest of the society followed... (81)

The wave of corruption in Nigeria since the military returned power to the civilians some years ago has been alarming. There is hardly any part of the nation's life that has not been infected by corruption, which is why Chinua Achebe equally laments thus: "corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage, and Nigeria will die if we continue to pretend that she is only slightly indisposed" (249).

Apart from the other reasons such as tribalism, what led to the Nigeria's most bloody violent scene and perhaps, one of the world's gruesome wars, the Nigerian/Biafran civil war, was corruption. And in the same vein, due to corruption which have made life difficult for many Nigerians, well-meaning citizens of the nation, particularly youths have embraced

crime in order to achieve socio-economic freedom. The crime rate in Nigeria in the past few years is very high, so high that the citizens cannot sleep with both eyes closed. Cases of kidnapping, cultism, armed robbery and terrorism are heard in the state capital, Abuja and across each of the nation's states every day.

The 5th April, 2018 armed robbery attack in Offa, Kwara State, Nigeria which claimed the lives of thirty innocent people is one of the good examples of armed robbery attacks in the country. More so, apart from the other incidents of terrorist attacks recorded in the country, the harm Boko Haram terrorist sect has caused in the life of the nation since 2009 till date can never be over mentioned. The Boko Haram which " started as an insurgency against the state and its institutions, gradually assumes political, religious and socio-economic permutations as not only police stations, army barracks, government establishments were targeted but also banks, business, churches, Christian leaders and later mosques and some Muslim clerics fell to the ranging inferno of Boko Haram violence"(Doki and Odeh in Odeh and Aji,84). However, many counter-terrorism strategies have been used over the years to curtail the situation in the country. Theatre and drama are among the strategies. Nigerian theatre has been producing drama, dance, play texts and other art works covering themes such as corruption, crime wave and counter crime for national peace and development. Some of such plays are Salifu Musa's *The Rebel Soldiers* and Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*.

Synopsis and Analysis of the Selected Plays.

In Salifu Musa's *The Rebel Soldiers*, Omogwu, a multi-tribal and corrupt nation is entrapped in an ethnic and socio-economic motivated violence which leads to lose of many lives and destruction of property. After the war, and some periods

of stability, Omogwu is faced with another kind of security challenge. The land turns to a free ground of criminals and dangerous insurgence. Cases of crime are reported in every part of the nation. The reason is thus: the Federal Republic of Omogwu is characterised by high rate of poverty and unemployment as the result of illegal activities of the leaders.

Mr. Mayor, the major character of the play happens to be one of the victims of the effect of corruption in Omogwu nation. He is a poor unemployed graduate whose country fails to provide an enabling environment for him like many other youths of the nation. He therefore, raises his arms against the Federal Government of Omogwu through the help of his terrorist sect known as The Rebel Soldiers, the result leads to the death of many innocent people and destruction of properties. As one of the characters laments thus:

Tom David:.. you see, the activity of Mr Mayor's boys in particular has already caused lots of havoc to both the lives of our people and the economic development of our land. Many lives have gone, properties worth million amount of money have been destroyed, even as I am talking... we cannot sleep at night with both eyes closed... (11)

That is the true picture of things until the apprehension of Mr Mayor towards the end of the play. The play without doubt is a portrayal of Nigerian society. Just the way many scholars, after a lot of research, placed the blame of security challenges facing Nigeria on the corridors of Nigerian leaders, the leaders are responsible for the problems in the play. The playwright uses his characters and themes to analyse the problem of

Nigeria as a nation. He argues that poor leadership is responsible for the security challenges the country has been facing. As some of the characters in the play put it in their exchange:

Professor Samuel:...when the leaders, Mr Presenter and viewers out there, neglected their responsibilities, like parents who do not take care of their children, waywardness of the citizenry will become inevitable. (10)

Leading Counsel:...what are the reasons for his action? Some people said "Mr. Mayor's aim is turn all the people of this land to worshippers of his god" ...well, I'm not against any one's opinion about him. But do you know who his boys are? The hopeless, the unemployed and the downtrodden...(46)

The playwright uses the above characters to portray some of the causes of the nation's current security challenges. The Nigerian leaders, like the leaders in the play, have neglected their followers for a long time; leaving them to die as a result of abject poverty. For, "nothing provokes a public reaction in open democratic society quite like revelations of corruption among politicians"(Brain Lighowler, 7). Lighowler's opinion is a best illustration of what is happening in Nigeria's society as it is captured in the play. In a broad term, the play portrays the issues of terrorism facing the Nigerian nation; by discussing the causes, the effects and way out of the exploitation of the poor masses by leaders as the major factor for civil unrest in any

society. The play equally shows that violence of any kind is an enemy of societal development and calls for peace. As one of the characters admonishes:

Violence is a friend of underdevelopment...
Violence is an enemy of development.
Violence is an obstacle to development... (29)

Like *The Rebel Soldiers*, Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* is a story of class conflict. The play tells a story of a group of individuals bound together by the occupation of armed robbery. The armed robbers, Angola, Major, Hassan, Alhaja and the others, the feelings that they have no other choice in a society that encourages unemployment, hunger, poverty, social injustice and other socioeconomic problems, choose armed robbery as a means of livelihood.

