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Theatre and Community Education: the Africa Experience

by Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh*

Abstract

This paper explores ways of making a more realistic use of television in the Third World. It argues for TV programmes in which entertainment is combined with education. Noting some disappointment in the role TV has played in the Third World since it was introduced, the author observes that TV programmes from the West are agents of cultural imperialism. In his opinion, the problems facing Third World networks are neither technical nor artistic, but rather bureaucratic and political.

Résumé

Cet article explore les moyens pour une utilisation plus réaliste de la télévision dans le Tiers-Monde. Il préconise des programmes de TV dans lesquels le divertissement se mêle à l'éducation. Notant quelque déception dans le rôle que la TV a joué dans le Tiers-Monde depuis son introduction, l'auteur observe que les programmes de TV de l'Ouest sont des agents de l'impérialisme culturel. Selon lui, les problèmes auxquels font face les réseaux du Tiers-Monde ne sont ni techniques ni artistiques, mais plutôt bureaucratiques et politiques.

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On one hand, art is affirmed to be pure contemplation, and on the other hand it is considered to present always, a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political insofar as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying it.

Should art educate, inform, organize, influence, incite to action, or should it simply be an object of pleasure?

Augusto Boal (1974)
Theatre of the Oppressed

African art and particularly traditional African theatre, has always been said to serve a social function (Bakery Traore, 1976). Unfortunately, however, many traditional African performances, considered as pagan, were suppressed by Christian missionaries and colonialists. The actual reasons for this seemed more to relate to the mobilizational force of these performances which threatened the ascendancy of both Christianity and colonialism. In recent years, African art is beginning once again to reaffirm its functionality..

The theatre in particular is being used in community education to conscientize and mobilize marginalized groups of society -- those who have been denied access to the more conventional forms of media. The theatre by its very nature and particularly because of its communality and fictionalized situations provides a forum whereby communication between members of the same community and between them and those others without who intervene in the community's life can take place without the attendant antagonisms which would normally occur in a directly realistic situation (Eyoh, 1986).

Africa has very rich indigenous performing traditions, yet not many people today have tried to relate these to questions of mass mobilization and conscientization. However, with the influence of Paolo Freire (1972) and Augusto Boal (1974) many theatre practitioners and adult and educators have sought to rediscover theatre's potential as a mobilizational tool. Theatre is being used in Africa today to stimulate community thinking, develop self-confidence, participation, expression, awareness and organizational strengths of popular groups, communities and organizations (Ross Kidd, 1982).

Popular theatre builds on the skills the people already have; the actors provide the songs, choreograph and the dances, create the scenarios and are responsible for the themes to be developed. As an educational strategy it combines the entertainment value of the performing arts with their capacity to highlight issues in relation to community development. Through dramatization, people's attention can be focused on problems in a way that challenges their perception of their situation. They are encouraged to take a fresh look at the situation and work out new solutions. In this respect theatre is used as a two-way communication process; it serves as a catalyst for involving people in discussion and action on their problems rather than merely accepting their lot or waiting for external solutions (Byram et al. 1981, p.10).

In using theatre for community education, the theatrical event thus only serves a catalytic function, intended to stimulate critical analysis, organization and reinforces the growth of identity and self-confidence. The codification of experiences is particular to the given community and emanates from their own experiences. Because theatre in this way exploits social reality, encourages audience participation, is expressed in local idioms and is accessible to the community at large, many people who would normally keep away from adult-education course, are encouraged to join in (Byram Molbe, Ad Boeren Byram, 1911).

The theatre can intervene in several areas of community education and has proven itself to be more effective than many other forms of communication. These areas include non-formal education, health education campaigns, health education campaigns, agricultural extension campaigns, community development projects intended to motivate self-help, mass sensitization campaigns etc.

While several experiments have so far been carried out in Africa, the tendency seems to be an increasing move away from the radicalism that characterized the early experiences. According to Tar Ahura (1986, p. 117) popular theatre which started as a praxis for offering challenges to oppressive structures os that human beings can achieve dignity, self-expression and self-realization especially in societies which have suffered heavy fragmentation and class divisions has, over the years in Africa, shifted its emphasis. Tar Ahura points out that the radical, and indeed the ideological aspects are moving out of popular theatre in Africa. In the rest of this paper we examine some of the experiments and analyze the shift in emphasis, the probable causes for this and the ramifications.

