

**LEADERSHIP, CORRUPTION AND REVOLUTION IN
CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA: AN ANALYSIS OF
CHARLES NWADIGWE'S *UDOJI* AND EMEKA NWBUEZE'S
*A PARLIAMENT OF VULTURES***

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Abstract

Right from the colonial period to this post-colonial era, the Nigeria political space has constantly faced one recurring problem; leadership. Almost all crises that have occurred at different periods of Nigeria's political history have all been leadership instigated. From the conflict that characterized the indirect rule introduced by the imperialists during the colonial era, to the Nigeria – Biafra civil war of the postcolonial period, down to the coups and counter coup d'états that held sway during the military era, then to the more contemporary times during which various security challenges like farmers - herders clash, boko haram insurgency reared their heads. These instances are all fallouts and aftermaths of poor leadership institution in the Nigeria nation-space right from time immemorial. As a result of this weak leadership structure which was first built by the colonial masters as exemplified in Charles Nwadike's *Udoji*, corruption like an incurable virus infested the blood stream of Nigeria's political system and so instead of service to the people becoming the primary and sole purpose of vying for leadership positions, wealth acquisition through flagrant embezzlement of public funds became the motivating factor as portrayed in Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*. From all indications, Nigerian dramatists who are also adversely affected by this vampire-leadership style that suck the nation dry are obviously in the forefront of the anti-corruption campaign. This is in recognition of the potency of drama as a viable tool for interrogating salient sociopolitical issues that require attention. Hence, the two plays studied demonstrate that the nation's leadership institution is infested by a can of worms and so needs urgent sanitization if the country must be redeemed from an impending total collapse. The researcher employed the qualitative methodology thus while *Udoji* and *A parliament of Vultures* – the two plays studied in the work – were used as primary tools for the critical analysis of the research problem, library and internet materials provided secondary sources of data. The playwrights having utilized the Marxist aesthetics prescribe revolution as the effective means of pulling the nation out of the cesspool of corruption she is enmeshed in. There are therefore glimmers of hope that by taking such radical step, Nigeria will be redeemed from the clutches of bad leadership.

Introduction

Cloaked in entertainment through artistic embellishment and ornamentation, contemporary Nigerian plays have been dominantly preoccupied with issues of leadership and corruption that surround the country's political landscape. An exposition into the works of founding Nigerian dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J.P Clark-Bekederemo to their progenies like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Tess Onwueme, Ojo Rasaki, Esiaba Irobi, Emeka Nwabueze, Charles Nwadigwe and a host of others will testify to the manifestation of a polarity between the playwright and what he sees as worrisome sociopolitical trend that tend to pervade the nation-space at one point or the other. The playwrights adopt varying dramatic styles in making commentaries regarding the various national issues that require remedial action(s). This is because the primary value of drama as an art lies in its subversive nature, borne out of its purpose as a protest tool against societal ills. This is probably why Charles Nwadigwe regards drama as a "barometer for measuring the pressures of human existence" since it pervasively exposes sociopolitical malaises bedeviling the society while still being "flavoured with robust entertainment" (149).

Despite the differing contexts and styles adopted by Nigerian dramatists, it is however not difficult to detect a particular thematic strand that runs throughout most, if not all their plays. This recurrent theme is – failed leadership and the search for a viable alternative. Scholars thus insist that this thematic strand is obviously the reason for the continuing concern and quest for heroes with ideal leadership qualities in the large body of literatures generated on the issue of leadership in Nigeria (Obadiogwu 94). These dramatic expositions utilize different forms and styles in satirizing the nation's leadership structure and institution. Saint Gbilekaa groups dramatic literature under two critical schools; the formalist and the radical schools. Whereas the formalists are more concerned with following literary conventions as propounded by Aristotle, the radical writers employ a more dialectical approach as proposed as Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels by transforming drama into a revolutionary weapon for the purpose dethroning any form inefficient, ineffective and oppressive leadership. Hence unlike the formalist writers who merely expose some of actions and inactions of leaders with the expectation that such exposure will indict their moral conscience thus bringing about change, the radical dramatists prescribe revolution as a weapon to be wielded by the masses in order to effect change in the society (28). Although the both camps have made and continues to make attempts to lend stronger voices in pointing the way forward regarding the challenge of poor leadership in Nigeria, we shall however turn to the radical camp in order to evaluate the effectiveness of toeing the revolutionary dimension as a possible means of eradicating corruption engendered by bad leadership from the society.

