

Education and the Intentionality of a Performing Arts Educator in Nigeria

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Abstract Education, particularly its form: aims, objectives and goals could be dangerous depending on the intentionality of the giver of such education. From such theory of education as “classical conditioning” and some others, we know that the form of a permitted or given education may be to programme or condition the minds of a people to always conform to a social, cultural or psychological stereotype. So, education could be a tool to force social, cultural or political conformation on a people in a subtle way. Such education makes a robot out of the people who are not really able to think through issues themselves. As a teacher, I see and deal with passive students who act like robots without original thought and native intelligence. This may be a carryover of the perversion of colonialism on their psyches and the understanding of most of the teachers and educators who took over from the colonial masters – for no doubt, their understanding, interpretation and appropriation of the interpretations of their circumstances affect and influence the form of education they have passed down to this generation. This also accounts for one of the reasons no Africa State, in spite of the available data on the primacy of mother tongue education, has reverted or officially adopted mother tongue education till today. As a Performing Artist and a teacher, my interest is therefore in using the theatre to provoke my students to social, cultural and political deconstruction of the cultural, religious and traditional ways of life that have been subtly imposed on them through educational conditioning. I have tried to do this through what I called “Theatre of Intentionality”. In this paper, therefore, based on my experience with the students in two theatre workshops, I like to explore what I perceive as the place of the theory of “dialectical texts consciousness” in analysing human intentionality in order to promote generative form of education that is capable of provoking societal transformations.

Keywords: Education, Intentionality, Performing Arts Educator

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1. Introduction

From my personal experiences of the relics of colonisation as a young boy growing up in Western Nigeria, I can give firsthand information of the subtle and unconscious damages of colonisation on the way Africans have come to perceive and understand themselves in relation to the crucial issue of identity. Such damages, especially of race and self perceptions, arise from the colonial masters’ perceptions, creations and narrations of the natives which were uncritically accepted as the true representation of the black self. I remember that anytime there is a demanding task to perform, men will be assembled and one, giving a supposedly rousing command to motivate the men to a collective action will say in a loud voice: “ees sobey”. “Eee sobey” is a corrupt form of “apes obey”! The colonial masters will yell at a group of blacks that have been assembled to carry out a task: “Apes obey”! So, “apes obey” is one of the several legacies of the colonial masters’ ways of seeing the Africans and of dealing with them. They are as mammal as apes and gorillas, no more no less.

Unfortunately, as a result of this form of perception and narration, a subtle and an unconscious damage has taken place in the collective psyche of the people that from primary schools to secondary schools, teachers and instructors motivating us to carry out any challenging or daunting task are fond of yelling out as the “new educated masters”, “apes obey”. Those of us who try to “rebel” against being called “apes” by the new masters are met with cane and other forms of corporal punishments. The new masters dress and attempt to copy all the “noble” actions of their mentors including religion. The actions of our teachers, a carry-over of the colonial masters’ superiority complex, can only complete the process of the progressive damages to the understanding and the perception of the black self of the students. The black self is also further damaged by the fact that the students are not allowed to communicate in their mother-tongue. The mother-tongue in the understanding of the new masters is a colloquial speech and, by implication, it is inferior, ignoble and totally unacceptable by any civilised mind! In front of every class during my primary and secondary school days till date one will always find it boldly written: “Vernacular Speaking in this Class is Prohibited!” The language of our self; of our identity and cultural

consciousness is prohibited. Our tradition, cultural and religious understanding are prohibited. We are “apes” with no language that must always “obey” in learning a universal language of the gods. This is also in spite of the fact that Nigeria Policy on Education clearly states that the language of the primary/basic education shall be that of the child’s immediate environment. (Nigerian National Policy on Education cited in Banjo 2013, p.5-6).

Many students and colleagues did not survive this uncritical educational conditioning of the mind of our people in accepting our “ape-ness” and consequently, the “inferiority” of our language and, by extension, our culture, tradition, religion and identity. Till date, many of them still go about with damaged psyche of a terrible inferiority complex of nothing African and black is good or of any quality and standard! This reality is part of what informed the themes of race and self retrievals in the works of writers like Soyinka, Achebe and Ngugi.

Race and self retrievals are about the liberation of the mind from the stereotype narratives and constructions of the West, the “dominant”, of the “marginal” or of the “others”, particularly Africans. In essence, race or self retrieval is a form of education: a process of unlearning certain ‘subjects’ and of relearning, in a different way, same and other subjects. What it really is, to borrow one of the popular titles of Ngugi is to see education as a retrieving course of action that has to do with initiating a functional method for the decolonisation of the mind of a people.

