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Reforming Beliefs

**PROTEST PREMISE IN DRAMA AND THEATRE OF AFRICA  
A SPOTLIGHT ON CULTURAL NATIONALISM****Dr. Benedict Binebai****ABSTRACT**

Protest drama by its very tradition in Africa and within the context and content of this study underscores drama of correction, negotiation, elimination of bottle necks and unhealthy cultures, anti-cultural activities, of anger against bad leadership. It is also about fighting against inequality, the struggle for identity and nationalism, cultural preservation, colonial and endo-colonial disengagement, economic exploitation, cultural and political oppression and the clamour for voice and agency. Protest drama as a matter of fact aims at change, it gets involved in resistance. It is enacted to draw sympathies, to educate a people, and to pass messages across from the weak and voiceless people against oppression and victimization.

Since the birth of modern African drama, dramatists have been writing protest dramas in varying degrees and in many forms and manifestations. This is the cardinal problematisation of this discourse. Viewed from this discernment, most cultural plays that were never and have not been considered protest dramas have now been re-read, reinterpreted anew and redefined as protest drama in this investigation. The investigation makes the statement that the predominant driving force behind African cultural dramas across the ages is majorly predicated on protest aesthetics. Even seminal works like *Myth Literature and the African World* and its thesis drama *Death and the Kings Horseman* are written with a big philosophical protest sense to establish the African cultural identity and sense of tragedy against the Eurocentric position that Africa has no culture and tragedy that can be free of European secretion.

**Introduction**

Protest is a way of expressing grievances by a people or person to negotiate a condition of life demanded. Beyond Negotiation, Protest can lead to a total elimination of forces of repres-

sion. Thus, protest can be rationalized as a social phenomenon which voices objection using words and direct actions against particularly disturbing and frustrating events, policies or situations. A formal avowal whereby a person expresses a personal objection or disapproval of an act considered retrogressive or injurious to human well-being. Protest expresses itself in many possible forms as far as and as able as the human thinking mind can carry. St. John Banned-Smith however states that these forms range from individual statements to mass demonstrations, as a way of publicly making their opinions heard in an attempt to influence public opinion or government policy, or they may undertake direct action in an attempt to directly enact desired changes themselves (2007:17) Where protests are part of a systematic and peaceful campaign to achieve a particular objective, and involve the use of pressure as well as persuasion, they go beyond mere protest and may be better described as cases of civil resistance or nonviolent resistance.

Protest expresses itself in many forms ranging from written demonstration, public demonstration, and civil disobedient demonstration. A protest has a destructive dimension. it leads to rioting, drives someone to suicide, makes an individual or group of people embark on hunger strike and encourages bombings, wars, kidnapping seizing of flow stations and blowing up of pipelines. Civil resistance, nonviolent resistance and occupation of business and significant spaces to paralyze the action of oppression are direct actions of protest. While tax resistance, flag desecration and ridiculing, boycott actions and judicial activism are protest actions against the obnoxious rules and policies of a government.

In literature, protest is registered in book burning, culture jamming and misrepresentation or underrepresentation of a people. "Protest" is therefore conceived as any human struggle that reclaims space from oppressors. It also means asserting right to life and forms of natural freedom that are denied. However, it is significant to note that some protests are not genuine because they are sponsored by oppressors. They are grouped as protests which celebrate oppression and social decadence. The purpose of protest by whatever means, is to express and convey dissent on some political issue or the state of things and to make the people in power, aware that they need to change things. Protest can also be branded as dirty.

A dirty protest is where a prisoner has chosen to defecate or urinate in a cell without using the facilities provided. Blood or other body fluids may also be present. In the majority of cases the walls, floor or ceiling are affected. Cleaning cells following dirty protests will expose members of staff or other prisoners to a number of dangers including biological hazards (Special Hygiene, 2013: 1)

The act of protest is communicated through songs, war, violence, literary and journalistic writing sociological and literary criticism etc. Protest as a word has link with revolution.

### **Protest Literature**

Protest Literature has existed in different forms throughout literary history. Some of the greatest writers in history have employed their talents toward awakening the public to injustices locally and world-wide. Protest literature was defined broadly by John Stauffer cited by Zoe Trodd:

...to mean the uses of language to transform the self and change society. By language I refer not only to words, but to visual art, music, and film. Protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspects of society, but suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society's ills. (2006:xii.)

