

Theatre Development in Sierra Leone A study of Care's Project Learn

by David H. Malamah-Thomas*

Abstract

This paper discusses the role of theatre in development. It starts off by summarizing the history of theatre in Sierra Leone. Then it gives a fairly detailed account of the activities of CARE's LEARN project in which theatre techniques were employed to create the necessary awareness for development among Sierra Leonians. It admits that though the approach used by LEARN in this project was not more truly participatory, it achieved noteworthy success in the areas of nutrition, sanitation and maternal childhealth care.

Résumé

Cet article traite du rôle du théâtre dans le développement. Il commence par donner un résumé de l'histoire du théâtre en Sierra Leone. Ensuite, il donne un compte rendu très détaillé des activités du project Learn de CARE qui utilise les techniques du théâtre pour créer une prise de conscience nécessaire pour le développement parmi les Sierra-Léonais. Il admet que, quoique l'approche utilisée par Learn dans ce project ne soit pas vraiment participative, il a cependant atteint un succès notable dans les domaines de la nutrition, de la santé et des soins maternels et infantiles.

* Mr. David Malamah-Thomas is Acting Director, Institute of Adult Education & Extra Mural Studies, Fourah Bay College University of Sierra Leone.

1. Introduction

The Government of Sierra Leone and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), national as well as international, have embarked with varying degrees of success on community and rural development programmes aimed at improving the quality of life of the rural masses. Some have exploited the country's rich dramatic traditions and have used the indigenous performing arts especially drama for education and conscientization and for the dissemination of development messages and information.

2. Popular Theatre in Africa, 1950-1980

Though relatively new in Sierra Leone, *Popular/Participatory Theatre/Theatre for Development* has been experimented with in many African countries over the past 3 decades. In the 1950s, Theatre for Development experiments were conducted in Ghana and Uganda by the Colonial governments as pressure built up for the dawn of independence. In the 1960s, the "travelling theatre" projects of the Universities of Ibadan, Makerere, Nairobi, Zomba, Lusaka and Yaounde emerged.¹ Groups of university students and tutors took plays depicting the *TRADITION/MODERNIZATION* conflict to rural villages and urban squatter areas as a form of "cultural democratization"². A third type characterised the 1970s, thanks to experiments in Botswana which centre the annual festival *LAEDZA BATANANI* (Wake Up. Let's come together and work together). It was to provide an occasion when the community was drawn together to critically understand and assess their situation and to discuss what might be done about it.

The dramatization of local issues after research and identification of villagers' problems, was used to communicate these issues in a way which people could comprehend. Post-performance discussions facilitated a process of community education and action.³

To make theatre truly participatory, functional and a catalyst for collective community action, the *Theatre Collective* of Nigeria's Ahmadu Bello University involved the villagers throughout the process from information/data collection to the follow-up action.⁴ The former "objects" of an externally-controlled research process in a top-down (monological or one-way) communication became "subjects" in a dialogical participatory research (PR) process (See pages 10-12).

Today, Theatre for Development in its various methods have been identified by many Third World countries as a two-way communication process and is perhaps the most efficacious instrument for conscientizing and enabling the masses and for propagating development information using the folk media and the people's language and idiom⁵ and effectively dealing with the problems of direct relevance to the people's socio-economic realities.

3. Theatre in Sierra Leone Upto 1970s

In Sierra Leone, dramatic activity started well before the advent of colonialism. Western education and training brought in their trail a new drama, an elitist drama, "high theatre," the focus of which was and still is the creation of empathy between actor and spectator around themes of emotion and laughter.⁶ After political Independence in 1961, dramatists in Sierra Leona were pre-occupied in Sierra Leonising the theatre with the establishment of the National Theatre League in 1964. In the early 1970s, playwrights began using the country's lingua franca, Krio, as the theatrical communication medium. Besides, during the 1970s, playwrights like Pat Amadu Maddy and K. John Kargbo, following in the wake of Nigeria's Wole Soyinka and Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o, increasingly earned the disfavour of Government with their socio-economic plays depicting the corrupt and unjust political situation. This directly led to the imposition of Government censorship on play in 1979.⁸ The 1980s have witnessed the mushrooming of theatre groups in Freetown (estimates have it that they now number over 50) and a plethora of dramatizations which have made the theatre look like a common market where playwrights frenzily and breathlessly rush for quick profit and even to profiteer with the consequent alarming drop in theatrical standards.

