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BER PINY[1] : TRACING AND TRACKING THE PRACTICE OF THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT IN EAST AFRICA.

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Abstract

The article traces and tracks the development of a popular theatre form in East Africa: Theatre for Development. In the process of tracing and tracking this genre of theatre, the article begins by locating the presence of this discursive theatre practice in Africa. The article then explores the development and manifestation of this theatre practice in East Africa, outlining its theoretical bases as well as its impact in transformation agenda.

Key Words: Theatre for Development, intervention, cosmic equilibrium/disequilibrium, Subjugated cultures

Introduction

To trace and track the practice of theatre for development in East Africa is an awesome task that cannot be undertaken outside the larger implications and imperatives of its evolution and development on the continent of Africa. However, before delving into a detailed critical exploration and interrogation of this discursive practice, it is perhaps necessary at this point in this article to declare the preference for the label theatre for development while also providing its working definition. It is also important to note that this article does not engage with the usual polemics and politics of labeling and definitions associated with theatre for development. For practical purposes of this article, theatre for development is construed as one of the inflections of applied theatre/drama. Simply put, this is one of those theatre practices that is deliberately and consciously deployed as a form and method of intervention; that is a form of theatre which is anticipated to participate in transformation of particular communities, sometimes referred to as target communities. Those who choose to use this type of theatre assume that there are certain limit situations that are oppressive and therefore militate against development and progress in such communities. The underlying assumption is based on the premise that these limit situations and conditions, oppressive and repressive as they are, have created a culture of silence[2]. It is, in fact, this culture of silence that this theatre form and practice attempts to break. To echo Walter Benjamin (1968), this form of theatre attempts to disrupt the 'usualness' of the target communities so that they can perceive themselves differently and in return embrace change.

In this article, theatre for development is used in a very fluid and general sense to include diverse forms of intervention theatre practices such as Theatre of the Oppressed, Liberation Theatre, Community Theatre, Popular Theatre, Participatory Educational Theatre, Theatre in Education, Alternative Theatre, Campaign Theatre, Resistance Theatre, Agitprop Theatre, Protest Theatre, Liberation Oppositional Theatre, Peace, Healing and Reconciliation Theatre, Rural appraisal and Development Theatre and Civic Education Theatre. The common denominator in all these variants of this theatre practice is intervention against some limit situation(s) or oppressive conditions which most probably militate against development or on individual's ability and capacity to participating in activities that enhance their progress and growth as human beings.

[1] This word is derived from Okot p'Bitek's usage in Artist, the Ruler (1986) and is used the same way, that is, referring to the 'goodness/happiness in the world

[2] See detailed explanations of the concepts 'limit situation and culture of silence'. In Paulo Fréire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

Though the nomenclature seems to vary, the essence of all these variants remains the same: anticipating the idea of theatre in the service of social transformation and reformation. Even a cursory engagement with the labels and manifestations of the different variants explicitly suggests their objectives and intentions. The phrase theatre for development however became vogue in the 80s and was mainly characterised as we are reminded by L. Dale Byam, (1999) as transcendence over the "less interactive styles of popular theatre," (p.12) and which is defined in terms of the increased participation of the target audience in the theatrical process. Thus, for her, "theatre for development aims to encourage the spectator in an analysis of the social environment through dialogue" (p.12). For Zakes Mda, (1993) it is defined as "modes of theatre whose objective is to disseminate messages, or to conscientize communities about their objective social-political situation" (p.48). And Penina Mlama, (1991) though referring to the practice as Popular Theatre, describes its aims as follows:

…it aims to make the people not only aware of but also active participants in the development process by expressing their viewpoints and acting to better their conditions. Popular theatre is intended to empower the common man with a critical consciousness crucial to the struggle against the forces responsible for his poverty (p.67).

While for Marcia Noguiera (2002, p.4) it is,

(…) essentially or ideally a progression from less interactive theatre forms to a more dialogical process, where theatre is practiced with the people or by the people as a way of empowering communities, listening to their concerns, and then encouraging them to voice and solve their own problems.

With this generally long descriptive definition of the practice, the article now turns, in a historical sense, to the way this intervention theatre practice has revealed itself in Africa, in the process mutating into its current discursive "forms" and "practices".

