

# Theatre for Development-

## *A Tanzanian Road Towards Citizenship and Cultural Renewal*

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### **Abstract**

During the 60s, Theatre for Development was introduced into several states in Africa. The focus at that time was to utilize theatre as a tool of communication in development projects. During the 80s Tanzania developed their own variant of this genre through the initiative of the University of Dar es Salaam's Department of Fine and Performing Arts offering lectures on Theatre for Development. They wanted to develop a supportive theatre and theatrical methods to improve the conditions in their communities. Self-determination and participation for the townspeople in the local conflict resolution process was the department's keywords. The basic idea was that Theatre for Development should be based on the local and popular theatre traditions. Through popular theatre, the whole population could be gathered whether they be young or old, women, men or disadvantaged. By means of storytelling, dance, drama, music, and songs people were encouraged to express themselves about problems in society. This included both mainstream and marginalized groups that did not usually take part in verbal discussions and express their opinions. The intention was to form a theatre genre that would gather the whole population to contribute to social change and improved living conditions.

This introductory paper will focus upon the different methods used in Tanzanian Theatre for Development and will discuss Theatre for Development's use as a vehicle for social change and increasing awareness about Tanzanian traditions and identity.

**Keywords:** *Theatre and Education, African Theatre, Theatre for Development, Tanzanian Culture*

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## Introduction

After its introduction, Theatre for Development (TfD) migrated as a strategy for popular education in sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and Latin America in the 70s.<sup>1</sup> Since then it has spread throughout the world. From the 70s onward the acronym TfD has been used to describe a variety of theatre forms and theatre expressions that share education and development as a common purpose. Community theatre, popular theatre and most recently, applied theatre are labels often used for Theatre for Development projects.

## Background and Inspirations

From the global society important inspirations came along with new pedagogical and educational ideas that were disseminated around the world. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*<sup>2</sup> the Brazilian adult educator and philosopher Paolo Freire underlined how education had to be based on one's own experiences in daily life and how communication between the teacher and student were essential. Their dialog becomes the focus for all educational processes. Illiterate people had to be given a voice and consciousness so that they were able and enabled to change their situation.



Figure 1. Musicians tuning and warming up before a performance.

Freire's experiments with innovative and participatory learning methods also inspired the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal to develop progressive theatre techniques that addressed how theatre could be used as a social intervention vehicle. In his book: *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal developed a number of strategies that could activate the audience to avoid oppression by participation.<sup>3</sup>

More local inspiration was found in the growth of the newly born nation states throughout Africa. In their own way, they emphasized the need for a national identity and a strong national culture. A common feature in these African states was that the cultural roots were underlined as a basis for their national culture. The first Tanzanian Prime Minister Julius Nyere expressed the importance of a national culture in this way:

"I want to seek out the best of traditions and customs of all our tribes and make them a part of our national culture. A country which lacks its own culture is no more than a collection of people without the spirit that makes them a nation."<sup>4</sup>

#### Theatre for Development: Early Projects in Tanzania

In Tanzania as for the rest of Africa, TfD projects were often initiated by huge worldwide organizations like WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO. By means of theatre, their aim was to spread information and knowledge among all people even the illiterate. These huge TfD – projects focused on health and living conditions by addressing issues like: health, employment opportunities, farming efficiency and educating people in the use of new technology.

These projects were increasingly criticized for being campaigns that were not seriously concerned about the local people and their living conditions. They were accused of being forced upon the local people by the external initiators. The projects were also criticized for their biased concerns about economic growth while sacrificing social and cultural factors. Additionally, they were accused for being top – down projects meaning that outsiders were forcing development upon people which had no voice of their own. This criticism was in accordance with new international tendencies where the new idea for development was the growth of *another development*.<sup>5</sup>

During the 80s *another development* was the criticism of the modernization processes that focused on economic growth and industrialization. Development meant ideally to consider the whole human being and its material, and non-material needs. Self-determination and participation in decision making processes were now considered important in all forms of development work.

