

RE-INVENTING TRUE DEMOCRATIC UNITY IN NIGERIA: A MYTHOPOEIC ANALYSIS OF BEN BINEBAI'S *IF NOT...A PLAY OF THE GODS*

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Abstract

*Democracy is often described as one of the best systems of government. African countries have embraced democracy as this system of government tends to benefit the people more than military regimes or any other system of government. Nigeria, for instance, jettisoned British monarchical rule and embraced democratic governance following her independence in October 1960. Since then, Nigerian democracy has witnessed a lot of upheavals as successive governments have struggled to create a sense of national unity in a complex country with over 250 ethnic groups and different political leanings, cultural and religious biases. It is these dichotomies coupled with the hydra headed corruption in the Nigerian body polity that have hampered the actualization of true and genuine democracy as evident in the works of some Nigerian Playwrights who have been preoccupied with the oppressive attitude of the leaders and the helplessness/gullibility of the people in their creative works. This study is an account of Benedict Binebai's view towards re-inventing true democratic unity in Nigeria by effectively deploying myths towards the service of society in his thought provoking play, *If Not... A play of the gods*. The study adopted new historicism as its theoretical framework and descriptive methodology of investigation. The study revealed that true democratic unity can be achieved through a reawakened consciousness of the status quo of traditional deities in fostering national unity which the concept of federal character has failed to achieve.*

Keywords: Re-invention, True Democracy, Monarchy, Unity, Mythopoeia

Introduction

IF NOT... is very timely, especially at this time that Nigerians are clamouring for national dialogue that will drive the country along the path of true and genuine democracy (Abiodun Olayiwola; 2017).

Africa's journey towards true and genuine democracy is one that is far from being realizable in the true sense of it due to the caliber of leaders and the type of democracy practiced in the continent of which Nigeria is not an exception. Democracy as generally known is a system of government which has the people as the deciding factor through an electoral process in the sharing of political powers. In democracy, political power is vested in the people to elect their representatives at the various tiers of government for the purpose of effective representation. Williams cited in Binebai and Eni (2014) define democracy as:

a form of government in which all people have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives. Ideally, this includes equal (and more or less direct) participation in the proposal, development and passage of legislation into law. It can also encompass social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political self-determination (p.3).

In an ideal democratic setting, the common interest and wellbeing of the masses are placed beyond that of personal interest which explains why the driving force is service to the people, transparency and accountability. It is often believed that democrats are liberal and are deeply aligned in political

ideologies and issues that are progressive in nature. The people have the freedom to speak, act, and think freely so long as it does not infringe on the rights of another. Binebai and Eni, (2014) observe that “a democratic society is synonymous with positive change and development that transform the economic and overall wellbeing of the citizens”. They further posit that:

As a system of government, democracy is predicated on the principles of majority rule and individual rights and liberties. Its leading function is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society (p.3).

Democratic system of government is a welcome development in post-colonial Africa and the world at large. This largely explains why majority of African nations are practicing democratic rule with a few exceptions like Niger, Mali and Equatorial Guinea whose democratic governments were toppled by the military juntas of their respective countries. Often times, the reason for this coup d'etat has always been attributed to corruption on the part of the political leaders and bad governance. Africa is known for not practicing democracy in the real sense of it; instead they practice autocracy where an individual wields absolute power in the name of democracy. This informed the reason behind Binebai and Eni's assertion that most democratic nations in Africa are practicing undemocratic democracy. African governments pay lip service to the concept of democracy while in actuality the system they practice is dictatorship (p.3). Corroborating this view, Adegbeye (2013) writes that:

The failure in the practice of ideal democracy in Africa can be attributed to many factors, both internal and external. There is the unquestionable evidence that the failure is as a result of bad political leadership. At the top of this failure of leadership is the scant respect that many African leaders have for constitution and constitutionalism (p.1).

