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A Professional Encounter with the Manufacturing China

Orisaremi, Alphonsus Shireku

Department of Theatre Arts

University of Ibadan

Oyo State, Nigeria

Email: shireku@gmail.com

Phone: +2348023316254

Abstract

This essay is a developed version of a presentation made at a workshop titled “ChinAfrica Under Construction”. The workshop was facilitated and hosted by Goethe Institute Lagos. It was conducted by two artist researchers, Danial Kotter and Jochen Becker from Berlin Germany. According to their consultant Jahman Anikulapo, it is a research and art project that is exploring the traces and cultural links between the African continent and China. He says it also dealt with the development of the urban land scape of Lagos with the aid of Chinese investors. This work therefore, dwelled more on the Theatre/Entertainment technology related aspects. It focuses on the art of manufacturing, purchase and its attendant ripple effects on the economy with tourism being one of them. In it, an attempt was made at summarizing views of some participants at the workshop. My briefing was to discuss my professional encounter and experience with manufacturing China as a theatre designer and technologist. Using the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) methodology suitable for the workshop.

Preamble

Dauda (2015) wrote on African traders in an emerging and fast growing Yiwu market. He highlighted their trade species and specialism and their distributaries of Made in

China goods. He stated that in 1984, the Yiwu local government authority took advantage of the 1978 Chinese economic and industrial reform. Thus, through their trade and industry council a new market Yiwu is growing to become a fast-growing international market place (Bodomo 2012).

The above portrays that policy shift at various levels of the Chinese political economy is positively affecting the China enterprises. In this presentation, I shall however focus on the design and technology aspects of the arts and sciences of the theatre. These are aspects that I have been fully involved in as a main stream participant in the field, in the classrooms and in the research world for two and a half decade as I am talking to you today.

I trained with the then Rank Strand lighting equipment in the university of Ibadan arts theatre. From the main bowl to the exhibition and the cinema halls of the National Theatre complex, what we had were the same United Kingdom made Rank Strand lighting equipment. Fortunately for my class, we had Sumbo Marinho and Olusola Aborishade (two dedicated experts in theatre design and technology) as our master-teachers who approached teaching from unconventional methods. As a student, the Osofisan/Sowande's theatre exposed us to other equipment in other parts of Nigeria and West Africa. At that time, part of my findings was that up till the early 1990s, Anglo Saxon west African theatres uses made in UK equipment while the Francophone West Africa uses French equipment. That was the situation because I have had opportunities to construct stage and handle lighting across west Africa as a student. Bode Sowande's theatre took us to several open theatres in Republic of Benin than. Naturally when it was time to pass out of school, I left. I then proceeded onto graduation field experience with Duro oni. Our tools in Duro Sound, Light and Vision (DSV) where our work tools too were made in UK. From DSV, I proceeded to Africa Independent Television (AIT) where I diverted all lighting equipment purchase to Whitelight North and Strand lighting. Strand had become a multi-national company and had zoned Africa and middle East to Strand Italia in Pomezia – Italy. During this period, there were still paucity of theatre design and technology equipment in Nigeria. The European equipment though durable were and still are expensive.

Of significance within this history is the advent of Zmirage on the scene in 1997 with its new technologies including automated lights, electronic curtains and trusses. It was exciting, and I advised the AIT management to incorporate Zmirage into Africa Independent Television entertainment unit for the beatification of our entertainment based programmes.

Now during this period, a full truss cost an average of 20,000 Euro in Europe making it difficult for artist to acquire means of realizing their production designs thus consigning us to PEC theatre and National theatre for production performances before the advent of MUSON centre in 1994. However this entire trends was systematically

changing with of Chinese incursions into theatre design and technology equipment manufacture and sales. Thus, the conservative arts of the of the theatre embraced the Chinese trusses, lightings and stage equipment.

The above preambles are essential as background to indicate our trajectories, to enable us proceed.

The Commerce

The influx of equipment became rapid from 2007 to date when all major entertainment technology companies in Nigeria possess some major work tools such as stage/roof system, public address systems and lighting that are made in China (Orisaremi, 2013).

These Chinese technologies seem to be subsequently backed by formidable marketing and sales policy that used and still uses conventional and unconventional methods in reaching out. Aided by these outreach strategy, there is no way you will not find yourself in either a real or virtual china market. Alibaba is everywhere in the cyber space fronting for Chinese technology as a sales outlet. Their young sales and marketing executives spends sleepless nights to synchronize the seven hours' time lag between us to reach out to Nigerians via internet chat rooms such as Whatsapp, Black Berry Messenger and such similar outlets. Thus, I came to the conclusion that if you see a china man standing in street corner pressing his phone, he is either fixated in retaining his market or in securing a new market. The driver of this sales agenda may be the politico-economic environmental enablement that allows for proliferation of factories. This has made them to coin out marketing phrases and jargons such as this and that equipment are Original Equipment Manufactured in China (OEM China). Now add this up with the Euro-American movement of factories to China probably leaving only their assembly plant at home you will get a fairly appropriate answer. Also, add it to the fact that the Chinese market and sales always feature in American electoral campaign in the past one decade, you will arrive at the conjecture that the phrase that certain Euro-American facilities are OEM China is a reality.