While the writings of Paolo Freire and the work carried out by Augusto Boal in Latin America provided a launch pas for initial assays in popular theatre in Africa, the kind of socio-economic situation prevailing in Latin America could not be said to be the same as the African experience, even if imperialism and capitalism are very evident in both situations. Augusto Boal used theatre in creating a revolutionary consciousness particularly within the class struggle. Boal used a series of physical exercises to make participants aware of their bodies and the deformations produced by the oppressive working conditions. These exercises lead on to analysis of the contradictions involved within the society thereby transforming them from passive observers to active engagement. Such active engagement results in a critical understanding of social reality and the rehearsal of processes for change.

Boal's methodology has since been re-adapted several times over and popular theatre now englobes a number of strategies, depending upon the social, economic and political climate of the particular milieu in which the popular theatre programme is being carried out as well as the predisposition of the theatre workers or adult educators concerned.

Beginning with the travelling theatres launched by various Universities in the sixties and seventies whereby groups of students took ready-made plays to rural audiences in an attempt to break away from the urban-based elitist theatre,

popular theatre developed out of mass sensitization campaigns carried out in countries like Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Malawi where dramatizations were used to propagate various policies.

It was however not until 1974 when in Botswana, a coherent attempt was made by some adult educators including Ross Kidd, Martin Byram and Petra Rohr-Rouendall who launched an annual campaign called the Laedza Batanani as part of an extension programme in community education using the theatre. The Laedza Batanani was a one-week programme involving performances by a mobile team of actors followed by community discussion. The programme with local problems chosen by the community and the extension departments. As much as possible the organization involved the community at every level. The programme often began with problem study (e.g. vegetable production, nutrition, cooking practices, venereal diseases etc) followed by scenario making, rehearsal, performance, discussion and follow-up (c.f. Byram et al, 1978).

Socio-drama seemed most adequate in the mobilizational, educational and collective action process because through the medium people could raise community issues (mirror), involve people in discussing the issues (community forum) an mobilize people to get organized and take action on the issues (mobilizer) (Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, 1983). In their assessment of the Laedza Batanani, Kidd and Byram point out that a major problem was one of control. The whole process was controlled by the more powerful members of the community such as the government workers and community leaders rather than by the peasantry which some times resulted in a distortion in perceptions as well as concentration on technical solutions rather than to changes in social relationships. In the end, the programme is said to have hardly provided a voice and an organizing tool for marginal groups (Kidd and Byram 1983, p.280).

An attempt to use the theatre to provide a voice for the voiceless was made with the Kamiriithu experiences in Kenya in 1976. According to Ngugi wa Mirri (quoted by EYOH 1984, p. 67), Kamiriithu has been the most important and significant centre, whose example has been emulated by schools, progressive theatre groups and writers inside and outside Kenya. What in fact happened at the village of Kamiriithu which is the site of a Bata Shoe factory and a Brooke tea plantation is that the workers and peasants launched an educational and cultural centre -- the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre with its own adult education programmes. As part of their cultural activities, the community invited Ngugi wa Thiongo and Ngugi wa Mirri to write a play which they would then perform. The two writers jointly prepared an initial script -- Ngahika Ndenda -- which was subsequently revised during discussions with members of the cultural committee. The direction of the project was assigned to Kimani Gecau although very many people of the community participated either as actors, musicians, choreographers or costumers (Kimani Gecau 1985).

While the Kamiriithu experience undoubtedly remains one of the most significant in the use of popular theatre in Africa, a lot needs to be said about the

project. According to Kidd (1983, p. 287), popular theatre in the Third World often claims to be a tool of protest and struggle and a means of social transformation, but rarely does it challenge the status quo in a significant way. Too often it becomes as marginalised as the peasants and workers it represents, with little real impact on society as a whole.

Kamiriithu was something else. The fact that the Kenya authorities responded drastically by banning the play, razing the 2000 seat open-air theatre that had been constructed by the community and subsequently incarcerating Ngugi wa Thiongo is eloquent testimony to the impact of the theatre project and the way it not only raised a revolutionary consciousness amongst the masses but went on to instigate a degree of collaborative action based on a new awareness of their circumstances. But even Kamiriithu was never totally controlled by the masses. A play was pre-scripted by a sympathetic member of the middle classes who brought in a social sensitivity that coincided with many of the problems which confronted the society. This feeling of a communal angst gave the play a lot of gusto, but it remains largely an individual's expression of that angst notwithstanding all the re-adjustments and modifications which the text must have undergone in the hands of the villagers. In any event the script reflected the 'people's experiences, concerns, aspirations, grievances etc. and the problems and contradictions in the village, using the words and expressions of the people' (Ross Kidd, forthcoming).

