

**THEATRE AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT
OF RURAL WOMEN IN BAYELSA STATE
The Adagbabiri Experiment.**

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Abstract

Before October 1 1996, the geographic location presently known as Bayelsa state was part of the old Rivers state. When in 1996 it became one of the five states to be created in Nigeria, the gross underdevelopment that had been concealed by her being part of a larger entity was brought to the fore. It dawned on all stakeholders that there was urgent need to address the under development in the state.

Various development mechanisms have been adopted to ensure growth in the state. Some succeeded while some failed. Today signs of development are evident in parts of the state. While the state still has a long way to go in achieving tangible sustainable development, efforts are being made to get there. But in the midst of the seeming development, the majority of the women folk especially those in rural Bayelsa are not reaping the dividends of development transforming their state.

This paper highlights the predicament of the rural Bayelsa woman and some of the challenges and factors militating against her development. The instrument of theatre is here presented as a tool to awaken and empower her to take charge of her life in the face of apparent neglect.

The paper presents a Theatre-for-Development workshop that took place in Adagbabiri a community in Bayelsa state. The impact of that workshop on the target group will be used to ascertain the efficacy of theatre as an effective tool in the empowerment of rural women.

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Introduction

Bayelsa state was created by late General Sani Abacha on 1st October, 1996. The name BAYELSA is derived from the acronyms of three local government areas in the old Rivers state: BALGA (Brass Local Government Area) YELGA (Yenagoa Local Government Area) and SALGA (Sagbama Local Government Area). Bayelsa state is a typical rain forest zone of about 21,110 sq. km that has a landmass of about 12,000sq.Km. The rest of the area is below sea level. Bayelsa state has a network of creeks, streams and rivers emptying into the Atlantic Ocean through Rivers San Bartholomew, Brass, Nun and Ramos. The vegetation of the state is characterised mostly by mangrove forest. Bayelsa has an estimated population of three million people, and is located within latitude 04.15" north, 05.23" south and longitudes 05.22" west and 06.45" east (Investment Guide 4).

With the creation of the state, it became apparent that the new state had been overlooked by the old Rivers state as the stark reality of her underdevelopment became manifest. From 1996 to date, government at all levels has been initiating various development mechanisms to raise the state to be at par with other states in the nation. Evidence of the development efforts in the state, are slow but obvious. The slow pace of development can be attributed to the non-involvement of the women-folk in the developmental process. Women constitute more than half of the Bayelsan population- a greater number of that population are situated in rural communities. Development transforming the state capital are not evident in most rural communities of the state

One is therefore constrained to pose this question "what role does the Bayelsa woman play in the building of her state? The answer to that question may give rise to another set of questions: Why are the women-folk not actively involved in contributing to the development of their state? What are those factors that impede them from being involved in the development process? What efforts

have been made to address their non-involvement in decision-making? Answers to those questions provide the bedrock this paper. The instrument to be used in the study is that branch of theatre known as Theatre-for-development.

Theatre-for- Development and Women Empowerment

Women empowerment has for some time in recent history been on the front burner of development discourse. Development studies are gravitating towards more integrally gendered approaches to issues of women empowerment. Academic women and other development practitioners are now aware of the need to act as facilitators in articulating the perceived needs of women as formulated by the women themselves (Afshar 1). Research on women in developing nations is now challenging fundamental assumptions of international development, adding gender dimensions to development studies. The concept of gender refers to the parallel and socially unequal divisions into femininity and masculinity thereby distinguishing between biologically founded, sexual and social differences between women and men. Biological differentiation is determined by the sex of a person, while gender is seen as a set of qualities and behaviours expected from a female or male person by their society and that expectation is in turn, affected by cultural and social expectations. These expectations derive from the notion that certain qualities and therefore roles are natural for women, while others are natural for men. Being a phenomenon that is socially constructed, translations of gender vary from society to society but for all societies, the common denominator of gender is female subordination to male supremacy (Mackenzie 158-9 Ostergaard 6; O'Connor 3).

The term empowerment has been defined by Jo Rowlands 'as a process of bringing people who are outside decision-making process into it. Her definition puts strong emphasis on access to political structures, formal decision-making and access to markets

and incomes that enable people to actively participate in economic decision-making' (Rowlands quoted in Dawson 190). Given Rowland's definition, it would seem that the concept of women empowerment still elude majority of world women population, a greater number of whom are located in rural communities. Various reasons have been given for the disempowerment of women and their non-participation in the development process of their societies. Most of the reasons are social restrictions intended to exclude women from contributing to the developmental process of their society.

