

TOWARDS EFFECTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES: THE IMPACT OF THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Several local communities across the nation are faced with serious conflicts that have hindered the peace and development of their communities. Often a time these conflicts have become so age old that it become difficult or impossible to have them erased and as such the community continue to be stunned in growth and stability. More scathing is the fact that some of these conflict have led to serious violence and killings at different times in these communities. The need to therefore advance approaches to ameliorating the hazards of conflicts becomes fundamental. More often than not stakeholders and official agencies who are into rural and community development do not give proper attention to development and conflict management approaches that ensure that community members becomes the greater owners of the process and making them to become central in the processes of intervention. This paper therefore argues that it very important that active participation of local communities through processes that stimulates their greater commitment and desire for change become very vital. The paper therefore explores the Theatre for Development (TFD) approach to addressing and managing community conflicts. It reveals the importance and impact of TFD praxis in harnessing people potentials and better participation for peace, social synergy and community collaboration.

Key Words: Conflict, Conflict Management, Theatre For Development (TFD), Peace and Communities

Introduction

Issues of conflict have existed with man and his environment over the ages. It continues to shape the development of his society. As a human phenomenon, conflict has always created a fundamental challenge which must be rightly addressed to make for peace and sustainable growth. However, it is important to state that the process by which conflict is

approached or handled can make or mar the attainment of collective goals and objectives in the society. Conflict can occur in different forms, it could occur at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. It could also be expressed at group levels that is community, local, state or national levels. Conflict can also assume international dimension when the situation is between two or more nations. Our main focus in this paper will be community conflict as reflected within the Nigerian Society. In Nigeria over the years, community conflict situations more often than not, degenerate into serious violence as experienced in various local communities. These situations range from religious, ethnic to political conflicts. Idebe notes that:

The ideological diversity of many communities in Nigeria have often led to a lot of parallel views on many issues that concern their cooperate existence. This disharmony that exists among them has often been the cause of violent conflicts in many Nigerian communities. In the course of these frictions a lot of lives and properties are lost. The aftermath of these conflicts is a strong disaffection created in the heart of one group against the other (5).

Community conflicts have in no little way contributed to the social and political dislocation of many communities and the nation as a whole. More so it has often threatened the cooperate existence of the National Structure.

In tackling the issue of conflicts in Nigeria, different mediums and measures have been employed by government and stakeholders. In spite of these methods applied, the management and transformation of conflict in a number of communities seems intractable. The reasons for these may include incompatibility of conflict resolution methods or lack of commitment on the part of stakeholders involved. But quite disturbing is the fact that most mediums employed to handle conflict situations are top-down and imposing in approach. More often than not the people are not carried along in the process of mediation and conflict transformation of the conflict situation. The implication is that whatever decisions are reached, will be forced down on the people, thereby leaving the community no better than they were. It is in this regard that this paper advances the use of Theatre for Development (TFD) as useful channel for conflict management and transformation. It examines the down-top method of communication in the TFD practice, as well as its designed participatory method in conflict management and transformation mechanism.

The Concept of Conflict

As a social phenomenon, conflict arises from the pursuit of divergent interests and aspirations by individuals and/or groups in a defined social and physical setting. Different scholars and researchers have offered diverse views on this concept which they see as an inherently prevailing phenomenon in the labyrinth of human existence. Isaac defines “conflict as the breakdown in communication between two or more parties of differing social, cultural, economic, ideological or political learning” (21). Otite citing Coser, in an elaborated definition states that conflict can be defined:

As a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. Such conflicts may take place between individuals, between collectivities or between individuals and collectivities. Inter-group and intra group conflicts are perennial features of social life (2).

From the above explanations, conflicts are generally viewed as inevitable and conscious acts involving personal or group contact, over incompatible interests. These interests range from religious, cultural, social, political and economic interests. As a human experience, conflict is not static in nature, but it is expressive, dynamic and dialectical. In this regard, Best (65) while citing Fisher et.al identifies five stages of conflict as follows:

- i. The first is the pre-conflict stage, a period when goals between parties are incompatible, which could lead to open conflict. At this stage, the conflict is not well known because parties try to hide it from public view, but communication is undermined between them.
- ii. The second stage is that of confrontation at which point the conflict becomes open or manifest. This is characterized by occasional quarrels, low levels of violence, and search for allies by parties, mobilization of resources, strained relations and polarization.
- iii. The third stage is the stage of crisis which represents the peak of the conflict. In violent conflict, this is the stage of war and intense fighting, leading to killing, injuries, population displacements, and the use of dangerous arms and weapons.
- iv. The fourth is believed to be the outcome stage. There is an assumption that all conflicts will pass through this stage, one way or the other. One side wins and the other losses, or a ceasefire may be

declared; one may surrender, or the government or other third party intervening forces stronger than the warring parties intervene to impose or suggest a solution and stop the fighting. The critical issue at this stage is that the violence is decreased which follows room for some discussion to commence, or alternative means of settling the conflict.

