THE PLAYWRIGHT AND HIS IDEOLOGY:
A Celebration Of
Fred Ägbeyegbe

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Playwright as a Sociologist: The Example of Fred Agbeyegbe

By
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ABSTRACT
Nigerian playwrights have put the creative and imaginative enterprises on the world canvas with a view towards establishing a firm understanding of the theoretical framework required in the interpretation of the social and political issues in their society. They see sociopolitical issues within the confines of historical and material reengineering and redistribution which must be captured in their works for the benefit of all. Sociology, as a social tool in analysing societal problems gives credence to the fast growing critical re-reading and re-writing of dramatic pieces in Nigeria.

However, in this work, the relationship between sociology as a field in the social sciences and the playwright’s endeavour is examined in order to establish their areas of convergence. In this study, Fred Agbeyegbe’s thematic concern is x-rayed from a sociological point of view using one of his popular plays, The King Must Dance Naked as illustration.

Keywords: Sociology, Nigerian Playwright, Societal problems, Drama, Thematic Concern

INTRODUCTION
In recent times, Nigerian writers, especially playwrights, have perfected the art of deploying all the nuances that go with the studies in sociology in their creative enterprise thereby making their works to be subjected to series of vigorous academic exercises particularly in interpretation, and comparative analysis. Although works of the first generation playwrights in Nigeria such as Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and J. P. Clark have been studied within the ambit of sociology but,
writers like Fred Agbeyegbe have also adopted the sociological tool in the construction of his artistic and ideological visions as a way of renewing and furthering the old politics and dialectics in the works of the established playwrights.

However, one could ask if sociology as a field of research can be divorced from a creative endeavor. The answer would be “No” going by the position of L. O. Bamidele (2000)

...though writers or artists are or may not be card-carrying social scientists, they vigorously advocate the artistic and literary pursuit of particular social and political causes and agenda and it is the business of the literary sociology to establish a theoretical framework to explain the implicit reflections of matters of social, cultural and political in the fiction and even in the non-fiction that are produced in society. (v)

Taking a cue from the above submission, a writer has a responsibility to his society beyond the immediate needs of that society and the sociological import of his works is essential in the analysis of his society especially at different times in history. The social and political re-engineering, as prescribed by scholars and practitioners in the society are documented, analyzed and dramatized for the purpose of improving the well-being of humanity and this is an area of interest for drama sociologists. The society as a field, and the stage as a laboratory for socio-political experiments, is a strong indicator for the understanding of sociological ethos beyond the cultural and ethnographical emblems. The playwright in this wise sees his society and the stage as tools that could be used to improve the cause of each other; society provides the hypothesis and the canvas for the analysis and interpretations at the beckon of the stage. Therefore, a sociologist who engages in scientific empiricism has enough materials to work within the area of drama and theatre practice. In Nigeria, for instance, playwrights’ thematic thrusts usually engage the happenings in the society in order to interrogate the existence and impact of such happenings on the masses.

OF SOCIOLOGY AND DRAMA

The place of sociology as a field of study in dramaturgic analysis has been variously discussed by different scholars and writers, therefore, the attempt in this study is not aimed at a comparative excursion or a repeat of what has been said in other works but an highlight of a common ground for the playwright and the sociologist as one can be useful to the other in social and political engagements. While sociology may be seen as a science that studies human behaviour in relation to the society, drama is a literary and visual presentation of such human behaviour using action, words and symbols. The scientific enterprise in sociology is usually empirical or factual while that of drama is both factual and non-factual. It, therefore, means that drama could expound and expand the scope of sociological standpoints by projecting and analysing both seen and unseen human behavioural patterns in the way sociology may not have adequate instrument to explore. But, the most fundamental thing is that they both embrace cultural and social values in the society. They interpret the political and religious ambiance of man and seek to liberate him from his ignorance by expressing the historical and material logjam hampering his progress. The development of science and technology in the society could be studied using sociological apparatus and those apparatus can also instigate the creative interplay in the dramatic exploration of the sociopolitical issues in a society. If Goldmann Lucien (1975) could see sociology beyond the theory that could be used in interpreting literary works such as a novel, and as an exercise that is geared towards understanding a social context in a novel, then, the playwright’s artistic vision can be seen as a sociological piece from which a society can be studied within a given time or period in history. Perhaps, Bamidele’s submissions would serve in driving home the point I want to raise in this study, especially on the symbiotic relationship between sociology and drama viz a viz how playwrights have used, effectively too, that apparatus of sociology in explaining some scientific and social issues, since...
...literature (drama) is an art that is principally an activity of the mind (and stage), a creation and self-conscious enterprise, one that is socially formed in the sense that the writer (playwright) is part of the current of human thought: the writer (playwright) shares in the language, attitude, tone and voice of his fellows and he expresses values that come from a discernible context in society, in a nation and at a period.