Now, having gone through the process of educational programming described above, one is fully aware of its capacity to damage the consciousness and the totality of the students’ mode of apprehension of self, culture and cosmic reality. By the way, our reality is already conditioned and is perhaps always programmed. So, by the time most of the students then arrive in the University, they are equipped with a “universal language and culture” in which they lack competence for such performance that meets universal eligibility. The consciousness of this lack is always evident: most of the students are withdrawn to selves, they do not show critical initiative in asking relevant questions, most find it very difficult to express themselves suitably and most still see their lecturers in that toga of the superior colonial master dealing with the historical apes and slaves!

2. From Conditioning to Provocation

Sincerely, something has been stolen from them (us) through educational conditioning. Our identity and power of self-apprehension has been stolen. This fact foregrounds the need for the initiation of the process of retrieval of self in particular and not necessarily of race – for, as I have argued in a place, gender, racial, tribal, clan, age, religious or sexist demographic parameters are unfortunately easy and ready tools of privileging often when self-interest is at stake (2013, p.111). I am therefore interested in a functional self-apprehension as a liberating power from conditioning instruments designed to create social, political or religious stereotypes. The immediate is my intentionality in every of my theatre workshop class. In the last five years, I have held over five theatre workshops and productions with undergraduates. One

thing that is very important is that the students are all often first timer as far as theatre workshop and production is concerned. This information is important to me because it helps to highlight the issue of self awareness and trust – as most of them do not believe they can ever act or participate in a meaningful theatre production. They believe that they lack the requisite skills and talents to act.

Now, one of the first things I do during my workshop class is to explain the concept of intentionality to the students from Sartre’s existential theory of consciousness to what is dialectical text consciousness where every text is a supposedly a myth that can be constructed and deconstructed in Derrida’s terms. I also take time to explain to them the fact that every human action is based on certain consciousness, proceeding to explain Sartre five theses on consciousness (McCulloch, 1994, pp.5-9). The first being that: all conscious acts have intentionality (McCulloch, 1994, pp.5-6). By which it means that consciousness is directed at an object one is thinking about, seeing or imagining. With this, I normally start to motivate them to begin to have a different consciousness of who they are irrespective of what they think they are or how they have been narrated by the privileged essence – culture, tradition, religion and others.

Personally, I have always been vaccinated by the deception of the culture of nobility or royalty as it excludes the “common” man from heroism (Aristotle, 2000, pp.18-46). Since most of my students are from familiar backgrounds, I often always tease them with the fact that they have been excluded from the ability to perform any heroic act by the likes of Aristotle long ago. This is done to begin the intentional process of the deconstruction and reconstruction of their consciousness....Sartre’s last thesis on consciousness claims that there are two fundamentally different modes of self consciousness or self awareness. The first is thinking or being conscious of an event in time, while the second is being conscious that one is conscious or thinking about the event (McCulloch, 1994, p.5 cite in Ojoniyi, 2008, p.11). One is a state of unconscious consciousness and the second is a state of conscious consciousness. With this explained to them, we begin to explore how to re-programme our consciousness in and through our theatre workshop production...as our production is not just about dancing, singing and jumping; it is about provoking ourselves to radical apprehension of what Soyinka would call cosmic totality (1976, p.3-6). In essence, I prepare their minds for the rupturing of every centre of received cultural and religious conformations in Derrida’s terms. I always impress it on their minds that every form of education, be it religious, cultural, formal or non-formal has intentionality – what it is supposed to achieve in the learners.

3. Acting Style in the Theatre of Intentionality

I try to impress it on them that what a theatre is supposed to achieve is in fact broader than mere styles or techniques of acting. So, for us, whether it is psychological realism, technical or formalistic acting, personality acting, character acting, representation acting, presentation acting, realistic acting, mirror exercise,

emotional recall, the use of internal resources and external resources, and the elaborate Stanislavski's "the method" or "system" incorporating the now popular enchanting "magic if" and "emotion memory" or the Brechtian theatre of reasoning known as the "Epic Theatre" (Stanley, 1962, pp. 9-14, 40-49; Ubong, 2005, pp.35-59; Inegbe, 2005, pp.109-127), the underlining issue in our theatre workshop production is in the overall intentionality behind the production. So, essentially, our theatre of intentionality reflects a form of the dual mode of consciousness: the intuitive mode and the reflective mode. As conceived, the intuitive mode is explained in Sartre's unconscious consciousness of an event while the reflective mode is captured in the conscious consciousness of the same event. The intuitive model is built around the unconscious conditioning of the artists' minds that has taken place historically, while the reflective aspect of it is built on their calling to mind the circumstances of their experiences. The intuitive aspect is like a kind of a substructure in the motivation of the artists, while the reflective aspect is the superstructure. By my calling the attention of the students to these two modes of their consciousness, I attempt to make the process of their training intuitively generative and reflectively transformational.