Africa's democracy is like a mirage and has completely deviated from the popular view of Abraham Lincoln's true meaning of democracy seen as 'a government of the people, by the people and for the people' to what a popular content creator Brain Jotter (2023) in one of his videos on YouTube with 933,259 views described as 'government of some people, for some people and by some people'. These few, of course, are wealthy and control the national resources because of their privileged positions. The reason behind this claim is the hypocritical posture of the leaders who are insincere and 'fantastically' corrupt as alleged by American President, Donald Trump. These leaders, entrusted with the power to bring about positive socio-political and economic change that would translate to good governance and national development, are more interested in amassing the common wealth of the people to their self-aggrandizement and their regions thereby impoverishing the poor masses and weaponizing poverty. In Nigerian democracy, politicians pay more emphasis on tribal sentiments, thuggery, violence, vote-buying and religiosity than on capacity and patriotism to garner votes and 'win' elections. This explains why people from different regions tend to prefer their towns-man or woman in positions of authority irrespective of whether such 'representatives' are qualified for those positions or not. As long as that candidate comes from one's family, town or geo-political zone, the candidate should occupy that leadership position to satisfy the yearnings of few people and to the detriment of the nation. This mental annihilation of good conscience has resulted in the continuous imposition of wrong people in governance and the subjugation of the masses to a life of misery, hunger and poverty. Hoffmann & Wallace (2023), observe that Nigeria's democracy was severely weakened by the civil war and centralization of power during the military era. The civil war conflict led to the seeding of oil revenues in the hands of some powerful, wealthy and often corrupt military elites. The dictatorship militarized Nigeria's political space and disrupted the flourishing of democratic institutions and culture (p.1).

Again, Nigerian democracy between 1979 and 1983 was marked by significant controversies. One major contribution of the Second Republic was the 1979 constitution which introduced a federal

character principle, requiring political parties and cabinet positions to reflect the diversity of the nation (Wikipedia, p.1) However, the political class was more interested in accessing power and state resources than promoting democracy (Democracy in Nigeria, p. 2). The 1983 elections, which returned Alhaji Shehu Shagari and the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) to power, were marred by violence, corruption and allegations of widespread vote rigging (Wikipedia, p.1). These issues contributed to the eventual collapse of the Second Republic and the military coup of December 31, 1983 (Wikipedia, p.1). Under the military, Nigeria's democracy remained elusive until when a democratic government was instituted in 1999 and had still remained elusive till date. Jega (n.d) commenting on the elusiveness of genuine democracy in Nigeria argues that:

In the Nigerian context, democracy is something much talked about...a set objective pursued with apparent vigour but not yet attained. For almost half a century, Nigerians have been searching for democracy through constitutional reforms and intricate political engineering and experimentation, spelt out in successive transition programmes. They have been consciously disappointed (p.101).

Now, the question is: how truly democratic is democracy in Nigeria? It is very worrisome that despite what democracy portends in western climes, true and genuine democracy is still far-fetched in Nigeria and Africa in general because of the hydra headed corruption that has taken the better part of Nigeria's democracy.

In Nigeria, corruption has become a norm. Alex Perry, in the US *Times Magazine* April 25 captures Nigeria's penchant for corruption when he states that Nigeria's rulers have often been indistinguishable from its criminals. In Nigeria, corruption does not just pollute the system. Corruption is the system'. The implication of this statement is that Nigeria's version of corruption is both pervasive and corrosive of public ethics. Leaders rule with impunity knowing that at the end of the day, they will always get away with it because of the docility of the citizens. This, indeed, is not the people's idea of an ideal democracy which ought to be an institutionalization of freedom, equity, justice and good governance.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theory of new historicism as propounded by Stephen J. Greenblatt, an American scholar among other proponents. New historicism is premised on the notion that a literary work should be considered a product of the time, place and historical circumstances of its composition, rather than as an isolated work of art or text. It provides an avenue for the study of an era by interpreting its beliefs, cultural views, political and social situations. According to Knapp and Fraley (2022) new historicists focus mainly on the political and social structures of the time. They do not just focus on the predominant social view however but focus on the underlying structures and less dominant structures as well and study how these structures interact. The interrelationship between power structure, the oppressed and the oppressor is evident in the text under study which treats issues of bad democratic leadership characterized by greed, brutality, dictatorship, corruption, social and economic slavery, ethnic cleansing and violence.

