

Psycho-Therapeutic Concerns in Performance Arts and Community Development in Africa

Peter Muhoro Mwangi*
Mount Kenya University, Kenya
Email: muhoromwangip@gmail.com

Mellitus Nyongesa Wanyama
Kabarak University, Kenya
Email: mwanyama@kabarak.ac.ke

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Abstract

This paper explores the position of art as a vehicle of socio-economic development; engineered by playwrights as mouth pieces of their societies. The arts domain has always been a contested field of experimentation in handling community-oriented issues concerning human life. Plato in *The Republic*, authoritatively condemned arts terming it a less important realm of education as “artists begin from ideas advance further ideas and end up in ideas.” This view was however challenged by Aristotelian views, clearly stating the value of imitating the right actions. In contemporary societal disposition, there has emerged a new wave of correction ideas for community artists with the development concerns of a people. Art emerges as a mirror of society and so whatever is performed for its good builds the psychological needs of the community members. The spirit of togetherness and cooperative movement is best expressed through performing arts while engaging, the people in development projects, for instance; building of community schools, cattle dips, police stations, water projects, social halls and churches among others. There is a great opportunity for developing a people’s future through the voice of the performers. Performance and education emerge as important paradigms for shaping not only an individual but community goals, ambitions and aspirations. Ideally, the performance enhances psychotherapeutic ingredient in the audience. An active synergized audience participates in creating an atmosphere of oneness, people’s power, innovation and societal empowerment. A culture of brotherhood, sisterhood and pacification entrenches itself in the minds of community members who are then able to participate in decision-making ventures especially that involve the youth and women groups. In the long run, the ensuing differences and conflicts that rock the community are addressed harmoniously and courageously through dialogue captured in dramatic arts.

Key words: Performance arts, Artist, Psychology, Therapy, Theatre and development, Community theatre

Introduction

In our contemporary society, there has emerged a growing concern in the appropriateness of the domain of performance arts and its contribution to matters concerning a given community. Humankind is known to have been an artistic race from time immemorial in addressing emerging issues and mundane metaphysical concerns. There is great need to integrate performance in dramatic arts as a vehicle for creating awareness of the needs of the people as voiced through community development forums.

The lives of many people in Africa have been antagonized by scores of challenges and problems. Therefore, the need to identify various means available for bringing on board the people to see themselves on the mirror of society is crucial; that is revealed through literary discourse. This

* *Corresponding author*

can be reinforced through the application of psychology as a paradigm that incorporates therapy to examine the status quo in the community. It is noticeable that members of a community embrace the totality of performance arts especially, when they reflect on their cultural practices. As a community, Kenya has demonstrated the spirit of working together to foster development.

As such, performing artists emerge as the drivers that steer their community and nation at large to call for unity of purpose. There are matters to do with peace and prosperity that require multifarious approaches that hinge on community needs and practices. Therein, the voice of the performing artist becomes a centrifugal force for pinpointing where the community was, where it is and where it is going, in its march to get its share of the space of development in the wider global community.

Discussion

Arts and Society in Africa

Artists in the classical age had an avalanche of hurdles to clear for them to be recognized as part of the sector of humanity that contributes to development. This was mainly because of the position held by classical thinkers and /or philosophers. Among them was the famous Plato who openly castigated artists that they are witches and live like pests in the society of the human race. In voicing his concerns on arts, he proclaimed that art is inferior to science (hard) as it was merely a work of imitation. In the course of imitation, Plato claimed that members of society would imitate bad behaviour to counter his postulations. Aristotle, another great thinker/philosopher came into the field of dialogue with Plato as his focus. He advanced the view that imitation is central in the life of a human being. When a child is born, it automatically starts imitating what is in the surrounding environment.

In Africa the source of performance and dramatic compositions prescribed by verbal artists emanate mainly from the world of mythology and legends. This is exemplified in “Nosilimela, An Africa Epic and mythology” by Yao-kun Liu. He notes that “The post (of African myths and legends) should be preserved in a living, dynamic form not by going back to it but by recreating it into new and lovelier forms.” (2001, p. 59).

Further, Yao- Kun Liu in Losamba and Sarnjeive (2001, p. 59) notes:

Drawing on as many African legends and [...] myths as possible from the rich treasury of African civilization “Nosilimela” enhances the glory of African civilization, and promotes African dignity, self-assertion and consciousness.

