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OZO-MEKURI NDIMELE (Ed.)



Language Policy, Planning & Management IN NIGERIA:

A Festschrift for Ben O. Elugbe

Language Policy, Planning & Management
in Nigeria:

A Festschrift for Ben O. Elugbe

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The Relevance of J.S. Sowande's (Sobo Arobiodu) Poems in the Contemporary Nigerian Society

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It is the duty of a poet in every society to serve as watchman for his people. He is naturally gifted to employ language in an elevated way to draw the attention of members of the society towards happenings around them. The message he has for the people as well as the aesthetic quality of his work would determine the extent to which his message would stand the test of time. The object of this paper is to examine the relevance of some of the poems of a great Yoruba (Egba) poet, J.S. Sowande (Sobo Arobiodu), to the present day Nigerian situation. He wrote his poems during the colonial era but as a poet, he stood and still stands out like the Biblical Abel who 'though he being dead yet speaketh' (Hebrews 11:4).

Introduction

Josiah Sobowale Sowande popularly called Sobo Arobiodu was born in Ake area of Abeokuta in 1858. He attended C.M.S. Training Institute where he acquired his ability to read and write Yoruba. According to Lijadu and Babalola (1974:iii), Sobo Arobiodu wrote many poems which were published in 1902, 1906, 1919, 1921, 1924, 1928, 1929, 1934 and 1936. He worked as an overseer of prison in the then Egba Kingdom between 1898 and 1907. He was a reader of the Holy Writ in Church, a farmer and of course one of the most successful poets of his time. He died in 1936.

Despite the fact that Sobo Arobiodu wrote his poems between 1902 and 1936, the poems are undisputably relevant to contemporary Nigerian society. Some of his poems dealt with the themes such as importance of education, indigenous languages, religious hypocrisy and socio-political matters.

A poet is an open-eyed individual, whose ears are tuned with keen interest to know the events and happenings around him. He is an embodiment of his community; he acquaints himself with the rich and the poor to understand their problems, yearnings and aspirations for the purpose of commenting on these in his poems (Olatunji: 1982:13). According to Olatunji (1982:7) it was customary among the Egba people as well as in other parts of Yoruba land where the *oro* cult (a Yoruba cultural festival in honour of *oro* deity) is practiced to satirize on all the happenings around them and they were protected against any legal action by their customary laws. Hence the saying:

N o o wi, oba ki i pokorin (Olatunji 1982:7)

(I shall say it, the king does not kill the chanter).

It is the duty of a poet to act as watchman for the society he finds himself because of his inherent ability to see things that others cannot or are yet to see (Ezejideaku 1995:1).

The poet as a political animal also performs the function of a political commentator. An example is Fatoba who wrote on "The Second Coming of the Politicians" in Olatunji (1995:331 & 332) where the poet revealed that the politicians have destroyed the nation in their self-destructing greed. Sobo Arobiodu served his society well in this assignment of magnanimous responsibility. His poetic comments on events taking place around him earned him the cognomen: Arobiodu (He who sounds like Odu – a bell-like instrument). Apart from committing his poems into writing, he was well known for his oral performance as he sometimes went about to chant his poem. Some of his major themes would now be discussed with a view to examining how relevant they could be to correct some of the societal ills that are prevalent in Nigeria of today.

Importance of Education

On the importance of education, Sobo had this to say:

Eko gbe ni niyi, ogbon gbe ni ga gogoro

(Lijadu & Babalola, 1974:34)

Education brings one to honour,
wisdom brings one to reputation.

To understand Sobo more clearly, let us look at this other one:

Ko si un me i iyi nse mi

Bi ai duro-le-si-sukuru' re

Ijo eniyan ko duro lo si sukuru' re o bogiri

E ko de bi mi lebi i bo ti se i?

Sobo sise ghodun mefa ni'le Oba

Owo re ko foke (Lijadu & Babalola 1974:30)

There is no other problem affecting me

Other than my irregularity in school.

Those days that a man failed to be regular in school,

It was too bad.

You don't want to ask me why?

Sobo worked for six whole years in the palace,

No increment in his salary.

Here, the poet bemoans his fate which resulted from his low level of education. He blamed himself for playing truancy. When he was supposed to be in school, he would

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follow some friends to grooves of Oro and Agemo (Yoruba deities). In spite of the mass literacy programmes in the country in form of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) today, most of our cities and towns are filled with disgruntle elements called the "Area Boys" who are mostly drop-outs. Most of them like Sobo never realized the great price they have to pay for not doing the right thing at the right time until when it is too late.