People's lives are shaped by their environment, cultures, traditions and customs. Cross - culturally, there are some cultural practices that place women at disadvantaged positions. These practices entrench in them a resignation which Paulo Freire describes as the 'culture of silence.' Some harmful traditional practices that militate against women's empowerment include: early/ forced marriages, widowhood practices, unequal education opportunities between boys and girls, female genital mutilation (FGM), teenage pregnancies and child abuse. All these practices and a host of other such practices hamper the empowerment of women. In addition to the above challenges that are prevalent in most African societies, the Bayelsan woman also has to contend with some other peculiar problems that contribute to her underdevelopment.

The issue of development is as old as man. From his earliest days, man has been grappling with positive and negative forces of nature not within his control, to ensure his safety and wellbeing. Ogunbiyi defines development as 'a process that concerns man's inventive and creative search for a better living'. He further stresses that development is realisable only in societies where basic problems of poverty, unemployment and inequalities have diminished considerably from high to low levels (17-18). Various other definitions have been used in attempts to contextualise the term

development but Ogunbiyi's definition best serves our purpose. It follows that if other scholars in development studies are in agreement with Ogunbiyi, then development logically should be people - oriented since people have within themselves the basis of their development. Development efforts that do not build on this foundation will be futile irrespective of the amount of input or sincerity of those who initiate the programmes (Kindo et al 8).

Poverty, unemployment, social, political and economic inequalities are some factors that prevent true development in Bayelsa state. The fragile nature of the state's geographical terrain makes her one of the least developed in the federation. In spite of Bayelsa being one of the nation's largest oil producing state, she still lacks adequate infrastructures like roads, potable water supply, housing, and qualitative educational institutions. To address issues of underdevelopment in the state, federal and the state governments have been initiating various development mechanisms to alleviate the sufferings of the people. The federal government on its part has at various times, instituted development boards/commissions to redress issues of marginalisation and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta region; the Niger Delta Development Commission being the most recent effort of the federal government's attempts to bring development to the golden goose region of the country (Ilagha 12-13).

In the face of these efforts it becomes surprising to observe that majority of the state's population still live below the poverty line. If in spite of 'concerted' efforts, development still eludes people of the state, it stands to reason that there has to be a fundamental anomaly in the development schema. Iorapuu and Bamidele give two reasons for lack of development in grassroots communities. The first according to them is 'lack of involvement of the people for whom development is meant in the process of planning' and two, 'the inability of development planners to use a medium of communication that is all-embracing, participatory, decentralised and located within the cultures of the rural people who form

majority of the population' (Iorapuu and Bamidele 98).

The ineffective top-down approach to development pervades all strata of the Nigerian society. Since our study however dwells on the rural woman of Bayelsa state we are primarily concerned with why development eludes her. Iorapuu and Bamidele have already provided for us the answer to that riddle. The people have been overlooked in the development process. Until recently, most development projects have been planned and decided at federal and state headquarters. Implementation of such development projects were made from the perspectives of bureaucrats and technocrats who neither live with nor experience the realities of the challenges that rural people cope with on daily bases. Distance and difference in class status also contribute to making it impossible for development planners to either understand or appreciate the priorities or needs of the rural people (Dube144).

Before state creation, Bayelsa constituted one of the rural areas of Rivers state. After creation, she qualified to be called a rural state. Assets were shared between her and the new Rivers state. Bayelsa indigenes left Rivers state to their new state. The first three years of creation passed with an unchanged rural Bayelsa under military leadership. The only sign of industry in the state in the first three years of creation was the civil service. However, with the inception of the fourth republic under D.S.P Alamiyeseigha as governor of the state in 1999, the state started shedding some of her rurality. By the year 2005, the state had acquired the trappings of any metropolitan state in the federation, but that was as far as it went. The rurality of the state had been pushed to the rural areas of the state and left there. Most rural communities in the state still do not have access to electricity, potable water supply, access roads, decently habitable accommodations or even educational institutions at the lowest levels. Government presence or development in any form is still non-existent in some of the rural communities in the state.

Economic Activities of the Bayelsa Woman

While it has been agreed that underdevelopment is still prevalent in Bayelsa state, it should be added that the rural woman is the worst hit by poverty and economic abuse owing largely to constant oil exploration and exploitation activities of multinational oil companies in their communities. Women in the littoral parts of the state depend heavily on fishing and farming which constitute their principal economic activities. Oil pollution occurring in rivers, creeks and streams not only endangers the communities' aquatic life but also destroys their farm lands (Binebai unpublished).

Development workers operating at grassroots level are becoming increasingly aware that existing development strategies alienate the people. They increasingly depersonalise human relationships and reduce development at the grassroots level, thereby generating shortfalls in the implementation of rural development projects (Nwamuo 75). These strategies which ideally should be comprehensible to target groups; relate to their value systems; take account of their needs and problems and enter the perceptive sphere of the groups and suggest practical solutions to highlighted challenges, in the long run, only succeed in eliminating target beneficiaries' conscious and active participation in the development process, because they make human beneficiaries the objects of, rather than the subjects of development processes. This negates the very essence of development completely.

