



**AIDS Education in Africa:**  
The Uses of Traditional Performance  
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**Introduction**

In Africa, social development projects, usually designed by western "experts," are continually being implemented. In these projects, there is usually communication support designed to inform and persuade the beneficiaries of the advantages of this development. The support frequently uses top-down communication models, with the state or a development agency as the source sending a message to a specific group of the population. Many media are used, ranging from radio, television, posters, and video to more traditional forms of communications such as griots, puppets, theater, and folktales.

Communication scholars have recognized that in Africa, television, radio and newspapers primarily reach urban people, resulting in an ever-widening information gap between rural and urban populations.<sup>1</sup> If rural people are to be reached and persuaded to change behavior, expanded uses of more traditional media are needed. One such approach is forum, or interactive, theater where communication, to share, is the foundation of this medium. Among its most important characteristics are that it encompasses cultural factors such as the oral tradition and social learning through performance, that it uses techniques to enhance audience identification, that it is inclusive, and above all, that it is participatory and stresses the equality of the input of all parties involved.

For two decades, forum theater has been used as a popular means of community development in West Africa and Kenya to bring healthcare and other social development messages to rural people. These messages are brought in a format, dramatic performance, which is enthusiastically received. This two-way communication permits audience members to act out and hopefully internalize concepts such as healthcare, nutrition, sex and AIDS education, and family planning.

**Theoretical framework**

Performance is the oldest vehicle for education in Africa. From praise singing by griots, to storytelling and masked dancing, oral histories and lessons have been passed down the generations through traditional communication forms. Children learn of values, tradition, history and behavior through observation of cultural artifacts, and absorb via metaphor. The level of abstraction is very high at times, and the performances are rich and sophisticated. Forum theater is a new genre of performance used to educate the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa over the past twenty years.

Forum theater developed indigenously in Burkina Faso modeled after a traditional form of community problem solving, the Koteba, although the ideas of the Brazilian educators Paulo Freire (1974) and Augusto Boal (1979) strongly influenced its development. Boal developed a type of forum theater as a mechanism for self-liberation of oppressed peoples in Brazil and Peru, and Freire used this interactive theater as a process to encourage dialogue in education.

This study examines the use of forum theater to evaluate whether its use as a cultural medium might be expanded, and to contribute towards a better understanding of African media and communication.

Scholars have recognized the importance of culture in rural communication projects. Servaes comments that the cultural and communication dimensions of development have long been given short shrift. He links these two dimensions together and states that "only in the last ten years has it been realized that culture and communication could well have a fundamental impact on the entire question of development" (1986: 203). Girard (1982: 26) argues that a cultural product that is transmitted or reproduced does not have the same cultural value as a work communicated directly at a live performance, one of the basic premises for this study of a cultural form. According to Weete "a development strategy that focuses on people, as the initiator and beneficiary of the process, indubitably depends on people" (1988: 39). Current strategies of top-down, one-way communication are decontextualized and a-cultural and often fail for these reasons.

The most important element to consider is the oral tradition in African societies. Conversation remains vital in Africa. Although radio is a popular medium, people in rural societies still prefer to use interpersonal speech (Pratt, 1987). Laye reminds us of the African love of talking:

***We touch upon one of the fundamental aspects of the African soul: the word, the love of palaver and dialogue, the rhythm of talk, that love of speech that can keep the old men a whole month under the palaver tree settling some dispute that what really characterizes the African peoples. (1984: 26)***

This love of words and speech manifests itself in many ways in Africa. Obeichina (1975) states that village story-telling, as well as other forms of oral tradition, is a living reality to African villagers and helps to inform and direct their attitudes. A feature of stories and tales is the use of proverbs. In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology emerges particularly and clearly in proverbs (Finnegan, 1970).

Obeichina (1975) suggests that the oral tradition persists in Africa because Africans are still largely illiterate, because most live in traditional, and culturally and linguistically homogenous village settings which foster oral culture, and because those who do live outside village settings still maintain close contacts with their orally based roots. He argues that the oral tradition persists in Africa because it expresses a consciousness atypical of the literary tradition. Shared metaphors or shared meanings are the basis of the common collective consciousness of rural people and may be very different from a cosmopolitan, urban ethos.

The spoken word also has an educational function. In most developing countries, traditions and cultural performances are the primary ways of educating the young and of promoting beliefs and values among adults. Ong (1982) considers that people in oral cultures learn by apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, and by participating in a kind of corporate retrospection. However, when attempting to bring new ideas to rural cultures, one is adding to or adjusting the stored knowledge; this needs to be done incrementally. Ong suggests that this way of learning—orally and incrementally—is not understood by Western communication scholars, whose own theories of learning and media effects may be different.

