

Theatre for Development in Conflict Management: Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) and Village Crises in Otobi, Benue State, Nigeria

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Introduction

The practice of Theatre in African societies is at a cross-roads. It has been since the entrance of colonialism. It has come from the traditional festival and ritual theatre to be confronted with the Western theatre of illusion and imitation of action—a meeting which has left both dissatisfaction and a hunger for a more practical theatre relevant to immediate reality of hunger, poverty, disease, lack and slow technological development.

In Nigeria, popular or community theatre, or theatre for development lends itself as a philosophical and practical solution to the dilemma of the African theatre, although, as a concept, it has been equally successful in many regions and situations in the world, especially in the developing societies. Saint Gbilekaa characterized this theatre as:

a process in which theatre is taken to the working class and the peasantry with the aim of conscientizing them through a dialogical exchange instead of taking to them finished plays as is conventional of the Western conventional theatre. The aim is to mobilize them for political and economic objectives.¹

Chris Nwamuo has estimated elsewhere that “it is in the identification with community and development concerns that Nigerian theatre can grow and be recognized as an important discipline” and contribute meaningfully to society.²

This article examines dynamics of popular theatre as practiced by a coalition of theatre practitioners in an entente Non-Governmental Organization, Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA). The emphasis is on the role of theatre in social development particularly its use in conflict identification, mediation and resolution.

NPTA and Community Development

When the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) announced the Theatre for Integrated Development (TIDE) workshop for between seventh and twenty-second of December 1989 in Benue State, Nigeria, it was the first major project of its nature in the country. The workshop had three major objectives:

1. To explore the potential of theatre in identifying and analyzing

village problems.

2. To make use of theatre to mobilize the target of communities towards agricultural and social development.

3. To discover and to put together the rural picture with a view to critically intervene in the problems. By working with and through village organizations, the workshop on long-term projects in order to solve some of the community's problems.³

Three communities were chosen as project sites, Onyuwei, Adankari and Otobi. The project was undertaken through two weeks of intensive research with groups of participants living in the aforesaid communities, cultural exchanges and various interactions through theatrical performances. In the communique⁴ issued at the end of the workshop, NPTA identified a similarity between the problems at Onyuwei and those at Adankari, being chiefly, the lack of bridges to enhance communication from their interior locations, the fragility of perishable food crops, futility of agricultural investment, and the health hazards as a result of the above. Importantly, it noted the growing culture of resignation to that hopeless state among the two hinterland communities.

Otobi village however, possessed different problems due to its "semi-urban" location. As the main source of modern water supply to Tarku Oil Mills and Otukpo town, it posed a classic case of a community astride traditional lifestyle and modern social services. Their problems were lack of electricity, a well-equipped clinic and effective distribution of water across to both sides of the village separated by a rail line. Apparently, theirs were problems readily identifiable with many urban townships like nearby Otukpo—that of harnessing local resources with basic technology to enrich their social life.

In following-up the work done in these communities two years later, Canada Fund through Cuso (a Canadian NGO) provided funds to facilitate the execution of some key projects. Onyuwei and Adankari opted for and were given monetary sums to commence community farms on an unprecedented large scale. These sums were entrusted into the hands of the village development associations and in the case of Adankari, one had to be created for that purpose. The Otobi community asked for a food processing machine to check the perennial domestic problem women faced in the community.

It is this Otobi project that has generated the most complications and offers a model for understanding the intricacies of self-help development in local communities in Africa. The objective of this study is to highlight the depth of the practice of Popular Theatre for development especially in the NPTA experience and to note its contribution to the general theory of alternative theatre and the field of acting and performance theory.

The Otobi Crisis

The food processing machine was an answered prayer to the women's wing of Otobi Community and Development Association (OCDA). It solved two of their immediate problems: providing accessible food processing at minimum cost and helping to improve their nutrition by adding several other variety of dishes to their menu. Thus, NPTA thought it wise to hand over the machine to the women. This met with a stiff resistance from the men, but, after series of meetings and consultations, the women were given its control with two women and only a man as signatories to the account. The day-to-day operation of the food processing plant was to be supervised by this three-person committee and financial proceeds deposited into an account for the women's use.

Under this committee system, signs of problems to come began to emerge. Firstly, the president of OCDA attributed the purchase of the machine to his Association, perhaps to indicate what later emerged as an attempt by the association to commandeer the machine. Secondly, the people began to question the autonomy of the committee and their use of revenues being generated from the machine.⁵ To set a system of checks and balances, the machine committee was to report directly to the OCDA and NPTA, while monies collected were in the interim, to be left in the account.