Themes of Leadership and Corruption in Nigerian Drama: A Critical Evaluation

According to the New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, Leadership is simply defined as the act of occupying the chief position as the foremost guide or officer that shows the others the way (724). Consequently, corruption on the other hand is defined by Webster's Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus as a state of moral and physical depravity and dissolution (125). Revolution, another key concept, is defined by the same source as the "the overthrow and replacement of a government or political system by those governed" (1079). The link between these concepts is that one may lead to the other.

Historical antecedents show that corruption was imported into Nigeria and by extension Africa by the colonial masters. It was gradually introduced as a system of governance by the formalization of British administrative rule through an appointment of self-appraised persons as paramount leaders of the people. This can be explained as why Charles Nwadiwe's *Udoji* captures corruption not as a postcolonial infiltration but as an element of governance introduced by British colonialism. Thus Emma Ebo and Canice Nwosu affirm that "important historical events provide strong indicators that colonialism, which formalized the organized government sector in Africa, also introduced corruption into the same system" (108). However, almost sixty years after attaining sociopolitical, economic and cultural independence from Britain, Nigeria still appears to be afflicted by this same disease. Udoka Ihentuge in fact regards corruption in Nigeria as not just an ordinary disease but cancerous illness. He further infers that this cancer of corruption has orchestrated leadership crisis in Nigeria. But it will be grossly erroneous, misleading and improper to continue to hold Britain responsible for the current condition of the nation almost sixty years after independence.

Poor leadership has consequently contributed in the weakening of important institutions in Nigeria like education, health, and security sectors. The constant increment in the prices of petroleum products, heightening of terrorists activities like the Boko Haram and Niger Delta militancy, farmers / herders clashes and so on are all pointers that the leadership in Nigeria is, if not dead, dying and that there is urgent need for a rescue mission. This is probably why despite the enticing manifestoes of various politicians and their parties during campaigns their years of rule appear to only end up bringing the nation nearer to her grave. This seemingly irredeemable situation presents nothing but a bleak future to the common man. In fact Ebo and Nwosu express total loss of faith in the nation's leadership by asserting that "there is no end in sight for corruption" in Nigeria (110). Their position as pessimistic as it appears goes a long way to, not only capture the decadent leadership in

Nigeria but to also underline the unwillingness of leaders to sincerely combat this scourge eating up the nation.

However, despite the precarious condition of the nation, poet and Literary scholar, Niyi Osundare is optimistic that the situation can be remedied. According to him, “there is hope for this country ... but we have to fight to liberate ourselves” (43). Herein lies the crux of the paper. Osundare’s assertion, put differently, implies that the long-standing negative narrative of ineffective leadership in Nigeria can only be changed when the masses take drastic measures against the narrators. In other words, the masses must rise up against and possibly overthrow their oppressive and suppressive leaders. Only then can the hydra-headed monster known as corruption be annihilated from the system. A number of scholars have thus aligned with this view that revolution is seemingly the plausible and possible means of rescuing the ailing Nigerian nation. Obadiegwu, for instance, holds that “revolutionary approach to social decadence in the country” is apparently the only means of changing the status quo without which “the masses shall end up being victims of bad leadership” (99).

