

THEATRE, CREATIVITY, GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIC DIVIDENDS IN THE SEASON OF PROSPECTS

Keynote Address

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Whereas there now appears to be agreement on the need for democratisation, *the contents* of the democracy, its institutional formatting and the social agents of the democratisation are still matters of debate, often trenchant.

Omafume Onoge

The arts are where we discover and express our humanity, privately or *collectively*. They provide us the language to share our common joy and grief, to find communion with one another, to pass our stories and wisdom from one generation to the next.

Claire Peeps

This is the 27th Annual Convention of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA) and like many would say, a lot of water has passed under the bridge. For about four decades, academics have gathered under this aegis to appoint ideas that readily fit the angle of scholarship that they espouse to advance humanity. Since 1990 when I became faculty at the University of Abuja, a lot has happened in the Society to challenge its existence. Many of us gathered here have witnessed at various national spheres different administrative styles, academic temperament, political (dis)orientation, depending on the dominant ideology in the nation, and physical or ideological exile of the forced, willing and reluctant types. Despite the challenges and specialty, the Society yearly admits academics whose robust scholastic bearing and standpoints have

helped to sustain the Society. Many of such are here today and I welcome you to SONTA. The theme for this year is logical and its centrality and soundness purported by 2015 as an election year. Theatre and Creativity in Enhancing Democracy is worthy of exegetical attention because the field of theatre arts has shown cross cutting exposé in the depiction and representation of reality in physical and virtual text, performance and other cultural manifestations particularly from folk to the new media. Life, as we know it presently, would be valueless without creativity of the theatrical kind.

This address is meant to anticipate what many participants at this conference have chosen to discuss as finished essays or work in progress from different spans of critical thinking, library research and field work. It is an address meant to facilitate an excursion into who creates what, how and why it is created, in order to enhance democracy in the Nigerian polity. The Nigerian society has undergone a lot of flux in different sense of the word and the upheaval arising from the unrest can only be mitigated by creativity, and the theatre is one of the endeavours or ventures that can salvage the country from such.

Onoge's view above poses the need to interrogate the contents of our democracy. Civitas, over a decade ago, engaged in a civic forum and education project and listed fourteen items to ascertain a democracy. The poster for the project showed the ways of monitoring the health of a democracy, and there is nothing strange about the indexes or content of the list. However, we may ask: what is our input into democratic practice as we now know it? The dearth of cultural inputs that are creative and project our common existence in our Nigerian democracy opens us up for more critical anxiety.

I

Theatre is discourse and it entails people-oriented and people-centred creativity that at once enriches through the spirit of cooperation. Whether it is identity-based or not, theatre pursues the values that make the world a better place, for the actor and the audience, and in between the lifelong factors that breed a valuable world. The Civitas project in Kuje, Abuja held in 2000 and had the following checklist: Human Rights, Bill of Rights, Citizen Participation, Multi-Party System, Political tolerance, Regular, Free and Fair

Elections, Accepting the Results of Elections, Rule of Law, Equality, Accountability, Transparency, Control of the Abuse of Power and Economic Freedom. These are not strange to theatre artists who have since ancient times created from the points of view of the checklist provided by Civitas. There are play texts on the Nigerian experience about every check list where a call to action is evident. To the theatre artist, it is imperative to build socio-political capital using such indices rather than score cheap political points. Theatre should continue to organize, and mobilize the masses, for therein lies its potency. Nigerian theatre since the pre-colonial time has not fallen short of this and it continues to boast of different forms of theatrical expressions.

All these depict the socio-political season in which we find ourselves and how theatre praxes can create paths for the (co)existence of multifarious or assorted creativity. The theatre is an ally of government when the latter finds the focus of the former in consonance with, rather than in opposition to its existence. Some political dramatists and their theatre of query have faced censorship and repression from government; thus, the examples of Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Joe de Graft, Al Amin Mazrui, who underwent incarceration for the blend of creativity, theatre and politics show the untiring spirit of the creative artist. Plays like *I Will Marry When I Want*, *Muntu*, *Cry for Justice*, earned their authors captivity. To Cieri and Peeps, "Art is usually among the first forms of expression to be censored under repressive regimes" (271). They affirm that this genre of art "gives voice to multiple perspectives, eliciting responses in the form of reflection, discussion, debate – the sort of civic discourse and public exchange of ideas that are elemental to a flourishing democracy" (271). Unfettered evidence proves that such creativity has advanced the dream and will of nations and even races. An example here is the silent film *The Battle Ship Potemkin* and the manner it propagates mass action. Connecting governance and its yields through creativity and theatre would help to make every kind of professional or amateur theatre or performance a parasol under which the visual, verbal, oral, virtual, creativity be they secular or religious coexist and propel to mass action.

II

The centrality of theatre to life cannot be overemphasized. The factors that limit creativity can also enable the creative spirit to head. The examples of repressive regimes that would 'drink nectar from the skull of writers' eternally prove the might of the pen than the sword or in very recent episodes, the bomb. Government can only support creativity to its advantage, or gain and suppress it to its loss. The ability to be creative about our challenges has led to the birth of theatre experiences that changed communities, countries and continents. It is well to appoint creativity to meet political problems. This is evident in the various community theatre or theatre for development expeditions in the Academy today. The creative enterprise in all its ramifications most suits the sustenance of democracy. Creativity involves people, and can influence them to act positively. It is the creative industry that is one of the few exceptions to operations that go under without government intervention. Our home video industry drew world attention to our creative acumen in the economics of culture. In the sphere of music, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Osayomore Joseph, Nowamagbe, Lanrewaju Adepoju, Miriam Makeba educe creative expressions that elicited the need for democracy. Where the politics of culture is concerned, however, the scorecard is abysmally a reflection of unsuccessful attempts to harness Nigeria's diversity for tangible profit, political or otherwise. Issues of nationhood and governance influence creativity, especially where regulations or laws do not offer adequate protection or compensation, or when the creative artist suffers breaches or neglect. The theories that commit the creative individual or group into a symbiotic relationship with his community offer cordial engagement: Where the watchdog effect is touted, creativity scrutinizes goings-on in the society for popular intervention or active participation. The mass effect is highly relevant here, carrying in its wake, the theories of the sociology of theatre, which analyse the commitment of creative artists to real life events in the society. The creative artist cannot therefore afford to play the ostrich and escape into oblivion without reflecting much concern with democracy and its attainment in Nigeria. It is creativity that empowers the functionality of the theatre, which in turn expresses the activity of the leaders and the led and extends the chain of humanistic deliberation.