Since this theory focuses on the study of an era, it is believed that whatever goes on in a particular period constitutes the text of a literature and this is not limited to the prevailing social milieu, cultural and political situations of that time. Often times, texts are influenced by authors' background and time in which they operate which presupposes the analyses of situations in relation to the traditions and ideology of the prevailing era. The implication of this is that the literary text and the social contexts are both relevant to this theory which the study is anchored on as it establishes the basis for the analysis of the corrupt and easily permissible characters depicted in the study text. It is often said that 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' which is why when the wrong people assume political power, the effect is usually devastating as the people are subjected to deprivation, hunger and poverty.

Talking about quest for political power, Akaenyi (2017) writes that:

New historicists are also interested in power in the society. Like the Marxists, new historicists believe that power emanates from a source and moves down while Marxists see power concentrated in the bourgeoisie; the historicists believe that human beings are never victims of an oppressive society, for they can find various ways to oppose authority in their personal and public lives (p.304).

The issue of power in new historicism, according to Tyson cited in Akaenyi (2017), is that of a dictator who does not wield absolute power alone but maintains it through various discourses such as science, religion, law and fashion. This theory therefore provides the basis on which the characters wield power either as dictators or democrats as well as circulate power in the community to which the people at the appropriate time decide to oppose and wrestle power out of the hands of oppressive leaders. Tyson further posits that power does not reside solely at the top but circulates in the community (p.304).

New historicism, therefore, attempts to seek answers to questions by interpreting our study text as follows: are the issues in the text true reflections of political situations in Nigeria? Does the author eulogize or condemn the events in the text? Does the author take into consideration the poor deprived people? How does the author's use of myths, language, characters and events portray the political environment in the author's era? These questions are all considered useful in understanding and analyzing the power relations in the play using the new historicism theory.

Concept of Unity and True Democracy

Nigeria's unity is non-negotiable despite her diversity which is why several calls and agitations for secession by the various regional non-state actors have met with stiff resistance from successive governments. Unity is the life wire that binds the Nigerian state together irrespective of ethno-religious and political differences. According to Ejiroghene, (2021) cited in Aragbaye, et-al(2023) "National unity generates notions of oneness in a nation, notwithstanding all types of multi-formity inside a nation, such as multi-culture, multi-lingualism and multi-religion. It fosters a sense of shared purpose, identity, nationhood, unity and patriotism among a country's citizens" (p.1).

The essence of national unity and integration is that it promotes a sense of brotherhood and love among different ethnicities. It allows the resources in different ethnic groups or geo political zones to be jointly harnessed and distributed equitably. It also means that no particular geo-political zone has the birthright to the leadership of Nigeria as every citizen by virtue of his/her birth has inalienable right to vie for the Presidency of Nigeria or any other leadership position. This concept allows citizen of a country to live, work and inter marry in any part of the country without any fear, intimidation or threat to lives and property. Abdulsalam, (2023), expressing his opinion on ethnic unity, posits that "to achieve unity of ethnicity, we must promote understanding and respect for our differences while recognizing our commonalities. We must acknowledge and celebrate the richness of our diversity and promote inclusion and equity for all ethnic groups" (p.1).

The principle of true democracy is dependent on the unity of a country. Unfortunately, this has been compromised by the political class in Nigeria. When the people allow ethnicity, religion, political linings and multi-cultures to drive their actions and decisions, the result is a nation devoid of good governance, gradually being torn apart. Such a nation is embedded in deep corruption as the privileged zone in control of the national resources would deprive other ethnic groups or geo-political zones of democratic dividends accruable to them. Lasisi and Iwekumo (2019) argue that the government of Nigeria, instead of formulating policies aimed at improving the well-being of its citizenry...have focused more on the use of force to exploit rather than promote an environment for sustainable growth and development (p.140). The political elites very often make promises to the electorates that are hardly fulfilled and rather than use the nation's common wealth for national development and upliftment of the

welfare of the citizenry, the resources are channeled to private pockets and personal aggrandizement thereby subjecting the people to perpetual slavery and abject poverty. Worthy of mention too is the use of excessive force by the political class to repress all forms of agitation which may arise due to marginalization, decentralization of power or unfair revenue allocation. The political class would sacrifice honour and integrity to clinch on to political power even against the will of the people because of their selfish interests. It is on this basis that Lasisi and Iwekumo (2019) reveal that access to political power provides the necessary opportunity to control the instrumentality of force which is further deployed to exploit the economic resource of the country for the self-aggrandizement of the ruling class (pp.139-140).