This is predicated on the assumption that a spontaneous or a reflective intuitive actions can generate an immediate spontaneous or a reflective intuitive reactions. It is a process that always involves a kind of the deconstructionist binary opposition, privileging, difference marking and elimination (Derrida, 2000, pp.107-123). What I do is to encourage the students to understand how to process the options in their consciousness as they finally decide on the final option of action to take in any given performance.

Now, let me further explain this issue of intentionality acting as I sketched it out in a paper (Ojoniyi, 2014, pp. 166-183): This approach to acting follows 'Wolfgang's (2002, p.212) view of the phenomenological theory of art as that which "lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text". As we can see, this speaks of looking at the work of art with the aim of, not just reading and understanding it, and in fact, there cannot really be an understanding until we are able to participate in the experience of the characters. We can probably participate in such experience by adopting the thoughts and consciousness of the characters in relation to their actions, juxtaposing it with what would be our actions giving the circumstance and reality of the characters in relation to other characters and cosmic phenomena. It is a whole process aimed at a total realisation of the world of the characters through a mutual participatory experience. The participatory experience is that which is called performance – a concretisation process of the workings of the consciousness on the object under investigation.

The concretisation reaches its full manifestation when "the convergence of the text and the reader brings the literary work into existence..." (Wolfgang, 2000, p.212). In essence, the convergence of the text, here, the director, the actors and the audience in the theatre provides the arena in which mutual participation in the "game of imagination" is accomplished temporarily in time in a

performance. We dare not speak of this accomplished participatory game of imagination as a closed experience; it is always an ever living and present experience in the consciousness of all the participants. For, years after all the participants in this game of imagination have departed from the theatre or the performance arena, the "game" continues to play out in their consciousness, influencing, modifying and even informing their subsequent actions and inactions through binary opposition, arbitrariness, difference marking, privileging and signs elimination.

The convergence of all that make up the texts – cultures, traditions, religion and myths – takes place in the human consciousness, in the consciousness of the playwrights, the directors, the actors and the audience. At the point of this convergence in the artists consciousness there cannot but be a provocation to take actions. So, characterisation, part of the concretisation of the texts by the playwright is therefore an action after such provocations. Playwriting, directing and acting are therefore acts provoked by certain consciousness. With this supposition, we need to appreciate the fact that action, decision or inaction as choices are not free from the totality of the texts. Even freedom is conditioned by the texts. And, consciousnesses, both spontaneous and reflective, represent the totality of human experience. It does appear that at the very centre of an intuitive spontaneous action, a reflective intuitive experience of a similar or near similar spontaneous action in the past, now recalled, can halt the character's present action. One can capture the fact here by paraphrasing the words of T.S Eliot that, one is not likely to know what is to be done or how to respond to events and circumstances unless he lives, not merely in the present, but in the present moment of the past, unless one is conscious, not of what is perceived or said to be dead, but of what has lived and is yet living (Eliot, 2000, p.410).' Our acting style is based on the understanding of the dialectical working of human consciousness as presented above. For us, every text is a myth to be deconstructed and reconstructed.

4. Texts: The Myths in Productions

I have always been worried by the received religious beliefs of my students especially in the light of a form of uncritical absolutism that is attached to them – as is manifesting in all sort of terrorists activities all over the world, but more importantly, in the Nigeria experience with the ongoing battle with "Boko-haram" terrorist group that is seeking the establishment of an Islamic State within the country. Sincerely, as Marx posits, religion is the opium of the masses. This problem of an all out naive religious belief is also re-echoed by Okegbile when he writes that religion, particularly Christianity, has become a sedative to help sleep at night...(2012, p.20). No doubt, my students seem to have taken enough dosage of religious opium that has done as much as necessary damage to their rationality.

The reality above informed our choice of texts in the two theatre workshop productions that I now want to focus on in this paper. The two texts are: *The Infidel and the Blood Suckers* and *The Primate and the Lost Clergy*. The two plays are written by me.

These two plays were chosen on purpose – for the plays focus on the issue of the irrationality of religious

absolutism which promotes the uncritical readiness of the faithful to kill others who do not share their religious sentiments. One thing is sure since the outbreak Boko-Haram Islamic insurgency in Nigeria and it is that Islamic scholars and Muslims in general have since been trying very hard to distance the religion from terrorism. However, the glaring contradictions remain and these contradictions have also been clearly captured in one of Ahmed Yerima's recent plays, *Heart of Stone* (2013). In his production note on the play Yerima writes:

I am not sure if I achieved what I wanted with this play.

