

Theater for development in contemporary Nigeria: problems and prospects

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Abstract

Theater has become more popular over the years. It is generally known to people as a building designed for the performance of plays, dances, etc. This paper is aimed at espousing the pertinence of theater in national development, especially in a developing African nation-state like Nigeria. In doing this, the paper identifies and discusses the exploitable prospects and problems that go along with the deployment of theater in enhancing Nigeria's development. The paper concludes that despite the challenges, theater plays a vital role to play towards creating a reliable, effective, and responsive representative institution and in advancing the frontiers of development of the Nigerian society.

Keywords:

Theater; development; Nigeria

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the years, from the Greco-Roman period through the Medieval to the Modern and Post-Modern times, the theater has always remained relevant to the society. This symbiotic experience has survived the various interplay of ideas that culminated in the evolution of different genres within the progressive theatrical periods above-mentioned. The society has contributed immensely to theater practice by providing the resource base or material, while the product of theater aims at re-shaping; re-creating and reforming the very society the ingredients were derived. Apart from the Traditional African theater experience, the whole idea behind any theater production is to present to an audience, a unified theatrical effect which will arouse them both emotionally and intellectually (Anagboso, 1989: 16). This portends a deliberate attempt at impacting on the development of an individual exposed to theater activities from different angles. However, a genre of theater, whose focus and ideology are development, exists. It is the concerns of this work to examine the problems and prospects of Theater for Development in Contemporary Nigeria. The second paragraph is indented for 0.5 cm. State your background (gap between theory and practice), problem statements, research questions, objectives, and literature review.

2 DEVELOPMENT AND THEATER FOR DEVELOPMENT

The word development refers to many but unidirectional things. But from whatever angle the term is examined, there is a common denominator; the progression from one stage to a higher one. This indicates a forward movement or advancement in successive stages. As Ogar (1995) opines, it represents a set of psychological schemata that hinges on change of attitude, self-reliance and self-help. It is a multi-dimensional process, a composite term with many attachments, advancement in educational level, socio-economic status, media exposure, agricultural innovations, acquisition of technical knowledge, mass production of goods and cultural awareness. It equally includes and most importantly, the total change in man's mental cum physical capacities.

From the above, one can say categorically that development manifests itself in two different but related dimensions: physical and psychological. The physical development of an environment is informed by the psychological and physical development of the individual or groups of individuals within that given environment, while the environment influences the psychological development and often the physical development of the individual. The whole concept of development revolves around the pivot of culture. This is where certain constituents like religion and arts including theater act upon or impact negatively or positively on the development of a given society. To excel; "Development must also establish a correlation between mode of life and the people's way of thinking, work and sense of values" (Ochi, 2001). It is equally important to state that development cannot exist without knowledge, where knowledge is a window exposing one into insights, broadening perspectives and horizons, especially as it concerns those materials and phenomena hitherto unknown. Knowledge places one at an advantageous position where facts and figures available intermingle to produce the best decision within the given circumstance. The seven categories of knowledge are the variables that propel the development of an individual and consequently that of the environment. This may have prompted Nyerere in Osler (1994) to assert that: "a people cannot be developed, they develop themselves, and hence development has to take root, first in the hearts of the people". And drama (with theater) like any other communication medium is sufficiently neutral where developmental programs are concerned. Drama reinforces the ultimate aims of the developmental program in which it is being used but does not transform the program into what its superficial rhetoric declares it to be or into something else. Live theater performance can have powerful effects on their rural audiences (Etherton, 1982: 320).

The underlying reason behind the emergence of Theater for Development (T.F.D) is the fact that wealth is unevenly distributed. This situation leaves some communities in abundance while others remain in abject poverty. Apart from this, even where the resources do exist, the communities may not be aware or do not know how to manipulate them to their benefit. It is such tendencies that tend to leave them deprived, impoverished, and under-developed. A people or community is said to be under-developed and poor when they manifest the following traits: chronic and debilitating sickness, ignorance, superstition, oppression, hunger, lack of interest in national life, unemployment, high illiteracy rate,

malnutrition, inadequate health facilities etc. (Curle, 1970: 69). Theater for Development attempts to solve these problems using materials from and within such communities.