Pre-colonial Period and Drama of Gods: Delegated Agency

Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Okot p'Bitek have argued variously that art was and is still central as an apparatus of 'cosmic realignment' in African societies. Their arguments are profound in respect to the ways that intervention theatre practices have evolved but also developed in terms of (form, content) philosophy, ideology, procedures and methodology in Africa. Of particular great interest to this article are performances of rituals: what Soyinka calls 'drama of gods'[3]. In the pre-colonial African societies and communities just like in any other pre-modern societies, rituals were performed for a variety of reasons: thanksgiving, to celebrate life and to seek divine intervention. However, my interest here is with the role of these performances of rituals intervention. When traditional societies were faced by 'cosmic disequilibrium' visited upon them by calamitous plagues, drought, wars and floods, they would perform rituals so the gods/supernatural forces would intervene on their behalf and restore the so desired 'cosmic equilibrium'. This role of art in society as intervention is appropriately articulated by p' Bitek (1986, P.40) when he argues convincingly that:

> The artist uses his voice, he sings his laws to the accompaniment of the nanga, the harp; he twists his body to the rhythm of the drums, to proclaim his rules. He carves his moral standards on wood and stone, and paints his colourful 'dos and don'ts' on walls. And canvas. In these and other ways, the artist expresses the joys and sorrows of the people. What is joy? What is sorrow? These questions are meaningless if the philosophy of life as created and celebrated in art, is not clear. What is happiness? What is sadness? Surely, these questions do not make sense unless the human situation is what it should be. Ber piny. (Ber piny as used by Okot is an Acoli/Luo word that plays on the pun beauty of the world/land; happiness in the world/land and goodness of the world/land. The emphasis is Okot's)

A problem envisaged in the dramas of gods (rituals) as forms of intervention is the fact that they took away agency from the participants/celebrants, transferring it to gods/divine forces. The fault of this specific performance as intervention is that it did not create consciousness nor unsettled the 'usualness' of the concerned societies and communities by imbuing them with new knowledge that would enable them to confront their limit situations; as such becoming more perceptive and reflective about their world. Typical of a meaningful intervention, the new knowledge should lead to new consciousness that would be expected to catalyze them to break out from this vicious cycle that traps on the dependence divine/supernatural providence. However, Soyinka (1976) argues that there were other types of rituals which raised the consciousness individuals to new levels leading to them into action and transformation of their societies and communities. He describes it as follows:

> …the withdrawal of the individual into an inner world form which he returns, communicating a new strength for action … We describe it as the

[3] See Soyinka's elaborate discussion of this exciting concept in his authoritative text on sense of African drama: Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and African World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

> primal reality, the hinterland of transition. The community emerges from the ritual experience 'charged with new strength of action' because of the protagonist's Promethean raid on the durable resources of the transitional realm', immersed within it, he is enabled emphatically to transmit its essence to the choric participants Soyinka of the rites – the community. (P.33)

Thus, one can discern two levels of rituals; one where the participants delegate their agency to divine forces and as such, accept their condition(s) as over determined by fate and destiny, and another level where the possibility of an individual acquiring new consciousness as a result of participating in a ritual performance as an initiand uses that consciousness to catalyze his community into praxis. Deducing from Soyinka's argument about pre-colonial Africa's rituals performances, it can be concluded, that there was to some extent, some kind of intervention theatre/theatre for development even if rudimentary.

Theatre for Development in the Colonial Era: The Microwave Approach

Theatre for development that emerged out of the colonial structures and processes took a distinctively top-down approach in communicating development. As David Kerr reminds us:

> The colonial heritage set a pattern which has had a continuing deleterious impact on post-independence popular theatre, establishing a pattern whereby 'control and goal-setting are kept out of the hands of those for whom the programme is run. (P.149).

The type of intervention theatre practice that was dominant at this time in its history took a decidedly top-down approach as it was message oriented, expected mainly to circulate the ideology, philosophy and policies of the colonial government framed around issues of adult literary, hygiene, agriculture, environment and cultural transformations. Mlama (1991) reminds us that:

> The European colonial rulers imposed European theatre on Africa. Their intention was not only to entertain the European community in the colonies but also to inculcate European values and attitudes among the colonized as part of the cultural domination crucial to colonization process. (P.57)

