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COMMUNICATING CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH DRAMATIC LITERATURE: EXPERIMENTING WITH SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

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Abstract

Civic responsibility remains a key prerequisite to good democracy and there is no doubt that the Nigerian government is aware of this fact. Consequently, efforts have been made by the government in communicating civic responsibility especially to the youth since they represent a large percent of the Nigerian population. The introduction of civic education to capture the youth and the organizing of seminars/workshop on civic responsibility and civic engagement especially for those occupying public and political positions is exemplary in this regard. Despite these efforts, it is ironic that Nigeria still rank high among world democratic countries with indicators of poor civic engagement cum sense of civic responsibility. Hence there is a need to strengthen the communication of civic responsibility and the transference of civic knowledge for national development. It is against this backdrop that this paper advanced dramatic literature as a tool for communicating civic responsibility and uses Soyinka's 'Death and King's Horseman' to accentuate the importance of dramatic literature in this endeavour. The paper concludes that communicating civic responsibility remains a necessity in maintaining good democracy in Nigeria hence incorporating dramatic literature would strengthen this process and facilitate positive outcomes in Nigeria and by extension other countries of the world.

Keywords: *Civic responsibility, Civic engagement, Civic education and Dramatic literature*

Introduction

The nous of civic responsibility is core to the overall performance of any individual who serves at any level. The nexus between civic responsibility, civic learning, civic education and civic knowledge provides the parameters by which the democracy of any society is measured hence the absence of any of these components is an indicator of an epileptic democratic system cum bad governance. Considered to mean the active participation of any individual in communal or public service, the philosophy of civic responsibility places importance on how it is expressed in the service of any democracy. Therefore, at the heart of civic responsibility is the belief that it must be expressed selflessly, in an informed, committed and constructive manner so as to make favourable impact on recipients. Komives, Lucas and McMahon (1998) cited in Lloyd (2004) defined civic responsibility as a sense of personal responsibility individuals should feel to uphold their obligations as part of

any community. However, Astin, Astin and Associates (2001) considered civic responsibility from a more practical stance; for them, it is the act of becoming effective social change agents by making positive difference in a society to help solve problems. Consequently, a civically responsible person is expected to see him or herself as a member of a larger social fabric where social problems are partly his or her responsibility; eliciting appropriate actions when necessary (Mayhew and Engberg, 2011).

The nexus between civic responsibility and democracy accentuates its role in good governance, human and societal development. Civic responsibility is believed to date back to Rome where citizens made positive impact as a result of their knack to build a better society for all in 519BC. However, civic responsibility became popular when it was officially sanctioned as a blueprint for democracy in 1787 by the ratification of the United State Constitution. The case is no different in Sub-Saharan Africa; the tradition of individual and collective responsibility for the well-being of groups predates the colonial era. Communities organized themselves with a view to meeting their needs along the lines of collective help and communal systems; giving birth to an interdependent communal framework. The idea of Ubuntu derived from the Buntu culture which emphasizes the historical background of mutual responsibility and support for communal living in Africa is exemplary in this regard. Also, the concept of *gaiya* which is domiciled in the Nigerian Hausa culture and mirrors the pertinence of collective responsibility, its attendant impact on social change is a stern proof of the historical backdrop of civic responsibility in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, as these traditional societies changed and began to modernize the idea of civic responsibility became more sophisticated. After independence, democracy spread throughout most of Africa and Nigeria is one of the countries that adopted a multiparty democratic system (Patel and Wilson, 2004).

The adoption of this system of government came with some difficulties one of which is poor civic engagement which became the premise for the introduction of civic learning in Nigeria. Civic responsibility is at the core of any democratic system; indeed, the very mention of the term evokes notions of what it means to live in a democracy. Suffice to say there can be no effective democracy without civic responsibility and this brings civic engagement to fore. Civic engagement simply denotes working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. Hatcher (2011, p. 82) corroborates that:

Civic engagement is working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes

