

**From People Theatre to Film:  
Articulating Minority Voices in Cameroon – An  
Anglophone Grass field Minority Case Study**

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**Abstract**

This essay analyses a video performance - *Gomen Na We*<sup>13</sup> - that emanated from the practice of community theatre in Cameroon in the early 2000s. The focus is on how community theatre artists used participatory community research and performance to raise awareness and consciousness in the Grass field Anglophone Minority. People Theatre practitioners employed participatory research and communication for social change that resulted in a live performance and video - *Gomen Na We*. The process that culminated in the performance was a research empowerment strategy to address the political, economic and socio-cultural inconsistencies that have since disconnected the masses from the leaders. From the 1990s and early 2000s, the social life patterns in the Grass field have not really had any observed change. People Theatre practitioners engaged to address these concerns through performance that made use of the active participation of the populace as a medium that generate messages for social transformation. On the basis of Paulo Freire's theoretical postulations in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which Augusto Boal enhanced in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, analyses point to the claim that community-made theatre and video reinforce community initiatives and instil critical thinking and creativity in the populace. This makes the experience more

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<sup>13</sup> *Gomen Na We* in this context can be translated into English as *We Are the Government*. The expression has an underlying meaning which points to the zeal and consciousness built in the Anglophones to work hard in order to improve on their wellbeing given the prevailing political, economic and socio-cultural imbalance and relegation the Anglophones experience in Cameroon.

appealing and relevant to social realities. Tailoring the workshop process and the performance to address issues of democracy and participatory transparent local governance served as a way to articulate, mediate and raise the voices of the populace in Cameroon.

### **Introduction: Context and Background of *Gomen Na We***

The Tubah Rural Council in 2004 hosted a community theatre experience to advocate for and reinforce the practice of participatory transparent local governance, in the grass field area of the North West Region in Cameroon with *Gomen Na We*, a live community theatre performance and video film. Anglophone Cameroon constitutes two of the ten provinces (now regions) of the Republic of Cameroon. It was administered by the British as a Trust and Mandatory Territory. Consequently, the educational, social and community development (CD) system followed the British model, staying very close to the people's way life. According to Kwo (1984), a community development agent in British Cameroon, this model of people-oriented development sought to highlight the communal life of the communities, empower the populace to be the main actors in charting their fate in every socio-cultural and economic undertaking (161). In spite of this people-oriented approach to social transformation, the natural factors such as the mountainous nature of this geopolitical region, swift rivers, poor communication and numerous ethnic groups and languages did not and have not enhanced growth. The advent of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s and the political, economic and socio-cultural tensions at the same time, contributed adversely to the development of this area given that the main opposition party to the current regime was founded and is deep-rooted in this region.

The tense socio-cultural, economic and political atmosphere that characterised Cameroon in the late 1990s and early 2000s with pressure exerted on the regime by political figures, especially the opposition parties and the civil society for some social reforms, made this a very distinct period in Cameroon. The Anglophone Grass field area seemingly had been victim of the absence of basic concessions and social development policy, thus political activism and aspects of civil unrest were vivid in this part of the country. Politics apart, the performing and dramatic artists had addressed these issues severally from outside the concerned communities with little social incidence. As such, the concept of community theatre practice through People Theatre was enhanced and experimented with. *Gomen Na We* (2004) was tailored to fit in this context by Bole Butake, assisted by Emelda N Samba. This was under the aegis of the People Theatre for Social Change sponsored by Helvetas Cameroon and Tubah

Rural Council. The experience focused on the theatre-for-development methodology. It is defined and used hereafter in relation to the theatre practice which sensitises and empowers communities to improve their status quo (Linje, 2002:1). The workshop process focused on the socio-economic, cultural and political concerns of Anglophone Cameroon, precisely the Grass field people and the need for the populace to actively participate in and ensure transparent local governance.

These drawbacks, as illustrated in *Gomen Na We*, have reinforced hard work and communal spirit in the North West and the people from this geo-political sphere wherever they find themselves. The persons who originate from this part of Cameroon are believed to, as individuals and as a collective, have a critical role to play in social their well-being. The introduction of the practice of People Theatre to these people was an innovative way of awakening and building in them through critical thinking social organisation to improve on their general well-being.