Traditional, or folk, media are employed in Africa to communicate new ideas. Drums and gongs often transmit news, puppets are used in morality plays, and even to convey political ideas in some countries. These media are grounded in the metaphors of an indigenous culture produced

and consumed by members of a group, and they reinforce their values. The important purpose of "oramedia," as Ugboajah refers to those media that employ language, is to provide teaching and initiation to members of society, with the object of imparting traditional social values. According to Ugboajah (1985: 9), an oral medium such as dramatic performance is expected to "teach." He continues:

***Traditional media linked to belief systems are effective tools in development programs of governments. As entertainment they can attract and hold the interest of large numbers of people. As oral media in local languages, they can involve the poorest groups and classes who are often left out of development activities because of illiteracy or lack of understanding of the English or French language. As dramatic representations of local problems, they can provide a codification of reality which can be used by participants in analyzing their situation.***

With this in mind, it is possible that an entertaining performance permitting audience input can codify reality and focus the spectators' attention on a particular problem. The role of performance is central to all African cultures, and for generations Africans have been communicating with each other through performance of different kinds (Banham, 1976). Performances communicate ideas and values and teach important lessons of behavior in every aspect of life. They function as a storehouse of cultural knowledge which is passed on to the next generation through the performance. In addition to the function as a social learning mechanism, performance is considered pleasure, a leisure activity in Africa. Events such as these are rare in a village, and therefore are an attraction, a social occasion, and an opportunity to interact with each other. Another important element is the notion of community. In Africa the group still generally takes preference over the individual. At the village level many problems are solved communally. A performance that brings together the village and involves all in problem solving is likely to be more appropriate than other approaches.

Theories of performance, such as the notions of role-playing and empathy, are important elements in forum theater. Boal discussed the importance of audience identification with roles and circumstances: "The actor must be guided by criteria of verisimilitude [the appearance of truth], as well as having his clothes and other personal items as authentic as possible" (1979: 181). Empathy with the actor is achieved with greater ease when a character performs an easily recognizable task of a domestic or professional nature. Communication is achieved through empathic role-playing rather than through roles with which spectators cannot identify.

Thus, the content of a play should reflect the realities of African village life. African playwrights strive to incorporate the audience into the performance through performing "in the round" in an open village square. Stone (1986: 241) says that Africans "often think of performance in a transactional sense. Like two people pulling at either end of a tug-of-way rope, rather than two people simply standing alone, one part rarely exists without the other". Theater in general, and forum theater in particular, can, therefore, be an effective communicator of new ideas to rural people in Africa, because of the orality of communication, the preference for face-to-face communication, theatricality in African tradition, and the need to interact that is met through this medium.

### **How it works**

There are three parts to a forum theater performance. First, the actors perform a play, in which social problems are depicted in ways intended to displease the audience. Second, a moderator invites the audience to re-enact certain parts that they did not like. Scenes are then replayed and spectators intervene as actors to propose changes and improvements, to engage in role playing, and to provide commentary. And third, there is a verbal exchange between audience,

actors, and health officials with the aim of clarifying the information. It is the aim of this endeavor is to transfer information that empowers people.

The role of the moderator is crucial. He, or she, controls the forum, and interrupts the spectator, who is replaying a scene, in order to ask the audience if they agree with the particular point of view being voiced. If the audience disagrees someone else volunteers to play it a different way. This continues until the audience is happy with the words and actions. The same role could be played several times until a generally acceptable solution is found. In this way audience input is solicited and received and this participation is the key element to success. The primary aim of forum theater is to engender feedback. Thus the feelings, opinions, and reactions of healthcare recipients are solicited and received in a constructive environment. Volunteers, usually children, are also asked to come onstage and respond to questions concerning the content of the play.

No formal attempt has been made to measure the effectiveness of the forum theater performances as would be expected of a traditional diffusion study. There are no quantitative measures that might indicate a change in behavior -- the norm for an evaluation of a typical development communication project. Social change is a process, and local knowledge is increased incrementally through many forms of communication and learning.

In my research in Burkina Faso in 1989, performances were all held in the open-air, often in a communal gathering place. On two occasions there was a stage, but typically the play was performed in the round which is the traditional mode of African performance. Children sat around the edge of the three-sided performance area, their numbers usually increasing greatly during the performance and the forum.

