

ETHNIC IDENTITIES

**THE NATIONAL QUESTION
AND THE CHALLENGES OF
MINORITIES IN NIGERIA**

Edited by
John Tor Tsuwa
Shadrack Teryila Ukuma

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	v
Acknowledgement	vi
Table of Contents	viii
Foreword	xi
Notes on Contributors	xiv

SECTION ONE: ETHNIC IDENTITIES, FEDERALISM AND ETHNICITY		1
1.	A Historical Discourse on the Changing Forms of Ethnic Identity Blowouts in Nigeria <i>Kenneth T. Azaigba</i>	3
2.	Communicating the Intricacies of Polarised Intergroup Relations in Nigeria: A Study of Selected Nigerian Plays <i>John Tor Tsuwa and Ukuma, Teryila Shadrach</i>	17
3.	The Evolution and Trajectory of Ethno- Religious Crises in Nigeria <i>Innocent O. Odey</i>	29
4.	Federalism and the Challenge of Ethnicity: The Nigerian Situation <i>Chinge Ayuba Dodo</i>	69
5.	Interrogating the Fundamental Causes of Religious Conflicts among some Selected Minority Groups in the Middle Belt <i>Emman-Lawson and Chinwumba G. Uchena</i>	83
6.	Ethnicity, Identity Politics and National Development <i>Jev Amos Asongo</i>	103
7.	The Federal Character Commission and Ethnic Minority issues in Nigeria <i>Agaigbe Faeren Mercy and Alagh Terhile</i>	125

212
 NIMOD
 (KMMN)

2. COMMUNICATING THE INTRICACIES OF POLARISED INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF SELECTED NIGERIAN PLAYS

John Tor Tsuwa and Ukuma, Teryila Shadrach

Introduction

There is no doubt, Nigeria, a country of multifarious ethnic nationalities, grapples with the problem of harmonious coexistence among her peoples. Internecine skirmishes are recorded among the ethnicities along the lines of their diverse beliefs, hopes and aspirations; political upheavals and resource control are always feature in the daily endeavours of the people and government; the Federal Character question is always raised, observed or jettisoned. All these lead to frosty relations among the various ethnic groups of the country. The National Conference convoked by President Goodluck Jonathan is indicative of the fact that all is not well with the soul of the nation due to her diversity in peoples and interests; the various interests and manipulations which played out in the selection of delegates for the conference is a clear case in point. Answers are, therefore, sought from all angles to ensure national cohesion in order to attain sustainable development; and in this quest, Nigerian dramatists are not left out.

Imperatively, it is inescapable for literature to attempt to avoid the socio-cultural, economic and political realities that surround man. That every society is capable of and responsible for the kind of literature it produces becomes the nexus between drama and the society. This interconnectivity that exists between drama and the society can be described as being necessarily symbiotic. This means drama and society do not exist independent of each other. While society provides the raw material from which drama draws its themes, drama on the

other hand reflects the society, making comments and suggesting possible solutions to social brouhaha. In other words, the two operate within the praxis of a symbolic relationship that is mutually beneficial to each other.

Every society is responsible for the nature of literature it produces. A nation's art and literature, which is the sum total of the product of many individual contributions in the society is not only a reflection of that people's culture and collective experience, but also embodies the cosmology of the community in question and its place in the making of that world. The entire corpus called drama concerns itself with a number of issues. This ranges from its role as an agent of social and political change, through education and edification, to the issues of commitment in the sense of being for a particular line or form of social development. This is why Bakary Traore submits that:

...the theatre is one of the elements which build up the consciousness of social groups as a means of education... the African theatre is the mirror of life. It registers each event: it expresses every essential action in life. Life in all its form serves as inspirational to the African theatre. (6)

Man is the centre of all activity on earth. Therefore, literature must necessarily be about man, his relationship with one another, and his environs, about his breathing, eating, crying, laughing, dying and creating men in history – this history that they as individuals are makers and writers. Interestingly, therefore, history becomes the writer's singular subject matter. This means, there exists a continuum within which man acts on nature, changing it and by so doing acts on and changes himself. Representing this on the war charts of class dichotomies, the changing power relations that follow the variable modes of production is the whole constituency of the playwrights concern, for it forms the basis of power structure. Hence, politics becomes an integral part of his literary territory.

