

Indices of Conflict Triggers in Femi Ajewole’s Theatrical Performances in Oyo State, Southwest, Nigeria

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Conflicts may be triggered by various factors. When not managed can lead to conflict escalation. This paper interrogates the theatrical performances of Christ Chosen Vessels (CCV), a Christian Drama Ministry. Scholars have established theatrical performances remain a tool for change. However, there is limited literature on the role of theatrical performances in peace and conflict studies. This paper analyses the conflict triggers in the theatrical performances of CCV.

This study is guided by social identity theory by Henri Tajfel. It adopted qualitative research and case study design. Primary sources of data include KII (2); IDI (2); police reports; and video CDs (3) of selected performances of CCV. Secondary sources include books, journals and theses. Descriptive methods were used to analyze data. Findings showed religious codes, language, characterization, and costume served as conflict triggers. It was concluded that theatrical performances can trigger conflicts. This paper recommends theatrical artists must consider the sensitivity of others in the process of creativity in respect of diversity for peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: theatrical performances, conflict triggers, peaceful coexistence

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has recorded a protracted history of religious conflict between Muslims and Christians. In other words, the conflict between these two religions dates back many centuries ago. Religion, to believers, portends a sense of belonging and so there is often the tendency for strict adherence by practitioners who are always prepared to defend their belief with their might because of the “push for orthodoxy (correct beliefs), and, or orthopraxy (correct practices), among adherents of any faith” (Joreiman, 2003:4). In religious conflicts, the content, contexts, contextualization and phases change but the basic contention lies in the rivalry between the two religions. The competition for supremacy has extended beyond religion to ideas, causing a divide between the Western and the Arab world where the Western is identified as Christian

and the Arab world as Islam. Omoregbe (1993) in echoing the thoughts of Emile Durkheim notes that religion serves as an instrument of control in the society. It is the instrument with which the society controls people and molds their minds in order to direct their thinking.

Africa has had to endure division created by Europe and Arabs through the colonization of African states. The African identity was downplayed and a foreign identity was imposed on the people using the lines of religion. Danjibo (2010) reiterates that Christianity and Islam are forms of colonialism that the Africans failed to understand. The Jihadist conquest and missionary activities formed new contradictory identities among Africans. Onu (2009) observes that these contradictory identities have led to hostilities between individuals, groups and states. According to Fisher *et. al* (2000:4), “Violence is a form of conflict and consists of actions, words, attitudes, structures or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damages and, or prevent people from reaching their full human potential.” Sometimes, the hostilities become volatile, escalate into riots, and dovetail into conflict and loss of lives and property. Religious conflict differs from intergroup conflicts because adherents of faith spontaneously become volatile once they perceive threats to their religious beliefs and values. Adherents are comfortable dying for their belief and faith/ and such deaths have been demonstrated in various suicide bombings since the advent of Boko Haram in Nigeria’s northeastern states of Yobe, Adamawa and Bauchi (YAB States) over two decades ago; and through the terrorist attacks of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and in the world in general.

Conflict is a human phenomenon and it is ubiquitous. Some scholars have even established that conflict is a mechanism for growth and expansion. As explained by Smootha (in Akpuru-Aja, 2007:19), the international concept actually encourages conflict on the “grounds that harmonious, peaceful, tranquil and cooperative relations grow out of conflict.” Extant literature has also documented numerous theories, concepts, definitions and manifestations of conflict from philosophical, sociological, anthropological, economic or political perspectives because it is prevalent in human interactions. Kwon and Silva (2019) draw attention to the broadness of human behaviour because it contains cross-cutting issues and therefore, generally relies on generalizations. Essentially, peace scholars have to continually interrogate issues of conflicts because conflict mostly deals with social behaviour, a highly unpredictable aspect of man. According to Omisore and Abiodun (2014) who concurred with several other scholars, human relation is an inevitable concept of conflict. Coser (1956), Lund, (1997), and International Alert (1996) perceive conflict as a contest for incompatible goals between two individuals or groups using incompatible means to strive for the same goal. In another dimension, Wang & Wu (2020) investigate the causes and impact of conflict management on the performance of a performance team. One of their findings which concurred with those of Hegre, Allansson & Basedau, (2019) and Chadefaux, (2014) is that early warning signals aided the prevention of violence and war; where the early warning measures forecast or predicts violence or conflicts in a bid to preventing them.

