

# THEATRE ARTS EDUCATION: APPROACHES IN KENYA



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## **THEATRE ARTS EDUCATION: APPROACHES IN KENYA**

This book provides an important outlook on the developing practices and understandings of theatre in Kenya. It reflects on the experiences, observations and research by scholars who have been involved in teaching and research at the university, and theatre activity in the field. The book is therefore an important resource for students and teachers engaged in theatre at secondary and tertiary levels. It is also useful for those who are involved in the work of theatre in the field including actors, directors, scriptwriters, adjudicators, producers and managers. In either case, the aim is to provide useful insights on the various aspects of theatre which should enable those engaged in the discipline to develop their practice.

The text covers theoretical and practical perspectives, and includes a variety of illustrations to facilitate comprehension of concepts in theatre and application in contemporary contexts. Major areas of drama are included such as Body Movement, Voice and Speech, Script Writing, Directing, Choreography, Criticism, Ethical issues, Theatre/Drama in Education, Community Theatre, Television Drama, Management and Marketing.



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### THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH IN THE PERFORMING ARTS: THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

*By Mellitus N. Wanyama*

According to O. Mugenda and A. Mugenda (1991: pg 1):

To research is to carry out a diligent inquiry or a critical examination of a given phenomenon. It implies exhaustive study, investigation or experimentation following some logical sequence.

In research, we ask questions and seek for answers to specific phenomena. In the sense that research involves 'inquiry' and 'examination', then it is an activity that has been intrinsic to the composition and production of art. Wordsworth (1800: 171) for example, describes the poet thus:

What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is expected of him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind.

In a later part of his essay, Wordsworth qualifies sensibility as the keen observation of nature (or life) through the 'eyes' and other 'senses' (pg 175), and adds that the ability to critically 'think' about (pg 176) one's experience is critical to the composition of poetry. Similarly, Okot p' Bitek (1986: pg 39) defines the role of art and the artist in the following manner:

I believe that a thought system of a people is created by the most powerful, sensitive and imaginative minds that that society has produced: these are the few men and women, the supreme artists, the imaginative creators of their time, who form the consciousness of their time. They respond deeply and intuitively to what is happening, what has happened and what will happen.

In other words, if art reflects upon experience, then the artist must be a critical observer of life. Thus, even though the work of art may be different from for

instance a scientific treatise, in that it may appeal to the emotions, may be subjective and represent a fictional world, the material that forms the content of the work are derived from the observation and knowledge of the artiste's reality.

TS Eliot (1919: pg 294) has argued that composition involves:

...in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature...of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

In effect, great works of art are not only unique; they also follow specific traditions from works of the past. This implies that any aspiring artiste must acquire knowledge of the works of other artistes including how they went about the process of composition, the formal qualities of their works and their strengths and limitations.

From the above, it is evident that critical inquiry is part of the process of artistic creation. Take for instance this description of the playwright by Kathleen E. George (1994: pg 1):

Playwrights tend to be watchful people. They have an eye upon the society of the day. They absorb its problems, its political and human rights struggles, its personality. But good playwrights are not just news reporters. They are also critics and philosophers who examine a society with an eye to what makes current struggles like the struggles that have always faced human beings, as well as what makes them different. Many people believe that an effective playwright is less likely to preach than lead, less likely to tell than show. For me, personally, this is true. Holding a mirror up to nature, a nature that allows people to see and understand, is, I believe, a great accomplishment.

In discussing the importance of research within the process of devising a Theatre for Development performance, Christopher J. Odhiambo (2008: pg 152) observes:

Research in Theatre for Development should not be confused with the academic type or form of research. It entails particularised research where the researcher and the community are seen as equal partners. None is more knowledgeable than the other. It is an interactive, participatory and action-oriented research; a collaborative venture between the researcher/actor/facilitator and the community in a quest to find out the community's perspective of the subject, its priority problems, interests, concerns, peculiarities and desires. Thus, research in Theatre for Development is the starting point in linking a local community's priority issues and external development agenda. It can be undertaken through discussion, living in the community and participating in their daily rituals and narrations, also known as 'homesteading', through performances with the community followed by discussions, the rendition of narratives and (in)formal interviews.