(Bamidele, 2000:3)

This submission nullifies any doubt that may be expressed on the relevance of sociology in drama since a playwright is a living member of a society and that society has culture and norms which are elements of sociological study. Bamidele’s three approaches to the study of literature vis-à-vis drama are of great value in this discourse. He sees Marxist, Documentary and Institutional approaches to the study of sociology in literature as the bedrock for the sociological scholarship and practice in literary endeavour and these shall be adopted as framework in this study.

THE APPROACHES

The Marxist approach to a sociological interpretation of literary works, especially drama, requires an understanding of the basic tenets of Marxism. However, it must be noted that the class distinction upon which Marxism is premised traverses various fields of study especially economics, religion, literature and cultural related discourses. Marxism is a broad theory in social science and the humanities, and it is an ideological concept that is meant to explore the diversity of economic, religious, social and political endeavours, and their implications on the society. It seeks to create a classless society, especially where the evils of capitalism hold sway. It recognizes three levels especially in terms of resource creation and distribution in a society and it also attempts to deconstruct such a society in order to reconstruct it within the available resources for the benefit of all.

In literature, generally, and drama in particular, a Marxist playwright uses this as an ideological theory that is geared towards the establishment of a uniform way of life. Marxist aesthetics is a dominant feature in the works of some of the foremost African playwrights such as Bode Sowande, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Athol Fugard, Olu Obafemi, and Femi Ososinan just to mention a few. In their works Marxism represents a philosophy that is hinged on radicalism or revolutionary standpoint and they have used all the various historical, folkloric, mythical, cultural, legendary stories and events to discuss Marxism in their works. As Marxist playwrights, they have expounded on the aesthetics of sociology and it is no doubt that Marxism as an area of study in sociology has helped in no small measure in the development of literary scholarship and theory. Any playwright who seeks to be relevant and make his work appeal to the immediate sociopolitical and cultural needs of the people makes Marxism as a theory, the bedrock of his creative enterprise. While Ososinan had established himself as a Marxist playwright from the beginning of his writing career with his first play - A Restless Run of Locusts and in his subsequent plays like Morountodun and The Chattering and the Song Sowande is more revolutionary in his use of Marxism especially in Farewell to Babylon and Flamingo. Essentially, Soyinka, Ososinan and Sowande are the front runners of radical poetics in Nigerian drama (Gilestone, 2001). However, Nigerian playwrights have borrowed copiously from the tenets of Marxism and have used them for revolutionary socio-aesthetic ideal. Studies in works of these playwrights have been tilted towards a sociological interpretation.

Another approach in the exploration of the sociological theory in literary works is the documentary approach. Every work is expected, according to Bamidele (2000), to serve as a reservoir or repertoire of knowledge that could be used at a moment of need by the society. It is a way of capturing history and development in dramatic writings. The history of a race could be understood from the drama and theatre emanating from that society. To Bamidele, this approach to the study of sociology in literature or drama is called Positivism which
established that race, moment and milieu are important in the analysis of a literary text. Every artistic creation, drama or theatre, cannot be separated from its root, and this root is in the garb of culture, history and the semiological system of a race. If the Marxists oriented sociological enterprise is tilted towards social and political change in a radical point of view, the documentary approach is in tune with a positive maintenance of status quo and it also seeks to question the existence of the alternative culture or tradition. This approach keeps records of events that may be lost in the near future. It is both factual and analytical in its endeavour. Playwrights in Nigeria have borrowed from this trend especially in reminding the contemporary society on the need to look back and assess past events against the backdrop of current issues. Wale Ogunyemi's Ijaye, Akinwunmi Ishola's Madam Timulu, Ola Rotimi's Kurunmi, Duro Ladipo's Oba Koso, Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and many other plays by Nigerian playwrights have discussed the history, culture, values, civilisation, sculpture, fables, folklore, proverbs, myth and legends, music, politics, wars, religions, festivals, rituals, ceremonics, commerce, dance, men and women in Nigeria. Their intention is to capture the sociopolitical and religious events in Nigeria from different perspectives for immediate and future uses.

