

TFD, ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND HEALTH ISSUES

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Abstract

Theatre-for-Development is becoming a fast rising theatre genre in Nigeria and Africa as a whole because of its focus on Development. The issue of development especially of rural communities in Nigeria has become a worrisome issue to Theatre Practitioners. It is no new phenomenon that the mainstream development strategies have so far failed to carry most of the rural communities along, neither is it also new that modes of communication the elites and the ruling class have employed have disregarded the rural populace who also consist of majority of the poor. TFD over the years in Nigeria is evolving to intervene in so many issues that will foster development in rural communities. The University of Abuja TFD Project, 2006 focused on Theatre and the Environment. This paper aims to contribute in the ongoing discourse that places TFD in a strategic position in theatre practice and development studies in Nigeria. The 2006 TFD project was carried out in Gwagwalada Area Council of the FCT. The theme: Theatre and the Environment seemed apt because of the state of the surroundings in Gwagwalada. This paper also seeks to tease out ways theatre can contribute to protecting the environment.

Introduction

This paper hopes to highlight the use of the cultural approach to intervene in environment and health matters. Culture here refers to its various forms of theatre, music and dance as a means of communication.

The gaps created by the existing and popular communication media

became such matter of great concern to development planners and theatre workers alike that they began to search for alternatives. Despite the transfer of wealth in terms of loans, grants to many countries of Africa, Nigeria inclusive, little impact has been seen in the rural areas.

Leading development scholars and other international agencies such as UNESCO and the UN began to realize that development had to be of people rather than material goods. This realization gave prominence to the thinking that what is important is not to give the people things but rather to move along with them to a mutually agreed destination. Information and communication are seen as important factors in mobilizing them for change.

TFD has been widely used to galvanize people towards change. Its success primarily rests on the fact that it uses cultural forms of the people which the people are familiar with and have their roots in the community.

However, to begin this essay, there is a need to re-echo this question which is that if theatre is a powerful conveyor of information especially in the traditional setting, why then has it not been simply adopted to solve the modern day problems of communicating development and change? This question and its obvious answer shows that in every TFD project, some setbacks are noticeable that continue to give theatre scholars reasons to seek for ways of making each project yield better results than the last.

Theoretical Framework

If there is a better approach to looking into issues like the health of a people, it is the cultural approach. By definition,

Culture is one of the many factors influencing human behaviour; it is a determinant of socially accepted behaviour, value systems, beliefs and practical knowledge. It is a means of expression or communication such as music, theatre and art. Culture in the broader sense includes also traditions, and local practices, taboos, religious affiliations,

gender roles, marriage and kinship patterns and so forth (Somma and Bodiang 5).

This argument shows that culture is deeply rooted in all aspects of society; therefore in using culture as an approach to tackle community issues and problems, one is sure of greater efficiency and sustainability. The TFD or popular theatre approach uses the peoples' culture as a reference point upon which to build the framework and design and implement programmes which will be participatory in nature to foster community ownership and control. The major problem with the mainstream mode of communication is the fact that there have been cases of communities not carrying on with the projects brought by development workers because these projects were imposed on the people.

Theatre for Development is part of a social movement covering many parts of Africa. Abah traces the emergence of TFD several decades ago.

It was given greater visibility in the late 1970s and 1980s and has grown differently in other parts of the developing world. It has been used to support development work covering health, water and agriculture (4).

TFD is informed by the concept of empowerment of marginalized groups started by the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Friere. Friere began the concept of conscientization where the central focus is empowerment. He postulated that the poor remain that way because they have lost their voices through imbibing the 'culture of silence'. The 'culture of silence' is reinforced by the banking system of education in which students are treated as objects or receptacles to be filled and stored with knowledge. The poor could gain back their lost voice through dialogue and the problem posing education which leads to critical awareness.

This is where TFD derives its participatory form that has ensured its success.

Abah posits that:

There is a whole space between these two points, with a myriad of intervening variables, problems and negotiations to navigate. First of all, the alternativeness of TFD in its movement away from traditional Western elitist theatre with its separation of audience from actor, its preoccupation with a finished product meant for consumption rather than allowing a process of creating together (99).