Indigenous Languages

Sobo decried the negative attitude of the people towards their indigenous languages. This he expressed thus:

Mi i ile ibi a bi ni si si ree a i so lede
Omo iyi Jimba bi l'Ake ko fo Ake lenu ko fo Gbein
Bi ko fo Kannike ki i simi lerinkan
Eyin ko ri Jimba yi n da maalu kiri
Pe ko fo Jesa i? (Lijadu & ABabalola 1974:33)
I said we should speak the language of our land
Jimba's son born in Ake did not speak the languages of Ake and Igbein
He cannot do without speaking Kannike (his own language)
Don't you see Jimba the cow rearer that he doesn't speak Ijesa.

Today, the attitude of people to indigenous languages and culture has not changed. Many parents do not see anything good in their own language. It is English language they want for their children. No doubt those parents are ignorant of the educational and cognitive functions of the Mother-Tongue (MT) towards learning (Makinde 1996:4). Araromi (2005) notes that the Nigerian children's use of English in school poses a number of teaching problems. According to him, since most of the pupils come from non-English speaking homes, mastery of the language is a Herculean task. The poor mastery of English tends to affect the mastery of other subjects in the school curriculum.

The Church and Materialism

In his reflection on the materialistic tendencies or affinities of the church of his time, he commented that:

Igbagbo ara isaaju fa ni mora ju tero eyin
Igbagbo igba yi n pe olozo aye tantan
O n lo otosi dehin
Eni ko ba sanwo Apo n'omo wa, o d'omo Odara. (Olatunji, 1982:22)

The faith of early believers is better than that of nowadays.
Believers of today run after the rich of the world
And turns away the poor
Whoever fails to pay for the priests' purse, is the son of Satan.

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would

These days like Sobo's have become perilous because those who are supposed to correct the society through their exemplary dispositions are the same people who promote unhealthy rivalry within the Church. There is religious meretriciousness everywhere. Posts given to people depend on the fatness of their tithes and not according to the measure of their fervency, chieftaincy titles are given to people who seldom attend the church on account of monetary consideration. Today, many churches are established mainly to amass wealth. Surely if Sobo were to be alive today, goings-on in the church would have been appalling to him.

Political Domination and Corruption

Sobo Arobiodu discountenanced the exploitation, injuries and oppression that attended the reign of the Colonial masters. In his poem on the domination of the Europeans on Egba and the Africans, he writes:

Mo de tun sakiyesi oro kan
 ki ng wi tabi ki ng jowo re gidi?
 Asiko yi si eniyan dudu de le bo
 Lowo Oyinbo fufu?
 Gbadebo, eniyan dudu ti f'ibukun won tore (Lijadu & Babalola, 1974:41)

I have another observation,
 Shall I say it or forget about it?
 When shall the dark-complexioned man be free from the hands of the
 Europeans?
 Gbadebo, the dark-complexioned man has given out his blessing.

He also gave a revelation of the abominations and exploratory practices perpetrated by the servants of the white men in these lines:

Ohun danasungbo Oyinbo nse Ibadan
 Ng ka wi e na?
 Nwon nkeran loja laisanwo eran:
 Nwon a gb'epo, nwon a b'ogiri
 Nwon nyo kele wo le eniyan lo baya won se 'dapo (Lijadu & Babalola 1974:41)

What the Whiteman's servants are doing at Ibadan?
 Shall I tell you?
 They pack animals in the market without paying for them!
 They take palm oil and fermented melon!
 They sneak into other men's homes to assault their wives sexually.

Sobo also went further to expose some whitemen who were characteristically wicked and irreversibly exploitative. He gave his personal experience here:

Oyinbo kan ko nye wa be mi logede libi mo gbe n roko
Lona Ibadan
Kehinde Atanbati f'ede Oyinbo p'egberun owe
Opa! b'o yun ogede nu. (Olatunji 1982:47-48).

A Whiteman did not cease from harvesting plantain in my farm
Along Ibadan Road .

Kehinde Atanbati said a thousand proverbs in English language to stop him.
Alas! He didn't stop stealing my plantain.

