

LITERATURE AS A VIABLE WEAPON OF MANAGING AND RESOLVING ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL OF SUNNIE ODODO'S HARD CHOICE

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Abstract

Ethnic conflict has been a perennial and a very daunting task to the entire nation. This is because of the enormous degree of the proliferation of ethnic and separatist groups across the country over the years. Consequently, the nation's peaceful co-existence is under a serious threat with the continuous unabated killings across the nation. Obviously, if this is not properly checked and managed it may further deepen the mutual suspicion and hatred among various ethnic groups in the country. The issue is how can the nation's present ethnic conflicts be addressed given the fact that various steps taken by the government to manage this menace has not yielded the much expected results? This paper seeks to establish that Nigeria's ethnic conflicts can be effectively managed and resolved through the moral content of her literature as it fosters tolerance and dialogue among warring factions. It is against this background that this paper explicates conflict management and resolution in Ododo's *Hard Choice*. It concludes that managing and resolving Nigeria's ethnic a conflict requires a continuous use of the moral imperatives in literature to create an enabling environment where the citizenship will be upheld above ethnic loyalties. The paper also recommends that with truthful, patriotic leaders who have the political will and the ability the Nigerian unabated ethnic conflict would be efficiently managed and permanently resolved.

Key words: Literature, Ethnic-conflict, Dialogue, Tolerance, Conflict-Management, Resolution,

Introduction

The most disheartening thing in recent time is the consistent significant decline in Nigeria's corporate and peaceful coexistence because of the proliferation of ethnic and secessionists groups across the country. The nation has experience numerous horrific cases of ethnic violence from the pogrom in the run up to the 1967 civil war right up to the present day. Presently, the nation is inundated with multifarious socio-political-issues resulting to violent conflicts such that her television, radio, social-media and pages of virtually all Nigerian newspapers are consistently preoccupied with only horrifying news of unending, unabated daily killings across the nation. Sadly, these ugly scenes seem to have defiled many solutions. It is in view of this, Osofisan (2011) declares that:

As a citizen and as a literary man, I am concerned that for more than six decades now, since independence, anomy has been the routine condition of our normal life. We wake from bed each day in febrile anxiety, unsure of our neighbours and of our governments, unsure even of the next sundown. Senseless violence, unleashed with

venomous and homicidal fury by one set of citizens upon another set of nationals, has become a banal cliché of journalistic reportage on account of its incredible frequency. Men, women and children fleeing in object error, pursued by hordes of hysterical youths, mostly male, welding cudgels and matches and other lethal weapons, chanting maniacal refrains, hacking down their fellow compatriots without compunction like vermin – you know all about this internal scenario; you have lived it all your lives.

This depicts the painful realities of the Nigeria nation today. Presently, the nation's unity in diversity has been highly polarized and politicized such that people no longer believe in one another as well as being easily separated on trivial matters. Consequently, the country is constantly inundated with bewildering amalgam of violence, insecurity issues, state militarization, ethnic militarization and communal and ethnic wars. According to Mbachaga (2010); "Nigeria as a nation has witnessed a number of insecurity problems that strongly constitute threats to the survival and sustenance of its democratic political system ..." Donli (2015), lend credence to this fact when she avers that:

There is no time that peace and security the world over have come under a serious threat than now. In Nigeria, people have been facing difficult and turbulent times since 1980s with record of various forms of conflicts which threatens the country's peace and security. From 1999 to date conflict have claimed and displaced over 80,000 persons. ... For five years now, more than twelve thousand (12,000) have been killed while thousands are maimed and injured because of the insurgency with more than two million Internally Displaced Persons. (IDPs)

This to some extent shows that what used to bind the Nigerian society together as a nation is on the wane as the country has been turned to a theatre of violent conflicts. Consequently, the Global Peace Index (GPI) 2018 reports ranked the country as; "the 15th most dangerous country in the world and the most consistent unsecured country in the West African region..." This submission by GPI report is evident in the recent steady multitude of mindless killings across the nation is as a result of the ethnic prejudice, rivalries and mutual distrust among the ethno-religious and political groups in Nigeria.

