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**Indigenous theatre troupe performances:
problems, challenges and prospects:
a peep at the national troupe of Nigeria.**

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Abstract

Nigeria is a country that is endowed with several indigenous theatre performances at all levels of ethnic, regional or “national” identities. Most often than not, either because of the geographical locations of these theatre formations or the socio-political motifs of the troupes, evidence abound that they are bedeviled with obvious setbacks, limitations and what one may term avoidable hurdles. When such troupes are organs of the government, either at the local, state or national levels, government policies dwarf the potency of the troupes as mirrors of the society where they perform. In this write-up, we attempt to take a look at the National Troupe of Nigeria, a Federal Government performance organ with the view to seeing how far it has fared, and examining its shortcomings and prospects.

Introduction

THE National Troupe of Nigeria officially came into being with the promulgation of Decree No 47 of 29th October, 1991 by the then military ruler of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Banamasi Babangida (Rtd). The Troupe was amongst other responsibilities, empowered to encourage the discovery and development of indigenous talents in the performing arts industry and achieve maximum artistic productions both for local and international

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consumption. The Troupe was also to pursue national aspirations and as much as possible promote and project the Nigerian spirit inherent in ethnic and regional cultural formations and identities that the Troupe was to harness into a central national relevance and acceptability. Simply put, the National Troupe of Nigeria has over the years been involved in this responsibility of identifying which of the multiplicity of cultural heritages to document, celebrate, promote and also project to the taste of the owners of the culture and the outside world.

In spite of the avowed focus of the National Troupe of Nigeria in carrying out its responsibilities to the society and the nation at large, the Troupe, like several other government agencies, is dwarfed with limitations and shortcomings. These hurdles are as old as the nation itself, or the politics involved in the establishment of the Troupe and the complexities inherent in the diversified identities the Troupe is expected to unite. How national, for instance, is the National Troupe? Does the staff and artistes composition that reflects all states of the Federation make the Troupe national? Do attempts to promote select pocket full of cultures and identities in Nigeria connote its nationality? How does the production of a Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, Edo, Igala music, dance and drama constitute the national essence of the Troupe? The National Troupe is obviously, the undisputed dominant performance outfit in Nigeria with full Federal Government backing. When they perform peoples' cultures from regional identities, are they being national or is the National Troupe involved in the politics of incorporating the weak, local and unknown identities into dominant national relevance?

Raymond Williams, talking about the issue of incorporation of the weak cultures by the strong observes that in most cases, the weak have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense. For the National Troupe to make a national sense in the execution of its duties, it is actively involved in "seizing" people's tradition, "polishing" such into national taste and thereafter, doing little or nothing to get those people on board in the national question. The troupe therefore, picks that which it needs to satisfy its calling, and abandons the people to their fate. The present logo of the National Troupe of Nigeria designed by one Abayomi Barber evolved from an Igala wooden mask called "Amuda". The typical Igala villager is not aware of this "theft" and may never ever be. The few Igala elite, who know this, have the emotional satisfaction that "after all, the logo of the National Troupe evolved out of my people's wooden

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mask”. And beyond this nothing else has linked the National Troupe with the Igala people. It is sad, is it not, that since inception as a National Troupe, no significant cultural art form of the Igala people, whose wooden mask the Troupe used for their logo, has been promoted by the National Troupe beyond acknowledging in their pamphlets the origin of their logo. Several other minority identities have suffered this same fate like the Igala people.

