

# NIGERIAN INTEGRATIVE DISCOURSES VOLUME 3

## intergroup tensions

EDITED BY  
PROF. C.S. MOMOH,  
PROF. JIM I. UNAH

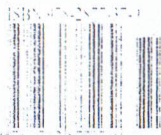
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**Nigerian Integrative  
Discourses:  
Vol. III Intergroup Tensions**

*Osita C. Ezenwaonu*

*Edited by:*  
Prof. C. S. Momoh  
Prof. Jim I. Unah

Faculty of Arts  
University of Lagos  
Nigeria

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## GENERAL PREFACE

The Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos, organized and held a national conference from May 13-18, 2002 in the University of Lagos. It was an Integrative National conference on **Sharia, Resource Control and Anti-Terrorism in Nigeria**.

The advertisement for the conference (see Appendix) paraded 624 topics on which stakeholders and interested scholars were invited to write and contribute. I reproduce immediately the rationale, as then articulated, behind the conference:

**Rationale:** The present state of affairs in the clamour for a national conference fortunately is that no serious caller insists anymore on its being sovereign. However, the thinking seems to persist that only a behemoth political outfit recognized formally and perhaps also funded by the Federal Government can carry out the assignment of organizing a national conference.

This position is sympathetically taken and received because the expectation is that the products and recommendations of such a national conference must be seen to be immediately impactful and alterative of the political and constitutional terrains of the Nigerian polity.

For obvious reasons, we are not that ambitious and clout-wielding in the Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos. But we are at least acutely conscious of the fact that a citadel of learning is the traditional place for initiating, organizing and holding conferences. We are determined to play that hallowed and time honoured role.

In the process we will clear the thick undergrowth and provide the opportunity for fresh air to blow on the soil of civilized and cultured national discourse and dialogue, and also fertilise the soil to plant the mustard seed of patriotism, tolerance, nationalism, peace, progress and stability of the Nigerian polity. The singularity of a national conference is also a plurality; a multi-mantioned edifice which can accommodate all well-intentioned contributors. It is an elephant or a whale whose meat can feed a whole village; and an intellectual marketplace



replaced by technology. In fact the test-tube baby technology may eventually make it possible for women to do without the Biblical pain that is associated with child bearing.

However, it should be noted that the options discussed so far does not address the question of oppression of other women and men alike by some women. Women of means can sponsor themselves to win the votes of people rather than the votes of a segment of society. Women without means can, with their talents, persuade investors of both sexes to invest on them as their political protégés.

### Conclusion

It is pertinent to conclude that the challenge of course is to turn the theory into practice and to move beyond talking about empowering women to ensuring that it is actually done. It would appear that choice and voice are what empowering women is really all about-giving them a choice in how they live their lives, and a voice in decisions that affect them.

In spite of the tremendous changes which have taken place, we still have to accept that many women today are choiceless, and many more have extremely limited choices. Their lives are almost entirely contingent on decisions made for them by others – decisions in which they have little voice.

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- Ajayi Abiodun Toluwalase is a lecturer at the Olabisi Onabanjo University. She holds B.A. Philosophy at the Olabisi Onabanjo University and M.A. Philosophy at the University of Lagos respectively.

## Chapter Twenty-five

### CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION ON THE STAGE

By

Dr. (Mrs) Osita C. Ezenwanebe

Department of Creative Arts University of Lagos, Akoka

#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Life is full of conflict, for conflict is part of man's existential battle for survival. It is at the heart of the tensions threatening a peaceful coexistence of Nigeria: the power struggle between indigenes and settlers, the confrontation between governors and their deputies, the quest for equity at local government levels, the supremacy disagreements between the National Assembly and the Executive etc.

Though conflict is part of life, it can be resolved or managed.

The view expressed in this paper is that a true and lasting resolution of the conflicts in Nigeria lies within the individuals (especially the leaders) and less with the numerous Institutionalized approaches being proposed. To illustrate this view, the presenter adopts a literary perspective by using Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) and Brenton's *Weapons of happiness* (1977) to evaluate the nature of conflict and conflict resolution, its causes and consequent effects, so that Nigerians could learn some lessons from them. This perspective is based on the concept that works of art are timeless universals, and hence can be applied to any context, irrespective of place and time.

