Issues of the Self and Othering in Community Theatre Practice

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Abstract
Theatre has continued to serve as a vehicle via which culture expresses itself. This is even more abundant in Africa. Playing together and imitating one another have been a performative occurrence via which Africans in various contexts elucidate matters of serious concern for edification, correction and education. The practice of community theatre has sprung from a desire both to demonstrably authenticate African indigenous performance forms as communal practices and to deploy same as forum for negotiating development for African communities. It has served as a response to Western postulations on the theatre of Africa and as a functional endeavour to push the frontiers of the advancement of the people of Africa, especially rural, forward. Essentially a social research practice, community theatre uses drama as a means for achieving dialogue, participation and communal action for change.The subject matter of the drama is usually derived from findings of research conducted within the community. However, there appears a deliberate attempt by communities to create fictional characters with antithetical traits as 'others' rather than as members of the same community, as self. This habit tends to push the blame on those in the minority, on the voiceless, and therefore inferior, among them.This paper adopts a postcolonial clout in case studying two community theatre exercises in northern Nigeria in order to underscore likely behaviours which add to the underdevelopment of Africa today. Community dialogue and participation for positive action is strained in environments where the dominant group (the self) is presented as perfect, therefore faultless, while the minority (the other) is represented as criminal, and sometimes voiceless. The Zuru and Sumaila experiences reveal that classification of people as self and/or other does not promote the basic goals of

community theatre nor would it help instigate any sustainable development.

Keywords: Self, Other, Othering, Community Theatre

Introduction

Community theatre, especially in Africa, emanated from the desire and need to culturally appropriate and communally determine issues of representations of 'self' for development. The practice sprung against the dominant rhetoric of perceiving and conceiving Africans, especially the rural poor, as backward, uninformed, undeveloped and therefore framed as inferior in a dialectic "process of **othering**" (Aschroft, Griffiths and Tiffin10). It emanated as an ointment by which application the slash of binary oppositions which separates people in a deterministic relation of power on the basis of *difference* and 'otherness' could be erased. Community theatre is seen as a leveler in its processes; promoting the removal of political, economic, social and religious inequalities among participants, for development.

As a theatrical exercise, community theatrealso referred to as Theatre for Development (TfD), involves people as medium for the depiction of communal concerns which significantly necessitates the taking up of roles (drama) in concretizing issues which threaten the developmental strides of the community. This act, consequently, implicates a (mis)representation of identities, a 'designification' of self and other in the manner Euramerican colonialists created pejorative stereotypes of peoples unlike themselves (the colonized):

> Their view of the "**other**" world-"orientalism"-is inevitably colored by their own cultural, political, and religious backgrounds, leading them to depict those unlike themselves as inferior and objectionable-for example, as lazy, deceitful, and irrational. The self, by contrast, is defined as good, upright, and moral (Dobie206).

Only, in the context of this article, it is not a Euramerican phenomenon but a propensity of socio-cultural majorities over their minority

counterparts in any multicultural cosmogony which are also found in Northern Nigeria. Dominant groups are of the tendency to represent and signify residual groups as weak and unproductive. Hall (229) notes that,

> people who are in any way significantly different from the majority - 'them' rather than 'us' – are frequently exposed to this *binary* form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic.

The psychologist, Jacques Lacan reviewed the perception of character and psyche to include a fragmented composition of the self and other rather than the Freudian postulation of the human self as unique and whole. The sense of self therefore, intersperses among the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic which are experienced as need, demand and desire. Dobie (71) captures Lacan's postulation thus, "the "self" is always manufactured by the mistaken acceptance of an external image for an internal identity. Lacan refers to it as the "**other**" because it is not the actual self, only an image outside of the self". But of greater import, for this article, is the underlying power play which such representations of self and other connote in the ascription and distribution of roles in society, the altercating fissures of identity politics and consciousness construction that pose as postcolonialism. However,Lacan's conception of the self and other as a psychological component of individuals is significant because it denotes that othering is an inherent human trait irrespective of religion, class, gender or cultural orientation. Hence, the perception of self as superior and other as inferior is bound to exist in any human society where differences exist among people. Consequently, postcolonial notions are not restricted to a study or representation of colonial interactions but also encapsulate the human tendency to view self as more significant and morally upright than the debased other.

Edward Said is attributed as the father of postcolonial postulations with the thoughts he expressed in his book, *Orientalism*. According to him,

> My idea in **Orientalism** is to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange (Saidxvii).

