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Crossing the *Zaure*: Theatre for Development and Women's Empowerment in Northern Nigeria *

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Abstract

Dominant strategies of development in the developing world have been criticised by development activists for failing to involve the participation of people particularly at grassroots level. Until recently, relatively less attention has been paid to how development as a whole has increased the gender gulf, how women continue to be undervalued and suppressed. The focus of this paper is on Theatre for Development (TfD) and women's empowerment in Nigeria.

TfD is a process-driven, grassroots community theatre practice that has emerged to challenge socio-economic and political oppressions that continue to undermine genuine popular participation in development in post-independent Nigeria. Its primary purpose is to utilise popular performance forms to facilitate community participation in development through democratic dialogue, decision-making and collective action. Tar Ahura (1982), one of the pioneers of TfD in Nigeria, had suggested that the task of practitioners is not "to force a cultural revolution on the people but to work within the cultural provisions enhancing credibility and public relations". More than two decades later his views are still echoed by practitioners who are reluctant to rock the boat. The paper examines the evolution of TfD in Nigeria. It highlights the challenges facing the practice in its attempt to facilitate women's participation in development. In the process it evaluates the effectiveness of the strategies employed to date to encourage women's participation in workshops and projects. The paper argues that the factors responsible for the marginalisation of women in development are cultural and economic; that the desire by practitioners not to be perceived as a threat to a community's cultural beliefs and values amounts to a contradiction. It suggests that any genuine attempt to mobilise women through cultural activities must be matched with a commitment to challenge and transform culture itself.

Introduction

The importance of a people centred approach to development is now more or less accepted as given in development discourse. The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provided the framework for the debate between the various contending views about development, which gathered momentum in the 1960s and 1970s.This was to culminate in the Declaration on the Right to Development adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1986. Development is described as a process of positive socio-economic transformation in the quality and level of human existence aimed at raising the standard of living, quality of life, and human dignity (Freire, 1972; Rodney, 1972, Kidd, and Colletta, (eds.), 1980; Srampickal, 1994). In addition, for development to be meaningful and sustainable, it must involve the participation of people, especially at grassroots level, who form the majority, and must benefit everyone fairly. However, until recently, relatively less attention has been paid to how development as a whole has increased the gender gulf, how women continue to be undervalued and suppressed in all spheres of life. Thus, although there is wide acceptance that the contribution of women to development is high, in real terms their share of the benefits continues to be low. Globally, but even more so in the developing countries, women, like children, remain among the worst victims of poverty. Not only do they have the least access to the means of production, but they receive the least remuneration for their labour also. Furthermore, during periods of socio-economic crisis such as war, civil strife, famine, epidemics, national debt and so on, they along with children, are the main or worst affected victims. Women's poor economic situation is reinforced by their having the least access to the educational system, which would equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to improve their productivity, the least access to political power and to the legal system.

Historically, women have always been perceived as beneficiaries rather than as agents of development. Consequently, development efforts of governments have tended to target men. The beginning of the United Nation's (UN) decade for women (1975-1985) brought increased international attention to the dangers of ignoring half of the world's human resources by focussing development efforts on men only. (Hamrell and Nordberg, eds. 1982). The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, sets the minimum benchmark for the elimination of discrimination against women and for the promotion of gender equality. The Convention re-emphasises the call for the integration of women into the entire development process as active participants and equal beneficiaries. This is intended to shift the emphasis away from strategies of welfare and aid that perceive women simply as victims of poverty and oppression to strategies that empower women to actively participate in

development by building their capacities and creating equal opportunities and access to means of production and social services. Since its adoption, the Convention has been promoted at world conferences such as the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, Australia, the 1994 Population and Development Summit in Cairo, Egypt, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, Denmark, and the fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, also in 1995. Complementing such conferences are the more customised initiatives in individual countries undertaken by UN agencies such as the United Nations development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Such international interest in the role and well being of women in development has given the issue of gender equality the legitimacy and urgency it lacked before.

In Nigeria, it was within the context of improving the quality of life of women and empowering them to participate in development that government initiatives such as the Better Life for Rural Women Programme (1987), the Family Support Programme (1994), the Family Economic Advancement Programme (1996) and so on were conceived. Well meaning as these and other similar initiatives were, they were flawed in many respects, especially as they failed to sufficiently take into account the role of culture in the process of development. As Ngugi wa Thiongo points out:

> [i]n many discussions on development, the cultural aspect is left out or else admitted through the back door. And yet if people are the centre of development, if they are both the object and subject of development, then the quality of their cultural life should be the most important indicator of development… what could be a more effective way of making people actors in their own development than to raise awareness and arouse their energies through cultural activities? (1982: 115).

Women constitute a gender and not a social class. Thus, although there are different classes of women with varying access to the means of production, access to power, wealth and general influence, all women in Nigeria are subordinated and discriminated against in terms of gender. Grassroots women, who form the majority of the rural and urban poor, suffer double oppression as a result of both their gender and their social class (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and United Nations Development Programme, 1996). Women's low social status is a result of, as well as a cause of, their low economic status.

This article is about Theatre for Development (TfD) as a strategy for women's empowerment in Nigeria with particular reference to northern

Nigeria. The aim is to show how, in the attempt to mobilise grassroots participation in development through cultural activities, culture itself is being challenged and transformed. Culture, like human action which it tries to represent and transform, is neither sacrosanct nor static but dynamic

Culture and Development

Nigeria is a multi ethnic, multicultural and multi religious country with a population of over 120 million. The richness of this diversity, and the challenges that it poses for national unity and development are acknowledged in the Nigerian constitution by the provisions made for the rights of Nigerians to develop their culture and to apply it as instrument for promoting national identity and unity. This is also in line with the 1976 UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, Nigeria is also inarguably a patriarchal society that is characterised by structural and institutional gender discrimination. It is a society where men dominate the decision making process both in the home and in government.