This explains why the colonial period intervention theatre was framed in a top-down message- oriented approach intended deliberately for the consumption by the colonized subjects. What is worth noting about this theatre, is that it assumed that the colonial subjects needed to be enlightened in a particular way in total disregard of their own indigenous forms of knowledge and aesthetic cultural productions. Admittedly, there was to some extent form and practice of theatre for development in Africa during the colonial period only that it was not designed to create consciousness that would provoke the colonial subjects to become aware of their own oppression by these very colonial structures and systems. Kamlongera (as quoted in Mlama, 1991, P.70) observes that Theatre for Development was witnessed in Africa as "early as the 1930's, when the colonial health workers, secondary school teachers, agricultural and community extension workers used drama to sell the virtues of modernization, cash crop productivity, and financial prudence". Mlama (1991, P.68-69) confirms this when she states that during the colonial period the "field workers traveled from village to village organizing drama performances, discussions and demonstrations based on such topics as cash crop production, taxation, and disease eradication. The theatrical programmes were planned, message chosen, and scripts prepared by government workers". In his reading of the works of Carr (1951), Mulira (1975), and Pickering (1957), Kidd also points out the presence of Theatre for Development during this period:

> In the 50s a number of "theatre-for-development" experiments were carried out by colonial governments in the transitional period as pressure built up for independence. In Ghana and Uganda, for example, mobile teams were formed to tour the rural areas with plays on cash crop production, immunisation, the importance of self-help, literacy, sanitation, and local government tax. The actors were development workers and often combined their performances with practical demonstrations (for example of agricultural techniques), question-and–answer sessions, and other forms of practical activity (e.g. the distribution of insecticide sprayers, vaccination drives, literacy teacher recruitment's etc.). The tours were a form of "mass education" to compliment and reinforce a process of community and extension work at village level. (Kidd, 1984, p.5)

Theatre for Development in Post-Independence Africa

Post independence marked the revival of cultures that had been suppressed and repressed by the colonization structures and processes. This renaissance of the "subjugated cultures" to paraphrase Michel Foucault, gave rise to "cultural nationalism which became a major impetus in the rebirth and development

of theatre for development in Africa but more in the specificity of East African region. At the dawn of independence African Universities, in an attempt to connect with their societies, initiated what came to be known as the universities' Free Traveling Theatres. The philosophy behind the Universities' Free Travelling Theatre movements was to take theatre to the rural masses and urban poor whom it was assumed, had been excluded from enjoying it as a result of marginalization by the colonial government.

Sharply indicted for its patronizing philosophy and practice by scholars such as Mlama (1991) faulting "the assumption implicit in the idea of "taking theatre to the people" (p.65), implying that this people do not have a theatre of their own; as such the Universities' Free Travelling Theatre was seen as imposing an outsiders' agenda, through their performances where the peasants and poor urban dwellers remained passive consuming of external ideas. Despite these kinds of criticism, the Universities' Free Travelling Theatre movement must be credited for not only catalyzing but also shaping the practice of theatre for development as an instrument of intervention. Documentary evidence (see Kerr, 1995; Mda, Ngugi , 1981) indicates that foundational theatre for development intervention's originated from Universities and their faulty members: Makerere, Dar-es-Salaam, Ibadan, Lusaka, University of Nairobi, and University of Botswana. For instance, the major theoretical and practical landmarks in theatre for development are associated with conferences, seminars and workshops that have taken place in different Universities in the continent and outside. The trend has emerged where the discussions from the conferences, workshops, seminars and symposia have resulted in simulated practical experimentation with communities around the environs of the hosting universities: Botswana, Laedza Batanani, Kumba (Cameroon) Rehoboth, Namibia (1991), Lagos, Nigeria (1995), Harare, Zimbabwe (1997) and Ibadan, Nigeria (1998).

Paradigm Shifts: The Quest for the Best Practice

An interesting dimension of theatre for development has been its practitioners' obsession with the quest for the best practice where best practice alludes to the transfer of agency to the target community. This has resulted in the quest for a form and methodology that does not only take into cognizance the maximum participation of the target community but one that indeed aspires to awaken their consciousness in regard to their limit situations or oppressive conditions.

In tracing and tracking the rise of the practice of theatre for development in Africa, its assumed foundational enterprise in Botswana exemplifies this quest for best practice with much clarity. The Botswana popular theatre enterprise, famously referred to as Laedza Batanani, originated from an adult education programme – a one week event were actors toured villages putting on performances and organizing discussions on highlighted issues. (Mlama, 1991). This became the model according to Mlama, (1991, p.71) as it,

> Introduced a two-way communication process important in development communication. People were made aware of their situation, encouraged to look at their problems and take action to solve them instead of merely accepting messages from government employees.

