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Strategizing Drama as Tool for Advocacy and Rural Development: Challenges for Non-Governmental Organizations in Nigeria (Pp. 109-121)

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Abstract

Between the decades of the 1980's till date the numbers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have mushroomed in Nigeria are quite alarming. The discovery of the venerated HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to record the establishment of HIV/AIDS-related NGOs in quantum in almost every nook and corner of our communities. Precluding their obvious pecuniary undertones, most of these organizations have failed to discover and employ drama/theatre as potent tool for the effective conscientization, mobilization and advocacy that can bring about development within their operational constituencies. This paper therefore seeks to re-position the redemptive partnering synergic relationship that exists between NGOs and Drama that are capable of fostering Development at the rural communities.

Key Words: drama, strategizing, globalization, rural development

Introduction

Most non-governmental organizations, especially in Nigeria, claim that they are set up expressly to augment the efforts of government in the areas of promoting women related activities as well as youth empowerment and

development, the transformation of the rural communities through the raising of awareness and consciousness, education and direct intervention in critical problem areas. To say the least, these objectives can only be realized through deliberate research, training and re-training, consultancy, advocacy, and networking for the necessary empowerment of individuals, groups, and the communities.

The complimentary roles that NGOs have continued to play side-by-side efforts of governments as development partners from the decades of the 1980s till date must be appreciated against the reality that national, state, and local governments do not always possess the requisite resources to go it alone in the face of conflicting developmental demands of need areas. The daunting challenges before governments fall far short of available resources and capacity utilization of both human and material resources available at their disposal. This argument demonstrates the Biblical adage that the field is wide but the labourers are few. Against this premise therefore the NGOs are increasingly intervening as the much needed additional hands to prop up governments' efforts.

Globalization and the growing concern for human rights, democracy and good governance have almost fizzled out international and national boundaries, while Information Communication Technology (ICT) has reduced the entire world into a global village. As such, events happening in a tiny village in Australia, Somalia, Latin America, Darfur, or even in Agwatashi (Nasarawa state, Nigeria), continue to capture the attention and concern of the entire world. This concern for human sufferings and the need to render assistance has resulted in the establishment of such international NGOs as *Doctors without Borders*, *Reporters without Borders*, the *International Red Cross*, among many others. It is however instructive to note that neither the local nor international NGOs operate in isolation because they always partner together among themselves and with governments in promoting the ideals of common humanity.

Strategizing the attainment of the goals of all NGOs is therefore of primary concern to all intervention agencies locally and globally. They are always concerned with how to make themselves relevant and acceptable to the target communities and how they can succeed in their mission and goals. To reach out to their target audience, therefore, more often than not, they employ the use of the radio, the television, the newspapers, pamphlets, fliers, posters,

handbills and leaflets. Occasionally too, they employ person-to-person contact and loudspeakers mounted on outboard vehicles. Yet, all these strategies have been found to possess inherent inadequacies for effective advocacy and mobilization of rural folks. It is however not the thrust of this paper to dwell on the weaknesses or otherwise of these strategies because the focus here is a critical and analytical appraisal of how NGOs could deploy drama as an effective weapon for advocacy that will fast-track development at the rural community level.

For the purpose of this exercise therefore, this paper is structured into six parts; namely: preamble, conceptual analysis, origin of drama, uses of drama, drama as tool for advocacy and development, conclusion and recommendation.

Conceptual Analysis

Altenbern and Lewis (1966) define *Drama* as “a narrative art, one of several modes in which mankind has learned to present a story” for the purpose of providing pleasure and entertainment. On the other hand, Fowler, ed. (1973) defines drama as a representational art which solely “depends on actors and audience”. The argument goes further that drama had through the ages been ascribed the status of a special type of poem that is rendered on the stage through the mechanism of acting, production, scenery, effects (Fowler, 1973). As an art form, drama mirrors or reflects life, with its focus on human beings (Wilson, 1998). Also, as a living communal art, drama “is a work of storytelling in which actors represent the characters...it is addressed not to readers but to spectators” (Kennedy and Gioia, 2002). This position seems to underscore McCaslin’s (1990) thesis that, “All theatre involves participation the moment the attention is captured. An audience feels, thinks, laughs, applauds, and occasionally speaks out...”