I wanted to raise a number of issues; the strength of beliefs, the disrespect of life, becoming heretical about the sociocultural things we hold dear, and how easy it is to sever the interlinks of lives in contemporary times. The new reality in my country constantly confuses me. The insecurity contrasts so well with our search for the meaning of new and more peaceful existence, and our place within our own new modernity. I shall pause here. The story is a sad tale and yet real. Sadder still are the characters, because they all live next to us... (Yerima, 2013, p.6).

Just like Yerima, I am confronted with how to raise these issues of the inconsistency of why men will keep killing other men on behalf on any god or gods for the matter? I want the students to also see the limit of the strength of any religious belief that has no value for humanity and how these beliefs are actually tools of socio-economic and political power negotiation rather than the belief in controversial and contradictory claims of the existence of an afterlife home for different religions and believers! I want them to see the imprudence of being uncritically absolute in the face the reality of the existence of Levi-Strauss' "multi-consciousness".

Now, within the lines of the plays, I have subtly and, in many cases, directly planted thoughts that attempt to rupture certain naive religious centres in order to provoke the consciousness of the students to questioning their own religious intentionality now and in the future. The opening song and lines in *The Infidel and the Blood Suckers* capture the issue in the play. The song goes thus:

Kill man for the gods
Destroy man for the gods
The gods, worthy of worship
The gods, worthy of sacrifice
Kill man for the gods
While the lines are:

The Man: There is no hope. I am soaked with the blood of the innocents — the blood of children, women and men murdered in cold blood in their sleep. They were butchered, slaughtered callously by men who claimed to be acting on the prompting of the gods. We learnt that when they kill and maimed for the gods, they will make it direct to the heavens of heavens; to paradise or aljon, as they fancy. Of course, the gods are happy that the infidels are killed by the saints of gods (Ojoniyi, 2010, pp. 5-6)

There are other lines in the play that equally demonstrates the intentionality to set the students thinking about the reasons why those who promote terrorists acts as ideological do not always lead the fight themselves:

The Man: I thought you believed the dead are in the bosom of the holy prophet and Allah.
Aafa: *Bi o ti wa!*
The man: *Bi o ti wa?*
Aafa: Yes, I will bury them today with the assurance to the faithful of their sure place of rest in heaven.
The man: And on the third day you will return to their houses—
Aafa: Yes, for the third day fidau—
The Man: And the faithful will drop money for special prayers—
Aafa: Mind you, for special requests—
The Man: Those who want to go to Mecca—
Aafa: Will drop money for special request—
The man: Those who want to make it to Aljon—
Aafa: They will also drop money for special request to make it to heaven—
The man: The poor cannot make heaven, not even in the church—
Aafa: That is the reason we find it easy to mobilise them...just paint the picture of an escape to heaven—
The man: Through martyrdom—
Aafa: They are up in arms. It is very simple. It is the easiest thing to do—
The Man: An escape to heaven—
Aafa: From the problems, crises, and challenges of living—
The Man: Why don't you escape Aafa?
Aafa: To where, to where? You underrate me. I have phobia for heaven—
The man: Not really, I supposed. You only believe in heaven on earth—
Aafa: Don't accuse me. Is heaven on earth not better than a heaven of mere imagination?
The man: Aafa!
Aafa: I know you want me to pretend. You would prefer I have phobia for earth? You taught us the lies we told always.
The man: You would tell the lies again today? (Ojoniyi, 2010, pp.9-11).

Let me quickly cite some lines in the second play, *The Primate and the Lost Clergy* that are also intentionally created to provoke certain deconstruction and reconstruction of perception of the students through the workshop experience:

Archbishop Odeku: I have seen your zeal and dedication. I demand it from everybody in the province but the torn in my flesh is that boy.
Very Rev. Judas: He doesn't accept there is hierarchy in heaven – the Father, the Son, Holy Spirit, Arch-Angels...
Archbishop Odeku: You know I have never thought along that line before. But I think that is profound. Hierarchy in heaven! As we do on earth, so they do in heaven!
Very Rev. Judas: And when God was challenged, he eliminated –

Archbishop Odeku: We need to develop this Theology of Elimination and survival of the fittest. It is not just a universal phenomenon. It is an eternal phenomenon. We are made in the image of God. There is hierarchy in heaven (Ojoniyi, 2010b, p.20).