Right from the inception of professional playwrighting in Nigeria to date, leadership and corruption are recurrent themes in Nigeria’s dramatic scene. Hence Asigbo affirms that “leadership and followership has been a major fulcrum around which playwriting in Nigeria revolves” (20). Revolutionary dramatists however radicalize their approach in order to make their drama more potent. Hence, Nigerian revolutionary aestheticians – dramatists who surreptitiously propose insurrection against corrupt political system in their plays – propose revolution as an end to the multifaceted dysfunctional leadership system. In other words, revolutionary crusaders, through the medium of drama, encourage the masses to take up the gauntlet and fight corruption to a standstill because only then can equity, fairness and justice prevail in the land.

It is therefore not surprising that many post-Soyinka generation playwrights captured this revolutionary ideology in their dramaturgy. This style of writing was pioneered in Nigeria by Femi Osofisan, a leading second generation dramatist. Osofisan asserts that their vision for adopting radicalism and revolutionary aesthetics in their play is borne out of the need to “examine the tension between pacifism and militarism, between a politics of free choice and one of coercion ... the concern about the failure of leadership” (qtd. in Alex Asigbo 22). Victor Ukaegbu in analyzing Osofisan’s dramatic style contends that “Osofisan blames Africa’s problems on internal failings in the polity, especially corruption, poverty and class conflicts ... His theatre is among many things revolutionary, his narrative and dramaturgy situate revolution in a populist dialectics that suggests that the search for genuine socio-political

freedom can only be achieved through the actions of the population” (135). The approach, vision and mission are also adopted by most revolutionary aestheticians as manifest in the two plays to be studied in this work.

Analyzing the Infiltration of Corruption in Nigeria’s Leadership System using Charles Nwadiigwe’s *Udoji*

Charles Nwadiigwe’s *Udoji* is a historical play that reflects the sociopolitical ills in contemporary Nigeria which were bred during the colonial era. Set in a colonial Igbo village of Ndiagu in eastern Nigeria, the play is given contemporary prominence and essence as issues such as bribery, nepotism, self aggrandizement which are still prevalent in Nigeria’s political system today are highlighted.

Udoji is an eponymous play that centres on Udoji, a character that can be regarded as the tragic villain in the story. Udoji saw his appointment as the warrant chief of Ndiagu community by the British colonialists as a lucrative business and so plots to exploit not only Ndiagu villagers but his employer as well. His first words during his acceptance speech after his appointment as paramount ruler subtly betray his shady intentions even though oblivious to his listeners:

Udoji: the white man is the master of our day. If we handle him reasonably, we shall gain a lot from him. Our elders say that those eating the food of a man possessed by agwu must eat it fast, because, if he recovers his senses, he will take away his food (9)

He thus indulges in all manner of tricks to achieve his goal before “the Whiteman” changes his mind about his appointment. The choice and imposition of Udoji as the paramount ruler of the Ndiagu community receives strong opposition because it negates the global principle of freedom of choice, opinion and fair hearing. This act puts a big hole in the administration of the colonial government that claims “will not condone any abuse of office” (6). Nwadiigwe approaches the problem from the perspective of the masses that are deprived of the privilege of making meaningful input in choosing who becomes their leader. Hence Egwuonwu, priest of Ezeudu queries:

Egwuonwu: ... If we want a king, we all know who can be king. Why should the white man chose and impose a king on us?

This is a pertinent question still bugging the present day Nigeria as elections which are crudely contested as do or die affair thus unpopular candidates rig their way through. Leadership positions are by implication manipulated by a

clique of power controllers. Hence, Umukoro affirms that “in all those so-called elections the masses of the Nigerian people did not elect their rulers” (85).

Udoji’s subsequent high-handedness and despotism after his appointment amply exemplifies the effect of subverting due process to favour a reserved few. When in power, they seize every opportunity and thwart administrative process in order to return the favour to their ‘godfathers’. To this end, huge sums of money budgeted for infrastructural development end up in personal pockets. Similarly, the issue of transparency in the execution of community projects is given exposition in the play. Udoji sees the “white man’s decision” to construct a new road in the community as an avenue for extorting the people. During the road construction, Udoji not only engages the free labour of Ndiagu men but also compels them into coughing out more money at the slightest opportunity as Ejike, the town crier announces:

I was told to tell all the men to make a fresh contribution of ten cowries each so that chief Udoji can appease the Whiteman and persuade him to change the course of the road (38).

