

TOWARDS THE MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT IN
PRESENT-DAY NIGERIA: THE FUNCTION OF POETRY

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between poetry (literature, generally) and human society with respect to conflict management and/or resolution. It establishes that literature has a vital role to play in the management and resolution of conflict in human society. The paper demonstrates that poets have cautioned over the years about vices and problems and their possible consequences, but that often, people do not heed the warnings and that is the reason there are too many crises in Nigeria today. The paper concludes that it is important that the voices of poets be listened to so as to avoid the conflagrations of the past and present in the future beginning from now.

Introduction:

Conflict is a necessity for human society. It brings out the best in mankind. This is desirable and good. But when it leads to the destruction of human society, its usefulness becomes doubtful. All over the world, conflict abounds and it could be a catalyst to development. But in this "modern" era it has, as the concept itself generally suggests, become a crisis-breeding phenomenon. Nigeria has had and is still having an ample dosage of this pill from the independence era.

From the dawn of creation, or broadly speaking from the beginning of time and man, conflict has been a constant. With this usually comes the infringement on the rights of individuals, communities and nations; or with the infringements on the rights of others comes conflict. The relationship between both (conflict and violation of human rights) .is like that

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between the egg and the chicken or the baby and the man/woman: which comes first?

It is in attempts at resolving these conflicts that nations and other human organisations have developed constitutions whose cardinal and total beings are focused on the establishment of and the maintenance of human rights. Humans in this context extend beyond individual human beings through communities to nations. After all, nations and states are addressed almost always in the feminine gender term "her/she".

Conflict could be viewed from the personal, community, state, nation, class, etc dimensions. One thing remains clear, that in its negative disposition, it is the source of all the problems of mankind. Delia Thompson (1998) has defined conflict as "a state of opposition or hostility, a fight or struggle". These conditions outlined could be in the form of verbal conflict. It could involve the fist, some crude war instruments, guns, bombs, missiles to the more insensitive devastating nukes and drones and to the psychological machines. One thing is common: the destruction and/or dehumanisation of mankind. This has been found to be very prominent in Nigeria.

Found to have ignited this fire, and fuelled it beyond proportion, is the human nature of self-centeredness and greed, which have been accentuated by the excessive drive of capitalism. This in turn has given rise to bad governance and rulership as against development which it was expected to generate. And these have generated restiveness on the African continent and as such, and because of its nature of interaction with human society, African literature has produced a myriad of works all bothering on conflict. This is the situation which Kcguuro Macharia (2007) has described thus: "...the [African] literature reflects on social, political and cultural changes of a restless continent" [emphasis added]. This connotes conflict. In the same vein, Gbemisola Adeoti (2005) surmised that Ayi-Kwei Armah philosophically reflects "on 'the trouble with Africa' as it relates to governance and development" (1}. Let us borrow this statement and apply it to Nigeria, and state that the trouble with Nigeria, which of course is a part of Africa, as it relates to governance and peace is that we do not learn from experience; neither do we look forward to or at other nations or regions. We wallow in darkness and in our blindness. Neither is our physical serving us nor our inner lights guiding us. So we constantly and perpetually relapse into the ambit of negative conflict. This has the elements of neurotic conflict which according to Karen Homey (2008) "cannot be resolved by rational decision" and so mayhem becomes the option.

Talking about governance, one recalls that Nigeria is an independent nation. But the question here is "how independent is Nigeria?" She was proclaimed an independent nation. But, according to Adeoti (2005), "unfortunately, political independence has not resulted in the much desired freedom and transformation. The elites who took over power from the colonialists, rather than dismantling colonial structure of social injustice and oppression merely preserved them for opportunistic end ..." (3-4). Consequent upon this and among other problems, ethno-religious violence, kidnapping, vandalising of oil pipelines, electoral fraud, armed robbery, human right abuses have become the order of the day. These form parts of denial of fundamental human rights as stipulated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in a way. Apart from being the results of bad governance and neglect of the feelings of "other people," it is capable of and has often started other rounds of conflict. Uju Ughamadu (2009) has also listed issues which she considered cardinal to any discussion on peace and conflict situation. Ken Nwuba (2007) in his discussion on Political Terrorism also shares the same views. And we make bold to apply them here. They are political terrorism, war and conflict. The other senses of these are assassination (political or otherwise), murder, kidnap, extra-judicial killing, coup d'etat, riot, killings (political or religious, etc), tribal clashes and so on. Let us add that bad leadership is one of the causes of conflict in a state. Therefore, just as the populace needs reorientation so as to do the right thing and avoid crisis, so also the leaders must be reoriented to govern well as well as live morally upright to ensure that their personal lives reflect the principle of good citizenship.

