

## ***Theatre, Television and Development: A Case for the Third World***

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### ***Abstract***

This paper underscores the role of theatre as a tool for facilitating community education. It reckons that traditional African theatre had a functional orientation. This African theatre, which is being reintroduced in various parts of Africa, was for many years suppressed by Christian and administrative leaders of the colonial era. It further observes that, in community education, the theatrical event serves only a catalytic function, intended to stimulate critical analysis, or organization and action. The paper discusses a number of experiments with popular theatre for public education, identifying some related problems. It ends by outlining the responsibilities of theatre practitioners.

### ***Résumé***

Cet article met en relief le rôle du théâtre comme outil de développement communautaire. Il reconnaît que le théâtre traditionnel africain avait une orientation fonctionnelle. Ce théâtre, qui est en train d'être réintroduit dans divers pays africains, avait été, pendant plusieurs années, réprimé par les autorités administratives et les leaders chrétiens de l'ère coloniale. L'auteur fait en outre remarquer que, dans le domaine de l'éducation communautaire, l'événement théâtral a seulement une fonction catalytique, destinée à stimuler l'analyse critique, à inciter à l'action, et à l'organisation. L'article analyse un certain nombre d'expériences de théâtre populaire à des fins de éducation, et identifie quelques problèmes qui y sont liés. A la fin, il définit les responsabilités des praticiens de théâtre.

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This paper is principally exploratory because it sets out to postulate possible ways of exploiting TV in the Third World where the need seems more to be geared towards education rather than just entertainment. Besides, it should be understood that while Third World countries have no option than import TV technology from Western Europe and Japan, there is most certainly no obligation whatsoever to import software from the same source.

Software developed in Europe and North America responds to a certain cultural milieu so different from that prevailing in most Third World countries. Whereas in Europe and North America, there is need for much escapist fare, the contrary ought to be true in the developing world where the media ought to combine entertainment with education.

Unfortunately, however, owing to cultural assimilation, absence of sufficient funds for production, ill conceived programming policies, unavailability of qualified manpower, displaced snobism, etc., the tendency in the Third World is to fill the box night after night with irrelevant even though sleek material largely imported from Europe and North America.

The problems of the developing world are complex and need not be compounded by the cultural imperialism which passes for the global village. If there were programme exchanges between the developed and developing world, one could easily understand the anxiety to contribute to the creation of a universal culture. But this is not the case. As far as software for TV is concerned, Third World countries have become a perpetual dumping ground for third rate spaghetti westerns, soap operas, *sitcoms*, thrillers of the most alienating sort. These programmes can only negate the search for cultural identity and mortgage any genuine form of development.

Some two decades ago when many Third World countries were launching their networks it was anticipated that TV would be the miracle needed to solve many of the existing problems within these societies. In retrospect, the performance of TV networks have been appallingly short of the target. It is difficult to see how many countries in the Third World which have been able to develop adequate programming policy which would reflect the aspirations of the masses. Rather, for the various reasons cited above, many Third World TV Networks have contented themselves with broadcasting material which is irrelevant to their communities and which has tremendous ramifications on attitude changes.

The power of television is undoubtable. In the Third World it was expected to accelerate the development process, contribute to the integration of society and provide a means of preserving traditional cultures. Today, there is evidence to show that the medium has even had a negative influence and enlarged, rather than diminished the gap between the rich and the poor and the urban and the rural. And as Mytton (1983) puts it, instead of nurturing traditional cultural values it has eroded them by offering a large amount of imported programming.

Television programming within the Third World increasingly seems to cater for the needs of a "small" urban elite using taxes collected from the masses to whom the wrong messages are sent. In Zambia recently, Dickson Mwansa of



the University of Lusaka described what he saw as peasant JRs coming out of thatched huts.

It has been suggested that the failure of television in the Third World to achieve its full potential has been due to social, cultural, economic and most especially, political constraints. The kind of freedom of expression that is necessary for the development of interesting programming tends to be muted and there is hardly any encouragement for the marginalized people to validate their aspirations in the medium.