Udoji’s actions in the play is a clear indication that development tends to take place only when it will favour those in power and their immediate environment or families as exemplified in Udoji’s plot to manipulate the course of the road under construction to his favour as one of the villagers reveals during a village meeting:

3rd Villager: I smell conspiracy in the whole thing. We know that Udoji’s house is not far from the shrine and if you look at the road very well, you will see that it is gradually losing its straightness and is veering towards the shrine. Apparently, Udoji wants the road to pass near his compound (39).

This is an apt description of the causes of underdevelopment and decay of basic infrastructures like electricity, good road networks and the likes in Nigeria. The people are denied basic amenities except where such development initiatives will directly favour the initiators. Hence, major roads in Nigeria like the Benin – Ore road, Port Harcourt – Aba road, Lagos – Ibadan road, Enugu – Onitsha expressway have remained death traps under successive governments for many years now. Political leaders obviously care less about the poor condition of roads in the country and the torturous experiences of commuters in these dilapidated roads since they are mostly flown in expensive jets.

Udoji's corrupt and Machiavellian leadership reaches a crescendo as he complacently tortures the people with reckless abandon. He "bans all village meeting except he presides over it" and even sends policemen to molest and beat up offenders. This is akin to the situation in Nigeria where law enforcement agents are vindictive weapons wielded by those in power against opponents. Udoji takes a step too far by attempting to tamper with the cultural unity and essence of the people. Udoji's order "for the postponement of the New Yam festival" is the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Myth and rituals are unarguably held sacred in the African society and an attempt to alter the laid own pattern or processes often come with grave consequences. Therefore pushed to the wall by Udoji's attempt to alter the mytho-ritual plan of the people, Ndiagu village is left with no other option but to confront his extremity as one of the villagers declares:

1st Villager: Something drastic has to be done. We have
 to clip Udoji's wings before he flies too high
 (65).

The villagers thus stage a revolt. A tumultuous revolution that is not able to be quelled by even the security at the British quarters. Udoji and his accomplices are captured and disposed in the evil forest.

Charles Nwadike's *Udoji* as an artistic recreation of history is a radical call for the overthrow of corrupt leadership characterized by wanton waste of public funds, political coercion, disregard for rule of law and free for all looting of public funds. By setting the play in the pre-colonial period, Nwadike asserts, amidst covertly, that corruption in Africa's leadership system was engendered by the colonialists. This is because rather than adopt a democratic approach in deciding who represents the communities they randomly select unpopular persons often times with stained records like Udoji as representatives of the people.

Leadership and the Entrenching Corruption in Postcolonial Nigeria: Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* as Example

Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* is a political satire that aptly captures the abysmal abuse of due process in a typically corrupt parliament. Situated in a contemporary sociopolitical milieu, the playwright beams a critical search light on the conduct of contemporary parliamentarians whose illiteracy and selfishness engendered obnoxious practices like thuggery, bribery, favouritism, prostitution, Voodoo among others. The play which is laced with action, suspense and even humour amply satirizes the Nigerian legislature at both the federal and state levels where legislative chambers have turned into houses of commotion, where lawmakers engage one another in exchange of blows, throwing of chairs and full blown physical combat. The plot is woven around madam Omeaku, an illiterate power drunken former

