THE YOUTH AS A FACTOR IN THE NIGERIAN THEATRE

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ABSTRACT
This essay puts forward the view that the frequently condemned behaviour of the Nigerian youth stems from a background of psychological or mental anarchy, as they are easily inclined to an attitude informed by a feeling of rejection and its attendant paranoia. Unfortunately this often leads them into trying their hands on various manners of vices in the bid to survive. Their beclouded state of mind makes them readily erupt at the slightest provocation, and there is no end to what they can do to, as it where, 'rise to the occasion' of their challenges. The study however, advances that what the youths of Nigeria seriously need is a form of theatre which will match their vigour in entertainment as well as involve them in a solution-seeking routine.

INTRODUCTION
"The state of Africa's children and youth is unacceptable….The continent's youth are frustrated and increasingly angry; they are not being enabled adequately to build a future for themselves and their continent" (De Waal 1). The disillusionment occasioned by this frustration often makes an average African youth perceive the entire society of human race as offensive and an avowed enemy of progress. This level of feeling of animosity is most prevalent among the youth of Nigeria, and that is very much traceable to the unfriendly Nigerian politics, which has little or nothing for the youths. Robert Coles, in his article "The Political Life of Children", argues that "a nation's politics becomes a child's everyday psychology" (3). And when such politics revolves around a few citizens whose only interest is squander manic and the looting of national treasury, with little or no interest in the health, education and social well-being of the citizens, the youth of such a society are bound to be pessimistic. This increases their vulnerability to criminal tendencies and they can easily engage in untoward conducts, all in the bid to survive. They resort to rioting, armed robbery, gangsterism, rape, kidnapping, oil bunkering and a lot more other vices, as a way of getting back at a system which has denied them the basic necessities of life. If the system on the contrary were friendly and accommodating, they will not only have high expectations about the future but will also leave a legacy for their successors who will readily step into their shoes (qtd. in De Waal 7). The theatre, however, wields a possible panacea which when properly channeled, has the potential for commendable success in regard to issues of the youth in the country. In the words of Augusto Boal "…the theatre is a weapon….A very efficient weapon" (Boal ix). Nigerian theatre should therefore, take cognizance of the above to try to give focus to the interest of the youth. This is in order to further impress its mark as a mirror of society. "Theatre is the art of looking at ourselves." (15)

Defining Influences of the Nigerian Youth Culture

Indeed sociologists are right when they define the term 'culture' as 'the way and life of a people'. The youth of society enjoy a peculiarity of lifestyle which only people of their social status typically appreciate. This could range from dress code to choice of music, style of dance, tendency to use drugs, rebellious lifestyles, and many other social habits which an average youth takes a fancy to. However, a great number of factors determine the level of challenges faced by youths of diverse ethnic or geographical backgrounds. The first is the family. If the family unit is faulty it is bound to have a ripple impact on the offspring who look to parents as role-models. "The participation of young people in situations of conflict is generally conditioned by the weakening of the family systems of support, and by the disruption of the ties that weave young people's lives with the life of the community. The sense of stability and protection is lost for these young people. They are led to seek protection, stability, and safety in other social groups that provide them with weapons and life routines that embody power, status and a sense of stability" (2006:39). A faulty family might be as a result of the ripple impact of societal anomalies such as lack of jobs or well-paying jobs which might bring about inadequate provision of basic family needs, inability of parents to afford school fees for their children, and so many other obnoxious developments which affect the psyche of an average youth. As a result the youths are disillusioned and silently nurse the desire to strike out against such a system. The second possible factor is bad leadership. The youth can tell from a whiff if their leaders are corrupt and exploitative, especially where such leaders, at election, made mouth-watering promises which only turned out to be hoax and empty. Ironically these youths are used as thugs during elections with promises of heaven on earth in the event of victory, but most of such often go unfulfilled, and so everything adds up to the fact of leaders being perceived by the same youths as users and dumpers, and robbers of the people's wealth.

Ikechukwu Enwenwa, writing on Teen Life in Africa, opines: The poor economic condition of the country (Nigeria) reflects the structural inequalities in the inherited political order, mismanagement of the economy, and corruption and looting of the public treasury, as well as a lack of accountability by Nigeria's …political leaders. These developments have created political strife and conflicts with serious negative effects on the lives of Nigerian teenagers (178). "One element" according to Arowosegbe, "in the contradictions underpinning Nigeria's development crisis, is the marginalisation of the youths." (*Informaworld* 575 - 594). The youths may lack the maturity associated with age in order to hold responsible government positions, but they certainly do not lack the wisdom to read the handwriting of bad leadership, and they most certainly lack the patience of the adult to hold out against oppressive governance. The present chaos in the Niger Delta region of the country is simply the youth's reaction to what they have termed unjust treatment from the Nigerian rulership. The unenviable state of affairs in the country "created a new brand of youths who woke up to a consciousness, which demanded that the Niger Delta people be aware of their human and material rights." (Ekiyor 221). The above youths teamed up and formed a sort of foot soldiers. Appraising the above situation, Akinwumi observes that the Niger Delta region of the country is the only part where there is a proliferation of youth-headed militia groups