With the exception of some Latin America countries, many TV networks in the Third World are dependent on hightech/high-cast production models which restrict the possibility for producing locally generated material. With a lot of heavy investment on production and transmission equipment, coupled with generalized suspicion on the critical bent of media producers, the predominant tendency is to purchase "safe" material from abroad.

According to Iain McLellan (1986) African television, as a rule, rarely shows or explains Africa to Africans. What we often see... is *Dallas*, *I love Lucy*, *Sanford and Son*, French police films and other imports with no redeeming social value.

McLellan adds that on most evenings, the African content seen on the majority of African televisions is represented by political speeches, reports on visits of foreign dignitaries, "development experts" speaking over the average viewer in European languages telling them how they should develop, or dramas featuring upper class characters dealing with typically Western problems. This observation is largely true from the personal experiences of the present writer.

In spite of the generalized recognition that many of the imported programmes are irrelevant these continue to occupy pride of place in programme schedules. As I said before, it is my fervent belief that for the enormous investments in broadcast and production equipment to be justifiable, Third World networks like other forms of media should be oriented towards development support communications particularly in the area of formal, non-formal and informal education. To be able to achieve these objectives, media resources should relate to, and be easily identified with, and by the people.

What is the use of showing pictures of snow every other night to children living in the equatorial regions? How would *Mud Squad*- and *Starsky and Hutch* affect urban youths? What are the ramifications of eroticism on the box? These are questions to be asked and the answers are needed urgently.

The medium also needs to be used interactively if it is to serve as a bridge between the governors and the governed. The present trend seems to be that the media exists to bolster the image of the administrators to the detriment of those they administer. Often enough, this results in overkill and induces viewer-cynicism.

Everyone, television principally serves the objectives of disseminating information, educating and entertaining. True to mores of many third World Countries these three objectives can be integrated. In Africa, for instance, art is supposed



to serve a social function (Bakary Traore, 1972). The 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, social, economic and political within a given community. Through conflict and resolution a society can examine its contradictions and seek communal solutions to its problems without the spill-over to violence which this might occasion in a real life situation.

The theatre could be used to provide collective theory whereby people seeing their actions reflected may come to a better understanding to their situations and the ironies these involve. Theatre can thus create a degree of self-consciousness and generate collective feeling. Bakary Traore points out that like all theatres, the Negro-African theatre was born under definite historical conditions.

It is said that the excellence of British television drama, for instance, not only derives from a long dramatic tradition but also because it is largely informed by the socio-cultural climate within the country. American dramas, trite as they are, derive from a certain levity of spirit occasioned by the American dream.

Each people have their culture and they deserve every right to propagate it. The theatre is one such way through which this can be done and when a medium such as television exists, this ought to be exploited in propagating such cultures. Popular theatre which emanates from the people, is about the people, and is intended for their consumption seemsto be one such possibility not only for its accessibility, but to see on our networks a dramatic expression which is in consonance with the aspirations of the masses.

Our world today has come to be dominated by media messages expressing a singular view-point — that of the ruling classes. And this phenomenon has come to reduce humanity to the state of perpetual domination, a world infused with alienating images which eventually reduce society to the point of no definition. Such images — negating and alienating — are perpetually being infused into the Third World by programmable material emanating from Europe and North America and whatever the search for identity constitutes can only result in a faceless society. These images are transformative but not validating. They destroy the roots of the Third World and in their stead, implant a new culture.

The Third Worlders, caught between their traditional cultures and the new coca-cola culture, begin to suffer from some form of schizophrenia. We have often seen the images of blonde black girls in "fur" coats walking the humid streets of tropical cities, side by side with the three-piece-suited and winter-coated brethren. Such, at the more ludicrous level, are some of the images engendered by many of those sleek serials like *Falcon Crest* and *Dallas*.

What one would like to see within Third World countries is a programme policy that encourages the development of local material with the view, to quote Freire (1972), to develop the practice of permanent dialogue between leaders and people. Such dialogue can be generated through the use of theatre.