Thus, while the kind of inquiry involved in the production of a creative work may not exactly correspond to that of academic research, nevertheless it sometimes adopts some of the methodology of the latter in order to obtain the necessary knowledge relevant to the formal representation of the art as the example cited above indicates.

In a similar vein, the author of this chapter has, on several occasions had to carry out research on the context, meaning and performance conventions of a specific song from a particular culture before adapting it into a set-piece for performance by a choir at the Kenya Musical Festival. An example includes the Ekigusii song *Bori-bwa-Kare* (This Love of the Past), which was adapted by the author for choral performance in 2011. In order to do so, the author sought information from members of the Ekigusii community on the context in which the song was sung as well as on its meaning and translation (of the words). He also researched on the style of performance of the song. This inquiry was necessary since the proper rendition of the piece depended on understanding its meaning and conventions

of representation. From this process, he found out that the song was performed during peace making meetings between warring parties; such as the Ekigusii on the one hand and the neighbouring Luo community on the other. The lyrics therefore speak of merrymaking after the cessation of conflict. At the same time, they refer to the actions made by participants in the course of performance:

### ***Bori Bwa Kare***

*Bori bwa kare obwanchani*

#### **the love of the past**

*Bwabokire*

#### **has rejuvenated**

*Tema nainde torore*

**Try again so that we see** \*(related to dancing: in congratulating the people involved in bringing back the love)

*Chugucha erobiro*

\*(Chugucha ---onomatopoeic: the shoulder shaking dance by the Abagusii---erobiro ..borrowed from the Luo -- word, ero biro meaning there it comes...( maybe the dance because this section is vigorous and climactic )

*Beng'*

\*(sound of the *obokano*)

*Waya*

\*(Refers to the wire i.e. strings of *obokano*)

*Beng' i waya-*

\*(appreciating the sound of the *obokano*)

*Amache*

## Water

*Amache kai are*

**Where is water?** \*(when people dance, they sweat, they lose water: the dancer is asking for water)

In this regard, and especially in the context of African performing arts, knowledge of the oral arts of specific cultures, the method of data collection and interpretation of oral literature is of significance to any person working within these genres. This is because every artistic form bears the cultural idiom of a specific community.

In Africa, the line between oral literature and the performing arts hardly exists, since verbal arts such as songs, poems, narratives, riddles and proverbs are performed and realise their essence in this form. At the same time, even contemporary forms such as popular music will bear the characteristic features derived from the oral heritage of source communities. For example, in a study carried out on *Ohangla* music, a popular contemporary genre of the Luo community of Kenya, Joseph B. Okong'o (2011: pg 23) observes:

An observation of the instrumental and vocal constituents of *ohangla* music gives the impression that virtually all the main genres of Luo music are found within its space. In the process, interface and play among various genres allows for exploration or experimentation with forms.

In effect, since *ohangla* music may be performed within the modern context with such contemporary instruments as the guitar, keyboard and drumset, its rendition is rooted in the musical idioms of the community and therefore a proper understanding of this genre would require analysis of the performance traditions of the Luo. In this sense, whether we are engaged in the adaptation, composition, or performance of a work, research is intrinsic to a better achievement of the product. Research then, becomes imperative when we have to deal with issues related to the creation, production and performance of an artistic work. One of the best illustrations of this is Efua Sutherland's (1986: pg 5) description of her adaptation of the conventions of *Anansesem* into the play *The Marriage of Anansewa*:

Of the many problems I have encountered in composing *Anansegoro*, the most tricky has been how to invest it with some capacity for invoking this element of community participation. I have used the device of moving on to the stage a pool of *Players* representing both the specialist performers and the participating audience of Anansesem. The onus for making the public audience feel at one with the on-stage participating audience is of course on the director of the play.