The third approach to the study of sociology in literature is the institutional structures. According to Bamidele (2000), and it is purely on the examination of what constitute social institutions and how these have helped to shape the cause of literature. Literature and drama in particular is a social institution around which other endeavours in the society can be built (20-21). He further refers to this aspect as a gate keeper:

... any formation or collection of agents performing specific tasks in the production, distribution or promotion of fiction is referred to as gatekeeper.
(Bamidele, 2000:21)

Going by the above, it is noteworthy that writers (playwrights), arts councils that regulate the artistic and traditional values (culture in a state), audio and video recording and sales companies, actors and theatre producers and audience are parts of these institutions that promote the development of the sociological ambience of creative enterprises. Arts or literary works like drama must be created and made available for the target audience. Therefore, a study in the audience for a dramatic piece of theatrical presentation requires an enquiry into the basic sociological parameters such as sex, age, social status, religious affiliation, educational background, the social and political environment, language and cultural affinities. All these would, in no small way, help a sociologist in determining the social relevance of such creative endeavour. They form parts of the issues in the analysis of drama and theatre audience, and audience is an institution in the analysis of literary engagement.

Beyond the three approaches to the study of sociology through the literary enterprise, as evinced by Bamidele (2000), modern Nigerian playwrights have adopted the feminist and postcolonial theories in their approaches to the analysis and interpretation of basic sociopolitical issues. It is important, therefore, to examine these in brief in order to establish their relevance in the sociological analysis of drama (plays).

Feminism is both an ideological and literary theory. It deals with the awareness, consciousness and the need for women to liberate themselves from the historical claws of the male gender. The attempt by feminists is to dislodge the phallocentric disposition of the society in all areas of human endeavour, politics, economics, religion, culture, professions and sports. It takes the interest of women as paramount against the position of their male counterparts. However, both sociologists and playwrights have employed this theory in order to interrogate the position of women in a radically changing world either in defence or against the place of women in the development of the society. For instance, classical playwrights had explored the women’s values in the affairs of the state and economy even before the feminist theory became prominent. Sophocles’ Antigone illustrates the potentials of women in the fight against oppression; it explores
the tenets of social justice. Even though the idea of gender equality was not established in the play, the fact that a woman, Antigone is made to champion this cause is enough reason to associate the play with feminist values. Euripides in Medea exposed the domestic and political essence of fidelity in marriage. Aristophanes, also, in Lysistrata defines women’s position in the political, economic and social development of home and state. To Aristophanes, women possess the ability to run a state better than men; women are more involved in the politics of home-making which allows them to have stable and enduring family. Therefore, if women are allowed to take charge of the political position in the state, feminists argue, the state will be stable and enduring. Women, to Aristophanes, have more responsibilities than men; women take care of the needs of children, husbands and home and by extension they take of the needs of the state. Men on the other hand only take care of their responsibility as the head of the family or house by providing the means of livelihood which women can also help to provide. Every woman is seen as a potential state builder. Feminism has been adopted as a guiding principle by Nigerian playwrights because it is a way of making women to be conscious of their development and growth in a male dominated society. Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofsian, Tess Onwueme, etc., have written pays in defence of the female positions, and the liberation of women in Nigeria just as done by Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo in Ghana.

Therefore, every sociological illustration in feminist plays gives credence to the place of women in the running or management of a society. The cultural and religious enclaves in a society are usually promoted with women’s participation. Festivals, ceremonies, egungun masquerading and other cultural and traditional elements in Nigerian society cannot have a head way without the involvement of women.

The postcolonial theory, on the other hand, extends its boundary to the study of Marxism, feminism and other related fields such as culture and language in societies colonised by the imperial powers.

However, every former colony and other third world countries are imbued with peculiar problems which are characterised by or could be classified under the following sociological headings:

(a) poverty  
(b) underdevelopment  
(c) natural disaster  
(d) unemployment  
(e) leadership misrule and dictatorship  
(f) terrorism and war  
(g) ethnic rivalry and nepotism  
(h) political instability and corruption  
(i) a search for identity and religious intolerance.