This was the position at which the matter was left until December 1996 when NPTA organized a public enlightenment workshop on AIDS at nearby Otukpo but had to take a day trip in-between the workshop to arbitrate over the crisis generated by this food processing machine among members of the Otobi community. The nature of the problem being disputes over the communal ownership of the machine that tore the hitherto harmonious village, leading to the suspension of work for over a year on the food processing plant.

From agitations and petitions which formed the background reports, NPTA decided to set up an arbitration team of ten people (including this writer) but with the over fifty participants of the Otukpo workshop in attendance. The aim was to use the group as a collective pressure on the dissenting parties to agree to reach an understanding to enable the immediate re-commencement of work on the facility. The ten-member team was given the mandate to arbitrate between the groups and serve as jury in the matter on behalf of NPTA. In a briefing, we were informed that the engulfing crisis pitched the reconstituted machine committee against the traditional powers in the village led by the chief. This camp, in the escalation of the crisis, subjected the committee members to fines and arrests by the police. As, at the time of this arbitration, the aggrieved party had taken the case to court and hired a lawyer to prosecute their case, forcing the village chief and elders also to acquire the services of a lawyer, both sides were losing valuable resources and time because of this machine which came with a promise of better living conditions for the villagers.

Since this NPTA “jury” team did not have any judicial powers over the community, a preparatory session was held on the eve of the visit to Otobi. The aim was to find means of circumventing the African tradition of older people being above the questioning of younger people (which we all were, in comparison to the leadership in the community). This attempt to “question” elders might be misconstrued for disrespect and insubordination. We reckoned their vulnerability to the threat of removal of the facility to other equally needy communities should bring everyone to accept to reason with NPTA. However, as a Popular Theatre for Development Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), our most potent means of communication was and still is, drama. We recognized that the problem was one of lack of understanding of the overall purpose of the project that led to the stalemate. However, we did not possess many solutions outside the people’s ability to resolve their differences; after all, the machine would remain with them, and they it is who have and will always continue to co-exist. We therefore toed Paulo Freire’s line of thought while saying:

It is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to bring about (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication . . . Superficial conversions to the cause of liberation carry this danger.⁶

Theatre in the Service of Conflict Resolution

After the pleasantries on arrival, the Otobi community treated the NPTA visitors to a masquerade dance performance as the entire village gathered at the village square (where the food processing machine was also located). The jury team then staged a drama skit based on the available information on the crises. It is pertinent to discuss how the drama sketch was arrived at, so as to be able to appreciate its service.

Theatre in the popular theatre tradition is marked by dynamism in approach and performance styles. Some of these include taking the theatre piece to the target community, the theatre facilitator co-habiting and devising plays from this close interaction into a theatre piece with the target community (as in the Kamiriithu experience of the two Ngugis in Kenya) and other guerilla techniques. Indeed, there are as many performance styles in popular theatre as there are problems to be solved; what determines which and how a performance style is suitable remains the nature of issues to be tackled. In this case, several suggestions were made and critically assessed by the ten-man team, and a skit with a capacity to “balloon” into discussion was opted for. The drama piece was to merely re-present the warring parties on stage, re-state the facts or grievances (at least as we understood them) and stop at the climax and ask the real parties in the village for corroboration so that the case can then be “heard.” This approach is based on the utility of theatre as

a means to an end rather than an end by itself. As reiterated elsewhere by Oga Abah;

the arena of action and of changing the situation, of letting development take place in concrete terms are outside the stage. They happen outside the life of the drama ... theatre in and by itself cannot change society.⁷

In our own rendition of the crisis, on December 5, 1996, the drama skit began with two actors coming as “members of NPTA” trying to forcefully remove an imaginary food processing machine amid pleas from the other “people” in the play. In order to further restrain the two “NPTA” members, the “people” begin to throw accusations and counter-accusation at one another. Two actors re-enacted the committee, alleging that they were fined and arrested and taken to the police for refusing to allow interference in the business of the machine. The “village chief” (played by this writer) had a close associate with whom they constituted a power block that would either have their way or lock up the machine room. Each time a stalemate is reached, the “NPTA members” would question whether it was wrong to have acquired the machine in the first instance and then threaten to remove it, thereby returning the “people” to the question of how the crisis is to be resolved. This climaxed at a point where the “chief” threatens to expel the “troublesome” two from the village. Since this performance was being acted in English, a popular orator in the Idoma community simultaneously translated to the local language.