The postulations of these scholars coalesce around the fact that every human system is not only plagued by conflicts but that conflict prevention strategies put in place can either promote peace or escalate the conflict. This paper contributes to the rethinking of conflict triggers and theatrical performances with a view to de-escalating conflict, engendering expansion and growing robust development in a peaceful atmosphere because without peace there cannot be meaningful development. The broad objective of this study is to empirically examine conflict triggers in theatrical performances as well as demonstrate how proposed solutions can impact peace scholars and practitioners; theatre scholars and practitioners, policymakers, government at all levels, and the larger human society.

Method of Analysis

This study examines, as a case study, the ability of theatrical performances or dramatic performances (two phrases that will be used interchangeably in this paper) to serve as conflict triggers in the theatrical performances of *Christ Chosen Vessels*, a Christian Drama group. The study will further analyse the content, context and contextualization of conflict in the dramatic performances of the group. *Christ Chosen Vessels* is domiciled in Oyo State, the Southwestern part of Nigeria. It is imperative to quickly examine conflict triggers and religious conflict since this study will use those terminologies extensively.

Trigger, according to the Oxford Dictionary (2006), is an event which makes other things happen. Schmid (1998) explains conflict triggers as events that spontaneously hasten the outbreak of conflict. In other words, conflict triggers propel an incident whose occurrence provokes a positive or negative reaction. As observed by Caldara, McBride, McCarter & Sheremeta (2017) in economics, conflict triggers suggest monetary incentives; in social psychology, they suggest fear; and in evolution biology, they are often caused by uncertainty in an opponent's desire to cause harm. Essentially, therefore, events usually lead to emotional responses which serve as triggers, causal factors, generators or motors for conflicts. Triggers represent the macro-social in the form of events, while motors are the 'micro-systems' including emotional responses associated with events "which continuously maintain (intra-group) stability and (inter-group) conflict" (Reed, 2004:94). Emotions always influence social relations because they guide behaviours that lead to actions.

Religious conflict, in the view of Ushe (2015), refers to a situation where two or more religious groups have disagreements. The disagreements may be caused by misperception, wrong opinions, abuse of power, and any other negative relational circumstances. A religious conflict is usually induced or morphed by religion. Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert, (2019); Danjibo & Okolie-Osemene (2018), and Henne & Klocek (2017), among other scholars have also concurred that religious conflicts are value-based and have the potential to degenerate to very destructive human behaviours, leading to physical and psychological harm.

The extant available literature on conflict triggers has come from different scholars and different perspectives. Caldara *et al.* (2017) in a study focus on post-organization settings on triggers of conflict, and its resultant reaction found psychological and physical changes but mostly emotional reactions as prevalent. The study further depicted that changes, which are neurological aggravate individual behaviour and result in more severe conflict responses. Lappalainen (2019), in a similar study, investigates negative undercurrents affecting team communication and their impact on individuals. Denton & Ryder (2009) use the perspectives of role ambiguity, scarce resources, fear, power relations and response to the unfamiliar to interrogate the process of theatre productions and the generation of conflicts in theatre arts departments in universities.

Adesina (1998) postulates that real-life experiences of the audience often manifest in the conflicts that form the themes in dramas. Today, the development and functionality of theatrical or dramatic performances are passing through rapid, and sometimes, violent changes. Therefore, the audience gains exposure and experiences from the play and consequently applies such lessons to their personal lives. Hallgren & Osterlind (2019) explore drama as an education initiative used for teaching civics education and migration. Silvey (2014) describes performing arts as a valuable resource for children's sense of well-being through imaginative play. The focus of this study, which also doubles as the gap, is to address theatrical performances as conflict triggers, using themes and rhythms in Christ Chosen Vessels' dramatic performances.

Theatrical performance is situated in the realm of social interaction of man and holds the potential for triggering conflict because of various interactions experienced within the theatre environment itself. Every theatrical performance is an interplay and interaction of actors, theatre personnel, crew, and actor-audience. In other words, theatrical performances provide ample ambience and nuances for both triggering and interrogating conflict at various levels such as the thematic structure of the performance, using performance to generate conflict from the immediate audience to the larger society, and provoking inter and intra-group conflict within and between various theatrical groups. From a sociological perspective, Silvey (2014), and Colman & Colman (2020) describe theatricals, performing or dramatic arts as educative, informative, socializing and entertaining, and as one of the artistic activities of man.