Participation in Friere's terms means total involvement even at the level of conceptualizing the vehicle of articulation (Mda, 13). Mda sees the issue of genuine participation as one of the problems besetting TFD. He starts by defining community theatre as theatre which emanates from the community audience. He further argues that for theatre to work effectively as a participatory approach there is need for full participation of the community in the whole process, from beginning to the end.

Scholars have argued that participation of the community in TFD has not been total because even though the theatre may use modes borrowed from the peoples' own modes of performance such as songs, dances and music; Mda says 'The process of theatre production as a creation is imposed in a benevolent style from outside the community' (Mda, 13). Mda further draws an analysis from Kidd's and Byram's critique of Laedza Batanani, a community development project in Botswana, Leadza Batanani's goal was to raise critical consciousness by finding out the concerns of the community and involving the community in workshops and post-performance discussions like all TFD projects are doing. However, the focus turned out to be on technical solutions rather than examination of historical, economical and political factors to explain rural problems (Mda, 15). Leadza Batanani was far from reaching its goal because according to Kidd and Byram, Friere postulates that authentic dialogue must lead to action while their

performance and discussions led to very little action. They however conclude that:

There is a need to reassess popular theatre. A re-alignment with the original goals would require a shift away from the undifferentiated community approach in which the more powerful community members dominate, to a genuine participation approach involving the oppressed sectors of the community and assuming participant control over the programme (Kidd & Byram in Mda, 16).

The question of TFD using catalysts in the form of facilitators in the communities does not take TFD away from its goal of changing the people from passive spectators to 'Spectators' (Boal, 1995), concluding this argument, Abah says:

Although TFD does admit outside animateurs who function as facilitators to kick start the process, they often of necessity must and do yield dominance to the grassroots powers of the problems which the practice interrogates. It is also the ordinary people who have a better semiological grasp of the autochthonous forms which TFD leans towards and always borrows from (Abah, 101).

Outside animateurs act as catalysts and this must necessarily be so. The animateurs are the ones with the burden for the rural community who sometimes just sit and wait until the government remembers them. Most times this takes a long time to happen. The visit of the catalysts and their subsequent activities in the communities arouses them to the consciousness and reality that sometimes they can help themselves. A good example of this will be seen in our case study for this paper.

The University of Abuja TFD Project

TFD began in the course curriculum of the Theatre Arts Department as community theatre. For the past decade it has been practiced as such till recently it has gradually evolved into Theatre for Development.

Issues of development, social change in rural disadvantaged communities have always been the focus of our workshops. The course is offered by students at the 200 and 400 levels respectively. A one-semester course, the course content implies weeks of intensive lectures in TFD on popular theatre practices, theories, arguments and case studies throughout Africa. As part of the course content the students are expected to go and stay in any rural community chosen for the workshop for that year and conduct with the supervision of staff coordinators a practical workshop with the target community. This has been the practice every year.

The Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja Theatre-for-Development (TFD) project for 2005\2006 session was based on the theme 'Theatre and the Environment'. The workshop took place in four communities in Gwagwalada Area council of the FCT: Kaida, Wumi, Anagada and Katse. The communities were selected by the Area Council officials for the exercise. The duration of the workshop was one week.

Aims and Objectives

The project set out to achieve the following:

1. Encourage the people to mobilize themselves and provide what the Government has not provided for them in order to make their lives more meaningful.
2. Educate the people on their rights to demand for basic infrastructures which were basically non-existent.
3. Raise the consciousness of the people and task them to wake up to their responsibilities.
4. Explore the potentials of TFD as vehicle for identifying and

analyzing the problems of the community and to suggest through the play making process, ways and means the community may adopt to solve their problems.

The workshop was done with assistance from the Gwagwalada Area Council and the University.