The products of a writer's imaginative excursions become a reflection of society: its economic structure, class stratifications, dialectics, and cultural and political scrambles – its structure of values. The perpetual conflicts and tensions arising from the antagonism betwixt those values, which are dying, and those which are progressive are pointers to the future. Wa' Thiongo avers that: "...hence, literature has often given us more and sharpened insights to the moving spirit of an era than all the historical and political documents treating the same moments in a society's development" (7). This is the primal function of the artist. Putting this into perspective, Bamidele opines that "the role of the artist and his function ... is that of commitment and revolution. It is a socio-political role. The artist sees his role as that role as a weapon to advocate for radical change in society" (30). Indeed, if his art does not fulfil this obligation, the artist is dismissed immediately as irrelevant, and his art dysfunctional.

The relationship between the playwright and the politician is important as it combines all cultural art forms: literature, language, music, songs, dance, flora and fauna. This implies that he depends on the society and for any reformation to take place; the dramatist has to dutifully perform his role. A writer responds with his total being to a total environment which changes all the time. Being the watchdog, sensitive needle or conscience of the society, he varies and registers with the dynamics in his society. This is determined by, and according to happenings in society; how the artist's relationship varies with his society.

On the whole, remove the society and you would have cancelled theatre, just as removing theatre will make the society atrophied, society will not be remoulded or reshaped for order and sanity to be restored and maintained. This is what drama must do and has always done in regards to challenge of credible leadership in Nigeria, and elsewhere. The sum-total of this position therefore is that literary artists cannot elect to stand

aloof, exempting themselves from the battlefield lest they become irrelevant. In this chapter, the focus is to x-ray how Nigerian dramatists have engaged the problematic of the heterogeneous nature of the nation, unveiling the intricacies of its diversity and orchestrating the way forward where complexities abound.

The Nature of Intergroup Relations in Nigeria

Intergroup relations in Nigeria are multidimensional. This is not unusual since man must naturally depend on his environment and others for food, shelter and clothing. O.O. Okpeh conceives this phenomenon as one which could be explained in two fronts: "the first is that no group or human community, notwithstanding its level of development, can be an island to itself ... the second relates to the significance of contact and interaction between groups, itself a logical sequence of the first point" (6). It is clear that the dynamics of human existence prescribe a necessary interaction of groups, whether consciously or unconsciously to survive. Against the above backdrop of the two points, it is easy to understand why human groups necessarily depend on each other. This makes contact, interaction and interdependence not just a fact of life, but one which is universally constant and basic.

In Nigeria today, tribal coexistence remains the greatest challenge facing the nation. The root-causes of this perennial challenge are multifaceted and they range from socio-cultural through politico-economic, to religious. Be that as it may, intergroup relations, in addition to its multidimensional nature, is essentially dynamic, reflecting the mutational nature and character of man's relationship with his environment. Thus, depending on changes in the nature and character of the material conditions of human existence, inter-group relations is factored fundamentally on social, economic and cultural conditions, and critically anchored on geography (Okpeh 16). When viewed as a process within a broad continuum, at least five stages are recognised, viz: (i) the stage of contact and

interaction; (ii) the stage of compromise and cooperation; (iii) the stage of completion; (iv) the stage of conflict; and (v) the stage of assimilation and integration. It is important to note however that these stages overlap with one another just as there is no hard and fast rules about the stages since the interactions between groups can take any form.

Against the backdrop of the above, therefore, the point should be made that the rise of inter-ethnic antagonism especially in 20th century Nigeria had a lot to do with the crisis in the post-colonial Nigerian economy and its attendant developments. What Nigeria witnesses today in the form of identity-based and resource-based conflicts is a clear manifestation of the consequences of the political and economic instability resulting from the contraptions of the capitalist economic system which consolidated its stranglehold on the nation by mid 1970s. It is the persistence of all these that have added new dimensions in the framing of the national question and the implications of this on the survival of the Nigerian nation in the near and distant future.