Civic responsibility is expressed as civic engagement and there is no question on the importance of civic engagement in every democratic system. Considering the history of civic responsibility in Nigeria, it is ironic that the indicators for paucity of civic engagement still rear its ugly head in Nigerian communities and public spheres. In recent years, the prevalence of fraudulent activities, terrorism, corruption, social vices and unaccountability plaguing Nigeria both at the communal and public levels are stern proofs that even though the idea of civic responsibility is a long-age phenomenon, the required know-how to express it is an issue of concern. In fact, Ikelegbe (2013) affirms that poor level of civic engagements and popular participation in the public realm and political process in Nigeria has been a major limitation in attaining a civil society. This evidence necessitates the need to revisit the communication of civic responsibility in Nigeria; take the introduction of civic education for instance. The introduction of civic education, the facilitation and organizing of seminars/work are recorded efforts made by the Nigerian government to communicate civic responsibility since improved civic engagement is a critical outcome of civic knowledge. Civic knowledge is the cradle of effective civic engagement in any society. Hence it can be deduced that a poorly transferred civic knowledge would automatically results into an epileptic civic engagement. Hatcher (2011, p. 84) affirms that:

Civic knowledge is an understanding that “knowledge is actionable and that individuals coming together to co-create knowledge empowers them to make positive change in the world around them”. This concept of democratic knowledge validates that knowledge is co-created in partnership with communities, students, and others.

In Nigeria, one of the fundamental structures that communicates civic responsibility is the institution of learning ranging from primary, secondary to tertiary institutions. The introduction of civic education in Nigeria's institutions of learning especially secondary schools enlists among the key efforts that have been made to communicate civic responsibility to her citizenry. Nigeria is acclaimed as

one of the countries in the world with large youthful population and the total of 32.4 percent of her population is pegged to be below 18 years accounting for over 140 million people (National Baseline survey, 2012). Consequently, such favourable statistics places civic education at a fundamental spot in the communication of civic responsibility cum engagement. Civic education is an essential component of any democracy because it provides citizens with civic knowledge on how to effectively participate in the public and political spheres of their countries. It empowers them with acceptable standards, morals, and a comprehension of how democratic institutions function; teaching them about their rights and obligations as they take part in the political framework of their democracy (Enyiaka, Aminigo and Osaat, 2018). Ajibade (2011) as cited Balogun and Abdulraheem (2019, p. 41) elucidate that:

Civic education as a school subject which prepares people of a country especially the young members to carry out their roles as citizens. It is concerned with the knowledge, skills and values citizens need to function effectively as political participants in various settings. It aims at building an informed, effective and responsible citizenry as well as cultivating in the citizens a sense of commitment to the fundamental values and principles essential for the improvement and preservation of the society.

Civic education was first introduced in the Nigerian education curriculum as efforts towards citizenship reform programme under the 9-year Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy in 1999. However, because of the need to attain the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and the need to complement the implementation of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies, civic education was re-introduced into the Nigeria education curricular to be offered at all levels of education especially the secondary level. Some of the primary objectives of this effort are derived from the goals of UBE which is aimed at addressing young Nigerian learners in their formative educational stage; hence enabling them to imbibe knowledge, values, morals, skills, and norms which will help them deal with various social, political, economic and personal issues (Idowu, 2017).

The approaches developed to facilitate effective communication and learning of civic responsibility in our institutions keep changing to enable them address new realities. Some of these newly adopted approaches are role play,

inquiry method and simulation method to mention a few. However, despite the long usage of these methods, Nigeria still ranks high among the countries plagued with vices of poor civic engagement especially at the public and political levels. The daunting irony remains that youth who enlist as the primary beneficiary of the transference of civic knowledge remain active participants and key perpetrators of these vices. The recent happenings in our society both at the political and communal levels are testament to the fact that the methods for teaching and communicating civic responsibility need to be strengthened, especially since not all youth in Nigeria have access to formal education. It is against this backdrop that this paper advanced dramatic literature as a tool for effective transference and communication of civic responsibility with a view to strengthening existing teaching and communication approaches for better outcome.