Sobo was expressing his griefs at the antisocial attitude of that Whiteman. What can we say of fellow Africans and Nigerians who use their position to exploit and oppress their people? The situation we are having in the country is that of maladministration and insensitivity to people's excruciating social-economic woes. Those who are vocal enough to point out the anomalies openly are made to pay dearly for their affrontry. This state of affairs prevailed in Sobo's days for he commented, thus:

Eyin omode Egba, e ko de ngb'oro mi na?
Ng ko je peri Oyinbo libi af'a ba nsawada
Igba Oyinbo yi de, ibi o fi sunwon de opin ni.

Iyi buru nnu re o poju're, ki s'awada
Eni ba la wi kan, a di tire nikan
Orin: Ati buruku ati rere,
Ati buruku ati rere,
E ko ma gbo kan'lenu mi (Olatunji, 1982:50)

Egba youths don't you hear my words?
I won't wish evil for the Whiteman, unless we are joking
This Whiteman's period is good indeed
The ills however outnumber the good; it's not a joke,
He, who says something, will bear the responsibility

Song: Both good and bad
Both good and bad
I won't voice any of them

Sobo would have been a good prophet for he foretold the end to the reign of the colonial masters.

Sugbon pipe re o ma a pe, agbon kasai de adie
 Ko ni i pe titi k'Oyinbo maa wo'kun lo
 Si'ya ehin Osa. (Lijadu & Babalola 1974:41)

However long it may be, the fowl would be covered by the basket;
 It won't be long till the Europeans would enter the sea and go
 Behind the Lagoon.

This offers consolation to the masses who are suffering from the hands of oppressors and dictators in that whatever has a beginning would surely have an end. There would be an end to the activities of malevolent elements that debase our moral values.

Social Life of the People

Sobo Arobiodu mirrored the society in which he lived in his poems. He talked about the marital practices, festivals, his experiences in the courts, and indeed all the happenings around him to prove that those things did not escape his watchful eyes. Time and space would not permit the writer to quote verses of his poems to confirm those claims. His views on polygamy are however given below:

Eni n'aya pupo a fi ra'ku tira,
 Eni de bi'mo pupo a bakeran-wariwa (Olatunji, 1982:14)

He who marries many wives procures death for himself
 He who gets many children gives birth to wild animals.

This is no doubt the true picture of many homes today as it was in the days of Sobo. Many children born into polygamous homes have a lot to tell of woeful and sorrowful experiences they are exposed to. Some parents who gave birth to more than enough children are also biting their fingers as they reap the harvest of disgrace, heartache, anguish, restlessness due to the unruly behaviour of their children.

Olurode and Olusanya (2005) no doubt share the same view with Sobo when they note that among the Yoruba people, those who wish to venture into marriage are cautioned because getting married is not as difficult as finding the money for soup. To bear children and fail to nurture them is an aberration.

Conclusion

If it is a popularly held belief that the past cannot be divorced from the present and that it is the past that charts the course for the future (Idowu, 1996:7), then the poems of Sobo Arobiodu should not be considered irrelevant to contemporary Nigerian society. The colonial masters had gone as prophesied by Sobo Arobiodu; but

his vision of Nigeria and the Black race as a whole is that which should enjoy true peace and stability. That kind of stability that would denounce corruption in all its facets. Oppression, greed and the system that gives room for brigands or bandits in the corridors of power should be decried by all.

Present day poets must therefore arise like faithful compatriots and echo their voices of reason to the generality of the people in language they can understand. They must compose and recite poems that deal with such themes as the value of education, war against indiscipline and corruption, praising such virtues such as tolerance, kindness, patriotism, obedience, honesty, probity, respect for human rights, and good citizenship.

We cannot but commend the contribution of some present day Yoruba poets like Lanrewaju Adepoju, Demola Adedibu, Yemi Elebubon, Olatunbosun Oladapo, Adebayo Faleti and others in this regard. For instance Lanrewaju Adepoju "Ni bo La n lo" an advisory piece to a derailing government was quoted by Adeyinka (1990:257) while he was expressing that a poet should see it as an obligation to the society in which he lives to comment on all aspects of the society including the behaviour of those in authority. The translated version of the poem is given below:

Which way are we heading in this country?

Let us know

Why is everything going upside down

In our life time

This situation is pathetic and unfortunate.

The poet in the society can then be likened to Radio Osun:

Akuko gagara

To rori ope re e le tente

Oju tole, oju toko

The giant cock

That perches on top of the palm tree

Keeping eyes on every direction.

However, it is one thing for the poet to speak and it is another for the people to take redress. It is the societal response or reaction that would determine the relevance of such a poet to the society in question.

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