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Changing Top-Down Neo-colonial Agitprop Approaches in Theatre for Development: A Photo-Text Essay from our Transforming Gender Injustices Project in Western Uganda[1]

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Abstract

This Photo-text article draws from Hussein Maddan and Bobby Smith's photo essay published in *Research in Drama Education* (see Maddan & Smith, 2021) which innovatively explored how Theatre for Development (TfD) has been used to empower communities in post conflict Northern Uganda to handle deep rooted challenges of water hygiene and sanitation. Following the example of Maddan & Smith's photo essay approach, our photo-text article showcases our rural development work in the Rwenzori region of Western Uganda with an aim of visually discussing how we have deployed our TfD practice to transform top-down agitprop practices. We graphically demonstrate that using TfD as a process of engagement leads to deepened community empowerment and collective action.

Keywords: Photo-text essay, agitprop, participation, collective action, empowerment

Practical challenges of TfD practice in Africa/Uganda

Theatre for Development (TfD) is conceived as a creative process of community engagement in which members of the participating community take the centre stage of using the medium of performance to identify and analyse the challenges which impede their progress (Chinyowa, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015; Harding, 1997; Mangeni, 2007b; Nogueira, 2002). However, in most of the developing world, the efficacy of TfD practice has been stymied by the nature of neo-colonial

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development practices adopted. As Osita Okagbue (1998) has pointed out, most of the TfD projects in the developing world fall short of transforming the theatre process into a potential space of participation and investigation of issues for excluded communities (1998: 24). This has been occasioned by the fact that in many of the TfD projects in Africa, the practical process is lacking in terms of community engagement as it confines what ought to be a participatory process to role play situations. By restricting the participatory process to such role play situations, we infer that the participants only engage in discussing plays designed and performed by external entities who come to sensitise communities about issues of concern. This is reminiscent of the colonial practice of using theatre and film to disseminate messages about development issues such as cash crop growing, taxation, health and savings. We are mindful that some role play practices such as those practiced in Augusto Boal's forum theatre, image theatre and simultaneous dramaturgy normally produce a high level of community engagement. The efficacy of community engagement in Boal's theatrical method in the African context, however, is normally dependent on the quality of facilitation or the proficiency of the joker and the amount of time allowed for the process to be imbued in the community. Consequently, restricting the TfD process to role play situations often arises from the scenario where TfD practitioners mostly engage communities in short lived participation in plays and then leave the community before initiating an effective participatory process of making theatre.

The problem of lack of effective community engagement in TfD is normally exacerbated by the fact that the framework of development practice in which most TfD projects occur is, in most cases, far removed from the envisaged goal of full community participation. Kees Epskamp delineates three development support modalities which are operational in many of the developing countries and which shape the nature of TfD practice. These include the project approach, the programme approach and the sector wide approach (Epskamp, 2006:97). The project approach is usually a planned short-term outside driven intervention geared toward an autonomous process of change in a target community. A programme is a group of projects or related services designed to achieve certain generally complimentary and interdependent operational objectives. The sector wide approach involves a grand plan covering both a country's managerial and financial resources. In the sector wide approach, instead of bringing the people to the centre of the process, ownership lies within the governmental establishments in a particular sector. The planning involves governmental institutions at a ministerial level, inter-ministerial management and continuous dialogue with bilateral and multi-lateral donor interventions.

One key observation that can be made about these modalities of development support is that in all of them, development is designed at higher levels of decision making and then implemented among communities who in most cases are not

involved in the design of the programme. In Uganda, apart from the work done by Rose Mbowa under the Stepping Stones projects in the 1990s, and until 2007 when Patrick Mangeni practiced participatory theatre in the Mulwadde II Muno Group TfD Experimentations (Mangeni, 2007), the majority of the TfD practices such as the School Health Education Programme (SHEP), campaign theatre (Breitinger, 1992; Frank, 1996), the Rural Water and Sanitation project in Eastern Uganda (Bamuturaki, 2021), the International Anti-Corruption Theatre Movement (IATM) practices (Bamuturaki, 2016) tended to be implemented in the context of the sector wide approach involving nationwide inter-ministerial coordination. Consequently, these projects, in most cases, covered expansive geographical areas, effectively lacking a sense of collective participation. The practice in these projects involved already made plays performed before audiences and engaging participants in short lived, ephemeral post performance discussion reminiscent of the colonial practices.

