Communication Development and Theatre Use in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article observes that the rich potentials of theatre as a media of development communication Africa has not been adequately tapped and so makes a strong submission for greater use of theatre for development purposes in the continent.

It examines three dominant methods of theatre use for development and other types of communication and points out that theatre can be used interactively or independently as a medium of communication. The three key methods analyzed by the article are the Agitrop method, participatory theatre and the Forum method.

The article reported six cases of theatre use for various projects in six African countries and concludes that the role of today's African communicator must be such that relevant communication forms are used in an interactive manner for the largest segments of African nations and people.

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Communication pour le dévelopment et utilisation du théatre en Afrique

RESUME

Selon cet article, les riches potentialités du théatre comme moyen de communciation, pour le développement en Afrique n'ont pas été adéquatement exploitées; l'auteur fait donc un appel pour une plus grande utilisation du théatre à des fins de développement sur le Continent.

Il passe en revue trois modes dominants d'utilisation du théatre pour le développement et d'autres types de communication et fait remarquer que la théatre peut être utilisé de manière inter-active et indépendante comme un média de développement. Les trois méthodes de théatre étudiés dans cet article sont la méthode Agitrop, le théatre de participation et la méthode de forum.

L'article présente 6 cas d'utilisation du théatre dans divers projets dans 6 pays africains et arrive à la conclusion que le communicateur africain d'aujourdi doit faire en sorte que les formes pertinentes de communication soient utilisées de manière interactive au profit du plus grand nombre de gens et de nations en Afrique.

This article is essentially introductory and exploratory in nature. It seeks to comment on the current media reality in Africa, explore the rationale for greater use of theatre as a medium in communication, and to generate discussion on some specific areas of theatre use for development.

Over the past fifty years, Africa, has been responding to dictates of growing industrialized nations that have set the pace for it in the determination of its media emphasis, communication needs and orientation, and content. We have developed the idea of the mass media referring, at times, mainly to the use of electronic channels that effectively reach the masses. The most frequent channels used have been radio and television.

Radio has been described as one of the most effective media, as it reaches a greater number of the African population than television. Low costs have allowed availability; the use of batteries have allowed it to services areas unreached by electricity, and the modern infrastructure associated with "development". Today, many of us are not too sure of this "statement of fact", as the breakdown in essential infrastructure in several African States, has crated major gaps between those who lead, and the led. In one African capital recently, the national radio network was barely audible within the national capital, with less than 700,000 people! Production styles and techniques to asses excellence have been imported or transferred, many times exhibiting a stark ignorance as regards relevance to the broad masses of their target audiences.

The media seems to exists to bolster the image of the administrators, to the detriment of those they administer. Often, this results in overkill, and induces a certain level of audience-cynicism. When we take stock of the effects of television, the results are more frightening.

Owing to factors such as cultural assimilation, absence of sufficient funds for production: ill-conceived programming policies; unavailability of qualified manpower and, in certain

cases, displaced snobbism, the tendency in many third world countries is to continuously depend on the irrelevant even though sleek material largely imported from Europe and North America.1   Third world nations have in the main become the perpetual dumping ground for third rate spaghetti westerns, misplaced eastern cultural prog-rammes, Box Office Soap Operas, and thrillers of the most alienating sort.

According to McMellan (1986),2 African television as a rule, rarely shows or explains Africa to Africans. What we often see ... is <u>Dallas, I Love Lucy, Sanford and Son.</u>

McLellan adds "that on most evenings, the African content seen on the majority of African television is represented by political speeches, reports on visits of foreign dignitaries, development experts speaking over the heads of the average viewer in European languages, telling them how they should develop, or dramas featuring upper class characters dealing with typically western problems". Whilst it is true to make such caustic criticisms of the existing state of affairs, it is important to state that there are redeeming attempts as provided by the Programme Exchange Exchange Centre of Union of National Radio and Television Organizations of Africa (URTNA) or the intermittent programme developed by the national network along national lines.

Generally though, either as a result of mediocrity or fear, media producers are woefully unimaginative, and would prefer the easier option of purchasing the "safe" material from abroad. The imbalance in the flow of information between the North and South ultimately allows us to generally assess ourselves more from the external eye, than a critical perception of ourselves from within.