The reasons for protest are clearly and effectively given by Joan Wink when she says, "the voice of those who traditionally have not been heard is usually embedded with varying degrees of resistance, rage, and a hint of resolve" (Wink, 2000:70). Protest essentially is a phenomenon that clamours for voice, voice to be heard. The indispensability of literature to the question of protest in post-colonial African and the rest of the world are not in doubt. Literature has remained over the centuries, one of the most important tools available to protesting groups. Some great American authors of protest literature include Thomas Paine, Thomas Nast, John C. Calhoun, and Martin Luther King. Through eloquent, sometimes subtle means, these authors became the spokesmen for their societies. Thomas Paine, an English-born generated controversy in his works wherever in late 1775, Paine had in his *Common Sense* states:

Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one: for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a Government, which we might expect in a country without Government, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer. Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise (1986:6).

Thomas pain published the above mentioned book in 1776 to challenge the authority of the British government and the royal monarchy. Protest literature castigates society and points the way to a better collective future. Protest literature responds to several sources from protest movements—political, social, and cultural—from the Revolution to abolition to gay rights to antiwar protest and history. Literature of protest is an ideological engagement of oppressed people. A good example can be drawn from the popular Black Arts Movement which is fundamentally opposed to any idea of the artist that estranges him from his society. Larry Neal in *The Black Arts Movement* holds that

This movement is the artistic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics (1968: 1)

In Africa, Post-colonial literature is predominantly and largely characterised by a strong dose and impulse of protest. It tilts toward revolt and pacification. This has down-to-earth moralizing implications for modern literary venture in Africa. This is so because the African colonial experience has dominated the origin and nature of contemporary African protest literature and placed it strongly opposed to Western values of aesthetics. Again the point has been made by Richard Wright, who said,

All literature is protest. You can't name a single literary work that isn't protest." This means many works of literature protest against social injustice. Whether or not this interpretation is correct, there is an agreement with the critical lenses and the interpretation (1945:1)

Calvin Ong holds Wright's opinion of literature as a thing of protest as correct. He goes on to argue that "all authors disguise their frustrations and problems of their time into the book. Although many people may not realize it, sometimes there is a deeper meaning behind the story. For example, a story might be thought of as a struggle between good and evil, but it is really showing the author's protest at a war between two nations (2009:1)

But Richard Right and Calvin Ong's views that all literature is works of protest is not fully true. This is because some writings especially plays published in the name of literature are anti-protest writings. Consequently they cannot be admitted into the ring of protest literature. Except such anti-protest literary works will be framed as anti- protest, protest literature. G.G Darah in his Paper titled "Revolutionary Pressures on Niger Delta Literature" stated that

All classical traditions of world literature are fostered by environment, where there are intensive struggles against great evil for the restoration of human dignity. This is the type of situation that created the great traditions of literature in Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (2008:2)

### **Drama of cultural Nationalism**

Cultural nationalism is taken from nationalism as a word which simply means the love for one's own country. This love embraces political, cultural, sports. The patriotism in this love helps to defend the country of one's noble birth against external aggression. It is a strong of feeling of self-determination commanded by a group of people shares common social and political goals. Cultural nationalism is taking pride in and showing great love for one's culture. Cultural nationalism involves the development of emotional attachment. The emotional affiliation to a particular cultural group is not simply a concern for self-determination, but rather it is the sum total of how individual feels about one's culture. Most African writers embrace the creative duty

and cerebral task of trying-out African theatre which evokes the vanished history in an objectionable historical representation by European writers.

In a discourse of this nature it will be a gross error of investigation if attention is not given to James Ene Henshaw. Today, Nigerian Dramatists have been categorised as first, second and third generation writers. The fundamental question to ask is, what generation do Nigerian literary historians place Ene Henshaw. Unarguably, he is the first Nigerian to write in the western literary dramatic form before the likes of Soyinka and Clark etc. When first generation writers are mentioned, he is not mentioned but he wrote his first play in 1945. Do we now fault the literary historians for leaving out Ene Henshaw in their classification or attempt to redraw the classification history of the emergence of Literary Drama in Nigeria? Obviously, James Ene Henshaw is the first modern literary dramatist in Nigeria. He belongs to the first of the first generation. I have decided to bring in James Ene Henshaw to this discourse because he is first Nigerian to write protest drama in response to western thoughts about Africa. In looking at the form of his drama, Nwamuo discovers that Henshaw presents a thesis of what constitute an African drama in opposition to the western breed. Nwamuo cited in *Radical essays on Nigeria Literatures* edited by GG Darah States

The issue of sanctified space in African drama and the unique idioms of mime, drama, ritual and drumming which characterised the total African theatre today were first effectively woven into written drama in English by Henshaw in *Children of the Goddess*. (2008:264)

Henshaw's plays are essentially his protest against the cultural stabbing imposed on Africa and the African man by colonialism. The plays were a sharp reaction to the image conveyed in colonial literature which projected African culture, African life and civilisation in negative light. These plays like those of his predecessors re-interpret Africa to the colonialists and to African victims of colonial alienation. They are plays of protest which rehabilitate culture.