Performance arts today have survived due to the Aristotelian view which overcame the Platonic view. Today in community development concerns, dramatic arts have been a major driving force in addressing, for instance, social ills in the community. Our contemporary society is a product of the conflicts that emerged between the political players of colonial times and post independent concerns. The conflict has in one way or another been the agent of perpetual problems in the African continent. Thespians have endeavoured to pick on the ills that have continued to feature in contemporary society, for instance, the spread of HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The artist shows the concerns of his or her society through acting dramatic pieces that lean towards the social concerns on the destruction of the moral fabric in contemporary times. The artist fills the gap that is required in systematic therapy. A therapy that is systematic in the

physiological sense; this means affecting the whole body rather than being local or regional whether via systemic administration, systematic effect or both. Systemic therapy in the psychotherapeutic sense seeks, to address people not only on the individual level but also as people in relationships, dealing with the interaction of groups. This augurs well with the spirit of group dynamics in contemporary times.

There is therefore a great opportunity in the field of performance arts for performing artists to fill the gap that exists in educating and creating awareness in the general populace. The campaign against the spread of HIV/AIDS takes the centre stage as one way that members of the African society can access the truth about the scourge that is a threat to the existence of humanity. In attending performances staged in community halls, social halls, market places, churches, schools and other venues like hotels, motels and bars; the performing artist emerges as the teacher of his or her own society.

Chinua Achebe, in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) underlines, the centrality of an individual artist's role in acting as the mouthpiece of his or her own African community. The creative talent that evolves from a given artist becomes the springboard for creating psychotherapeutic paradigms for countering the social ills in our contemporary society.

It is against such a back drop that the application of indigenous knowledge, used to marry it with modern ways of tackling education appears to have a meeting point. In the traditional African set up there used to be an element of African drama that featured in rituals and ceremonies observed by a given community at a given location. There were rites of passage which included birth, child-naming, second birth, initiation rites like circumcision, tattooing of particular parts of the body, piecing of ears among others that featured prominently. In celebrating traditional dramatic rituals and rites of passage it spells out the connection between realism and imagination.

According to Emunah (1994):

Drama therapy offers an intensification of the psychotherapeutic process by introducing a wider range of methods for accessing images and effects, thus contributing to the growing need for more cost-effective types of psychiatric treatment (p. 12).

Performance and Education in Africa

Performance that is not geared to achieving an identifiable end is, to say the least, a valueless venture so to speak. Performance arts and education prop up as a noble cause to be pursued by all the parties concerned. In a single performance, a performing artist can achieve great mileage in educating his or her audience depending on the approach applied. The choice of words, gestures, eye contact and other aspects of drama are all central in making or breaking a performance. This is reinforced through the application of music therapy in a given performance. There is some faith-healing power that comes from seed germinated from musical utterances, rhythm and beats.

As Dos Santos (2005) notes:

The seed of Music Therapy has been planted in African soil. Some water the seed, some are not convinced that it's necessary to have such a seed in this particular garden and others are unaware that the seed has been planted at all....music therapy grows, flourishes and produces much fruit in Africa.

We have taken time to watch street performances in towns like Nakuru, Thika and Nairobi just to get amused and also record the achievement and goals of the performing artist. The street performer's main goal is to "pluck" a coin (feather) from your deep or shallow pocket. Notwithstanding, his/her utterances in whatever amount of time the performance lasts, has what we would call a "telling" or "impactful" effect in a serious viewer's point of view.

The level of masquerading adopted by the performance "kings" and "queens" on our streets is the hallmark of cheap but justifiable entertainment especially for travellers who have at least a minute or two to spare and watch these 'pseudo-Shakespeares' of our contemporary times. Their satirised and politicized renditions add flavour to the existing reality on the ground.

As Kitege-Ngoi (1990) further postulates:

Politics is one of the main topics of drama in independent Francophone Africa countries. Many writers depict in their plays the terrible situations that prevail in independent Africa. They clearly exposed political abuses, corruption and exploitation of the masses by the new Africa bourgeoisie who are perpetuating the colonization process. Dramatists fiercely condemn neo-colonialism.

The populace suffocates under neo-colonial systems in the African continent and the rest of the third world. Poor governance and misuse of public funds are common features in contemporary regimes of Africa. Performing oral artists address these burning societal ills through dramatic renditions tailored with bits of exaggerated wording of the literary text so created.

Rise of Mobile Community Theatre

In Africa, performance art is part of the daily activities that are conducted by communities in different locations of the continent. Merc and Answell (2004) note that in African theatre matters, African theatre is entertainment, but it can also be aesthetically, politically, socially and spiritually committed and often in all these things simultaneously.

