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Championing African Identity and Survival through the Organization of Theatre: The Perspective of Femi Osofisan's *Richard Lander* and the *Traveling Polygamist* and Ajayi Crowther: The Triumphs and Travails of a Legend

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Abstract

The aim of this presentation is to buttress the fact that the artists have through their writings and performances in various forms propagated the struggles for identity, liberation and survival of the African descent within the continent and in the diaspora. The paper adopts literary and descriptive approaches as methodology in an effort to establish how the artist champions and sustains the cause of the African through their works. The paper reveals that an artist like Femi Osofisan in many of his plays, especially *Richard Lander* and the *Traveling Polygamist* and Ajayi Crowther: *The Triumphs and Travails of a Legend*, re-writes the continent's history with a view to giving voice to the hitherto subdued indigenous peoples. In these two plays, Osofisan re-presents the story of the forays of the Lander brothers in the establishment of the British exploration in Nigeria. It is noted that the rewritings as undertaken by Osofisan in his theatre will be a useful tool in the effort to correct the mistakes of the past where foreigners dominated the African space in opinion formulation and character formation. Therefore, it is recommended that Africans within and in the diaspora should remain conscious of their identity as well as endeavor to work hard through their own writings and performances to correct the misinformation and misinterpretation of the "African" as written by foreigners and thus define themselves in their own way as Africans.

Keywords: *African identity, Artist champions, Osofisan, Lander brother, diaspora*

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1. Introduction

Since the historical beginning of mankind as contained in the Biblical story of creation by God, the consciousness of the group identity seems to have been established among the living creatures on earth. Among the creature, each group makes efforts to recognize the members and goes on to establish link with them as a community in their struggle for existence. This situation is replicated in human society where peoples from various backgrounds recognize their kinds and also go on to live with them in a community with distinct characteristics. This development seems to have given rise to the existence of many communities with the same cultural background in different parts of the world. It is this cultural

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consciousness that brings that brings the feeling of oneness among the peoples and then propels them to formulate activities identical to their environment and culture. This seems to be in line with what Ezeugo refers to as “the property brain”. It supplies all available power to fight for survival. National consciousness is the liberation struggle in thought and activities of citizens of a nation (61).

So, it is this cultural consciousness which gingers the artist to take action in order to promote the ideals of the society. It is at this point that the artist takes the available cultural materials recognized in the society to formulate ideologies for his arts which are intended to influence the activities in his society. According to Onuekwusi:

The thoughts, ideas and experiences which a literary artist communicates are those that he obtains from the world of men and women. These provide him an interpretation of life, and a theme which he tries to communicate to humanity.

He goes further to observe that what the literary artist obtains from life, indeed from the socio-cultural environment of his acquaintance, he clothes interesting stories about the actions of men and women whose kinds we may recognize on the road. The above shows that cultural environment influences the creativity of the artist which he uses to formulate his art and create awareness among the people.

2. Conceptual Framework

It then becomes imperative at this point to define the concepts such as champion, identity and organization on which our presentation is based.

2.1. Champion

In the wisdom expressed by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, champion of something is someone who publicly fights for and defends an aim or principle such as the right of a group of people; a champion of women’s right. This is one who has special concern in the cause of justice and rights for the people in order to enable them live freely in the society. The champion sees it as a duty to ensure that those he works for live normal life without oppression. A champion also creates awareness which makes the people conscious of their rights and environment. This is what Osofisan has done with his plays used in the analysis by creating awareness for Africans to understand their cultural background.

