Theatre and Democracy in Nigeria

Edited by

Ahmed Yerima, Ph.D
Ayo Akinwale, Ph.D

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The Artist as a Democrat: A Case Study of the Text and Production of Osofisan’s Many Colours Make the Thunder King

SOLA FOSUDO

Introduction

If democracy is defined as a system of government in which the people hold the ruling power, or the control of an organization by its members who take part in the making of decisions, and a democrat as somebody who believes in and supports democracy, then every artist can be described as a democratic being, especially the performing artist. This is so, simply because the art of performance or play production requires the keen collaboration and joint participation of every artist involved in its process, beginning with the playwright down to the cast, crew, management personnel and even the audience. Viewed from a more social and philosophic perspective, the artist is often seen and regarded as a conscious political element, whose product makes pungent remarks and comments about the life of men individually and collectively and also the state of affairs in the country and as such, provides a means of indirect participation in governance and in the making of decisions in that country.

This assertion may appear arguable or unqualifiable but we do have examples in the annals of history where artistes in countries such as Greece, Rome, USA, Germany, and even Nigeria, have been revered and risen to top positions in their countries’ administration primarily through their works. Only recently, some Nigerian artistes including Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala), Chika Okpala (Zebrudaya), Sunday Omobolanle (Aluwe) and others were conferred with national merit honours of Commander of Federal Republic (CFR) and Member of the Order of the Niger (MON). Also, some theatre artists were offered
political appointments as chief executives of parastatals and agencies under the newly created Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The appointees include Professor Femi Osofisan (playwright, theatre director) as General Manager of National Theatre; Mr Duro Oni (theatre designer) as Director, Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) and Dr. Ahmed Yerima (playwright and actor) as Artistic Director of National Troupe of Nigeria amongst others. These appointments provide ample opportunities for Nigerian artists to participate directly in governance in the new democratic dispensation.

In this paper, we intend to examine the extent to which an artist is conscious of, embraces, and practices democratic ideals and principles in his work. We shall make illustrative references to the production of Osofisan’s *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* directed by this writer and produced by Lagos State University for her year 2000 convocation activities. We shall examine the play itself by uncovering its undertones and political relevance to our young but jealously guarded democracy.

Femi Osofisan is one of the committed writers Africa has produced. His works take root not only in the mythologies of the African (especially the Yoruba) people, but also in their politics. This paper shall discuss the ideology of Femi Osofisan as a playwright and as an artist, his commitment towards political change and his stance concerning the principle of democracy and social justice especially with regards to *Many Colours* ...

Finally, the paper shall examine the production process of the play, the mode of relationship and decision-making patterns between all the principal officers of the production from the executive producer who is the Vice-Chancellor of the University, the producer, the executive director, the designers down to the cast and crew of the production all numbering about 200 people.

The play-context analysis

Muyiwa Awodiya captures the picture of Osofisan’s art when he writes:

> Osofisan is one of the country’s leading playwrights, whose work shows a radical revolutionary perspective on contemporary socio-political issues. His plays are revolutionary in that they propose radical political alternatives for the present social order.

Osofisan himself professes that the burning patriotic ideals he and other committed African writers have, is to use the weapon they have, their pen, zeal and eloquence to awaken in the people the song of liberation, to wash away the stigma of inferiority and preach positive sermons.
Our works will be a weapon in the struggle to bring our country to the foremost ranks of modern nations, our songs would call for radical political alternatives.9

A casual reading of Many Colours Make the Thunder King may not exactly present the kind of radical picture laid down in the foregoing notes, but a closer encounter, through a deeper and more reflective reading and more importantly, its visual representations, through performance on the physical stage exhumes the broad but hidden political statements inherent in the text and brings them to the fore. Many Colours ... is no doubt a narrative story-telling with the flashback technique to reconstruct theatrically, the popular legendary tale of the thunder king — Sango.

Even though Osofisan agrees that theatre is principally for entertainment and that the first duty of a playwright is to write a good play, he however submits that our particular social situation at this particular moment dictates the type of theatre that we do — a theatre that should create a kind of awareness that should lead to change in society,10 a theatre that would confront the inadequacies of our society, the injustices and the corruption, the spreading misery of the majority of the populace, our self-destructive violence and aggression, the contaminating vulgarity of the elite, the pervasive hysteria in the tenor of public and private life, our reckless squandermania and the repeated failure of our leadership, the general deterioration in the value we accord to human life11 and so on.