Dynamics of Intergroup Relations from Selected Nigerian Drama Texts

The foregoing discourse on the nature, dynamics and form of intergroup relations in Nigeria has been reflected in several Nigerian drama texts; the vocation of the playwrights being to unveil the intricacies of these relations and communicating them adequately to the general population with a view to raising consciousness levels towards harmonious coexistence. A few examples are discussed hereunder.

Ola Rotimi's Hopes of the Living Dead

Hopes of the Living Dead is a play which embellishes an explosive class war. It is the daring and glaring story of the usually ignored and rejected sector of society. As Osofisan rightly pinpoints, Rotimi's heroes in this play are not heroic personages – the

rejected lepers – “being celebrated with festive activities on national holidays, they are social outcasts, diseased fellows, leper...” (Gbilekaa 166). The vibrancy and authenticity of the drama is in the fact that the lepers are precisely involved, actively in the process of confronting and dislodging the powerful hegemony. The dramatic process of struggle in the play becomes an essential drama in itself. The lepers are self-mobilised under difficult circumstances of disadvantaged and altruistic leadership, to change their situation. When the storm begins, Harcourt Whyte employs the multi-lingual facility of “each-one-tell-one,” with multiple renderings and translation of major statements from English to the vernaculars and from any of the indigenous languages to English; to ensure communication flow and mutual comprehension and discourse. This immediately enhances a severe mobilisation of the lepers to redress their own destiny right from the beginning of the actions of the play as volunteers emerge spontaneously to search for catechist and a decision for self-liberation through self-mobilisation is unanimously reached.

In a rather desperate question from an Igbo female inmate, Harcourt unravels the reality of what ambushes them ahead: “The answer to the question you asked sister, is in ourselves. Each one tell one... From now on, we are alone... children of our fathers our struggle has begun! (*Hopes*, 21)”. This visionary prognostication becomes the departing point of resistance – against being forcibly dispersed at the abrupt termination of the rehabilitation programme; against brutal intimidating orders; and through mutual, self-supporting mobilisation. The play ends on a note of continued solidarity and struggle as Harcourt captures it “... children of our fathers, to our new struggle!” (*Hopes*, 113) – a message to inspire people towards self-liberation, to convert today’s pains and troubles through collective struggle to the “hopes to tomorrow.”

As a dramatic parable, *Hopes of the Living Dead* uses the collective struggle of the lepers to buttress that political, economic and human domination and enslavement can be

surmounted by collectivism and not individualism, also, that collective conscientisation, which in the play is set in motion by Harcourt, Hannah, Court Clerk and Mallam surrounding their situation. In other words, leprosy as a dramatic metaphor for the socio-political, economic and psychological malaise (though deadly and wears many faces) can be overcome through a workable praxis by the downtrodden who are their own best doctors – that is, if they are truly willing to take up arms and deliver themselves from the leprosarium of economic and psychological bondage.

The interest here is simple; Ola Rotimi identifies our language differences as one of the critical factors that challenge cohesive integration. Through the lead character, Harcourt Whyte, Rotimi devices a multi-lingual mechanism “each-one-tell-one” to ensure that the plural ethnics in their camp are all carried along and the delineating lines eroded. Again, *Hopes of the Living Dead* is an illustration with emphatic clarity that our failure to attain an egalitarian society is due to:

... lack of understanding and cooperation, the petty squabbles and bickering that exist between various tribes, the lack of purposive leadership, the desire to carve for our individual selves personal empires of influence, the lack of political awareness among the lower classes and a lack of understanding of the true nature of class relations and oppress. (5)

In presenting a common frontier, Whyte is against the idea of his comrades “squeezing into tribal groups.” He pursues the principle of unity in diversity and asks the SMO:

... Drop us with a feeling into one basket ... you say we’ve come from different parts of the land that is true. You say we must return to our different villages. This is not good ... because ... sticks are picked up from different parts of the bush, but it is on one spot that they are put together, tied and carried home for use. (47)