Theater for Development started as Community Theater; a relatively new concept which can be traced to the early 1950s with the efforts of two giant figures – Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire in Latin America. Nwamuo (1996) asserts that since then the concept has passed through several communities in different continents of the world – predominantly under developed ones. In this sojourn, it has come to be known or re-Christened Development Theater, Theater for Development, People's Theater, Community Theater for Development, Community Theater for Rural Development and Community Theater for Integrated Rural Development. Paulo Freire developed a philosophy of revolution in the third world that makes use of radical literacy program in a particularly critical way. He expressed through the idea of "conscientization the process" by which the oppressed of the third world can generate their own political consciousness along the path of revolution. Conscientization empowers the peasants and provides insights into achieving literacy thus helping to identify their problems as emanating from a particular social order. Their approach to learning, he opined, must involve a rejection, through direct experience, of a fatalistic universe and of a mechanistic concept of society. It is important, Paulo furthered, that the peasants be sufficiently involved in devising the avenues for the learning.

Augusto Boal was the personality who applied Paulo Freire's ideas, specifically to theater. Being a Theater Activist, he carried the discussion further and was particularly interested in using theater as a vehicle while achieving radical social change. To him, popular theater can only be significant and relevant when the people are not only reduced to being spectators but when they are actively involved as actors and creators of the drama (Etherton, 1982: 342-343). Etherton (1982) says that the process involves collecting at first hand, data concerning the different problems experienced by the people within the geographical location for the project. These problems form the core of the drama presentation (344). Certain techniques and knowledge are required at this stage and it is equally necessary to reveal the nature of the work and objectives to the community. There must also be a commitment on the part of the community and the Theater Workers (Facilitators).

The next stage is the constitution of the problems of the community into drama sketches, role-play, songs, dances and probably, mimes. Certain skills are also required at this stage and they include scenario-making and acting; composing and singing songs; puppets making and operation and performance of local dances. After the performance, the project is evaluated to ascertain its failure or success. Theaters for Development projects follow this format. Theater for Development in Africa is said to have started with the efforts of Ross Kid and Martin Byram who instigated the formation of the group Laedza Batanani meaning "Wake up, let's come together and work together" in Botswana in 1974. The group operated through the transformation of the development process and by getting the communities to critically analyze their situation and then take problem-solving initiatives that propelled and led them to collective action. The two figures later extended the project and worked among the Basarwa (formerly called the Bush-men) in the west of Botswana across the Kalahari Desert (Ross Kid and Martin Byram). They were quite successful in these experiments. TFD therefore is the practice where the arts of theater are put at the service of the disadvantaged rural and urban poor for the purposes of discussing and working out avenues for tackling their socio-economic problems (Abah, 1990: 17).

3 THEATER FOR DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Forty-four years after the Union Jack was lowered in favor of the Green-White-Green flag; indicating the emergence of Nigeria in the comity of nations, the country and its people remain in dilemma. This is because the issues that prompted nationalist movements and aspirations seem to have remained to some extent, un-resolved. One of such is the issue of development. Today many citizens in both rural and urban locations live in abject poverty without the slightest knowledge of where the next meal will come from. Few can afford to send their wards in quest of formal education. Health care facilities are almost non-existent. Where they exist, are in a non-functional and deplorable state. One can go on and on to enumerate the various challenges that the average Nigerian must put up with during existence. However, there are certain areas the country has made some tremendous gains. But when juxtaposed with the drawbacks, they fade out of contention.