(*International Perspective on Youth Conflict and Development* 78). The last but not the least, is the issue of tribalism. This usually occurs in nations where there exists a lot of diverse ethnic presence, and often bringing about incidences of favouritism. The result of this is that the citizens, especially those who have been disfavoured, feel that they do not belong, whereby giving room for a feeling of second-class citizenry. Such discriminatory attitudes stand to have far-reaching volcanic implications where the youths are involved. The above and a lot more have largely defined what today may be tagged the culture of the Nigerian youth.

Typical Issues with the Nigerian Youth Culture

Cultism is one of the major destabilizing forces in the Nigerian society."No single day passes by in recent times without an all-encompassing and heart-breaking discussion on cultism among the youths, the elderly, the learned and the illiterate alike" (Echekwube A.O. 2). Its presence is being felt in a number of post- primary schools in Nigeria today, but the greater impact of this obnoxious anti-social practice is felt in the tertiary institutions of the country. The collapse of traditional institutions, which has occasioned a relapse of civil morality, is the motivating factor behind youths' involvement in cultism. The youths are caught in the 'age of anxiety' and are 'forced' to "constantly challenge and narrow the wide generation gap that separates them from adults" (Aina et al. 3). In the words of Jennifer Chapman: Adolescence is a time of active deconstruction, construction, reconstruction—a period in which past, present, and future are rewoven and strung together in the threads of fantasies and wishes that do not necessarily follow the laws of linear chronology. The adolescent phase of life is not a mere space of time that stands between the past of infancy and the future of adulthood (*What is the crisis of Adolescence?*14).   It is indeed very sad and pathetic to imagine that cultism readily presents itself as a convenient bridge of this perceived gap. One stands to wonder if other less harmful and or non violence-oriented sociological influences could not have found better expression in the lifestyle of these members of society.

Sex-related Escapades

Another dimension of youth cultural problems in Nigeria is their engagement in illicit sexual habits otherwise, sexcapades. This being a possible offshoot of a number of factors, among which are the use of hard drugs, excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages, the lack of useful vocation or gainful employment, unemployment, and a general breakdown in moral values. Abah (1997) blamed sex-related problems of youths in rural Nigerian villages on unemployment, as he observes: "Many of the young adults in the village are unemployed secondary school graduates. A good number are drop-outs. Consequently there is idleness, a high incidence of unwanted pregnancies and a general sense of diffidence among the youth" (23). Some of these youths especially the females among them, create jobs for themselves by "using what they have to get what they want" (23); they go into prostitution as a way of making ends meet. One cannot but wonder why any sane girl would want to have her most sacred and treasured possession be messed up by just any man for the sheer sake of monetary reward.

Political Thuggery

It may not be justifiable to conclude this segment on the overwhelming culture of the Nigerian youth without, at least, making passing reference to their unwholesome participation in the violent act of political thuggery. The above phrase not only applies to the Nigerian youths' unpopular thuggery role during political elections in Nigeria, it also speaks of their violent activities when they feel politically marginalized. Many a Nigerian youth today welcomes the 'savory' role of thuggery during elections in Nigeria, as it usually tends to give them a false financial security for the future. They base so much hope on empty promises by politicians who are only out to adopt the popular Machiavellian dictum of the end justifying the means, to perpetrate very inimical acts of violence. Some get paid to fight the thugs of the opponent, or to kidnap or even kill a potential threat. At the end of the day they end up being sapped and abandoned, and the resultant frustration from this and the innate desire to survive, make them find useful tools in the guns they had been previously armed with for their thuggery operations. Majority take to armed robbery or kidnapping as a new found trade, others take to activism, yet others embrace cultism since they already have some of the basic props for membership. Indeed, many a society has mortgaged the future of her youth by simply ignoring the relevance of these potential leaders of the future. This neglect has in turn impressed a ripple negative impact in many societies, that today the primary concern in such societies is how to arrest the obnoxious development of youth rebellion and insurgency; they are simply reaping what they had sown. Robert Coles argues that "a nation's politics becomes a child's everyday psychology" (In *Children and the Politics of Culture* by Sharon Stephens 3). A number of these youths who play active roles in ethnic militia groups did not start out as such. A number came from very good homes but eventually turned wild in the face of very unfriendly societal developments. Such are the members of "The Suicide Squad" in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*. Governments should rid themselves of undesirable elements whose presence provoke a sense of silent anarchy, for though their actions might go unchecked by others but definitely not the youths, whose veins harbor the presence of warm and eager blood.

