

MILITARY RULE, FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND THE ROLE OF DRAMA IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper recognises the fact that despite the long years of military misrule and continued dwindling of the economy during this period coupled with the domineering influence of foreign economic and political powers, literary theatre has been vibrant and unsparing in its treatment of the state of the Nigeria's ailing economy and its remote and immediate causes. The plays of discussion are Hagher's "The camps of Segbwema," Soyinka's "King Baabu," Bakare's "This land must sacrifice" and Osundare's "The state visit." The paper builds on the role of the literary theatre in an atmosphere of economic and political abscess.

Keywords: drama, Nigeria, political economy, criticism, governance

Introduction

The root of Nigeria's present economic debacle dates back to the pre-independence years. Before the declaration of independence in 1960, the British colonial government had already initiated or dragged Nigeria into the world capitalist system as exporters of raw materials and importers of finished and capital goods. This became the inheritance of post-independence that made Nigeria only politically independent but economically dependent on Britain and other industrialised countries for technology, modernisation, development, etc. (Ndebio & Ekpo, 1991, p. 3). The Nigerian economy has been at crossroads since then.

Both military and civilian administrations have had their share in the devastation of the economy of the Nigerian state, although the former is largely responsible having ruled the country for the most part of her existence as an independent state. During the period economic programmes were built on self-interest either internally or with the collaboration of foreign economic and political powers. Consequently, the masses are left to bear the brunt of such programmes. Economists generally agree that economic development is seen to have taken place if there is a sustained increase over a long period of time in the per capita output or product of a country. This obviously has been missing in Nigeria in her five decades of post-independence existence and in most cases the country has been led into undue dependence on foreign aid and powers for economic wisdom, as if her survival as a nation is tied to such aid. Some economic experts believe that such aid "has a multiplicity of motives and development assistance may be quite low in the priority scale of the donor" and while the recipient may think that the aid can accelerate economic development, for the donor, the motives may also include promotion of commercial self-interests, political interests, and strategic interests (Iyoha, 2002, p. 359). Thus, the motives of both donor and recipient are more likely to conflict than harmonise. And this is where the motives behind every grant or aid from the so-called First World are questionable as amply demonstrated in the plays considered in this paper.

The debate in 1985 during the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida on whether or not Nigeria should take the IMF loan will continue to be remembered because of the public ideological debate on the question of Nigeria's path to development – the argument between neo-colonial social forces and the comprador capitalists, the national and trans-national assembly plant industries, the banks and the bureaucracy on one side and the large mass of workers, students, the majority of the intelligentsia, some business people, farmers and petty traders, on the other (Iweriebor 1997, p.109-110) . In fact, the 1980s appeared to be the period of deepening poverty and general economic repression, and it unravelled the active attempts at the recolonisation of Africa by the West through its agencies of multilateral imperialism like the Paris Club, the London Club, and the most powerful of them all, the IMF and the World Bank. Today, the last two agencies are more powerful than any national government and they formed the bulk of Nigeria's foreign creditors until very recently.

It is apposite to note the fact that the prolonged years of military dictatorship in Nigeria, especially the Babangida and Abacha years, the dealt a devastating blow to the economy of the nation as economic policies and their implementation were distorted and haphazardly carried out.

Oftentimes, under the pretext of correcting the economic and political logjam, the military sought to perpetuate itself in power. The years covered by these two military regimes are well captured in our texts here especially as they relate to economic policies and foreign hegemonic structures in Nigeria and Africa. Thus, as at the time the Obasanjo civilian administration was taking over the reins of government in 1999, the economy of Nigeria was comatose and the performance of social services was generally dismal.

As a concept, political economy is a branch of the social sciences that takes as its principal subject of study the interrelationships between political and economic institutions and processes. That is, political economists are interested in analysing and explaining the ways in which various sorts of government affect the allocation of scarce resources in society through their laws and policies as well as the ways in which the nature of the economic system and the behaviour of people acting on their economic interests affects the form of government and the kinds of laws and policies that get made. It is interesting that today the term has become flexible enough to be accepted and applied to cultural studies. Its relation to governance now makes it amenable to interdisciplinary discourse, and as the most liberal of all the arts that humanise, the theatre finds a convenient place in the political economy of governance in Nigeria in both text and performance.