The Laedza Batanani model became at this point in history the best practice, eliciting a lot of excitement from scholars and practitioners from different parts of Africa who replicated it variously with different degrees of success. Examples of such replications took place in Zambia in 1979 and 1980 through workshops held at Chalimbana on the use of theatre in primary health. The workshop details as cited by Mlama, (1991) brought together theatre workers form Southern and East Africa. Another attempt was made in Swaziland through a National Workshop at Nhlango in 1987, while another one took place in Malawi again in form of a workshop at Mbalachanda rural growth centre in 1987, and so was Lesotho adopting the Laedza Batanani with Maratholi Travelling Theatre between 1983 and 1985. Whereas this model was embraced with a lot of enchantment and enthusiasm, it was later discarded because as it was realized that it perpetuated the top-down approach in communication; the message was pre-packaged and participation of the target community's was found to be rather superficial[4]. The realization that this model was not as effective as was initially thought of, led to a major rethinking of the efficacy of the practice. This was particularly reflected in the later works of Maratholi Theatre which came to be known as Theatre for Conscientisation and Nigeria Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Theatre group. It is reported that in a workshop at Bomu, ABU came up with a new approach that emphasized improvisation, repeated revision of the drama to generate debate. More importantly, instead of a finished play, skits which were open ended were devised to allow the audience to intervene at moments of crisis. This approach was definitely informed by Augusto Boal's theatre strategies and techniques of simultaneous dramaturgy and forum theatre[5] (see details in Theatre of the Oppressed). Marotholi also adopted this approach in 1986 at Liwonde. Other

[4] See Mlama 1991 and Mda 1993 for more details on this disussion.
[5] For details see Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1972)

enterprises that adopted this ameliorated model included the Murewa workshop in Zimbabwe and Kumba in Cameroon. The Murewa enterprise has been acclaimed for introducing local popular aesthetics in the practice. Mlama, (1991) observes that Zimbabwean traditional dancing, including Jerusalema.

A close and critical attention of the paradigm shifts in the practice of theatre for development reveals that best practice anticipates a bottom-up approach, a democratic process that acts as a site for the target communities to be fully involved at all the stages of its development. Thus emphasis appears to be placed on the process and not drama/theatre as an end product to be consumed. One actually discerns a great attempt at employing the ideas of Paulo Freire especially his problem solving pedagogy as well as the various methods, techniques and strategies formulated by Augusto Boal and other renowned proponents of educational drama: such as theatre-in-education, drama in education and drama therapy.

Theatre for Development in East Africa: A Forest of Different Species

The way that theatre for development exhibits itself in East Africa is obviously not different from the rest of Africa. In this section of the paper different inflections of this practice will be mapped out. Examples will be based on theatre for development programmes, projects and enterprises that have been documented in various forms but mainly in printed form. This is because, theatre for development, like other performances, is ephemeral but unlike proscenium arch stage theatre does not benefit from press review. As such evidence that it ever happened is mainly found in reports made to donors and when scholars use such data for researches for journal and book publications.

An incisive engagement with the practice of theatre for development in East Africa indicates that there are four main approaches based on modes of rendition. These can be categorized as:-

1. Campaign theatre
2. Workshop oriented intervention
3. Forum theatre
4. Festival model

The major intervention theatre enterprise in East Africa is of course the much publicized and often cited Kamiriithu experimental community theatre of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and his co-animators from the University of Nairobi. The hallmark of this enterprise was indeed the opportunity that it opened for the members of the community to participate in its conception and eventual performance.

However, the end product took a predictable form of a straight play for the proscenium arch stage theatre. There is not much documentary evidence to suggest that there were other theatre for community enterprises in Kenya or in East Africa prior to Kamiriithu Experiment. There might have been some theatre for development activities but as alluded earlier, they may have never been documented. Kamiriithu was an exceptional case because of the politics that surrounded and the many studies that were undertaken as a result of the persecution of its originators by the then autocratic KANU government.

Theatre for Development however became more popular in the 1990s in Kenya after the repeal of the infamous section 2A of the constitution that allowed for multiparty politics and subsequently the expansion of the democratic space. Initially, theatre for development in Kenya became popular as an intervention against the spread of HIV-AIDS. (Though there might have been earlier cases of its usage in adult education, health, agriculture and sanitation issues). These early initiatives were framed in form of campaign theatre where the message of HIV-AIDS prevention was privileged. Some examples can be drawn from ArtNet Waves Communication which organized some of these campaign theatres all over the country with climax performances in Nairobi during the World AIDS Day. The signature of these early initiatives was the HIV-AIDS message warning the population against reckless sexual behaviors and the consequences of such behaviours. ArtNet waves, however, changed its strategy and began to use competitive drama festivals which started from the grassroots level culminating once again with a National Festival on HIV-AIDS issue-oriented plays in Nairobi during the World AIDS day. Given that AIDS was threatening the population campaign theatre, a less audience participatory model, then was the most appropriate strategy to employ.