The Archbishop here and his Secretary accept eliminating a perceived enemy as a spiritual matter that has its foundation in the divine acts of God himself. This is further established in the following lines:

Archbishop Odeku: Contempt! Contempt!! What do we really do with them now my secretary?

Very Rev. Judas Otu: The Theology of Elimination, my Worship and Lord. The Theology of Elimination should be fully applied to them, let their place no longer be found in this ministry as the place of the ancient serpent was no longer found in heaven!

Archbishop Odeku: "As the place of the ancient serpent was no longer found in heaven", profound, profound, but tell me, how can we achieve this on the mundane plane?

Very Rev. Judas Otu: What is mundane that cannot be raised to the celestial? Look, "Your worship", you have been raised from "His Grace" just now to "Your Worship, the essence of being and faith", the Pre-eminence! What does it cost? The agreement of men; a wilful submission of will and suspension of disbelief—

Archbishop Odeku: Synod Secretary, by a willing suspension of the general human disbelief – the great illusion, I hereby appoint you as the new Secretary of Conference to the ministry of Word and Sacrament of Holy Saviour Movement on this day of the Lord two thousand and eight years after the death.

Very Rev. Judas Otu: (*Visibly Overwhelmed*) Ah, your worship, the great Pre-eminence, the beginning of beginning himself. I thank you, I promise and pledge my total submission and loyalty to your course and purpose. All along, I have not troubled myself about the quest for the absolute, or the remote kingdom of God. I have always wanted this kingdom of men.

Archbishop Odeku: The Secretary of Conference, your consecration to the office comes up tomorrow two

thousand and eight years after the death.

Very Rev. Judas Otu: "Your worship", your dating must carry the day and the month of the year. The secretariat will take care of that. In fact, we may have to consult Kongi for an insight into the process of historical dating. We must be careful about this "after the death" thing, so that it would not be mistaken for the death of the Primate. We would be immortalizing him.

Archbishop Odeku: Nonsense, who would immortalize a man full of flesh. Look into it very well if the dating could reflect my ascension to Pre-eminenceship... Oh, this is glorious. Secretary of Conference, you are my right hand man.

Very Rev. Judas Otu: Your worship, in the spirit of Theology of Elimination, the secretariat will now file a report claiming that the formal Secretary of Conference and the Bishop of Kwara Province are privy to the death of the formal Prelate (*There are sounds of approaching steps*) I hear steps. Your worship should retreat into the chamber (Ojoniyi, 2010b, pp. 57-59).

These are the lines we worked with for over eight weeks each from the auditioning through the first reading to the eventual performances. I think I need to state here that my students are always made up of both Christians and Muslims. In fact, at the very beginning of each workshop experience, most of them were evidently not comfortable with the issues in the plays. Although, some of them also appear to be aware of the contradictions in whatever faith they confess, yet the fear of the unknown and survival which made the primitive man to seek salvation in rituals and the supernatural (Oscar, 1995, p.4) has kept them in line as they equally confront their own unknown.

In the process of the rehearsals to the final performances, many of them were able to break away from their shells as they begin to internalise the lines and the issues in the plays. They also begin to say the lines freely outside the rehearsals. Those who were shy and did not ever believe they can appear on the stage to face an audience equally discovered something hidden about themselves. Those who fall into this group remains with me in the University Troupe through the days of their programme. They keep asking and looking up to when next there will be a call for auditioning. Some of them have gone ahead to star in Nollywood films while some are looking forward to taking up careers in the film industry.

However, I still have some of them who are not able to break themselves from certain religious and cultural

conditioning. In fact, among this group, there are those who are always interested in knowing my religious inclination. On several occasions some of them have sought to know my view on religions and whether I practise any. Nevertheless, and this is my joy, all of them from our interactions seem to agree that killing for a god or the gods in the name of any faith is ridiculous.

5. Conclusion

Since every education is predicated on certain philosophy with aims and objectives, every education is designed for a purpose. It is however unfortunate that we have not been able to totally free ourselves in Nigeria from the educational legacy of colonialism that is designed to produce manpower to serve the interest of the multinational companies and the Western hegemony. However, we cannot continue to lament the process that has conditioned us to be consumers of every form of product including knowledge based products. We need to begin to provoke ourselves towards deconstructing and reconstructing ourselves; our identity and true self must be retrieved from the narratives of third world mentality and primitivism. This is the goal that I have set for myself with my theatre of intentionality... as I say to some of my students I now say in conclusion: "We are not apes; we are human dedicated to freedom of life and self actualisation without any bondage to absolutism. We will not kill for any god or gods. And will not use education to programme robots or social stereotypes.

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