Modern Nigerian drama and its generation of playwrights

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Abstract
Many scholars have written on the beginning and development of modern Nigerian drama. This paper is an attempt to do same, with reference to the views expressed, divergent as they are, by these scholars, on the beginning and development of Nigerian drama from its inception to the present. These views are matched so that the forms of modern Nigerian drama and the different generations of Nigerian playwrights are re-visited, for proper documentation and reference.

Key words: Modern, Generation, Nigerian Drama, Forms and Pioneering Efforts

Introduction
Different attempts have been made by scholars and critics to document Nigerian drama from its inception to date. Notable among them are Oyin Ogunba’s “Theatre in Africa”, an article in Presence Africaine (1966), Joel Adedeji’s 1966 Ph.D Thesis at Ibadan titled “The Alarinjo Theatre: A Study of Yoruba Theatrical Art Form from its Earliest Beginning to the Present Time” and his article “Oral Tradition and the Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria” in Research in African Literatures (1971). Others are Yemi Ogunbiyi’s edited Drama and Theatre in Nigeria (1981 & 2014), Biodun Jeyifo’s The Yoruba Travelling Theatre in Nigeria (1984), Chris Dunton’s Make Man Talk True (1991), and Olu Obafemi’s Contemporary Nigerian Theatre (1996) which Osita Okagbue describes as “the first comprehensive study of contemporary Nigerian theatre” (146). However, an attempt is made here, to summarise all these writers’ views as to the historical development of modern Nigerian drama from its inception to date. Nigeria as an African nation with multifarious cultural groups has produced innovative playwrights and significant and innumerable works of drama. In fact, in a broader perspective, Nigerian literature of which Nigerian drama is a sub-genre, is now, according to Ezechin Onyeronwu and Allwell Abalogu (55), the hotbed of African literature, judging from its qualitative and quantitative outputs. Abiola Irele’s corroboration of this statement is very relevant today. According to him, “literary creation is the one area of contemporary endeavour and achievement in which Nigeria has an undisputed claim to supremacy in Africa” (101). Irele’s statement is still relevant today because the plays published in Nigeria by Nigerian playwrights since 1990 to date are unprecedented.

Modern Nigerian drama: Its beginning
It will be difficult to take a statistics of the number of plays written between 1990 and now, compared to the one taken by Bernth Lindfors in 1982 where he presents a table of Nigerian plays published between 1952 and 1967:
The above statistics shows that between 1952 and 1967 (16 years), only twenty eight plays were published. The implication of the above is that modern Nigerian drama (written Nigerian drama) started in 1956 with the publication of four plays. Remi Ademola Adedokun (11) informs us that the heritage of written drama in Nigeria (modern Nigerian drama) ostensibly began in 1956 with the publication of James Ene Henshaw’s *This Is Our Chance*. He reveals that James Ene Henshaw, a medical practitioner, was the first notable Nigerian playwright. *This Is Our Chance* was followed subsequently by *Medicine for Love* (1961), *Children of the Goddess* (1964), *Dinner for Promotion* (1965) and *Jewels of the Shrine* (1965) all by Henshaw. His other plays include *A Man of Character, Companion for a Chief* and *Enough Is Enough*. At the time of Henshaw’s demise on August 16, 2007, he had just finished translating William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* into Efik, his native language.

Henshaw’s pioneering dramatic upsurge was followed by Wole Soyinka’s debut in 1958. From then onward, playwrights and theatre scholars began to sprout and thrive in their diversified groups. Since 1958 when Wole Soyinka’s *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* were produced, as Gerald Moore (78) makes us to understand, traces of African oriented works of Nigerian playwrights started to appear, including J.P. Clark’s *Song of a Goat, The Raft, Ozidi* and *The Masquerade*. The creativity of the Ibadan School of Drama as well as the encouragement derived from the attainment of political independence in 1960, promoted more seriousness and productivity in writing, leading to increased fame for modern Nigerian drama. Since it would be difficult to enumerate all the Nigerian playwrights since 1956 to date, it is better to
look at modern Nigerian drama from the point of view of its generation of writers and their thematic concerns.