The hope of every average Nigerian for remedies to the abovementioned hindrances is in the government and its agencies. But they seem to have failed. As such the people continue in the state of deprivation, abject poverty, educational backwardness, poor health, etc. This is partly the reason in recent times, there has been growing interest in Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGOs) work in Nigeria. Government agencies and parastatals have failed to live up to the expectations of the people and government program are often seen as no man's business; white elephant projects which only serve as avenues for the enrichment of officials to the detriment of the populace who are supposed to benefit from such ventures. The NGOs have as their areas of interest, those aspects that are essential to the survival and well-being of the people including water and sanitation, women's rights and advancement, widowhood, the girl child, air pollution, AIDS etc. This is where the ideals of Theater for Development have been made popular in Nigeria as most of these NGOs employ it to carry out their activities.

4 SELECTED EXAMPLES

4.1 Samaru Project (1980)

Samaru is said to have existed because of the development of the Ahmadu Bello University's (ABU) Main Campus, about 22 kilometers from Zaria. The community, though its plays host to many of the university staff, was not affected by the beautiful buildings and the towering secretariat that adorn and constitute the aesthetics of the university campus.

Although the settlement's population had increased to about 30,000 there was no commitment to the community or sections of it, which suffered from a range of social problems like illiteracy, alcoholism and prostitution. (Yerima, 1990: 87). The Samaru community manifested erratic electricity supply and pipe-borne water for a few. The streets were un-tarred and highly prone to waterlogging during the rains due to lack of drainage facilities. These were the problems ABU Collectives – executors of the project were to help and guide the community to overcome.

4.2 Katsina-Ala Project (1982 – 1983)

This was an international workshop that drew over eighty participants from within and outside Nigeria. The workshop lasted for about two weeks and was championed by Tar Ahura who was then the Director of the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture. The base community was the College of Education, Katsina-Ala. The experiment demonstrated that by involving the villagers in all aspects of the project, a long-lasting impression is created and the urge for collective action gingered. The project was quite functional in the sense that not only the villagers were conscientized. The development workers equally benefited and were purged of their bourgeois inclinations. The project was aimed at using the poetics of theater for development in creating insights and propelling the communities – Wombo, Ndigbo, Abaji and Abwa, into solving some of the problems which plagued them, including acute shortage of water, lack of fertilizer, low education, high rate of divorce cases, lack of medical facilities, bush burning, lack of unity, land acquisition, inadequate market outlets for farm products and refusal of parents to send their daughters to school.

4.3 Kudingi Project (1994)

The ABU Collectives also undertook this project in Kudingi comprising Kudingi, Pan Hauya and Gidan Mai Gambo. The squalor, which characterizes many rural communities in Nigeria, is dexterously exemplified in these settlements. They have poor access roads, no electricity or pipe-borne water, the only primary school stopped functioning because the roof of its building was blown off, no health facilities, early marriage was predominant, high birth rate, women live in seclusion and child abuse. These were some of the problems the project was to help the people solve.

4.4 Communication for Life – Talking AIDS (1997)

This project was carried out in Yola by the Nigerian Popular Theater Alliance (NPTA) in conjunction with the Adamawa State AIDS Control Committee. The exercise was predicated upon the fact that in spite of the frightening statistics which point to a worsening situation, there was very little public awareness campaign going on in Nigeria. Also, there was a trenchant defiance of AIDS by a huge proportion of the sexually active sector of the population; especially noticeable among young men who very often retorted when one talked about AIDS: “A man has got to die of something! So, what difference does it make if it is AIDS?” Yola as at the time of the workshop/project, had a high prevalence rate. So, the project aimed at providing insights and confronting the people with the realities of the situation. In doing so, help to reduce the rate of infection.