The Nigerian playwright together with the novelists looked back into their archival past with the aim of unearthing the rich culture, philosophy, poetry, dignity, and in fact values that the colonialists had wantonly destroyed. It was this breed of cultural regeneration that gave birth to

plays like JP Clark's *Ozidi, Song of a Goat and the Masquerade* (Gbilekaa 1993:3). African writers began writing across the three broad estates of literature with the theme of cultural nationalism. This is because western scholars claimed Africans have no culture. Most of the dramatists across the continent of Africa responded to this negative claim by writing to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the African society. Plays like *Ozidi, death and the king's horseman, Wedlock of the Gods, the Gods are not to blame, lion and the Jewel, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, Akassa Youmi, something to Die for, A matter of Honour* are grouped as plays that deal with the subject of cultural nationalism from various angles. These plays thematically range from a glorification of African culture and culture conflict. There are others plays of the cultural gamut preoccupied with protest against cultural impediments, cultural resistance and preservation. In reaction to western vandalism, African writers create plays in defense and rehabilitation of Africa, of African persona, solemnity and to restore the lost rights and freedoms of African people. They write plays to project the beauty of African past and to recreate a new Africa impelled to meet African ways of survival in a modern universe. The creation of plays on the literary landscape of Africa is still in vogue even after the long exodus of direct colonialism in Africa. *Hard Choice* a play by Ododo Sunday is a recent African drama that deals with the subject of cultural nationalism.

These African playwrights write with a protest sense they are progressive practitioners of the theatre who write to effect the transition from an imported culture to an independent tradition of the theatre. *Tololwa Marti Mullet* (2007:21) notes that "one of the most interesting theatre experiments to come out of Zambia has been the Chikwakwa Theatre. Formed in 1969 as an experiment in popular theatre, Chikwakwa was based on the aspiration to create a truly Zambian Theatre, out of Zambia's indigenous cultures and local resources, a theatre that would treat topics and issues From *Zambian* life, history and politics". Michael Etherton an expatriate and one of the principle founders of the theatre, describes the nature of its popular basis:

The idea of Chikwakwa Theatre was to develop, through self-help, a theatre place that would allow an expansion of the traditional performing arts... The intention was to stay as close as possible to the function of the traditional performing arts, i.e. to tell the history of the tribe, to keep society intact... Since these functions



invariably involved the whole community either as performers or as audience, or at least were accessible to everyone in the community it follows that the work of Chikwakwa should also be accessible to all and not just on the level of admission charges (1982:20)

African drama and theatre all over the continent is designed to configure an African theatrical aesthetics different from the western model even though the dramatic structures are still secretions of the western literary tradition. But the fact remains that the African theatrical model and that of the west are blended to negotiate the establishment of the African cultural identity in Literature. JP Clark's *Ozidi* is a total theatre experience very strong in its cultural projection.

Apart from its political protest on the cruel and unproductive leadership tradition in Africa which has besieged the political life of Africa, the play which is located between the corporeal and incorporeal environments with characters in that mode is a celebration of the African cultural heritage. The arena stage, the audience participation, the game of wrestling which features constantly in the play, the spiritual recreation of young *Ozidi* for the purpose of revenge in a gladiatorial combat tradition speaks volume of the glorification of the African cultural setting. Such plays written with a great sense of entertainment, from authorial perspective is his contribution to celebrate the African cultural passion within the global culture. *Ozidi* is one African play which establishes the fact that gladiatorial combat is an African entertainment experience which coincides with the western experience. Here we see Clark contesting and protesting the question of African cultural nudity and monopoly of theatrical paradigms.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka presents an African thesis and theory of tragedy on the subject of cultural nationalism. The play is once again a glorification of the African culture represented in the Yoruba tradition. In this play, Soyinka celebrates and protests the modernization of the Yoruba tradition. Despite the attempts made by the colonialist to stop the materialization of the ritual of death, the society responds collectively to cause the ritual to happen. Soyinka in this play protests western interference in African tradition and at the same time presents his protest against the question of the African leaders' love for material possession over state duties. Here he joins Clark in painting a picture of leadership in Africa that refuses to take

sacrifice for the society. In fact Soyinka is clearly a playwright who ingeniously writes with a temper of protest. In *Lion and the Jewel*, he presents a contest between the western and African cultures in the arena of marriage and bride price between Bale Baroka and Lakunle, the village Teacher over Sidi, the Village Beauty. The triumph of African cultural practice over the threatening western culture registers *Lion and the jewel* as a protest cultural drama predicated on culture conflict.