- v. The fifth is the post-conflict stage. At this stage violence has either ended or significantly reduced and the parties have gone past the crisis stage. This is the stage to address the underlying causes of the conflict, those incompatible goals which created the conflict in the first instance, such as needs and fears of the parties. If they are not tackled at this stage, the conflict cycle may be re-enacted and a return to the pre-conflict stage with consequent re-eruption of violence, is a possibility. These conflict stages are also referred to by other names, such as “conflict process” or a “conflict progression”.

The Concept of Conflict Management

Although conflict may generally exist whenever incompatible activities occur and may result in a win-lose character, the management of conflicts may produce a “Win-Win situation”. It is important to state that conflict, although has been mostly depicted as totally negative and destructive can also be constructive, depending on how it is handled. The concept of conflict management is “the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict” (Best, 95). This term is sometimes used synonymously with “Conflict regulation or prevention”. The term conflict management is perhaps an acknowledgement of the fact that conflict is inevitable, but that not all conflicts can always be resolved therefore what can be done is to manage and regulate them.

Wilmot and Hocker cited in Otite (11) identify some ideas for managing conflict. This include clarification of communication which involve: the speaking out what is in one’s mind or heart, listening carefully, expressing strong feelings appropriately, remaining rational, asking questions, maintaining a spirit of give and take, avoiding harmful statements, asking directly what is going on, telling others one’s opinion, looking for flexible “shades of gray” solutions, recognizing the power of initiating a co-operative move, identifying conflict patterns, and engaging in negotiations

of agreements and settlements. Appropriate communications skills and channels are curial in conflict management.

Conflict management should occur in a polite atmosphere and context. Otite (12) further remarks that conflict managers must be skilful to overcome the generally chaotic and disorderly scenarios associated with the behavior of conflicting parties. Emotions or sentiments and irrationality must be controlled and managed. Simple common language and the use of metaphor normally make positive contributions to conflict management. Conflicts need not be portrayed as warfare or violence. Ebo (52) explains that:

Conflict can be managed to become the antithesis of a given situation, which is what brings about a change in an original situation. Proper management of conflict can bring positive changes in the society. However, conflicts that are not properly managed degenerate to crises and violence, protests, youth restiveness, gender violence, kidnapping etc.

The position given above, highlight and presents an insight on why creative and participatory mediums such as the TFD practice which allows for a serene, peaceful, active and united participation of all stakeholders involved in the conflict need to be explored. It is important to state that the idea of managing conflict to bring about change in conflict situation is quite central in the TFD process of managing conflict. This is so because, it is only in this way that the society concerned can gain the needed development which they lack.

The Concept of Theatre for Development (TFD)

TFD is a theatrical approach to development issues that gives emphasis to active participation, critical consciousness and dialogue among participants. The practitioners of this theatrical form are seriously committed to community transformation through theatre. Issues and problems affecting the community usually form the thematic thrust of this type of theatre. It ensures that a clearly worked out process or workshop is taken to engage the community in order to get them attend to the challenges of their social realities. This form of theatre is also known by different nomenclatures. These include; Theatre for Integrated Rural Development (Th.I.R.D), Participatory Theatre, Grass-root theatre, Theatre for Integrated Development (T.I.D.E), Theatre of the Oppressed and Community Theatre. Abah, defines TFD as “the practice by which theatre is put at the service of the disadvantaged rural and urban poor for

the purposes of discussing and working out strategies for dealing with their socio-economic conditions” (17).

Commenting in a similar vein, Ifeanyi (71) state that “theatre for development is a process of stimulating and sustaining participation with the target community along development lines, using the world of theatre to achieve real solution to practical life problems affecting the people”. The functionality of the TFD process in bringing the community to the awareness of the key role they play in shaping their hopes and prosperous livelihood is here emphasized. The community using Paulo Freire’s term is “conscientized” and made to realize the potentials they have in harnessing their individual and collective energy towards addressing the myriads of problem they are faced with; instead of picking up arms against each other that further cause destructions to lives and properties. Ahura (55) thus gives an elaborate explanation of the concept by stating that it:

...emphasizes the mass mobilization of the rural masses for the purpose of upgrading themselves intellectually and materially, so that they come to a thorough understanding of themselves and their environment. By this understanding they as a group come to full knowledge of the structures that are injurious to them and those that enhance their prestige as human beings. They therefore prepare themselves to control their destiny by seeking to change the existing situation.