The state therefore, promulgates a death penalty decree in order to curtail crime wave. In the process of carrying out criminal activity, many of armed robbers including their leader, Alani, are killed. However; the state's efforts to curtail crime seem to be fruitless. Alani and many other armed robbers are killed; still the armed robbers in their determined efforts to continue with their illegal business seek for diabolic magical power from Aafa with which they continue to carry out robbery attacks without been caught.

In the same vein, the situation in *Once Upon Four Robbers* is a replica of what is happening in Nigeria. Like in the play, for a long time now, unemployment, poverty, hunger, and social injustice are some of the socioeconomic realities facing the Nigerian nation. The gape between the rich and the poor in the country is wide. There are little or no opportunities for the poor. The poor masses are trapped in economic difficulties. The rich keeps getting richer and the poor keeps getting

poorer. This situation leaves the poor with shattered dream. Osofisan rightly captures it in the play through the voice of one of his characters:

Hassan: Yes, Ahmed. What excuse do you think I owe you? Everyone has a dream. Everyone has a point at which the dream cracks up. I have sworn never to be a slave in my own father's land. All I wanted was the right to work, but everywhere they only wanted slaves...(90)

The larger portion of the Nigerian population is poor. Most of the people within this class of Nigerian citizens, like the characters in the play, struggle everyday to actualize their dreams. But the dreams most often ended up unfulfilled due to the poor socioeconomic and political structures of the country which are designed in such a way that make life difficult for the poor. It has been observed that in Nigeria, "... the ordinary citizens remain the victims of adverse economic policies that have failed to ameliorate their socioeconomic conditions, while the privilege class pillage and plunder the nation's resources with criminal impunity... (Amirikpa, 60).For greener pasture, many youths leave the rural areas of the country to the cities every day thereby populating the residence of the poor which are normally slums .The condition of life in the Nigerian slums are true pictures of the conditions of life in the play as they are captured in this exchange:

Hassan:...I could never raise my knife against you. But what's this you're doing?

With oath we bound our
lives together.

Major: Yes. Our lives, not
our corpses.

Angola: Listen to him! It's
disgusting! What are
you if not corpse? You
are born in the slum and
you didn't know you
were a corpse? Since
you burst from the
womb, all covered in
slime, you've always
been a corpse. You fed
on worms and leftovers,
your body nude like a
carcass in the
government mortuary,
elbowing your way
among other corpses.
And the stink is all over
you like a flooded
cemetery in Lagos (10)

The Nigerian slum dwellers are poor people with no or little hope. They are poor as the result of uneven distribution of the nation's resources. They suffer all kinds of humiliation in the hands of the government as Amirikpa observed:

The demolition of Maroko is a historical reality. Maroko used to be a marshy and waterlogged slum habitation of the poor who could not afford the luxury of owning parcels of land in Victoria Island or Ikoye areas of Lagos. With the sack of the original owners and occupants of Maroko, the military government then reclaimed and appropriated the land to their colonies. But the question is, with the demolition of Maroko, and without alternative allocation, "where do a million people go to find a home?"(68).

This is exactly the kind of hardship poor Nigerians are exposed to across many cities of the federation. The question is, are the poor masses in Nigeria by every legitimate reason not supposed to be offered a decent atmosphere for them to live and actualize their dreams? For a very serious reason, these people deserve a better life just like the rich. It is the inability of the government to realize and accept this fact that is always responsible for violent activities in the society.

...if a free society cannot save the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich... a society cannot save the many who are poor, it cannot itself be a free society... poverty degrades the people; it decades government... (Osofisan, 5)

Based on this backdrop, it is clear that the violent activities of criminal gangs across the country likethe situations portrayed in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Salifu Musa's *The Rebel Soldiers*, are products of an unjust society where the wealth of the nation is unevenly distributed. The poor Nigerian citizens are human beings with numerous needs just like the rich. They will not remain silent in the face of injustice. Their relations without a sentimental fact are seen in level of crime wave in our society today. And like it has been revealed in the selected plays, the solution to the problem is not death penalty to criminals but introduction of a good economic and political policy that can see to equitable distribution of the nation's resources.

Conclusion

The paper has to some extent discussed the problems of terrorism in Nigerian space. Through the analysis of the selected plays, it has logically demonstrated the fact that the principal factors responsible for the Nigerian security challenges have a strong

link with the nation's poor and unjust socioeconomic and political structure. It has given the awareness about the issues and the way forward. On a general note, the paper has shown the functions of drama and theatre in the society.

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