These problems are constantly explored by Nigerian playwrights for the purpose of reminding the nation of the need to focus on the development and growth of the society through a conscious effort by putting the historical and cultural abuse which the nation was subjected to by the colonialists and the political leaders, in their plays. Though, their approach to the postcolonial issues may be tied to the concept of resistance and subversion, the plays of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofsian, Bode Sowande, and Olu Obafemi have explored these postcolonial issues in such socialist radical view while the plays of Zulu Sofola deal more with issues of culture as it affects the woman.

In view of the broad spectrum of sociology in the analysis of a playwright’s creative impetus, and the ideological vision for his society as illustrated above, it is important to explore these view points from a playwright and his works. And the playwright chosen for this discourse is Fred Agbeyegbe.

**FRED AGBEYEGBE**

Fred Agbeyegbe is one of the Nigerian playwrights whose thirst for stage crafts had produced quite a number of plays among which
are *The King Must Dance Naked*, *Conflict Resolution, Budiso, the Last Omen, Woe Unto Death, The Will, The Reincarnating Lovers*, *The Tombs of Westminster Abbey* and many other creative works like poems, published as a collection under the title *The Confused World*. Though he did not study drama or theatre arts, he is one of the practitioners of the arts that communicate through the stage medium. He studied and practice law but his love for the theatre is immense and unmatched by his contemporary outside the theatre arts profession in Nigeria. Through his works – plays in particular – he has won several recognition awards in Nigeria. Most of his works cut across national and contemporary issues using the folkloric elements like myth, legend, fables and storytelling devices. Though, he may not have gained much publicity in scholarship, that is, his works may not have attracted wide study or research, it is essential to note that the message of his works are needed by the people and states transiting from the historical and material despotism to a more liberal, humane and technologically sound society where life would have values and meaning. The style and techniques deployed in his plays have been influenced by his artistic and intellectual romance with the works of such established first generation playwrights in Nigeria, like Wole Soyinka and J.P Clark. The styles and techniques of the stage crafts e.g. lighting, costumes and make-up, set design and the narrative modes in his plays instigate conclusion that his plays are director’s plays. In this study however, *The King Must Dance Naked*, one of Fred Agbayegbe’s popular plays is examined against the backdrop of a playwright as a sociologist. Fred Agbayegbe has established himself as a sociologist by entrenching all the variables of sociology discussed above in *The King Must Dance Naked*.

**THE KING MUST DANCE NAKED**

The play examines power-play and its implications on the sociopolitical and economic status of a state. Bagiwa, a chambermaid in the palace of King Omajuwu the 9th takes advantage of the barrenness of Queen Lube to seduce the king and later gave birth to a set of twins – a boy and a girl – for the king who had no heir to the throne. According to tradition, women cannot be king of the land and the oracle ordered that the girl, being the first out of the twins be sacrificed to the gods but Bagiwa, who is now Queen Odosun, refuses to release the child to the priest, Afinotan.

The play adopts the storytelling technique and the Aristotelian style of stage craft by involving the chorus as both advisers and storytellers. However, our concern in this study is to examine the sociological contents highlighted above as used in this play and how Fred Agbayegbe can be described as a sociologist. The play explores the dialectics of systematic revolt of Bagiwa, a chambermaid who later became Queen Odosun. There are two issues that could be highlighted in this case (a) her revolt against her status as a maid (b) her revolt against the gods in order to free the palace from the historical and cultural practice that are anti-people, especially the masses. Odosun sees herself as the liberator for the slaves; the people who have no voice and that cannot be reckoned with in the society. Agbayegbe uses Odosun to confront the oracle as a revolutionary just as Ososfan has done in *No More the Wasted Breed* where Saluga and Biokun are made to revolt against the gods that feed fat on the people they are meant to protect. Although, Odosun’s action may be considered sacrilegious, and selfish. Agbayegbe also uses Odosun to explore the real meaning of life of human beings; that the life of every human being counts, irrespective of their social class or race.

*... But Afinotan can’t you appease the gods, tell them that it is my child and not a dog that they ask for, that I shall do any other thing they ask of me.*

*(The King Must Dance Naked, 1998:27)*

Going by this statement Odosun understands the relevance of the gods as the custodians of life but she is also willing to make a concession just for the purpose of saving the life of her child.