The theatre has not been untouched by the above state of affairs because first of all, the state of a nation's economy definitely affects the patronage of live theatre in the same manner it controls the consumption of literary production. Secondly, the nature of the government of the day influences theatrical or literary productions either positively or negatively. This paper however recognises, and dwells on the fact, that despite the long years of military misrule and continued dwindling of the economy during this period, coupled with the domineering influence and meddling of foreign economic and political powers, literary theatre has been vibrant and unsparing in its treatment of the state of Nigeria's poor economy and its remote and immediate causes. It has also proffered ways out of the politico-economic debacle. The paper therefore builds on the role of the literary theatre in an atmosphere of economic and political abscess. It examines four plays, namely Iyorwuese Hagher's *The camps of Segbwema*, Soyinka's *King Baabu* Ojo Bakare's *This land must sacrifice* and Niyi Osundare's *The state visit*. These plays deal with the way capitalism is rationalized. Therefore we shall employ a Marxist perspective to analyse the plays, particularly keeping in mind the manner in which Marx relentlessly "exposed the biases, misrepresentations and sterility of vulgar political economy and proceeded to develop, building on the achievements of the physiocrats, Smith and Ricardo, the concepts and methodology for a scientific understanding of capitalism and society in general" (Ihonvbere 1989, p.29-30).

Politico-economic Policies and Foreign Meddlesomeness

The camps of Segbwema dramatizes the naivety and ineptitude of military leaders. President Abdelaziz and his team display this situation in their flagrant show of opportunism, ill-preparedness and over-dependence on foreign powers for economic and political wisdom. The butt of the playwright's criticism is this undue romance with, and reliance on foreign powers with their selfish, ill-motivated political counsels and economic conditionalities. Obviously, it is this romance that brings the local administration clamping down on the well organised traditional home-bred Bondo society in the village of Segbwema. The Bondo Society is the local economic think-tank that controls three quarters of the country's leaders.

It is obvious too that the major reason behind the elimination decree against Bondo is the desire of the regime to fulfil its pre-accession agreement with the International Community led by the Samankus Ambassador (representing the United States of America) and Mr. Diehardt, Ambassador of Aiemuef (representing the IMF). The pre-accession agreement is to allow president Abdelaziz to enjoy the economic and political support of the International Community. Thus he establishes a strong military task force and invites foreign support to help me to completely crush the Bondo society.

Of course, being the police of economic policies of nations, the IMF, largely controlled by the US, is apprehensive of any home-grown economic arrangement, which may render it redundant. As Cheryl Payer puts it, "in this era, the status of a country's relationship with the I.M.F. is the most accurate guide to the fate of its aspirations to autonomous development" (1975, p. x). Thus, the IMF builds small offices in ministries all over the country especially the Central Bank with concealed tapes, telescopes and invisible transmitters with which it monitors activities and dictates on how government policies should be run. This type of a situation has made Nigeria to be an aid-dependent

country while all self-reliant programmes over the years seem like a sham. The end result of this aid dependency is continued economic and political enslavement of African countries of which Nigeria is said to be a giant.

Ironically, for reasons of “purely methodological exigency”, Professor Bot James a university don, and an honorary member of the Bondo society has spent two years researching into its organizational structure. The conclusion, in the words of the playwright’s persona James, is that Bondo as an organisation is the last hope for African countries as it ensures democracy, law, justice and distribution of wealth based on equity. Here, we have a motif that is recurrent in virtually all of Hagher’s plays – that of a struggle whose ultimate goal is happiness for the generality of the people. Well might this be, for:

The business of literature ought to begin from the creation of the conditions necessary for economic and political freedom; for it is from this that the cultural freedom flows. A literary culture that sets itself this vital task cannot but be carried in rigorous activist and radical political terms that go far beyond the bourgeois insistence on super structural decolonisation (Amuta, 1989, p.199).

The merits of the Bondo society are further corroborated by the fact that it has the most impressive arrangement with incredible division of labour, an elaborate chain of command, a workable judicial system and economic theories. The playwright’s point of emphasis here seems to be on the workable economic experiment of Bondo. Thus, he castigates local/national economists and intellectuals for their overdependence on foreign economic models:

Our own advisers always lead us into dangerous experiments with our economy and then say if all things are equal. Of course, nothing is ever equal, so we plunge into economic hopelessness (Hagher, 1996, p.100).

Therefore, Hagher, while castigating their local collaborators, does not spare the international community for their meddlesome postures through these international economic organisations, which are used to deceive African and Third World countries and deplete their economies for the benefit of the imperialist powers. The playwright finds this unacceptable and so, calls on all Africans at large, and Nigerians in particular regardless of their status to be “wary of all camps, foreign or local, in their choice of ideologies and options” (Umezina, 1996, p.vii). Bondo then becomes the playwright’s endogenous economic model for African nations just emerging from the throes of military misrule. In this regard, he rejects Western capitalist ideals and the ‘glorification of Eurocentric technocratic magic wands’, which he believes, cannot bring us to the Promised Land (Hagher, 1998, p.4).