The Federal Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation is that arm of government charged with the responsibility of developing and implementing a national policy on culture at federal and states levels. From its title and its activities, the functions of the ministry are primarily economic and Political. The dominant perception of culture is as material culture that can be researched, preserved and marketed. Important as these are, particularly in terms of job creation and the promotion of ethnic identities and national unity, the idea of culture as ideology and its interface with development almost becomes an after thought except in an overtly political sense. Without a doubt patriarchal hegemony and the gender inequality that it fosters pose a serious obstacle to sustainable development.

Gender is culturally constructed because social roles and standards of behaviour are determined by cultural norms and values rather than by what women can do for themselves. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981) explains that it is the group or groups with the political power who control all the machinery of state power who also control the values and world outlook of the rest of society. Gramsci's theory of hegemony describes the process of gaining the consent of subordinate groups, a process whereby dominant groups maintain their power and control over cultural institutions and activities by making these appear as common sense or the norm (Williams, 1977: 108-114). Patriarchal hegemony is entrenched in the social structure and is perpetuated by beliefs, customs, norms and values that have their roots in indigenous Nigerian cultural systems, in Islam, Christianity, and colonialism. Essentially, it is through the process of socialisation in a specific culture that the cultural expectations of male / female roles and

behaviour are inculcated.

Althusser (1984: 1-60) recognises that cultural institutions such as the family, the law, politics, the arts, religion, the education system and the mass media are the vehicle of ideology and therefore the institutions through which hegemony is exercised, reinforced and reproduced. At the same time they become sites for conflict as the various groups struggle for means and occasions to express themselves there.

Because gender is culturally constructed, attitudes and behaviours can be changed. The same cultural institutions can be usefully appropriated to mobilise and to energise every member of the society to contribute fully to development.

Theatre as Cultural Intervention

The current status of the performing arts in Nigeria, compared to that of other forms of cultural production would seem to indicate that they have very little to contribute to national development beyond their economic value. There appears to be very little investment by government in the performing arts beyond infrastructures such as the occasional theatre building and hosting of large cultural festivals. Whereas the mass media such as radio, television, film, and the home video industry receive some measure of recognition, the performing arts, particularly theatre, receive little such acknowledgement except in times of acute national crisis when they are appropriated to consciously influence people's behaviour Politically. For example, the significance of educational television broadcast to schools was acknowledged in 1959, the same year that television broadcasting began in Nigeria. In addition, today, each of the thirty-six states of the federation as well as the federal territory in Abuja has a Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) station while some states have an additional state owned television station. All of these are largely under state control and are funded by the state. The development of the performing arts, on the other hand, is largely left to local communities, the universities and individual artists. While few would argue for or support any form of government control of the performing arts, various disguises of state censorship already take place without an equivalent financial support.

Theatre is a cultural institution and is at the same time a form of cultural production. As such it is a vehicle of ideology. This notion is imaginatively captured in Richard Schechner's and Victor Turner's 'infinity loop', and in their interrogation of the relationship between social and aesthetic drama (Schechner, 1988: 187-193). Unlike literature, theatre not only seeks to reflect social reality but to affect it as well. Its relationship with social reality can be reactive as well as proactive, setting the agenda, exploring and showing what is, as well as what is possible. In the process, it can itself be transformed. Soyinka puts it this way:

> We must not forget that drama, like any other art form, is created and executed within a specific physical environment. It naturally interacts with that environment, is influenced by it, influences that environment in turn and acts together with the environment in the larger and far more complex history of society… (1993: 134).

Theatre is situated in the here and now, lending it a sense of immediacy and of the contemporary. As dramatic action, theatre depicts what people choose to do or not to do when confronted by certain circumstances, and the consequences of their decisions. It is a dynamic medium that shows dynamic characters in dynamic situations where anything is possible. But theatre is also much more than these. Nigerian theatre, for example, is multi disciplinary and multi functional. Studies of extant and contemporary forms and practices reveal a variety of traditions existing simultaneously. Despite their differences, the tendency of Nigerian theatre is to reproduce, maintain and reinforce the dominant patriarchal structures of power though there are occasions when they can be used to challenge and to subvert the status quo. The role of theatre in pre and post independent socio-political and economic struggles in Nigeria is exemplified by the works of artists of the literary and popular travelling genres such as Hurbert Ogunde, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Bode Sowande, Femi Osofisan, among many others. In the minority are female playwrights such as Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, and Stella Moroundia Oyedebo, championing the cause for gender equality and women's empowerment with varying degrees of success. Despite the attempt to combine western dramaturgical techniques and styles with more localised and indigenous Nigerian performance forms, the appeal and impact of Nigerian literary drama has been limited, especially at grassroots level. Its audiences have continued to be largely drawn from among the western educated and school going population.