There is therefore, a need for reorientation which literature offers. This is where the sociological/utilitarian function of literature comes in. The kind of role which, such scholars as Jean-Paul Sartre, Wole Soyinka, Taban Lo Lyong, Ngugi Wa

Thiongo and L.O. Bamidele, have associated to literature.

We are of the opinion that Nigerians of the present era are aware that we have failed our founding fathers who toiled that Nigeria may survive through colonial emancipation to being salvaged from political disintegration. Today, all forms of wars are raging on.

Literature is about man and his existence. This requires no reiteration. But that it could be employed in conflict resolution needs emphasis. This will make better meaning if one realises as Bamidele (2000) does when he says, "literature in its literariness is incomplete method of studying literature without a consideration of the social value and context of text" (1). Attention to the social value of a text means that the didactic implication of the piece of literature must be held in top priority. The application of "the social value and context of text" will also yield greater meaning from the work. Bamidele, cited earlier, fully subscribes to the Marxist ideology in literature. He says that, "... writing is not merely a personal venture; it is a social act" (33). Another scholar, Arnold Kettle (1952) "... sees the novel not simply conveying life but revealing something about life and the pattern of life" (2). The implication of this is that the wrongs in society, in addition to the rights, are exposed with a view to promoting the good. Here, literature is seen interacting with history. This implies also that the respect of the fundamental human rights of individuals could be fostered by means of literature, especially as the attainment of human rights could perform as a means to an end.

The didactic function of literature could be employed at resolving these issues. We wish to aver here that our idea of literature in this light covers both the written and the oral. Let us also agree with Osundare (2007) that the writer must write "...to change the world..." (30). It is good that we realise this. But this does not mean that we must continue realising without action. However, let us again add that realisation is a step towards redirection. All we need is to take further steps at influencing others. This is where literature comes in.

A look at literary works generally will reveal that it proffers preventive solutions. It performs preventive roles in that it, according to Ayo Kehinde (2009), "... advises against conflicts and all their sources" (129). Literature promulgates and prophesizes to forestall evil. Christopher Okigbo in his "Thunder Poems" attempted this, although his warnings were regrettably ignored. This was also a violation of Omotosho's (2006) admonition that the moral function of literature must be employed for peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution and management.

The theoretical frame work is the Marxist cum sociological. As such, theorists and literary giants as Jean-Paul Sartre, Wole Soyinka, Taban Lo Lyong, Ngugi Wa Thiongo and L.O. Bamidele come under focus, and their postulations are adopted. The works to be studied in this paper include a selection from J.P. Clark's A Decade of Tongues," Christopher Okigbo's "The Passage," Ochia Ofeimun's "for Christopher Okigbo," a selection from Esiaba Irobi's Inflorescence and Birago Diop's "Vanity". The cardinal focus of this paper is the demonstration that literature could and should be employed in

the management and resolution of conflict in the body polity called Nigeria.

Poetry in the Management and Resolution of Conflict:

Among the poets who have made comments and warned about conflict is J. P. Clark. In a section of his A Decade of Tongue (1982) we hear him decry the war and conflagration that engulfed Nigeria between 1966 and 1970. In one of the poems, "The Casualties," he defines and explains, through elimination, those who constitute the casualties of the war. According to him, they are not only those who lost persons, property, offices, nor those who are dead. Neither are those who started the war (the leaders on both sides of the war) nor "...the emissaries of rift" who fanned the ember of the war into blazing flame. Not even those who are dead were the only casualties. Clark unequivocally declares, "we are all casualties." A situation as gory as that presented by Clark in this poem is enough to bar any right thinking person from such action or inaction capable of precipitating armed conflict. As if his definition and explanation are not enough warnings, and as a typical scholar, he in "Skulls and Cups" gives a list of some real persons who lost their lives in the clash. These are "Chris" [Christopher Okigbo, a poet-soldier who died a Major in the war], "Sam" [Sam Agbam, a diplomat] and "Emman" [Major Emmanuel I feajuma, the leader of the Army revolt of 15 January, 1966). These are among the numerous Nigerians and foreigners whose lives especially, and voices as drums were "silenced in mid-throb," as Odia Ofeimun mourns in "for Christopher Okigbo"-. By drawing attention to these flurries of deaths and destruction Clark has contributed his quota towards changing the Nigerian life pattern for good.

In "Epilogue to Casualties" Clark laments the state of ruins that greeted him when he visited the eastern part of Nigeria four years after the war. This is a time when it was deemed that reconstruction work was in progress:

The ruin that greeted me on the road
Right from Milliken Hill to the amputated
Giant astride the River Niger....

This succeeds in evoking a "...vision of the unnatural / Disaster that is the war". Then Clark reels off visage of "skeleton" and "wreck" that spans the way from Qnitsha through Ihiala, Ulli, Umuahia, Owerri to Aba.