This land must sacrifice by Ojo Rasaki Bakare confronts the growing challenge of irresponsible and unresponsive leadership in contemporary Nigeria and its effects on the country’s political economy. Set in the fictional land of Okanlogun, the play traces the history of the land from colonial period to the postcolonial. In Bakare’s play, King Wonbiliki is expected to ‘paddle the canoe (destiny) of his people to the promised land’ of peace and prosperity but as is characteristic of most African leaders, he connives with his chiefs to deplete the national treasury and progressively impoverish the people. The harsh economic situation forces some citizens to adopt dubious survival strategies like pocket picking and feigning of blindness to beg for alms. The Narrator rightly and rhetorically asks in the play: “Being freed and reaching the Promised Land are no problems, but is it possible for the people to settle and live in peace in the Promised Land?” (Bakare, 1991, p.9). It is interesting to note from the initial actions of the play that the people truly fought to gain their political freedom from their colonial masters, but the Narrator does not leave us in doubt as to the pending crisis of disunity among the people shortly after their freedom. The initial unity is now soon gone.

The Stranger’s or colonial master’s cynical dance as he disappears from the stage reveals his lack of confidence in the people to truly govern themselves after his exit: “The colonial master laughs and mocks him before disappearing into the opposite direction ”(Bakare, 1991, p.8). His physical exit from the political scene does not stop him from still interfering in the governance of the new nation. This is symbolised by his standing in the opposite direction to watch the course of things. Thus, the Stranger stage-manages the election of lackeys as leaders of the new nation. Here, like Hagher, “Rasaki by this design seems to draw a parallel here to the choice of the departing colonial masters to

tacitly anoint and hand over power to their lackeys and those individuals who were products of their structure of political and economic exploitation" (Nwaozuzu, 2012, p.110). This strategy is intended to entrust a high level of control on the Stranger's home country in the governance of the new country. To worsen the people's already sordid economic condition the leaders connive with foreign powers that pretend to be helping the ailing economy of the community. Conditionalities are dished out by the Stranger to reach the pact, and these include borrowing money from the latter, stopping the free supply of chairs and tables to community schools, taxing the land (the method and collection of which are to be dictated by the Stranger's home country) and the devaluation of the local currency. This economic arrangement is no longer new in the Euro-American bid for economic hegemony in Third World countries. With this new vision, the king defies the warning of the oracle and strengthens himself by removing all welfare packages the people had been enjoying until that moment.

Again, like Hagher, Bakare seems to warn that although some of the western ideas and options may contain some elements of truth, they must be looked at with caution and even suspicion. While one agrees in part with Nwaozuzu (2012, p.112) that Bakare 'seems to hold the former colonial masters culpable in the leadership quagmire' because the 'very structures put in place by the departing colonial masters were fashioned in a way that it was guaranteed to fail', it is apposite to add that the playwright nevertheless, does not spare their African successors for their complacency and outright selfishness. Perhaps, the Narrator's explanation may suffice here: "The mistake of the past brings misfortune to the present. Cheats have been mistakenly made rulers. They contravene the laws made by Ayelala before he departed" (Bakare, 1991, p.20). This demonstrates two things, namely: first, that the past colonial experience of the people is a contributory factor to the present crisis; second, that the present leaders whose ascension to the seat of leadership was stage-managed by the Stranger are themselves guilty for their glib acceptance of the Stranger's conditionalities. For example, king Wonbiliki's chiefs strongly oppose the idea of improving the people's lot in the areas of farming and taxation, and they encourage the king to continue to exploit and oppress the people. This situation is akin to the 1985 IMF loan debate in Nigeria, which conveniently creates two classes of people in the land, namely the neocolonial social class represented by the king, his cabinet members and their local and foreign collaborators on one hand and the oppressed large mass of people including the workers, students, farmers and traders.

After all is said and done, it is evident that the King's 'glib acceptance of the Stranger's proposition' as Nwaozuzu (2012, p.114) is wont to agree, is a clear pointer to the poverty of ideology of postcolonial Nigerian and African leaders as they readily mortgage the future of their countries and their peoples in the hope of attracting foreign economic and political goodwill. The end result is hardship and pandemonium in the land, leading to a revolution that sweeps off the corrupt king and his cabinet members. It is evident at the end of the play that Bakare's theatre of revolt opens up the doorway for the possibility or impossibility of revolutionary change in the contemporary nascent democracies of Nigeria and Africa.