4. Theatre for Development in Sierra Leone

Popular/People's Theatre/Theatre for Development was introduced in Sierra Leone towards the late 1970s. The Planned Parenthood Association (PPA) and the Plan International of Sierra Leone and health educators in provincial hospitals in the Eastern Province used drama and other folk media for adult education and for disseminating their family planning and primary health care messages.

CARE's Project LEARN (Local Educational Activities for Rural Networks) also experienced with drama to spread its messages in agriculture, health, nutrition and sanitation. The limitation of all those "experiments" was that the programme beneficiaries were entirely left out in the identification and analysis of their own problems and so become passive listeners/objects and recipients of sloganistic messages.

5. Project Learn

Project LEARN was sponsored jointly by the Government of Sierra Leone and CARE, the former providing the personnel while the latter finance, resource materials, transportation etc. It was launched in 1979 and phased out in 1983.

CARE started operations after the 2nd World War as a relief aid agency, to war-shattered and war-weary European countries. Today, CARE's activities are worldwide and it rushes emergency aid to victims of natural disaster such as earthquakes, drought and floods. It also provides food, clothing and shelter and medical supplies to recipient countries.

CARE came to Sierra Leone in 1961 and its first major programme was a feeding programme for schools and hospitals which started in 1962 and continued till 1977. It was discontinued when it was realised that most of the food items did not reach the beneficiaries they were meant for. However, CARE has in partnership with the Government of Sierra Leone continued its development activities such as construction of feeder roads in the East and the South, wells and pit latrines all over the country.

The idea of using folk media — drama, dancing, music and singing — together with visual aids for entertainment and to initiate a process of *conscientization* and adult education for local-level community development was first mooted in 1977 in response to requests from development and extension workers for new ways of reaching the villagers with their development messages to enable them to maintain good health, improve their productivity and personal and environmental sanitation. Conscientization here refers to a gradual learning process in which people look critically at their socio-economic realities in order to gain a deeper understanding of the root causes of their problems. People can engage in this enabling process through dialogue or group discussions stimulated by key (generative) words, pictures, stories or dramatisations on pressing community problems. Conscientization is predicated on the promise that with an increased critical understanding of their social and economic situation, people can gain control over their lives and thus their ability to effect positive changes to ameliorate the quality of their lives.⁹

The LEARN Resource kits contained among others a series of 15 taped dramatised stories mostly 15-20 minutes and consisted of 4 or 5 scenes,¹⁰ which featured the experiences of a typical farm family. Each story was based on an actual village situation and some of the dramas showed ways in which problems could be solved while other problems remained unsolved to encourage the listeners, the programme beneficiaries, to work out their own solutions. Each drama was recorded in Mende and Temne, the 2 major languages of the operational districts, Pujehun in the Sotu and Portloko in the North. Project LEARN brought together village development workers from various Government Ministries concerned with community and Rural Development like Agriculture, Health, Social Welfare and Rural Development and Interior. Village participants were selected for the interest, motivation and commitment to village development while the selected developments and extension workers were trained to use the LEARN Resource materials — the dramatised tapes, an Instructor's Manual, a "Gongoli" poster, a flipchart, a tape recorder and a Discussion Guide — designed to bring health education to all villagers, young as well as old, educated and non-educated alike.

6. Learn's Objectives

Among the many objectives of Project LEARN, the following are perhaps significant.

Health/ Sanitation

1. To get rural people to change their personal and social habits and beliefs so as to prevent and control ill-health.
2. To enable the rural people to appreciate the value of health care by helping them to develop awareness of their own capabilities for contributing to healthy living.
3. To inform and assist them to make use of simple hygienic latrines.
4. To provide adequate supply of safe drinking water and basic sanitation and to promote community and personal hygiene.
5. To enable the people to eradicate disease vectors from their environment and engage in community disease control campaigns.

Agriculture

1. To enable learners to know modern methods of farming and appreciate the value of improved but simple agricultural techniques.
2. To assist people to value and utilize vegetable gardens as well as improved agricultural practices for storage, consumption and sale.

Nutrition

1. To demonstrate and assist the people to prepare a balanced diet for children, adults, pregnant women and the sick.
2. To educate and assist families in utilizing home-grown food for balanced diet.
3. To assist families to appreciate and value nutrition by helping them understand the interrelationship between balanced diet and healthy living.