Problems and Challenges

The problems of the Troupe cry too loud enough for even the insiders of the Troupe to ignore. Its immediate past Artistic Director, Bayo Oduneye bares his mind thus,

My first problem is with the name, the National Troupe of Nigeria. Calling it a troupe belittles it. It does not signify a nation that is serious. You need to call it the National Theatre Company of Nigeria. That will give it the spine that it deserves. When you go out and introduce yourself as the National Troupe of Nigeria, those who understand what a troupe is will conclude you are not there yet. A Troupe is more of an itinerant group of dancers.¹

and the business of the National Troupe goes further than dance. What is in a name one may ask, for after all, “rose will still smell rose with another name”? We are talking of how the National Troupe can foster the identity and culture of Nigeria. So the name by which it is called attracts attention and speaks volume even before a performance. If one is looking at the Troupe as the government organ and cultural ambassador of Nigeria, then how we call our ambassador tells a lot on how it will be seen outside. Nigeria may not be the most advanced nation in Africa by all standards. But because we have the benefit as the most populated African nation, we tag ourselves “the giant of Africa”. Giant by population advantage, technology breakthrough, good government or good economic growth? Whatever that term means, the mention of the “the giant of Africa” does give a bloated image for us and that attracts attention from the outside world.

The Federal Government that set up the Troupe does not even look committed and serious to the cause. They do not look enthusiastic at all about the crucial role the Troupe plays and can play in national image laundering and identity promotion.

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Cultural policies generally are at best given haphazard or lip service in their full and congenial implication. What for example,

... has the Nigerian government been doing since FESTAC 77? The annual festival of Arts and culture has become very irregular. There are no grants for artistes or any open identification with the use of culture as an instrument of nation building. The nation's cultural policy had remained merely a document. The ministry of Information treats culture as if it is mere entertainment.²

A nation that does not cherish its arts and culture is no nation. Until Nigerian government(s) recognise the fact that if we don't let people know that we have a culture, our music, our dance, our drama, our collective or regional identity we have not started. Within the country how many people really know about the National Troupe? When we talk of national consciousness or national identity, how many people know about this national carrier of that identity?

For us to actually talk of identity promotion, the National Troupe should be able to tour the 36 states and Abuja regularly. But we have not been able to do that after twelve years of legal recognition and establishment of the Troupe via Decree No. 47 of 1991. The National Troupe had not even been to half of the states in the country in over twelve years of formation. Even within Lagos, not many people, we dare say, know about the Troupe. Almost all productions are commissioned or sponsored. First nights of such productions record large turn out of invited audience, beyond which there is hardly any audience. The National Troupe is the cultural ambassador of Nigeria quite all right' but how often does this ambassador profess its ambassadorial credentials abroad? Reacting to this seeming oblivion of the gigantic piece in slumber, Dapo Adelugba bemoans,

...what I am not so sure about is what the position of the National Troupe is about the foreign versus the local impact. I am yet to see very clear policy in terms of where and when the National troupe is to perform. What percentage of each calendar year will be spent performing in Nigerian venues and what percentage will be spent performing in non-Nigeria venues and what percentage of the non-Nigerian venues will be African, What percentage will be European, what percentage will be Oriental and so on. We need to have a National

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Troupe policy that is clear along these lines. I don't know the impact the National Troupe is making outside of say Lagos or when they are invited, Abuja. I think the time has come for the National Troupe to really make an impact on the Nigerian audience far and wide, in order that the ordinary Nigerian will feel the impact of the National Troupe.³

The National Troupe may be making its impact on some people and establishments no doubt; but even if it has entered into the life of some citizens and it is accepted as part of the nation, readily identified by visitors to the country or who have contacts with it as hosts, it still remains in its hegemonic state problematic. This entity which is national has diversified regional identities that within their enclaves do not know and may never be aware of the existence of the National Troupe that is expected to promote the national identity of the nation of which they are indigenes. Within this scope, the larger identities who are the greatest beneficiaries of their programmes are bound to prevail over the other ethnic cum cultural nationalities in Nigeria. For many, what the National Troupe does mainly is nothing short of an unacceptable imposition of national identity.