The unabated carnage presently being experienced in Nigeria is as a result of unresolved deep seated hatred and mutual distrust among ethnic groups across the nation. A situation Wole Soyinka aptly refers to; "as a recurrent cycle of human stupidity. There is no doubt that, if adequate measures are not taken to manage and resolve the present tension breeding animosity among different ethnic groups the unity and little peace the country enjoyed after the civil war could soon be jeopardized. This is ultimately why the moral contents in literature remain the popular, effective and viable alternative for managing and resolving any kind of conflict. According to Keyinde (2009):

In a situation so fraught with conflicts as Nigeria, literature achieves a peculiar significance and importance. The effort of Nigerian writers in searching for how to effectively manage and amicably resolve conflicts should be commended. However, literature cannot affirm because of the values are too much in a state of flux; it therefore, becomes a form of protest against conflicts.

Most Nigerian writers' works has been influenced by the inefficiency of the steps taken by successive administration to manage the nation's ethnic conflicts. According to Auwal (2010), "Every plural society is bound to experience one form of conflict or another but what makes an ideal polity is the extent to which conflicting interests are constructively managed." It is against

this backdrop that this paper explores Ododo's *Hard Choice* as a viable Weapon of managing and resolving ethnic conflict in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Conflict connotes a state and situation in which people, groups, countries, communities or organizations are involved in a serious disagreement which with grave contention or controversy may snowball into prolonged fighting, confrontation, belligerency and hostility. This explains the inextricability of literature and conflict as literature cannot be devoid from human and societal conflicts. Francis (2006) sees it; "as central to human sociological setup." To Imobighe (2003), "conflict represents a condition of disharmony within an interaction process usually as a result of a clash of interest between the parties involved in some form of relationship." Such clash of interest could occur because either they are pursuing incompatible goals or they are using incompatible means to pursue their chosen goals. For Onu (2009); "conflict is a manifestation of hostile attitude in the face of conflicting interests between individuals, states or groups.

According to Akpuru-Aja (2009); "conflict may be propelled by feelings of marginalization, exclusion and mutual suspicion." To Otiye (1999), "Humanity conflict arises from the pursuit of divergent interests, goal and aspirations by individuals or groups in defined social and physical environments." Rahim (2002) also identifies causes of conflicts as:

Conflict may occur when a party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her need or interest; a party holds behavioural preferences, with satisfaction of which is incompatible with another person's implementation of his or her preferences; a party wants some mutually desirable resource that is in short supply, such that the wants of all parties involved may not be satisfied fully; a party possesses attitudes, values, skills, and goals held by the other(s); two parties have partially exclusive behavioural preferences regarding their joint actions who two parties are independent in the performance of functions or activities.

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) Ethnic is relating to a particular race, nation or tribe and their customs and traditions." It is someone who comes from a group of people who are different race; religion etc. In Africa ethnicity is use as very powerful tool for political campaigns and mobilization for ascending to all levels of political power. Nnoli (1989) avers that; "... Ethnic conflict usually occurs under the condition of inter-ethnic competition for the scarce valuable resources particularly in a society where inequality is accepted as a natural and wealth is greatly esteemed."

From the forgoing, it obvious that if a group feels shortchanged it automatically becomes a rivalry group which if not properly checked result to a violent conflict between them as witnessed in recent times. It is in view of this, that Mazrui (1980), "In black Africa, ethnicity is more a serious line of cleavage than religion. Africans are far more likely to kill each other because they belong to different ethnic groups than religion."

Conflict management in this study encompasses all activities and processes involved in the long term management of intractable ethnic conflicts. Mayer (2012) sees it as "a term used to refer to many ways and means by which people handle grievances that result to conflict while Akpuru-Aja (2009) refers to it as "the use of open and clear dialogue to assist opponents or parties not only to have agreements against hostile images or actions, but compliance to agreed resolution and strategies." Indeed, conflict management is the most effective when it addresses both the

disputant's difference in interests and their divergent and mutually hostile interpretations.(Wallenten,2007).

Conflict resolution on the other hand is essentially aimed at intervention to resolve the causes of conflict. Conflict resolution provides an opportunity to interact or dialogue with the parties concerned with the hope of reducing the scope and intensity as seen in literary works. It promotes consensus- building, social bridge reconstructions and the enactment of order in the society. The healing function of conflict resolution in the society cannot be taken for granted. According to Kotze (2000); "Conflict management in general and conflict resolution in particular, are almost entirely determined by our understanding of the composition of a conflict and not only by symptom." This is the very essence of literature in the society as it exposes the root causes of conflict and prescribes the standards of managing and resolving any kind of human conflicts that may lead to violence.