The Military and Economic Waste

In Soyinka's *King Baabu*, attention is drawn to the cavorting attitude of military leaders in Nigeria towards the end of the 1990s especially in their misuse of power for economic self-aggrandisement. The social environment created by such regimes is the determining factor of Soyinka's new ideo-aesthetics, which in its entirety highlights the danger posed to development and nationhood by the closed state that a tyrant favours (Adeoti, 2001, p. 60). Unlike his older plays where Soyinka was driven by a lack of faith in the ability of the people to upstage tyrannical governments, here in this play he equips them with the needed wisdom for revolutionary change.¹ Written at the threshold of the present democratic experiment in Nigeria, *King Baabu* is Soyinka's post-military literary engagement that celebrates the demise of the General Abacha dictatorship. The play's actions take place in the fictional state of Guatana in front of the residence of the former Chief of Army Staff the late General Uzi (now being occupied by General Basha Bash). Maariya engages her beloved husband Bash in a crucial dialogue, which borders on her obsessive ambition to become the First Lady. This ambition affects Basha to an alarming level when she threatens to reveal to his aids how he 'leaks into his pants' if he does not act upon her ambition. Basha himself is not altogether free from such obsession, having single-handedly murdered his predecessor, General Uzi and participated in several coup plans in the past, yet his strategy is too slow for the highly materialistic and power-mongering Maariya.

His ambition drives Basha Bash into the next palace coup that unseats his boss, General

Potipoo. Even before this coup, Basha reveals his excessive greed; not only through his melodramatic physiognomy, but also by his attempt at personalising the huge budgetary resources allocated for his pet programme Operation Feed the Stomach. Two somewhat perceptive officers, Shoki and Kpoki, sense Basha's insidious motives and raise an alarm leading to a unanimous clamour for accountability and audit beginning from his ministry. But he is, in the interim, able to convince the Commander-in-Chief that such a huge allocation is needed for their efforts at democratisation and for making theirs the last military government in Guatana, especially as he is able to promise the latter of a 50/50 sharing formula, by 'fertilizing his Saudi account'.² The permanently semi-inebriate brother-in-law of Basha and Minister of Public Enlightenment, Tikim, explains somewhat ironically how Guatana's Army is not only set to serve as a midwife for democracy in the nation (by bringing themselves back to power under a different guise) but also, in their new role as the backbone of 'Operation Feed the Stomach', to serve as a model for all corrupt nations on the continent (Soyinka, 2002, p.18).

Predictably, when Basha Bash eventually takes over the reins of power as Commander-in-Chief he lives up to popular expectations. In an attempt to quell the public outcry for democratic governance, Basha Bash transforms himself into a monarch as King Baabu. It is in this 'spirit of democracy', and in order to carry along 'those western busybodies', that Baabu's coup against his master had to be bloodless – again, on Maariya's recommendation. Ironically, on his assumption of full control of the reins of power, Baabu unleashes his personal inimical programme of (personal) wealth, *Pax Baabunia* Baabu dynasty and of hereditary monarchy, all under the new guise of 'reinventing Africa'. His son Biibabae automatically becomes heir apparent to the throne. This means the investment of more economic resources in personal security and survival, the implementation of which yields one evil after another. Paradoxically too, he becomes prisoner to his self-machinations as he now operates according to the whims and caprices of court philosophers, marabouts, and pseudo-intellectuals like Tikim, who are more loyal to the spirit of wealth and thus give Baabu's emptiness a veneer of seriousness. These advisers and assistants well know that Baabu does not like being told the truth hence, they resolve to tell him only things he likes to hear about power, wealth and pleasure. They even spiritualise the throne and deceive him that his continuous stay in power or perpetuation of the Baabu dynasty has divine backing. Consequently, Baabu degenerates into more oddities and obscenities until, powered by the rhino powder, he is 'overdosed' by sexual indulgence and dies in the hands of his prisoner-women.³ His obsession with power is responsible for his short-sightedness, that is, he is not able to read in-between the lines the insincerity of his close aids.

It is interesting to note that in this play, Soyinka exposes how 'millions disappear into a bottomless hole without a trace' during the Abacha regime – for he is undoubtedly Baabu in this play – in Nigeria and under other similar dictatorships, especially in the Developing World. Presented as the 'most bountiful of all living spirits' ironically for his financial impropriety, Baabu recklessly siphons money from the Central Bank and spends without due process. This is Soyinka's satirical way of portraying highly corrupt African dictators in their brazen and reckless spending of public funds as he does with them in *Kongi's Harvest* (1965) and *A Play of Giants* (1984). A clear picture is painted below:

Baabu... (Seizes notes and 'sprays' the ecstatic crowd below.) Here is more. And more. And more. King Baabu the bountiful say spend it all. Spend every last penny of spanking new Guatana currency (Soyinka, 2002, p.49).