In the last ten years, there have been indigenous efforts to transform the TfD process in Uganda into a programme of collective learning and engagement. Examples of such efforts include the work done by Jane Plastow in Eastern Uganda (Katie & Plastow, 2016; Mcquaid et al., 2017; Mcquaid & Plastow, 2017; Plastow & McQuaid, 2015), the work done by the Rafiki theatre company in Northern Uganda and the Karamoja region (Bamuturaki, 2013, 2016). Our own practice involving the application of TfD in rural development practice in the Rwenzori region of Western Uganda is built upon these earlier practices.

Engendering Participatory Practice

Drawing from Freire's Pedagogics and notions of participatory development communication practice, TfD practitioners and scholars such as (Breitinger, Eckhard & Mbowa, 1994; Byam, 1999; Chinyowa, 2009; Kerr, 1991, 1995; Mangeni, 2007a; Mlama, 1991; Okagbu, 1998) have emphasised that participation is at the core of an effective TfD process. We have, in our practice, been making a great effort to learn from the above scholars foregrounding the notion that participation in TfD is about facilitating the target community to take an active role in the theatre process from planning, problem definition and prioritisation, play making, performance, post-performance discussion and follow-up action. To eschew colonial practices in our work, we have worked hard to draw from Kidd's notion that, 'participation in TfD projects should be both a goal and methodology' (1982: 97). We have become increasingly aware that by participation as a goal and methodology, Kidd supposes that the process should attempt to increase collective participation of community members in the TfD process by involving them in both the planning and running of the TfD programme. Reading Chinyowa, we have learnt that participation in TfD should be a process rather than product, partnership rather than patronage, and diversity rather than uniformity (Chinyowa 2009). By 'partnership rather than patronage,' we have in our practice deciphered a process in which the TfD practitioners work closely

with the members of the target community on an equal terms' basis while by 'diversity rather than uniformity' we ensure that all the members of the target community regardless of their social status have an equal stake in the process.

In our practice, we have aimed to achieve a plenitude of Freirean praxis. Working within the framework of Freirean pedagogics, we ensure that our TfD process is a practice of cultural action for community transformation. We are aware that the foundation of cultural action should be a dialogical process in which we, as leaders of the TfD process, together with the participating community, engage in analysing the needs of the community in dialogue with one another. We draw from Freirean critical pedagogy the understanding that 'if it is in speaking their word that people, by naming their world transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings' (1970:69). We eschew using theatre as a tool of depositing knowledge, typical of the colonial banking concept of education and instead adopt the posing of problems facing the members of the community. Subsequently, our practice involves working together with the community as equal partners on a horizontal plane, or in Freire's terms, 'on teacher-student and student-teacher relationship' (Freire 1970:61).

In this photo-text article, we showcase our effort at transforming top-down approaches of TfD to engender effective community engagement. The photo-texts presented here demonstrate that it is possible to engage a community in the TfD creative process and transform neo-colonial development practices by fostering communitywide participation and empowerment.

Figure 1. Photo by Keneth Bamuturaki. The community in the post conflict region of western Uganda performing a welcome song before TfD animators from Kampala.

Figure 1 demonstrates the first meeting between the participating community and a team of facilitators. At this meeting, the animators introduce themselves to the community and explain the aims of the project. They lay down the agenda, promising the community a process of collective learning and participation on a horizontal plane of facilitator-participant relation. In this photo, the facilitators from Kampala (seated on wooden chairs) are meeting the community of Kanyalango village, Bunyangabo district for the first time. The community have prepared the space by providing the chairs for the visitors. Having known through prior mobilisation that the programme will require performance skills; the community have also prepared a song which they courteously perform for the visitors. In turn, the facilitators from Kampala, after the warm reception by the community, unveil their programme. At this point there are expectations from either side which need to be mutually clarified. In most cases, members of the participating community expect tangible gains such as money, agricultural inputs and school fees. In this first meeting, it is clarified that the aim of the process is to

use performance to foster understanding of the problems facing the community to transform the situation to foster better livelihoods.