**Pioneering efforts**
Despite the above insight into the beginning of modern Nigerian drama, its historical excursion would be incomplete without taking a backward glance to its predecessor. One basic reason for this is that the thematic concerns of Nigerian playwrights from 1956 can easily be traced to the dramatic events before the inception. Most of these events were in the oral traditions of the towns and villages where these playwrights come from and from where they borrowed their themes which they incorporate into their plays. What this means is that in preliterate Nigeria, there were festivals, rituals and other traditional performances and which Nigerian playwrights had to incorporate into their works. This is why, in his theory of evolutionism in drama, Clark traces the origin of Nigerian drama to the tribal myths, rituals and lore. He asserts that:

> We believe that, as the roots of the European drama go back to the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysius, so are the origins of Nigerian drama likely to be found in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the people of this century. (56)

Prior to the founding of the University College, Ibadan and its associated theatrical and dramatic activities, and dating from the pre-colonial times, numerous performances had provided theatrical atmosphere in Nigeria. These ranged from the traditional African performance genres like the masquerade, ritual displays, festivals, storytelling, dance, music, etc. It was at this time that “Alarinjo” theatre thrived.

A peep into this “Alarinjo” theatre and then folk theatre which of course preceded modern Nigeria drama will suffice because of their basic influence on modern Nigerian drama as already pointed out. As Adedokun reveals, “Alarinjo” theatre is a Yoruba traditional theatre which evolved from the masquerade cult. Masking, chanting, dancing and drumming are basic elements of this theatre. “Alarinjo” theatre, Adedokun further reveals, grew from a religious motive of ancestral worship to the secular court entertainment. The word “Alarinjo”, he says, is a derivative appellation meaning ‘common itinerant dancer” and it is an equivalence of the “Travelling Theatre” of Ogunde and his colleagues, though they are not the same in form, style and content. Joel Adedeji’s “Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre” is a good reference point. According to him, the Alarinjo theatres first emerged from the dramatic roots of the Egungun (masquerade) in ancestor worship and was first performed on Wednesday, February 22, 1826 in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo (27). Biodun Jeyifo’s book, The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria is also a good reference point.

In their (Adedeji, Adedokun and Jeyifo) submissions, apart from the richness of the “Alarinjo” theatre in cultural content, versatility of its artists in music, dance, folklore and spectacle, the fact is also there that the Alarinjo theatre which predated the 1946 emergence of modern Yoruba Travelling Theatre of Hubert Ogunde, had an imperishable tradition upon which the modem travelling theatre heavily relied for continuity; and from which the literary theatre could leave an eclectic taste. After the era of Alarinjo, Yoruba travelling theatre, which Darah (5) prefers to call “Itinerant Theatre” came on board. The leader of the park was Hubert Ogunde who formed his first opera group: African Research Music Party in 1944, four years before the establishment of the University College Ibadan. It will be recalled that J.P.
Clark in his classification of Nigerian drama, prefers to group this folk theatre of Ogunde and others as part of modern Nigerian drama. Darah, Jeyifo and others have written much on folk theatre in Nigeria. Apart from Hubert Ogunde, often referred to as the doyen of Nigerian drama, others are Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya (The founder of The Alawada Theatre), Oyin Adejobi, Kola Ogunmola, Isola Ogunsola (also known as I Show Pepper), Lere Paimo, Ade Love, to mention a few. While listing one hundred and fifteen different groups in this category, Jeyifo reveals that it is virtually impossible to obtain the accurate number of Travelling Theatre groups that existed in any one given period (200). Ogunde alone, the pioneer folk theatre practitioner, produced many plays which were acted all over the country. Many of these plays were satires to expose the ills of the colonial administrators, even the Nigerian leaders after independence.

While the folk theatre practitioners were busy with their performances, a theatrical and dramatic writing that was classed as “Onitsha Market Literature” which pioneered literary writing in drama and prose, emerged in the 1940s. Many scholars had written much on this. Notable among them are G.G. Darah, Emmanuel Obiechina, Obi Maduakor, and a host of others. Darah’s explanation will serve a useful purpose. According to him, Onitsha Market Literature which he refers to as “The Onitsha Literary Renaissance”, was an intellectual revolution involving a whole range of writers, readers, journalists, traders, booksellers, printers and teenage students (6). In the introduction to his book, Onitsha Literature, Obiechina informs us that one of the major factors that influenced the ideas found in Onitsha Market Literature is the African folklore tradition. He submits that “the pamphlet’s constant combination of entertainment with didactic intent derives directly from the African folktale” (19). According to Obiechina, the first popular pamphlets of the literature appeared in Onitsha in 1947. Obiechina explains the important position of Onitsha Market Literature in the beginnings of literary drama in Nigeria. Onoriose would rather prefer to classify all literatures produced during this period as popular literature which he says “marks the commencement of Nigeria’s endeavour at literary creativity in the English Language” (86). Referring to the literature at Onitsha, Donatus Nwoga posits that locally published pamphlet novels and plays commonly called Nigerian Chapbooks, began to appear in 1947 in market bookstalls (26). Supporting Nwoga’s view, Obiechina reveals that the first Nigerian play (not under the rubrics of serious literature) was written by the title, Veronica My Daughter by Ogali A. Ogali. Others are My Seven Daughters Are After Young Boys by Nathan Njoku and The Western Crisis and the Army Take Over of 1966 by an anonymous writer. Dapo Adelugba also informs us that in 1950 (of course before 1956 when the first serious play in Nigeria was written), Nigeria held her first Arts Festival which included lively competitions in literature and drama. And that from 1956, the School of Drama at the University College Ibadan began to produce plays by Nigerian playwrights.