It is in this regard, that most African playwrights have explored such themes as corruption, quest for power, marginalization, slavery, terrorism/ insecurity, national unity, true democracy, human rights abuses, change for social development and a whole lot of other themes in their creative works. One of such playwrights is Benedict Binebai whose play, *If Not....* aptly captures the theme of dictatorship, corruption, greed, brutality, terrorism, economic deprivation, human rights violation and violence. Mamdani (1996); Niemi and Barkan(1987) observe that:

These are characteristics of African democratic institutions. To explain Africa's lack of democratic progress, scholars routinely point to factors such as widespread poverty, small middle classes, and a population that is disproportionately young and rural (where people especially women-remain repressed by customary law, traditional authority, and patriarchy), all of which limit the size of the public with a stake in stable democratic rule (p.3).

The point has been made that poor governance in Africa and particularly Nigeria is most glaringly manifested in the denial of fundamental human rights, exploitation, marginalization, lack of accountability, absence of political pluralism or basic democratic institutions and above all, dehumanizing or weaponization of poverty. All of these put together have prompted the demand and clamour for democracy and better governance in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular.

If Not...A play of the gods: An Overview

It is a new dawn in the land of Ukolo and the traditional deities (gods) in Nigeria, representing the different geo-political zones and ethnicities along with their people, agree to embrace democracy signifying modernity over monarchy which has been their system of government. The people gather at the pantheon which is the village square to joyfully herald the new Democracy and jettison the Monarchical system of government. The transition to a new government is accompanied with lots of music and dance- an indication that the people so much desire change. Democracy, which in this context is personified, assumes office as the President of Ukolo Kingdom and immediately begins to manifest his autocratic nature. The newly installed President called 'Democracy', issues order forbidding his subjects from staring at his face. He appropriates individual or family farmlands and converts all farm produces as his own. He brutally disciplines anyone who dares to question his authority. Democracy wields his power over his subjects at any slight provocation and arrogates to himself the power to declare anybody a slave, and any woman as his wife as in the case of Ozala and his pregnant wife.

His undemocratic style of government which subjects the people to hunger, humiliation and suffering provokes the gods, Amadioha, Sango, Atiri and Azeza who then decide to revolt against Democracy. As the entire kingdom of Ukolo is thrown into confusion and violence as a result of Democracy's reign of brutality, corruption and the erosion of their traditions and value system, the other gods and ancestral beings of the land, Amina, Moremi, Agadagba, and Ogun, can no longer restrain from fighting Democracy. In the battle between Sango and Democracy, a new democracy emerges to demand his rightful place in the land. It is in the course of the verbal war that a great revelation is made that the

Democracy on the throne is an impostor. The false democracy is compelled by the gods of Ukolo Kingdom to reveal his true identity. To the amazement of the people, he discloses his true identity as Esu who has been parading himself as the President of the Democratic Republic of Ukolo.. The authentic democracy discloses to the gods of the land that Esu and his servants detained him. False democracy is forced out of the seat of power through the combined efforts of Sango, Agadagba and others, and unanimously banish him from Ukolo, giving way for a true democracy to assume power through a democratic process.

Mythopoeic Analysis of *If Not...* in Nigerian Democratic Unity

If Not..., like the playwright asserts, is a play woven around the world of the gods who assume human characters to condemn dictatorship, deprivation, erosion of societal values, bad governance and ensuring that true and genuine democracy is restored in the kingdom of Ukolo. According to Binebai and Eni (2014), the play is a mythical reproduction of the perception of democracy in Africa especially, its aberrant form in Nigeria. Its universe is metaphysical as all the characters in the play are incorporeal entities representing different regions of Nigeria (4).

