

SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT FOR ETHNICITIES ON THE FRINGES THROUGH THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT: GWANDUM EXPERIENCE IN GOMBE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The design of the Nigeria states into thirty-six federating units (states) and Abuja as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) have automatically meant that the over 500 ethnic groups in the country will have to be situated within these federating units and Abuja. While some states have fewer numbers of ethnic nationalities, others have so many to grapple with. This situation has led to so many states having dominant ethnic nationalities and ethnicities on the fringes. The challenge however is not in the different status which they possess, but how those within the dominant have continued to marginalize and oppress those at the fringes. The situation which those at the fringes found themselves has affected them in pursuing development agenda internally and externally. Therefore, the need to empower the ethnic nationalities at the fringes is the focus of my paper. This article provides an account of Theatre for Development (TfD) experience in Gwandum to relay how instrumental it is for the pursuit of development agenda for nationalities on the fringes. It specifically relays how the experience resuscitated hope for the pero ethnic group living in Gwandum district of Shongom Local Government Area (LGA) in Gombe State, Nigeria. The conclusion reached from the Gwandum experiment is that TfD can become a beacon of hope to begin a transformational change for bridging the gap and awakening the spirit of marginalized nationalities to surmount their oppressed and marginalized statuses.

Keywords: Development agenda, Ethnic nationalities, Marginalization, Social empowerment, TfD.

Introduction

In the evolvement of the Nigeria since its amalgamation in 1914 by Lord Lugard, the then colonial head of the northern and southern protectorates, Nigeria has metamorphosed into a country with multiple ethnic groups that are over 500. Since independence in 1960, there have been different efforts made to ensure that these ethnicities are able to forge themselves to promote a common national vision (Utin 45). One of the outcomes of this is seen in the creation of states to form federating units. Besides the political basis, the states were meant to cluster a few number of the several ethnic groups within the country to have a manageable collection that are able to relate together and produce virile federating units that will be useful national assets (Nkwede 89). Since independence till 1996, Nigeria

have seen the formation of 36 states with a federating centre called Abuja, better known as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Gombe State where the community of focus for this paper is situated was among the last six states to be created. It was created by the then military head of State, General Sani Abacha in October 1996. Gombe has over 16 ethnic groups with the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group being the most influential/dominant in the state.

Despite the creation of the states to forge a manageable collation, it has seemingly led to new problems in the vision of having well-formed, balanced and united fold. Adetoye argues that the need for balanced federalism was at the base of creation of states but today Nigeria is yet to achieve the balance. The northern section which was one of the three regions the country emerged with at independence has 19 states and Abuja, while the others (east, west and mid-west) have 17 among themselves. This has provoked more agitation for the creation of additional states in the country. Since north-south imbalance is one of the reasons for state creation, it is advisable that 6 more states be created to give every zone equal number of states. Except for the north-west zone that already has 7 and, therefore, should remain so, the remaining four zones (north-east, north-central, south-south, and south-west) should each have additional state while the south-east having only 5 states should have two more. With this, every zone will have an equal number of 7 states. This will bring the number of states from the present 36 to 42 plus Abuja, the FCT (Adetoye 3).

The argument of Adetoye seems to resonate even currently across several minority ethnic groups based on the fact that most ethnicities which have found themselves as the most dominant/influential, particularly in states with multiple ethnic groups, have become suppressive in nature. The dominance as it were have made other ethnic groups on the fringes to see themselves as 'second class citizens' in the country. Most of the political, economic and social development privileges have been appropriated by the dominant groups. They have made democracy which has been adopted by the Nigerian state to have a sour in the mouth of minority groups. As they have become the minorities who must be trampled on rather than be given the right and fair inclusion. The geographies occupied by these minority ethnic groups are often bedevilled by lack of social amenities and infrastructure. This scenario is what Pero ethnic group found themselves in Gombe State where they are among the ethnic group at the fringes. This situation has led to redundancy amongst the people who are less motivated to rally themselves to ensure they work towards greater social development. The situation of the Pero people in Gwandum is not so different with several minority groups across the nation.