Community education and development as expressed in *Gomen Na We* entails a variety of activities carried out in the community – traditional institutions, local governance, and collective social and economic interaction by the community members for general well-being. The Tubah workshop experience was a practical demonstration of the concept of participatory research and communication for social change. The locals actively participated in the determination of their important and vital needs. The priority of the theatre experts was to see the efforts of the Tubah Rural Council and Helvetas Cameroon combined with those of the people to improve the political, economic, social and cultural conditions of community. To address these issues adequately and illustrate the process of transforming community theatre to film for articulating minority voices in Cameroon, analysis will seek to respond to the following questions:

- How has People Theatre and Film used the socio-cultural situation in Cameroon and in the Anglophone Grass field to articulate minority voices?
- Do the Anglophone Grass field minority express and assert their opinions and aspirations through the performances identified?
- How has the audio-visual information and communication technology been appropriated and localised in the Anglophone Grass field as a minority articulation process?

## Critical Overview of the Performance *Gomen Na We* - 2004

The story in *Gomen Na We* is told in episodes chronologically linked by a central issue - participatory transparent local governance. The story is told of the problems of tax evasion, school infrastructures, lack of proper bridges linking the different localities and especially farms and homes and suggestively markets, and the land disputes between graziers and farmers commonly referred to as farmer-grazier problems in the North West Region and conflict resolution outside the police and gendarme milieu or the law courts.

At the preamble, a local council revenue agent goes to the market to collect taxes but is bullied by sellers who do not understand why they should pay taxes before selling their wares in the market. This is particularly because they do not know exactly what the money collected is used for. Moreso, it is because the Council authorities are voted into position by the populace to represent their opinions. The Mayor has to intervene and explain to the people the *raison d'être* for the taxes. This particular story helps to bring out the problems of communication between the powers that be and the governed.

This episode gives rise to the next problem of land dispute between graziers and the farmers. A farmer is engaged in clearing a piece of land for his farm which the grazier thinks belongs to him. To the grazer, the farmer has exceeded boundaries, encroaching into his grazing land. The farmer claims the land is his family heritage and consequently belongs to him. The farmer discovers after having toiled in the farm that the grazer has allowed his cattle to destroy his crops. Totally overwhelmed, the farmer's wife attacks and severely beats up the grazer's wife in the street as people look on with indifference. This sparks off tension between the two camps and the grazer bribes the Divisional Officer (DO) to lock up the farmer. The farmer on his part complains to the Mayor who takes appropriate problem solving methods by bringing the two parties to the negotiating table. The Mayor's method unlike that of the DO is people-friendly, unifying and so effective to the extent that the grazer who had already bribed the DO decides to pay for damages caused to the farmer.

Another episode in the village school is presented and the structures hosting the community state-owned school are all dilapidated and incomplete. The situation is seen to be even worse as a single teacher is in charge of teaching three classes in one classroom. The teacher laments and wonders if being there is punitive given that many trained teachers roam the streets unemployed. The episode underlines government failure to assume its responsibilities vis-à-vis the populace - creating structures only on paper.

In a parallel episode, the farmer's troubles are aggravated by a heavy downpour of rain which destroys the bridge that links his farm to the village and market. The same bridge is used by some village children and the school teacher. There is need to repair it and the village traditional council under the community development association comes out to do the repairs. While the populace are engaged in the process of repairing the bridge, the Mayor stops by to encourage them. This is a pointer to harmonious social interaction for local governance.



Pic 1: Farmer and wife struggle to cross damaged bridge



Pic 2: the community members under the traditional council repair bridge.



Pic 3: Mayor and an assistant visit and encourage the community development bridge project respectively. The people and their leaders commune and work together for general social well-ness. Source: *Gomen Na We* (2004).

The story ends in another episode where the traditional council and the Mayor jointly donate some corrugated sheets to roof some of the school buildings constructed by the Parents Teachers' Association. This episode synergises the various issues raised in the story as all the factions previously presented come together as one but for the conspicuous absence of the DO.