Nearly in all our countries communication is unplanned or poorly administered, ad hoc, ephemeral and excludes the participation of competent, well selected communication strategists, theorists, and definitely does not encourage major participation by the populace. In the past few years, African have started to debate the need for comprehensive communication policies with a view to assist the process of national development. The absence of such policies have allowed an ad hoc approach to the vast area of communication. The interlink between economic measures and effective communication, have usually come only as an after-thought, not as a premeditated strategy in national

development planning. It is against this backdrop that we are being called to participate in developments towards an information society. A new form of cultural awareness and the problem of cultural synchronization in the new global village.

There is no attempt in this overview to reject outright the place and need for modern communication, yet there must develop the answer to the question: media for what purpose, and for whom? Should the media restrict themselves to the non-classical, inform, educate and entertain catch phrase, usually developed at the service of the few? Or do we develop a new perception of our understanding of communication / information and the channels used?

By and large, the overview points to the following facts:

1. that we largely use communication in an ad hoc manner, manifestly geared towards servicing the small sections of our nations populations.
2. that these media have become instruments of control usually by those who own them, rather than tools for the liberation of our masses, or in some cases even nations.
3. an uncritical use of the media has entrusted these channels with the role of purveyors of mediocrity and caricature, limited mainly to foreign and alienating cultures, in all areas - science, culture, religion, entertainment and others.

All this, calls for a serious reassessment of our attitudes in their use for *relevance.*, Our call in this article is not for the potential demise of modern mass media systems as we know them, but the recognition of the role to which they can be put, and an acceptance of other validating media that have usually been downplayed as a result of their potency.

Theatre Drama or folk media is such a medium. Theatre in Africa is at times classified as a part of oral culture, or folk media / culture. It has also been classified in the field of no-formal or informal education.

Twenty-five years ago, an attempt to encourage any formal training in this field in Africa would have been declared a heresy! However, today there are several institutions in Africa exploring, training and elaborating on the potential

strength of theatre holds as an effective medium in modern communication.

In Africa, art is supposed to serve a social function (Bakaray Traore, 1972),3 elaborates this by noting that "theatre in particular acts as a mirror of life with every event recorded therein. In all its manifestations the theatre can englobe the cosmic as well as everyday human existence. The theatrical event can provide an occasion for the validation of all that is religious, political, economic and social within the community. The development of conflict and resolution allows a society to look within and define appropriate solutions to its problems, stirring clear from the violence that could be caused in a real life event".

Theatre can be used to provide collective therapy, whereby people seeing their action reflected may come to a better understanding of their situations, and the ironies these can provide. It can create self-consciousness and develop the collective feeling.

All theatre has had its own historical development. An attempt to trace the developments of theatre in Africa would be unfair as nations have all started at differing levels. Yet there are some common elements. The dance, the song, the element of story-telling or poetry, wherever these have appeared in the socio-cultural history of African people, they have been fundamental in the creation of dramatic activity in these countries.

Like all theatre, staged African theatre was born under definite historical conditions. Some of the earliest evidence of staged African theatre, were in the traveling theatre groups in the 19 Century in certain areas of West Africa e.g. the *ALRINGO* theatre of Yorubaland in the 1800's - developed purely as entertaining groups for royalty and chiefs. The more common reality was the traditional expressions of theatre in the village square or compound, re-enacting the hunt or an initiation ceremony and others. Later there were developments in the concert parties, as in Ghana and Nigeria, and the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Gatherings of Sierra Leone reminiscent of the colonial period. Appreciation of theatre by this time, was reflective of the colonial masters, and though it developed its own nuance, it was used at times for articulating the desire for independence from colonialization. The use of theatre during the colonial period

was along ordered and planned processes charac-teristic of the west. During this period, individuals who studied theatre abroad, were using Western models, and in some cases idioms to reflect an understanding of theatre for Africa.

One may say it was a period of approximation. African theatre had to approximate to the West, or did not qualify. This period is in fact characterized by the production of western plays, as a sign of assimilation and acculturation to western values. Between 1965-1975, a significant shift once again occurred in which the work of African writers created a new genre of plays and scripts, that enhanced a new attitude and perhaps a new respectability in this field. Some of the most satisfying results were recorded in countries such as Botswana, Ghana, Guinea, Malawi, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zambia.