Recently, Cameroun launched a hygiene and cleanliness campaign with posters and slogans on radio. However, a most effective tool which went a long way to implanting the idea into the masses, if judged only by the number of responses in the national newspaper, was a dramatization entitled *l'ammende de Mbosi*. In this thirty minute sketch a family head who insists on throwing refuse around his house and who encourages his neighbours not to use the dust-bin provided by the administration is sentenced and fined. Through dialogue and discussion with various people he comes to regret his actions. The presentation on television was very effective providing very humorous entertainment with an underlying didactic thrust. A similar example where theatre can be used to provide both entertainment and education is a recent dramatization on Guinean television based on a new government programme encouraging early retirement aimed at retrenching the civil service. Slogans and posters could never be as effective as the dramatization.

According to Katz, Wedell, Pitsworth and Shiner (1978) modernizing campaigns aimed at achieving change in the relatively short run depend on communications systems that combine the efficient diffusion of information with opportunities for reinforcement, discussion and feed-back. While as in the examples quoted above the messages are packaged by media specialists to promote a particular establishment point-of-view, the use of the medium can be taken a step further by making it interactive through the use of local dramas.

You would have realised by now that I am less concerned with traditional theatre — especially scripted plays which have come to be accepted as forming part of the classical heritage of a people. I am more concerned with dramas such as sitcoms, telenovellas, docu-dramas etc. which have a local content. The production of these programmes is not the most herculian task even for the least talented producers. The star-system which often pushes up production costs in the Western countries hardly exists in the developing world even though the performers are often very talented. Production costs are therefore minimal particularly because there is not a pressing need for technical excellence.

Often enough however, it would seem that the problems confronting Third World networks are neither technical nor artistic, but rather bureaucratic and political. Most managers of Third World TV Stations tend to be caught between the demands and aspirations of their production staff and viewers on the one hand, and those of the "political elite" on the other. The result as I have already pointed out is invariably to play safe by importing material to fill air time. While accountants may be impressed with the performance of the managers, the ramifications on the perception of the community can be psychologically disastrous. And such consequences can hardly even be measured in pecuniary terms.

In his survey of a number of African TV networks, McLellan points out that most broadcasters are agreed on the fact that drama is the best format for communication development support information. By creating a realistic setting with characters and situations viewers can identify with, the level of communication is greatly enhanced.



Drama involves the viewer, it encourages him to objectify his responses to a given situation. Rather than talking down to viewers as in a talk-show, drama encourages interaction and empathy. Drama provides a forum in which people talking to people comment on everyday issues and the fictional situation allows for the handling of even sensitive and controversial issues.

Drama's most potent techniques on television are humour and empathy and many skilled writers exist who have developed the knack of displaying society laughing at itself even within those areas often considered taboo.

While it may not be possible to achieve a production capacity capable of filling all available air time, it is unacceptable that little that is locally generated appears on Third World networks. McLellan (p.38) asserts that in the African countries he surveyed, dramas, particularly those in African languages, enjoyed the largest viewership of all domestic programming and are often more widely accepted than the imported soap operas and action-adventure series produced in Europe and the United States.

We are proposing here that local sitcoms, docu-dramas, telenovellas, telefeuilletons etc. can be produced cheaply and are more relevant and effective as communication tools. While production equipment has become more sophisticated and light weight, there is no longer the need for the studio-style lighting thereby encouraging much location work.

The networks need not suffer from too much financial pressure in hiring performers, many of who are unemployed anyway and who would often even offer their services free if only to appear on television.

Another possibility is creating dramas with urban and rural communities using real live characters dramatising their own lives. Such programmes could deal with a wide range of subjects including agriculture, community health care, literacy and numeracy, planned parenthood, environmental protection and improvement, nutrition and home economics, women's education, arts and crafts, culture, management and leadership etc., all these within story lines with strong dramatic force.

There however will need to be emphasis on the simplicity of the messages delivered and how they relate to the needs of the people. It will thus be necessary in developing these teledramas to allow client groups to articulate and clarify their own points of view and then move on to an agreed upon definition of community issues, problems, and methods for their resolution. Within this format also can be introduced a two-way communication process between the governors and the governed.

Technical excellence is not the ultimate goal of this kind of programming. Rather, the onus lies on communication and relevance. Such technical excellence can be displayed in studio-type productions of scripted dramas which already form part of each country's repertory.

As said at the beginning, this paper is exploratory and is intended to launch a debate on the issue.

## ***Bibliography***

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