The issues of modernization of African culture resurface in the Drama of Zulu Sofola. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Sofola in collaboration with her characters in that dramatic universe roundly protests and condemns the attempt made by Uloko and Ogwoma to modernize the culture through defilement of the sacred customs. *Wedlock of the Gods* is a protest in defense of The Igbo and by extension, the African tradition that was put under the pressure of change by the star cross lovers.

This theme of culture protest finds its roots also in the dramatic works of Ola Rotimi. Of particular interest to this discourse is *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Bini kingdom Under Oba Ovonramwen was attacked and sacked by the British. The Kingdom, its people and the Bini tradition faced humiliation and destruction because of British economic craving. Bini Kingdom fell while attempting to defend its time honoured customs and traditions. The fall of Benin arises as a result of a treaty entered into between Benin and the British in which the British Government attempts to enforce the article of faith in parts reads:

The king of Benin hereby engages to assist the British consular or other officials in the execution of such duties as may be assigned to them; and, further, to act upon their advice in matters relating to the administration of justice, the development of the resources of the country, the interest of commerce, or in any other matter in relation to peace, order and good government and the general progress of civilization...The subjects and citizens of all countries may freely carry on trade in every part of the territories of the king, partly hereto, and may have houses and factories therein(Egharevba, 2008:87)

Obviously the British is driven by the compelling necessity to make obligatory the treaty. And

this is further compounded by the unbridled Acting Consul-General, Phillips who remains resolute in his plan to see Oba Ovonramwen the king in opposition to the tradition and custom of the Benin people which forbid strangers to see the king during Igue festival. Unfortunately and coincidentally too, this was the time the British desires to enter Benin. Lack of compromise on both sides results in the Benin massacre.

It is obvious that the British uncompromising economic longing and ego resulted in the total destruction of Benin Kingdom. Ola Rotimi gives historical reconstruction to the Benin Massacre with the vision to document for posterity, the condemnable discretion of the Benin culture and the mass killing of the Binis. The kind of Cultural nationalism we find in *Kurunmi*, another of Ola Rotimi's seminal drama is nationalism of change. This is a kind of cultural nationalism that craves for internal change against obsolete and barbaric traditions which do not go down well with modernity. *Kurunmi*, from authorial angle, character plotting and thematic occupation is configured to protest against a tradition that no longer holds sway.

In *Akassa Youmi* Ola Rotimi reconstruct Nembe history of 1895. Although the play parades the theme of self-determination from the occupation and the dislocation caused by the Agents of the Royal Niger Company which acted in the interest of the British crown, the fact remains that cultural dislocation and the struggle to dislocate the alien influence and rule with the intent to relocate Nembe properly emerge strong. The occupation of Nembe by the British through the disguise of the Royal Niger Company fits into the question of loss of power expressed in Walter Rodney's Seminal Work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. The point is made that

The decisiveness of the short period of colonialism and its negative consequences for Africa spring mainly from the fact that Africa lost power. Power is the ultimate determinant in human society. Being basic to the relations within any group and between groups. It implies the ability to defend one's interest and if necessary to impose one's will by any means available. In relations between peoples, the question of power determines maneuverability in bargaining the extent to which people survive as a physical and cultural entity when one society finds itself forced to relinquish power entirely to another society, which in itself is a form of

underdevelopment (Walter Rodney,2009: blurb)

In *Akassa Youmi*, Nembe culture, religion, political systems of governance and economy fall under the administration of the Royal Niger Company. The Abuse of the people's culture, the arbitrary over taxation of the Nembe subjects as well as gradual extinction of the people's traditional religion sequel to the christianization of King Koko became a source of threat to Nembe collective existence as a people. The character Igodo while lamenting the economic dislocation suffered by Nembe states

...Whatever we do, it is the white man who gains. If we agree to pay all those taxes, but, all those crazy licenses, our money all goes to the Whiteman, and we starve. On the other hand if we stop trading and look or as the Nembe traders are doing now, the Whiteman controls everything all the same, and we still starve (P.54)

Rotimi constructs *Akassa Youmi* as a protest drama which contests Nembe cultural, political, economic, religious and psychological dislocations. Using the aesthetics of commitment in literature, Ola Rotimi mobilizes the Nembe people in a collective combat against the dislocation of the dislocating force of repression at Akassa, the Royal Niger Company's headquarters. Rotimi uses the weapon of culture in *Akassa Youmi* to set Nembe free of the dislocating force imposed on them by western colonialists.