Figure 1 Photo by Keneth Bamuturaki.

In this photo, after the facilitators have been welcomed into the community, they have started engaging more fully with the community. The expectations from both sides have been clarified and levelled. The facilitators have introduced the proposal to use theatre as a tool to transform gender prejudices in the agricultural sector in the community. The community have agreed that the theme is pertinent given the rampant human rights violations in the community which normally adversely affect women. The members of the community have been invited by the facilitators to take their space which they will jointly occupy with the facilitators in the process of analysing the gender issues affecting both the men and women in the agricultural enterprises. The space referred to here is real and not metaphorical. Both the community and the facilitators will occupy this space for the next ten weeks, using various media of performance such as image theatre, storytelling, dance, song and drawing to articulate issues of mutual concern. This photo shows that the community are taking over their newly acquired space of collaborative engagement. They are beginning their personal and collective journeys of what we hope will result in a transformative process of engagement.

We say newly acquired space, because most of the participants, especially the women, are getting the opportunity to perform and articulate issues of concern for the first time.

Figure 2 Photo by Grace Mary Mbabazi.

The facilitator (in the middle of the participants) is interacting with a community freely, breaking the culture of working in traditional rows and column seating arrangements which typically characterise top down approaches of community engagement. He is trying to create enthusiasm amongst the participants to act in this new space. The process develops gradually, as participants gain confidence in their contribution to the process. Evidently in this photo, community members have not yet taken hold of the process. They are still learning what to do and how to do it. This should normally be fine since it should not be expected that the process will begin at a high level of active engagement. We believe the beginning is always a moment of breaking ground, of building a social contract with the community. The initial workshops with the community are normally devoted to transforming the performance space into a safe space where every member of the participating community is free to contribute to the process of transformation. Participation in cultural play activities, including storytelling, cultural dance and song are some of the methods used to invite all community members to contribute and engage in the process.

Figure 3 Photo by Simon Enou. One of the ways of breaking the traditional space is empowering the community to work in a circular formation. This transformative space fosters participant intimacy, participation and agency.

It is true that participatory theatre in some parts of Africa such as West Africa has worked with the circular space for the last 30 years. In Uganda, however because of the neoliberal politics of funding that pervades the process, the circular space of engagement has not been effectively cultivated. Save for a few projects by practitioners such as Jane Plastow, Mangeni, Rose Mbowa, where collective participation has been engendered, many theatre projects such as the SHEP, the Kabarole Basic Health Project the RUASA (see Bamuturaki, 2021), have mostly adopted a mass mobilisation approach where theatre is externally devised and performed before large audiences. When the circular space is adopted, however, it enhances intimacy between participants, creating an atmosphere of agency where participants feel ready to work together. This photo exudes this type of atmosphere.

Figure 4 Photo by Keneth Bamuturaki. Teopista, A member of the community has taken leadership of the process. She is teaching a song related to the agenda of the TfD process.

Unlike the earlier photos, which showed a community still learning to participate in the TfD process, this photo demonstrates that the community has gained agency. They have taken over the performance space. In the initial workshops, as evidenced by the earlier photos, it was the facilitator who was at the centre of the process. In this photo, the community has begun to confidently take over the process. In effect, the success of the process is no longer concentrating on the facilitator. We argue that this is exactly what should happen in an effective participatory TfD process. The process of empowerment which, in most cases, is measured in qualitative rather quantitative terms, is normally evidenced by the extent to which participants take control in terms of ownership of the process. The means of production, in Boal's terms, which include the participants' bodies, their voices and the resources within their immediate environment are placed in the hands of the participants so that they may utilise them. Looking at the photo, one of the participants has taken a huge step of leading the process. For a member of the community who, perhaps, has previously had few opportunities to lead, this is a huge accomplishment which fosters self-worth and transformation. Ownership of the process, which is desired in participatory processes of theatre for change, is beginning to emerge.

Figure 5 Photo by Grace Mary Mbabazi. The community has begun to actively engage in the participatory theatre games.