It is at this point that Theatre-for-Development finds legitimacy in women empowerment discourse. Tfd according to Ahura 'is the theatre of the people which uses the medium of expression of the people to review their problems in a bid to seek solutions to them". Through Tfd, the theatre portrays the totality of the way of life of the people of the society out of which it originates. Though Tfd is but one in the conglomerate of development instruments, Its horizontal communicative ability to reach out to rural audiences and overcome barriers of illiteracy; the spontaneity it generates

which helps to pass on difficult messages in simple forms and its instant feedback reports makes it a very effective alternative strategy in development (Aloh 16).

The practice of Tfd fundamentally does not require technical knowledge from participants. Rather, it advocates a strong conviction in the creative capacity of human beings and attempts to restore the use of that latent ability in the larger majority of members of society (Daniel & Bappa 18). As an instrument of change in developing countries particularly Nigeria Tfd is widely accepted due to its horizontal communicative ability and participatory approach to development issues. The people oriented nature of the practice mandates that the people for whom the projects are meant to empower, be made to control the dramaturgical process. The people provide materials for drama, isolate through discussion and analysis issues around which the drama skit will be built, thereby forming the core of the communication process (Abah 17). It has also been accepted as the peoples' theatre because it addresses issues and problems of the people. It uses their cultural values and norms to challenge them to become involved in the march towards changing their realities.

As the practice of Tfd gained momentum across the world as an alternative strategy to development communication, operational patterns in executing programmes also evolved. Three basic principles evolved which serve as guidelines for practitioners in executing projects. They are: (i) one of two approaches that can be employed in carrying out a Tfd project - The Homestead (Inside-Out) Integrated Approach or the Migrant (Out-side In) Approach; (ii) procedural steps to be followed in project execution and lastly (iii) Community Research Methods. Before the actual commencement of any Tfd workshop experiment, facilitators of the project must have answers for such questions as: what goals do we intend to achieve with the project? In which community do

we intend to carry out the project and why that particular community? How do we access target community? Are the needs of the community in tandem with our set objectives? Providing answers to the above questions will not only indicate the facilitators' preparedness to execute the project, it will also enable them decide which of the principles to apply to successfully execute the project. Theatre-for-Development has been variously applied as an alternative strategy in mobilising people into an awareness of the need to act for social, political, cultural, political and economic change. It mobilises target groups to participate in decision-making processes that influence development policies meant for their betterment. It is an angle to the development process that had previously not been explored by development workers in the planning and implementation of rural development programmes. The writer used theatre as a tool in an economic empowerment campaign for rural women in Bayelsa state. Below is a brief report of the experiment and the results it yielded.

Making Theatre with Rural Women

Adagbabiri is a rural boundary community to the western borders of Bayelsa state. The language spoken by the people is Kabo Izon. The founding father of the community in addition to four other communities that make up the Kabo clan is Kabo-owei. The principal economic activities of the people are fishing and farming, their major agricultural produce are: cassava, plantain, yam, coco-yam, ground-nut and sweet potato. The lifestyle of the Adagbabiri woman is not peculiar. She, like her counterparts in other developing rural societies, is constrained by socio-cultural mores of a patriarchal society. She is saddled with the responsibility of her productive and reproductive duties, a myriad of domestic chores in addition to her farming and fishing activities.

The Workshop Process

Juliana Ogbotubo was the contact person between the community leaders and the writer during the preliminary stages of the workshop. She is an indigene of the community and also a part of the workshop. She organised the various meetings the researcher held with the paramount ruler (His Highness Chief Agbana), women and other opinion leaders of the community. The workshop lasted from 23rd-30th September 2003. A group of fourteen women were chosen from those who volunteered to participate in the experiment.

The workshop adopted the Homestead Integrated method. The day by day itinerary of the experiment is as follows: **day one:** Familiarisation/Sharing, **day two:** Community Research, **day three:** story/scenario building, **days four-to-six:** Casting and Rehearsals, **day seven:** Presentation and Post-Presentation discussions. The researcher was accommodated in the quarters of the chief's wives. His two wives also formed part of the workshop team. The experiment took place in the chief's open court. The familiarisation and sharing session was intended to create a rapport between the researcher and the participants, to put everyone at ease with each other and to learn about one another, for the researcher to feel the pulse of the women in relation to their community and for the researcher to introduce them to the concept of theatre for development and how the medium could be used to empower to them. From the sharing session, the researcher discovered that all the participants were illiterate, petty traders in addition to being either farmers or fisherwomen and above all, they all agreed it is a hard life they are living.