Fundamental to drama are such key elements as a story that is acted on stage for an audience through characters wearing costumes for the purpose of entertainment, information, education, and the invocation of pleasure. Underlining entertainment and pleasure are the lessons that the audience is ‘forced’ to learn at the end of the performance.

A **Tool** is a working implement which people employ in their daily quest for livelihood and survival. Literarily, some of its components include such items as the hoe, the cutlass, domestic utensils, the ball point, *ad infinitum*.

On a sublime or metaphorical level, a tool could refer to knowledge or skills needed to accomplish both mental and physical tasks that seek to advance human progress and development. In this application, therefore, one infinite tool is the human capacity to create and recreate situations and conditions that promote the improvement of human condition.

Advocacy as a concept and practice in the social sphere deals essentially with purveying of new ideas and working assiduously to ingrain such ideas in the minds of the target audience or populace with a view to making them accept new innovations and changes. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2007)* defines the term as “public support for a course of action or way of doing things”. More often than not, this ‘action’ takes the form of mobilization and conscientization of the populace through the aid of relevant tools.

Development on the other hand is the end product of the success of advocacy. Citing contemporary paradigm shift, Agber (2002) opines that development should be considered “from the perspective of improvement in the quality of life of a group of people”. Rather than emphasis on the structural transformation which tends to preclude the people, Agber once again argues that there is now “a systematic process of the humanization of the concept of development”. This humanization aims largely at improving the quality of life of the people and the enhancement of their living standard and life style. Development therefore should be capable of ushering in progress in the community through collective action and participation of all members regardless of age and sex. Unarguable is the fact that indices of development must be capable of containing hunger, disease, want, misery, and ignorance; while on the other hand the entrenchment of good health, better sanitation habit, better education, and good governance, among others. This can only be realized through the down-up paradigm shift where the people initiate their development objectives and goals rather than the moribund top-down approach that had failed to address the people’s need areas, which was found to be wasteful and asphyxiating.

Origin of Drama

Scholars of drama, theatre, and ritual seem to agree that drama originated from ritual (de Graft, 1978; Dasylya, 2004; Oyigbenu, 1990; Crow, 1983). While Dasylya (2004) upholds this view because “in ritual there is enactment with mystical significance and dramatic element such as costuming,

impersonation, songs and music, dialogue, spectacle, and so on”, (Crow,1983) does not accept conscious impersonation in ritual “ in which a performer consciously and deliberately seeks to represent someone other than himself”. The point of disconnect between drama and ritual is that while the performer in drama is aware that he is play-acting, the individual in ritual performance dons the costume and masks and temporarily assumes the identity of another being, usually a spirit , thereby believing himself to be the spirit and not an imitator.

Once again, Crow (1983) explains the dividing line between drama and ritual as,

It may of course happen that, as religious and cultural attitudes change, a particular ritual ceremony continues to be performed in a community but its significance for the performer and audience changes. It may be that the performer no longer becomes possessed and the audience no longer believes that he embodies the spirit, and if this is so, we can say that the activity has changed from being a ritual to being drama.

In its totality, ritual is a spectacle known as theatre rather than drama in the strict sense of it. While drama is a sequential plot representation through action that employs comprehensive dialogue, in ritual the dialogue is not sustained. Richardson (2004) defines drama in its widest sense as, “any work designed to be presented on a stage”, but is quick at drawing technical distinction that refers to drama as “a work that treats serious subjects and themes but does not aim at the grandeur of tragedy”. However, the movement from ritual to secular theatre of entertainment is explicated by de Graft (1976) in the article titled *Roots in African Drama and Theatre*. He argues that,

With the involvement of a spectator-audience of the uninitiated in what had formerly been secret rituals built around cults with a strong element of impersonation, the movement towards secularization and dramatic art may be said to have begun and led naturally to the theatre of entertainment.