One of the concerns of his submission is with the representations of identity, especially by a 'superior conscience', in the framing of roles and in determining modules for interactions; the dynamics of control and subjugation in the perception of self and other. Community theatre tends to lend its voice to the ongoing debate and politics of representations.

Community theatre practice is a response to several development and communication strategies and practices which undermined, or neglected, the efficacy of indigenous forms and local participation in the apprehension, comprehension and articulation of discordant voices for harmonious collective action towards progressive change.van Erven(i) submits that, "community theatre is an important device for communities to share stories, to participate in political dialogue, and to break down the increasing exclusion of marginalized groups". It thrives on community researching and dialogue in order to spur wider participation and communal ownership of decisions reached collectively. One of the fundamentally cultural avenues for achieving this is via the application of native songs, drama, music and costuming.For Epskamp (3), community theatre is "a learning strategy in which theatre is used to encourage communities to express their own concerns and reflect upon the causes of their problems and possible solutions".The process of community theatre usually adopts the sequence of moving to the community, community research, data collection, data analysis, scenario formation, play rehearsals, play performance and evaluation/follow up (Abah, 13, Akinwale, 231-232).

The human agency serves as both the 'fictional' character in the dramatization of issues as well as the reflected personage in real society who needs to 'act' for the betterment of his society. In other words, the character in the drama may serve as the other while the person in real life,

who informs the character, is seen as self.It is essentially this peculiar trait that engenders issues of the self and othering in community theatre practice, especially as witnessed in the Zuru Theatre for Development (TfD) Campaign by the Centre of Excellence on Development Communication, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in 2015 and the Sumaila Community Theatre Experience by the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts, Bayero University Kano in 2017. Community theatre, as a practice, swings on the oak of culture and could be regarded as an experiencing of postcolonialism. Postcolonialism, on its own account, is a strand of cultural studies, which is particularly concerned with "the signifying practices of representation" (Barker8). Community theatre as a postcolonial phenomenon is therefore grounded on construction and representation of the dynamics of self and the other.

The Zuru Experience

The Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria Centre of Excellence on Development Communication embarked on a TfD exercise from the 7th to 18th of December 2015 in Zuru, Kebbi State. As most community theatre practices go, the trigger for the exercise comes from outside the community with the goal to engage 'locals' in dialogue, drama and action for change. The emphasis for community theatre is research and participation. Issues that serve as thematic concerns for interaction and drama are not imagined but are garnered from the daily routines and realities of the host community and its people. This therefore makes it essential for a thorough search and research of the community in order to gather factual data for a realistic and thorough interrogation of causes, effects and possible solutions to the ills and harmful practices discovered. Several community researching techniques abound for community theatre participants in the quest for locating issues of concern and interest within communities.

The Zuru experience deployed techniques such as Focus Group Discussion (FGD), interviews, and Participatory Video (PV) as research tools for generating data. FGDs occur in the form of community meetings where people of the same interests, profession or expertise are brought together to interact. Interview refers to the dialogue between two parties with the view to share information. Participatory video is the use of the

video camera to capture what one or more people see as the challenge in their community, an audiovisual documentation of what they frameas the development issue. The key findings from these interactions included poor health facilities, lack of potable water, poor connectivity/network, unemployment, drug addiction, loss of cultural values/disrespect for elders and traditional authority, poor hygiene, sanitation and other related environmental problems and poor education and educational facilities.

Issues of self and othering usually spring at the point of data analysis and character representation in drama. They are points where facts are connected to members of society and their habits which contribute to stall the development of society. These points spur levels of denials and counter accusations because the self fights to free itself from the conception of the other, hence initiating the process of othering. Hence, when the images captured by the participatory video were projected to a gathering of the community members, old and young, male and female, various remarks trailed the video. The adults were taken aback by the sordid squalor and distastefullyunhygienic environment which nauseated their eyes. The images, though real, counteract with their sense of self and put their desired imaginary and symbolically superior 'self' into a state of vulnerability which jolts them into denial. They started by asking where those images were taken, for as far as they were concerned those images do not represent their community and, inadvertently, their 'self'. For all they cared, the "visitors", by which they mean the participants from Zaria, were merely trying to portray them as the other, therefore as inferior, backward and uncivilized. The video was played again for all to view more closely and it took the children in the crowd to excitedly point out locations which are familiar to them while attaching unkempt houses to the names of the adults present. The adults of course were irritated at first by the children's innocent depiction of them as the 'other' and attempted to silence them by rebuke, but the 'characterization' had already stuck.