The Gwagwalada TFD Project 2006

This study is a report of the project in Anagada community, one of the communities chosen. The project adopted the homestead approach that involves the practitioners living in the community. For six days the animateurs lived among the Anagada people, eating with them, sleeping in their homes, sharing views with them and so on. The following processes were adhered to in the methodology chosen for this research:

Preliminary Visits

At this stage the heartbeat of the community towards the programme is evaluated. This is the stage where the workshop organizers visit the community for the first time to intimate them of our plans, seek their approval and also discuss issues that would foster a common understanding of the workshop agenda. This was done after approval was sought from the Chairman of the Gwagwalada Area Council.

The first visit was led by the overall coordinator, Prof. Saint Gbilekaa, Olympus Ejue, Emem Obonguko and a community development staff of the area council who is an indigene. On getting to Anagada, the animateurs headed to the Chief's palace and were warmly received. The Area Council staff who had previously been briefed on the workshop acted as our guide and interpreter since the Chief could not speak English fluently. Also present to receive us were some members of the village council. The aim was to seek approval from the community after presenting the details of the

workshop for discussion. Generally, the reaction to the idea of a TFD workshop in this community was that of joy and enthusiasm and we could see signs of expectations written all over the people's faces. During this visit, we intimidated the chief on what was expected of the community during the workshop especially as we intend adopting the homestead approach. The date of our arrival was set for 11th May, 2006.

Arrival at Anagada

The opening and closing ceremonies respectively which would have held in the area Council were shelved because of logistic problems on the part of the Area Council. Each of the groups departed to their respective communities on the 11th of May.

The departure was preceded by an orientation given by the Chief Coordinator basically to remind the students of what they were expected to do as they reside in the community. He gave reasons for the choice of the homestead approach we intend to adopt. The team arrived at Anagada at about 6:00pm in the evening and headed straight to the chief's palace. Anagada is about 20 minutes drive from Gwagwalada. We were welcomed by the Council of Chiefs on arrival and their native dialect 'Koro' was translated for us by the council secretary. He informed us that the community as a whole was glad to have us and wished us God's guidance and success in what we came for. We were given food items, cooking utensils and shown the respective places we would be sleeping and bathing.

Anagada is a semi-rural community of less than 500 people. It lies about 2km from the expressway between Zuba and Gwagwalada. 'Koro' is the dialect of the people even though Hausa is also fluently spoken. Most indigenes are farmers and grow crops like yam, maize, guinea corn, beans which they use for domestic as well as commercial purposes. Due to its proximity to the city, civil servants and other workers rent houses as well as non-indigenes.

We met a police officer, Mr. Idoko, who hails from Benue state who helped with most of our research.

Community Research

We woke up in the morning and began to clean the surroundings. We did this exercise throughout the duration of our stay. We discovered that the environment was so dirty and unkempt, refuse were indiscriminately dumped as well as human waste.

The youths and the children came to join us as we worked. By midday we divided ourselves in four subgroups. The reason for this was so that we can reach every home to carry out our research.

At the end of the day we returned to the square outside the chief's palace which was our central meeting point to compare notes and submit our reports. Each group was asked to use the conversational approach which allows the animateurs and villages to converse thereby sharing information and experiences. Komolafe says of this approach:

The homestead approach reveals to the community that the animateurs are very human with very similar frailties and problems as the rural dwellers have. This helps to demystify animateurs as a group of people who know it all and who will therefore provide solutions to the community problems (205).

Problems and issues identified were:

1. Poor electricity supply.
2. Lack of infrastructures: housing, road, water, health facilities, schools.
3. Lack of sanitary facilities. It was really devastating to see that even the houses were built without toilets and bathrooms which are features of a functional accommodation.

Our observations included:

1. Lack of consideration for environmental sanitation or cleanliness.
The base group which we identified also confirmed they recognized this as a problem that the community had.
2. The women just sit in the houses doing nothing except giving birth to so many children. This we realized was because they were not educated and lacked skills and information on family planning.
3. High rate of teenage pregnancy.