Throughout the length of the play, Rotimi is concerned with ensuring a harmonious coexistence among the diverse ethnic representations in the world of the play. Using the character of Harcourt Whyte, Rotimi sends a forewarning to the various ethnicities in Nigeria that it is only through collective action, tolerance and collaboration that the nation can defeat the common enemy of underdevelopment, deprivation, poverty and the likes that disease the country like the leprosy in the play. In driving home the lesson of solidarity and unity in diversity, Harcourt warns after victory is won in the play that:

The day children of the porcupine made bond to drift apart: one, going this way, a mouse; the other going that way, a bushrat, is the day both mouse and bushrat become food for cats. Together, then, we move. If not for our own gains, then for the gains of our saplings to come... (113)

Rotimi's play is a huge lesson in solidarity and communal living. The play appreciates the diversities of a plural polity like Nigeria, but quickly indicts polarisation along ethnic lines and tribal cleavages with nepotistic inclinations as the bane of harmonious coexistence and sustainable development.

Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*

The other play is Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*. Ododo makes definitive statements about the issue of ethnic diversity and its effect on nation building. The play is an extensive discourse on ethnic tolerance, and the question of ethno-regional domination which has remained a huge challenge to post-independence Nigeria.

Built around the overwhelming realities that dawned on two lovers, Prince Oki and Princess Azingae, Ododo delivers a thorough lesson on peaceful coexistence and ethnic tolerance. In the world of the play, two kings decide to cement ties between their kingdoms through the marriage of their children. As the marriage is being arranged, it is discovered that the mother of the bride had traded the bride's life so that her

husband is crowned king in return. As if that was not enough, the bride's mother further connives with some citizens of the kingdom in a plot to prevent the marriage from ever taking place. To drive home their hideous plan, they hire thugs who steal the crown of Iginla, father of the bride and king of Emeperi Kingdom. Polarised positions are taken in the play. Chief Ubanga, for instance, has this to say: "... as the only child and being a woman, her son automatically becomes the heir apparent to the throne of Emeperi Kingdom. Should such an opportunity be dubiously given to an outsider just like that? ... Your Highness, the gods and God will never approve that an Igedu Prince becomes the king of Emeperi Kingdom..." (*Hard Choice* 17, 39, 40). It is clear from the lines above that the prevailing situation is such that ethnic sensitivities and divisive tendencies abound in the body politics of the nation.

Ododo does not just stop at diagnosing the nepotistic problem associated with a plural polity like Nigeria, he goes ahead to orchestrate the ability of groups and communities to manage political and social disputes peacefully, without recourse to violent conflicts. In the world of the play, King Iginla, who is Yoruba, is humiliated at the marriage ceremony as his crown is stolen and taken away; his warriors threaten war against Eze Okiakoh and the entire Emeperi kingdom. However, the crown Princess on discovering the looming danger and its gravity decides to salvage an eminent war between the two communities by yielding to the demands of the Oguguru shrine – only the princess will be a worthy sacrifice in exchange for the crown that was taken there. Thus, Ododo succeeds to deliver a masterful lesson that:

Promoting peace and nation building requires fostering acceptance and understanding of the differences as well as creation of an environment where citizenship will be upheld above ethnic and religious loyalties which can help people contribute meaningfully to the country's development and promote nation building in a country with several ethnic and religious cleavages. (Mbachaga 133)

Regina Ode's *The Masquerade Called Religion*

Regina Ode's *The Masquerade Called Religion* (2007) is the other play of interest to this discourse. The play is a commentary on how religion is manipulated by politicians in order to access political power. The story is plotted around party politics and vicious electioneering in which two political parties, GPP and PIP struggle to sweep the polls in a forthcoming election. As things become clear that PIP might lose out in the polls, the party elects to divide the voting population along religious lines by sowing seeds of acrimony and activating the touchy frosty relations between Christians and Muslims in the world of the play. It is the Chairman of the party who sets the plan in motion when he says:

Prof. I'm actually proposing that we adopt the "divide and rule" tactic. And the divisive weapon now will become religion. We... will just tell them that, er... Islam and er... Christianity are not exactly alike... and that one sector is not worshipping the true God; well... something like that...
(11)

This is a clear indictment on desperate politicians who spin wicked yarns in order to achieve selfish political gains. In the play, this disposition is what prompts Zainab to carefully slip a full page of the Qur'an amidst the wrapping sheets of a bean cake (*akara*) hawker, who unbeknownst uses it to wrap some of her cake for a Muslim customer and thus sparking off untoward mayhem. It is not until Zainab confesses to this act in one of their meetings that Ada and Ahmad, new youthful members of the party decide to reveal the conspiracy to the general public in order to quell the crisis.

Regina Ode's *The Masquerade Called Religion* espouses the varying dimensions of intergroup relations in Nigeria. The play throws up most of the problems as emanating from religious and ethnic anxieties fuelled by selfish political ambitions and machinations of the elite class.

Conclusion

The major preoccupation of this discourse has been the thesis that Nigeria, as a plural polity, has an overwhelming diversity complex which has affected the mode of relations among her variegated ethnic nationalities. Ethno-religious suspicion and complexes of ethno-regional superiority have consistently challenged the collective and wholesome development of the nation. What this means is that the nation, it may seem, have been marking time in her march toward development since there abound conscious efforts to undermine the seeming advantage of every other ethno-socio-political setup in the country; this, in the final analysis, culminates into an overall underdevelopment of the nation.

In the plays explored here, Rotimi in *Hopes of the Living Dead* recognises the challenge of harmonising the petty interests of the multifarious ethnic nationalities in the country and insists on the harnessing of existing differences in order to bring about unity in diversity especially in the face of the common problematic of exploitation and suppression in the fashion of capitalism, which challenges the very survival of the common Nigerian, and indeed the nation state as a whole. Ododo's *Hard Choice* draws attention to the prevalent ethnic sentimentalities and selfish desires of groups in the Nigerian project; he thus advocates sacrifice of immediate private and personal gains for the common good of the nation as way forward in the face of prevalent challenges to national development. Ode's *The Masquerade Called Religion* pricks us to the realisation that religion in the country is not just an "opium of the people" but has become, to some self-seeking apologist, a vehicle for division and manipulation for personal aggrandisement.

On the whole, the chapter concludes the plays explored here and many more have adequately captured recognisable dynamics of the relationship of the various ethnicities in Nigeria, and it could only be timely for the nation to consciously sensitise and mobilise the people to genuinely key into machineries that

foster harmonious coexistence, cooperation and integration, in order to bring about a general advancement of the commonwealth of the people.

Works Cited

- Bamidele, Lanre O. *Literature and Sociology*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden, 2003. Print.
- Gbilekaa, Saint. *Radical Theatre in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop, 1997. Print.
- Mbachaga, Jonathan D. "Managing Diversity: Promoting Nation-Building and Peace in Nigeria: A Critical Reading of Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*" in Osakue S. Omoera, Sola Adeyemi, Benedict Binebai (Eds.) *A Gazelle of the Savannah: Sunday Ododo and the Framing of Ethno-Cultural Performance in Nigeria*. Kent: Alpha Crowns, 2012: 125 – 133. Print.
- Ode, Regina. *The Masquerade Called Religion*. Makurdi: Bookmakers, 2007. Print.
- Ododo, Sunnie. *Hard Choice*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2011. Print.
- Okpeh, O. Okpeh. "Conceptual and Theoretical Issues Arising from Studies in Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria in the 20th Century" in Olayemi, Akinwumi, Okpeh Ochayi Okpeh, Jr, Je'adayibe, D. Gwamna (eds.). *Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria during the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Makurdi: Aboki, 2006. Print.
- Rotimi, Ola. *Hopes of the Living Dead*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1988. Print.
- Traore, Bakary. *The Black African Theatre and its Social Functions*. Dapo Adelugba (trans.) Ibadan: UP, 1972. Print.
- Wa'Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Writers in Politics*. London: Heinemann, 1981. Print.