Acting in this kind of “direct talk” drama does not mask under pseudo-satirical characters but rather attacks the subject matter on the face. The people being mimicked, surprisingly, appeared to enjoy the performance despite its critical attack on their persons and actions. The villagers laughed at the story line and our attempts through mannerisms and dialogue at enacting characters familiar to them. While playing the role of the chief, I stole glances at the man I was impersonating and found him staring transfixed at what was unfolding. It was almost like a direct, point blank communication with him through the improvised piece. This feeling of intrinsic pleasure which I got acting this role and looking at the man I was impersonating is similar to that expressed by Hodgson and Richards’ description of improvisational acting:

During the portrayal of the role the actor has aimed to identify himself with the part he is playing, but practice has led him to be able to develop awareness to the point at which this can be achieved while he is still retaining control. His awareness is such that he may, paradoxically, forget his audience, while knowing he is communicating with them.⁸

As in the real life village situation, the drama stopped with the impasse over the food processing machine. At this point, the “actors” remained seated in the midst of the village crowd being already transformed to a Jury (I doubt if the villagers knew that at this point) over the matter at hand. In his brief response to the “facts and fiction” in the play, the chief of Otobi denied knowledge of any such problem in the community! He went ahead to challenge us to confirm his assertion from official police and court records in the land, starting with the Otobi police outpost. There was a graveyard silence at this point, but the chief insisted on his position and asked the elders, “is it not so?” to which they all chorused in the affirmative.

We (the jury) were beginning to wonder about the validity of the crisis report and to feel the folly we had created through the play when an elderly man stood up in an outburst to say a fine of a live goat and eight hundred Naira cash (about \$9) was paid on his behalf because he objected to the attempt by the men to hijack the machine. In an unprecedented act of bravery, he turned and accused the chief: “why are you telling our visitors that there is no misunderstanding?” He was immediately asked to apologize for putting a direct question to the chief, against customary traditions. He immediately did, but the die was cast.

In response to this outburst, the chief began a defense by stating philosophically that if there was a quarrel even at a funeral, he would advise that the body be buried first. He again denied any knowledge of the crisis but he betrayed this fact as he went on to say when the keys to the machine house were taken away from the committee, no one came to report to him. Secondly, he retorted that the community through its elders had rights to fine anyone while his office had jurisdiction to entertain appeals of such punitive measures.

Realizing our arbitration mission was being endangered as it was being subjected to the political authority of the chief, the Secretary General of NPTA (Dr. Jenks Okwori) who was also serving as a member of the “jury” at this time, abdicated this position to become a sort of a prosecutor. This was a spontaneous act, and I doubt if the villagers understood that a trial had begun. If they did, their chief would hardly agree to any such arbitration. He introduced himself and added that he delivered the machine on behalf of NPTA. This gave him authority to speak on the matter. He re-capped that a letter was received previously on the brewing crisis and the NPTA President came on a mediating mission that took him three days. “If the letter lied, was the president’s visit also deniable?” he asked. He had indeed proved there was a problem and left the gathering with the choice of facing it.

The elders at this point asked for five minutes to confer aside in a *tete-a-tete*. When they returned a youth leader (Agaba Ringo Aje) offered to testify in the matter being a witness and participant in the crisis. His narration of the events shed more light as to what transpired in the preceding four years. The first committee failed to “impress” the community and was dissolved without objections.

A new one was consequently elected and when they too failed to perform, they met the same fate. Only, this time, the second committee defied the communal decision and instead kept the machine room locked for six months. This led to the fines imposed on them and the locks forcefully opened, although work had to cease in the face of the imbroglio.

Elder Egbo Okoko, aged over seventy, corroborated this story when the elders returned to the gathering. He reiterated that the “people” collectively agreed to relieve the second committee for acts of mismanagement and that one of the committee members had claimed that the machine was bought by his son-in-law (who is an important functionary of NPTA) as such he had more rights to it. He still maintained that there was no misunderstanding at all over the food processing machine.

At this point, both the NPTA president and the interpreter (Barrister Obulete, who incidentally was representing one of the parties in an outstanding matter on this case in court), appealed for a resolution of the matter since a “jury” was there and ready to resolve the crisis. This appeal made Godwin Ola Opleku, a retired army officer who was on the allegedly dissolved committee, to open up with their own version of the “facts.”