Scenario Building and Improvisation

This stage of the workshop began on the 3rd day of our stay. At this stage we found it necessary to meet with the members of the community in a central place so that we can possibly put the pieces of information gathered during the community research together. We agreed to meet in the only primary school later in the day. Members of the community and the theatre\dance troupe were among the people who participated in this session.

The afore listed problems and observations constituted the major issues discussed. This process continued the next day. At 12 noon in our venue with the people assembled the rehearsal began. People were given different roles including the children. We analyzed the story with them. Blockings were also given and they were told to say the line in the dialect. The people tried their best even with their lack of experience and skills in the theatre; even the children participants all enjoyed the process. At first most of them were shy since it was their first time, and it made the process a long and difficult one for the animateurs.

The children were even faster in learning and adapting. This process to the members of the community helped to really drive home the point we have been trying to make all along and it became their first time of really getting involved and participating in the issues that will hopefully be a beginning of a process or rather that would better their lives. We could see from all indications that the peoples' expectations were raised.

The Performance

The 'play' was titled 'Environment Palavar'. This issue was more pronounced and we also felt that the dirty and unkempt environment also gave birth to other problems. This could be linked to problems of health, lack of access road, so many cases of sick people, rise in teenage pregnancy and moral laxity. High maternal mortality and morbidity rate, high birth rate (resulting in so many children) than the parents can cater for, low rate of educated people and poverty.

TFD uses improvised skits. The practice is that it involves action and not its literary form. This still involves a logical sequence and flow of action that is flexible enough to allow for interventions and interjections even as the performance progresses. It also does not have a definite end and resolution; members of the audience who are not really spectators provide the end. In Abah's words, this form is called 'perforaltics'.

Is the oral and gestural amalgamation of a community's cultural systems into a dramatic representation of their own reality? The oral which names and codifies the issues in this system of performance does not only refer to dialogue. It is about the gamut of language which included speech, song, drum and dance. They expound and locate the community's philosophy and ethos. The added conveyance of meaning happens through physical body gestures and moment-not necessarily acting to concretize the issues named... Perforaltics in operation defines the ethics and aesthetics of the community in which TFD is operating (41-42).

In playing out the community's story, the play was divided into stages. The performance took place in the open square in front of the Chief's house in the daytime. The community musicians brought out their drums and started playing and singing. In no time, women, youths and children had gathered and it turned into a

dance and music session. When the chief stepped out and took his seat, the musicians were told to hold on for a moment because we had some things to say.

The scenario focused on the effects of lack of sanitary facilities in the community-toilets and bathrooms and people defecating on every available open space and the bushes. Children are seen openly defecating and walking off. Some by the stream and people are seen going to fetch the water. Another woman sits, eating near her child's faeces. She rises up, packs it with a paper, throws it outside and comes to resumes her eating without even washing her hands. Other children are seen playing in that same spot.

The chief is seen in council with his elders. They are discussing how to get the area council chairman to donate modern farming implements to the community to improve their farming and harvest.

A group of women are wailing, some carrying sick babies and crying to the chief about the ill-equipped health centre in the community with no drugs and no doctors and some crying about their children sick with strange diseases. The council stops deliberating as they realize that they had a more pressing problem at hand. As this exchange is going on members of the audience are seen intervening and making suggestions. This stage led to the post-performance discussion without the play ending formally.

Workshop Evaluation

The 'play' sparks off a lot of questions which the people also answered for themselves. At the end of the day they agreed that a simple thing like keeping the environment clean, keeping human waste in its proper place can save the children from being sick, save money and that through community efforts, the roads can be expanded to make them motorable and easier to transport their farm produce to neighbouring towns and markets for sale. 'Poohs' were donated to the community. These were given out after

demonstrating how they are used. They were told one sells for about #100 in the market and is affordable. They were also told that it was meant to stop babies and children from passing faeces indiscriminately on the streets, etc.

The chief and his council thanked us for coming to awaken and create such awareness in them and asked us to come from time to time. This brings to the fore also that programmes of this nature should not just end in one week. The workshop was over in less than a week and the question on everyone's lips was: Did we achieve our goal and did we make any impact at all in the lives of the people that they will remember in a long time to come besides our presence as university people in the community?