4.5 Changing Games – Democracy and Governance (2000)

Again, NPTA sponsored by the Ford Foundation carried out this project in Chikun and Kabau. The project aimed at attempting to consolidate the gains of democracy when juxtaposed with the fact that Kaduna state is made up of different ethnic groups from the different parts of the country and has always been a center for religious crises. It aimed at instilling the virtues of good governance including responsibility, consultation (people-centered) and dialogue that involve negotiations and consensus. Tackled also were the issues of gender, religion and democracy. So, the various stages of the project right to the performance were geared towards injecting the elements of tolerance, dialogue and good governance in the people.

4.6 Living Earth Nigeria Foundation Projects (2000)

In recent years, the Niger Delta Region has become a troubled spot, due to the neglect and deprivation suffered in the hands of successive governments. The region produces crude oil, which is the nation's main foreign exchange earner since the 1970's, but can boast of very little development. Being inhabited by ethnic minorities, the region is not reckoned with in national issues, often dictated and decided with majority-minority parameters. Consequently, the youths and other concerns have taken it upon themselves to seek redress. Violence resulting in the heavy loss of lives and properties is their tool for remedy. Femi Shaka observes that during these, the Living Earth Nigeria Foundation (LENF) has been trying to calm frayed nerves by teaching the communities and the youths to adopt alternative non-violence methods of agitation for restitution from both multinational oil companies and the federal government. The NGO has been funding the establishment of community theater troupes aimed at helping to project the ideals of using Theater for Community Development. Its efforts have culminated into projects at Biseni, Akipelai, Oloibiri in Bayelsa State. Danare, Ifumkpa, Iso Bendeghe, Bendeghe-Aji, Abontakon and Okiro; all in Cross River State have been exposed to projects on forest conservation, bush-burning etc. by the NGO.

5 PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

The problems militating against the accessing of Theater for Development in Contemporary Nigeria dwell within the realms of Funding/Sponsorship, Skilled Man-power, Culture/Religion, Language, Lack of Follow-up, Insincerity, Continuous Depravity and the inability to adapt it to the media. Most human endeavors require some level of funding to thrive. Theater for Development is not an exception. A critical examination of previous TFD projects carried out in the country would reveal a very minimal involvement of the government by way of funding. Most of them are funded by overseas agencies. The government, which happens to be the sole controller and distributor of resources including money in the nation, does not seem to believe in the efficacy or capacity or the use of Theater for Development in solving

developmental problems. Apart from the MAMSER community theater project attempts, none other in that line has been initiated by the government. It rather believes in contracts. The attendant negative consequences associated with contracts are all familiar to us. So, the only solace seems to be in oversea funding agencies, who also must cater to other countries in similar circumstances. This makes funding very difficult to secure. Due to the debased notion many people hold of theater and its practitioners, very few ventures into it or allow their wards to do so. Even those who miraculously find themselves reading theater, soon veer into other fields at the end of their study. The consequence is that there are very few who are schooled in the arts of theater including TFD. Many personnel now in the field are those who for one reason or the other dabbled into it and are forced to learn on the job. So skilled manpower remains a problem.

Ours is a culture, which believes in the strong relationship and unity between the dead, the living and the unborn. The dead (ancestors) have a very strong hold on the people (living). So how will the project executors be able to convince the people that the stream, for example, which their forefathers sacrificed to and drank from, is guinea worm infested? Will they be convinced that the deaths experienced within the community are not because of their gods' anger but poor hygiene and sanitation? Will they be convinced that certain age-long cultural practices prescribed by their ancestors, are harmful to the health and well-being of the people? Coupled with this, is the influence exerted by religion, which makes it impossible for certain people to be reached directly. This operates predominantly within the north where the *Puduh* system and its attendant "*Ba Shiga*" are operational. Apart from the restriction, the information from the inmates of the system; useful materials for some reforms are often passed through intermediaries and are often distorted and censored. The operational language of Theater for Development appears imported, not indigenous. As such, intermediaries and translators are employed to help realize projects. The processing language in our case is English. How many of our people can read, write and understand the English Language? Few! In translation into the local dialects, it seems to lose its flavor and efficacy as it is opened to levels of distortions. So, the message received may be slightly different from what was intended. Domesticating and using predominantly indigenous languages in projects can help overcome this. Gbilekaa (1997) had supported this notion when he succinctly put it that the use of indigenous languages bridges communication gaps. This should of necessity be accompanied by local theatrical idioms of the people expressed in puppetry, masquerades, dances, songs or narrative traditions.