The Playwright believes in the power of these mystical beings to proffer solutions to man's problems which, to all intents and purposes, humans have willfully avoided because of their inherent corrupt tendencies. In other words, that which humans have failed to provide solutions to over the years, the gods are turned to for answers. The people of Ukolo with all enthusiasm decide to embrace a new system of government which is democracy, generally considered as one of the best forms of government. They believe it was time to enjoy good governance that is based on efficiency, transparency, responsiveness and accountability. A government that guarantees the rights of the people, provides equal opportunities to its citizens irrespective of tribe or religion, promotes national character principle, people-oriented policies, freedom of speech, improved and quality life of the people and general development. These are the nature and characteristics of true democracy which is why the character, 'Democracy', is told to *Live in your true world and bless us with the spiritual colour of your nature* (p.17). Often times in the so called democratic governments in Africa, the reverse is usually the case as those elected into governance are very corrupt and power drunk. They become autocratic; make policies that are anti people and subject the citizenry to further hardship, misery and sufferings. 'Democracy', on assumption of office, did not waste time in revealing his autocratic nature when he sounded a note of warning to his subjects thus:

DEMOCRACY: Consequently, from this day henceforth, you shall do whatever I ask you to do. Those of you who are respectful and loyal to my authority shall be rewarded. The lazy, the wicked and the disobedient ones shall and must be punished. Perhaps I need to sound this warning to everyone present here and everyone in Ukolo. I have come neither to kill nor be killed by any one. Therefore, your safety and mine demands absolutely that you don't look at my face. You have the freedom to look at me or imagine me in your dreams. Have I made myself clear? (P.18).

The above is typical of African leaders. For a leader to speak in like manner to his subjects shows how arrogantly disrespectful and brazenly corrupt that leader is and therefore is not qualified to occupy such position of authority. Such a leader sees himself as a demi-god whose authority whether good or bad should be obeyed to the letter. True democracy entails freedom in its entirety, opens door policy where the people can look their leaders in the face, eyeball to eyeball and criticize them when they go wrong in their policy implementation but in this case, the President of Ukolo warns sternly that nobody should look at his face except to imagine it in their dreams. What insolence! When the ruled cannot look at the faces of their rulers, then it is impossible for the rulers to share in their problems. This is typical of

Nigerian politicians. They relate closely with the people, eat with them from the same plate, board public transport, attend churches uninvited only during electioneering period and after winning elections, they block them from having access to them.

Nigerian democratic history is bedeviled with corruptive tendencies, ethnic diversity, religious bigotry, nepotism, marginalization, deprivation, hunger and poverty. All of these contribute to the underdevelopment of Nigeria over the years of democratic government which makes one wonder if this is what true democracy is all about. Contrary to their expectations of good governance, the people of Ukolo suffer humiliation and high handedness under Democracy which, according to Amadioha, is unacceptable.

AMADIOHA: (Stands up) I don't like this kind of humiliation. I don't fancy this government. I wonder if this is the kind of democracy we imagine has the beautiful face of a rose flower (p.21).

Democracy has a lot of beautiful things to offer. So many countries have embraced it wholeheartedly which is why Amadioha likened it to a rose flower with beautiful face but rather than seeing the beauties of democracy, they see humiliation. Sequel to public outcry, Democracy assuredly tells them that *"if their idea of democracy is rose flower, they deserve an adjustment of their brains"* (p.21). There is no democratic leader who would address his subjects in like manner. However, despite Democracy's level of intimidation to his subjects, Amadioha, true to his name (as god of thunder and lightning) stands in defense of true democracy irrespective of threat to life:

AMADIOHA: Look! Let it be known that evil triumphs only in a defenseless society. I can't be here allowing this visitor with a mental republic ruled by cruelty and disorderliness to tear us apart... (p.22).

In the face of tyranny, it can only take a fearless and courageous one to speak truth to power like Amadioha even at the expense of his life. Spurred by his bravery, other people begin to reminiscence over their onetime cherished Monarchy which they sacrificed in preference for democracy as exemplified in these lines:

OLOKUN: Ukolo! Ukolo, the land of the superior ones has sacrificed monarchy on the altar of democracy. A violent wind blows, the rains descend ferociously like the anger of the revenging baboon, like nihilistic wizard, like battle bees attacking an enemy, like locust visiting a farm land. The age long songs of melody cease, we hear them no more. Ukolo crumbles under the cart blanch of civilization; good hopes die like a scuttled rising sun. Our great dreams fizzle out like a spent candle light. The terrorism of this democracy bleeds the sky of Ukolo; the claws of darkness now feed on us. Bitter memories are these not? Ukolo, the land of the superior ones is now like a man cast into the sea of devouring crocodiles, like a fatherless child thrown into the den of lions. We battle like the dog and its image in the mirror of the sea (p.29).