Uses of Drama

Drama has several uses that vacillate between entertainment and pleasure, information,, education, spiritual re-enforcement, emotional and

psychological purgation and catharsis. It is also a potent tool for propaganda and advocacy, conscientization, psychotherapy, as well as the projection of and the preservation of the culture and tradition of a people (Agoro, 2001). In a nutshell, therefore, drama is an instrument for social transformation and the reinforcement of positive values through mobilization for collective community participation and action. As such, the flexibility of drama makes it performable in such places as public libraries, museums, parks, churches, classroom situations and other locations that are environmentally friendly (McCaslin,1990).

The aforementioned functions of drama were developed and deployed with proven success in Peru and other Latin American countries, and the East African countries of Kenya, Zambia, Botswana, and Tanzania. In addition, the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (Nigeria) experimental theatre project that was founded by Michael Etherton in 1978 and popularized by Ogah Steve Abah (a pioneer student of this project) and Jenkeri Okwori are fundamental to our appraisal of the uses of drama in the society as agency for rural transformation and how non-governmental agencies can deploy it effectively to further enhance their activities and programmes. This analysis is underscored by the reality that drama is all about people, about conflict, and about intra and inter human relationships, about man and the environment, and about man and the spiritual realm.

Drama as Tool for Advocacy and Development

With the contemporary paradigm shift in the notion and practice of development efforts as departure from the anachronistic ‘top-down’ approach to the now popular and acceptable ‘down-up’ participation stratagem, the rural populace must be seen to be carried along in all stages of development efforts. In fact, as both the stakeholders and beneficiaries, the people should be made to initiate their own project needs and follow all the stages of implementation through to completion and maintenance for sustainability and derivable values and benefits. To facilitate this objective, a clearing ground must be established. This ground therefore is the preparedness of the rural people to embrace and accept new innovations and ideas that affect their lives. This is where drama comes in as an agency for advocacy, mobilization, and conscientization through the efforts of non-governmental organizations which must seek to work in tandem with the rural communities.

In the annals of Nigeria's political and social history, drama's potency has been acknowledged and appreciated as a necessary tool for mass political and social mobilization. For example, in the 1940s the late Hubert Ogunde successfully employed drama as a political weapon against the inhuman and obnoxious colonial policies. Gbilekaa (1997) drives the point home in his submission that,

In the 1940s and 1950s, theatre was used for propaganda and to comment on policies during the nationalist struggle for independence. Thus we can see that, even in the colonial days, theatre was inextricably linked to the struggle for independence for a better society in Nigeria.

In line with above position therefore, some of Ogunde's political satires include *Bread and Bullet*, and *Strike and Hunger* (which satirizes the general workers' strike of 1947). Because of the reaction of the public to these plays the colonial administration did not take kindly to Ogunde. As a consequence the plays were banned. This could be said to be the beginning of protest theatre in Nigeria.

Post-independence governments in Nigeria came up with myriad of propaganda outfits that were intended to mobilize the people to achieve certain set policy objectives and goals of government. From Olusegun Obasanjo's historic 'Operation Feed the Nation' to Shehu Shagari's 'Green Revolution', to Mohammadu Buhari's 'War Against Indiscipline' (WAI). Then came the celebrated Ibrahim Babangida administration, conscious of the morass and the decay in national ethos and values, introduced an agency that was saddled with the onerous responsibility of mobilizing the populace towards identifying with and accepting policies and programmes of his government. Babangida's propaganda machine was known as Mass Mobilization for Social Justice (MAMSER). As it were, since every government in Nigeria tends to create an identity of its own that is separate from its predecessor's, when Babangida 'stepped aside' after eight years of 'motion and no action', Ernest Shonekan took over the reins of power, but was toppled in a palace coup by Sani Abacha. Abacha therefore came up with a rebranded version of the propaganda agency which was christened National Orientation Agency (NOA). Common to all these publicity outfits is the realization that their level of success lies in their use of drama for advocacy and mobilization drive. Gbilekaa (1997) describes such efforts by government as "bureaucratically inspired plays" whose themes