### ***Gomen Na We*, a Framework for Participatory Social Research and Communication**

Freire's educational pedagogy of oppressed of the 1960s and Boal's theatre of the oppressed concepts in 1970s galvanised educators and theatre practitioners to rediscover the potential of participatory education and theatre as a mobilisation tool. This contributed to community based efforts integrating research education and action through interaction and knowledge production for dissemination (Conrad & Campbell, 2008:251-252). Its effectiveness is attained from the non-predetermined and non-prescribed process which involves the target, thus enhancing critical communication. The participatory approach illustrated through *Gomen Na We* stimulates community thinking; develops self-confidence, participation, expression, awareness and organisational strengths of popular groups, communities and organisations (Kidd, 1982). The process gets to a more critical stage as both the creators and consumers of messages send out and receive meanings upon analyses. This helps to give more

meaning to performance and alternative ways of seeing things and furthering understanding.

The making of *Gomen Na We*, as participatory theatre/video, adopted 'pedagogy of the oppressed' and 'theatre of the oppressed' as critical concepts for social change to express and assert the minority concerns. Freire and Boal, respectively, demonstrate how the society and ideas that develop to performance form an intrinsic basis for critical thinking. The concepts, pedagogy of the oppressed and theatre of the oppressed, illustrate how performing artists build in the minority consciousness towards improving their political, socio-economic and cultural predicament. The creators of these art forms collectively shaped the content to reflect the plight of the target communities. *Gomen Na We* goes beyond the conventional realms of entertainment to delve into the political, economic, and socio-cultural interface of edification, learning, development and growth. This is attained by incorporating alternative communication media like oral tradition, cultural art forms, such as storytelling, music, songs, dance, through improvisations and games. Boal (2000:xxi-xxii) advocates for:

...the Spectator to take on the role of Actor and invade the Character and the stage [...] to occupy his own Space and offer solutions [...] taking possession of the stage, the Spect-Actor is consciously performing a responsible act. The stage is a representation of the reality, a fiction. But the Spect-Actor is not fictional. He exists in the scene and outside of it, in a dual reality. By taking possession of the stage in the fiction of the theatre he acts: not just in the fiction, but also in his social reality. By transforming fiction, he is transformed into himself [...]. It symbolises all the acts of trespass we have to commit in order to free ourselves from what oppresses us. [...] It is through a creation of ...the new... that which has not yet existed begins to exist...

This gives Osofisan's (2006:20) contention that "Theatre is political, Theatre is subversive, Theatre liberates", relevance as the intrinsic link between participatory performance and society is highlighted.

Practitioners thus created performances responsive to society. This work points to the unbearable political state, social biases and hierarchies that characterised the communities concerned in the 1990s and early-2000s. The popular cultural performance forms that combine to make up *Gomen Na We*, both in content and contexts, speculate on a possibility to bring social change. The performance forms are an upsurge of the political, social, economic and cultural mainstay of the Anglophone microcosm in a macro Cameroon. The task for participatory learning catalysts was to affect the masses into seeing how to blend these intricate life situations

into a fertilising nursery for the seeds of creation, change and nation building (Osofisan, 2006).

*Gomen Na We*, as a framework for participatory social research and communication, engaged facilitators and participants in a process that incited critical thinking. The technique of participatory social research imbued the participants with content that appealed with relevance to them through fiction. The process encouraged the participants to contribute to the communication process as power and social imbalance gaps were closed (Conrad & Campbell, 2008:251).

### **From Participatory Theatre to Film**

Butake (2005:7) postulates that the shift from theatre to film:

Arose out of the need to reach a still wider audience thereby extending the experiences of people on various issues from a few hundred or thousands to tens of thousands especially in the urban centres which are fortunate enough to have electricity and so can capture television signals from the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV).

He further underlines the issues of methodology and procedure which is practically the same, but for the fact that:

...in People Cinema we follow the same process as in People Theatre, the only difference being that we have to write a scenario for the story that has been created through the participatory method, rehearse for camera and on location, and then proceed with the shooting and later by editing and mixing in the studio followed by screening. We are also able to package the final product either as videocassettes or as video compact discs which can be distributed to any one (sic) interested. (p, 7)

People Cinema denotes the video film made from the community theatre experience. As Butake asserts, the film script comes to life after the live performance text. The scenario from the performance text is more detailed giving allowance for the insertion of aspects the story could not present on the live performance. Symbolic artistic embellishments that necessitate critical appraisal and which could not be represented on the live show are included in the scenario.