The theatre by its very nature and particularly because of its communality and its fictionalized situations provides a forum, whereby communication can easily take place without the attending antagonisms which would normally occur in a directly realistic situation. As part of an educational and organizational process, theatre can play a range of roles: ringing people together and creating contexts for collective reflection and action; drawing out participation and expression of popular concerns, and analysis; overcoming people's fears and rationalizations and building confidence and identity; stimulating discussion and a critical under-standing of problems, contradictions, and structures underlining everyday reality; clarifying the possibilities and strategies for action; stirring peoples emotions and mobilizing people for action.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of theatre use as a means of communication is the possibility it holds as a participatory tool in and for peoples development. Popular Theatre / Theatre for Development which uses local language and idioms have at times been used to pass on development messages, and themes for which specific responses are required by people in community. The word popular theatre denotes their commitment to popular masses, and the word development denotes the use of development oriented themes / ideas in the drama.

Whilst the 60s and 70s witnessed the development of performances done on the stage, or radio and television, the

80s have witnessed a significantly different approach. Instead of having theatre schools / enthusiast develop set productions for a specific target groups or the society at large, more and popular social environmental or even political issues have been used amongst rural people, with them being the initiators of their own performing arts experience. Let us review a few specific strategies being employed.

The Three Methods

The Agitprop Method

Until recently, Theatre for Development Projects in Africa had been using a method of theatre known as Agitprop. This is a method used in didactic theatre most, since it has been found to have strong rallying potential for people to organize themselves into action groups. Although its creators may be "outsiders", where the actors go out to the communities with pre-packaged productions which they have created themselves, the theatre is oriented towards the people. The actors respond to local situations, since they have gone through a five-step process of information gathering in the target communities, information analysis, story improvisation, rehearsal and finally community performance.

It has been discovered that in the Agitprop method, the level of *critical awareness* on specific themes such as family planning, nutrition, human rights, and sanitation,may not be very high since it is raised from outside the community. Another weakness of this method is that there is no community participation, and the spectators become mere consumers of a finished product. Post-performance discussions may lead to individual action on a short-term basis.

Participatory Theatre

A second and more fulfilling method is Theatre for Conscientization for Participatory Theatre. In Participatory Theatre, participation is both goal and methodology. The theatre is produced by and from the people with the help of catalysts. "Catalyst" refers to "outsiders: with specialist skills

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in theatre and in community development. In Participatory Theatre too there is improvisation within the specific parameters of the themes. The main difference between this method and Agitprop, is that members of the communities themselves are the performers rather than a group from outside. The "outsiders: become the catalysts. Participatory theatre is able to raise community issues, to involve people in discussing the issues, and finally to mobilize people to take action on the issues. Since the catalysts mus get the community members involved in presenting the dramatic programme, it does become necessary for them to stay for some days in the community, to learn at first hand the problems of the community, and to improvise, rehearse and perform the play, with community members as both actors and spectators.

There are modifications of the Theatre for conscientization method. Theatre for Conscientization as a methodology is regarded as a higher stage of Participatory Theatre. The main difference between the two is that in the former the spectacle is produced by and for the people without spectators, since those who may initially be spectators later become actors themselves Improvisation happens throughout the life of the production, and the direction the play takes at each performance is never pre-planned. However, here too catalysts are necessary, because the performers must be made to acquire the essential skills to mount an effective production., Augosto Baol, the Latin American theatre practitioner, has developed a methodology which has two man stages both of which are designed to transform the spectators into actors. The two stages are known as "Simultaneous Dramaturgy" and "Forum Theatre".

In Simultaneous Dramaturgy professional actors perform a short scene suggested by a local person, halt the action at the crisis point, and ask the audience to offer solutions. The actors become like puppets, and perform the actions strictly on the spectator's orders. The "best" solution is arrived at by trial, error, discussion and then audience consensus. Thus the action ceases to be deter-ministic; everything is subject to criticism and rectification. Everything can be changed, by any spectator at a moment's notice without censorship., The actor does not cease his role as interpreter.

The Forum Method

Forum Theatre as a methodology refers to a case where actors and spectators converge. The participants tell a story with some social problem, then improvise, rehearse and present it to the rest of the group as a skit. The audience is asked if they agree with the solution. Any spectator is invited to replace any actor and lead the action in the direction that seems most appropriate to him or her. He or she must not make speeches, but must act to evoke responses from the others on the "stage". This goes much further than Simultaneous Dramaturgy as the spectator loses his or her safe seat since the line of demarcation between actor and audience is destroyed.

Such theatre offers the means whereby all possible paths may be examined. Through this method, theatre does not only become a medium of development communication, but a vehicle for special analysis. The emphasis in this kind of theatre is self-education. Consciousness is raised from inside as group analysis of social reality and power relations. When the spectators themselves become actors, the catalyst group is no longer necessary. It is at this stage that participation and control increases. The spectator has become a dramatic actor, and then a social actor.