Sutherland intimates that her work was informed by her understanding of the conventions of performing the Ananse stories among the Akan people of Ghana (Sutherland 1986: pp 3-5).

Since the performing arts respond to changes in society, it is often necessary to take cognisance of the transformations that occur and to identify the forces or the motivations behind them. Research then becomes important as a means of monitoring emerging forms as well as the evolving elements in established genres. Musa Awuonda and George Ouma (2008) have for instance carried out a study on the development of *Benga* music, a popular genre whose origins have been traced to the Luo community of Kenya. In this study, they explore the ways in which the genre moved from a local context and became a national form that was embraced by other communities in Kenya. They identify the factors that led to the genesis and transformation of the music, to its contemporary form: such as urbanisation, the influence of colonialism, exposure to the music of other African regions such as the Congo, among others. They indicate that currently, there are several streams of *Benga* depending on the spread and adaptation of the genre by a specific community; for example Luo *Benga*, Kikuyu *Benga* and Kisii *Benga*. Their study further revises earlier assertions on the origins of this genre; for instance, it has long been assumed that Owino Misiani was the innovator of the form. However, their research demonstrates that, in fact, it was John Ogara Odondi (in the early 1960s) who carried out the necessary innovations that moved the genre from a local village musical form to an urban and regional style. In other words, research allows us to interrogate and revise previously held assumptions and observations concerning aspects of the performing arts.

The documentation, conservation and preservation of cultural forms as part of the heritage of a society, as well as for future consciousness of the state of artistic

genres in the past heavily rely on research. In the African case, this process has been a political engagement since it has been viewed as part of the process of identity formation and decolonisation. In describing oral literature as the creative heritage of a community, Nandwa J. and Bukenya A. (1983: 5) observe that we need to study the subject for 'our self-realisation and self-confidence as genuine members of an African society.' Soyinka (1976: pgs vii-xii) argues that the understanding of African literature and performing cultures is the means to 'self-apprehension' of our world as Africans and fulfils an important role of affirming our identity; an important element in the process of decolonisation.

Indeed at times, the study of cultural forms, including the performing arts is an important means of understanding the social concerns and the socio-political dynamics of communities. In commenting on popular art, Karin Barber (1997: pg 2.) has observed that:

The assumption made by some early enthusiasts of African popular art that it is by definition naive, cheerful and carefree has been replaced by the recognition that genres billed as entertainment usually talk about matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce and consume them.

David Coplan (1997: pg 29) has also commented on the significance of employing artistic genres as data for understanding societies. He argues that while the social sciences have adopted standard (and assumedly objective) methods of data collection such as interviews:

The interview format and its methodological underpinnings, employed in the context of the unstable, opaque relationship between interviewer and subject, creates a framework of communication that must to some degree remain alien and undomesticated...While we cannot hope to solve this problem, both, anthropology and history can benefit from examining forms which 'privilege actors' interpretations of their own conduct (Rosaldo, 1986: 97), in particular those which people themselves create to reflect upon their own experience. Of these, among the most potentially revealing are forms of oral literature, which provide

symbolic statements about common experiences, reflect popular consciousness, give us history from below and ethnography from within (Vail and White, 1983: 87).

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of Coplan's observation above is the collection by Barz G. and Cohen J. (2011), which consists of studies by various scholars on how specific African communities have employed music to document, reflect on and deal with HIV/AIDS in their cultural environment.

Most importantly, research in the performing arts is necessary for us to understand how specific forms work. As Meki Nzewi (2003: pg viii) has stated with reference to the musical heritage of Africa, and musical arts education:

If musical arts education in Africa will truly derive from Africa's rich knowledge base, we must engage in research at home levels. We must re-institute African concepts, meanings, theories and values of the musical arts education and practice.

In conclusion, research is intrinsic to the creation, appreciation, study and preservation of the performing arts. In addition, it is part of the process of dealing with practical problems and challenges in the production of art, including issues concerned with quality, marketing and presentation.

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