Osofisan’s ideological persuasions are determined by the foregoing distortions which plague our society. Though, he shuns labels such as “socialism”, “radicalism”, “Marxism”, or “revolutionary” because he believes they are mere propaganda, an act of playing to the gallery and dangerous juvenility,2 his critics agree that the overriding philosophy in his plays is essentially revolutionary as it articulates commitment to social transformation. For instance, Niyi Osundare believes that Osofisan’s plays possess tendencies that range from liberal through the radical to the revolutionary.13 Olu Obafemi believes that he experiments with forms and enduring artistry to embody a humanistic social philosophy.14 Biodun Jeyifo places the ideological leaning of Osofisan’s plays on the left,15 while Izevbaye observes that Osofisan takes a revolutionary stance in his writing with a view to making possible a new egalitarian society.6 Adelugba categorizes his works as pro-marxian.17 In all of these, there is a general consensus by the critics of Osofisan that he creates through his writing the awareness for responsible leadership in society, the consequences of misplaced priorities in decision-making, and the results of societal vices such as corruption,
non-accountability and despotism. These themes are clearly portrayed in plays such as *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Who is Afraid of Solarin* and the play under focus in this essay — *Many Colours Make the Thunder King*.

Another important point to note is that though he oftentimes creates what may be termed “central characters” in his plays, he does not promote the idea of sole heroism. This confirms the fact that he ideologically embraces the ideals of democracy, which requires collective participation in the struggle for emancipation and human survival. Some of his plays such as *Morountodun*, *The Chattering and the Song*, *Twingle Twangle: A Twynning Tayle* and even *Many Colours* ... all highlight the need for men to act in concert, to be courageous and determined to confront adversity and attain democratic freedom.

Finally, Awodiya informs us that Osofisan writes himself into his plays and that the self he continually exposes is that of a compassionate man with a revolutionary spirit. His revolutionary counterparts for instance could be found in Akanbi and Biokun in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* and *No More the Wasted Breed* respectively, while his compassionate and humane vision is demonstrated by Old man in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* and even Alagemo and Osun in *Many Colours Make the Thunder King*, etc.

The play itself is about the tall dream nursed and embarked upon inordinately by King Sango son of Oranmiyan who wishes at all cost to surpass his father or indeed “become the father of his father”. To assist Sango in realizing this excessive ambition, Alagemo informs Sango that for his desire to be achieved he would have to marry first, a river, then, wed a forest, and take a mountain for a third wife — a feat no one has ever dared. Driven by a determination to surpass his father, he succeeds in marrying a river and wedding a forest symbolized with Oya and Osun respectively, themselves important deities in Yoruba mythology. However, the human being in Sango and his wives leads them to committing several blunders through a series of intriguing manipulations emanating primarily from jealousy, leading to betrayal and conspiracy and culminating in unmanageable crises which eventually lead to self-destruction and suicide.

The specific points of beginning crises that lead to betrayal in the play could be itemized as follows:

i. Oya’s fury at Sango’s absence from the kingdom (for his usual hunting expedition) without giving her notice and the envy of appointing Gbonka one of his generals as regent in his absence.

ii. Her jealousy towards her husband’s desire to marry a third wife with the help of Alagemo.
iii. Her resentment of Osun who seems to be the favourite wife of King Sango because her womb is fertile and blessed with children while she (Oya) is barren and childless. Hatching the dangerous plan, she soliloquizes:

... And now, I must prepare, when he (her son) comes. There must be no rivals in the home of his father! No, no one must challenge his right to the throne! I love Osun very much but she must admit, she's had more than her share of joy. I cannot have her children competing with my son for the throne. She has to leave, Alagemo too. Orisa be with me!20

The grouses above provide for Oya adequate reasons to embark on a treacherous mission of betraying and implicating Osun and Alagemo and influencing Sango to banish them from the town, and also coaxing Sango to deal ruthlessly with Gbonka and Timi, his (Sango's) loyal generals:

What about your generals? How are we to know they did not instigate the army against you ... How long now have they been agitating for you to return to battle? If the witch cried last night a child is found dead this morning, shall we still search blindly for the cause of the death? You've indulge your generals and they've grown too powerful. Too powerful and too greedy.21

Sango epitomizes and acts as a despot virtually in every situation in the play, a condition that is anathema to the principles of democracy. There is no problem being ambitious or nursing tall dreams in life, it is the way one goes about realizing them that matters.

Sango is selfishly determined to surpass his father. He pursues the desire blindly with a closed mind, reminiscent of the dictators in world history such as Adolf Hitler of Germany, Samuel Doe of Liberia and Sanni Abacha of Nigeria to mention a few. Sango's aggression makes him vulnerable to the caprices of Oya who now takes possession of his soul. As a ruler of people with a constituted council of chiefs, he practically ignores his advisers and takes decisions all alone without recourse to his aides, except Oya's wilful plot.