By experimenting with Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* this paper proves that dramatic literature can serve the course of communicating civic responsibility in Nigeria. Dramatic literature reflects the essence of society in all its socio-cultural and ethno-political ramification. Hence it provides a scenario where societal issues are made tangible and easy to understand (Ajidahun, 2017). More so, this play is chosen because it provides an opportunity for theatric performance which can serve as a campaign tool for communicating civic responsibility to students in school and by extension youth in Nigeria. Considered as a story inspired by true event, the *Death and the King's Horseman* mirrors some of the factors that hamper civic engagement especially those of political and public nature. It also paints a picture of some of the consequences that result from the lack of courage to be civically responsible in any given society.

Summary of the Play

As a play that centers on the importance of duty, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a recount of a true event that is believed to have happened in Oyo Empire in 1946. Published in 1975, the play captures a tragic story of Elesin who shies away from the reality of the responsibility that his status demands from him. The Elesin Oba is a prominent man who is seen as equal to the Alafin (the King) because of his courage to will his death in service to the king and his people in the after-life. Consequently, the Elesin is accorded the same treatment and privileges of royalty because of the magnanimity of his duty as portrayed in the play. He enjoys every appellation, praise and privilege that comes with his title and everything looks fine until the king's demise upon which the horseman is expected to willfully

submit himself to the pains of death. On the day of his preparation to die, Elesin is given any and everything he wants with no exception; this is seen as the market women led by Iyaloja respond to every detail of his demands in readiness for the rituals.

Having enjoyed all the privileges and benefits that come with such status, Elesin is overcome by fear to perform his duty as the king's horseman and is elated when Mr. Pickings who is informed by Amusa intervenes since he considers Elesin as rather unfortunate and the nature of his duty barbaric. Consequently, he intervenes and tries to deter Elesin from responding to his decision hence Elesin is locked up in a cell where Iyaloja meets with him expressing her disappointment, blaming his inability to fulfill his own end of the bargain on weakness and lack of courage. However, while this argument goes on between Elesin and Iyaloja, the praise singer reminds Elesin what his duties are and that someone else has taken his place. The market women reveal Olunde the oldest son of Elesin, as that 'someone'; on hearing this, Elesin flings his chains around his neck and strangles himself. This play expresses the importance of civic responsibility in public service and the need to not only focus on the privileges and benefits that come with these public appointments and offices but to respond efficiently and sufficiently to the execution of the duties and responsibility that come with such offices and privileges. The lack of courage to respond to these responsibilities and duties ranks high among some of the breeding grounds for corruption and other vices in our country. There is no doubt that the consequences that this kind of attitude attract would go a long way to improving civic engagement for better outcome and good governance.

Establishing the Privileges of Occupying Public Offices

A major issue raised in the play is the glamour of the privileges that comes with public appointment in the service of any society. The availability of numerous resources which are at the disposal of Elesin and the quick responses to his need are captured by the playwright as a resultant effect of his brave decision to serve as the king's horseman. This scenario mirrors the reality of our day, there is no doubt that appointments to public offices to perform specific duties in service to one's country attract certain benefits and privileges which are geared towards enhancing the efficiency of the servant to effectively carry out these duties. Some of these privileges come in the form of cars, houses, health insurance, paid vacations to mention a few. Soyinka uses Elesin and the praise singer to highlight these

privileges. The statements below portray this reality:

Elesin: How can that be, in all my life as Horseman of the King, the juiciest fruit on every tree was mine, I saw, touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer no. The honour of my place, the veneration I received in the eye of man and woman prospered my suit and played havoc with my sleeping hours. And they tell me my eyes were a hawk in perpetual hunger (p. 18).

The praise singer also validates this reality in his praises which shower appellations and accolades on the Elesin.

Praise Singer: Who would deny your reputation, snake-on-the-loose in the dark passage of the market! Bed-bug who wages war on the mat and receives the thanks of the vanquished...(p.19).

By capturing these realities, the playwright affirms that the Elesin accepted the appointment and the nature of its responsibility. Consequently, the lessons remain that a call to service is more about responsibilities and a sense of duty to one's country than an opportunity to leave on the lap of luxury. An effective communication of this reality through class dramatization, studying of dramatic literature and the staging of such theatrical performance during communication campaigns, seminar or workshop would go a long way in strengthening the communication of civic responsibility in Nigeria.