Historically, the theatre served as a major contributor to the formation and development of human societies. In early societies, religious doctrines were epithets of myths and ritual performances, serving as a tool for social control. Ogunbiyi (1981) states that the origin of many robust theatrical traditions in various Nigerian societies emanated from numerous religious festivals and rituals which are the expression of meeting particular human needs. Human nature is complex because whatever positive or negative action he experiences either as a participant or as a viewer is stored in his mind and can be retrieved and later replayed in communication. It is in the process of replay that man's artistic or creative virtue comes to play as he

attempts to delete or recreate experiences in order to satisfy his inner yearnings and exaggerate those experiences found acceptable and pleasurable. To echo the views of the words of Cassius Longinus, a literary critic whose work on aesthetics and good writing was dated 1st Century, “man can reproduce the second level of reality (<https://www.britannica.com>). Dean and Carra (1974: 4) explained that it is instructive that while “the stimulus produced by the work of art has not dictated what the individual should think, it has brought to action or consciousness the individual’s own experiences, images or ideas about life. It may stir the individual to a deeper realization of life and man’s relationship to it . . .” This can be described as the agenda-setting role of the arts.

Modern technology, particularly the electronic media, has created a tremendous improvement in the actualization of dramatic forms and has imbued the latter with a potent capacity for propaganda at the social, political or even religious levels. The electronic media, therefore, entrench the artist’s doctrines within the cognitive and the affective domains of their audience, and the society at large. Efforts at entrenching Christian doctrines through the theatrical performances of Christ Chosen Vessels triggered conflictual reactions from the National Council of Muslim Youth Organization (NACOMYO) an Islamic religious organisation in Oyo State, Southwest, Nigeria in the year 2010.

Man’s Daily Activities as Performance

Turner (1987) postulates that performance is the presentation of self in everyday life. In the social sciences and humanities, performance can be grouped into two parts: social performances and cultural performances. Social performances include social drama which often enacts societal problems and advocates change in the status quo. Cultural performances include aesthetic drama which appeals to aesthetics. The genre and types of performance usually differ from one culture to the other but tend to be similar because they are guided by “style, goals, entelechy, rhetoric, developmental pattern and characteristic roles” (Turner 1987:13).

The literary theory reveals that theatrical performance is the interpretative rendition of literary work which is acted out as a play. Osipovich (2006) notes that in the course of acting out this creative imagination, an interaction evolves between the performers and the audience in a given space. During this interactive moment, both parties live in the pretence of reality in real time a reality described as ‘willing suspension of disbelief,’ a phrase created by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). However, the performance is an interpretation of a creative idea (written/unwritten) which comes to life as a play. Ellingson (1995) states that theatrical performances call attention to problems that had not earlier been seen as impediments to progress in order to inspire people who hitherto were lackadaisical in their attitude towards change to take sides and make believable oppositional understandings. “Dramatic events are also accompanied by collectively shared emotions, and in effect, ‘emotional climates’ that similarly help define the unfolding of the political” (Reed, 2004:93).

Government’s Ban on Theatrical Performances

History is replete with governments’ imposition of a ban on theatrical performances. The ban comes at both the supra and supranational levels because of the anxiety that such performances had the potential for provocative reactions from the audience and the larger community. Some of the, theatrical performances that were banned include Hubert Ogunde’s *Strike and Hunger* (1949); *Bread and Bullet* (1950), and *Yoruba Ronu* (1960). Due to being a critic of the government through leading political protests, Wole Soyinka’s play *The Man Died* (1984) was banned by a court in Nigeria. In 1977, the Kenyan Government banned Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii’s controversial play entitled *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want). The play was published in 1970 but performed at Kamirithu Educational and Cultural Centre, Kenya in 1977. The play covers post-colonial themes of class struggle, poverty, gender, culture, religion, modernity versus tradition, marriage and family. After its ban, the government arrested and detained both playwrights in December 1977 and released them in 1978. The two playwrights then fled into exile. Ngugi wa Mirii went to Zimbabwe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o went to the UK.