Potentially much more effective in addressing the issue of the role and participation of women in sustainable social change is TfD, a process driven, grassroots community theatre practice that is a part of a growing global movement that began about the middle part of the twentieth century particularly in the developing continents of Latin America, Asia and Africa. TfD intends to challenge dominant trends of cultural representations, presentations and social relations and to facilitate sustainable development in communities at grassroots level. It is designed to use popular performance forms to facilitate the active participation of rural and urban grassroots communities in collectively researching, identifying, analysing and communicating development issues with a view to solving them (Abah, 2003). As such the social relationships articulated in the process of creation, presentation, and reception, become just as crucial to it as those articulated in the specific and more contained

theatrical performances that form part of its process. These subtle aspects form part of the meanings generated and communicated through the practice. In other words, the question of who performs or is allowed to perform is just as crucial to it as what is performed, how, where, when, and why. In principle, there are no spectators in TfD. All are actively involved in a process of mutual learning, empowerment and action. As a process of theatre creation emerging from the community, it is culture in the making, constantly challenging and transforming in many complex ways, and in turn is being challenged and transformed as participants' understanding of their situation deepens and they explore the possibilities of action and the implications of each course of action (Srampickal,1994).

However, TfD's practice has come under increasing scrutiny amidst criticism from within as from without for wittingly or unwittingly viewing its constituencies in monolithic terms. Until recently, its practice and discourse has at best been gender neutral and shrouded in such terms as 'the people', 'the oppressed', 'the grassroots communities, the 'marginalised' and so on. At worst, TfD has generally addressed itself to men despite the fact that the female population is higher than the male's in its primary constituencies, the rural and urban working class areas. In many practices it is assumed that community participation means men speaking for and acting on behalf of every other social group. For a practice that prides itself in demystifying cultural structures and processes, TfD has seemed powerless, at times even reluctant, to turn its attention to those that are rooted in patriarchy. As Paulo Freire, one of its influences, puts it:

> To be oppressed is to be emotionally, psychologically and economically dependent on another. An act is oppressive when it prevents another from being fully human…any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his [sic] pursuit of self affirmation as a responsible person is an act of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity…(Freire, 1972: 31).

The marginalisation of women in TfD is reflective of their marginalisation in society in general. It is perpetuated by the dominant patriarchal structures from within which the practice operates and by weaknesses in its methodology.

TfD in Northern Nigeria

TfD in Nigeria emerged in the mid 1970s in the activities of the then drama section of the English Department of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria, the oldest federal university in northern Nigeria, particularly in its Samaru and Community theatre projects (Amkpa, 2004: 95). For more than two decades after that ABU remained primarily the singular seat of the practice in Nigeria. However, since the 1990s, the practice has not only

spread beyond the confines of undergraduate and graduate drama programmes and into the surrounding communities but even further to other parts of the country. Today, there exist a number of practices that are distinguishable in terms of their contexts: academically based practices located in the curriculum of Colleges and Universities departments of drama or theatre arts, practices located in the activities of Non Governmental Organisations, and those that form part of the output of independent professional theatre companies.

To a large extent there is a general agreement among the different practices in terms of philosophy, aims, and methodologies. However, essentially, TfD is a context specific practice. The detail and emphasis of each practice is determined by factors such as the geographical location of its activities, the local economies, and the dominant cultures of the area including language, religion and performance traditions. Thus as far as gender expectations and the impact that they have on the practice are concerned, these may vary, even if only slightly, from one geographic community to another, or even from time to time within the same community such as between the Muslim north and the non-Muslim middle and southern parts of the country; between the more cosmopolitan urban communities and the rural communities. There is a sense in which the history of TfD in Nigeria as a whole is tied to the history of its evolution in Zaria. Therefore, this discussion will focus largely on the activities of Zaria which still remains the epicentre of the practice in the north. However, wherever it is necessary, references will be made to other areas as well.

The city of Zaria is located in the northern part of Nigeria, specifically in Kaduna state (present day Nigeria is divided into thirty six states). Although the city is predominantly Hausa speaking, Islamic, and culturally conservative, it consists of various settlements such as Sabon Gari, Zaria City, Tudun Wada, Wusasa, Gyelesu, Samaru, Palladan, and so on, each with its own distinct characteristics. The Hausa is the dominant ethnic group in northern Nigeria and is patrilineal, predominantly Muslim and polygamous. In the Muslim areas, *purdah*, a system which confines women to the domestic space and prevents their active participation in public life is widely practiced particularly in the rural areas. The *Zaure* is the Hausa word for the large entrance porch that leads into the main traditional residential compound and often doubles as a male reception area. You cross the *Zaure* to reach the walled compound where the women's living quarters are located. Therefore, the *Zaure* may be considered as a symbol of, or metaphor for male supremacy. It is an appropriate symbol for a patriarchal society where men rule the roost at home and outside it, and are society's gatekeepers and opinion leaders. That a practice so radical in its intentions should emerge from this city may seem ironic at first. However, sometimes the most challenging situations can be the most stimulating and provide the impetus for creativity and

innovation. Besides, the location of the drama section within a highly politicised Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences partly contributed to its growth. Equally of note is the fact that Zaria, despite its cultural conservatism, was the seat of power of the legendary 16th century Queen Amina of Zazzau, the formidable warrior who fought and conquered many of the kingdoms that constitute contemporary northern Nigeria.

Academic Based Practices: The Samaru and Community Theatre Projects

Drama was established as a degree programme at ABU in 1975 under the leadership of Michael Etherton, renowned TfD practitioner and development activist. From the start the Samaru and Community Theatre projects were part of the undergraduate and graduate curriculum.

With their emphases on practice, three groups of participants can be identified working collaboratively on the two projects: the teaching staff, whom we may want to call trainer-practitioners, the students and the communities. However, the two projects differ from each other in the details of their objectives, their mode of operation and in the communities involved.