usually centre “around the need for building pit latrines, digging of wells for drinking water, the need for family planning, and literacy”. More often than not government agencies employ the glamour of public enlightenment films and jingles over the broadcast media to appeal to the public. This scenario establishes a disconnect between the people and government programmes.

Because government efforts have failed to record desired success, there are now community-based organizations working in the communities as intervention stop-gap with “village groups, welfare or cultural associations and co-operative societies”(Agber,2002).To say the least, the role of hometown associations in promoting rural development cannot be ignored(Honey and Rex,1998).This is also in addition to the activities of civil rights NGOs that seek to promote the rights of citizens to full participation and voice in the affairs that affect them. The overall success of these experiments lies in the deployment of drama that seeks to connect the people directly in appreciating and confronting their problems head-long thereby generating home grown solutions.

The point of departure, however, is that the form of drama that is being advocated is not the conventional audience-actors disconnect scripted drama of the West. We are advocating the drama that borrows tremendously from the performance style of traditional African theatre that is total, a theatre that recreates the idioms and ethos of traditional African values and worldviews; indeed, a theatre that is aesthetically functional. As enunciated above, the key components of this theatre form are identification with the peculiar needs of a community requiring intervention, research undertaking of the problem, dramatization of the problem and hypothesizing possible solutions, analysis of the presentation, and obvious follow-up action to ascertain the success or otherwise of the exercise.

Fundamentally speaking, however, the community must be adequately mobilized effectively to embrace this level of intervention. As such, the catalyst group working in the community must be ready to identify with the culture and traditions of the host community. In the same corollary, if the catalyst group must be trusted and accepted as working partners, they must not see themselves as outsiders who are presumed to be culturally superior to members of the host community. They must live with the local people, eat their food along with them, worship with them where necessary, and fetch water with them from the common community source of water supply within

the period of the research workshop if they must court the confidence and trust of the locals. This assumption anchors Gbilekaa's (1997) view that, The period of contact and interaction would avail the catalyst group of the opportunity, not only to study the customs and beliefs of the people but will also enable them to live with them and become active participants in the social and economic life of these people and to experience at first hand some of their problems themselves.

This underlying philosophy largely explains the success story of the Theatre for Development (TfD) and the National Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) which are jointly coordinated by Ogah Steve Abah of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (Nigeria).

Community theatre, therefore, as the property of the community must be seen to be utilitarian, focused, collective, committed, functional and emancipatory. It is not the type of conventional theatre that is taken to the people; rather, it evolves from the people as a cultural expression of their total being and essence. In addition, it is a theatre in which participants and actors are identifiable members of the community who engage in acting out the shared problems of the community with a view to finding common practicable solutions. As such, the songs and dances, the language and narratives, the idioms and proverbs, are all too familiar. This is indeed the theatre that gives the people an opportunity to express themselves so as to be heard. It also gives voice to the voiceless, and purpose and relevance to those who hitherto felt either unwanted, marginalized or irrelevant in the community. To say the least, this theatre constitutes itself as a rehearsal and research for revolutionary social change.

In fact, a community theatre or drama seeks to instill confidence, sense of belonging and accomplishment in members. In this sense the theatre is said to be revolutionary and liberational. Through this medium the ordinary people have a say in the affairs that affect them and their communities as development partners. Against this trope, therefore, the local people veritably constitute the necessary redemptive building blocks for their communities.