Within the cultural plays of protest, it is significant to note that some condemn some circumventing African traditions. A play that comes into usefulness in this regard is Agoro's *Something to Die For*. The play which expresses itself in an existential form is heavily predicated on the desire for marriage and the non-fulfillment of that desire. Tokieme the principal character is in this journey of existence. Out of frustration he takes heroine and finds himself in a mental hospital. At the hospital he finds Asueme a nurse who is attending to him and proposes to marry her. But this new found love and wife to be is from a leprosy family, a taboo for the Tokieme to have as wife. Like the Osu system a straight born is not culturally allowed to marry an Osu. This is a belief held strongly in Igbo land. Tokieme could not allow his marriage to be ruined by cul-

tural inhibition. Consequently he decides to actualize his marriage to Asueme. *Something to Die For* is a play bristling with the temper of Cultural Revolution. It is a protest against some of the traditions that bring about class discrimination and emphasizes equality of man in matters of marriage.

*A Matter of Honour* by Barclays Ayakoroma explores themes of death, pride and nationalism from the phenomenon of death and culture. The play presents a platform for dialectical contemplation on the subject of the right and the right home to bury a dead person between the diseased father and mother land. This play set in traditional communities of Angiama and Amabiri locates its culture in Ijaw land. The culture draws honour, pride and nationalism in burying its own dead people. Fatherland is considered first culturally before other places of birth for burial. The burial of Oweibi the dead one in Amabiri is a matter of honour; a matter of profound communal affection and pride, to the Amabiri people, his father's people. Oweibi was born in Amabiri but was brought up, stayed and died at Angiama his motherland.

The fundamental thesis of the conflict in the play is who has the right to bury Oweibi. Fatherland or motherland? The playwright presents this argument in protest against the generally believed idea that a dead person is only fit and proper to be buried in his fatherland and not anywhere. The point of protest in this drama has authorial position which states that a dead person can be buried anywhere provided such a place is his or her home. In Ayakoroma's own words

There have also been instances of people resorting to alternative routes from the mortuary, all in a bid to outwit an aggrieved party. And there have been cases where mortuaries are turned to battlefield as aggrieved parties vent their anger on each other freely. As a consequence of the above, instead of burying one corpse, sometimes the number multiplies, as there are victims in these seemingly senseless exhibitions of irrationality. This is the cultural context under which the play matter of honour should be view. (2007, x)

Ayakoroma protests the wars, the bitterness and other calamities or setbacks that come with the dispute over where a dead person can be buried. *A Matter of Honour* is therefore a protest drama against cultural inflexibility and ethnocentrism; it protests the refusal to modernize culture to

meet up with contemporary realities. It is a protest drama that negotiates a better deal for the avoidance of war over the dead and the achievement of peace for the living.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has dealt with the study of protest drama in Africa along the column of cultural nationalism. The playwrights of the first, second and third generations have written plays based on the subject of cultural nationalism in a protest sense. The paper notes strongly that the cultural themes that emerge from these writings range from cultural renaissance, cultural decolonization, culture conflict and protest against cultural impediments. The study holds firmly that the cultural plays investigated were never and have not been considered within the context of protest drama. Apart from the fact that the paper is founded on the justification of drama as a tool for social change, the investigation makes the statement that the predominant driving force behind African cultural dramas across the ages is majorly predicated on protest aesthetics. Ola Rotimi in *Akassa Youmi*, *Kurunmi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, Wole Soyinka in *Lion and the Jewel*, *Death and the kings Horseman*, Barclays Ayakoroma in *A Matter Of Honour*, Saviour Agoro in *Something to Die For*, Ododo's *Hard Choice*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods etc* create these plays with a protest sense for the liberation of African culture. Thus, this paper is guided by the writings of African dramatist with enormous influence on their literary fabrication. Furthermore, it presents the incontestable predominance of the theory of cultural decolonization in African postcolonial literature.

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