Of great importance for today's TfD- projects in Tanzania was the Jipomoyo Project. Jipomoyo was established as a bilateral cooperation between the Cultural Ministry in Tanzania and the Academy of Finland in 1975. The foundation of this Project was an understanding that indigenous culture and traditions were to be

the sources for innovation and development with the direct participation of the townspeople. One of the project leaders Swartz, describes the methodology as follows:

“To experiment methods of approach in development research which incorporates people from all levels in the process of research, and creates in them awareness of their own resources.”<sup>6</sup>

It was desired that most of the townspeople were to take part in this process and as a result distance between the researcher and the community was minimized. The core idea was to put in motion changes desired by the community itself with their own experience as the starting point. Then secondly, utilize the indigenous culture and traditions as vehicles to achieve social innovation.

The Laedza Batani-campaign in Botswana during the 80s also became important for the development of new TfD-projects in Tanzania. This campaign underlines the importance of two-way communication. The model for TfD-projects in the future was described in the manual of the campaign that stated:

“Popular theatre includes performances of drama, puppetry, singing, and dancing. These performances are called popular because they are aimed at the whole community, not just those who are educated. They are performed in local languages and deal with local problems so everyone can find them useful. This new type of theatre in Botswana builds on local ability and interest in story-telling, singing, poetry, and dancing.”<sup>7</sup>

### University Theatre in Tanzania

The Department of Art, Music, and Theatre at the University of Dar es Salaam established contact with the community's grass-roots. In the Travelling Theatre movement during the 70s they toured theatre productions made on campus to remote areas, while in the 80s this was replaced with a new movement called Theatre with the People.

One of the first TfD- projects following this new model and methodology was the Malya Popular Theatre Workshops in 1882-83. Lihamba describes the project as follows:

“Participants in the project use their own theatre forms to pose developmental problems according to their own context. Through the creative process the problems are posed, discussed and solutions suggested”<sup>8</sup>

The background of this project was the lack of communication between the townspeople, politicians, and local authorities.

The follow-up work indicated that the project had succeeded in many ways. One of the projects leaders, Professor Penina Mlama writes that as a result, meetings between District Council and townsfolk were held where among other things, job schedules for adults were created.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, David Kerr remarked on the success of the Malya project:

“The catalyst group in Malya became so well accepted that they were able to influence the Malya Christian sect of the African Inland Church to stop its hostility towards drama performances. In general, the campaign led to a revitalization of cultural life, and paved the way for economic projects to alleviate problems such as unemployment and vagrancy.”<sup>10</sup>

The Malya project showed that TfD not only had relevance for local communities, but that it could contribute to social innovation and social change.

From the beginning of the Malya Project and up till now, a huge number of TfD-projects have been initiated in Tanzania. Rough estimates report that more than 200 communities have been involved. Both external institutions such as UNICEF, SIDA, AMREF, Red Cross, NORAD together with local organizations (Tanzania Gender Networking Program (TGNP) and Tanzania Media Women Association (TMWA)) has been involved in these projects. Moreover, the University of Dar es Salaam, the National Arts Council of Tanzania, and TaSUBa, (former Bagamoyo College of Arts), Tanzanian Theatre Centre have initiated special projects by sending theatre practitioners to work at the grass-root level to implement projects initiated by the townspeople or form them outside in the communities. Economic support is provided for theatre practitioners that have developed their own TfD projects.



Figure 2. An ensemble performing Maji Maji.

### The New Generation of University Projects

Every year TaSUBA and University of Dar es Salaam's Department of Fine and Performing Arts conduct TfD-projects. The main objective at the Department of Fine and Performing Arts is to train and develop its students' skill in art both academically and professionally. This objective is reached by using community-based theatre and theatre as an educational tool in development support and communication. The department trains and uses students as facilitators in TfD projects. Both at TaSUBA and the Department of Fine and Performing Arts, TfD-projects and their development form an important part of the curriculum.

The University of Dar es Salaam's fundamental idea is that TfD- projects should be based upon the local community's needs. Instead of top-down projects, they want to develop bottom-up projects. Their precepts are:

1. TfD-projects should be based on the region's local and rural theatre traditions.
2. Townspeople should be centrally involved in the process in its entirety.

Among other things, this has resulted in that even today; most of the TfD projects in Tanzania take place in rural areas.