Yemi Ogunbiyi also points out that Onitsha Market Literature has been ascribed with the quality of providing “clues towards understanding the earliest forms of contemporary Nigerian literary drama such as Igu’s John in the Romance of True Love and Ogali’s Veronica My Daughter (25-26). What this has shown is that apart from the traditional drama, “Alarinjo” and Modern Travelling Theatre which predate modern Nigerian drama, Onitsha Market Literature also provides the necessary illuminating force in the history and evolution of Modern Nigerian Drama before the establishment of the School of Drama in the University College, Ibadan.
Forms of modern Nigerian drama

In their discussions of the various features or forms of Nigerian drama, scholars and critics have come out with contradictory but slightly related groupings. For example, J. P. Clark, in his “Aspects of Nigerian Drama”, divides Nigerian drama into traditional and modern drama. He makes it clear that traditional drama had existed before the establishment or coming of modern drama. According to him, traditional Nigerian drama includes sacred (religious) and secular drama. In his analysis of sacred drama, he identifies ancestral worships of the gods and festivals. Secular drama to him includes myths, plays, masquerades, age groups and cults. Modern Nigerian drama, he says, includes folk theatre (as practised by Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and a host of others) and literary drama (written plays).

In his own categorisation, Ola Rotimi posits that Nigerian drama falls into four major forms: Ritual drama, Traditional drama, Folk opera and Nigerian drama. Saint Gbilekaa’s typology is twofold: Traditional and Modern (Literary Drama). Traditional as far as he is concerned, involves dramatic rituals (festivals, sacred ceremonies and masquerades), popular tradition and Yoruba travelling theatre. As for Olu Obafemi, who decides to take a cue from the radical English critic, Raymond Williams, Nigerian drama can be classified into Residual, Dominant and the Emergent drama. Residual drama in Nigeria, according to him, refers to those indigenous dramatic forms which include the ritual and festival performances involving dramatic elements, the indigenous dramatic heritages of local communities and the early contemporary indigenous theatres. Dominant drama, he says, embraces literary drama of English expression and the emergent drama mainly comprises the “young generation of dramatists.” Michael Etherton in his own categorisation, identifies the traditional drama, the arts theatre (University based) and the theatre for development (Community based) as the major forms of Nigerian drama. Biodun Jeyifo’s categorisation, however, is along ideological lines. According to him, Nigerian drama is divided into the Conservative, the Reformist and the Revolutionary.

From the above varied forms of Nigerian drama by scholars and critics, Ola Rotimi’s typology appeals to us. We have been able to discover that modern Nigerian drama sprouted from the School of Drama when the seed of educational theatre was planted in the University College Ibadan, now University of Ibadan. This “tendril” (modern Nigerian drama) developed significantly between 1956 and 1970 and since then, it has continued to soar, owing to the number of published works.

Generations of Nigerian playwrights and their thematic concerns

Critics have disagreed on the use of the word “generation” to classify the different sects or groups of playwrights, especially Nigerian playwrights. To some of them, the word is inadequate. While some like Ogunbiyi prefer the word. Wumi Raji rather prefers the word “age”. According to him, “in adopting the term in this essay, however, I take the factor of change into consideration” (624). However, he cautions that his update is not rigid because “writers do not retire” (624). He buttresses his point by observing that Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark and others “who have been grouped together in the first generation have continued to produce, right to the present moment” (624).

Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu had earlier drawn attention to this when they observed that, “writers like Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Tess Onwueme, Niyi Osundare, Emeka Nwabueze, among others, have ‘reinvented’ themselves as significant voices of the present time, after also having featured prominently in other generations of the Nigerian dramatic trade” (174-175). In our
study, we shall opt for the word “generation” to categorise the different groups of Nigerian playwrights from the inception of modern Nigerian drama to date. This is an addition to Raji’s 2014 update on the developments that have greeted Nigerian dramatic writing since 1981.