The Samaru project is an annual community outreach programme involving second year (formerly first year of a three year programme) undergraduate drama students devising performances on issues derived from research conducted in the satellite community of Samaru. The community, which is separated from the university's main campus by the Zaria – Sokoto highway is multi ethnic, multi religious and predominantly working class. A large proportion of the population is literate or semi literate. Women form part of the labour market with many engaged in one form of income generation activity or the other as employees of the university, the local banks, primary schools, local government, or as self employed petty traders in the local market or within the vicinity of the home. While the dominant culture exercises its hegemony, the community is less conservative than the more homogenous, Hausa speaking villages located a little further away from the university.

In the drama department, the number of male students tends to be higher than female students and this continues right up to the level of the trainer-practitioners. The history of education in Nigeria as a whole, and in northern Nigeria in particular, is one of unequal opportunities for women compared to men. Pre-colonial customs and values, religious ideologies, and colonial educational policies and practices have, in the past, all united in their mission to keep women subordinated. While current policies within the education sector to empower women are beginning to have an effect on the statistics, gender imbalance, especially at tertiary level, continues to be noticeable. In fields of study such as drama or theatre arts, the number of registered female students is on the increase. However, the

majority of these are drawn from the non-Muslim areas of the North and the Middle Belt because Islam frowns upon any form of artistic representation of humans, more so where these forms are perceived to have their roots in 'pagan' practices. In addition, the values of extreme female modesty and chastity inhibit any form of public displays or self-promotion by women.

In terms of its process, the Samaru Project involves students spending about one week gathering information through face-to-face interviews in order to identify issues and problems significant to the Samaru residents. From the start students are encouraged to be aware of the mediating ideologies of their privileged class position in relation to the members of the community however, less stress is placed on gender as a defining aspect of identity. They engage residents in discussions and observe modes of behaviour, expressions, cultural practices and values. At the end of this exercise, the students return to the university based studio theatre where, in a whole group plenary session, they compare and share their experiences with one another. Through guided discussion and analysis students try to arrive at a deeper understanding of the information gathered. Such understanding is then used to rank the issues in order of priority and to decide which of these would be explored further in the process of play making.

The next stage involves students working in two or three sub groups to devise open air dramatic pieces on the issues which they return to perform in strategically identified locations on the streets of Samaru. Performances are usually in Hausa or Pidgin English, itself widely spoken, with translator – narrators for each.

Where performances end at the point of crisis or with questions, they are open ended and flexible, allowing room for discussion during and post the performance. Improvisation, storytelling, mime, dramatic enactment, song and dance are some of the forms drawn upon. The early evening is the preferred time and the audience consists largely of male adults, children and relatively fewer women.

On its own part, the annual community theatre project involves third year (formerly second year of a three year programme) drama students working with one or more rural communities located further away from the university such as the villages of Bomo, Hayin Dogo, Tudun Sarki and Palladan. These are relatively more culturally homogenous and conservative than Samaru, predominantly Hausa speaking, Muslim, and agrarian. Here, the *purdah* system is in force. Young girls of school age engage in hawking outside the home as a way of helping their mothers earn some modest income.

While following the same process as Samaru, the Community Theatre Project is very different in one crucial area. Despite the conservatism of the communities involved, there is a greater community involvement throughout the process. This is largely due to an improved methodology

that enables the presence and participation of volunteer members of the community, many of whom are drawn from Community Based Organisations. (CBOs). Meetings, discussions and performances all take place in the communities. And, where the communities are located quite far away from the University, the students lodge in the villages for the duration of the project. Such increased contact and exchange with the community establishes a different kind of relationship between the project and the community. Usually the plays that emerge from the process are much more organic to the communities, and attract larger numbers of villagers who turn out to watch their friends, relatives, and neighbours perform stories about the problems and issues concerning their communities, and to participate in the debates.

Graduate students participate in both projects as trainer-practitioners. Over the years, the general template of the Samaru and Community Theatre processes have been adapted as the practice continues to evolve and spread to other parts of the country. Today, they serve as models for undergraduate and graduate community theatre programmes at other universities departments of drama, theatre, or performing arts such as Katsina Ala, Jos, Abuja, Maiduguri, Ibadan, Benin and Lagos. Practitioners are in agreement that of the two, the Community Theatre Project provides a better model for developing an effective and sustainable TfD practice in Nigeria. As a model, it has been adapted, with varying degrees of success, by NGOs and Independent Theatre Company practices. The unique and positive experience of living in the community throughout the duration of the project has now been formalised into what is known as the *Homestead* approach or method. However, despite these achievements, a major problem that the two projects (and their adapted forms in other parts of the country) have shared over the years is their inability to engage women as actively as the men throughout their processes. The more culturally conservative the community is, the more challenging it becomes for the projects to involve women. In the case of Samaru and other non-Muslim communities in, for example, the Middle Belt and southern parts of the country, there are other factors besides *purdah* which prove equally effective in preventing their active involvement. Socio-economic factors, which are nonetheless rooted in patriarchy, such as the double work load outside and within the home, and their attendant issues are proving to be effective barriers.