*I shall give them a goat... Two cows, three, four, five cows, ten cows...*

*(The King Must Dance Naked, 1998:27-28)***
However, beyond the violent standpoint of Odosun and her eventual success in establishing herself as Queen in the palace of King Omajuwa 9th, Agbeyegbe’s *The King Must Dance Naked* could be regarded as a document or repertoire of traditional and folkloric experience of the Nigerian people. It captures the monarchical succession bid which characterised the traditional African society, with a dominant influence of the gods and the priests. The play serves as a reminder of the culture that should be subjected to a review in the contemporary world. It also portrays Agbeyegbe as a playwright with a good understanding of the institution of the arts in the development of a state. Art has a significant role to play in the affairs of a society transiting from a socially and historically backward state into a technologically and scientifically viable one. Drama, though a medium for social liberation, an understanding of its implication on the social, political, religious and economic life of the people is immense. Agbeyegbe’s treatment of issues relating to power and politics in *The King Must Dance Naked*, using the storytelling technique, places on him the role of a sociologist who seeks to refine and redefine social values. It may also be argued that his feminist exploration runs contrary to the general view that women can handle the affairs of a state better; that women are not ambitious, Bagiwa’s transformation to Queen Odosun underplays this point of view. It rather makes one to believe that women are opportunists and when they get the opportunity thrust upon them by nature, they make use of it even to the extreme.

Perhaps, what Agbeyegbe had in mind with this story is that sex or gender disparity does not have anything to do with power and politics especially where self-realisation and ambition abound. Every human being is susceptible to inordinate ambition in a society where the socio-cultural and religious values are being dictated by corrupt leaders. For Odosun to have seduced king Omajuwa through her feminist weapons – food and sex – and to rise and establish herself in as a queen is, no doubt, against the dictates of feminism as theory, rather, it shows the cunning disposition and the quest for power by human beings, and in this play a woman is being used to illustrate this.

Queen Odosun’s intrigues in the play suggest that human beings can rise to the top in the society and would like to remain atop through all means even the ones that are against the people and the institutions in the society including the society’s gods and goddesses. The play explores sex, food and social habits, corruption and bribery as bane for archiving one’s goal in the contemporary world. But at the end Agbeyegbe wants us to reflect on a common saying that ‘no one can win a war against his people’ and this is what Odosun experiences before she eventually gives up her.

*Perhaps it is best to give in... you can’t win against the crowd... bit you shake them. (She picks up the baby girl). They will come again. I shall have offer you. Enjoy the night breeze until they come for you.*

*(The King..., 1998:36)*

She sees that her aspiration to the position of power in the society is not for the common good but for herself. Perhaps the general interest of Odosun lies in the fact that she must shake the society in order to make a name and impact the society. Though, Agbeyegbe’s *The King...* has been described as an experimental play (*Asagba, 1998:85*) especially in terms of the use of dramatic techniques and theatrical devises but he (Agbeyegbe) has also succeeded in probing the minds of the audience/readers on the need for them to see any issues relating power and politics as a serious concern. To him, people should not be too complacent about who governs them. State power should also be well protected so that is does not slip into the hands of those will abuse it. But then, it may be argued in the play that it was not the fault of Bagiwa that Queen Lube did not have a child but, we must note that she took the advantage of the impending pestilence as a result of King Omajuwa’s childlessness beyond the limit by subverting the tradition.

It may be emphasized that African leaders, as captured in this play, usually come to power under one excuse or the other. In Nigeria, for
instance, the military used various economic and social indices and the collapse in the social order as reasons for coming to power. People would be happy for a moment, hoping for a better deal from a new government but after some time, the new leadership would begin to subject the people to unimaginable hardship. Therefore, the leaders who had come to power as the people’s saviours or angels would then become the people’s terrors inflicting more pains on them, and destroying, on a large scale, social and political institutions.

CONCLUSION
Fred Agbeyegbe’s position in The King Must Dance Naked can be regarded as the poetics of power clothed in the robes of history and folklore, and as a postcolonial tilt, his handling of the tenets of feminism and cultural dialectics are socially and ideologically relevant to the contemporary world. Though, his theatrics may not readily come to us as a professional but his creativity in the field of theatre practice would, because his thematic thrust is loaded with issues, provoke intellectual and political examination by the masses. As a sociologist, he has shown that the poetics of power, as illustrated in the play, indicates that power can be abused by its custodians.

REFERENCES