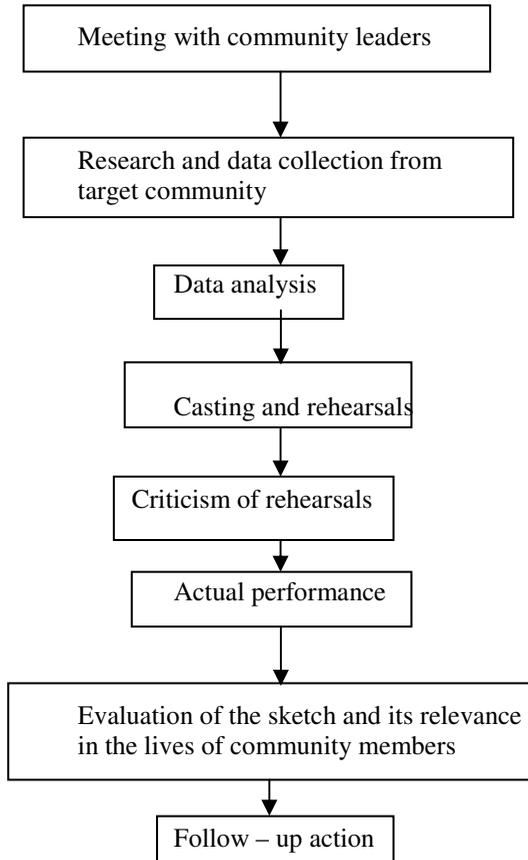
Problem areas such as low primary school enrolment, girl-child education and unwanted pregnancy, female trafficking, the venerated HIV/AIDS scourge, reproductive health, drugs and narcotics, among others, could be identified by the community as researchable areas. Having identified relevant

problem areas through collective group discussion or parley, production plans are then carefully worked out. Finally skits or sketches are acted out for and by community members, but professionally guided and supported by a catalyst group. At this stage the involvement of the catalyst group should be minimal so as not to jeopardise the entire project altogether.

At the end of the performance a discussion session or analysis of the project follows where issues and problems that are identified in the plays are addressed and action plan drawn up. Armed with the action plan members of the community are then set and focused to confront their problems by themselves where necessary through evolving homegrown panaceas.

Because the catalyst is merely a facilitator group, the use and choice of language becomes contentious as the use of English or Hausa in non-Hausa and non-English speaking communities for such projects will ultimately lead to monumental failure, precluding exceptional circumstances. Against this possible bottleneck, it is suggested that the choice of language should always be the local language of the community. This position neither seeks to demean nor shortchange the role and the good intention of catalyst groups and their international and local support agencies who are genuinely interested in the problems of the local communities.

It is the responsibility of NGOs to adhere strictly to the methodology of working in the communities if they must achieve their set goals. Briefly, therefore, the stage by stage methodology is presented diagrammatically below:



The failure of most NGOs stems from their inability or ignorance of drama and theatre as potent tool for social change. Sometimes, they are constrained by the factor of appropriate methodology and intellectual endowment.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it has been the position of this writer that among all the known tools of advocacy and mobilization for development, the most practical and most successful is drama or theatre for development (TfD). In the deployment of this tool, civil/intervention organizations should not seek to alienate the host communities, rather the involvement of communities

should be of paramount concern from inception to the end because any development effort not people-centred and people-conscious is ill-fated to fail from the very onset.

Non Governmental Organizations' intervention efforts in rural communities should aim at offering professional guidance rather than impose ideas and knowledge on the people. Therefore, the people should be encouraged to be part of the solutions to their problems because, as Ahura (1990) argues that, development communication must aim at getting people together for solidarity, to celebrate victories and to plan action strategies for the common good. Its basic thrust is to make the rural masses develop a positive attitude to change so that they will be willing to enter new situation and participate in them as fully as possible.

In this paradigm lies the challenge facing all NGOs working in the rural communities. They must strive to be proactive, focused and intellectually disposed to face the enormous challenges of rural development as complements of governments' efforts. Against this paradigm shift is the consciousness that people should think more of what they can do for themselves rather than what government can do for them through the effective utilization of people-oriented drama.

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