2.2. Identity

Identity is a mark, name or something which someone is known for. This is what differentiates one from or something from the others. Dictionary.com defines identity as the state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or condition. This implies that someone needs to be identified with a particular culture in order to make the person distinct from the others. For example, we have groups within the various human communities such as Africans, Americans, or Asians that are usually identified with distinct cultural characteristics. These are what make the people distinguishable wherever they go. These include their arts, management system, economics, science, and technology. It is believed for instance that culture is on display in the arts of drama, theatre, music, dance, storytelling, poetic chants and recitations by the people for entertainment, information and education. This is the reason for Enita’s insistence that:

Theatre has stood over the years as a means of maintaining the mentality and identity of the people. In traditional African society, the theatre assumes a harmonious ensemble of chants, rites, songs, and dance. It is an integral part of the social and religious life of the people and therefore reflects the life of the community and its ethics, drawing its subject from an aggregate of the people’s folklore, myth, legend, tradition and custom and thus reinforcing the cultural values and norms of the society (246).

This further highlights the fact that the theatre can be used as a vital instrument for cultural promotion and identity as seen in Osofisan’s plays under analysis.

2.3. Organization

Organization is defined by Dictionary.com as an entity, such as an institution or an association that has a collective goal and is linked to external environment. It goes on to say that it is derived from Greek word organon which means “organ” an agent that makes something to function effectively. So, organization is an act of bringing together the various management principles such as planning, directing, staffing, coordinating, controlling, to utilize them effectively to achieve a set goal. It is through proper organization of resources that individuals, groups and governments can work together to realize the aim of their establishments. It is in this regard that Ayakoroma highlights the fact that:

Organizing entails knowing what is supposed to be done at what point in time...It involves the systematic arrangement of tasks and facilities in such a way that the various functions can be carried out with minimum cost, time and energy. Theatre is a collaborative process; and the success of a production depends on the prompt execution of the various aspects of the production design (20).

So, the aim of organization is to ensure effective implementation of tasks to realize the goal at minimum cost.

2.4. Strategies for Identity and Survival

In Femi Osofisan's plays entitled *Richard Lander and the Travelling Polygamist* and *Ajayi Crowther: The Triumphs and Travails of a Legend*, many strategies were adopted to create awareness and make the Africans conscious of their identity. The aim is to promote the African culture and make it acceptable as the stand point and the basis of their survival. Let us examine these strategies in relation to their benefits to the Africans as a means promoting their identity and survival within the global community.

2.5. Science

From the commencement of their voyage, involving, Lander, Clapperton, Pasko and the other expeditionists, were embarking on the voyage to discover the hinter lands of Africa. This according to Lander was to open the hinter lands to other explorers working for development and the need to bring civilization to Africa. Again, one of the aims of the expedition was to advance science as a tool to eradicate human misery especially as it affects Africa. This was clearly expressed by Lander while explaining their mission to Pasko. He observes that:

...no science can have true meaning in the end, if it turns its back on the urgent needs of humanity. All this wandering, all this suffering we undergo in the course of exploration will be a waste, unless our work helps to point our compass towards the source of human misery, and shows us how to end it (108).

available experience so far shows that science when properly applied will benefit Africa and the entire world. Although, science seems to be the aim of the expedition, other issues of importance to the British government were also being pursued which include commerce, slave trade, politics, religion and their civilization mission to Africa.

2.6. Slave Trade

Slaves for domestic and industrial use became an essential commodity of trade for both the Europeans and their African collaborators. This was brought about due to the urgent need for the slaves to work in the industries and plantations as well as serve at homes for domestic chores. In the play, 2ND MAN and 3RD WOMAN complained to Bishop Crowther based on the reckless manner they were being subjected to by Goldie simply because he wants to monopolize business in the area without considering others involvement.

2ND MAN: We thought the white men were Christians since they brought the religion to us. But they bombed us, and on a Sunday too!

3RD WOMAN: Bishop, our father, can it be right to fire at a people, seize their property, forbid them to seek their daily bread, simply because they would not allow Goldie to monopolize trade in their country? (105).

This shows the level of misunderstanding and cruelty by Goldie on the Africans he encountered during their colonization and civilization mission.

2.7. Religion

The European missionaries brought the Christian religion to Africa and since then, it has continued to influence the life of the people. This also influenced the struggle for the abolition of slave trade in Africa and other parts of the world Europe and America. Other practices that had negative impact on the society such as the killing of twins and human sacrifices were also abolished. This has created more friendly environment and security in Africa as it facilitates free movement of people. The 2ND WOMAN commented on it as she expresses appreciation to the CMS Mission and Bishop Crowther for their efforts to abolish slave trade and in the evangelization of the people.