Though the feeling of othering has its daunting consequences, the people of Zuru realized that they are not the self they have thought themselves to be hence they found themselves framed in the mindset of the other. The denial such a realization creates tampers with the goal of community theatre, which is to ensure participation for action towards the

betterment of the community. It creates a postcolonial suspicion between the outsiders, who are seen as superior, and the locals who see themselves as custodians of their culture and assume to figuratively know where the shoe pinches. This consequentially results in what Eagleton (51) tags as 'culture wars', to suggest "pitched battles between populists and elitists, custodians of the canon and the devotees of *difference*, dead white males and the unjustly marginalized". The outsiders, most often more educated and Western inclined than the locals, are conceived at this instance of suspicion as representatives of colonialism and its imperialist elitism, that reversed binary which is now the other, while the locals, as the insiders, are populist oriented assuming the stature of the self which must refuse to be the other. Such altercations hinder mutual trust which better ensures participation and representation that should ultimately benefit the community.

The Sumaila Experience

Perhaps it is the Sumaila Experience that foregrounds the parenthetical attributions of self and othering in community theatre practice. SumailaLocal Government Area of Kano State played host to staff and students of the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts, Bayero University Kano from the 22nd of April to the 28th of April 2017 for a community theatre project. As part of their curriculum requirements, students are taken to a community and are made to reside among members of the community for a period of time. Sumaila community is predominantly populated by Hausa/Fulani Muslim majorities but pockets of settlements around the community centre accommodate the Maguzawa minorities who are either animists or Christians. Interactions between these multi-religious locals are said to be cordial based on the information gathered from community researching. Market days, which occur every Tuesdays and Fridays in the community centre, provide a space for both parties to come together and engage in exchanges of goods and services which usually double as interchanges of cultural tropes and icons. For instance, the minorities are in a process of linguistic assimilation as they could be heard speaking the Hausa language, albeit corrupted while the majorities are seen purchasing items of food and wares which are locally produced and culturally attributed to the minorities. Though Adamu (35)

considers them as the "original Hausa", the minority status of the Maguzawas cast them in inferior representations.

The nature of the community and its inhabitants invariably creates its own autochthonous power structures and representations. The majority see themselves as the self while the minorities are perceived as the other. The location of the market suggests an appropriation and mainstreaming of superiority which draws the peripheral locals from the margins to the centre. The 'home advantage' creates that sense of otherness between the owner of the house and the visitor, the visitor of course deprived of any sense of sustained belonging. Community theatre thrives on the creation of an enabling environment for a horizontal communication, irrespective of social, economic, religious, political and traditional standings and affiliations. Mda (1) has noted that one of community theatre's concerns is to devise means as to "how communication can be organized so as to increase participation, achieve self-reliance, promote equity, and close communication gaps". All participants need to feel at home, without innuendoes of superiority and inferiority, self and other.

The composition of the market, for instance, also does not include women and girls from the Hausa/Fulani population, only a few of their men even visit the market. This is largely due to the religio-cultural practices of the 'hosts'. Women are not expected to be seen in public spaces and 'well trained' adolescent girls from 'responsible' homes are not expected to be seen trading in the market either. Another reason proffered for their absence is the rampant recurrence of rape and sexual abuses in the community (rape was a persistently recurring issue during the community research, it was the most popular ill mentioned by the community members); as a result their movements are limited as a preventive measure against such ills. Women in the market are usually comprised of the old and the minorities who come to buy and sell.When interviewed in the market, some of them refused to comment while others said the issues of the community are not their problem because they simply come and go. Meanwhile all those who spoke agreed that their stalls need upgrading especially because the rainy season was approaching and most of them operate under makeshift shelters. This suggests that they have silently accepted the inferior identity of"the other

that is only important to the extent to which it can be known" (Ashcroft et al9). They do not see the general social issues of the community as their problem because they are the other. Only issues which directly border on their trade is relevant to them but not their representation as other, which they seem to have come to accept.