The performances I studied concerned family planning and AIDS prevention. Gender tensions were played out, and there was never any lack of input from the audience. Young women, usually reluctant at first, recreated the role of the lead female role, taking a stand against her husband who refused to allow any form of contraception. Elders in the audience were eager to replay the part of the older man to explain his position as the patriarch and to emphasize the need for large families and were treated respectfully by younger men, who nevertheless disagreed with their views. However, younger women seldom argued with an older man. Discussions of sex generated much laughter and applause, and the women replaying the role were greatly encouraged by female audience members. The ability to play a hypothetical role seemed to embolden the women. The forum appeared to give them a rare public platform to air their feelings, and there seemed to be solidarity between women in the audience. I observed a number who were moved emotionally by the play and generally there seemed to be great sympathy for the female character.

In general the spectators were pleased with the performance. Typical comments were that "the play informs people," "it teaches," "we can express ourselves," "it poses the problems that we experience," "we can learn many things," "everyone participates," "it permits an exchange of ideas," "it allows us to participate in searching for solutions to problems," "it makes us more aware," "it's a game that distracts," and "it helps the people to better understand certain things." A common response was to mention the play's consciousness raising effect on "the masses." Respondents generally thought that this was one of the only means for exchanging ideas with most of the village present. Participants appreciated being able to say what they felt about the topic as it was a forum for both old and young to voice opinions and discuss differences.

During follow-up visits, health personnel reported having learned a great deal about village attitudes from the forum. They were generally satisfied and reported increased sales of contraceptives which could be attributed to the scene dealing with AIDS and its prevention. Personnel also reported increased visits to the clinics. A doctor felt that "in the play there were

situations that are very real in the lives of people. Everyone knows someone like this in his or her neighborhood, so the situation portrayed is very realistic". Health personnel also felt that the people who saw the play talked about it and the message was spread many times. A midwife said "theater gives a practical example as opposed to other forms which provide only theory, such as loudspeakers or talks. People do not know how things should happen". A young man told me that he was impressed with the proverbs used in the play as "they come from the ancestors, you cannot dispute them. It comes from our customs and even the old people accept what you are saying".

A health worker said "theater allows for questions and statements that might otherwise be seen as vicious. People know that in the play they will not be judged by the questions they ask or the statements they make". Another said that these productions create a social context and introduce certain behavior that is imitated. "People see aspects of real life and elements of society in the play, and they can learn how they should behave from these performances. Plays permit us to introduce negative aspects and show positive responses." He found the forum very useful and said, "It permitted me and my staff to ascertain the level of perception among the audience and to assess what work was still needed in family planning from the audience reactions. This feedback is important, as it provides information about how the people think about certain topics."

This opinion was shared by a UNICEF communication officer who reported that forum theater was the best adapted communication means because it is based on "la palabre africaine." For him the instantaneous feedback is invaluable as a source of social data. "For instance," he said, "when audience members take positions vis-a-vis the problem, exposing their divergent feelings and opinions, their feedback provides a synthesis of ideas which emerges as a system of dominant thought. This information forms the subsequent healthcare and other social information campaigns." (Solo Baro. August 8, 1989).

## **Conclusions**

Villagers learned from the performances. They obtained and retained family planning and AIDS information. The play had generated an awareness of the availability of options and this translates into some empowerment for women, and families generally.

The opportunity for dialogue resulted in people's voices being heard, and a feeling of contributing in community problem-solving. These elements of feedback and sharing are missing in so many development communication projects.

An oral medium such as this conforms to the preferred means of communication--interpersonal. Audiences appreciated the use of proverbs, and other cultural specifics which appeared to have made an impression on villagers. This entertaining medium appears to be well-received and very popular.

At a cost of approximately \$600 per performance, and an average audience of 100 plus the multiplier effect, it is cost-effective. Feedback on the topic presented is instant, and opposition is publicly aired. Village attitudes are thereby shared and incorporated into future projects. The theater and other forms of traditional participatory media are popular and effective methods of achieving genuine communication. African values play a very important role in successful communication with rural people. The orality of the people, the preference for interpersonal communication, and the traditional of performance in the culture are the main reasons for the acceptance of theater as a medium of education and communication. It is a step towards a more egalitarian society. It provides an opportunity for dialogue between the people who are powerful and those who are powerless, the educated and uneducated, urban and rural, and men and woman at the village level -- a necessary steppingstone for progress.

## Notes

1. Radio has been used in many countries for the dissemination of social information, but more often than not it is listened to only for entertainment such as music. (Ugboajah, 1972).
2. Personal communication. Burkina Faso Ministry of Health and Social Action, May 5, 1989. They estimated the multiplier to be ten.

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