The Significance of Literature in Conflict Management and Resolution

Literature (drama, prose or poetry) is a recreation of history. So, it cannot be divorced from conflict. It records events, happenings and every human situation that constitutes threats to societal peace. Literature and conflict are inextricably linked as it reflects the exigent of socio-political ills that affect the society. According to Ayo (2009):

Giving inefficiency of the various means of resolving and managing, the Nigerian writers have considered the possibility of using literature as a viable weapon to manage and resolve conflict across the nation. In fact, ethnic, religious and gender conflicts are found sharply crystallized in the works of selected Nigerian writers." This is reflected in many contemporary Nigerian.

To Osaghae (2000), "while some writers are particularly interested in explaining the deterioration of conflict situations in Africa, others have focused on the thematization of management of conflict." In looking at the significance of literature in conflict management and resolution, Kehinde (2009) buttresses that:

For literature to be ultimately relevant to human condition, it must have moral content that makes conflict management, resolution and transitional justice practically possible. This utilitarian value of literature is very important now that the country's value system and peaceful co-existence have been traduced by a frightening near-collective obsession with expediency, violence and the ephemeral.

Obi (2006) also argues that; "being an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings and aspect of society such as politics, religion, social conflicts, class struggle and human conditions, literature can be a viable tool to manage and resolve conflicts."

Conflicts as the Writers' Moral Burden

According to Onwumere and Ugorgi (2017):

Literary artists take it as a duty to sensitize the people on the reality of conflict in human society, through their artistic works- drama, prose and poetry, they criticize the conflict as well as present the inevitable consequences of such conflict; and finally, proffer objective strategies to managing and resolving it and subsequent peaceful coexistence.

In a situation where a society is fraught with conflicts and the efforts to resolve the conflicts are not yielding the expected result, the next viable alternative is the literary artist. This is because the traditional role of African artist is to use his works to condemn conflict and its perpetrators. As Ezeaku (2000) would say; “The literary artists present the pleasant and unpleasant sides of life, realities and the unrealities of life. It is the duty of literature to observe and to comment; to open individuals and their society for observation and understanding.

It is imperative to note that conflict management and resolution are integral to literary artists. Keyinde (2009) affirms this when he asserts that: “Nigerian writers write against the perpetrators of conflicts in their societies; they are in constant disagreement with the conflicts in their milieu ... even some of them have at one time or the other mediated in the conflicts in their nation at their own peril.” It is in view of this that Omotosho (2007) also asserts that; “if any meaningful progress would be made in Nigeria, the moral content of literature must be applied for conflict management and resolution.” This is because the writer’s moral burden is the creation of literary works that can resolve individual and societal conflicts. As Binebai (2016) rightly observes; “the resolution of conflict of ethnic differences and religious intolerance in Nigerian literature dictates writer’s direction of how conflicts should be handled.”

To Nigerian literary writers, there would be no cause envisaging the resolution of the present social and political tension in the country without cautioning the perpetrators. It is in view of this that, Osofisan (2011) cautions that; “the politicians should pause a bit and think of the nation itself, its survival, its health and its stability, otherwise, there will be no country to lord their victories over after the ruins of violent politicking.”

Causes of Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria Today

Conflict is the characteristic of any given human interdependence. In Nigeria ethnic conflict is the most reoccurring issues across the country. According to Tsaku and Embu (2015); “...ethnic conflict has been in the heart of Nigeria’s development problems and has permeated the Nigerian landscape since the colonial period up till the present time and there seem to be no solution insight...” In Nigeria, ethnic violence could be caused by the following pervasive socio-political issues such as; violation of human rights, proliferation of ethnic groups, polarization, politicization, deep false-hood, ignorance, joblessness, injustice, bad leadership, unequal distribution of resources, intolerance, cultural prejudice, boundary disagreement, ethno-religious hostilities, quest for liberation, a history of fear and animosity etc.

Karim (2012); declares that; “In Nigeria, conflicts manifest in forms of religious, ethnic, political and economic issues.” This is a true reflection of Nigeria nation as ethnic loyalty is placed above the state. As Justice Oputa (2005) also puts it; “we don’t have Nigerians but tribalists.” Salawu (2010), “...the character of the Nigerian state is responsible for the country’s deepening unabated violent conflict. The plural nature originates a constant feeling of distrust between the component units and the fear of one group dominating another.”

Onu (2009) also gives the causes of conflict in Nigeria as; “environmental deterioration, population growth, resource scarcity and competition, the colonial or cold war legacy, breakdown of values and tradition, poverty, the marginalization of the pastoralists and ethnicity...” For Mbachaga (2012), “Ethnic, religious, political disagreement and national resources are issues that affect our nation because the recent social unrest in various parts of Nigeria are linked to them.” Karim (2012) also assert that “in a plural state like Nigeria, conflicts have been more associated with social, communal, religious or ethnic issues rather than any other factor. Even political conflicts are usually explained in terms of either religious or ethnic differences.”