These lines speak volumes about the pains, agony and lamentations of the people of Ukolo in the hands of their leader whom they had thought would bring civilization and good governance but who in return dashes all their hopes. Ikenga, voicing out his anger of dissatisfaction to the leadership style of Democracy says:

...we are no longer alive with joy. Ukolo has seen the errors of your political ways. It is so sad that a land formed and strengthened by the blood and bones of our great fathers is being messed up by your matchless and fruitless political style and ideology' (p.36).

Democracy, becoming intolerable with their criticisms of him and his style of leadership, refuses to listen to the voice of reason and goes ahead to brand them ancient and expired cowards who have no better counsel to offer him. Hear him:

DEMOCRACY: The chicken that pecks at soldier ants must run. The cassava tree that dares the big wind will bend and break. This insult is getting too much! Ikenga, NdemNdua, Obiemwen, Omale Okun, Bayajida, Ndem Isong, Olegen, Ahwoisi and Iso, is this how you behave in this land? Don't make me regret coming here to serve you. Each mouth that opens spits fire. Now I realize you have no better counsel to give me. You ancient cowards, your visit has expired (pp 38-39).

This is typical of Nigerian leaders. They hate the audacity of men and women who constructively criticize their government. Rather than welcome wise and good counsel from elders and people of good conscience, they surround themselves with sycophants who feed fat on them by telling them that which appeals to their ears. This, most times, has led to catastrophic end of the leaders. Some of their major tactics in holding on to power against the wish of the people are the principles of divide and rule, excessive use of force to repress all forms of agitation by the people. Leaders are aware of the gullibility of their followers hence they will so threaten them that they will lose confidence in themselves and become puppets in the hands of their masters. Democracy did find dependable allies in the characters of Ogun, Agadagba, Amina, Moremi and Obiemwen that he beckons on them to fight his supposed enemy, Amadioha when the former brazenly declares war on/against him (Democracy). When Ogun attempts to carry out his master's orders, Amadioha promptly responds:

AMADIOHA: Don't touch me with those bloody hands of yours, Ogun. You dine with this fraudulent democracy to run a battle against me? Ogun, I have never known you to be this cowardly and stupid. Where is your independence? Your legendary honour is eroding very fast. It has been messed up by the cruel politics of this democracy? Why have you suddenly become gullible? Don't force me to question your integrity (p.47).

Indeed, this type of attitude on the part of some people believed to have integrity because of their antecedents but who choose to sacrifice their honour and integrity on the altar of political gains calls for concern. Such are people known for their past exploits, outspokenness, wisdom, power and success but rather than deploy their strength for the good of the people will trade it for a pot of porridge. Ogun is known as the god of iron and one expects that he deploys his strength of iron to crush their common enemy but instead he chooses to fight Amadioha safe for the intervention of Agadagba who speaks sense into both of them.

AGADAGBA: Ogun! Ogun! Amadioha, you know you can't fight. Let the past die for the future of Ukolo. Amadioha, you Ogun and I are good brothers, friends indeed. Let us not destroy our age long festive union with anger (p.47).

However, after Agadagba's advice, Ogun retraces his steps and joins forces with Amadioha irrespective of their differences in tribe or religion to enthrone true and genuine democracy using a peaceful approach rather than war. Agadagba further throws more light on their age long brotherhood when he observes that Amadioha, Ogun and himself are children of the same father brought up at different places in Ukolo. It does not matter which region; the fact remains that they are one people. According to him, *we are looked upon by our people as their war generals. Consequently, we own this sweet and beautiful world. ... (p.50).*

This is a great lesson to the people of Nigeria who allow ethnicity and religion to take the better part of their brotherhood. Though Nigerians come from different geo-political zones, they are one indivisible entity with a common goal of achieving unity and true democracy devoid of hatred and wars. Moremi points out the need to choose peace over war in their search for democracy thus:

MOREMI: Amadioha, wars are fought only when absolutely necessary. Wars have no place in a land ruled by logic. We should tread carefully to allow peace reign in our land. We clamoured for democracy to come and rule over us; let us give him a chance. The beginning of everything is difficult. Perhaps if we endure a little more we shall come face to face with the paradise we seek (p.51).