Participatory theatre and video entertain but the overall intention is education. This is introduced through improvisation, an important participatory communication medium which to Singhal (2004:141-142):



is...a dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups, and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realize their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare... While participation comes in all shapes and sizes, participatory communication means working **with** and **by** the people, as opposed to working **on** or working **for** the people.

The process that culminated in *Gomen Na We* followed this approach. Through improvisation the participatory process raises critical consciousness. The participatory learning process empowers the minority to learn and develop. Action and interaction in collecting data and building a story through improvisations instil a sense of belonging in the participants; as such focusing on the process and output makes the product almost void of film aesthetics that characterise feature films. In this form, these aesthetics only come out as simple modes of expressions used with the intention to avoid concealing and or distorting the message. Aesthetic forms like costumes and makeup as well as props stay in the natural state most of the time serving the natural role as in daily life.

The effectiveness of the process and performance lies in the distancing from reality to fiction "to watch from a distance, without involving oneself, as one who observes, thinks and draws his or her own conclusions" (Boal, 2000:xix). Performers are only pretending to be the characters in that community (Brecht, 1936, Butake, 2006). Fiction ensures that no-one is victimised. The move from discussion to dramatisation takes place in a number of ways. The story is built by the introduction of characters, and aspects like songs, dance, music and other popular expressive forms and communication media. It puts to task the creative ability of the group which depends very much on the ability to build a story from the data collected such that it engages and suggests sustainability. The story must be interesting and entertaining with messages related to the topic under treatment. *Gomen Na We* focuses on the need to have the masses participate actively on issues of local governance. The stories privilege the participatory technique; the down-to-earth and doable solutions to problems presented rather than a resort to pure fiction.

### **Expressive Imaging in *Gomen Na We***

Vivid and expressiveness of camera distances, shots, deep focus photography, very simple and telling language, costumes, make-up and sounds drawn from the local idioms in *Gomen Na We* are of interest and meaningful. This is built up as part of the process whereby the technicians and the performers are encouraged to use their artistic intuition and creativity to

capture and express relevant details that add to the story. These include, amongst many, reactions, interjections, gestures, and expressions which produce meaning and are concerned with the process of signification and communication. To Metz (1991:235) performance is *saying* that which determines the *said*. Reading signs is making sense out of aspects of performance in content and context. The signs are read according to what the world says about them and their significance. Signs can take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects. It implies that properties, actions, movements and gestures, dialogue and the performer are all signs as far as the art of representation is concerned. Briefly, semi-otic analyses focus on how the text relates to its sources, the text's relationship to other texts - context and inter-textual and the relationship of the text to its interpretation. This takes a two dimensional approach in the mutation of community theatre to video as the video technician, especially the camera operator, has to capture the expressive performers creatively.

Sequences introduced to complement the story in *Gomen Na We*, include parts of the market scene, farm scenes, the scenes at the bridge, the town-crier mobilising the populace for community work and the fight scene between the women - indigenous woman (Farmer's Wife) and the Mbororo woman (Grazier's Wife - settler). In the market scene, details like the Mayor visiting vendors are additional sequences in the story. This scene also shows some reactions coming out spontaneously and naturally from people who are naturally vendors in the Tubah market who express the desire to know why they must pay taxes to the council before selling in the market. Close up shots are made on very anxious faces of people in the market who are not performers in the story. Two women selling food stuffs play active roles of food-sellers for the camera although they were not workshop participants. This shows the social and cultural relevance of the story, the message and people's readiness to learn. Transmitting a message through role-play has proven very effective as shown in these scenes more than public lectures and other formal approaches to sensitisation. The presence of the video camera equally captured the attention of many to the message passed through in this scene - participatory transparent local governance.