Highlighting the Factors that Hamper Effective Civic Engagement

The playwright captures lack of courage, poor sense of duty and external interference as some of the factors that hamper civic engagement in any society. Elesin in the face of the reality of his duty as the horseman is enveloped by fear to carry out his chosen duties, making him unwilling to pull through with his responsibility. It is no news that it takes courage to be civically responsible and to take part in civic engagement. Therefore, obstacles that stand in the way of performing civic duties might produce justification for one to relent in his/her effort to perform these responsibilities. Consequently, the lesson remains that courage is one of the key apparatuses which facilitates adequate civic engagement in our societies. The lack of courage is portrayed in the conversation of Iyaloja and Elesin

while he is in prison. A key element that this play captures is external interference; as portrayed in the play, Mr. Pickings is that external interference and is instrumental in discouraging Elesin to perform his duties. In our world today, external interference can rear its ugly head in the form of selfish interest and personal gains which rank high among reasons for mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds designated for public projects and societal development. This is portrayed in the statement of Mr. Pickings to Jane

Pickings: Get your costume back on, nothing to worry about. I've instructed Amusa to arrest the man and lock him up.....i'm not having him put in the station cell. Amusa will bring him right here and lock him up in study and he'll stay with him till we get back (pp. 33).

Iyaloja laments in response to Mr. Pickings on his interference by outlining the grave implication of such unapologetic obstruction. She laments:

Iyaloja: To prevent one death you will actually make others die? All great is the wisdom of the white race, but have no fear your prince will sleep peacefully. So at long last will ours. We will disturb you no further, servant of the white king. Just let Elesin fulfill his oath and we will retire home and pay homage to our king (p.73).

The lack of courage to perform civic duties is captured in this dramatic play as the fear by the Elesin who lamented about how his courage, powers and charms have failed him. These excuses as highlighted by Elesin are portrayed in the play as the expression of cowardice and fear to perform his duty. Elesin laments:

Elesin: My powers deserted me, my charms, my spells, even my voice lacked strength when it was made to summon the powers that would lead me over the last measure of the earth into the land of the fleshless. You saw it Iyaloja; you saw me struggle to retrieve my will from the power of the stranger whose shadow fell across the doorway....my senses were numbed when the touch of the cold iron came upon my wrist; I could do nothing to save myself (p. 69).

Highlighting the Consequence of a Poor Sense of Civic Responsibility and Civic Engagement

As the play portrays, the consequence of poor civic engagement and responsibility is definitely the ultimate prize which is destruction. The play captures this as the death of Olunde which ultimately leads to the death of Elesin his father. However, this paper considers this ultimate prize as losing one's public position in disgrace and shame. In some cases, such poor response automatically leads to societal upheaval resulting in under-development and division in worse cases. The recent trials and conviction of public servants over embezzlement in Nigeria and the dishonourable dismissal of corrupt public servants have established the impact that the consequence of civic irresponsibility can have on both political and public servants. More so, the stench it leaves on their image is another factor to be deeply considered. This dramatic literature not only depicts the impact that civically irresponsible attitude can have on people but it portrays the long-lasting impact that it can have on posterity. The playwright succinctly captures this idea in one scene of the play:

Soyinka: Elesin stood rock-still, his knuckles taut on the bars, his eye glued to the body of his son. The stillness seizes and paralyses everyone, including Pickings who has turned to look. Suddenly Elesin flings one arm round his neck, once and with the loop of the chain, strangles himself in a swift, decisive pull. The guard rush forward to stop him but they are only in time to let his body down (p. 75).

Therefore, if the idea is to build a better country for our children, then the role of communicating civic responsibility must break beyond the walls of formal institutions of learning and embrace other methods that makes its communication far reaching.

Conclusion

Communication is an important aspect in civic responsibility since civic knowledge is a prerequisite to civic engagement. Consequently, the methods for communicating civic responsibility must be cross-cutting and encompassing to accommodate the peculiarities of Nigeria democracy and societal structure. Nigeria has her peculiarities and these unique traits must be adequately considered in the communicating and teaching of civic responsibility hence this paper validates the integral role of dramatic literature in strengthening the communicating of civic

responsibility especially those meant to address the vices of public servants, politics and Non-Governmental Organizations.

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