In 1982**,** concerned about the lack of women's participation in its projects the drama department sought the support and mediation of a prominent female politician from Zaria City, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba. The proposed project was to be modelled on the Samaru project and would involve an all female group of students. The devised theatre pieces would be toured round purdah households to predominantly female audiences in Samaru, Sabon Gari and Zaria City. Both Sabon Gari and Zaria City, large settlements of the city of Zaria are located in close proximity in the centre

of the city. Sabon Gari is large, sprawling, and the commercial heartland of the city. As can be expected, it attracts settlers from all parts of the country. However, despite its multi ethnic, multi religious composition, the dominant Hausa, Islamic culture maintains its hegemonic influence. In contrast, Zaria City, the original site of Zaria before its expansion, is much more culturally homogenous. It is the seat of the emirate and still boasts the ancient wall that defines its boundaries and protects its cultural identity. That the project was able to scale its wall and cross the Zaure to reach the women was in itself a decisive achievement in the history of the evolution of TfD practice in Zaria. The two devised pieces, *Dillaliya* and *Duniya Juyi Juyi*, were based on issues identified by the women in the communities as important to them namely, the break down of marriages and the value of female education. However, due to entrenched gender bias and the fact that it required the consent of the male heads of households, the project was limited in what it could achieve. Censorship, and even self-censorship, governed the decision making process and the choices that could be made. Practically, it was impossible to achieve more than a few visits or to engage the women in any lengthy discussions. Likewise, the research period was short, and limited to information gathering without much exploration of women's popular performance forms. Devised by young female students, the emphasis was on tightly structured, close ended, finished performances rather than on the process itself. In the end, the status quo was left intact, though as an experiment, the project managed to highlight what was possible.

Non-Governmental Organizations

For decades both projects, especially the Samaru Project, have tackled the same issues year in year out with very little impact. Instead of decreasing, their repertoire of issues continues to increase. Perhaps not surprisingly, the number of students, especially female students who, upon graduation, pursue careers in TfD, or in Community Theatre in general continues to be small. 'Nothing succeeds like success' is a famous educational tenet. The involvement of CBOs in the Community Theatre Project has yielded a small crop of TfD devotees. The association of these individuals with the drama department has been mutually beneficial. While these individuals have been instrumental in widening the participation of communities through their organisations, the department has provided training in TfD skills. It was in order to increase community participation that the drama department, and its associate CBOs came together to form the Zaria Popular Theatre Alliance (ZAPTA) in 1986. ZAPTA became one way of establishing an organisational base outside the university and extending TfD practice beyond the confines of the undergraduate and graduate programmes. It was considered to be a more effective organ for facilitating skills transfer to communities and increasing

the possibility of follow-up action by them. At the same time, the success from the grassroots level would provide greater incentive for students to specialise in this area of theatre practice. Amidst all these developments, the low participation of women continued to be a vexed issue. The CBOs initially involved, Haske (Samaru), So Dangi (Hayin Dogo), and Muna Fata (Palladan), happened to be all male social clubs. One exception to the membership of ZAPTA was Women in Nigeria (WIN), a national women's organisation. However, at the time, there were other organisations besides those in ZAPTA that existed in Samaru and other parts of the city. It is widely known that there are many ethnic cultural organisations to be found in every urban town or city in Nigeria, many of which have their women's wing. These grassroots cultural organisations are formed in order to support and promote the socio-economic development of their members whilst celebrating their cultural identity through periodic cultural activities. These were resources that were yet to be tapped into at the time.

While ZAPTA provided the model and foundation for the formation of The Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) (Amkpa, 2004: 97), it is the latter, particularly through its zonal and national training workshops and conferences, that has been most influential in the expansion of TfD practice not only to the curriculum of other university departments of drama and theatre arts but throughout the country as well. NPTA is a nation wide none governmental voluntary organisation inaugurated in Zaria in 1989 under the leadership of Oga Abah (Ewu, 1999: 98). Its function is to bring together professional and voluntary theatre practitioners, educationists, and cultural and development workers interested in using theatre for development purposes. A key objective of the organisation is to encourage and to support the practices of its members, and to facilitate the expansion of TfD practice nationwide. The activities of NPTA generally include convening international, national, and zonal TfD workshops and conferences while member groups and individuals run outreach and training workshops and projects locally and further beyond as determined by their experience and reputation. Most of these workshops, some of which target issues affecting women, have been funded by partner international voluntary and governmental agencies such as the Mass Mobilisation for Self Reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER), Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO), the McArthur Foundation, and UNICEF.

The work of NPTA at its headquarters in Zaria has been complemented by the Renaissance Theatre Network (RTN), a TfD organisation led by Steve Daniel with its base in ABU. RTN is said to work in close collaboration with 'a web of community based theatre groups that have their own internal dynamics and focus on a wide range of significant community action…' (International Human Rights Law Group, 2003: 17). In addition to its own projects, RTN offers training in dramatic skills to CBOs and drama groups. These include such CBOs as 'Bayajidda Social

and Dramatic Club, Funtua, Munji Mun Gani from Giwa, Tawakaltu Social and Dramatic Club, Sabon Gari, Gamji Social and Dramatic Club, Sodangi Social Club, Hayin Dogo, and Inganci'(30). The combined effects of the curriculum based courses, NPTA and RTN on TfD practice in Zaria has been significant. NPTA's research and documentation centre located on the main campus of the university ensures that TfD itself continues to develop in response to wider social changes. Collectively, the practices have enabled a slight, but inarguably, visible increase in women's participation in TfD. Their collaborations with CBOs, some of which, following the examples of their mentors, now include women in their membership, are beginning to make a difference. For example, Bayajidda Social and Dramatic Club now includes female members. Located in Funtua, Katsina State, an area under the jurisdiction of the Islamic *Sharia* law, makes this a remarkable achievement. The women, many of whom are former prostitutes, arguably represent some of the most exploited and marginalised groups in the society. The community theatre projects involving these CBOs have inspired a more positive image of their female members. From being viewed as a breeding ground for prostitutes, the public's perception of theatre is beginning to shift to it being an instrument for the reclamation and rehabilitation of broken lives. Additional support from women's organisations and other progressive NGOs which sometimes partner NPTA and RTN on projects is also contributing to this slow but certain transformation. The theme of collaboration, which runs through these projects, collaboration between men and women, between academic institution and CBOs, and between CBOs and Local Government organs and agencies, has been decisive in achieving the sustainability of both TfD practice and development at grassroots level. Even more will be achieved when membership of women in these organisations spreads, or better still, when more grassroots women's organisations are involved.