The official ban on theatrical performances (which birthed gadfly) has only reduced; it has not stopped. A recent instance was the ban on Twitter usage by Nigeria government. The obverse of the ban is that the

government is unwittingly confirming the potency and irrepressible ability of theatrical performances and social media to evoke spontaneous and volatile reactions from the audience. Echoes of the 2010/2011 Arab Spring continue to resonate in social media to the discomfiture of politicians and governments. The various bans and stoppages of theatrical performances were largely designed by the government to stem public protests and social upheavals, and perpetuate the status quo. On the contrary, the citizens need to see the reality of their life as depicted by theatrical performances. Unfortunately, productive intervention by theatrical performances is severely limited by the paucity of relevant literature, a lacuna that this paper seeks to correct. It is in this regard that this paper, on the one hand, uses conflict triggers to explore the vortex of theatrical performances, audience reactions, and desired change in order to challenge impediments to development, and on the other hand, promote peacebuilding in this nation in particular and the human community at large because without peace and justice there cannot be robust development in this world.

Motivation for Change

Ogunbiyi reiterates that “Nigerian theatre and drama originated with the Nigerian himself, embodying his first pre-occupations, his first struggles, successes, setbacks and all” (Ogunbiyi 1981:3). This struggle, especially, the need for a paradigm shift and improvement in the human societies, has been sustained by dramatic arts which have not only been serving as a major change-motivator but has been resonating resoundingly with technological growth. The attendant successes of various theatrical forms have multiplier effects in our modern world. In the US and UK, for instance, theatrical performances yield enormous revenue, providing various jobs and reinforcing positive ethos, values and virtues for the larger society. In Nigeria, the movie industry (further development of dramatic arts) popularly referred to as *Nollywood* has continuously grown the nation’s economy and impacted a positive cultural export, redeeming the nation’s public image in superlative ways than diplomacy. Public analysts have described the industry as one of the fastest-growing sectors in Nigeria. As a major sub-sector of the entertainment industry, *Nollywood’s* impact has become so resounding that the Federal Government has provided structural support for the industry largely because it keeps expanding and creating job opportunities for professionals and amateurs alike. Individual politicians and political parties keep exploiting the potential of movie practitioners in galvanising electoral support and shopping for votes. *Nollywood* movies appeal more to the youth and in the youth lies the most resounding energy of any nation because it is both the most productive and the largest sector of the economy. Their sheer size and propensity to attain set objectives played out as they supported the election of Desmond Elliot, a Nigerian film actor, as a lawmaker of the Lagos State House of Assembly for Surulere Constituency in the 11th April 2015 general elections. The *Nollywood* industry is mainly recognised as an entertainment industry, yet it did not downplay its primary role of information and education.

Therefore, its impact on society cannot be ignored in the efforts at effecting change. Some of the distinct roles of dramatic arts (which have been subsumed in *Nollywood* movies) is the externalization of early warning signals (captured as danger signals, warning utterances, attitudes, decisions and actions), which come across as conflict triggers. The concept of conflict indicator in conflict analysis is that conflict does not just occur, rather before any conflict, the early warnings would have offered ample signals. These signals offer ample opportunities to conflict managers to institute conflict prevention, management and strategies.

Synopsis of Christ’s Chosen Vessel

Christ Chosen Vessels is a group of artistes led by Femi Ajewole, a young producer, actor and playwright. This Christian Ministry commenced its dramatic arts vocation with 10 members in January, 2002. At inception, the group was named *Chosen Young’s* but four years later (2006), Ajewole renamed it *Christ Chosen Vessels* after saying he got inspired by God. The group comprised youths (young boys and girls) who were either in secondary schools or waiting to gain admission into tertiary institutions. The group puts up theatrical performances in churches, have becoming popular and now drawing increasing large admirers and followership since it started operating twenty years ago. Over the years, different churches have invited them to participate in special programmes such as vigils, church anniversaries and

youth programmes. The group has become so popular that those that invite them literally advertise the troupe's expertise. In other words, the organisation that invites the group to their programmes promotes it on posters, billboards and handbills.