- 2.0 Politics and Art in Soyinka and Brenton. In Soyinka and Brenton, we have two different playwrights who mingle politics and art.



Their theatrical activities have moved beyond the fictitious realm of art into the political reality of their time. In them, theatre and politics join in a riotous embrace. They are committed to the cause of equity and justice in the society. Wole Soyinka is a well-known theater artist and a social critic. The relationship between his literary works and socio-political reality is more oblique than that of Brenton, who is more directly political. Soyinka sees literature primarily as an art form, yet a critical analysis shows that the artist is making serious comments about his period and life in general.

Though Soyinka is indirectly political in his literary works, he is more confrontational and overtly political in his personal response to acts of injustice in the society. (if to be political means to be committed to a particular view point). At Royal Court Theater, Soyinka came in contact with "the first wave" of political theater in London (articulated by John Osborne in his play Look Back in Anger (1960). It was a period of social realism when the reality of the dehumanized life of the English working class found expression on the London Stage. In life, Soyinka came into the lime light of Nigerian politics when he broke into a radio station in 1965 to broadcast a parody of the election result (Alain Ricard, 1983, p.1). Howard Brenton is one of the young radical intelligentsia who benefited from the Education Acts of 1944 in England only to realize that the Welfare State has failed to bring about a classless society.

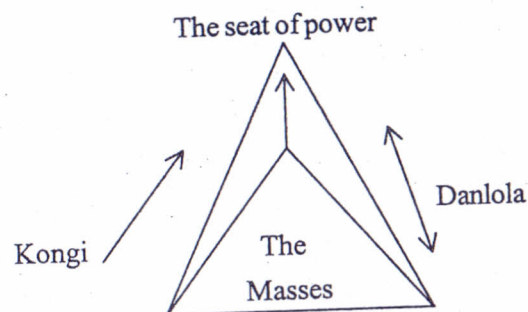
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In desperation, Brenton and his fellow playwrights of the '70s rejected the "humanistic gradualism" suggested by Raymond Williams in Culture and Society (1987) and The Long Revolution (1965) and become

more directly political. He turns his plays into harsh, explosive weapons with which he hopes to smash all forms of establishment culture that oppresses and marginalizes the common man. In one of his plays, Fruit (1970) written as a reaction to the electoral victory of Edward Heath, an explosive was actually thrown on to the stage (Brenton, "Petrol Bombs," pp.96-97). Both Soyinka's play Kongi's Harvest (1967) and Brenton's play Weapons of happiness (1977) are written in reaction to the prevailing political reality of their times.

### 3.0 CONFLICTS IN THE PLAYS AND THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

Kongi's Harvest (1967) and Weapons of happiness (1977) are plays of conflict motivated by a deep yearning for change and an inordinate desire for political power. The triangular conflict in Kongi's Harvest (1967) is between Oba Danlola, the traditional and spiritual ruler of the land of Isma, and Kongi the throne with the masses beneath the towering might of the powerful contenders to the throne. It can be represented diagrammatically:



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As illustrated in the diagramme, the seat of power is the object of the conflict. While Kongi and his men rise to the throne, Oba Danlola and



his men lost grip and fell but with their hope rising up to it. Though they (Danlola and his men) are physically overthrown, their greed for power remains intact.

The fierce conflict between Kongi and Oba Danlola has three levels- the psychological, the socio-cultural and the political. On the personal/ psychological level, the conflict is in form of personality clash between an old, conservative and retrogressive spiritual leader of Isma and a young, "dynamic" and "progressive" new leader. Kongi, a fictionalized power- gone- mad Villain, is bent on enforcing his acclaimed scientific and progressive ideals on the Ismites. Unable to control his ambition and follow the proper channel, he overthrows the incumbent leader and keeps him in detention together with the Old Aweri Fraternity. Being a greedy monster, and also being aware of what a stubborn and ambitious man Oba Danlola is, he insists on stripping Danlola bare of every power and to humiliate him in the full view of the people. He therefore demanded that Oba Danlola be made to hand over the new Yam to him in the full view of all Ismites so that, by being the first to taste the New Yam, he will automatically be the spiritual leader of the people of Isma land.