In his study of the trends in the theory and criticism of African drama, Ziky O. Kofoworola lists three generations of Nigerian playwrights. According to him, the first generation of Nigerian playwrights comprises Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Roimi, Wale Ogunyemi, Kalu Uka and Zulu Sofola. He draws attention to the fact that the categorisations are not based on the age grades of the playwrights and they are not strictly meant to reflect the ethnic and socio-cultural background of the playwrights. He observes that the writings of the playwrights of the various categories cannot be strictly classified as some kind of water-tight compartmentalised categorisation. He further observes that in spite of the above, some distinctive factors can be recognised in the categorisations. According to him, the first generation of Nigerian playwrights “were produced at the throes or the dawn of Nigerian independence” (27). He goes further to mention the significant features of that period which include the struggles for independence from the colonial hegemony, the search for cultural identity by the new Nigerian nationhood and the transition phenomena brought about by modern system of government, education, socio-economic changes and the need for political stability (28).

Kofoworola’s explanation of the thematic canvas of the first generation of Nigerian playwrights is a confirmation of Geoffrey Axworthy’s treatise in the interview he granted Ahmed Yerima after he left Nigeria in 1967. Axworthy was the first expatriate of the Ibadan School of Drama. He was invited to Ibadan in 1956 by Professor (Mrs.) Molly Mahood, also an expatriate, the then first female Dean of Arts of Ibadan. Axworthy’s list of first generation of Nigerian playwrights is an extension to Kofoworola’s. He includes Joel Adedeji, James Henshaw and Sonny Oti who all wrote before 1967. According to Axworthy, these playwrights wrote plays that dealt with social and traditional issues and that “all these playwrights started to write plays that can be considered traditional and historical plays. These writers started to go back into history and awaken the cultural values of the rich history of Nigerians” (qtd in Yerima, 67).

The second generation of Nigerian playwrights, according to Kowoforola, comprises renowned playwrights like Femi Osofisan (who Muyowa Awodiya sees as Soyinka’s heir apparent), Henry Iyorwuese Hagher, Olu Obafemi, Bode Sowande, Tess Onwueme, Bode Osanyin and Effiong Johnson. According to him, this generation of Nigerian playwrights employed the radical approach through their Marxist and Socialist Ideologies as ways of achieving liberation struggles by the African nations. This view of a change in the thematic preoccupations of the second generation of Nigerian playwrights from their first generation counterparts had earlier in 1981 been canvassed by Yemi Ogunbiyi. Ogunbiyi’s list of the second generation Nigerian playwrights is somewhat different from that of Kofoworola. Ogunbiyi’s list include Fela Davis, Comish Ekiye, Soji Simpson, Kole Omotosho, Mezi Nzewi, Laolu Ogguniyi, Zulu Sofola, Ahmed Yerima and Wale Ogungbemi whom he, though arguably, says is “by far the most prolific of these writers”(36). Others that he had included which Kofoworola also mentions are Femi Osofisan, Bode Osanyin and Bode Sowande. Ogunbiyi reveals that “this crop of playwrights are set apart from their first compatriots not necessarily by any substantial age difference (where it does exist at all) but rather by temperament and vision” (36). Geoffrey Axworthy in the interview he granted Ahmed Yerima in
1982, corroborates Ogunbiyi’s statement by saying that in the late 1970s and 1980s (which by implication refers to the second generation of Nigerian playwrights), the trend of theatre and drama in Nigeria witnessed a great change. According to him, there was a change from the “old guard” of writers (by implication first generation) who wrote of pre- and post-independence, and historical and traditional writers, to a more committed set of writers. His own list tallies with that of Kofoworola. As for Olu Obafemi, the second generation of Nigerian dramatists includes Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotosho, Bode Sowande, Tunde Fatunde and Tess Onwueme. He says the plays of these writers “deal urgently with contemporary social problems in Nigeria with the aim of raising mass awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the present decadence” (168). He goes further to say that these playwrights deal with subjects as topical as the phenomenon of armed robbery, students’ rampage, class struggle, corruption, fierce anti-capitalism and feminist concerns” (168). According to him, theirs is to use their drama to effect social change.

Austin Ovigue Asagba’s view is in line with that expressed by the earlier mentioned critics. According to him, the theatre of the 1970s and 1980s were:
characterized by profuse ideological concerns aimed at enlightenment and education of the masses ... The 1990s and beyond have ushered in a new thinking process, characterized by the yearning for democratic values, human rights, freedom and improved social life for the masses. (82)

Muyiwa Awodiya’s study agrees totally with the above. Though in his own list, he adds Niyi Osundare. In his own view, he says “the thrust of the revolt of the second generation of Nigerian writers is to use literature as a weapon of social change” (33).