However, the demise of Kamiriithu led many other theatre practitioners and adult educators to review the methodology and objectives of popular theatre. While it has continued to be necessary to provide the possibility for peasants and workers to analyze their reality and act out their understanding of their situation rather than remaining simply passive observers, approaches have become less radical, less confrontational, and more pragmatic.

Whether in the Chalimbanda project in Zambia (David Kerr and Stephen Chifunyise, 1979), the Ahmadou Bello Theatre Collective (Ross Kidd, 1982), the Malya project in Zimbabwe (Ross Kidd, 1984; Oga Abah, 1985; Ndumbe Eyoh, 1984), the Kumba project (Ndumbe Eyoh, 1984, 1986, Bole Butake, 1986; Tar Ahura, 1986), the trend seems to be moving towards assisting village communities with developing a better awareness of their milieu. Popular theatre is becoming more and more an enabling process although the ultimate objective of handing over control of the medium to the people is yet to be achieved.

In all of the theatre projects mentioned so far, the initiation and control has always come from middle class people, most often based in universities. The result has been that in spite of the enthusiasm often raised by the popular theatre projects they have continued to remain one-off affairs since most often enough, the organisational structures left behind have hardly turned out to be strong enough.

Granted, the theatre experience should only be catalytic but the analysis of social reality to gain a deeper understanding of the contradictions and problems inherent in a given society needs to be continuous. A single theatrical perfor-

mance may reveal the underlying tensions at a given point in time but society is dynamic and each new day brings along with it a different set of social relationships that need to be understood and mastered.

The approach of carrying out investigative research within a given community, analyzing the information to gain a deeper understanding of the contradictions, building up a scenario within which to illustrate the issues, putting up a performance followed by a discussion and possible mobilization for action, seems to be the approach best suited for the kind of workshop situations within which many of popular theatre projects in Africa in recent years have taken place. The fact that most of the initiators of popular theatre projects in many African countries are often residents of the area in which the work takes place with the extra complication that the work needs to be accomplished within a workshop participants who seem invariably to rush on to a performance even before the realities of the given situation are fully appreciated. An added problem is the need to see the theatre only as a catalyst to more consciousness raising and the need to look at the question of development from more than just a materialistic position. There is also a need felt to look at life in its entirety rather than in fragments which tends to limit performances to problem-posing thereby making life somewhat continuously drab. The theatre exercise should be able to celebrate moments in a community's achievements and then provide avenues for greater self-actualization.

It is also becoming clearer that there is need for further clarification of issues raised and better rationalization, of the procedures for information-gathering. The power of the theatre to change entrenched attitudes must never be under-estimated, which makes it incumbent on popular theatre practitioners to determine well in advance whether the plays they finally put on have to be prescriptive (i.e. offering concrete solutions to be given problems), or open-ended (encouraging audiences to provide solutions based upon the dramatic action performed). Theatre practitioners also need to decide before hand whether the play is to be scripted, rehearsed with an outside group and then performed to a particular community or whether the play is to develop out of work carried out within the community with the theatre practitioners only performing the roles of animators. It is preferable to develop the script with the community reflecting the community's understanding of its problems and using members of the community at every level of the programme -- information gathering, data-analysis, scenario-making, performance, discussion, follow-up (action), and evaluation. A central issue occurs as far as scenario-making is concerned: plot before theme or theme before plot? Of course if the themes have to emerge from the community then these will have to dictate the nature of the plot. Stephen Chifunyise (1985) has proposed three possible procedures viz: (a) beginning with a research structure and allowing the issues to emerge from the community, (b) beginning with a story, without prior research, and allowing thematic elements to evolve within the rehearsal process; and (c) bringing a group of development workers to live for an extended period (a fortnight or so)

in a village to help guide the discussion of major problems, and, without stressing drama particularly, allowing the need to articulate debates to develop naturally into theatrical forms.