Unfortunately, Oba Danlola is not the kind of man to dance to Kongi's tune. He is strong-willed, evasive, and indomitable. His cynicism, and subtlety are fruits of

his conservative wisdom. The Organising Secretary of kongi's new regime describes him as "a damned stubborn goat, an obstructive,

cantankerous creature and a bloody pain in [the] neck." (p.14) Kongi keeps him under close watch until he has removed every power he has because he sees him (Oba Danlola) as a threat to his new, a scientific order. Oba Danlola is therefore the opposite of what Kongi stands for except for their lust for power. Danlola rightly refers to kongi as "my son in politics." They are birds of the same feather who refuse to flock together. Indeed there is nothing to choose between a thoughtless, vain, irreverent rebel and a sit-tight leader who has so over-fed himself with power that he would not let it slip off his grip. The meeting of the two is like that between a derelict mortar and a rotten palm fruit. With Oba Danlola defiantly clutching to the remains of his power, and kongi unwavering in his determination to strip him bare of it, the Ismites suffer. The hatred between the two elites grows.

Soyinka gives a true picture of power tussle in Nigeria. Kongi's Harvest is written in 1967, the year that marks the beginning of the Nigerian Civil War. A lot of the political crises in Nigeria are as a result of egoism, selfish greed and personality clash. Hatred, ill feeling, deep-rooted grudges and intolerance of another's point of view are at the root of political problems. It is a common occurrence in Nigerian political scene to see contenders to power sticking to their guns refusing to shift either to the right, left, forward or backward, thereby creating stasis out of which erupts disaster.

On the socio-cultural level, both kongi and Oba Danlola believe that they are the messiahs of the time. Oba Danlola believes that the way of the forefathers is still the spirit of the age and should be upheld undistorted. Kongi believes he is the progressive man of the scientific



age. He detests the old humanistic traditions of Oba Danlola and his conclave of elders and insists on turning the land of Isma into a scientific, new world. He determine to have a clean break from everything associated with those of his old- fashioned predecessor: things like "speaking in proverbs and ponderous tone rhythms of the so called wise ones as well as their "ridiculous paraphernalia" (pp.11-12). His Reformed Aweri, "the youthful elders of the state" who replaced the old conclave of Elders, constructed a true image of the age in consonance with the contemporary situation. It is a scientific image "with pronouncements dominated by a positive sceintificism," not "long-winded proverbs and senile pronouncements," "nor proverbs nor senile pronouncements," "nor proverbs nor verse" but "only ideograms in algebraic quantum" (what ever those words mean) (pp.12 and 13). Danlola and his men do not believe in it, more so considering the apparent meaninglessness of its speech and actions. He feels it his duty to protect the spirit of the ancestors from every defilement of kongism. He is therefore not willing to make kongi the spiritual leader of the land by allowing him to be the first to have a taste of the new yam.

The opposing socio-cultural stances maintained by kongi and Danlola create enormous tension, which aggravates the psychological conflict generated by their

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personality clash. Both insist that they have an obligation to protect their age, its visions and the aspirations of the people. Each believes he is the spirit of the age. The socio-cultural conflict can be likened to the perpetual conflict between the technological advancement of science and humanism of Art. In all, the people suffer.

On the political level, feudal autocracy and military dictatorship lock horns. Kongi is a fictionalized political dictator. His over throw of Danlola, the use of detention, camps, firearms, superintendents (of police) and the Organising Secretary (The State Security Agent of Kongi) are facts associated with the reign of a dictator. Oba Danlola is a symbol of a feudal lord whose power is welded culturally. His reign is over- powering. He is both the spiritual and secular leader of the people. kongi's overthrown of Oba Danlola can be taken as a military coup d'etat and the Reformed Aweri Fraternity as the Supreme Military Council, etc. The political conflict is widely felt. It spells a lot of pain and hardship on every Ismite. Both the autocrats and the dictators suffer. The conflicts have moved beyond personal hatred and ideological oppositions to physical actions. While Danlola and his men languish in detention, kongi's men are starved the cover of quasi religious practice (forced fasting). People are kept in detention and are either killed or forced to kill themselves.