In the Kenyan nation-state of contemporary times, there has risen a new wave of trial performances as many aspiring artists have discovered that there is a ready audience out there waiting patiently to be entertained.

As Merc and Answell (2004) observe further:

African theatre refuses to be compartmentalized into a particular form of presentation. Instead, it draws on indigenous performance traditions including dance, music, storytelling and mime, and combines them with ideas of drama drawn from experience of western (colonization) colonialism, to create.

Having noted the gap that exists in the entertainment circles at around 1990s, there emerged a kind of mobile street community performance (theatre). In terms of legislation of the troubadour-type of street performers, we have no idea, whether they are licensed to operate in the "corners" of strategic streets in towns and cities. Though most of the performing artistes of this emergent

genre appear to perform in a kind of “incognito” nature whereby, they “drop” on “anecdotes” of socio-political renditions, the most significant one was his Eminence the late “Nyengece” a handsome young man from Murang’a County. It appears he coined his name from a Congolese animation chant: *O Mama Nyengece- Nyengece! Nyoo! Nyoo! Nyengece*” This prince of street theatre died in his early twenties, when he was involved in a motor vehicle accident in Survey area – located in neighbourhoods of Nairobi city.

Recently, one of the authors of this article happened to be walking along the streets of Thika, an industrial town of Kenya and later he boarded a Nairobi bound bus. No sooner had the bus departed than a trio of young men boarded the bus and started their mobile “clinic” performance. They applied dialogic realism technique to spell out their joke-performance inside the bus. The lead performer donned a Sombrero hat, popularly known as “godfather” or *Mugeka*. In addition, the artist was painted on the face and arms to masquerade as an elderly person. In fact, the performer spotted grey-haired moustache and beard that suited him well for the performance. The rest of the pack of “duet” played the responsorial as the first performer did the “man-solo” or leading the “trilogue”.

In a performance of five minutes the trio entertained the travellers who were left crumbling in “thrills” and peals of laughter - the charge of the “impromptu” and “incognito” performance! Yes! They produced recorded street drama on CDs. Each was sold at a price of one hundred Kenya shillings. On estimate, they sold an average of one thousand and five hundred shillings.

Nobody complained or condemned them for having “hijacked” the travellers to listen and watch their five-minute show. The CD, titled *Panda mbegu ministry* is a satirical piece of street drama that addresses political, social, economic and religious issues in contemporary Kenyan-nation-state and even beyond.

The performing artists indicated on the cover of the CD are: Overseer, one man Wandahuhu, Jimmy, Bishop Car-Mongo and Bishop Adonai. In our own judgment this troupe of performers reaches a wide audience in a day than would a professional group that is “holed” up in a place like Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi city centre. Simple as it appears the mobile joke-performance artists address members of the community in a short time but after soul searching, we believe they are doing a good job in spreading the art of performance and its significance in community development. They are advancing the *Gikomba* renaissance drama and performance of the 1980s and 1990s.

All in all, as Emunah (1994, p. XVII) has emphatically postulated:

The use of drama as therapy fosters liberation, expansion and perspective. Drama therapy invites us to uncover and integrate dormant aspects of ourselves, to stretch our conception of who we are and the experience of our intrinsic connection with others. The process begins with the dramatic mode. But eventually the curtain lifts and we find that what was revealed under the protective prices of theatre no longer needs a stage.

The way forward in the advancement of performance arts in Africa lies in the commitment of African government’s role in appraising the centrality of citizenry healing process in matters of peace of the mind and that of the nation-states that are socially, politically and economically polarized beleaguered by negative ethnicity, for instance the case of Kenya and the rest of the wider East African nation-states.

Conclusions

The paper has attempted to look into the unexploited sector of performance arts and its role in community development concerns. It has addressed the gist of the matter related to creation of psycho-therapeutic episodes in drama which makes the ordinary citizen to have chance to laugh not only to others but to himself or herself. Why? Life is full of many misgivings from the high and mighty to the meekness of man or woman walking on the street. The socio-therapy “clinic” staged inside buses, street corners and at times in church compounds has come a long way to fill the gap of the citizenry missing to attend theatre shows and factual cinemas that are offered by relevant government sector and non- governmental organizations (NGO) in the land.

The “scriptible theory” technique applied by the “mobile community theatre” operators echoes the nature of the idiomatic expressions and proverbs used to guide, counsel, entertain, warn and create harmony in African traditional societies. There is great potential out there in the villages, streets, towns, trading centres and cities that can be tapped to foster the ideals of providing forums to heal the society through performance-therapy that comes not only as a form of entertainment but job creation to the youth.

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