A number of countries have tried some of these methods. These include the following:

a. the Marotholi Traveling Theatre - Lesotho
b. The Theatre for Integrated rural Development Programme of the University of Sierra Leone
c. experiments in the Ministry of Social Welfare of the Government of Zimbabwe
d. experiments by the Department of English at the University de Yaounde, Cameroun
e. The Kanyama Production Unit of Zambia
f. i. experiments in Nigeria at the Katsina Teachers College
   ii A UNICEF project at the University College Hospital, Ibadan
   iii. A John Hopkins University - (PCS) - Adolescent Fertility project in Nigeria

g.   A UNICEF related project with the Institute of African Studies and the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana, Legon.

All these efforts seem to suggest a reawakening to a more relevant means of disseminating development information to rural and urban peoples alike more effectively.

The Imperatives

Given this schematic view of theatre in Africa, what are the imperatives for communication institutions and structures in Africa?

The interactive nature of the theatre calls for a new acceptance of theatre as a medium for the dissemination of ideas and the bridging of the communication gaps within the media systems. Modernizing campaigns aimed at achieving change in a relatively short period of time depend on communication systems that combine the efficient diffusion of information, with opportunities, or reinforcement, and feedback are needed. The use of drama in existing media systems should be encouraged, promoted, and further facilitated, to enhance these development goals in Africa.

Greater use of theatre as a medium of national communication, will allow perhaps for a certain level of democratizing media systems. The call for greater say in the media systems of nations and for the largest number of people in our countries, will be one sure way of changing the imbalance as experienced by the beneficiaries of the media systems. In Kenya, some of the most exciting programmes in the Voice of Kenya have been drama or theatre programmes. It is significant to note too, that there potency have created for them the *greatest humour* and yet the *greatest controversy*. Perhaps it is because of its great diversity that African governments whilst calling for its development, have also facilitated its destruction when it has become an instrument to facilitate active change for peoples parti-cipation in communication development.

There is need to reassert a clearer and more progressive understanding of the word *communication*, so as to encourage the greater interactive response from all sectors of the community, especially rural peoples who form the bulk of our

African nations. This means a new kind of training to the Communication student so that he/she does not necessarily reinforce a media of domination, but allows for levels of de-schooling and re-education of their roots, culture and African personality.

Creating theatres within urban and rural communities using live characters dramatizing their own lives, are necessary. Subjects that could be handled range from agriculture, community health, nutrition, population concerns, women's issues, crafts, cultural shows and so on.

It is necessary to note that because our training is usually reflective of foreign models, the student and practitioner is usually unprepared to face the challenges I propose as imperatives. Many of us today may be described "neo-Westo-African". We battle for a retention of certain elements of our Africanity, amidst the continuous barrage of being a part of the new global village. Therefore, we see evidence of:

- a resistance to necessarily change existing systems;
- a fundamental ignorance of African traditional concepts, beliefs, idioms, symbols, images and forms;
- a pressure of performing among peers to gain justification and validity in the rat race;
- an undue and uncritical acceptance of non-indigenous models of our own understanding of appropriate communication patterns for Africa;
- training that has largely destroyed internal creativity and freedom of the human spirit - *we are tied down by too many invisible chains in community.*

Conclusion

Theatre has potentials that have not been tapped. Many of the set theories of training, given current efforts in the field, need to be de-mystified. There was a time when without the appropriate training, entering the field and contributing to productions, would have been deemed sacrilegious. Today, we recognize that rural peoples who form nearly 80% of Africa's population, can use folk media as a concrete expression of their own agenda, *not one superimposed on the by the by the trained communicator.*

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Interactive communication, with an emphasis on group media may be the direction that would allow for a more democratized system of media in Africa.

Stefan Bamberger in his article "New Challenges for Creative Interpersonal Communication" (1981 Media Development) sees the significance of group media lying in their availability to minorities as instruments for promoting the exchange of ideas within the group and for articulating both the aspirations of members as well as the aspirations of outsiders.

We believe that the role of today's African communicator must auger for relevant communication forms used in an interactive mode for the largest sections of African states and their peoples. To do this means revamping the stereotypical approaches to communication, and the use of our media systems; advocating greater participation in the use of the channels and the development of content; and acquiring greater control of our direction in the choice of the medium. Theatre used interactively or on its own does form therefore a credible challenge.

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