Transformation to Alfa Sule

How did Femi Ajewole, the group leader, come to be popularly known as “*Alfa Sule*?” He is one of the personae and the personality has become about the most popular character in the cast. *Alfa Sule*'s roles always thrill members of the audience in various churches and the name has become a synecdoche for the group. Anytime the group is to be invited to perform and could not be easily reached due to poor communication (poor network and internet access), organizers of such programmes usually refer to the drama group as *Alfa Sule* or *Otiganpa*. According to Ajewole, the first time the group was introduced as *Alfa Sule* at a performance centre, it missed its cue because the group did not connect with the name since it did not resonate on that occasion. Between 2008 and 2011, it performed and put on electronic media (VCDs) the following plays *Take Heed* (Sora), *Pride*, *Amos 3/3*, and *Owe*.

It would appear as if the theatrical performances of those early years fetched it immense popularity and earned *Alfa Sule* a favorite place in the mind of the audience. *Alfa Sule* (See Figure 2) is featured as a major character in *Take Heed* (Sora). The group soon connected the name *Alfa Sule* to its identity and practically took on the image of *Alfa Sule* as a major icon. Since then, the group had incorporated the name into their corporate image by featuring it on posters and announcement platforms as *Christ Chosen Vessels (aka Alfa Sule)* as shown on Figures 3-5. The group is based in Ibadan but has leveraged its dramatic performances on stage on the electronic media. The group's name has a religious connotation but its themes and performances are cross-cutting. So the group has been performing for both religious and secular audiences.

Analogue to Digital

For this paper, the focus will be on the group's (first five and two edited versions) performances as recorded on videos and sold in the open market. At its inception, the group started its theatrical productions using the traditional church premises. It adopted the church premises as a theatre setting through the use of props and backdrops. At that time, the group only did stage performances and recorded them on Compact Discs (CDs), a digital optical disc data storage format for documentation. At each of the performances, the group subtly but successively transmitted content, context, contextualization, nuances and other sublime themes, and messages (on the benefits of cautiousness) to the audience, using conflict triggers contained in *Take Heed (sora)*, as an example. As their themes expanded, their audiences grew.

However, due to increasing demand and because the group saw itself as evangelical and not-for-profit, it started selling the recorded CDs on a small scale, just to meet basic group needs. Today, the group now has, to its credit, several CDs. In order to extend its reach and reiterate its messages, the group has consciously resorted to filming theatrical performances and burning them onto Compact Discs (CDs), and Digital Video Disk (now updated into Digital Versatile Disk [DVD]). Through the technological innovations of CDs, and DVDs, the group embarked on mass dissemination of content, context and contextualization to variegated audiences (comprising Christians, Muslims, believers in traditional deities and non-believers) and has been able to achieve a more resounding impact. In addition to mass dissemination and market expansion, it has created employment at various levels for many people and consequently achieved multiple effects not just in Ibadan but in major metropolis of the world. This meant the group has become open not just to a selective audience but to a larger and more varied audience.

Christ Chosen Vessels Dance Drama Ministry's Conflict Triggers

Conflict triggers are spotlighted in particular events or incidences. In the words of Akpuru-Aja (2009:16), conflict indicators may be triggered by “provocative utterances or decisions or actions that automatically give vent to an outburst of frustration or aggression by a party through manifest violence.” A conflict trigger is usually initiated by one of the parties in the conflict. After the annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections in Nigeria, for instance, crises were triggered in various parts of the country by the annulment. Okolie (2009) traces the historical antecedents of conflicts to identity, ethnicity, and anomalies

in the extraction, production and distribution of resources. Best (2006) notes three related dimensions such as the distant past, immediate past and current events as conflict triggers. On September 7, 2001, in Jos, a non-Muslim girl passing through a congregation of Muslim worshippers at prayer time was rough-handled and this triggered conflict. Within a short while, there were violent confrontations between non-Muslims and Muslims in the Congo-Russia community. But the latent context of that conflict had been from 1994 to 1996 between the authorities of a private mosque and non-Muslims living in the Congo-Russia Community. The issue in conflict is the irritant disposition of the Muslims towards the “local alcohol reputation” of the Congo-Russia Community which they blame on non-Muslims. The above expositions offer this paper an appropriate entry window for examining conflict triggers of Christ Chosen Vessels Dance Drama Ministry.