WIN has been a member of NPTA from the start and to date remains the only member to wholly and consistently address gender issues. Established in 1982 with Ayesha Imam as its president, its initial base was in the sociology department of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Currently, WIN is one of the most established and politicised women's organisations in Nigeria with its headquarters in Lagos. It is an organisation aimed specifically at women but with membership open to men as well. According to its mission statement, WIN is set up to 'make policy on, and take action aimed at improving the conditions of women' (WIN, 1982a). Its intention was to use such activities as research, conferences, public representation, and meetings to provide:

> the means through which effective strategies and campaigns might be developed and fought in the continuing struggle against women's oppression (WIN, 1982b).

Initially, the overall membership of WIN was middle class. In this it

followed a pattern that has been repeated in most developing countries, where literate urban women, who are often more economically independent, and therefore wield more political power, lead the struggle for women's emancipation. The question of whether or not the aims and activities of such organisations are compromised by their middle class identities is an on going debate. Suffice to say that WIN is an organisation that believes in self-advocacy as a strategy for women's empowerment, and recognises the need for progressive alliances with similar minded organisations such as the Nigerian Labour Congress, grassroots co-operatives, Academic Staff Union of Universities and Student Unions. The concern to reach out to, and be relevant to grassroots women is one that WIN shares with the drama department and with NPTA in general. This was what led to the forging of a partnership between it and the department from the start. The idea, then, was that TfD would become a vital tool for WIN's operations. Reciprocally, WIN would provide the practice with the organisational base, structural support, information, and funding that it needed to facilitate the continuity of its projects.

The first of their collaborations was facilitated by Salihu Bappa, a trainer-practitioner, and an associate member of WIN. This took place in 1984 in the form of a pilot project that targeted the university community. The play that was devised tackled the topical issue of the increasing frequency of rape on the university's main campus. Increasing pressures to address cultural issues that affect women's health such as unequal distribution of labour, infant mortality, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) led to another collaborative project in 1984. The project addressed medical and social complications that develop when young girls, sometimes as early as twelve years old are married off for cultural reasons.

The drama that emerged, titled *The Dilemma of Womanhood* was a product of a collaborative process between the department, WIN, community nurses and other health workers from Yakawada Comprehensive Health Centre (Abah, O. *et al*. n.d.). It was performed by nurses and health workers, and to a mixed audience of midwives, patients, and community heads from the surrounding communities. The plot proposed female education as a solution to the problem and shared the responsibility for change equally between community leaders, policy makers, and parents on the one hand, and women themselves on the other.

Post performance discussions attempted to take on board factors that helped or hindered treatment and rehabilitation and, quite significantly, patriarchal ideologies that engendered the problem. Equally significant was the fact that the majority of the performers were female health workers who had first hand information about the problem from their patients whose lives they tried to represent. However, as the audience of the drama, the patients' own experience was on the whole, little more than as voyeurs. It would have required the patients themselves to perform in order to deal

with the more complicated issues of agency involved. The experience of crossing the spatial boundary and physically performing would have been one further step towards challenging those cultural factors that engendered the problem in the first place (Boal, 1979). However, the collaboration showed a much more improved practice than hitherto. Some few years later, in 1989, the Theatre for Integrated Development (TIDE) workshops held by NPTA in the three rural communities of Otobi, Adankari, and Onyuwei of Benue State was to demonstrate just what collaborations with grassroots women's organisations can achieve in performance terms (Illah, 2005; Harding, 1999).

Singularly and in their collaborations, NPTA and WIN have grown since those early days. The general political climate in Nigeria as a whole today means that gender, as an issue can no longer be ignored. The aftermath of the Beijing conference in 1995, and the increasing contact with other parts of the world through international travel, and developments in technology such as satellite television and the Internet have generated a myriad of women's organisations across the country. In terms of their composition, some of these are local and others are national; some are religious based and others are secular, some are cultural while others are business and professional. Each of the organisations has a mission statement which identifies the specific issues with which it is concerned such as education, law, health, the media, human rights, children and youth, the environment, and so on. In real terms, there are thousands of women's co-operatives, associations and organisations located in rural and urban areas across the country. Although many of these describe their activities as none political, there are now more politicised women's organisations than when WIN first started out. Such organisations are taking the issue of women's rights on, particularly in the areas of politics and citizenship, education, health, the law, the mass media, and the environment. Significantly, many of them would like to incorporate theatre in their activities but are hindered by lack of skills and funds. Here exists a strong potential for collaboration with training institutions such as universities departments of drama and theatre for mutual benefits. Women's empowerment and role in development will be greatly enhanced by their participation in such cultural activities as TfD and vice versa.