Raji disagrees with Ogunbiyi who listed Zulu Sofola and Wale Ogungyemi as belonging to the second generation. Raji says these two writers belong to the first and not second generation. Raji further adds Olu Obafemi and Tess Onwueme to the list of the second generation, which Ogunbiyi omitted. Emphasising the thematic concern of the second generation, Raji says:
Almost to the last person, the dramatists are socially conscious, anchoring their works on ideologies which admittedly have western origins but which have been carefully adopted into indigenous contexts. Advancing the theme of inevitability of social change, they demonstrate an attitude of openness towards different aspects of inherited traditions, refining them to suit the moods of the postcolonial moment… (636).

Kofoworola’s typology of third generation of Nigerian playwrights includes Emeka Nwabueze, Sam Ukala, Ahmed Yerima (whom Ogunbiyi classifies under second generation), S.O.O Amali, Ayo Akinwale, U.B. Ahmed and Julie Okoh. Raji includes Uko Atai, Esiaba Irobi and Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju to the list. He is of the view that the third generation wrote from the late eighties to the end of the nineties (1985-1999).

As for their thematic concern, Kofoworola argues that these are folkloric playwrights who have continued to adapt the resources of oral traditions in their plays. Critics of twenty-first century Nigerian drama notably Mabel Ewriehoma, Ezeki Onyerionwu, Allwell Abalogue Onukaogu and a host of others, agree that old writers like Osofisan, Obafemi, Onwueme, Osundare, Nwabueze, Julie Okoh and others, have not stopped writing even in the
twenty-first century. Evwierhoma sees them as writers that have “reinvented” themselves in order to be part of the new generation of Nigerian playwrights. Of the new millennium playwrights, Evwierhoma posits that:

We are going to see younger writers and then we are going to see writers who have traversed the generational gaps, reinventing their own creativity in trying to adapt to technological innovations, to problem and developmental issues. (qtd in Onukaogu and Onyerionwu, 174).

Raji corroborates this view when he posits that, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark and others “who have been grouped together in the first generation have continued to produce, right to the present moment” (624). Notable among these old writers who have “reinvented” themselves as significant voices in the new millennium are Rasaki Ojo Bakare (*Once Upon a Tower* (2000), Niyi Osundare (*The State Visit* (2002), Julie Okoh (*Aisha* (2005) and *Closed Doors* (2006), Tess Onwueme *Why The Elephant Has No Butt* (2000); *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* (2000) and *Then She Said It* (2002)), Femi Osofsian *Women of Owu* (2006), and Sam Ukala (*Fumes of Fuel* (2009), to mention a few.

The new millennium has ushered in the fourth generation of Nigerian playwrights. The new millennium writers (twenty-first century writers) include Hope Eghagha, Isiaka Aliagan, Chris Anyokwu, John Iwuoh, Onyebuchi Nwosu, Chris Ngozi Okoro, Chukwuma Anyanwu, Peter Omoko, Augustine Anigala, Felix Akinsipe, Helen Hahila, Stephen Kekegue, Alex Roy-Omoni, and others. As for their thematic preoccupation, Onukaogu and Onyeriowu posit that the Nigerian drama of the twenty-first century is characterised by “a proliferation of themes, some of which would have been incapable of securing slots of any special worth in earlier generations of Nigerian drama” (176). These writers write on different issues “from all angles”. There is no manifesto that guards the new writings. Writers are free to write on any area of human endeavour. The proliferation of themes, as Onukaogu and Onyerionwu observe, include, “family squabbles, intimate relationships, community existential struggles, womanist agitators against malevolent cultural practices and even magic realism” (177). Furthermore, they observe that the new millennium Nigerian playwrights’ thematic concerns also include “historical reconstructions and adaptations, which have complemented the natural, understandable propensity to capture contemporary realities” (177). In addition to the above, many have continued to adapt the resources of oral traditions in their plays.

**Conclusion**

What this brief historical survey of modern Nigerian drama has revealed is that modern Nigerian drama right from its inception in 1956 has recorded four generations of its playwrights up to the twenty-first century. Each generation has produced well known playwrights and its thematic preoccupations. The fourth generation does not have a major thematic underpinning. It discusses various issues from domestic violence, child abuse, examination malpractice, marital problems, environmental degradation, and incorporation of oral elements in their writings to mention a few. The various groupings of the playwrights into generations have shown some slight differences but generally, they have revealed some notable creative artistes in the area of drama in Nigeria.

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