road side hotelier who suddenly finds herself in parliament through illicit means. As the play opens, madam Omeaku flaunts her new status as a parliamentarian. For her, getting into the legislature is a rare achievement that has elevated her above the “so called educated people” but being a member is not enough as she further lobbies to get a position in parliament that will determine her financial security. This is also the case in Nigerian where honourable members lobby and bribe to be elected chairmen in various House Committees in the upper and lower chambers. Madam Omeaku is a morally bankrupt character that is ready to give up her family for political post and engages in amorous relationship with Mr. Brown, a fellow parliamentarian. She quarrels, argues and fights in parliament at any slight opposition, actions which betray her uncivilized character. Her illiteracy and gross competence is lampooned when she emerges secretary of the House consequent upon the civilian coup they successfully plotted against Mr. Otoro, the uncorrupt secretary of the House. The House sitting takes a hilarious bend as Madam Omeaku reads minutes of previous deliberations written by Mr. Otoro. Common words like “Rapport”, “Awe”, “Lire”, “Embezzlement” “Ireland” betray the abject illiteracy of the supposed lawmakers. This explains how most of Nigerian politicians engage in certificate forgery, bribery and election rigging to find themselves in positions of affluence as revealed in the following dialogue between Mr. Brown and Madam Omeaku.

Brown: Forget about Dr. Parkers, he’s no force at all. After all we brought him back from American for a purpose.

Madam: What purpose?

Brown: having lived in the united state America for fifteen years, we felt he should have enough connections to help us put money in foreign banks. After all, what was the worth of his campaign? He could have crashed like a pack of cards if I hadn’t stepped in to rescue him. Fortunately, the returning officer was my classmate. It wasn’t difficult for me to negotiate the right figures for him as I did in your own case. (They laugh).

Madam Omeaku: Wonderful

Brown: That man is a friend indeed; in fact he couldn’t have passed the School Certificate Examination if I hadn’t persuaded my cousin to take the Examination for him, so he had to pay back in his own little way (4).

Likewise, titles like Reverend and Professor given to some of the characters are political schemes to win elections.

However, through the characterization of Dr. Parkers and Mr. Otobo, we catch a glimpse of minority leaders whose commitment and efforts in improving the lots of the masses are sabotaged and frustrated through political manipulation and maneuvering of the majority corrupt opposition. Thus, Dr. Parkers, a trained political scientist is denied proper contribution to the daily business of the house through constant opposition by the corrupt majority. Hence, House sitting are always avenues to discuss trivial issues like Harvest / Thanksgiving Service and parliamentary party with huge sums of money voted for their executions. Stunned by such shocking debate on how to squander the nation's treasury in the name of "parliamentary boogie", Dr. Parkers supported by Mr. Otobo burts out:

Parkers: Mr. Chairman, such colossal waste of public funds is unnecessary. I don't see any reason for it. The value of our currency is very low, the masses are suffering, civil servants in some states have not been paid their salaries for upwards of six months. I move for it to be completely erased from the programme.

Otobo: Supported, besides the house should concentrate on winning the credibility of the people after many years of misrule. We shall not think of ourselves. In Europe and America, parliamentarians are the servants of the people (42).

This kind of frivolous spending and execution of white elephant projects is not alien to the present Nigerian leaders. For the parliamentarians chaired by Habamero, the "honourable" speaker, the philosophy of "the end justifies the means" is what holds because to them, what matters is how much you can accumulate rather than how it was accumulated. This typifies the Nigerian society because here acquisition of wealth, no matter the source is considered a great feat as wealthy people are eulogized while the poor as depicted in the character of Mr. Omeaku are slighted. Seemingly, Mr. Otobo's rickety vehicle which Dr. Parkers defends as "a sign of his intergrity" becomes an object of ridicule when mentioned to the House members (31). This is one of the indices for measuring the level of moral bankruptcy that has permeated the society today because "contemporary Nigerian society has lost the ideals of life such as honesty, integrity and truth; replacing it with decadent values such as love of power and material wealth. Thus, people who corruptly enrich themselves are hailed and eulogized as heroes rather than being condemned as villains" (Umukoro 85).