Many of the TFD projects already carried out within the country seem to crumble and the people return to status quo ante due to lack of follow-up. This often emanates from the fact that the funds for the project have been exhausted or that the executors failed to adopt this as part of their plan for the project. Follow-up is a necessary aspect of TFD projects and should not be neglected for whatever reason. An ideal TFD project should provide solutions with back-up/follow-up. This view is shared by Odi (2004) who asserts that development and empowerment normally follow slow and gradual processes. As such there is need for follow-up to TFD workshops. She further states that TFD has an on-the-spot impact on participants and target audience. To sustain and build on the instant impact, follow-up activity should be constituted from time to time. Another very serious problem against TFD projects is the wave of embezzlements in the country, which hinges on insincerity. It is uncommon for the executors to fake reports of their projects in the communities and organize photo-shoots to deceive the sponsors. The job is left undone but the executors smile to the bank and buy expensive cars and live ostentatiously. The communities then continue to wallow in their sorry state, with no hope of redemption.

It is mind bugging to discover that even though millions of Naira is being expended or budgeted each year for developmental projects, we hardly see or experience the impact. One may be tempted to ask what has happened to the thousands of boreholes for example, allegedly sunk by the erstwhile DFRRI. But every administration continues to devise economic measures that have not improved the lives of the citizenry, rather continues to sink them into higher degrees of depravity. Reports from world economic agencies corroborate this fact. This makes the work quite enormous and tedious for TFD workers and creates credibility crisis. The electronic media, predominantly radio and television have gained incredible acceptance within the Nigerian society. This is accentuated by the emergence of the home video. The adaptation of TFD projects would have made it possible for the enormous audience to be reached. But so far, there is still the inability of adapting TFD to the media. The reason may be the high cost of running such a scheme but more correctly is the fact that when placed within the ambience of the media, TFD might not be as participatory as it ought to be. (Hagher, 1997: 110). However, despite all these drawbacks, it is heartwarming to note that all is not lost. TFD is quite relevant in contemporary Nigeria and with the wave of democracy in the country; foreign agencies are beginning to show some interests in investing in Nigeria. This is opposed to the resentment expressed by them during the military era. The import of this development is the likelihood of more funding in the direction of TFD.

6 CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that with the prevailing circumstances in the country, TFD becomes a veritable tool for a people who want to shake off the shackles of under-development. Our gratitude must be expressed to personalities like Michael Etherton, Wole Soyinka, Tar Ahura, Salihu Bappa, Steve Abah among others who took the bold step of experimenting with this genre and creating the much needed "interaction between people who are in the flight path of development projects and those who initiate development" (Harding, 1997). Concerted efforts must be made to surmount the various problems enumerated above. The government should acknowledge that its policies towards development over the years have failed. They should seek remedies within the parameters of TFD. We should come to the realization that there is always motion from chaos to creation and light in every environment, and creation is action internalized by a succession of climaxes of creativity, where creation establishes and creativity enhances and sustains. As the world attempts to embrace globalization in this century, and peripheralization paces up, the people of the theater must also write to inform that theater (TFD inclusive) and stage offer the only hope now (especially to the under-developed) for a world in which

the balance between man's spirituality and intellect, which has become distorted and lopsided through mega-machinery and mega-bureaucracy, can be restored (Hagher, 2000). Any developmental project, which ignores the involvement and contributions of the people it is meant for, is bound to fail. Once again, in adopting TFD paradigms to solve our developmental problems, we must first eliminate the setbacks that have been militating against it. This done, the sky will be our limits

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