Apparently, this is because ethnicity and religion have been turned to tools for political ascendancy in Nigeria.

The above and other unresolved cases of imbalances in the system are responsible for Nigeria's current turmoil which is becoming the moral burden the Nigerian contemporary writers are confronted with, since they cannot stand aloof and watched their society destroyed by conflicts. It is in view of this, Ngugi (1969) admonishes that; "it is not enough for the African artist standing aloof to view society and highlight its weaknesses. He must try to go beyond this, to seek out the sources, the causes and the trends." This is exactly what Ododo's *Hard Choice* subtly explicates.

Textual Analysis

Ododo's *Hard Choice* espouses the existentiality of man as conflict is inevitable. It is a contemporary drama that dwells on the problem of inter-ethnic rivalries acrimony and disunity that has ultimately snowballed into violent conflicts in the country today. Ododo seeing ethnicity as one of the nation's major cause of ethnic violence uses his play to condemn in entirety the cause of ethnic violence and its perpetrators. This is with a view of how inter-tribal conflicts can be managed and resolved among different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Binebai (2016): explicitly recognizes this when he avers that:

In *Hard Choice*, Ododo creates a bold picture of national consciousness. In a plural setting and sermonizes that intolerance, ethnocentrism, or ethnic selfishness, individual geocentricism or greed be sacrificed for the emergence of a new and better multicultural society where peace and justice shall reign.

The main thrust of Ododo's play is inter-tribal marriage between a Yoruba man from Igedu Kingdom and an Igbo princess from Empiri Kingdom. Eze of Empiri land intends to marry out his princess to a Yoruba prince -Prince Azingae. This is to strengthen friendship ties between the two kingdoms but some chiefs in Igedu Kingdom do not welcome this idea as a result of the cultural and tribal differences.

In the play Eze Okiakoh is the archetype of an honest and patriotic leader that fosters national peace and unity through inter-ethnic ties. As such, he displays the spirit of inter-ethnic tolerance and values in order to discourage ethnic prejudice, rivalries and segregation in Nigeria. Eze Okiakoh averts the eminent war between the two communities by yielding to the demand of the Ogunguru shrine. In the play, despite the chiefs' pressure, and vehement resistance to his daughter's marriage, he accepts it to affirm Ododo's vision for a unity in diversity in Nigeria. A dream of Nigeria in which a citizen could live, work and marry in a place of his /her choice and pursue legitimate goal open to his fellow countrymen. As Achebe (1983) would aptly put it; "A Nigeria in which an Easterner might aspire to be premier in the west and a Northerner become Mayor of Enugu." Thus Eze Okiakoh declares that:

Love that binds and unites shall be your companion always. The freshness and purity of the morning dew shall be the sustaining tonic of this new home. The sweet-soothing spirit of our ancestors will forever abide by you two. God Himself shall be your guide. Like the butterfly and flower, so shall the fragrance of your romance attract peace to our different kingdoms? And there shall be no regret coming together. So shall it be. (12)

In response, Chief Ubanga: avers that:

The Eze I'm sorry for all of these. Our action too was precipitated for the common good of our people. Even though you overruled my position, I still maintain that the betrothal of the Princess to Prince Oki would indirectly throw our kingdom into slavery (37)

The above reveals Ododo's idea of 'dialogue' between the warring factions in order to manage and resolve any kind of conflict in a multi-ethnic society. This also shows his appeal for the love for one another in spite of the cultural and ethnocentric prejudice that magnifies our differences. He would rather want Nigerians to appreciate the strength and opportunities that abound in our unity in diversity than to be divided. To the Igbo people in the play losing the throne of Emepiri kingdom to the Yoruba Kingdom of Igedu is an abomination and would lead to their marginalization. In fact, this is the painful reality on ground, as mutual suspicion and intolerance among ethnic groups are what breed animosity and tension across the nation. Chief Ubanga in the play reveals:

I'm not persuaded your highness. The gods and God will never approve that an Igedu Prince becomes the king of Emepiri kingdom. Unfortunately, you're the only one who thinks otherwise just to keep faith with some unguided promise made behind your council of chiefs. This is a state affair and not a domestic one. Besides, it wasn't my idea. Yes, we planned a protest, but abducting the crown wasn't part of the plan (37-38).