How theatre can be used as a rallying point to bring about the needed change in the community is here emphasized. How it allows the community to be released from bottlenecks and unfavourable conditions such as conflict that hinders community growth and stability, thereby spurring them into a new experience wherein they see themselves as a collective-force for sustainable development is central to this form of theatre.

The Importance of TFD in Conflict Management

Theatre is a creative and expressive area of human activity which provides a powerful source of peace – building energy and passion that is not always apparent in the formalized processes of political conflict management. (Ramsbotham, 347).

It is worthy of note that theatre in general work in a familiar terrain when it is utilized in a project dealing with conflict. This is because by its very nature, theatre involves conflict and the management and transformation

of conflict as an embedded mechanism in both its conception and realization (Kafewo 160). Jeyifo (7) further argues that:

More than any other arts, drama deals at highly concentrated level with contradiction of social existence. A dramatic piece, which does not in one form or another deploy as its organizing structural criterion, a physical or emotional conflict, moral or spiritual contest of will, is almost inconceivable equally important is the fact that drama does not merely subsume conflict as its organizing structural motive, beyond this, drama also axiomatically attempts a provisional synthesis in the conflicting pulls within its constitutive actions.

Drawing from the ideology of the larger frame work of drama and theatre as a whole, TFD uses dramatic performance at the grassroots level to unfold and analyze development problems of the community and raise critical awareness and potentials to solve these problems. Kafewo further observes that:

Theatre here functions as a cooperative, with common leadership and ideological orientation, without a director as such. The audience's direct involvement is sought in order to create a drama specific to its interest and the materials are structured through improvisation and discussion (161).

It is in the light of the foregoing points that the significance of a TFD workshop aimed at looking at the challenges of conflict is found. The issue of conflict management and transformation through theatre and drama is a practice that has pre-occupied several theatre scholars over the years. Practitioners through different mediums of theatrical explorations have actively advocated and preach the gospel of managing conflict affecting different ethnic, religious, social, geographical and sectional affinities. Nwosu (35) explicitly argues:

...That the conflict management and transformation attribute of the theatre is age – long and therefore time – tested is a truism. For instance, as far back as the pre-colonial era, the traditional theatre functioned as a veritable instrument for handling issues of conflicts.

The traditional African Theatre is not alone in its conflict management agenda. Today the modern and post – modern theatre studies have also given concrete attention to the issues of conflict management and transformation. One of the most effective ways used to achieve this agenda is through Theatre for Development. The attention and exploration given to this form of theatre by today's practitioners, is borne out of the emphasis it places on the bottom – up model of communication. This model of

communication gives power to the people affected to decide greatly the outcome of their predicament.

The basic idea behind this theatrical form is to enable members of a conflict group to interact in a friendly and approachable manner rather than a coercive manner; as well as giving an objective insight into the different parties' mutual condition. A main thrust to this theatrical methodology, is to destroy negative stereotypes held by parties in conflict situations against each other and help to re-humanize their relationships. By learning together how to respond to conflict, through the TFD experiences, the parties to community conflict are made to realize that they can actually work together at solving their problems. Nwosu (ibid) thus states that theatre and drama in this way

...act as a catalyst that stimulates change in modes of behaviour and perception of thoughts, which is capable of reshaping the social structure of a people for a more conducive and comfortable living. Thus theatre has a high rate tendency of conflict management and transformation. This it does through analyzing past conflict, highlighting mistakes and guarding against future occurrence of conflict.

In this way, they are helped to gain a realistic understanding of what conflict is and what it is not. They are also made to have a better understanding of the cost of violent conflict.

As a problem – solving process for conflict management, the dominant questions in a TFD setting will be; how can the parties to a conflict peacefully participate and work together to develop a community they both share? How do the parties develop relational empathy? In terms of conflicting cultures, how do the two cultures merge into the production of what Broome describes as a “third culture”. Third culture as Broome (404) informs can only occur in a conflict situation “through interaction in which participants are willing to open themselves to new meanings, to engage in genuine dialogue, and to constantly respond to the new demands emanating from the situation”. This is a very essential prerequisite for conflict management and transformation. Still writing on how the “third culture” manifests, Casmir and Asuncion–Lande (294) further describes that:

Through beginning with contrasting perceptions and behaviours, two individuals through their interaction, create a unique setting for interaction. In the conjoining of their separate cultures, a third culture, more inclusive than the original one is created, which both

of them now share. Thus a third culture is not merely the result of the fusion of two or more separate entities, but also the product of the “harmonization” of composite parts into a coherent whole.