It is understandable that being a government body most of its problems or limitations come out of unnecessary administrative bottlenecks and lack of fund from the government. What the National Troupe needs to really function may not be money from the government as much as infrastructures and the political will to act. The same leader who promulgated the Decree No. 47 from which the Troupe emerged, used government funds to build two structures in all the local government areas during his tenure to house the Social Democratic Party and National Republican Convention political party secretariats. If the government is committed to the promotion of arts; if the government actually realises the potency of the National Troupe in Cultural presentation and promotion, infrastructures like say, 300 – 400 seater theatres built all over the country will boost the promotion of arts. The National Troupe of Nigeria has not been stories of frustrations and incapacitation alone. Over the years, in the midst of unfriendly attention and appreciation, the Troupe has kept its head above water. As the parlance goes in the theatre profession, no matter what, “the show must go on” and so has it been for the National Troupe of Nigeria.

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Landmarks and Prospects.

The success drive of the National Troupe of Nigeria can be classified into two broad levels viz music/dance and drama. Music/dance has remained the most physical, the most expressive and spectacular form of African performance evident in the Troupe's outings. Its beginning stage with "the Ososa experiment" attests to this. The musical mode of presentation involves the elaborate use of body movements, facial expressions and costumes during performances. By employing costumes, the troupe brings what Jenks Okwori correctly tags "an aliveness which establishes an image as well as communicates a philosophy. The costumes validate the symbolic colours of the people as strong signs of identity articulation"⁴. When it comes to the issue of identity articulation, Okwori goes further to observe that "everyone goes back to their community's music and performance system". This sums up what the National Troupe does in its search for and the eventual promotion of music and dances in the various communities in Nigeria.

Music/dance productions go further than what meets the eyes of the spectator. The question whether music and dance represent anything more than itself is a long lasting debate. While some regard music and dance as absolute which could only be interpreted as waves of sound and body movements with no extra meanings other than entertainment, others regard music and dance as "programmatics, which can be understood to represent sometimes deliberate or unconscious messages"⁵. Whichever way however, within the functions of the National Troupe, music and dance can be interpreted in a number of ways. As a highly individual way of positioning oneself into societies and surroundings, music/dance not only "reflect what is happening beyond the immediate visual and aural, but rather is the particular space of negotiation over identities, ethnicities and in human relationship"⁶. In virtually all music/dance shows of the National Troupe, the central thrust has been the promotion of that particular culture tailored towards the Nigerian identity as a unifying form. Music/dance remain existential matters, so the National Troupe "reworks", "redirects", and "refocuses" them towards the promotion of the culture and identity of the immediate owner(s) of that production from their fragmented identities to central prominence.

The National Troupe does not perform the music and dance in solitude, oblivious of the outside world. Since they have

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contact with global forces, the dichotomy of global versus local is a major key to the understanding of why they “rework”, “redirect” or “refocus” the music/dance. In other words;

...the whole world is tied up in the proceedings and happenings of the global arena while at the same time, and with sometimes very different results and outcomes, the music/dance make a statement on the local ground. A direct result of this situation is that playing with identities and establishing images become a very important feature to the musicians and performers of music and dance culture.

All efforts are therefore geared towards making meaning with the music/dance both at the local level and when exported to the outside audience.

This has guided the Troupe in their performances of well over forty dances from different parts of Nigeria. Some of the music/dances include “Abang” (with an Efik origin from Cross Rivers State. Maidens perform the dance usually during the outing ceremony of a bride with whom the performers share her joy of matrimony), “Egwu Odum” (from Owerri, Imo State. The dance is a celebration of the agility of the Leopard, hence the name which translates to “the leopard dance”), “Korobedi” (an Ijaw dance from Bayelsa State performed during fishing festivals to celebrate the fertility of the sea). Others are “Nkwa Umu Agborgor” (a maiden dance from Afikpo, Ebonyi State performed to welcome community heroes back home), “Maliki” (a social and aristocratic dance named after its creator who was the District Head of Konduga District of Borno State), “Obitun” (ritual dance of maidens, who have come of age among the Ondo Yoruba), “Omoko” (folk dance of the Itsekiris of Delta State, performed during ceremonial occasions) and “Swange” (from Benue State – an acculturation dance for Tiv youths). Dance dramas like “Yemoja” and Mbarra have made tremendous impacts too.