Self-Reliance/ Community Development

1. To encourage people to use their own resources and initiative to improve their living conditions.
2. To assist them to make the best of their potentialities and human resources by helping them to appreciate and practise an integrated approach to improve their living conditions. . . ¹¹

7. Identification of Village Problems

The Project's Advisory Committee (PAC) comprising representatives from Government Ministries and Departments, the University of Sierra Leone and NGOs requested village representatives to identify some of their pressing problems which could be solved mainly by village participation and resources e.g. the construction of pit latrines and wells to improve their health status. 15 problems were identified on which dramas were made, namely, cup and spoon feeding, clean water, wells, tuberculosis, pregnancy, transplanting rice, rice storage, measles, malaria, sanitation and latrines, composting, first aid, feeding infants and toddlers and tetanus. The dramatised stories were acted by the BONDOKALI Theatre and taped by the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service for use by development workers.

8. Use of Learn Resource Kit

When a development worker arrived at a village, he called on the chief, described the project and requested his support in implementing the project. Together with the chief, he identified the 3 members of the villager's LEARN committee including himself, usually as a chairman. Then he described the Project to the Committee, played the project's Theme Song, *Sickness Nor Go Ebul We* (Sickness cannot overcome us); (Appendix 1) showed them the GO-NGOLI mask, (Appendix 2) LEARN's symbol which to Sierra Leoneans represents good humour, fun and entertainment. The worker then demonstrated by playing one of the dramatised stories to the committee. Assisted by the members he formed a LEARN Discussion Group comprising the 3 Committee members and 22 villagers consisting of both men and women. The venue, conduct of meetings and other logistics were later agreed upon. Elaborate hints for the preparation of lessons and how to lend discussions groups were finally dished out to the development worker (Appendix 3).

9. Impact of Project

If the reports and expressed views in LEARN's newsletters are anything to go by, some of LEARN's objectives were achieved and had visible impact on the project areas and populations.¹² The impact was mainly in the areas of personal hygiene, environmental sanitation and maternal and childhealth care. There is unmistakable evidence that the project beneficiaries changed their negative and superstitious beliefs with regard to the causes of diseases like malaria, bilharzia and tetanus. For example, they learnt that malaria was caused by mosquitoes and not by eating plenty of burnt oil, oranges and overdrinking beer. They then inculcated the habit of drinking anti-malaria tablets and cleaning their environment. The villagers became aware of killer diseases like tuberculosis, measles and tetanus and were taught methods to prevent them and to

treat their symptoms. They became aware of the advantages of cup or spoon feeding over handfeeding. Also that breastmilk is good for babies and when a baby is 4 months old, foods like mashed fruits, pounded fish, eggs, beans etc. should be added to its food to make it more nutritious. Before the project, the villagers urinated and defected in rivers, streams, swamps and even in and around their compounds. Less 11 on *Sanitation and Latrines* sensitised the people to the health hazards of such malpractices and to the benefits of constructing and using simple pit latrines. Some self-help community development activities promoted by the LEARN lessons and ensuing discussions were digging of communal and individual wells, building of community stores, cultivation of vegetable gardens and learning simple gardening techniques such as transplanting and composting. Lastly, but equally important, the Project LEARN promoted coordination and collaborating among governmental and non-governmental organisations.

10. Project Learn – A Participatory Research Process?

Participatory Research (PR) arose in the context of questioning such basic research issues as the relationship between the purposes and consequences of the means and ends of social research, the implications and results of using the conventional and traditional social science methodologies, the relationship between the purposes and consequences of the means and ends of social research, the implications and results of using the conventional and traditional social science methodologies, the relationship between the researcher and the researched, neutrality, subjectivity and objectivity.

The basic objective of participatory research is the progressive social change for the betterment and liberation (viewed as the equivalent of development) of the oppressed and marginalised peoples. "Participatory research is a tool which oppressed people can use to begin to take control of the economic and political forces which affect their lives."¹³

The following broad features characterise participatory research.

- (a) Subjective commitment of the part of the researcher to the researched is vitally essential.
- (b) The researcher is perceived as a participatory social actor/change agent who must combine his critical insight and knowledge with the "native intelligence" and resources of the programme beneficiaries to trigger new and increased awareness of the contradictions in their socio-economic realities and devising appropriate strategies to solve them.
- (c) The approach is problem-oriented. Research is perceived not as mere information/data collection, the result of which can be acted upon by others, the policy makers. Rather, the fundamental objective of social research is to understand the conditions underlying the problems in order to solve them by transforming the conditions.