Eze Okiakoh in response says: If I may ask, whose idea? (38)

This is the pertinent question in the play that Ododo wants Nigerians to meditate upon as people with common destiny in order to understand the forces assiduously working against our peaceful coexistence today. To him until we make hard choices of accepting our differences and appreciating one another, the peace and unity we seek will continue to elude us. In the play, Eze Okiakoh's acceptance and clamour for inter-ethnic marriage in the play affirms Ododo's endorsement of a sustainable peace and unity in Nigeria through inter-ethnic marriage. For a plural nation like Nigeria to move forward, it needs the character of Princess Azingae as she portends a sacrifice for a peaceful and united Nigeria. She displays the character of a patriot as she rubbishes the idea of ethnic prejudice to carry the burdens to the gods of Emepiri kingdom in order to avert the war between the two communities to save lives. When Prince Oki advises her to elope, she says;

It's too late Prince Oki. Can we really escape from our shadows? No. The life of our father, the king of Igedu kingdom, and that of the entire people of Emepiri kingdom are enmeshed in this atmosphere. It would only take a life, to save them and you want me to walk away? (46-48)

In response, Prince Oki asks further: what then happens to me? She responds that:

Please don't be selfish. In due season, the sun and the moon shall fuse together for celestial edification. My love, my heart yearns for a new world devoid of acrimony and rancour amongst kingdoms. As I paint that world with my blood, you stay to animate it for all to enjoy... Kiss my feet and bid me farewell... (47)

This is precisely what Ododo intends to achieve in the play. According to Mbachaga (2012): The princess' death seals her vision for peace and unity between the two kingdoms by decorating Prince Oki with her royal coral beads fulfilling two things in her death-creating peace and breaking new grounds by making the

prince the next King of Empiri Kingdom what her mother and chief Ubanga fought against.

The unity between the two Kingdoms which is the vision shared by the two lovers in the play is what Ododo wants to encourage as he desires to have a society that is devoid of acrimony and rancour through patriots like the princess and indeed a very peaceful and united society that resolves her conflict amicably. Princess Azingae's tragic and sacrificial death in the play marks the beginning of the death of mutual suspicion and the fear of marginalization among cultural and ethnic groups in Nigeria. Binebai, (2016) buttresses that:

Princess Azingae decoration of Prince Oki with her coral beads reaffirm the vision both share. It is the vision to unite two kingdoms so that a new world may sprout. In Ododo's proverbial words, spoken by Princess Azingae that; in death life is found and in life our dreams are secured, creates deep impression of his sense of nationalism in which sacrifices are made for good things to happen.

Conclusion

No doubt, conflict resolution in a plural society like Nigeria can be quite complex principally because of cultural and ethnic diverse situation in the country. But Ododo in his bid to reconcile the conflicting parties uses his literary ingenuity to unite the two opposing kingdoms in a well harmonized song of victory over cultural and ethnic prejudice. Obviously, without truthful and patriotic leaders like Eze Okiakoh in Ododo's *Hard Choice* Nigerians will continue to be seriously prejudiced against each other which could easily result to ethnic violence. The fact is, we cannot continue to be hysterical about the current national issues breeding tension across the country because as Clark puts; "We are all casualties" as we cannot realize our potentials without a sustainable peace in the country. Hence Achebe (1983) admonishes that in our bids to manage and resolve ethnic conflicts; "we need to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us, else the peace we seek will continue to elude us."

Recommendations

In view of the forgoing, the study recommends the following:

- i. As a matter of necessity, what we need now in Nigeria is truthful and patriotic leaders with massive re-orientation that will shape and prepare us to look at ourselves as "Nigerians" whose loyalties absolutely lie with the Nigerian state, not a particular section or religion as revealed in the play.
- ii. The government needs to be decisive on issues of ethnic conflicts across the nation and use the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to enlighten Nigerians and encourage inter-ethnic and inter-tribal marriages as this will go a long way in strengthening cultural and ethnic ties among Nigerians and prevent frequent conflicts as seen today. .
- iii. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) needs to encourage peace campaign on social media on a daily basis and organize inter-cultural festivals in order to make people appreciate other people's culture as seen between the Igedu and the Empiri Kingdoms in the play.
- iv. Peace initiative is a collective effort; therefore the political and traditional leaders must as a matter of urgency use all available means and sincerely create an enabling environment where citizenry will be upheld above ethnic loyalties as seen at the end of the Ododo's *Hard Choice*.

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