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But from the collective suffering of the masses arose the spirit of the age under the leadership of Daudu and Segi. From the groans of the people arose a new song of freedom. The so- called lay- abouts who gather at Segi's club to dance or sing away their sorrow soon constituted themselves into a formidable opposition to the two super powers of Danlola and kongi. The group is an enigma to kongi's Organising Secretary. While the two over-bearing opponents are preparing to display their last fight in public during the feast of the New Yam, Daudu's group is equally planning the best way to liberate the masses by disposing of both Kongi and Danlola. Hence, they offer a befitting present to Kongi in the full view of his likes. The gift of the head of an old man in



place of the long-awaited New Yam brings the conflicts to a catastrophic end. With Kongi gazing at the head in front of him while Danlola and his men are on the run, the masses win the day. They have demonstrated the fact that they are the spirit of the age. Their celebration is the victory of life over death.

In Weapons of Happiness, the conflicts are less personal and more cultural and political. On the cultural level, England is a class-structured society. People's identity is tied to the three district classes. These are the Aristocracy, the determinants of social ethos and culture, the Middle Classes who share the same capitalist interest with the Aristocrats, and the working class with a strong identity of the oppressed group in the society (Anderson, p, (1964), "Origin of the present crisis" pp.38-39). The conflicts in Mr. Makepeace' potato-Crisp factory

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between the management and the workers is a form of class struggle. The workers in the factory—Joseph Frank, Janice, Billy, Ken, Stocky, Alf and Liz—are enraged not just because of the starvation wages they are paid but also by the management's decision to sell the factory without informing them. On getting the hint, the workers resort to the only weapon in their possession—physical might. They (except Frank) beat up their boss, Mr. Ralph Makepeace and take over the factory through a political action.

On the political level, there is a conflict between capitalism and socialism. Brenton has used the revolutionary action of the frustrated workers to evaluate the political structures in the society and the effects they have on the masses especially the Working Class. The workers

have hoped that by overthrowing capitalism and enthroning socialism, they can have true freedom from poverty, oppression and other forms of dehumanization. But no sooner have they taken over the factory, than they realize that the "big idea" does not translate into a 'big reality' as they have hoped. First they recognize that they had no adequate planning and organization before embarking on a political action. Therefore they have to face the same managerial ineptitude that has led to the closure of the factory. They realize they are back to where they started. Ken one of the workers, bemoans the futility of the great idea that inform the revolution. When asked by Janice (another character in the play) whether he is not happy, he replied, "Course I'm happy. Taking over the world, n't we? Workers paradise here in't it? (p. 57) Raymond Williams proposal of an evolutionary route to socialism

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through a gradual process of insinuation and of the education of the Working Class has been violently opposed by the Left- Socialists as an extended form of the paternalism of the Welfare State.

Brenton's global evaluation of political structures in the play shows that none of them is free from oppression and dehumanization. The only difference, Brenton implies, is in the style of execution. The workers state is not better in either democracy and capitalism, or socialism and communism. The oppression which the workers experienced at the potato-crisp factory of Mr. Ralph Makepeace is within a capitalist system in a country that practices democracy. The worker's overthrow of the factory ushered in another series of oppression-physical and mental brutality, aggressive interrogation and detention. Brenton universalizes these oppressive experiences of the working class and show how they have become part and parcel of every political structure.



To demonstrate this fact, Brenton uses a character from the past, Joseph Frank, who has undergone horrible experiences under different political systems just because of his revolutionary principles; first as a young idealist dreaming of an utopian paradise in a socialist future, then as a young adult who helped to usher in Communism in Czech Republic and finally as an experienced, old and battered man in a democratic nation. In the play, Frank's torture under the English social democracy is linked, through a cinematic technique, with the brutality of Stalinist 'hunt' in Russia. For example, after the workers physical assault on Ralph

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Makepeace, the English Labour Party officials and the police interrogate Frank on the incidence. At the height of the interrogation Frank reflects on similar inhumanity he suffered at the hands of a communist government, and said:

"Eighteen, twenty hours a day they question you.  
*You are cold, you are hungry. You sleep a few hours*  
*on a plank... You walk for three days and nights in a*  
*cellar filthy mud to your ankles. Your feet are infested,*  
*the toenails bulge with pus. You are offered a sandwich*  
*they tear it from your mouth.... And your head is beaten*  
*against the wall. You try to kill yourself. To starve yourself*  
*to death. They find out what you're up to, they force feed you."*  
 (p.22)

The above brutality is not different from what he suffers from the "nice" English interrogators who neglect him to the point of extinction. While

the interrogators exchange drinks and pleasantries, the light shows Frank crawling on the floor, pleading unconsolably:

"I wish to relieve myself. It is unreasonable that a man not be allowed to relieve himself. An inalienable human right, for all that is sacred, to let a man have a common piss (p. 23 )

Brenton demonstrates that violence, [psychological and emotional violence ] is at the root of English democracy just as physical violence exists in every form of autocratic government. What then are the Weapons of Happiness for the masses?

Like the fictitious worlds of Soyinka and Brenton, Nigerian society is rife with conflicts which may be personal, ethnic, cultural, religious, political and economic. For example, the power struggle between indigenes and settlers is

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deeply rooted in a culture that sees a group of people as out- casts, slaves, visitors and another group as "son's of the soil". Such culturally –rooted practices lay a foundation for the oppression and marginalisation of one group over another. The various ethnic crises and inter –tribal conflicts being experienced in the country are as a result of an undue exploitation of such cultural time- bombs for the selfish gratification of some "influential people". To reduce the wave of conflicts in Nigeria such cultural loop- holes should be addressed.

However, the majority of the conflicts in Nigeria are personal and political as Soyinka has demonstrated in Kongi's Harvest. The confrontations



between Governors and their Deputies, the Presidency and National Assembly etc. might have started as a desire, a feeling of hatred, a grudge, an ambition, which are not controlled until they degenerated into personality and ego clashes. Often the personality conflicts graduate to a political level in which each of the contenders sees himself as the only Messiah of the masses. Each holds on to his political ideologies as the only way forward. Most of them also insist on a clean break from his predecessor. Yet neither the Nigerian Kongis nor Danlolas have succeeded in putting smiles on the faces of the masses. The practice of kongism is responsible for the lack of continuity in the administration of the country. Every self-acclaimed deliverer insists on a clean break from his predecessor least his achievements be attributed to anything or anyone before him. In all, the masses suffer and groan under the yoke of unemployment, homelessness, hunger etc.

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#### 4.0 CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE PLAYS: A LESSON FOR NIGERIA.

How are the conflicts in the plays resolved on the stage? Many literary artists do not believe that conflicts generated in a play must be resolved. To meet audience expectation. Sometimes a conflict resolved provides a key for the generated of other conflicts. The works of literary art as timeless universals suggest their application to particular contexts. Commenting on the universality of Soyinka's Kongi's harvest (1967), Adejare (1992) stated that:

"In order to decode the text... the fictionalized situation must be seen as a symbolic human situation and the characters as metaphor. Employed to transmit the writer's message about the nature of political power in general and any specific situation to which it can be applied in the world, be it Africa, Asia,

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America or Russia" (Adejare, 1992, p.167).

Playwrights do not write for nothing, but to impart knowledge for a better society. It is therefore hoped that Nigerian political elites, especially, should learn a lesson from the fictitious political worlds of Soyinka and Brenton.

For Soyinka, the conflicts in Kongi's Harvest are left to play themselves out. He feels that there was no need for a round-table dialogue and Soyinka does not feel morally obliged to impose a resolution considering the course of the action. The conflict, which started as a desire in kongi, is allowed to grow until it could no longer contain itself. It then bursts, setting in to motion another wave of conflicts, as the 'Hemlock' states "that we the rotted bark spurned when the tree swells its pot" (p.1). As the two stubborn, proud and obstinate contenders to the throne poised for a final action, many other issues are brought in to fuel the conflict: racism, quasi

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-religious plots, claims of certain ideologies, cultural claims and what have you. The conflicts gather momentum and take dangerous dimensions. They mount up until they play themselves out with a catastrophic bang.