This gross show of economic debauchery has had a telling effect on the economy of the nation during this period and beyond as the tenets of accountability in government spending were completely absent and the fallout is still being felt till now. In fact, the personalisation of state property has led the playwright in another forum to wonder before the present play if Abacha would not be Nigeria's last despot (Soyinka, 1996, p.15).

In *The state visit* also, Niyi Osundare is unsparing in his exposé of the state of affairs outlined. Written at the height of the late General Abacha's celebration of folly in 1997 (published in 2002), the play is set in the fictional state of Yanke where the rulers prey on the helpless ruled with abandon and the entire atmosphere is filled with the stench of the waste. As the action of the play unfolds, Yanke (still Nigeria) is set to receive an august visitor from a brother nation, the military president of Wilama. And as is common with all corrupt regimes, the military Head of State spends ample time discussing with his cabinet of mostly corrupt ministers on how to give the visitor 'a fitting welcome'.

As the Head puts it, the matter of the 'state visit' is 'a pressing job in hand' and so, every other government business must wait until it is over. The entire action of the play is built around the planning and spending for this visit. No wonder a whopping sum of six hundred million arina (Naira?) is voted for it!

Despite the fact that there is only two hundred million arina left in the coffers of the government, the Head of State directs the Minister of Finance to take a loan from America. The latter however refuses. Consequently, the grant of six million arina given for a maize project is misappropriated for the visit. This has become the regular practice of the Head of State and his cabinet:

Agric: (snapping in)...It has happened before. Remember that the money for our Water Dam Project was diverted to the funeral of our leader's grandfather (Osundare, 2002, p.19).

The depletion of the national economy is here portrayed in the way the six hundred million arina is wasted. Again, the Head withdraws millions of arina without the knowledge of the Minister of Finance and when the latter resists by his economic prudence and perceptiveness, he is replaced with a willing one. Even more curious is the fact that it is the Minister in charge of public morality that always suggests to the Head on how to divert state funds. Besides, the manner in which the Minister of Agriculture and Minister for Public Morality publicly display (in words and actions) their vulgarity leaves much to be desired (see pp. 17, 24, 28, 42, 43, 47 and 57). In fact Minister of Agriculture openly declares their preference for the Lucretian philosophy when he asserts thus: "The future is not the problem now. When it comes it will take care of itself. Let us eat and be merry today. Why should we bother about tomorrow? You can only grab what you see (Osundare, 2002, p.18).

The play also shows how the country is made to be dependent on grants and borrowing from countries like America:

Finance: Remember just last year we borrowed two hundred million dollars from...

Head: We did not borrow it. America gave it to us as "thank you" money for allowing them to use Biirona as military base. We can always ask them for more. They are our friends.

Finance: Our masters! Debtors and creditors are never equals. Debts, debts. Debts eat away our freedom. Debts enslave our future. (Osundare, 2002, p.17).

At the end of the play, voices of dissent are loud and many against the general waste. The resultant revolution sweeps off the Head and his entire cabinet of corrupt ministers. Although, the playwright calls the entire play a dream, *The state visit* also demonstrates the possibility, if not certainty, of a revolution if crass economic and political oppression of the people remains the order of the day.

Conclusion

The four texts discussed in this paper all point to the fact that the mismanagement of Nigeria's political economy is a combined act of military rulers and their Euro-American collaborators. And this condition has been most propitious to dramatic productions. In essence, the business of the literary theatre is not impaired by either military misrule or foreign economic and political interferences; rather these have provided the artist an avalanche of materials upon which to build his works. The playwrights considered here seem to be unanimous in the opinion that Nigeria's national economy would do better in the hands of selfless leaders who also will look inward for economic policies rather than depend unduly on foreign powers whose interest is to have continued hegemony over Third World nations. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that although the artists have responded variously to this malaise, the poor economic state of the target consumers of such artistic productions is a factor that may make them less functional.

What is most interesting in the treatment of this condition by the playwrights is the call for a radical approach to bring about its end. Thus, while in *King Baabu* a bloodless approach for the overthrow of the principal actors is adopted, in *This land must sacrifice* and *The state visit*, the approach is premised on a Marxian revolution that makes the people active agents of (revolutionary) change.

Notes

¹See, for instance, *Kongi's Harvest* and his tragedies where the fate of the people is inexorably tied to the ruler-hero.

² This is a jargon among corrupt government officials, and it means 'to pay some ill-gotten money into someone's private foreign account'.

³ These excesses were common among military rulers in Nigeria especially in the late 1980's and 1990's.

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