The challenge is to see that these minority groups on the fringes are well equipped to gain inward motivation to respond positively to the ordeals of their socio-political situation. The need to intervene on the social marginalization /injustice bedevilling minority ethnic groups as well as other local community challenges, have motivated researches in theatre that advocate the use of

empowerment schemes to support marginalized communities to advance the course of social development. This paper, therefore, examines the practice of TfD as a tool employed to intervene in the social challenges of ethnic minorities on the fringes in Nigeria. It is important to note that in the conceptualization of TfD, focus is made on how it bears relevance in addressing social issues of disadvantaged and marginalized communities (Epskamp 89; Abah 20; Balme and Hakib 9; Idebe 203). Abah defines TfD as a “practice in which ordinary persons in disadvantaged communities (very often with the collaboration of animateurs) research and perform their issues and problems to better understand them and to find solutions” (21). In an explanation of the concept, Mlama notes the following:

One is that TfD is community-based, whereby the concerned community is the main player in the creation and production of the entire TfD process of; identifying the challenges that deter the community's socio-economic advancement; analysing the root causes of the identified challenges; speaking out their views in the form of a theatrical performance; identifying possible solutions to the challenges and taking action to solve them. Two, TfD is a participatory process whereby there is active participation of all the stakeholders in the community involved in the TfD process. Three, the engagement of animateurs who work closely with the community members as they go through the processes described above. The basic principle here is that the animateur's role is to help the members of the community to understand more deeply the nature and power of the forces of their domination and exploitation and to gain the confidence to confront such forces. The animateur helps the community members to reach a deeper level of analysis of the causes of their under-development and disadvantaged positions as well as the nature and magnitude of the forces working against their economic, social or cultural advancement. The animateur, furthermore, encourages all the members to air their views, facilitates the accommodation of diverse views and to help the participants to work towards consensus at every stage of the TfD process. (66-67)

As a practice TfD is community and empowerment oriented, the thematic thrust is often aimed at constructing a basis for attaining community empowerment and liberation. Thus, community members' active participation to begin a process for individual and collective development actions is what TfD aims at. Dutta claims that: theatre here is a communicative process for organizing communities to come together to create community-driven articulation of development programs, and to articulate projects of change as envisioned by community members through their active engagement in these projects from identification to problematization to planning to implementation (209). More than providing entertainment aesthetics with lessons to be learned, theatre in TfD context demands that the community members liberate their voices by discussing and pursuing resolutions that can address their subjugated conditions. In other words, “it promotes pedagogic, radical and critical engagements in terms of the genre's prospects of stimulating people to talk together in new ways about issues

of essence in their communities” (Iorapuu 355). At any rate, Iorapuu and Bamidele claim that:

First Tfd has its roots in the philosophy of empowerment. The current view in development struggle respect the need to build on what people know, with the belief that this type of theatre seeks to liberate, demand innovation and effect potential change in the lives of those that use it...Tfd uses local resources and enable programme beneficiaries to make use of the tools it offers to change it realities...Tfd also provides a means of exploring and addressing dynamic relations between people. It offers a means of reflecting upon why and how changes might be necessary and why and how they come about. It is this dimension that practitioners of Tfd are deeply involved with, and attempt to promote by seeking to create Theatre with the People around issues that question the contradictions that have reduced them to objects not subject. (35)

Tfd thus offers the community the opportunity to break barriers that are clog in the wheel of growth and development. It gives them a platform that raises their consciousness and creative response to the several contradictions and complexities that have shaped their social identities and existences. It is in this sense that Tfd seeks to engineer a process of awareness and galvanization for change among the disadvantaged class. It is about empowerment that enables the participants gain the momentum to rise above their different marginalized statuses. Idebe emphasizes that: the idea of Tfd must have to do with the people’s active participation. That is, the galvanizing of the people’s collective will and determination to figure out possibilities for confronting and challenging the complexities of their existence, with the aim of developing new scenarios of desired changes for their progress and prosperity (207). Consequently, the article explores the Gwandum experience to concretely exemplify the role of Tfd as a community development practice, which empowers ethnic communities on the fringe in Nigeria to advance social change and development.

Gwandum Community in Perspective

As drawn from the report of the Tfd project undertaken in the community, Gwandum is a rural community in Shongom Local Government Area of Gombe State. It is about one hundred and ten kilometres away from the state capital. From the data provided by the community members, Gwandum is one of the seven districts in Shongom. Gwandum shares border in the north with Tudun Kwaya in Billiri Local Government Area of Gombe State and Alkaleri Local Government Area in Bauchi State. From the West, it shares boundary with Filiya district of Shongom and from the East and the South it shares borders with Karim Lamido Local Government Area in Taraba State and Gundale district of Shongom respectively. The traditional language of the people is Pero and they mostly speak their traditional dialect. The name of the current traditional head of the Gwandum community is Chief Haruna Yahayha.