To achieve this harmonized experience, the TFD process becomes very sensitive and cautious as regard issues and values which are peculiar to the different parties as well as those issues which seem to be commonly acceptable by them. While issues which are very peculiar to both parties are de-emphasized, values and social experiences which are common and acceptable by both parties are emphasized and brought to the fore. In this way both cultures are synthesized to bring about a culture of love and mutual respect. The TFD approach can be considered a very useful method in dealing with conflict, as its outcomes are usually self-supporting in the sense that it takes into consideration, all parties concerned. The essence of TFD in conflict management can be viewed in the light of what Kelman (ix) remarks in discussing the importance of problem-solving procedure. He states that problem-solving procedure is meant to:

...empower the parties, meet their vital needs for identity and security, and lay the foundation for a stable co - operative relationship consistent with the welfare and development of each party. Such changes imply some re – distribution of power as well as the gradual creation of a new – culture shared by the former adversaries without, of course abandoning their separate cultures.

This is exactly what TFD practice aim at achieving between conflicting parties. The opposite parties are led to a new orientation that demands collaborative and progressive culture as well as a diplomatic attitude towards one another. Over the years a number of theatre practitioners have achieved great result using this medium of conflict management and transformation. A good example in this regard is the *Hammock to Bridges (T.H.I.R.D) Experience*. It was organized by the theatre section of the Department of English, University of Yaoundé, Cameroon. Here, there was a serious conflict between the Konye, Ngolo – Bolo and Ndoi villages in Cameroon. The conflict situation was so serious that Butake Bole - one of the resource persons in the community theatre trip, described it as a “psychological war”. This negative situation made it impossible for them to agree on building an accessible bridge to replace a hammock over the Mungu river for their effective transportation., but after the interventionist medium through the TFD process, the conflicting communities were able to resolve their differences and therefore saw the need of coming together to build a brigde that will replace the hammock. It was this beautiful

achievement that made the organizers titled the community theatre experience as “Hammock to Bridges”. Another example is provided by Steve Abah in his book *Performing Life*. He recounted how the dispute that emerged in Otobi Benue state, over the usage of a grinding machine, meant for the good of the general community was resolved, using the TFD process.

To further establish the commitment and potentials which practitioners make out of the TFD practice in bringing about conflict management and transformation, Uzoji and Iorapuu (101) generates a new concept termed Theatre for transformative Peace and Conflict which they define as “as an instrument of cultural power that provides the connection between theatre, democracy and conflict resolution, where community participants articulate and critically question their assumptions and perspective”. Here they conceive of a TFD experience that is capable of generating more critical and spontaneous response by community members in changing the negative conditions that hinders peace and harmony in the community. It is an attempt to make out a more revolutionary outcome of the TFD process. While making an example of what can be achieved through the theatre for transformative peace and conflict, Uzoji and Iorapuu (102) give vivid account on the strategic impact which the approach played in Panyam, Mangu L.G.A of Plateau state.

Prior to the 2007 elections, YARAC used dramatic skits to engage the Panyam community on elections, how to vote, freedom of choice, electoral conflicts and voters’ mobilization. The community actually took over the process. They owned the story and ensured that the final performance was successful. The result of the performance was spontaneous as the audience (community) engage better by speaking to the issues in the performance. Elders, politicians, women and youth leaders spoke. There were instant resolutions on the way forward. Youths resolved not to allow themselves as conduits for political violence.

Although a relatively new concept that is capable of generating more meanings and perspectives, it necessarily brings to light the level of impact which employment of TFD agenda can be in bringing about community peace, transformation and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Communal conflict still continues to plague our national landscape. A lot of communities keep retrogressing in the nation as a result of steep

divisions that that have hampered their growth and development. The government and stakeholders seem to be more concerned with the stability and peace of urban and commercial towns with little or no commitment to ensuring that local communities enjoy peace and social development. Even when some attention is given to intervening on communal conflicts and social challenges, it is more of lording it over them without making real commitment to getting them actively participate in the process of interventions. This paper which explores the importance of TFD approach to conflicts in communities have shown the need to advancing creative and participatory approach to communication wherein the community members are empowered to become stakeholders in sorting out and ameliorating the effect of conflicts in their society. It advances how participatory modes of communication ensures that the people become more interested in the path of managing their differences and misgivings against each other thereby giving them that impetus to commit themselves to the peace, synergy and collective development of the community.

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