- (d) The research process is conceived as an educational process for the researcher and researched alike. The close and active interaction between them predicated on dialogue and discussion is ultimately aimed at positive action towards the solution of the socio-economic contradictions.
- (e) The research demands respect for the people's own capabilities and potentials to produce knowledge and to analyse it. Knowledge Creation as being the monopoly of the professional researchers alone, as commonly practised by conventional researchers, is manifestly challenged by the participatory research approach.

In short, participatory research has been described as a "three-pronged activity: an approach to social investigation with the full and active participation of the community in the ENTIRE research process; a means of taking action for development, and an educational process of mobilization for development: all of which are closely interwoven with each other."¹⁴

In the light of the above, it can be seen that LEARN's process using Theatre for Development was not altogether a truly participatory research process. Right from the start, the project beneficiaries, the researched, were secondary in the planning and implementation stages. They were "objects" not "subjects" of their development process. Although the dramatised stories depicted the real socio-economic realities of the villagers, using popular idiom and language, yet the project programmers adopted Everett Rogers' euphemism ITYTWIT

"I
Think that
You
Think
What
I
Think" ¹⁵

No doubt, the LEARN process was problem-posing, problem-solving and succeeded in conscientizing and educating the beneficiaries mainly in the areas of nutrition, sanitation and maternal child health care. The lesson of the project LEARN is that if development programmes are woven into the social-cultural life of the beneficiaries, they can involve, entertain, instruct and inform.

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Appendix I

Project "Learn" Theme Song (KRIO)

"Sickness Nor Go Ebul We"

1

We broda en we sista dem
Una all kam togedda
For Join mek we mek good life
Bikus E go gee we well bodi.
Na im mek are wan mek we sing
Bot well bodi en good life.
If we all dae think bot dat
Sickness no go ebul we.

3

Yu for mek vegetabul gardin
Wey yu lan ow for mek di
manure.
Yu for trai mek yu yone fam
Agriculture na fine tin.
We for gee we pikin dem yam
yam,
Wey go mek pikin dem grow fine
en strong
Lik res paap wit mass banana,
grain granat, fish, pamine
or grain binch.

5

Wass yu iya tu tem for wik
Klin yu tit every monin
Plenti sick wey we kin de sick
Na we sef we mak we sick.
Klin way go gee we well bodi
If we all mek we village klin
Klose klin, pikin klin, chop klin,
Sickness no go ebul we.

2

For gee yu babi wata mek et
drink,
Yu get for boil di wata.
Wey we want for fid deh babi
We for trai en klin all tinks:
Lek di chop, spoon or cup.
We di babi nor go choke or
koff
If we du so for di babi en we
sef,
Sickness no go ebul we

4

Wey yu wan for yeat yu for
wass yu han
Yu wey de cook am, yu sef
for klin.
If yu de na village wata
bisness tranga
Yu for dig good wata well.
Yu for always wass yu close
klin
Wey yu pred matta yu babi
sidom
If yu am na di empti gron
Dat go mek yu babi sick.

Chorus

Dis sing na for we village, For all man na dem village, Watin we all go do
togedda Na im go mek we village strong.

English Version .. "Sickness cannot overcome us"

1

Our brothers and our sisters
Let us all come together
We must join to make a good
life.
Because it will make us
healthy.
It makes me want to sing
About health and good life.
If we all think about that,
Sickness will not overcome us.

3

You should make a vegetable
garden
Where you can learn how to
make the manure.
You can try to make your
family farm,
Agriculture is a good thing.
We should give our children
good food
To make them grow good and
strong.
Like rice pap with mashed
banana, groundnuts, fish
or ground leaves.

5

Wash your hair two times every week. Clean your teeth every morning. Many diseases that make us sick, its ourselves that bring them on. Cleanliness will give us health. If we can all make our villages clean, our clothes, our children, our food clean, sickness will not overcome us.

Chorus

This song is for our village, for everyone in the village. Whatever we all do together, that will make our village strong.