The scenes at the bridge and the last scene at the school premises were introduced only at the shooting phase after they were only mentioned in the live theatre performance. These scenes are complementary/additional actions to justify certain issues presented earlier in the story. The community initiative to repair the bridge destroyed by the rain, as initiated by the traditional council, shows the active participation of the populace in issues of local well-being. Kwo (1986, 161-162)

reiterates the involvement of the populace in community concerns by contending that:

...incidents usually involve...members of the community working together to build a school or fence the premises, community members... considering the educational and developmental impact and influence that the school and other non-formal educational institutions can have in the Cameroon on individuals and their communities...

In *Gomen Na We*, the people actually go to work and repair the bridge and are encouraged in the process by the Mayor who commends them for contributing towards village social well-ness. The action also brings to the attention of the viewing audience that the ongoing school project, supported by the Mayor is an initiative of the Parent's Teachers Association.

From another perspective, as the traditional council brainstorms on repairing the bridge, mention is made of the school that is fast dilapidating because they cannot finish the roofing project. This is linked to the problem of insufficient and broken down school infrastructure and the acute lack of staff in rural areas. It is illustrated through an overcrowded classroom in an uncompleted hall hosting three classes with just one teacher for the three classes. The teacher has to move from one area of the class to the other to teach pupils who are seated back to back with no demarcation for the different classes. The lone teacher, completely overwhelmed at the end of the lesson, sends off the children. She thinks that she has been posted to that school as a punitive measure. The underlying problem of un/employment in Cameroon is exposed in the teacher's soliloquy. She exposes the issue of thousands of trained teachers who roam the streets with no jobs yet there are schools like hers with just no staff. In the sidelines, the traditional council resolves to go and seek help from the Mayor who has been putting to use the money collected from the market and other sources. The Mayor actually responds with material donation in the last scene.

Such sequential insertions complement action and make the story more relevant to the social context the story is reflecting. The farm scenes in *Gomen Na We* show the occupations of the people of the community. They are engaged in subsistence agriculture and animal farming which operate side by side. This is a source of conflict and social disputes. The farmer is relatively unconscious of the boundaries between the gazing and farming land; he encroaches into grazing land and when cattle damage his crops there is conflict which degenerates into the far relatives of the farmer and grazer. The Mayor takes a transparent and peaceful approach to solve this problem. She preaches peace and cohabitation,

stating that the animals can leave droppings that fertilise farming land after the harvest. The DO on his part indulges in corrupt practices and does not bother about peaceful resolution of conflict. His interest is how much money he makes out of the conflict. He takes money from the grazer promising to lock the farmer up. His office and status is foreign to the community – a government appointee as opposed to the Mayor who is chosen by the people to represent and serve them. These opposing institutions come to reinforce the main idea of the story – active participation of the people in ensuring transparent local governance. Tolerating and accommodating each other's ideas and culture are ideals preached and advocated in this story. This is encouraged more by the Mayor as opposed to the DO. The various issues expressed and asserted are a reflection of the self-help and self-assertive Anglophone minority, especially the grass field people all in telling picture composition, set design and use of properties on the different scenes.

Elsewhere, framing the DO and the effigy of the head of state is iconic, establishing a high degree of reality between the sign and its referent. It tells of the complicity between the duo – the person who appoints and the appointee. The corrupt DO an appointee of the person represented by the picture remains in this position to perpetrate such baseness as corruption to the people he is supposed to look after. Picture framing is conceived in this scene certainly to move the emotions of the viewer towards annoyance. The artistic intention is perhaps to raise anger against the personalities in the picture. The “overseer” in the heart of bribery and corruption scandals had asked the complainants for proofs “*ou sont les preuves?*” to be able to take action against corrupt officials. The effigy's strategic position is intended to deter occupants of public offices from corrupt practices. It warns perpetrators of the consequences of their acts. This is in line with the current fight against bribery and corruption in Cameroon under the slogan “Opération Epervier”. The statement “a stitch in time saves nine” becomes very relevant in this context. Unfortunately, the person in position of power and decision to have stopped corruption rather asked for proofs. The situation has since degenerated tarnishing the image of the country. Picture composition brings critical thinking corroborating the intention of this performance form as an alternative to raising consciousness in the minority. People critically think and ask what could be done to affect lives or the life of the nation instead of watching and accommodating such malpractices supposedly tolerated by the supreme state personality.