The festival approach has been adopted by other groups like the Kenya Puppeteers addressing the issues of governance and corruption. The festival, other than its competitive nature, is not very different from campaign theatre. Both of them are motivated by the desire for mass communication. The essence is to disseminate the message to as many people as possible.

The workshop approach is usually used for specialized groups such as orphans, victims of abuse etc. It involves the use of theatre games: i.e. breakers, trust, confidence and community building; use of role play, image theatre, and Simultaneous dramaturgy and Forum theatre. A good example is the work that was done with Shangillia Mtoto wa Africa by Joy Masheti and Frances Harding in the late 1990s in Nairobi . These were former street children who were in a programme of rehabilitation to normalize them into regular school programmes. This approach was also deployed by KOLA (Kenya Oral Literature Association) in Mount Kenya in peace building and Reconciliation targeting community leaders and opinion sharper's.

Forum theatre technique derived from Boal's

'Theatre of the Oppressed' is the most popular in Kenya. The point to note here is the way different theatre practitioners have adopted it. Three examples will suffice our illustration. Petad used the methodology in their HIV-AIDS campaign in the mid 1990s in Kisumu. In their approach, the actors and facilitators create a drama, and through the use of story boards ask the audience to choose the story they want to be performed. At the end of every episode there is discussion and members of the audience are invited to try out the solutions i.e. stepping into the shoes of the character Conciliation Reforms and Education Consortium (CRECO) and Centre for Law and Research International (CLARION) also deployed this strategy in their civic education in the run down to the 2005 constitution referendum.

Unlike PETAD – CRECO and CLARION – also used story board but mainly involved the audiences through questioning technique conducted by the narrator-facilitator. The interesting aspect in the strategies of CRECO and CLARION was the way in which they framed their Forum theatre within the African oral narrative traditions. However, CLARION also used the Boalian technique of the "Joker".

In Uganda, the scenario is not different. According to Marion Frank in her research outcome in the book Aids-Education through Theatre Uganda clearly shows that campaign theatre was the most common form of theatre for development in disseminating messages and information on HIV-AIDS. She also indicates that conventional theatre for development as a technique was also used in addressing the more "developmentalist" issues. In addition she highlights the use of festivals as a strategy of communicating the HIV-AIDS message especially in the projects sponsored by donors. Jessica Kaahwa, Geoffrey Wadulo, Jonathan Muganga and Breitinger also reveal how theatre for development has been used in Uganda in the reconstruction of the nation after many years of ravage as a result of war, in social economic empowerment of rural communities as well as in hygiene and sanitation and in social therapy.

In Tanzania theatre for development is related with Dar University and Bagamoyo College of Arts. The main theatre for development enterprises, though Mlama refers to it as popular theatre, took place from 1982 to 1986 and was facilitated by scholars from the department of Performing Arts at Dar. The interventions took place in different locales within the country and were mainly meant for social development. The main difference that is discernable in the Tanzania practice is mainly in its emphasis on local traditional performance aesthetics. The other defining characteristic of their practice were the post-performance discussions. Chahya Mtiru in his M.A. thesis discusses the use of Boalian Forum theatre by different theatre companies in Tanzania. Their approaches are not different from the witnessed in Kenya and Uganda.

Conclusion

From this exploration, it is obvious that theatre for development in Africa has always been in search for best practice. This best practice is usually equated with maximum involvement of the target communities in the identification as well as the transformation of their consciousness and limiting situations. In most cases, this best practice is hardly achieved. This is because there are so many other factors and stakeholders who are involved in this enterprise. For instance, patronage plays a significant role in determining the particular trajectory that a theatre for development intervention will take. There are other factors that come into play such as the skills of the practitioners; a number of actors from the mainstream theatre may not be very familiar with the ideologies, philosophies and methodologies of theatre for development as a practice. This has specifically raised a number of ethical questions in the way the practitioners are perceived. Finally the mode of monitoring and evaluating the efficacy of this practice has remained controversial given that it is an art form, yet most monitoring and evaluation tools that are used are essentially quantitative and not qualitative. This has, in many cases, created tension between practitioners and the patrons (sponsors) of projects. An important development in theatre for development as a practice is the inclusion of its curriculum in a number of University departments teaching theatre, drama, performance and literature. This is a significant development in the practice as more of its practitioners in the field are increasingly getting grounded in its theory, philosophy and methodological approaches and procedures.

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