Independent Theatre Companies

Contemporary professional theatre companies, with the exception of the popular travelling theatre variety of the likes of Ogunde, Baba Sala and Jagua, are of a much rare breed in Nigeria. Operated as businesses, and run by graduates of drama and theatre arts, they are located in urban towns and cities, and are comparable to the University arts theatres. Generally under funded, they constantly battle to survive. Many have found that the

more diversified their activities, and their audiences, the more chances they have to survive. In part strategic and in part responding to the general mood in the country, many are beginning to incorporate TfD objectives and approaches to their creative processes and outputs but are still limited by time and funds. Voluntary and semi professional drama groups or associations, whose members have other full time jobs, often describe themselves as NGOs. There are increasing numbers of these operating at grassroots levels. Partnership between these and university departments of drama and theatre arts, and with organisations such as NPTA and RTN, is enabling their acquisition of TfD skills that are useful and more effective for their operations at grassroots level.

All TfD practices in their different contexts have potential for promoting gender equality and empowering women to participate actively in development. Together, they provide a rich variety of means of using theatre to mediate and to facilitate socio-economic change.

Problems of Methodologies

The factors hindering the effectiveness of TfD in enabling women's participation at grassroots level are not only cultural but methodological as well. TfD's philosophy and principles are sufficiently inclusive and robust to embrace all senses of the oppressed and marginalised including women and children. Rather, it is in the interpretation and translation of these into practice that it continues to fail women. Self-censorship and the tendency to make one template fit all play a big part in this. The tendency to not want to 'rock the boat' often limits its revolutionary potential and cripples creativity and innovation. Furthermore, it is insufficient for men, whether as cultural or as development activists, as husbands, bosses, practitioners, policy makers, theoreticians, analysts, and so on to speak for women no matter how well intentioned. Similarly, it is insufficient to have a situation where invariably urban elite women represent rural women because the former's class privileges remain intact. TfD has the capacity to change these through the extension of its training programmes to grassroots communities and in its collaborations with women's organisations. But it may entail a more specific and fitter for purpose approach that what currently obtains.

Research, analysis, devising, performance, discussions and implementation of action plans, are crucial aspects of a TfD process, and what define its methodology across practices though not necessarily restricted to this order. Close scrutiny of the workings of any of these aspects reveal the need for them to be adapted to suit the unique situation of women. For example, the preliminary research phase, which tends to occur at the early stages of a TfD process, involves identifying and gathering information on community issues. That this research is not simply in order to create 'truthful' performances but also to understand the

people, establish trust, and to find the most appropriate ways to contextualise, problematise, analyse and collectively find solutions to the problems has been made clear (Abah, 2003). The *Homestead* and *Community Mapping* are the most favoured approaches to information gathering. Employed within these are the techniques of observation, face-to-face interview, group discussion, and cultural batter in which knowledge and skills of performance forms are exchanged between participants. Culturally, men predominate in household and community decision-making. Thus the success rate of an interview, particularly with women in *purdah*, depends to a large extent on the cooperation of husbands or household heads. The absence or objection of husbands or heads of households can easily prevent the participation of women. Even in none *purdah* communities, community heads and opinion leaders tend to be men and hegemonic values of modesty further contribute to silencing women or tempering what they can say about themselves publicly, and to whom. While the fewer number of women engaged in the practice continues to constitute a problem there is also, the ambivalent attitude of grassroots women themselves to female facilitators. There are as many reports of women finding it easier to engage in dialogue with women exclusive of men as there are of them to better believe men, and to place more weight on their words. What these indicate is that even the research techniques employed must be scrutinised and where necessary, more appropriate methods and techniques that can cross these invisible barriers will need to be explored and used.

The stage following the preliminary research is often described as an analysis stage. However, it is generally acknowledged that analysis is endemic to the TfD process and goes on all the time as participants engage in discussions and decision-making. Analysis is a useful activity engaged in by all participants in order to come to a shared understanding of the issues involved. It is what is at the heart of any conscientisation process, a process that may be described as qualitative education. Where gender, as a mediating factor, is ignored or suppressed then an incomplete or false understanding is reached. With its stress on class differentiation orthodox Marxist analysis, which still largely informs the practice, often ignores the influence of culture on women's participation in development. This is compounded by the desire by practitioners not to be perceived as a threat to a community's cultural beliefs and values; not to make people feel uncomfortable.

Reporting on a 1982 Benue International Popular Theatre Workshop that took place in Nigeria, the late Tar Ahura, one of the key facilitators said of one stage of the workshop process in Igyura village:

> There was a lengthy group discussion in the reception hall of the village head from which women were excluded. Women in this society are only

> seen in public and not heard except with their husband's permission. Even so, they must speak the minds of their husbands. Since popular theatre is a cultural action efforts must be made to respect the ways of the people as a way of establishing credibility (Ahura, 1982: 60).

He went on to explain that as far as they, as cultural activists, could understand:

> their assignment was not to force a cultural revolution on the people but to work within the cultural provisions enhancing credibility and public relations (61).

The prevalence of this view is confirmed by reports on more recent projects (Mike, & Members of PSW, 1999: 61-78; Amkpa, 2004: 98-104). Clearly, there is a need to strike a delicate balance between demonstrating respect and sensitivity to people's cultures on the one hand, and promoting and protecting the rights of women on the other. The intention of TfD is to draw upon the cultural strengths of the people. The technique of cultural batter is one that offers a great deal of potential for integrating human / women's rights into the entire process but is currently under utilised in favour of more verbal techniques

The development and performance making stage continues the process of analysis with the added task of encoding the issues in a performative form that will communicate to participants on various levels. The aim is to develop performances that will stimulate critical consciousness and empower every member of the community to actively participate in effecting positive socio-economic change. Where the research done in the early stages has been thorough enough to include researching into the most effective and inclusive forms, and where the analysis is extended to include a critical interrogation of these, the tendency to fall back on forms which may seem easy and pragmatic at the time but contradictory in terms of the purpose of the practice, especially where women are concerned, may be minimised. Conventional Western dramatic form is well known for its history of gender bias. Indigenous pre-colonial performance forms demonstrate similar gender bias with genres divided along gender lines. Some performance forms are more associated with one gender than the other. Among these are oral traditions and performances associated with various rites of passage, occupational forms, and ceremonial community festivals. However, there are some genres that are common to both males and females, although the context in which they are performed may differ. Storytelling, praise singing, and dance are typical examples. It is possible for TfD to tap into all these genres, including the most ritualistic and patriarchal of them, and also to revision them.