Gwandum community has more than 47,000 people as at 2006 census figures. The Pero people of Gwandum migrated from Borno Empire as a result of the injustices which they suffered from the Empire and settle on a mountain called Yuru. They later came down from the mountain to the present Gwandum district. The clans that settled at Gwandum on the Yuru Mountain are: Anya-Gwadi, Bangindang Kala, Gwinning, Bula, Shakam, among others. Farming is the dominant occupation of the people. A majority of them practise Christianity while others practise Islam and African Traditional worship. From observation, the people are quite peaceful nevertheless their marginalized and suppressed conditions are quite evident in the lack/deplorable conditions of their social structures and amenities that hampers the growth and development of their environment.

The Gwandum TFD Experience: *Preliminaries and Community Research*

Preliminaries are usually the preparatory stages in the Tfd practice. Idebe and Danladi note that the “preliminaries stage of the Tfd involves facilitators paying visit to the community to inform them on the idea and modalities of the TFD research project” (380). For the Gwandum Tfd project, there were two preliminaries visits where discussions on how the community project will be undertaken were done. Community members who were to be key participants in the community research process were met. After the preliminary visits, the Tfd actual community research and performance stages were fixed for 10-15 of February, 2020. On arrival the students were warmly welcomed by the leaders and community members, and were encouraged to feel at home with them. The research stage usually involves the facilitators and community participants working together to identify the key issues and challenges that affects the community, using different tools for data gathering. In Gwandum, transect walks, focus group discussions and interviews were employed. As obtained from the report of the Tfd project, the following were the major issues that were identified in the course of interaction with the community members:

- i. *Poverty*: One major problem talked about by the people of Gwandum during the course of our research is poverty. The growing poverty rate in Nigeria which does not exclude Gwandum community is alarming. In a focus group discussion (FGD) with some members of the community, they complained that the reason why the young ones have resorted to only farming instead of furthering their education is as a result of the lack of finance to advance their studies. They also lament that some of their young girls and boys have had to go to the town to become housemaids (house boys and house girls) so that they can help their parents and family members living in the community.
- ii. *Bad condition of the main road*: Another major challenge faced by Gwandum is the bad conditions of the major road leading into the community. Travelling into the community, it was clearly obvious that the road was in

a very bad situation due the very sandy terrain of the environment. This has led to a number of accidents that has caused injuries, fractures, and loss of lives. In the course of interview with some of the motorcycle riders, they said they are always over speeding in order to get rid of the sand otherwise they will easily fall. Despite efforts made to seek government intervention they are still yet to have any kind of help.

- iii. *Lack of Portable Water:* The community equally lacks portable water. While transecting the community, it was noticed that the community have just three boreholes to serve the entire community but even at that the boreholes are not always functioning. This has made them to resort to Well Water. They also do have a particular stream known as Yakonda Stream which is quite far from the community. They usually trek a long distance to get water from the stream. The need of having portable water was well mention in the interviews and FGD conducted with members of the community.
- iv. *Insecurity:* Like many other rural communities within the north-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria, Gwandum is facing the challenges of insecurity. Even though they have not been taken over by terrorists, they have had their share of insecurity challenges that have manifested in some cases of kidnapping, shop and house breaking, motorcycles theft and herders' theft of farmland produce. They said they have made several requests for a divisional Police Headquarters because of the different boundaries they share with neighbouring States of Taraba and Bauchi that makes them even the more vulnerable, however, they yet to have their request granted.
- v. *Health Issues:* In terms of Health, they also decried the poor state of Basic Health facilities. The community does not have any government owned healthcare centre. They have a community based clinic that was set by the ECWA women fellowship and another donated to the community by an NGO. These Healthcare facilities are unfortunately lacking equipment and staff that will ensure effective functioning and service.

The issues which are brought forward by the community bring to the fore the several kinds of challenges which have equally kept many ethnic nationalities at the fringes in a deplorable condition. Identifying and articulating these issues to ensure that these communities are not further devastated by them becomes fundamental. The articulation of common social problems becomes a strong rationale that motivates and energizes the ethnic minorities to further organize by coming together as a strong collective to engage the issues so identified.

- i. *Creating the Story and Rehearsals:* Having identified the social challenges of the community, it becomes important that the participants create stories on the identified issues for the purpose of theatrical performances. In the Gwandum experience, the participants considered all the major issues generated from the community. They then created stories on them in such

- a manner that can provoke discussions from the community members watching the performance.
- ii. *Performance and Post-Performance Discussions:* The performance was done on the last day of stay in the community. It took place in front of the resident of the district head. The district head himself, his elders as well as community members in their numbers were there to experience the drama performance put together for them.