2

You must give your baby
water to drink.
You should boil the water
That we want to give the
baby.
We should try to clean
everything,
Like the plate, spoon or
cup
So the baby will not choke
or cough.
If we do all this for the
baby and ourselves,
Sickness will not overcome us.

4

When you want to eat, you
must wash your hands.
If you cook, you should
clean yourself.
If you are in a village
with a water problem,
You could dig a water well.
You should always wash your
clothes clean.
You should always use a mat
to put your child on.
If you put him on the bare
ground,
It will make your baby sick

Appendix 2

Using the Learn Resource Kit in the Village Notes for Learn Workers

1. Meet with the Chief:

- Describe the Project and ask for his or her support.
- Decide who will be the 3 members of your LEARN Committee.
- Ask the Chief if he or she will serve as the Committee Chairperson.

2. Meet with the LEARN Committee:

- Describe the Project, play the theme song, show the gongoli mask and demonstrate by playing one of the stories.
- Have the Committee members help you talk to important individuals in the village to gain their support for the Project.
- Ask the Committee to assist you in starting a LEARN Discussion Group in the village. They can help you decide:

WHO — Select 22 villagers who wish to join the LEARN Discussion Group. Be sure to include both men and women. With your 3 Committee members the LEARN group will have 25 members. (If you find that all 25 members cannot hear the stories at one time, you may have to make your group smaller).

PLACE— Where to meet and how to arrange the room so everyone can hear and participate.

HOW —the meetings should be announced.

3. During the LEARN Group Discussions, your Committee Members can:

- Record the names of the group members on the green ATTENDANCE SHEET and keep the Attendance record.
- Help gather the group members for the meetings.
- Set up the room for each meeting.
- Take notes of any actions the group decides upon.
- Work with you, the other group members and the whole village on follow-up activities.

Preparing a Learn Lesson in the Village

1. **BEFORE EACH MEETING** listen again to the taped story you will be playing and read the Discussion Guide for that story carefully. This will help you plan an effective discussion.
2. **REVIEW THE LEARNING POINTS FOR THE STORY**, these points are the objectives for each lesson. At the end of your **LEARN** meeting, the members of your group should understand each of the points completely. The **LEARNING** points are to help you focus your discussion and know what points to stress.
3. **REHEARSE ANY DEMONSTRATIONS** you plan on giving during the meeting. Make sure you have all the materials you need to do the demonstration ready.
4. **CHECK OUT LOCAL RESOURCES** that are relevant to the story. Bring the information to your Discussion Group. For example, when you play "Jatu (Fatu) has her First Baby," you can find out when and where the MCH clinics are held in your area and what immunizations are readily available.
5. **THINK ABOUT ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES** to involve the villagers in.

Helpful Hints of Leading a Learn Discussion Group

1. **TIMING** is important. Have an idea how long you think the group meeting should last. Unless you are having a very lively discussion, try not to let it run too long. People lose their ability to concentrate and cannot spare the time if the meetings are very long.

Remember, you want people to enjoy themselves during the meetings so they will want to return again and again to hear the next new story.

2. **PRESENT RULES FOR DISCUSSION** at the very beginning. For example:

—Only one person should speak at a time.

—Only funny stories, not people should be laughed at.

—Group members should agree to come on time so meetings start and end on time.

—Comments that do not relate to the subject of the story should be kept for discussion at another time. (Committee members can help you to remind people of this if this discussion starts to wander off the subject).

3. **DISCUSSION GUIDE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS** are there only to guide you. Do not feel you must use all of the questions. The answers that are given in the guides may be different from what the villagers answer. Give your group time to come up with the answers themselves. Encourage each group member to participate by stating his or her own views, thoughts and experiences on the subject being discussed. People learn best when they feel involved and have a chance to express themselves fully. Don't forget to let the women in your group have their say!
4. **LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY** to what the group members say. Villagers have lots of experiences and wisdom from which we can all learn. Being a good listener is a lot harder than being a good talker!
5. **LOOK FOR THE SILENT LEADERS** in your group. Encourage them to take an active role in the discussions.

Groups identify and follow their own leaders. If you indirectly help this to happen, your job will be a lot easier.
6. **FOLLOW-UP ON THE DISCUSSIONS** by reminding people of what was talked about or decided upon in previous discussions. Repetition helps people learn. For the same reason it is important to review the **LEARNING** points at the end of each lesson.

Project LEARN
CARE/Sierra Leone
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