Indigenous Nigerian performance forms are adaptable and continue to adapt in response to wider social changes in society. Their survival and

continued relevance depends on this quality. Soyinka explains:

> when we consider art forms from the point of view of survival strategies, the dynamics of cultural interaction with society become even more aesthetically challenging and fulfilling. We discover, for instance, that under certain conditions some art forms are transformed into others – simply to ensure the survival of the threatened forms. Drama may give way to poetry and song in order to disseminate dangerous sentiments under the watchful eye of the oppressor, the latter forms being more easily communicable. On the other hand, drama may become more manifestly invigorated in order to counteract the effect of an alienating environment (1993: 134-135).

The Kwagh-hir puppet theatre of the Tiv of Benue State, and the more general art of storytelling are some good examples.

The Samaru Project experimented with one such form in the mid-1980s. Sauna and Dauda were two male 'stock characters' who featured across a number of projects as a way of providing the audiences with characters they could grow to recognise and identify with (Amkpa, 2004: 99). Sauna was derived from a Hausa popular comic cartoon strip character and transplanted to the community outreach project to facilitate easy communication as well as to provide some organic thread through the various issues and experiences that the projects dealt with. The original cartoon features the farcical escapades of its protagonist, Sauna. Comparable to animal trickster characters popular in many folk tales, Sauna constantly over reaches himself. Like the tales, the female characters that appear in *Sauna* only play supporting roles. Both genres present many opportunities for gender revisioning but this did not happen on the project. As a result the women that featured in the performances were assigned their traditional passive / victim roles while the issues were perceived and addressed from the dominant male perspective of Dauda and Sauna. Both functioned as narrator-facilitators, mediating between the stories enacted and the 'realities' of the audiences' lives. They had the freedom to engage in dialogue with persons on either side of the narrative frame as they flitted in and out of the world of the story and that of the audience. The use of male narrators failed to acknowledge the role of women in storytelling, and to empower women to be protagonists of the action.

TfD performances are intended to continue the process of analysis by engaging all participants in dialogue. The extent to which they are effective in achieving this is determined by the effectiveness of the previous stages. Described as the most concentrated part of most community theatre processes (Kershaw, 1992), the dramatic performance commands a lot of attention as various project reports show. Such concentration may prove more restrictive than other more loose and inclusive forms such as festival drama. The festival has a lot to offer a practice such as TFD in terms of its

context, its loose structure, and the variety of performance forms that it can accommodate, the abundance of opportunities for impersonation, subversion, and role reversal, and its ability to appeal to both the emotions as well as the intellect. With festivals, the meanings articulated extend beyond what can or is verbalised. Again as Soyinka points out:

> The level of organisation involved, the integration of the sublime with the mundane, the endowment of the familiar with properties of the unique (and this spread over days) all indicate that it is into the heart of many African festivals that we should look for the most stirring expressions of man's [sic] instincts and need for drama at its most comprehensive and community involving (1993: 138).

The *Kallankuwa* (meaning a show for everyone) annual festival of Bomo village is a famous example of one such Hausa festival that has evolved from its ritualistic roots as a community harvest festival where everyone is a participant as a spectator and as a performer (Etherton, 1982; International Human Rights Law Group, 2003). It is where everyone goes to see and to be seen. The festival has had close association with the drama department since the latter's establishment. The 2003 festival was a close collaboration between CBOs and drama groups, the International Human Rights Law Group, and RTN under the general theme of 'Voter Education and Mobilisation' in the run up to the 2003 General Elections (International Human Rights Law Group, 2003). That year, the format of the festival was replicated in different towns and villages in Kaduna and in the neighbouring states of Katsina and Kano in what was described as 'the ripple effect'. It invited participation from NGOs from around the country including women's organisations such as the League for Democratic Women (LEADS), the Legislative Coalition on Violence Against Women (LACVAW), the Raising Hope for Women and Child, as well as from the Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs. Their involvement was aimed at raising awareness on the significance of women's active participation in Politics and related issues. In general, the participation of grassroots women in the festival itself, including the dramatic performances, was still relatively marginal but significant (International Human Rights Law Group, 2003).

For festival drama, the space of performance in concrete spatial terms and in terms of the opportunity it provides to play with notions of the real and the imagined often generates sufficient license for normal rules of social roles between male and female to be challenged. Thus the potential for TfD to challenge patriarchy lies not just in the unconventional structure of its process but can extend into even highly concentrated moments of performaces. Whatever forms are employed will need to be interrogated for the opportunities they afford women to represent themselves or to subvert the status quo. Ultimately, what all the stages of the process should

be leading towards is the empowerment of grassroots communities to participate in development. Where the process works to engage women actively, the chances of translating this into real action are enhanced. This may require the emergence of TfD groups whose main agenda would be to address development issues from the perspective of women, working in collaboration with other women's organisations. The shift from advocacy by well-intentioned practitioners to self-advocacy can only be achieved when grassroots women take centre stage and speak for themselves. Only then can genuine participation be said to take place.

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