Now please note that to the best of my knowledge, The American export market is dollar denominated, the European export market id Euro denominated while the Chinese export market seems US dollar denominated to me because all entertainment technology equipment were and are still being procured in United States Dollar by us. I say this because in recent time, the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria said Nigeria will henceforth denominate our export in the Yuan which is Chinese currency. If so, such policy shift should not be mere broadcast statement but a carefully calculated advantageous action which I doubt anyway.

This is relevant in the sense that we artists are not economists and our politicians must be asked some questions to aid us in our little attempts to secure our independence via equipment purchase. We are not a manufacturer nation.

Not being a manufacturing nation, the purchase of entertainment technology equipment from Europe, America and of recent China became like the upward hill toil of Sisyphus. This is caused by the attendant result of automatic weakening of purchasing power of consumers. We are a consumer nation in all ramifications. In purchasing equipment and having them shipped to Nigeria, the total cost may not be known until it arrives at the end users warehouse. This is because it involves additional costs of freighting, custom and other duties and movements to end users' destination. At certain points, it gets incongruous to want to calculate total cost of equipment purchase in Nigeria (Orisaremi, 2013).

The above scenarios are cyclical in Nigeria. That is to say that it affects other aspects of the Nigerian import. In Martin street on this Lagos Island yesterday, I sat in one corner for an hour, observing constant offloading of clothing materials bearing the signs of Guangzhou wholesale export market. This is an area for other experts.

My Experience

I have attended exhibitions of aspects of the arts of the theatre in Europe from Rimini Fierra to Messe Frankfurt and more. I have also visited factories to witness assembly line production of equipment. But then I changed gear and decided to embrace a cheaper and equally well sustained technology by establishing contact with Trussing China (a stage and truss manufacturing company in Guangzhou) Thus, this led to me bringing in prefabricated stage into Nigeria in 2005 from China for my Theatre Technology Laboratory. Checking the cost, I discovered that a full square truss that cost an average of 20,000 Euro in Europe cost 14,000 US dollars in China (note the different currencies). What I then did was to engage trussing china in discussions on weight, counter weight and quality control of what I wanted We were new to each other, and I did not want to take for granted what I do take for granted with the European Union (EU) manufacturers. These negotiations lead to my importation of stage, trusses and lightings from China.

In 2014, a French company came to Nigeria on a marketing drive and some of us where invited by the French Cultural Centre to a meeting with the CEO in Lagos, I told him my experience and he agreed to be competitive, but when I made request for stage from him, his proforma invoice was way above the cost we get same equipment in China. This re-iterated my knowledge that in my trade, factories and manufacturers in Europe are no longer ready to be competitive in and for Africa. The Chinese factories on the other hand keep upgrading and creating better templates. The prefabricated roofed

stage I procured from Trussing China eight years ago, is still in use without much diminishing returns, so why should I not by more from same source at half the cost of same facility in EU countries? All we hear at European exhibition grounds are talks of quality and improved quality when defending high cost, but speaking for Nigerian entertainment technology professionals, we are well trained in the science and technology of the theatre. In other words, we know quality and have come to the knowledge that manufacturers in China are not static. In terms of iron, steel, aluminum and wood constructions for theatres, it is empowerment of our professionals to purchase from China because the EU dealings are not favourable. At the moment, the EU and America have upper hand in audio, Public Address facilities and automated lighting facilities in terms of quality but the Chinese impact is felt more in Nigeria because of cost effects. Subsequently, the long run effects are the same the difference being in the fact that in the EU, you get what is available based on standard while in China you get what you want based on price and professional knowledge of theatre design and technology.

Last year, I had the opportunity of visiting two cities in China, one is Guangzhou. Guangzhou seems to remind me of Bodomo's description of Yiwu (see first paragraph of this work) because of its extremely huge market with influx of African traders, except that most internet marketing from China that I receive bears Guangzhou addresses as the factory base. The second city is Shenzhen (the sky scraper city). My visit was to Focono a screen manufacturing company. I was there for meetings and training on the use and installation of the maximum image screen (video wall). That, I did. Beyond the training is that Shenzhen is dusty, very very dusty and you can see the reason for it being dusty. It is a city under construction. There are sky scrapers everywhere, yet more are being built everywhere in the city. I see massive construction work going on in this city. Shenzhen smells new but beyond or rather beneath that newness, it is old, the signs of ancient civilization are also there. This I saw when my host took me on an excursion to a park called Splendid China. I do not know the size and dimension of the park but it housed so many facilities such as theatres, some sort of zoo, farms from where I saw so many palm trees that I regretted not learning the craft of palm wine taping in Nigeria. Splendid China is a park dedicated to the culture of minorities in China. According to my host, there are estimated 56 minorities in China, while Han is majority, the Zhuangs, Manchu, Dong and Tibetan are minorities. My point is that in this park, I was taken to see a performance in one of the theatres. Although I do not understand a word of the Chinese language, this performance connected me to the history and culture of China in image forms. I saw cattle being grazed on stage, Emperor being moved on chariot (which is historical) and then I saw flying systems opening up walls and walls forming rocks and then changing into the face of animals. I was told that all the performances in all the theatres in that park are government sponsored and they are mostly minorities based theatre group. Splendid

