

# The Death Metaphor

JAHMAN ANIKULAPO

A SUDDEN BURST OF CONFUSION overwhelmed the belly of the vast hall, yielding a cacophony of cries and shrieks of agony, furiously stampeding feet and then... blackout! In no time, the ambience of the hall which moments ago had been a spot for fun had become a site of anguish. In the aftermath of the pandemonium, nine tiny bodies lay on the ground, while the fumes of sweat and blood ruled the atmosphere. Emergency rescue operation by some of the survivors of the stampede brought the nine prostrate bodies to the open foyer. They were rushed to the nearby hospital – two were confirmed dead, seven other young bodies suffered various degrees of injury and had to stay days in the hospital.

Dateline, May 1992. The film, *Ayanmo (Destiny)*, was being screened and the workers at the box office had oversold tickets, as was characteristic of their corrupt operations; the 5000-seater Main Bowl was over-stuffed with eager patrons of the films of the doyen of Nigerian theatre, Hubert Ogunde. During the course of the film, the poorly-maintained and overworked chillers in the hall gave way, leading to a violent disruption that later claimed those two lives.

Again, official greed and avarice have triumphed, leading to death of the young. The indecorous action of the commercial office of the theatre, symptomatic of the general malaise that reigned in the operations of Nigeria's prime cultural edifice, had inflicted bruises of varying degrees on the bodies and souls of usually enthusiastic patrons of the theatre's programmes.

The people fled from the site of death; abandoned it to its dark songs and fatalistic destiny.

The tragic incident led to the closure of the Main Bowl of the National Theatre, and the gradual decay of the edifice – a supposedly awesome architectural piece borrowed, perhaps senselessly, from temperate Bulgaria and planted in tropical Lagos. As dysfunctional as it had been since 1975 when it was opened, the theatre played host to the best of Nigeria's artistic and cultural expressions.

There is a complex web of metaphors and ironies trailing the story of the theatre, and these are tied ostensibly to the depressive narrative of Nigeria itself – a resource-rich nation with little sense of financial discipline and planning decorum. Recall that the theatre was built in the era of recklessness when, according to a senior member of the military junta in power then, "Money is not our problem, but how to spend it."

Thus, it was possible to peek at the Palace for Culture and Sports in Verna, and just import it – bones, muscles and contradictions notwithstanding. It made sense to install a facility meant for a temperate region, where air-conditioning systems are not necessarily a compulsion, and plant it in a strikingly hot climate, where the energy supply needed to power air-conditioning systems is next to nil; and where maintenance culture is never a favoured tradition.

Indeed, it is understandable why the metaphor of death has hung since that 1992 incident, not just on the 5000-seater Main Bowl, but also on the National Theatre itself. It was as if the incident was a foreboding of the gradual death of the once-flourishing site as a place for communal sharing. In years gone by, the facility – the only one of its type in an art-starved infrastructure such as is Nigeria – had closed in on itself, shutting out patrons and artists who ought to have been consistently nourishing its rumbling belly rumble.

There had indeed been moments, no years, of renewed dreams and vigours, especially in the period 2006 to 2009, when there was a concerted effort to revive the facility by fixing its many leakages and depressions. But the pang of death continued to haunt the soil of the culture empire and the process of rebirth was truncated by politrickians in the public service, who were fuelled by seemingly insatiable greed. Since then, the National Theatre has sunk deeper into distress, moreso under the regime of one who infamously claimed that he was merely a rent-collector deployed to manage (ruin, perhaps) the edifice.

Yet, the trajectory of the National Theatre can and should not be divorced from that of the nation, or the fate of the continent. Here, in this land of forlorn hopes and dreams deferred or denied, rulers are never leaders, are never visionaries, are never planners or considerate of the collective good. Rulership is occult, government is secrecy and the people are stranded at the borders of national wellbeing. Art, which liberates and guarantees access of participation to the citizens, cannot be given free reign to flower – for its flourishing is dangerous to the contentment of the ruling class.

And so, unlike its sibling in Varna, which welcomes its patrons with open arms, the National Theatre and its once-precious Main Bowl, remain inaccessible, sad, depressed, unreachable, untouchable and unimaginable spaces.