The National Troupe has a Children’s Theatre outfit called the Nigeria Children and Youth Company which started in 1995 to imbibe in the youth a theatre culture. Since inception, the Troupe has produced drama sketches, full length plays and dances which include, “I dream a Christmas”, “Clash of the Ants”, “The rejected Blessing”, “Circle of Life”, and “The fall of a King”. In July 2002, the Commonwealth Cultural celebrations took place in Manchester. About ten youth theatre companies

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from five continents took part in the festival. The National Troupe of Nigeria Children and Youth Company did not only represent the country, but was the only group invited from the continent of Africa. The plays “Circle of Life” and “The fall of a King”, Nigeria’s entries did creditably well at the global festival. Talk of children as cultural ambassadors in their own way.

When the Troupe took the dance drama, “Yemoja” to Mexico, it thrilled the international audience remarkably. This was mentioned in the Millennium Models of *This Day* newspaper of December, 17 2001. Not long after the U.S. commenced strikes against Afghanistan following the refusal of the Taliban regime to handover Osama Bin Laden, the alleged master-mind of the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S., the National Troupe left for Mexico to represent the nation in one of the most important cultural events in Latin America. The theme of Nigeria’s entry “Yemoja” was peace. Peace at time of global focus on the clash between terrorism and organized brute force in Afghanistan.

The dance drama celebrates the triumph of peace and unity in the Yoruba Pantheon of gods after a period of strife. Most of the Mexicans are Spanish speaking, but yet appreciated the underlying message that whatever the attraction and benefits of war, peace is much more beneficial in the long run. In all, 39 countries from around the world participated in the festival. After 13 performances watched by over 80,000 people in 10 theatres in Mexico, the National Troupe’s production was judged the overall best piece in the 29th edition of the International Arts Festival in Mexico. This was a well deserved global outing for the National Troupe of a country that hardly performs their own festival of Arts and Culture. Not only was the choice of “Yemoja” appropriate, it was said to have evoked identity consciousness in the Latin Americans who have some strong cultural links with Yoruba culture and to which they related.

The Troupe has a record of outstanding drama productions which include *Kurunmi*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The King must Dance Naked*, *The Posters*, *The Silent Gods*, *The Trials of Ovonramwen*, *The Concubine*, *Attahiru*, *Lottery Ticket*, *The Sisters*, *The Visit of Bishop Alaba*, *The Contest* and a host of others. Of late, an addition to the promotion of literary appreciation of the theatre profession was introduced by the National Troupe called the National Troupe Play Reading Session. Here, new plays by new playwrights are read, discussed and suggestions that will improve the works are offered. In all the play productions, the beauty of

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the Troupe lies in the discovery of different cultural motifs yearning for exposition, presentation and preservation.

Conclusion

The National Troupe of Nigeria has experienced many shortcomings through the years; but its success, in spite of odds, shows that its spirit is still very much alive. Despite the neglect and denied but deserved attention by the government, the renaissance the Troupe is going through, in the final analysis, is a clear testimony that the Nigerian spirit is after all, an enduring one. The Troupe has had good performance tours to at least fifteen countries so far viz Brazil, Venezuela, Egypt, USA, New Zealand, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Congo, Switzerland, Ghana, Portugal, China, Germany, Mexico, Republic of Benin and Manchester. To justify the tag of the nation's cultural ambassador, in this age of globalisation, these tours are, to be very modest, far from a good start. We live today in a global village. For the National Troupe of Nigeria to be relevant in the global onslaught, it is imperative for it to assert its relevance at the home front first, and then get the needed funds, facilities and personnel in place for a fair participation in the current game of globalisation. How far the Troupe will go in this regard depends on the political will of its sponsor, the Federal Government of Nigeria.

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