This last method was adopted for a Workshop on Theatre for Integrated Rural Development (Th. I.R.D.) which took place in Kumba, Cameroon, in December 1984 (Chifunyise, 1985 a,b; Ahura, 1986; Butake 1986; Eyoh, 1985, 1986). In this Workshop participants were distributed amongst three villages -- Kake, Karume and Konye.

After the initial initiation into the whole question of theatre for development which took place at the Community Development Specialization Training Centre in Kumba and involved a team of International Resource Persons, the workshop participants went to the villages where they spent a total of six days gathering information, analyzing it, preparing scenarios and putting performances followed by discussions.

For information gathering, the participants used a number of strategies: the flooding method, whereby the participants moved around the villages, meeting people wherever they were and holding informal discussions with them, the 'homestead technique' which entailed living-in with families and trying to pick up as much information as possible through discussions and observation; interviews with selected villagers using a random sample; and holding discussions with village authorities. One group used the 'performance method' whereby improvisations were put on by both participants and villagers in order to slowly gain a deeper understanding of the issues. It was realized that villagers do not easily accept discussing their problems openly and should be drawn into this slowly and carefully, particularly because they have become suspicious about interviewer's motives (Eyoh 1985,sp. 13).

In implementing the theatre for integrated rural development methodology it was discovered from initial discussions with the local liaison officers who had been chosen that each of the villages, even though within the same vicinity, presented unique and interesting features and well as varying attitudes to community life.

In Kurume for instance, as Chifunyise (1985 p. 26) writes, the village primary school has over the years provided the nucleus for much developmental activity within the village. The school is so integrated into the community that the local nurse at the village health clinic is also a domestic and health science teacher in the school. The headmaster of the school is the chairman of the local branch of the Cameroon National Union Party (now called the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement) and chairman of the village development committee which is a projects committee for the Traditional Council headed by the Chief. The Secretary of the Traditional Council is one of the school teachers. He represents the school's interest on the Council on which all the peasants are represented by leaders elected on ethnic basis. These socio-economic and cultural interactions between the school and the village have made the school truly practical extension unity of the village's development.

The same cannot be said of the relationship between school and community in Kake where the participants discovered too many tensions which had virtually brought the functioning of the school to a halt, a fact uncovered only after a number of exploratory improvisations had been put on by the group with participation from the villagers. It is interesting to note that it was only in Kake that the villagers were able to take over control of the performance (Eyoh 1986, p.)

Although school and community live so harmoniously in Kurume, the situation has given rise to another which is very ironic. Owing to their achievements measured in terms of what services the villagers have been able to install (pipe-borne water, construction of village health centre, construction of village school etc.) for themselves, they have become rather conceited and blinded to some of the consequences of the so-called developments they have carried out. There are for instances standing pools around virtually every water-point in the village which have become veritable breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Consequently, there is a high occurrence of malaria, which the villagers attribute to witchcraft much to the elation of the village witch-doctor who undoubtedly does a thriving business. Social relationships had been left at a very traditional level resulting in several tensions between the youth and their parents, between women and menfolk etc., but these had never been addressed in any serious manner until the group of workshop participants dramatized them and opened up a new avenue for discussion.

Konye presented a more complex problem for the workshop participants who discovered that they had to deal with three separate villages that had physically grown into one but which, psychologically and otherwise, had continued to maintain their uniqueness resulting in a debilitating rivalry that had made it impossible for any collective activity to be carried out within the community. Perhaps because of the results achieved in this village in terms of attitude change, we will use it as an example of how the theatre can be used in community education (Butake 1986, p.)

As soon as the Konye group realized the nature of their task they set about approaching the three traditional councils involved in the need for collaboration which could only be achieved if they all came together and talked. Given the urgency of the problem the constraint of time, and owing to the traditional structures, the group of participants at the workshop assigned to the area decided that it would be time-consuming to try to involve the villagers at every level of the process and limited such participation to the members of the traditional council.

Having convinced the three councils to meet, which was in itself a feat, the group settled down to preparing an improvisation which was intended to be used to initiate the discussions amongst the councillors. The improvisation revolved around the persistent quarrels between three brothers who had inherited farmland from their father and had allowed this to get ruined since they would not collaborate with their younger brother whose parcel was being eroded by frequent floods since this was located near a river. In spite of the advice he

receives from an agricultural engineer to build a sort of embankment and his willingness to do so, he is stopped by his elder brothers who accuse him of insolence brought about perhaps by his education. The three brothers cannot reach an agreement and rather a fight ensues which finally leads the young man to seek the intervention of the village council.