The excesses of the corrupt politicians riches its climax when Dr. Parkers and Mr. Otobo are arrested by the police, apparently instigated by the speaker of

the House, Habamero. Their arrest is a precautionary measure taken to forestall any confrontation or verbal attack that may emanate from the duo against the president during his visit, a character the playwright presents as not only corrupt but inhumanely insensitive. Hence, during the president's visit, freedom of speech and expression is first of curtailed as the president first of all warns the journalists that he is "allergic to foolish questions" and so "shall deal ruthlessly" with any of the them who attempts to bug him with "foolish" question (63). As expected, the threat helps to put the journalists under check. This is not out of context within the Nigerian society which explains why presidential media charts as well as interviews with other top politicians are always held on lighter mood devoid of probing questions. Journalists privileged to participate in such interviews are merely selected from a crowd of journalists in the country. They count themselves lucky to be selected from the lot because they must smile home with greased palms after such interview. Thus brown envelop turned out a concept in Nigeria's journalistic practice. Femi Osofisan contends that government is one of key enemies of press freedom (43).

The deep-seated corruption and abuse of human right that pervades the world of the play culminates in a revolution. The arrests of Dr. Parkers and Mr. Otobo stir up outrage among irate youths whose patience have already been stretched beyond limits. The youths form a militia group, invade the parliament, disrupt the process, plunder the building, capture and drag the corrupt members to the slaughter.

Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* is clearly an artistic statement against corruption. The play is evidently inspired by the playwright's genuine desire to address the ugly business that transpires in the Nigeria's legislature since the inception of democracy in the country. The thematic preoccupation in the play is revolution as the only resolution against corrupt leadership. Nwabueze prescribes "full scale revolution" as "the only answer" to consistent misrule in the country but is quick to remind the populace that "revolution is not an exercise in simplicity. Revolutions are carried out by men not robots. Revolution is the handwork of progressive generation" (24). Emeka Nwabueze's call is for the masses to understand that revolution is neither a personal vendetta against perceived enemies or arm chair activity. It is a serious action that calls for masses' involvement.

Conclusion

This discourse proves that drama is potent, not only as therapy for societal malaise but as a medium that predicts the future. Many major occurrences in Nigeria like the military coup, Niger Delta crisis, general elections and so on had been predicted by Nigerian literary writers before their manifestations. Hence Emmanuel Uzoji affirms that "the dramatist is a prophet and the

dramatic text is an authorial prediction of future political developments in Nigeria” (62).

From this research work, it is also deduced that corruption in Nigeria’s leadership system is the bane of the Nigerian nation or as Chinua Achebe puts it, “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership” (1). Inferences drawn from the two plays studied show that the underdevelopment of Nigeria as a country is caused by corruption which has infested the blood stream of the nation. Evidently, most contemporary Nigerian dramas treat the theme of leadership and corruption in the Nigerian polity. A number of these plays recommend revolution as the solution to the quagmire. This prescription cum prediction should not be dismissed by Nigerian leaders, who are almost blinded by the pleasure of corruption, as being too idealistic to be actualized.

Even at the risk of sounding like a dooms day prophet, the researcher contends that corruption in Nigeria if not checkmated may soon explode into another full blown war or revolution at least. Leaders in Nigeria should take lessons from the plays studied in this work seriously. The two Nigerian playwrights recommend a total eradication of corruption in Nigeria’s leadership. Individuals with tainted images and records like that of the characters in the play such as Udoji, Madam Omeaku, Habamero, and Mr Brown should not be allowed into leadership positions. Sincere and non-partisan anticorruption strategies should be mapped out. Ideas can be borrowed from countries with zero tolerance for corruption. Similarly, subjects and courses that promote moral, national values and patriotism should be introduced as compulsory subjects in educational curricula. Again, accountability should be the watchword of political and public office holders as a way of promoting peace, stability and development in the country. However, in a situation where the leaders appear lackadaisical to effective governance through accountability, the masses must learn to demand for it however violently.

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