The themes of *Alfa Sule's* plays proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Femi Ajewole refers to his plays as modern dance drama which develops themes that explicate the power of Jesus. The power in the name of Jesus is testified to in his production as being able to overcome all other powers, especially the works of darkness. The name of Jesus is invoked in those productions to heal, prosper, deliver and serve as an answer to all of man's problems (whether physical or spiritual, economic or social). The contents of his productions are evangelical and the promotion the gospel of Jesus Christ. This touches on religious beliefs, just as it promotes Christianity. It ought to be stated that the performances recognize the existence of other powers as characterized by Awojiginni (*Ifa* priest), *Yeye Osun* (Osun priestess), *Woli Agba* (a prophet of a white garment church), Islamic cleric (Alfa Sule), Professor (Guru of the oriental or Indian origin), and *Anjonu* (spiritual beings of the Yoruba pantheon). He asserts that the power in the name of Jesus is superior to all other powers. All other religious beliefs, which he portrays in his performances, are either fake, powerless or weak, or a combination of these three.

However, some people have taken exceptions to what they perceive as insinuations of Islamic subjects and objects in two of his theatrical performances entitled *Oruko Nla* (Superior Name) and *Take Heed* (Sora). According to Dr Amoo Alaga, an Islamic cleric and leader of an Islamic group, “the context of the conflict is not a recent development rather, it has been graduating and the anomaly is getting crystallized in negativity” (Interview with Dr Dawood Alaga, 22nd September, 2011). Following the controversy and conflict generated by some of Ajewole's works, the CDs had to be withdrawn from the open markets and edited.

In both *Oruko Nla* (Superior Name) and *Take Heed* (Sora), the themes in the performances focus on poverty, joblessness, marital disharmony; negative attitudes and behaviour such as pride and greed. His performances are fashioned after the Folk Opera of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre; Ogunde's theatrical form. This draws its style from the indigenous theatrical styles of the Yoruba traditional culture. He demonstrates this by chanting not in the traditional guttural mimicry tone but in the modern-day rap technique. He complements his performances with other theatre methods of music, dance, drama and costume. His performance is in the narrative form, which commences with an opening glee reminiscent of the *Eegun Alare* (Masquerade) theatre fashion performances. It also echoes a related tradition of *Eegun Alarinjo* among the Yoruba. His theme song is a call for Christian believers to be fervent in their belief and in their service to God. This usually precedes the actual dramatic performance. He blends background beats with his narrative as he voices out verses and choruses. His songs are simple, popular, short and easy to sing along with by the audience who are able to follow and recall them because he uses the popular call-response format. He uses scat singing (using words or sounds with no semantic meaning, though in rhythmic flow).

His technique is mimetic. Usually, the narrator is the voice-over for all the characters. This style of performance was most prominent in his early works such as *Take Heed* (Sora) and *Oruko Nla* (Superior Name). The narrator has to oscillate between the characters in tonal and voice-change. His video productions embed the use of soundtrack with reggae or highlife styles. This use is seen in the video production of *Amos 3/3*. The musical composition in his performances makes extensive use of African traditional musical instruments such as *Agogo* (bell) and *Ilu* (drums). Flashbacks are high points in his use of storytelling techniques. Ajewole refers to his theatrical performances as “modern dance drama.” He presents serious themes through comedy and consequently offers pleasure to the audience by the relaxation

of emotions, while eliciting a lot of laughter. This dramatic form has endeared his performances to both young and old. The language of his performances is Yoruba with the interjection of the English language. This is done both in the musical and dramatic narrations. The video productions are subtitled in English and French languages to reach a wider audience, which is an implication for marketing and international acceptance.

Holub (1989) notes that the interpretation of any work of art is dependent on the readers' extrapolation. These are determined not just by the text and the reader but also within an interpretative framework. The first issue in the cause of conflict between the Christ Chosen Vessels and Dr Alaga (representing the views of NACOMYO) is the use of the name "Alfa Sule". He said it was offensive to use a Muslim name for a character in a Christian theatrical performance. However, Ajewole claims the name "*Alfa Sule*" was meant to attract the attention of the Muslim faithful for evangelistic purposes. Critics have noted that the evangelical tactic was indefensible because the Muslims drawn to watch these performances may believe that the group is Islamic. Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim and it is expected that many people from the north would have Arabic names. Except for converts, it is unusual for Muslims to bear Christian names and vice versa. However, it is not unusual for Africans who are adherents of these foreign religions to still retain and use their ethnic names no matter their religious affiliations.