In this photo, the process of control and ownership is increasing as the process progresses. Having joined the process as individuals from their homes, they are no longer acting as individuals. Their collective energies have been spurred by the process. They are working as a team in trust theatre games. This prepares them for deepened collective analysis efforts. By sharing in these games, the participants in the process become animated to engage collectively and passionately. The process begins to flow spontaneously.

Figure 7 above, photo by Simon Enou. Participants are allowed space to work in small groups to analyse and breakdown issues of major concern.

The process of creating the smaller groups is participatory. Groups are created working in the circular space, normally after collective group activities such as games and exercises. Standing in a circle, we ensure that there is a fair mix of men and women standing together. Depending on the number of groups we need, each participant speaks out a number 1, 2, 3 in a sequence until each participant has called out a number. All participants who call out 1, become group one, those who call out 2, become group two. Since the circle at the time of calling out the numbers had a good mix of men and women, there is normally a fair chance that all the groups created have an equal number of men and women in them. In the groups created, members engage in a dialogical process of identifying issues of collective concern using a number of performance processes such as storytelling, drawing, letter writing, image theatre, tree exercise analysis among. Working in dialogue, the process leads to collective reflection and analysis.

Figure 6 above photo by Grace Mary Mbabazi, Community Members are reflecting on the participatory research results.

This photo shows that collective participation becomes deeper as the process progresses over the subsequent weeks. Here, participants in their groups are breaking down issues further leading to the identification of what Freire (1970) calls generative themes. The process leads to collective learning and gathering data for collective play making. The community is denied such opportunities when the practitioners adopt the colonial agitprop model of theatre.

Figure 7 above, photo by Simon Enou. Participants are empowered to use other art forms and idioms to breakdown their problems.

In this photo, participants have made great strides in their journey of collective engagement. They have become profoundly creative and imaginative transforming their stories through drawing. Again, they are using the talents, gifts and resources already available within their community to do collective analysis of issues pertinent to their lives. While the facilitators provided the participants with essential resources: manila papers, pencils and makers, it was with their own imagination and ingenuity that community members have crafted their stories in a style much like the professional film making practice of storyboarding, expounding the story of their community. From this visual representation they plan to collectively create their dramas. This is a highly engaging process in terms of collective thought and action. We believe this is the crux of the transformation process in TfD practice. It is the hallmark of the conscientisation process expected in TfD.

Figure 8, photo by Keneth Bamuturaki. The community is performing a play articulating their collective needs.

After a process of collective participation and problem analysis, the participants have devised a play articulating their community needs. The play focuses on the values of working together on their farming business and how they can transform their small-scale farming occupations into sustainable enterprises. After the performance, the community engages in post-performance dialogue to strategize for action. Here they have strategized to begin collective research about markets for their farm produce.

Figure 9 above, photo by Simon Enou. A scene where participants are celebrating the value of collective action.

Collective action leads to collaborative development and stability of incomes. As a result, families can educate their children. Follow up action done after two years following the implementation of the participatory theatre process showed that there was a profound change in the community. Members of the community became empowered to take up income generating activities such as rearing pigs. They even requested us to go back to their community to reinvigorate their efforts of using theatre in a participatory way to empower larger sections of the community.

Conclusion

In this photo-text essay, we have demonstrated that collaborative participation in the creative process brings the participating community to the centre of the process. Instead of bringing to the community a pre-packaged performance and engaging them in ephemeral role play activities, the photo-text essay has

demonstrated that an effective TfD process begins as a humble act of initial meeting between the community and the facilitator. A skilful TfD facilitator nurtures this initial contact to culminate into deepened collective engagement. Through the process of extended collaborative engagement, the community comes to grips with the issues that impede its progress to attain fuller human lives. This photo-text essay has articulated a narrative of how we engendered collective participation through theatre with a farming community in western Uganda. Through analysis and performance, the community grew in collective awareness and empowerment. They took collective action in the form of doing participatory market research aimed at gaining relevant information of their agriculture business. We commend the ways in which the TfD practitioners in the developing world brought to fruition the practical points raised in this photo essay as a way of transforming the TfD process into an engaging participatory process.

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