Wars are destructive and devastating that no sensible people or country would choose to go to war as means of solving a problem. The consequences of war are hunger, insecurity and deprivation as against peace and development. This could be seen in the Russian-Ukraine war and Israeli – Hamas war. Moremi observes that engaging in war should be as a last resort and that where there is sense of reasoning it should not even be an option. If the people are determined to reap the benefits of true democracy, they should be prepared to tow the part of peace and be patient as change is always difficult.

Nigeria's democracy is still under captivity as current realities reveal the wantonly cruel suffocation of the people by those in leadership. The democracy in place at the moment in Ukolo Kingdom is a profound poverty of imagination and a purposeful design to gradually and continuously impoverish the people so as to remain in power. This is evident in the actions of false Democracy on the throne who by his authority annihilates people's farm lands, incarcerates one of his subjects, Ozala and forcefully takes over his pregnant wife. The sufferings become unbearable for the people of Ukolo Kingdom (Nigeria) hence the quest for true democracy. False democracy whose real name is Esu, upon discovery of true Democracy, illegally held under captivity by him, refuses to give up easily as evident in his speech: "The throne is mine. I am Democracy. Democracy can't come in here. I declare war! War! Warriors!" (P.58).

In one accord the people resolve at the appropriate time to dethrone false democracy (Esu) and enthrone true democracy as indicated in the following lines:

AGADAGBA: Esu, there is a time to begin and there is time for an end. Your time is over.

OGUN: The coast is clear. The war has ended.

SANGO: Democracy come now and seat on the throne.

DEMOCRACY: Great elders of Ukolo, I am delighted to be in your midst as your servant master. Democracy does not thrive in darkness. The presence of Esu and his likes is the darkness tormenting the land. If democracy must rule successfully in Uklolo, Esu must be banished (p.59).

Indeed, true democratic unity must be stripped of bad and corrupt leaders, insincerity, greed, covetousness, servitude, nepotism, hunger, deprivation, poverty and bad governance. All of these are represented as darkness militating against true democracy. They must give way for true democracy to thrive.

In other words, since humans have failed to provide the much-desired dividends of democracy; the author swiftly invokes the combined spirits of the legendary gods from the geopolitical zones in Nigeria to bring about new democratic change aimed at strengthening the unity of Ukolo kingdom. Spearheaded by Amadioha, the other regional gods namely, Ogun who fights and destroys with iron, Sango the fire king of Ukolo, Ikenga the fearless one, Ndem Isong the fertility goddess of Ukolo, Ologen the tall god, Obiemwen the mother goddess of children and ancestral beings like Moremi and Amina resolve in unison to rescue their land from the tyrannical rule of despondency.

In African tradition, several gods exist in the different cultures and each of these gods has a different name and attributes that clearly specify his/her functions. In Igbo culture, there are several known gods some of which are, Amadioha- god of thunder and lightning, Ikenga- god of strength and war, Agwu-ishi- god of health and divination, Anyanwu- goddess of the sun, Njoku-ji- guardian deity of yam, Ala or Ani – goddess of the earth, fertility, creativity and morality, Idemili- goddess of the ocean and seas amongst others. Ogbodo (2019) observes that Igbo culture parades over 100 gods, both small and big but for some reasons most people do not know anything about them except few. The few known ones include, Amadoha, Ikenga, Agwu-ishi and Igwekala etc.