From the report, the drama performance began with Mama Hannah waking her daughter very early in the morning to fetch water from Yakonda stream, but the daughter complained that it was too early for her to go and fetch water, complaining that the place is far and she is scared of being kidnapped. The second scene opened with Mama Hannah on her way to the stream where she meets Mama Esther who is on her way coming back from the stream, they exchanged pleasantries and complained about the issues of water and insecurity affecting their community. At the end they suggest that they will talk to their husbands to meet the Hakimi (District Head), so that he can address these serious issues.

As the women exit the stage, two men, Baban Palalu and Malam Musa were seen discussing different social problems the community is facing. They particularly talked about how their wives complained bitterly about going to the stream as early as early as 4:00 am in the morning and come back late. This they considered as very risky in the light of the kidnapping and insecurity challenges which them and their neighbouring communities are facing. They concluded to take the issues to other Jauros (Elders) and meet the Hakimi (District Head) in his palace. The last scene was at the palace of the District Head. The elders discussed how they can address the situation of water challenges in the community. They also talked about the insecurity situation, the bad nature of the roads in the community, and the state of healthcare facilities in the community. The play does not end instead the conversation was opened up with different members of the community present making their contributions and inputs on the plights of the community and it can be addressed.

For example, Mrs. Hannatu Tanimu Jalo the community women leader said that she was amazed at this kind of drama which she describes as 'drama of life'. She went on to further stress the need of repairing the boreholes in the community no matter what it will cost them. She also said the young people can seriously help to at least reduce the sand on the road. Although she noted that poverty is a major challenge in the community, but explained that since this drama has made them believe they have a role to play in their destiny as a community, they cannot just stay and do nothing especially when the Government has not helped in addressing some of these basic social amenities for them. As a way forward she suggested that little contribution can begin in the community to address one of the issues as identified in the drama. Her position was backed by

many who went on to speak. Wilson Samson a youth member of the community and John, the Community School Head Boy said that the Youths are ready to play their part in ensuring that the road issue is attended to. Mary Adamu, one of the cast admonished her fellow young ladies to learn a particular skill such as tailoring, bead-making or hairdressing. She appealed to parents to stop sending their children to the city as Housemaids rather they should try to educate the Ladies by sending them to Schools. Mr. Saidu Manzo (Deputy Secretary to the Shongom Local Government) who was also present said he is completely challenged by what he has witnessed, and will make sure on his part he sees to it that the Local Government Council do their part to help some of the community action plans which have been agreed upon.

Finally, the district head after different suggestions, made a lengthy remark. He started by appreciating the student for choosing Gwandum for the TfD project, he said he was very delighted for the wake-up call the drama presented. On his side, he said he is doing his best to engage the authorities in Shongom Local Government Secretariat and the State to come to their aid over the state of the road, water and insecurity. He also said one thing the community must take from the engagement with the students is the fact that they can build on some of the efforts they have been making to address their community challenges despite the injustice they suffer as a community. He said this experience has really motivated the community and they will like to accomplish more community works to the best of their abilities while others which cannot be accomplished by them, they will never relent in demanding the support of the state and local governments.

Based on the different submissions, the community decided to have some of the following Community Action Plans (CAP) which they believe can be tackled by them. Firstly, they decided that a vigilante group that will help in tackling the issues of insecurity will be formed. They also agreed to contribute money to repair their exiting boreholes. These are also in addition to the Youths decision to ensure that they reduce the sand on the road that is affecting them. They demanded the community head should not relent in ensuring that they get the support they need from the local and state authorities. After a very robust conversation, the community participants together with the students showcased the cultural dances and performances they have been rehearsing. The dance performances were quite enthralling that even the elders and members of the community joined. Worthy of note in the dance performance was the way it was choreographed to advocate community unity and oneness.

Conclusion

The community through the TfD experience has been made to reignite and improve on their sense of communal dignity and collective capacity. Mulwa in this sense asserts that "People should be made to experience the joy of self-reliance, the dignity in the ability to attain community aspirations through self-

reliance, the dignity in the ability to attain community aspirations through self-help" (Mulwa,70). Indeed, the Tfd project provided for the community a participatory approach to increase their sense of awareness of the issues that hindered self and collective growth in the community. It also gave them the opportunity to open new vistas of community responsibility despite their marginalized and deplorable situations. It, therefore, important to state that Tfd among the Pero people of Gwandum in Gombe State has brought to the fore the increasing need to pursue creative and non-formal approaches which offer hope of an inclusive national structure. That is to say one that can be more responsible in the inclusion of ethnic nationalities at the fringes and those who are continually been marginalized by the dominant and influential ethnic structures. Tfd here concretely demonstrate that a transformational process that bridges gap and awaken the spirit of marginalized ethnic nationalities to surmount their social challenges can be creatively and progressively attained.

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