To J P. Clark this holocaust was as a result of injustice, lies, deceit and hatred. Let us add tribalism, nepotism, mediocrity and ultimately, corruption to the list that he presents in "Seasons of Omens". "The five Hunters" presented in the poem are the plotters of the 1966 coup that ousted the government of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and ushered in the first military government in Nigeria. Among the issues that caused the mayhem are riots in the North and West of the country, falsification of population figures in terms of people and towns, arson, corruption, electoral malpractices, as captured in the expression, "when women grew heavy with ballot papers delivering the house entire to adulterers" and such other vices as are plaguing us today. The message therefore is that we should learn from the past and redirect our steps to avoid the

conflagration that enveloped Nigeria for more than thirty months between 1966 and 1970.

Among those who died in the war is, as stated earlier, Christopher Okigbo (Clark's "weaver Bird" in "Death of Weaverbird"). He, a poet, went into the war. Being a man of sensibility, he ought to have known better. Perhaps he was driven by the force of the spirit, being a creature from the depth of "Idoto". As a priest-prophet he warned about the war. In his "The Passage" he says:

Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom,
foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of.
Rainbow on the far side, arched like boa bent to kill,
foreshadow the rain that is dreamed of.

Shortly after these lines he adds, "Rain and sun in single combat; / on one leg standing". This, is an unfortunate situation. It is also a precarious one. So we plunge into the "festivity in black" as we find ourselves "at crossroads":

Silent faces at crossroads:
festivity in black...
Face of black like long black
Column of ants,
behind the tower,
into the hot garden
where all roads meet:
festivityinblack...

This evoked a picture of those fleeing from war and mourning and in an utter state of confusion "crossroads". In his exasperation, he as a priest prays, "O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong, / hear us at the crossroads at the great hinges".

Okigbo has also evoked much poetry. One of such is "For Christopher Okigbo" by Odia Ofeimun. The poet laments the death of a fellow poet: " the drum is silenced in mid-throb;/ the flute is flung away", and so the ear must "... strain to master the malediction / of the thunder". The message is lost; the messenger is gone. So Okigbo, the priest,, the prophet and messenger is claimed by the thunder he foretold. Today, we must learn to take the message of the poet to heart and heed his warnings so that we do not like Chris, Sam, Emma, Ahmadu Bello, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, S. L. Akintola, F.S.. Okotie-Eboh, Zak Maimalari, Ademulegun, Shodeinde, Pam, Lagema, Unegbe and all other fallen Nigerians perish in a possible fire.

This warning has continued till date. Esiaba Irobi (1989) in his *Inflorescence* has carried on the message. In "Cinna the poet", a title borrowed from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1983), Esiaba presents the spate of violence that could and would erupt should the raging corruption, maltreatment and insensitivity continue. The last stanza reads:

I have rehearsed my death

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like a one-act play,
A comedy of four scenes.

The curtain rises:

Scene one: The loss of my job.

Scene two: The possession of a gun.

Scene three: Your death.

Scene four: My death..

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The curtain falls, (sic)

What could be more premonitious than this? The voice promises not only death to the oppressor but also adds suicide. This underscores the level of frustration and irritation.

Esiaba maintains this war-like stance in "Handgrenades". The poem is replete with images of war and war equipment: "I sharpened my smiles into shrapnels / On the jagged edges of my mind... /To slash the heads of heady Heads of State". This again has shown that people will always be prepared to war at any time they feel their lives and rights tempered with or infringed upon. He calls himself "a soldier of diction" (poet) and states that "poetry is an open door"; and in the last two stanzas declares.

But I, I Esiaba, I kicked the door open
Because I was on the other side. And
Poetry is this child crying in my hands
Crying only as a child would cry, shovelling
Everything into its starving mouth, including
Bread, ballots, bullets, bayonets and blood.

This is enough warning for us. It is enough cautioning for us to shun every form of human right abuse, corruption, injustice, deceit, tribalism and their likes. It is enough, so that we do not, like in Birago Diop's "Vanity" get laughed at when we "tell", "cry" and/or "clamour" with our "sad complaining voices... of our torments". Let us reiterate here that there is a dangerous trend in Nigeria: the tendency to oedipally identify with ethnic affinities rather than the national. This is understandable. But there must be a re-orientation among the populace to create a change of attitude, if the negative conflict is to be averted, and peaceful co-existence entrenched.

Conclusion:

Efforts have been made to x-ray the possible functions of literature (poetry especially). It has been found that one of the numerous functions of poetry is that of engendering peace by managing and resolving conflict. So far in this paper, it has been demonstrated among other things that poetry and poets can foretell and warn of a possible danger and by this forestall it. It is therefore important that their voices be listened to so as to avoid the conflagrations of the past and present in the future

beginning from now.

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