Democratic governance according to Afolabi Ojo is predicated on the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality. It implies justice, fairness, equity and freedom.22 Democratic governance presupposes peace through the protection of the rights and dignity of the individual. Also, the nature of man's relationship with others at the family, neighbourhood, community, ethnic, national and international levels is fundamental to the evolution of human rights and democratic practice.23 The errors Sango commits which leads to his downfall are all about the foolish decisions and pronouncements he makes which he later regrets.
He confesses:

Now I know how much smaller than my father I am. He could never have done this, to banish his wife unjustly, condemn a faithful servant and then accuse without proof, his own generals. Ah! how much more I need to learn.  

Again, Osofisan makes a very salient political statement on the use and application of power through the character of Alagemo when Osun requests him to change into a resemblance of Sango. In the play, Alagemo represents the chameleon capable of several mutations and possessing the ability to transform into the replica of anything. An excited and curious Osun wants Alagemo to demonstrate before her the rare gift he possesses to change into the semblance of Sango in order to fulfill the plan hatched between her and her “Iyaale” to play a practical joke on the general. Alagemo warns Osun that the power he possesses is not for trifling with, because it is great responsibility for anyone to be able to change and assume someone else’s form. He says:

Imagine such a power in the hands of evil people. Rascals interested only in their own ambitions. Politicians scheming for power. Generals with their eyes on the throne. A rogue, with his eyes on someone else’s wife. Can you imagine the chaos that will fall on the world.

Furthermore, Osofisan hints on one of the important features of democracy, which is collective will or joint responsibility through the ants when they discover Alagemo walled up in the caves. They offer to set him free by digging him a tunnel out of the cave if he passes their seven-riddle test. Alagemo wonders why he has to be tested before being set free and one of the ants replies:

We’re not interested in your politics, you understand? All that interests us is the survival of the earth and that can only come through the solidarity of each and every living thing.

Many Colours... no doubt, treats the central theme of the excessive ambition of Sango but it is also about caution, compassion and humility in the use of power. A very significant lesson for despots could be found in Scene 17, and that is the usual collapse of dictatorship in most cases under unsuspecting circumstances and the crave for power shift by the people. Having defeated Timi for the second time in a fight ordered by Sango between Gbonka and Timi, Gbonka now challenges Sango and demands a total change in the order of things. He charges:

There Sango, I challenge you now, I Gbonka have freed myself of your spells. Bring out the fire in your mouth now and see if I
won't quench it. I Gbonka, I dare you in the open! I declare your reign ended today! You must leave the throne from now on. I give you seven days to surrender your crown or I, Gbonka will come for you. I, Gbonka, I am second to none.28

One thing leads to the other and Sango eventually turns a fugitive, leaving the throne and running away from the palace of Igberi in shame, a condition which is a common feature with renowned world shameless despots such as Idi Amin of Uganda and Mobutu Sese Sekou of Zaire.

The production process
The production process of Many Colours ... is quite interesting and it is one democratic experience, which we will like to share with readers of this essay and theatre practitioners. The play was commissioned by the ceremonial committee on behalf of the Senate of the Lagos State University to commemorate the 11th convocation ceremonies of the university. The drama committee of the English Department on whose shoulder was placed the responsibility of producing a play met and picked the play Many Colours ... from a list of three proposed plays. Also in that meeting, this writer was nominated to direct the play. An open audition was conducted and roles were competed for in a free and fair atmosphere in the spirit of democratic practice. In fact some people who had thought that they would be considered for bigger roles other than what they got were disappointed and dropped out of the production.

Conscious of the collaborative nature of the theatre and the need to democratically carry the university along, especially the staff of the English Department and Faculty of Arts, the released cast and crew list included names of the Head of Department as Executive Director, Dean of the Faculty of Arts as the Producer and the Vice-Chancellor of the University as the Executive Producer. This immediately gave all of them a strong sense of commitment and allegiance to the production. Besides, the entire theatre staff of the department had something to do with and for the production and this really engendered the spirit of collectivism, which is essential for the achievement of success in a play production. At separate times during the course of the production, the Head of Department, Dean of Arts Faculty and the Vice-Chancellor came to visit and address the cast and encourage them to hold the assignment in high esteem.29

Another point, which requires emphasis, is the strategy with which the Director (this writer) worked on the production barely under four weeks of rehearsals. Normally theatre directors are known to be no-nonsense men and are expected to be firm and strict with cast
especially in the educational theatre where a majority of the cast are students and just undergoing training. However, this particular production was handled differently. Even though there was considerable firmness which is essential for control, discipline and order, the overriding philosophy adopted in the directing of the play was that of liberalism all in the spirit of democracy. Although, the play had been blocked on paper weeks before rehearsals started, discussions were held with the actors on stage during blocking, such that rigidity was replaced with fluidity in the relationship between the actors and the director.