The bigger problem noticeable from the beginning of the workshop was the fact that in each of the houses, there were no toilets and bathrooms built as part of the house. Our worry was how they were going to correct this after we have gone. The chief actually promised looking into this. We left believing that a seed has been dropped in their lives that will bring about change. Secondly it was a time of learning for the students; some of them have never been to a rural community before nor seen people living in shacks and cooking with firewood, not to talk of sleeping in one. The participants agreed it was a great change to their level of reasoning and exposed to them that there is another way of life than the one they are used to.

It was also a good practical experience of the theories they learnt in class as they could see people who are not at all experienced in theatre play out roles given to them effectively, even children. We were also faced with the reality of extreme poverty in the rural communities where even the basic amenities are lacking and people just cannot afford to buy things they need. The area looked completely neglected by the ruling authorities. This makes us reflect in whether TFD should not also be a tool that can advocate for amenities for the rural people sometimes. We should not just

finish our workshop, raise their expectations and go home leaving them to their devices.

The workshop carried out and the results achieved show that TFD has some strength.

TFD recognizes first the people as the starting point of the development process. This recognition is key because people and not things should be at the centre of development. One of the programmes involves researching into what are the peoples' problems by seeking their views and thoughts. The plays are improvised based on the issues raised here. Even though at the workshop, the participants (students) presented gifts of 'poohs' to the children. The people saw this as a solution to the problem.

A visit to Anagada showed that 'pooch' is now a popular phenomenon. First we saw the problem from the people's perspective. Helping them proffer a solution did not take away the fact that the problem is theirs. Research, discussion and analysis of the different positions by the people themselves made them see providing 'poohs' for their children as an immediate solutions to the problems they were having. Mlama says;

Popular theatre begins with the grassroot community and with what its members think are the major concerns of their lives.. it starts with a peoples' way of life in general and then work out whatever development problem the people feel is of concern (204).

Mlama also adds to the strength of popular theatre:

The strength of popular theatre lies in its use of peoples' communication media for development, unlike other kinds of communication for development purposes as seen in the mass media. Popular theatre offers a communication medium where the members of the community are in control of the medium.

The strength of this communication medium is the fact that it is not

an imposition on the people. The people are familiar with it, which makes it easy for them to understand, assimilate it and work with it to create a change.

TFD is an agent of change. It arouses and awakens critical consciousness of a very bad situation and then the desire to see it change.

Mlama says,

It is this critical awareness that moves the people to take action for development...should be viewed as a process in which every stage goes towards facilitating a meaningful participation of a people in bettering their welfare is important (208).

In as much as TFD has much strength, it also has shortcomings which this paper will focus on because of its place as a course of study in the university. In the case of our workshop, the problems were numerous;

We had a short time to do everything thereby forcing the people to move with our pace;

We had basically no sponsorship, so we could not achieve all we had in our plans. Also a major setback, which TFD at every level has to address, is the problem of continuum. The project lacks continuity and in the eyes of many, it seems we always start something we cannot take to a finish. Another problem is how to confront community problems at micro level by involving the government and other agencies to take up solving these problems.

Recommendations

In conclusion is this view from Mlama's,

Any government, development agent or person committed to the meaningful development of the world's poor and the true integration of peoples' culture into the development process ought to take an interest in the Popular Theatre approach to culture and development. As the case of Popular Theatre in Africa indicates, it is the totality of their way of life (211)

It means that instead of throwing away TFD from our theatre

studies and practice, we should seek new ways of developing it because it will always be relevant as long as there are poor, oppressed people and as long as there are people, there will always be culture which should help in development.

TFD in University of Abuja is done only in the first semester, just before or after examinations. Usually the duration is so short that not much can be achieved. In some universities it is non-existent. A.B.U., Zaria has a model that if most universities adopt it, the programme will be more meaningful for the students. As it is now, they sometimes get confused and not really fulfilled with its outcome. Some of them express their fears of engaging in a project that does not bring useful results.

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