Locating the Youth in the Nigerian Theatre

The youths of Nigeria have been confronted by a number of factors which have occasionally challenged their resilience in the face of untoward hardship. A number of fallouts from these have been noted above, and in a wider sense it has resulted in what has been collectively referred to as the youth crisis. The theatre as the watch dog of the society stands to step into this present crisis situation in order to salvage a potential disaster. From the foregoing, it has become very evident that the youth of Nigeria are helplessly inclined to an offensive attitude of violence informed by their genuine attempt to react to uncomfortable positions which they find themselves in due to the general hardship in the society, and which they have also defined in many exaggerated forms. This tendency to exaggerate problems often leads them to violent options as possible solutions, and so they employ irrational methods which they feel justified executing. These youths however, do not necessarily need to be shunned or dismissed as hopeless. On the contrary, they need to be drawn close and shown a better alternative which they will not only identify with, but which will also possess the

power to transform and indeed, over time, actually impact a great measure of positive changes in their moral and social values. The tool of theatre for development or theatre for social change is actually a very viable medium as far as addressing youth conflict is concerned. This form of theatre has recorded tremendous success in many societies; it has been used to effectively address the problems of innumerable communities, it has even also proved effective with imprisoned hardened criminals. It is a form of theatre with a format that enables it to be adapted to different situations and for different audiences. It is also a theatre which is based on the educational initiative of Paulo Freire, but which later expanded in influence as a result of further embellished perspectives robbed into it by Augusto Boal. It is a theatre which Boal himself has described as a" very efficient weapon" for change (ix); a theatre for the oppressed and the downtrodden in the society. The youth of Nigeria have been described "… as people who grow up with big dreams about their future but who sadly discover soon after that the journey into the future is full of frustrations" (Ishaya Ibrahim in Newswatch an online magazine np). These 'frustrations' of the youth can be harnessed, tempered and be given a better outlook through the glorious medium of the theatre. An average youth has an undue flair for the theatre. This could be directly or indirectly. Many youths may not find time to do their home work or school assignments, but they can spend endless hours watching movies or home videos, some in big cities go to cinemas, yet others go to watch live drama performances. This is occasioned by no other reason than the fact that the theatre has a very appealing format which stands to make a positive or negative impact on any mind. The positive aspects of the theatre should therefore, be explored if not exploited to recondition the mindset of the Nigerian youths. The theatre should be used to suggest alternatives to violence as a medium of expression. Indeed, a new script need be written on the Nigerian youth scene.

Henceforth, Nigerian theatre aimed at solving youth problems should be conceived from the perspective of the youth; its sympathy should lie with the youths, and it should seek to advertize a histrionic perception of youth challenges. The apex of the glory of this theatre is hinged on the idea that its success would be initiated, sustained and executed by the youths. Indeed, there is no limiting the power of the theatre art, its impact can penetrate the confines of any section of society and successfully address the needs of any given class. Bertolt Brecht in his work *The Development of an* Aesthetic edited by John Willet, opines that "art addresses all alike, and would confront the tiger with its song" (278). The youths are no exception to this rule and are by no means immune to its influence. More so, the youths of Nigeria, just like their counterparts the world over, have a very rich and voracious appetite for entertainment. An average Nigerian youth spends 3-4 hours daily watching movies, in the same way as "American children and youths spend, on average, more than 4 hours a day with television, computers, videotaped movies, and video games" (Roberts et al., np. and Woodard np.). So the idea of this form of theatre would be to present a social environment and or activity that will embody an equal measure of entertainment, but with a richer flavor, in that it will not only afford the youths the privilege of being in one another's company, it will also challenge their creative enterprise. It will be a theatre that will bring to the fore the reality of their challenges in order that they may face them with the right attitude and also

make a collective effort to solve them. Paulo Freire opines thus: There would be no human action if there were no objective reality no world to be the 'not I' of the person and to challenge them; just as there would be no human action if humankind were not a 'project,' if he or she were not able to transcend himself or herself, if one were not able to perceive reality and understand it in order to transform it (53). An average youth is endowed with a lot of strength and vitality, and one of the principal characteristics of youthfulness is its tendency to engage in acts of bravery. Robert Kennedy has described youthfulness as "a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth). The youth have a tendency to adventure, but where that is not properly managed that same spirit will lure them towards anti-social behaviours. That is why it has become imperative that they be encouraged towards positive alternatives where such exploratory propensity would be better utilized, not just for their own good, but also for the interest of the general society.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to draw attention to the point of view that the frequently condemned behaviour of the Nigerian youth stems from a background of psychological or mental oppression, as they easily fall prey to an attitude informed by paranoia. And this often leads them into trying their hands on various manners of vices in the name of trying to survive. Their beclouded state of mind also makes them readily erupt at the slightest provocation, and there is no end to what they can do to, as it where, 'rise to the occasion' of their challenges. Effort was also made in the essay, to suggest that what the youths of Nigeria seriously need is a form of theatre which will match their vigour in entertainment as well as involve them in a solution-seeking routine.

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