Soyinka implies that deaf and dumb conflicts are beyond the level of dialogue. In Nigeria, what started as personal conflicts underpinned by greed, ambition, grudge etc among the politicians often takes dangerous dimensions. The issues of race, religion, language, ethnicity etc are brought in to sharpen and broaden its scope. In this way, conflicts are amplified and compounded, keeping them beyond the level of peaceful resolution through dialogue. For example what can a round-table talk achieve for people who are unwilling to make compromise; to shift or adjust their

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positions to accommodate the other person's? Even when such are organized, they may be merely cosmetic and hence achieve little or nothing at all. The position taken in this paper is that the key to a true and lasting resolution of conflict lies within us. One of the messages of Kongi's Harvest is that there will be no progress in a country where its "men of timber and caliber" always stick to their own guns. The result is stasis; every thing stands still, and the masses suffer.

As the conflicts in kongi's Harvest play themselves out, poetic justice is upheld. Agwonorobo Eruvbetine (2002) in his inaugural lecture entitled Poetic Existence, defined poetic justice as "an unstoppable force that policies the world" (p.13). Once it is set into motion it cannot be stopped. The best way forward therefore is to

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resolve the conflict within us by checking eccentricity of any sort; This is what one of the characters in a play by the Renaissance English playwright, Ben Johnson, referred to as humours "What ever hath fluture and humidity as wanting powers to contain itself" (Ben Johnson, Every man in His Humour, in Dobree, 1963 p.33 ).It is poetically justifiable that Kongi, who gives himself over to the lust for power, with claims to quasi- religious practice, progressive and scientific ideologies, etc should receive a gift of a human head in the place of the long awaited New Yam. In the same vain, the seemingly unmovable Oba Danlola took to his heels when he is made to come face to face with the fruit of his unwavering political position. Soyinka like many artists believes in poetic justice. People, he implies, should be made to take responsibility of their action and to face its consequences. In this way, they will be eager to control the conflicts with them before they escalate and are externalized.

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In Weapon of Happiness, Howard Brenton throws back at the audience the conflicts in the play. Under the feudal autocracy, the inequality of English class system was kept in check by the "Paternalism" of the feudal lords and the contentment of the peasants. After the Industrial Revolution, capitalist oppression and the quest for material well- being magnified and complicated the inhumanity of class. The Working Class attempts towards an egalitarian society have been met with the repressive measures of English neo- capitalism. In Weapons of Happiness (1977), the workers have tried different measures to free themselves from the institutionalized

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ignoble life. They have tried hardwork, contentment, unionism, physical assault, and revolutionary political action but to no avail. None of them has proved to be the weapon for happiness.

In Nigeria, ethnic pluralism and multi-lingualism are part of the rich cultural heritage that makes Nigeria a great nation. The rich human and material resources have been considered sources of strength and progress until personal greed and managerial incompetency put a knife in the things that hold us together. Things started falling apart. What constitute blessings to the country are being turned into a curse as climbers to the throne turn the multicultural endowments into weapons of defense and attack for the realization of their selfish political ambition.

The resolution which Howard Brenton offers in the play is a soul- searching question; "what are the Weapons of Happiness," in the face of all the tensions tearing the society apart? In the play, he has offered -examination of the "isms" with which men have tried to bring about peace, equity and

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justice but none has provided the answer. Each of these "isms" like liberalism; capitalism, feudalism, fascism, feminism, communism and what have you has revealed an inherent weakness. Nigeria has tried many of the "isms" of leadership from feudal autocracy, colonialism, federalism, (partial or false), and capitalism to Military Authoritarianism and now to Democracy (Home-Grown or Imported), yet incessant groans of injustice, oppression and marginalisation fill the air. What are the Weapons of Happiness? Brenton brings the issue back to the position maintained in

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this paper: that the key to lasting peace resides within us. The incidents of crime, power tussles, bribery, corruption, ethnic militia and ethnic clashes, and other forms of conflicts in Nigeria have become so complicated that any seemingly good programme is likely to be faulted on either ethnic, religious, ideological or cultural grounds. No programme for equity and progress will work unless Nigerians control the conflicts within them and resolve to make such programmes work..

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