At this point the villagers were asked to act as councillors and settle the dispute before them. They all immediately recognized the fact that the play had been about them and that it had aptly portrayed their situation. They recognised their follies, heartily laughed at these and proceeded to discuss strategies for action. An ad hoc committee was immediately set up to think of collecting contributions towards various village development projects, especially the construction of a much needed bridge to replace a hazardous hammock which presently links the villages to their farms situated across a large river and the installation of pipe-borne water. But the achievements of the group working with the committee went far beyond just thinking about the material. A healthy climate now seems to exist within the community.

The play had led to a better understanding of their situation, it had allowed them a format to hold discussions; it had incited them to mobilize themselves for action and had finally created an organisational structure for further action within the community. However, without future supervision and constant motivation with additional inputs from outside sources, such organisational structures may soon become frustrated owing to lack of tangible results besides the collection of funds, for their efforts. While the theatrical activity had helped catalyze the articulation of problems, the discussion of the basic contradictions within the society, the raising of new consciousness and putting together an organizational structure, it will be assuming too much to think that a two-week workshop of the Kumba-type was enough to provide a basis for sustaining the work. True enough, the inclusion of local liaison persons may have facilitated communication within the communities, but, with differing interests and other social and economic pressures, these local officials do not seem to have continued with the work. Even the inclusion of student-participants from the Community Development Specialization Training Centre which was intended to provide a core of trained personnel seasoned with the methodology in retrospect may have seemed ambitious; it is still too early to find out whether or not they have continued to use the experiences gained during the Workshop. The Kumba Workshop had an international framework because of the different countries of provenance of the Resource Persons which helped to bring together various lines of thought in the area of popular theatre and which has equally helped in propagating the experience in other countries.

However, like most of such events which operate under several constraints finance, ideology, time, difference in temperaments and level of motivation, etc. - Kumba seemed to have posed many more questions than it set to answer. Firstly, it is clear that large workshops which bring together several people from various countries can be expensive. There also seems to be a tendency for many

of such resource persons to pursue their own research ambitions some times to the detriment of the actual process. The fact that most of these projects can only operate with state authorization often makes it difficult to enter into those areas which may be controversial, leaving the exercise very short of its target to give vent to those silent voices. As Tar Ahura (1986, p. 172) points out, popular theatre like all popular activities in Africa is received with suspicion by the ruling class and, where they prove too popular with the masses, they are regarded as security risks and banned. This is also true of the more conventional forms of drama which meet with the most severe censorship because of its direct appeal to the public.

Ahura, like many others, advocate a return to the revolutionary posture for the popular theatre. While we may agree with this, the difference is in the question of strategy. Theatre should never reinforce the culture of silence but contribute to the liberation struggle. However, each battle is just another face of the war for mass conscientization. The process, as Butake (1986, p. 197) assets, ought to be gradual because the rural masses who can afford all that is needed for a comfortable existence are likely to become more politically conscious and awake than those who live an absolutely marginal existence and whose taking up of arms against the status quo may only result in their atomization.

The theatre is undoubtedly a viable method for generating community involvement, in discussing communal issues and seeking joint methods for action. It provides a forum for collective-interrogation towards a communal search for a better life. It creates a dialectical context within which the past can be used to inform the present and shape the future. It provides humanity with possibilities to set its own agendas and set about their realization. But the theatrical event should form an integral part of the community's life, reflect its aspirations and represent its total psyche. The final objective is of course to create a people's theatre with the view to using cultural action to instigate the process of change. The various experiences that have taken place in Africa so far clearly demonstrate that the choice of methodology can only be defined by the ideological leanings of the exponents, the political climate within which they are operating, the scope of the project, the level of motivation, the feelings of the client group etc. On no occasion should these be imposed by the animaturs if the theatrical event is to belong to the people and be a just validation of their own experiences. That is the ultimate goal -- the control of the medium by the people. How to get there, is a different question altogether. Various revolutionary theories could be propounded but the theatre exercise remains practical and only the circumstances met in the field can determine exactly what approach can best be used.

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