2ND WOMAN: For if you had not brought Christianity here, I would have long been under the ground. For I was one of the seventy people they sent to be sacrificed when our king died in Osamare a year ago. But you intervened with your Book, cross and the people accepted to kill bullocks instead. And now, human sacrifices are a thing of the past (100).

This change initiated through the introduction of Christianity helped in advancing the cause of the African identity which continued to be negatively affected if not for the intervention of the missionaries.

2.8. Marriage

Marriage is an important aspect of African culture which shapes her identity. Marriage in Africa is a communal affair as it involves the participation of the two families of the man and the woman, friends and the entire community. This is what Pasko was referring to when he admits that although he lives in Britain, he still wants to go home to marry an African woman. He places emphasis on the value of African marriage and relates it to Britain where he has been living since his freedom from slavery. He becomes eager to embark on the expedition in order to use the opportunity to fulfill his marriage ambition.

Pasko: I must travel with the expedition! Besides, I am not growing younger, you know! Look at me, at my age! No child yet, you get what I mean? Britain is not a good place, but you must admit it's no place for black man to find a wife! Not just a –ah no, I just must go with the expedition (12).

Another important aspect of African cultural identity highlighted by Pasko is the issue of Child bearing in marriage. This is considered very fundamental in an African marriage as one of the aims of the marriage for the couple. In some cases, a marriage is considered unfulfilled without a child in a typical African traditional marriage. This makes it imperative to consider the suitability of the couple for child bearing before the commencement of the marriage engagement. Experience has shown that marriage is an essential part of African society as it is used for the promotion of African identity and survival. In traditional African society, marriage is for procreation which sustains the transmission of African culture from one generation to the other. The emphasis according to Pasko is on the coming together of the man and woman whose off springs will populate Africa and sustain their geneolgy.

2.9. Establishment of Education Center

One important institution which Crowther proposes and hopes it will facilitate the training of the African missionaries is the Preparandi Institution. This was initiated to serve as a training institute to equip young Africans in their religious matters, agriculture and the sciences to empower them to be ready to live with the challenges of the contemporary world in their missionary assignments. Bishop Crowther speaks in favor of the establishment of the Preparandi Institute.

Crowther: The preparandi! All our hope was on it, the hope of raising the future generation of African missionaries, boys and girls who be better educated than us, and trained, not only in religious instruction, but equally well in agriculture, and science (126).

The training is to produce well equipped future leaders and missionaries who will be conscious of their African culture and therefore live to project their identity.

3. Conclusion

Experience from this presentation has shown the efforts made by Femi Osofisan in managing the resources of the plays to promote the cause of the African people. Osofisan's recreation of historical events in the plays brings to fore the African experience in the past which will influence actions of the moment, and advance a better future for the survival of the Africans. For instance, it is noted in the plays that Bishop Ayayi Crowther as a CMS missionary worked to establish Christianity in Africa. It was through his efforts and that of the others that slave trade, human sacrifice and killing of twins were abolished. On the other hand, Lander, Clapperton and the other expeditionists added impetus to the advancement of science through their voyage across the hinterland of Africa. It was based on this that Lander described their expedition as an avenue through which they contribute to reduction of misery afflicting mankind and intensified efforts aimed at accomplishing their journey even when some of their colleagues died on the way. Although many of the explorers died not reaching their destination, it is however noted that this situation did not deter others from achieving what they believe will benefit mankind. In each of the plays, one observes the need to open Africa to the rest of the world is succinctly highlighted through the propagation of an African identity. Therefore, based on the experience from the plays, it is recommended that Africans should endeavor to promote their culture in whatever they do and wherever they go. Through marriage, Africans are encouraged to hold on seriously to their marriage system since it promotes their identity and survival with distinct culture.

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