He recounted that they were elected by open ballot and they performed credibly, bringing the machine back to life after five months of inactivity. Their dissolution was the singular decision of the village chief, which when they resisted, was followed with fines and ostracization. To buttress his point, he said they were asked to come over and handover all documents at the palace instead of the village square where such events take place and contrary to all procedures. His testifying brought out the fact that the crisis had other factors and dimensions attached. These include the community’s grievance over the alleged sale of communal land to Fulani herdsmen for grazing purposes and the authoritarian leadership style of the chief. As this could not be confronted directly, the food processing machine became the ground for open conflict. As conflict mediators, we realized we had jurisdiction only on the matter which concerned us, the food processing machine.

The “jury” at this point called for the women to speak, as it was for them the machine was installed. Martha Ikaboku the chairlady of the purportedly dissolved machine committee, spoke on their behalf. She carefully avoided the crisis and pleaded that the machine be left for the community as she vouched that no such problem will surface in future. The youths also pleaded for the machine to be left in their community as the bickering would only serve to rob them of its benefits.

After consultation, the “jury” asked the various interest groups if they were resolved about finding a solution to the crisis, to which there was a general echo on the affirmative. Consequently, a ten-man committee was set up, made up of two representatives each of the elders, youths, women, NPTA and the embattled committee. The term of reference of this committee was to resolve the crisis

amicably and work out a formula for managing the food processing machine henceforth.

Conclusion

The Otobi project has raised pertinent issues that should interest practitioners of modern contemporary theatre in Nigeria. With the lack of theatre facilities and the economic downturn which has discouraged patronage evidenced by dwindling fortunes of commercial and Traveling Theatre groups, alternative audiences must be sought. The community theatre offers not only a willing audience, but also a needy one, which calls for sacrifice and social commitment on the part of the theatre practitioner. The thriving practice of the NPTA attests to this, and unless the artist can encourage social development, both he and his art stand the danger of extinction in the developing world.

As a developmental concern, the theatre should not just stop at projecting crisis as reality, but be a first step towards finding solutions for them. Many national and regional conflicts are easier resolved at their earliest manifestation. In Otobi, the crisis can be said to be one from lack of foresight. It emanated largely from the food processing machine being seen as an end, rather than a means to an end. No other concrete project or goal had been set for the proceeds of the machine. It, therefore, left room for suspicion and manipulation by various interested parties. This later forced the community to set further developmental goals.

Closely linked with this stagnation caused by lack of vision is the question of the target groups and their perception of projects being attracted to them by popular theatre initiatives. If the community is not encouraged to contribute to any project by way of financial levies or material donation, such projects at best could be seen as the property of the most vocal, active, or powerful members of the community or as a "national" cake for exploitation. This is usually counter-active to the developmental goals of communities.

In this case of Otobi food processing machine, NPTA had the authority as the facilitator of the project and a respected party in the crisis to further commit itself to resolving matters arising therefrom. This has saved the project from wasting and community from disintegrating – objectives that were obviously not planned for but had to be faced. This underscores the importance of continuous cooperation and follow-up in theatre for development practice.

The options for and in theatre for development are limitless; but, most definitely, this theatre serves to develop both the person and the environment. This makes, every theatre curricula in developing countries hollow without it. For in the words of Brian Way: "In education we are not developing actors. we are not teaching actors, and above all, we are concerned with developing sincere living in a myriad ways and not concerned with developing a capacity for giving others an illusion of living."⁹

In the aspect of the practice of theatre. the Otobi project has emphasized

that the conscious use of the techniques of theatre can help to by-pass the stumbling blocks to communal development such as the traditional beliefs and institutions of a community and open up new vistas for the practice of the art.

Notes

1. Saint E.T. Gbilekaa, "Theatre and Political Change in Nigeria Since Independence, in *Theatre and Politics in Nigeria*, ed. Jide Malomo and Saint Gbilekaa (Lagos, SONTA, 1993) 10.
2. Chris Nwamuo, *The Faces of Nigerian Theatre* (Calabar, Nigeria: Centaur, 1990) 65.
3. *Networker: Newsletter of the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA)*. 1.1 (1989): 29.
4. *Networker: Newsletter of the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA)* 1.2 (1990): 3-4.
5. Oga Abah, "Monitoring Trip Report," *Networker: Newsletter of the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA)* 1.3 (1992): 8.
6. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) 41
7. Oga S. Abah, "Participatory Theatre: Issues and Cases" in *The Practice of Community Theatre in Nigeria*, ed Iyoruwese Harry Hagher (Lagos: SONTA, 1990) 21.
8. John Hodgson and Ernest Richards, *Improvisation* (London: Methuen, 1974) 15.
9. Brian Way, *Development Through Drama* (London: Longman, 1967) 269.