Also, a negative portrayal of Muslims in the performances of Christ Chosen Vessels served as just another trigger of conflict. A character in *Take Heed* (Sora) dressed as a Muslim cleric was made to "freeze" or "standstill" after being invited by Bayo, another character in the play, to do deliverance for Soji, a third friend who became spellbound as he attempted to pick up some money that had been carelessly dropped on the ground. Unfortunately, the money has had a spell cast by a demon sent from a *Babalawo* (an *Ifa* high priest in Yorubaland). As a result of the spell, anyone who picks the money or touches anyone who picks the money freezes. Bayo had sought help from Soji's teacher, parents, **Muslim cleric**, *Ifa* priest (*Awoginni*), *Osun* priestess (*Yeye Osun*), a white garment Christian prophet (*Woli agba*), Professor (guru from the oriental religion), all to no avail. None could free Soji or the others from this spell until a **Christian pastor** was called to pray in the name of Jesus and consequently delivered them all from the spell. All the characters ended up praising Jesus Christ, the God of the **Christian pastor**. The representation of the powerlessness of "Alfa Sule" (the Islamic Cleric in *Take Heed* (Sora)) was reprehensible to the Ansar-Ud-Deen Islamic Society. So, in 2010, the group protested against the continued viewing of the performance due to the perceived negative portrayal of Allah.

Names form identities which are culturally driven. The Oxford Dictionary (2006) defines a name as a word or set of words by which someone or something is known, addressed or referred to". A name serves as a distinguishing factor. The context of naming in the two Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam) is rooted in the essence of what a name expresses. The character, identity and nature of a person may be known through the name. Personal names express hopes for a child's future in relation to destiny. According to the Bible Dictionary (2004), names could be changed stemming from a divine or human initiative. Names also differentiate people, communities, ethnic groups, religious groups, and identities. The names Usman, Nurudeen, and Risikat, for instance, are identifiably Islamic while Daniel, Deborah, and John are identifiably Christian. Names such as Ifagbemi, Sangoyomi, and Ogundeji are of Yoruba traditional origin. Islam and Christianity are imported religions. It is instructive that there are shared commonalities between them: this shared commonality can be seen in names such as Ibrahim/Abraham; Ismail/Ishmael; Isaac/Ishaq; Jesus/Isa.

In Yorubaland, *asa* refers to popular sayings or cultural idiosyncrasies. Some of the sayings can be derogatory especially when applied to another group. The saying, "*aponle ni Mallam, Hausa lausa 'n je*" literally translated means "to dignify the Hausa man is to refer to him as "Mallam" (an Islamic teacher), a Hausa man is a Hausa man." Names can also appear derogatory. The name "Sule" is derived from the Arabic name Suleiman. The derogatory usage of the name "Sule" was popularized in a TV drama series in the 1980s where the character played the role of a foolish fellow. Some of the statements derived from "Sule" are "*O'n wo bi Sule*", used when a person stares unreasonably at nothing in particular; "*Ebi ni o pa 'jesha to l'ohun o j'aya; b'ebi ba pa Sule yio j'obo*", which means desperate situations will compel 'Sule' to do what he normally might not do. As a Muslim, 'Sule' would normally not eat a monkey because it is

forbidden meat in Islam. However, starvation might cause Sule, a Muslim, to eat the “unclean” or “forbidden” food. This saying compares Sule to an Ijesha man who would eat ‘*ori Oyo*’ (pap) in the face of starvation. Dr Alaga frowns at these comparisons because he says they are uncomplimentary to the Islamic identity. Also, he wondered why Christian dramas give Islamic names to characters playing uncomplimentary roles in their plays.

According to Alaga, some of the names such as “Lamidi”, “Wosilat”, and “Basira” (from Basirat) featured in Moses Olaiya’s *Awada Kerikeri*, a popular Yoruba TV drama of Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) now Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in the 1970s and 80s. “Basira” was tagged “Ba se je” (literally translated to mean a destructive character). Alaga insists that Moses Olaiya’s stage name, “Baba Sala” was derisive of Islam and Muslims. He stated that Muslims have always shown displeasure to these issues but have always been overwhelmed. However, no record shows Moses Olaiya’s dramatic performances triggered any religious conflict during his professional career.