Even Bellasco once noted that a director should not be tied up or down to the stage directions prescribed by the playwright. He may find some of the suggested directions useful, but he should not set out to rely on the writer's ideas concerning movements and stage vision of actors. He says:

I seldom follow the stage directions on the printed page either of my own plays or those of other dramatists. I prefer to plan the scenes myself with reference to stage values.  

This method helped the interpretation of the roles in very remarkable ways and most of the actors and actresses who were hitherto theatre novices grew so rapidly in their understanding of the character development and performance stylistics. Apart from the artistic director, the production also had speech and movement coach, characterization coach, music instructors and choreographers who handled those special aspects of the production to achieve the overall unity, which characterized the final product seen on stage.

From random discussions held with members of the audience in all the venues where the play was performed and comments made by professionals after the performances, people enjoyed and savoured the production for different reasons. Some enjoyed it for the well-rendered songs, some for the beautifully choreographed dances, some for the diction and speech power of the actors, some for the dynamic stage pictures and movements, some for the colourful costumes, some for the stage design and visual effects etc. For instance Professor Adelugba in his comments after the performance of the play at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, praised the actors for their “articulate and intelligible speech, and the sheer clarity in the rendition of all the lines and songs in the play.” Dr. Ayo Akinwale commended the troupe after the performance at Afrika Hall, University of Ilorin in the following words:

This is without doubt, a wonderful performance. One in which all the elements of play production are carefully selected and effectively applied. Even though, yours is a young troupe, I must
say your actors and actresses possess abundant talent and skill to reach for greater heights. I must also say that what you have come to do here is a great challenge to us.32

The playwright himself, Professor Femi Osofisan was so impressed that he sent a three-page typewritten note to the director after seeing the performance at Muson Centre on 3 September 2000. In it, he comments thus: “A thrilling performance. I was particularly impressed to find a student’s production to be of such a high standard.”33 Continuing he writes:

I want to praise in particular, the courage of the director in tackling the script and the creativity he brought into it. Many Colours ... is a very complex and demanding script and I am happy to say that Sola Fosudo rose bravely to its demand.34

Concerning the actors, he says:

I also wish to commend the actors. Some of them were absolutely brilliant, and most of them displayed talents beyond the usual average we see on our stage nowadays.35

Conclusion

In conclusion, the point being stressed here is that results are best achieved in the production of a play when the director is diplomatically liberal and allows other artists to make their professional inputs in an environment which promotes collective responsibility. Democracy should not be seen as a term reserved only for politicians in governance, but with everyone whose work requires that he interacts with another and since no man is an island, every human being should embrace the ideals and principles of democratic practice. What is more, if artists really want to live up to their ascribed labels as “watchdogs of society”, “role models”, “social commentators”, “human rights defenders”, etc. then, they have no other option than to be conscious of, embrace and practice the ideals and concepts of democracy in their works.

Notes


5. Presently, Femi Osofisan occupies the seat of General Manager of National Theatre, Duro Oni, the Director of Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization and Ahmed Yerima, Artistic Director of National Troupe of Nigeria with effect from July 2000 (their offices are at the National Theatre Complex, Iganmu, Lagos).

6. See the cast/crew list in the command performance programme brochure of Many Colours Make the Thunder King, Lagos State University’s Convocation 2000 staged at Muson Centre, Onikan on 3 September 2000.


8. Ibid., p. 25.

9. Ibid., p. 25.


12. Ibid., p. 38.


15. Ibid., p. 38.


17. Ibid., p. 39.


20. Ibid., p. 47.


23. Ibid., p. 16.


25. Ibid., p. 48.

26. Ibid., p. 52.

27. Ibid., p. 60.

28. Ibid., p. 77.

29. See back page of the LASU 2000 convocation production programme brochure.

31. Comments made by Professor Dapo Adelugba at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan after the performance of *Many Colours* ... on Monday, October 2 2000.

32. Comments made by Dr. Ayo Akinwale at the Afrika Hall, University of Ilorin after the performance of *Many Colours* ... on Wednesday, 4 October 2000.

33. Memo to Sola Fosudo from Professor Femi Osofisan with comments on the performance of *Many Colours* ... at Muson Centre on Sunday 3 September 2000, p. 1.