The drama making process requires a distribution of roles and responsibilities. Community Based Organizations (CBOs) are usually more disposed to participate in the drama than an average member of the community. This is largely due to the perceptionof those who engage in drama and dramatizationin northern Nigeria as wayward and irresponsible (Ibrahim, 2013, Na'Allah, 2004), therefore framed as the other, by community members, who are in this instance the self. One of such CBOs is theHimma Dramatic and EnlightenmentAssociation, Sumaila. This group has reported that it has suffered a lot of marginalisation and insults, with some of their performances banned and members banished as immoral and inciting. They are characteristically forced to the fringes of social life because they do not represent the ideal representation of self. When the research findings were to be dramatized, this group started scouting for actors from within the community. Knowing full well that the "self" never participates in representations, the other sought for its likes to engage in the drama. Though socially recognised in Northern Nigeria, prostitutes are also classified as the other because they are often tagged as misfits. But sadly, when the dramatic group approached a well known prostitute in the community to join in the performance, she exclaimed, "Ai niba 'yariskabace", which literally translates to, "I am not a wayward person". This shows that even among "others", those who engage in drama are the most inferior. This process of othering not only limits the scope of participation in community theatre but also denies the performance of reality, by those who are seen as inferior, its credibility and substance.

But even with the othering of the drama group and its members by the larger community, the drama making process revealed a level of what HomiBhabha(1994) refers to as "Mimicry". This notion refers to "the imitation of the dress, manners, and language of the dominant **culture** by an oppressed one" (Dobie352). The research findings indicated that rape is a rampant phenomenon in Sumaila. Some of the

respondents in the community admit that they have accosted some of their own people, the self, as culprits and perpetrators of the dastardly act. The self engages in rape. However, at the point of representation, the drama group merely mimicked the 'self', which is always in denial of committing any ill, by pushing blame on yet another group of others rather than on the self. In fact, Schechner (89) has noted that dramatic representation is an activity where "people make, costume, and act in ways that are "not me", hence characters which represented rapists were given names which are not in tandem with the dominant self. The mother of the rapists was named MamanKubandu in the drama, a Bamaguje name, signifying that the malaise is committed by Maguzawas and not the dominant Hausa/Fulani majority. And when the drama was presented with such a character, the response from audience was more of laughter from humour than from a deep reflection that should lead to action that would help arrest the situation. The resounding laughter is largely due to the fact that the audience is always the self, while the actors are the other which has been delegated with the task of representation, therefore playing to the gallery.

Some adolescent girls, at the point of post-performance analysis, said the most touching scene in the drama, for them, is the one that presented and discussed the rape issue. But unfortunately, as they also noted, the community received it with unjustified levity because girls are falling victims increasingly. At that instant the girls became the other which is not important at the point of the self's pleasure, which further alludes to them the status of underdogs which dare not revolt against the dominant paradigm (Eagleton, 2005).

Recommendations

If differences are highlighted in community theatre engagements rather than a conscious effort at addressing issues that hamper community development, then issues of the self and othering would always take centre stage thus leaving the entire process and community in a state of stillbirth. The process of community theatre needs to include a stage/step of clarification where participants are deliberately made to realise that it is not about trading blames but about the general good of the community. And as human beings, some, if not all, are bound to have inclinations and

behaviours which hinder the collective development of the community hence the need to change and imbibe behaviours that encourage sustainable development.

The cultural politics of representation and identity would remain a major factor of interaction, especially among multi-ethnic entities. It is therefore pertinent that community theatre should judiciously promote Boal'sspect-actor techniques which empower the persons being represented to step into the action and represent themselves in the drama. Representations of the self and other cannot be wished away. In fact, it is almost impossible to avoid the tendencies of self and othering, as Lacan indicated. What can be taken away however, is the monopoly of identity construction and representation by dominant groups through the inclusive participation of minority groups in community theatre. Weedon (52) notes that the:

> Process of the dominant group constructing the 'other'… points to a major cultural political task both within multi-ethnic societies and beyond, that involves promoting recognition of the diversity of marginalized groups. Invariably this relies on the positive intervention by people from the groups in question who challenge hegemonic constructions of their otherness.

Minority groups should be encouraged to appropriate the avenues and tools of representation in order for them to construct their own identities.In the same vein, people should be encouraged to step outside their 'perfect self' and objectively view themselves in their otherness so that development can be both total and holistic.

Conclusion

Community theatre is a postcolonial practice which sought to bridge gaps of communication and development by deploying indigenous modes and media of expression. But rather than helping to initiate egalitarian forums for dialogue and collective progress, the practice has witnessed varied notions of consciousness and representations have only widened the rift between the self and the other which makes it difficult to achieve the goals of any community theatre experiment. The Zuru and Sumaila

experiments are examples of how issues of self and othering hinder the success of community theatre practice, especially in the aspects of participation and mutual collaboration for collective action towards communal change and development. They represent the bane of contemporary community theatre practice and the implosive underdevelopment such issues confer on the development of Africa.

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