Pic 4. The perpetration of bribery and corruption overseen and accommodated by supreme state authority, extracted from the video film *Goman Na We*. Source: *Goman Na We*. (2004)

Camera angles and picture composition in the scene with the next authority - the Mayor does not bring the Head of State's effigy to focus. This picture remains hanging on a nail directly behind the Mayor, a usual position in most offices. In the Mayor's office the picture of the head of state can hardly even be noticed except through paying very keen attention. It is equally not included in the framing suggestive of the message the film wants to send across in that scene. On the contrary, in the DO's scene, the picture is positioned to fill a big space next to the DO, virtually making it a silent character in the scene. Given the socio-political, and economic situation in Cameroon at the time the film was made the picture really is not silent.

The film suggests a solution in the scene with the Mayor. The Mayor who is closer to the people and who takes more practical measures in solving problems is framed with the picture of the head of state completely out of focus, but the Mayor is also an auxiliary of the government but acts for the benefit of the people. The Mayor does not talk to one camp alone but convenes the two camps and even succeeds in having them embrace each other.



Pic 5. Mayor's office (sitting position) rid of supreme supervision of the head of state. As an authority who is mandated power by the people, the Mayor is directly answerable to the people - extracted from the video film *Goman Na We*.

Source: *Goman Na We*. (2004)

The film therefore is suggesting a communal perspective to problem solving and not the hard individualistic approach used by the DO. This should be the same reason why the DO is conspicuously left out after his intervention. He is not part of the people nor is his attitude worthy of having him commune with the people. These two scenes build up an image of a better way of communicating and solving problems. In effect, this is the kind of juxtaposition that video goes for thereby fulfilling its mission of subtle suggestions as against an outright solution bank.

## Conclusion

*Gomen Na We* has brought to attention arguments about how the Grass field Anglophone minority have been marginalised. It shows how the political, economic and socio-cultural situation in Cameroon affects the Grass filed Anglophone minority. The work expresses and asserts how the minority are initiated into the art of performance and the intrinsic link between art and the masses. The artistic intention is to incite critical and constructive thinking for action in the populace. The performances are a medium through which the populace hold "...a mirror of [their] condition on the face of the nation in an effort to force it to change" (Bannavti, 2010:122).

Participatory communication has never been innocent, no matter from whose perspective. This practice is total and engaging. *Gomen Na We* strives to empower the masses in the urban and rural centres with focus on active participation of the communities in governance, leadership, development, democracy and human rights, cultural diversity and tolerance. Through the performance, issues of self-reliance, self-regulation, and self-support are discussed and resolved with a community inspired and community-based solution. *Gomen Na We* "...prescribe[s][proposes] new skills, attitudes, and practices to be adopted by the villagers [concerned community members]...". (Eyoh, 1986: 20) At the same time the performances elicit interactions on the prevailing political, social, economic and cultural life patterns.

The use of the new audio-visual information and communication technology as another medium for the articulation of the Grass field minority voices does not only allow for a wider spectatorship, but also contributes to the sustainability of the participatory research and communication for social change. This is because long after the workshop and live community performance, the video film remains a reference source that could be used time and again for inspiration and initiating new projects. As such the mutation from People Theatre to film reinforces Boal's practice of theatre of the oppressed which gives confidence to the populace to think critically and constructively. Using film as a medium to address social change purposes cultivates in the locals, ownership. Film stimulates collective learning and improves social cohesion within the concerned populace and gives a vision for future perspectives in this practice.

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### ***Corpus***

*Gomen Na We*, (Director. Kwasen Gwangwa'a. Performers - Victor Phubwen Mbunbeng, Nshom Esther Nguh, Mbuh Caroline Nkenyam, Mufi Mabong Peter, Grace Betuakeh, Awachwi Ayuninjam Agnes, Monica Nchangfon Vuyen, Mumeleuh Cornelius, Boubu Muhammadou, Ahmadou Kaigamma, Mbuh Mary Magha, Lawrence Akumbu Tinyu, Ngwe Eunice, Bicheh Romanus, Njoka Ignatius (CRTV 2004).