During Community Research, the following problems were identified and listed in order of priority to the women: Oil Pollution, Unsupportive Husbands, Woman to Woman Oppression, Difficult Terrain, Hurried Selling of Farm Produce and Lack of Government Establishments in the Community. The problems were prioritised

and the story telling session saw the women weaving as many of their problems as possible into the fabric of the story. This was because the women claimed the problems are the fundamental factors to their predicament. On completion of the story telling exercise, a story-line was developed, the story was broken into scenes and by the end of the third day the women had an improvised script.

CASTING AND REHEARSALS started on the fourth day and ran through the fifth and sixth days. The experiment saw hitherto timid and reticent women transformed into vocal theatrical revolutionaries as they threw themselves into the liberating techniques of Theatre-for-Development. By the sixth day, the women were comfortable in their new roles and declared the skit ready for presentation. The front of the chief's palace was used for the presentation. Turn-out was impressive for a community not used to such a phenomenon. In attendance was the paramount ruler, his chiefs and members of the community. By way of publicity, the services of the local town-crier was employed, the Community Radio was commissioned to announce the event over the radio and participants also engaged in 'each one tell one'.

Post production discussion clearly revealed audience identifying with the performance as evidenced by the active participation and comments made by members of the audience especially women as the skit progressed. During the post-production interventions, some members of the audience called on state government to establish ministries or other agencies to encourage development in the community and alleviate the suffering of the people, some women called on their husbands to be more supportive of their wives while some advised women to look inwards and search for that capacity within themselves to embark on individual and collective empowerment instead of resigning their lives to fate

Impact Assessment of the Workshop

One of the most effective instruments that can be used in assessing impact of TfD projects on target groups is constant monitoring through Follow-Up activities. Follow-up was initiated on-the-spot, during post-production audience participation and feedback process. Three months later, another follow-up visitation was made to Adagbabiri. Approximately a year after the conclusion of the workshop yet another follow-up activity was embarked upon by the researcher. During the follow-up visits gradual progressions in the conscientisation and mobilisation of the womenfolk towards economic emancipation was evidenced. By the last visit, concrete and sustainable achievements by the activities of the womenfolk were recorded. The achievements were not limited to the formation of a co-operative society by participants of the workshop but other social changes were observed in the improved attitudes and behaviours of the men-folk towards the women.

On the spot assessment of the impact of the experiment highlighted once more the fact that TfD's interpersonal interactive nature encouraged full participation between members of audience and workshop participants. The workshops successfully reached out to the people, promoting a sense of identity and belonging among the people. Three months after the workshop processes, a follow-up visit was made to both communities. Findings from that visit revealed that for the core-group, progress was slow but evident. The larger society was sceptical about this new doctrine of self-empowerment. The researcher had to visit the group several times after the conclusion of the workshop process to encourage them in the face of negative comments aimed at distabilising their newly discovered self confidence. Encouraged by the researcher's monitoring activities, the women spread their development messages to other women in the community.

By October the next year, when another Follow-Up activity was initiated, evidence on ground left no doubt as to the efficacy

of theatre as a veritable tool for mass mobilisation and social change. Though not monumental, the transformations were there to be observed. In approximately one year after the Tfd workshop, the participants, under the name: The Izon Progressive Women Society, successfully registered a co-operative society with the state Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and increased their membership to twenty. The women had, as a group gone to the State Ministry of Health to demand the posting of medical staff to the community's well stocked Petroleum Trust Fund Health Centre which hitherto lacked medical personnel.

By September-October 2004, the Izon Progressive Women came up with "sons-pooling" strategy to harvest their crops without losing their produce to the year's floods. Sons-pooling according to the women is getting their sons to become partners in development with them. This is how it works: in the planting season, members' sons would collectively plant the crops rotationally. The farm owners would supervise the work which their sons assisted their mothers to do. The same process is repeated during the harvesting season. By sitting together as a group, the women were able to discuss their problems and search for solutions to the problems. By 2006 the Izon Progressive Women Society bought a Cassava Grinding Machine which serviced the members and the general public thereby generating income for the women.

Conclusion

The medium of theatre has through its horizontal interpersonal and interactive problem solving approach to women empowerment and community development, engendered economic and social change in a grassroots community in Bayelsa state. The Inside-Out method proved to be appropriate as the workshop process afforded the groups the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process on issues that affect their lives, thereby preparing them for actual transformations. The study also proved that there

is need for constant follow-up to Tfd projects because Follow-up activity is a vital aspect of the Tfd process. The study has also provided a model for development planners in the choice of an appropriate strategy for rural women empowerment.

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