China park is tourism in motion in multiple ramification. In that place, I saw the field manifestation of culture, economy and movement of capital. This brings me to Throsby's thesis on cultural capital. In this thesis, he defined cultural capital as an asset that contribute to cultural value. More precisely, cultural capital is the stock of cultural value embodied in an asset. This stock may in turn give rise to a flow of goods and services over time i.e. commodities that themselves may have both economic and cultural values.

Throsby's position is from the non-conventional economics point of view in which he argued that cultural value may give rise to economic value in both its tangible and intangible forms. The inclusion of music in the intangible cultural capital assets by Throsby makes music of Wagner in itself of immense cultural value. This music's scores were always interpreted into physical stage settings by Adlphe Appia. Stage setting in itself being a relevant aspect of theatre design and technology is a tool for music actualization. It automatically falls within the cultural capital asset. That in itself is the essence of engaging professionals in organized trade expos and exhibitions for which the Shanghai trade shows are known for. These trade shows attract tourist who in turn create boom in tourism income that in turn continue to impact positively on the lives of the Chinese citizens while impacting on their international sales promotions.

The workshop eventually took us to the Lekki export processing zone.

Lekki Free Zone

The Lekki Free Zone was conceptualized in 2006 after which designs and bureaucratic processes commenced. Occupation of the zone commenced in 2010. These processes involved various government agencies such as the Lagos ministry of physical planning and ministry of commerce. The zone sits on 16,500 acres of land with 700 acres earmarked for manufacturing. According to Wole Adegoke (the marketing manager) there are over twenty free zones in Nigeria but not all are operational. The zone shall have airport and deep-sea port. It is a joint venture for which Lagos state is providing 40% and a Chinese consortium is providing 60% capital for takeoff and continuity. The Dangote conglomerate is building a refinery in it and has as at present been engaged in reclamation of land. The space is being opened up with power plant being built for electricity. The power plant is up and running now. There is provision of 24 hours' land air and sea security in the zone.

We paid a visit to the HSE steel manufacturing company that has commenced building of its plant. Their plan of action is to bring in their raw materials from China, manufacture and assemble in the zone. Upon enquiries, they claimed they can manufacture trusses, stage and roof systems for the theatre and entertainment industry. This is of particular interest to the Nigerian entertainment technology business and there is need to follow up on it with the company. In doing this, the fact that beyond recouping of capital, they are here on profit making venture must be countenanced.

Workshop Summary and Essay Conclusion

A steady question in the workshop is what does china want in Africa? According to Moody Yahaya, (a workshop participant), China wants a large share of Africa's resources. He posited that the rise of capitalism was brutal from feudal lords to the industrial revolution and the enslavement for plantations. He says the rise of Russia and China coincided with the rise of the empires via colonialism. China not being a colonial power was giving out scholarships, aids and assistance Africans and African states. Although it's a creative work, a critical study of Ayi Kwei Armah's anthropological fiction titled *Two Thousand Seasons* indicated to us that in scrambling for labours, Africa had a fair share of brutality from the Arabs and the Caucasians raiders under multiple guise and facades. As trends changes, styles and acquisitive methods had to change. What they want is trade and acquisition and the betterment of their societies, not ours.

Chantel Wong, a participant from Hong Kong claims that What China want is trade and commerce. She said for the west, foreign policy is a manifestation of home policy while China adapts to local situations of their host countries. This she said is contradictory. She however claims that Nigeria can learn the Chinese leadership way in which early communist leaders unified the country, eliminated discrimination and laid out industrial development plans. This she said expanded the Chinese creative space.

Zemaye Okediji pictorial presentations synchronized with Uzo Anyawu's discussion. He is an artist/painter and he lived in China for one year. In relating his experience, he spoke of the preservation of culture, cultural heritage and proposed that we proceed to engage the Chinese in cultural dialogue on preservation of cultures citing instances his several visits to heritage sites. He spoke of Lasa engraving in photograph. Linking development and modernization with tourism and tourist centre, he cited the rail road into the Canton tower.

The crux of my experience above is that policy formulation is a relevant factor at the root of development. Policy subsequently back by action plan is at the root of human progress towards the basics of existence. This is well portrayed in my experience in Guangzhou a metropolis that attracts variety of tourists across the globe.

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