Today the Theatre for Development genre in Tanzania is realized through two main approaches, namely the performance approach and the workshop approach.<sup>11</sup>

**The performance approach:** In this model, an external group of theatre workers (students) decides the theme, content, and the design of a performance. This might be the result of prior contact with the local communities, but it might also be the result of the artists own choice or a sponsor's wishes. The group of artists creates a performance and tours it to different villages.

The aim is to perform in such a manner that the audience is moved, motivated, or provoked. The artists wants to establish a dialogue between the performers and their audience, in order to discuss community problems. At the end of the performance the performer(s) initiates a discussion with the audience. This discussion might also take place during the performance when it may be stopped for input from the audience. Additionally there might be involvement by the audience taking up roles in the performance. At the end strategies are put forth for the implementation of the decisions reached.

**The workshop approach:** This model is to a larger extent, based on interaction with the local communities. The problems to be address are worked out by the facilitators (students) and the townspeople. During the preliminary work, the facilitators establish contact with the community and decide the theme(s) and contents for a performance. The facilitators move into the village in order to live among them for two or three weeks where together they create the performance. Both facilitators and the townspeople participate in the process that includes research and analysis of their specific development problems, performance creation

based on the analyzed problems, and the post-performance discussion. The facilitators and townspeople analyze the community's problems and translate them into a theatrical language using their indigenous forms of expressions. Concurrent with this process, strategies are set up for the implementation of the decisions that are reached.

### Theatre for Development and Sustainability

For decades the Tanzania Theatre for Development has been recognized as one of the leading methodologies of continuous participatory research and an effective and appropriate medium of communication in community development.<sup>12</sup> The first reason is it is recognized for its potential to integrate the whole population, young and old, male and female, marginalized groups and people that usually don't talk in public, are enabled by the opportunity to express themselves through storytelling, dancing, and singing.

Secondly, it is recognized as an effective method that makes social change possible. The immediate response from the audience creates a room environment where people can analyze their situation and their problems. And as a collective activity based on the premises in the local community it creates a milieu for cooperation and participation.



Figure 3. Students from University of Dar es Salaam's Department of Fine and Performing Arts.

On the other hand, one of the major constraints of Theatre for Development in Tanzania is that it is not sustainable or purely grassroots-based. Although the methodology favors a bottom-up approach, the fact that it is initiated from the

outside makes TfD a top down project. The projects are always coordinated and facilitated by the elite who are mostly from cultural institutions or urban-based companies.

The studies about Theatre for Development concludes that even after participation in TfD projects the rural townsfolk do not manage to initiate TfD projects themselves. The two weeks of educational training does not enable townsfolk to actuate similar projects independently. In his book “Participating Popular Theatre, the Highest Strata of Cultural Underdevelopment,” David Kerr concludes as follows:

“The model tended to use the rural community as a sort of experimental laboratory. The shortness of theatre workers usual two week stay among peasant “guinea-pigs” fostered a “project syndrome” that resulted in a superficial understanding of a community problems and failure to become engaged with the organizations which might be empowered to change them.”<sup>13</sup>

In his master thesis from the University of Dar es Salaam 2002, Ghounche Materego comments:

“The irony (...) is that when a community leader needs to do any kind of sensitization program, he/she approaches the artists so as to disseminate his/her information through theatre. Theatre is thus used to achieve the goals of status quo and not the other way around.”<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, questions about the sustainability of Theatre for Development’s - projects has been raised among many scholars. Again David Kerr continues:

“Two weeks of education in TfD as like a drop in the ocean. The methodology is not internalized, as soon the projects are brought to an ending, the theatre workers are leaving the members of the communities with only golden memories of songs, play dances and the like.”<sup>15</sup>

Presently even though many of the TfD projects are directly tied to the HIV/AIDS issue and all are directly initiated and facilitated by organizations or institutions outside of the local community these projects in my opinion, provide great educational and community value. This value remains worthy despite the fact that the local community is in general, unable to initiate new projects on their own after the facilitators leave, and that the TfD-methodology remains a process which is only being utilized by skilled external facilitators. This is because they contribute to the enlightenment and conscious raising of important central issues, if even for only a short period of time. More importantly, it is my opinion, that by using local and traditional modes of cultural expressions these projects also contribute to the sustainability of local cultures for the present and future generations; which in turn may result in a consciousness and pride of the townsfolk in their own traditions and cultural identity.

### Endnotes

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