In Yoruba culture exists several gods or ancestral beings that help shape their history, philosophy, literature and religion. Yoruba mythology involves the presence of the supreme being called Olodumare – a distant god believed to live in the sky and the mightiest of the four supreme deities in the Yoruba religion (Thabit and Walubengo, 2023). Others include, Olorun- the god of creation, Sango- the god of thunder and lightning, Ogun- god of iron and war, Osun- goddess of love, intimacy, wealth, beauty and peacekeeping, Yemoja- goddess of life, Moremi according to history, is not a goddess so to speak but a legendary Yoruba queen and folk heroine known for assisting in the liberation of the Yoruba kingdom of Ife from the neighbouring Ugbo kingdom. (Wikipedia).

Moremi is credited with the spirit of liberating her people from the constant oppression, pillage and raids of the Ugbo people. She displayed unprecedented courage, belief and proves that anyone can do the impossible even as a woman. In the same vein, the name, Amina, according to Hausa history is traced to the ruler ship of Zazzau. She was a legendary Queen of Zazzau known today as Zaria. She was a fearless warrior and was known for her military prowess (Wikipedia). It is in this same spirit of Moremi's and Amina's exploits that Ben Binebai deployed the ancestral beings of Moremi and Amina in unison with the gods towards the inquest for true democracy and unity in Ukolo Kingdom. As diverse as the people of Nigeria are with their ethnic diversity and religious pluralism, so also are the deities from the different regions, each serving the meter physical and supernatural needs of their people. These ancestral beings and gods put their differences aside to fight one common enemy which is false Democracy who occupies the throne of the Democratic Republic of Ukolo. The essence of this unison is to pave the way for the institutionalization of true and genuine democracy that will benefit the generality of the people of Ukolo symbolically representing Nigeria.

One thing is very unique about the setting of the play which portrays centrality. One cannot state categorically whether it is set in the North, East or Southern part of Nigeria. This could simply suggest the unity of purpose of the Playwright who believes in the oneness of the people irrespective of region. The locale centrally, is the 'Pantheon' representing a mountain or village square where all the gods from the various regions congregate for the business of each day. The choice of 'Pantheon' by the author is

significant as it is associated with mystical beings or deities which he effectively deployed for specific purpose. This paper is not meant to delve into the origin of pantheon as established by history but it is also important to restate the fact that 'Pantheon' is derived from the Greek word, pan (all) plus theos (god) literally meaning "all gods", or the complete range of gods and it is traditionally thought to have been designed as a temple for Roman gods (History.com Editors; 2018). Ever since then, the pantheon has never ceased to be associated with the gods who are mystical beings imbued with supernatural powers for cause and effects.

Conclusion

In this study, efforts have been made to re-invent true and genuine democracy which appears to have eluded our country Nigeria since the inception of democratic rule with Binebai's *If Not... a play of the gods* serving as the case study. The unity of Nigeria is non-negotiable hence the need to reawaken the consciousness of the people of Nigeria irrespective of their political, ethnic or religious leanings to once again see themselves as one indivisible entity, tolerant of each other as that is the only way to deepen democratic process and restore the eroded confidence of the people. The present democratic leaders have failed in upholding the dreams of the founding fathers of democracy as well as in uniting the different geo-political regions of this country resulting to the high spate of insurgency, weaponization of poverty, proliferation of illegal arms and wanton killings in the country. As a matter of fact, there is the need to return to status quo in reinventing true democracy in Nigeria as that would guarantee equity, fairness, justice and good conscience.

Recommendations

This study employed a mythopoeic view to analyze Ben Binebai's thought provoking play, *If Not...A play of the gods*, as a paradigm for re-inventing true democratic unity in Nigeria. Having identified some of the major setbacks impeding the institutionalization of true democratic unity in Nigeria, this study therefore recommends a reorientation of democratic values in Nigeria emphasizing the importance of accountability, transparency and citizen participation.

There is also the need for cultural revival and reorientation, highlighting the importance of reclaiming and reintegrating Nigeria's rich cultural heritage in ways that promote democratic unity and national cohesion. The study suggests areas for further research including the role of social media in shaping democratic discourse, the impact of economic inequality on democratic unity and the potential of traditional institutions in promoting national cohesion. All of these are geared towards re-awakening the consciousness of the Nigerian state to its one indivisible entity bound in love for brotherhood and the status quo of traditional deities in fostering national unity which the concept of federal character has failed to achieve.

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