Other critics and observers have mentioned *Agbara Nla*, a production by Mount Zion Ministries, another Christian Drama group led by Mike Bamiloje. The group became very popular in Ibadan in the 1990s. Alaga claimed that all the good characters in *Agbara Nla* had Christian names but the bad characters had Muslim names. One of the characters he cited was Alhaji Garuba who, as a contractor, was dubious in nature and never executed any job he was paid for. Another character was Mutiu who in the play was tagged a ‘419’ (a fraudster). Alaga said all these names as well as characterizations portray Islam and Muslims as unreliable. This serves as a threat to religious identity which, Wright & Khoo (2019) say may cause emotional reaction upon which leaders may mobilize to cause violent reactions to intergroup conflicts. It would be recalled that Tajfel & Turner (1986) aptly capture the triggers to group identity when they stated that when the value of a group is impeded, aggressive responses to threats come to play. This complements the group identity theory that has guided this study. Therefore, Alaga’s reaction can be seen in the light of group identity.

Alaga took exceptions to some other Christian dramas with plots portraying Islamic clerics as compromising female students attending Quranic schools. In the interview conducted, he said “such a portrayal suggests that those who are Muslims should not send their daughters to traditional Quranic schools again. If you do so, the Mallams will be having carnal knowledge of them. That is also scandalous” (Interview with Alaga, 22nd September 2011).

The Muslim cleric also observed that the costumes used by some of the characters in the plays are unacceptable to practitioners of the Islamic religion. This is in reference to the Mallam (Figure 2) who is dressed in typical Muslim attire, a long gown, called “*jalamia*”, a very big turban and a rosary. This scenario triggered spontaneous reference to yet another Christian Drama titled “*Alagba Jeremiah*”, where the wife of the Mallam “was dressed like a typical Muslim worshipper, with hijab and everything to match” (Interview with Alaga). Alaga said that these costumes were designed to scandalize Islam. The Arabic language in Islam is spiritually connoted. In *Take Heed* (Sora), *Alfa Sule*, one of the characters in the play kept reciting “*lai lai, eni, ilahulai, eji Mohammodu....*” To Muslims, the recitations are deeply spiritual constructs and are not to be uttered in vain or for the fun of it. This, to the Muslim organization, remained unacceptable especially when such utterances come from an out-group.

CONCLUSION

In theatre and the creative arts, there is an unending cycle of communication of actions and reactions because theatre serves as a fertile ground for ideas (artistic) to be invented, created, spawned, distributed and communicated. This study has established that theatre is a social network which serves as an influence on the operations of society. The findings showed that some theatrical productions of Christ Chosen Vessels elicited conflict from an out-group. This conflict was a value-based conflict (religious), pointing to the fact that groups would defend whatever they hold valuable. This study shows that as social formations, theatre performances may lead to inter-group conflicts. The performance arts, though a liberal art form, should be used to promote peace and not provoke conflict. It should impact positively. Performing artists need to project messages of peace and not of discord and must be sensitive to inherent conflict triggers in the

projected messages, especially in a plural society like Nigeria with diverse cultures and belief systems. The fundamental role of peace in development should form key aspects of the educational curriculum of education from the elementary to tertiary stages so that beneficiaries would have imbibed peacebuilding ethos.

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APPENDIX

FIGURE 1
A SCENE FROM *ORUKO NLA* WITH CHARACTERS REPRESENTING DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS



FIGURE 2
ALFA SULE, PLAYED BY AYO LALA IN '*TAKE HEED – SORA*' PLAY WRITTEN BY FEMI AJEWOLE



FIGURE 3
CD JACKET OF ORUKO NLA (SUPERIOR NAME) WITH ALFA SULE WRITTEN UNDER CHRIST CHOSEN VESSELS DANCE DRAMA MINISTRY



FIGURE 4
CD JACKET OF TAKE HEED (SORA) WITH ALFA SULE WRITTEN UNDER CHRIST CHOSEN VESSELS DANCE DRAMA MINISTRY



FIGURE 5
‘A K A ALFA SULE’ BLOTTED OUT AFTER NACOMYO’S ACCUSATIONS



FIGURE 6
‘A K A OTIGANPA’ WRITTEN UNDER CHRIST CHOSEN VESSELS IN PLACE OF ‘ALFA SULE’

