The Performing Arts And Development

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This paper tries to link two dynamic processes which exhibit a dialectical relationship. Development means changes, a re-alignment of forces to improve man's lot and enable him to come to full realisation of himself. It aims at his total freedom through the exploitation of his powers and potential, a historical process which is economic, political and cultural. All man's activities are manifestations of growth or retardation within the process of development. The perfoming arts, dance, music and theatre, are cultural activities which contribute towards and at the same time manifest socio-economic development. These are social historical phenomena which embody man's expressive capacity at each moment of his development. An understanding of the proper role of the performing arts, therefore, calls for an analysis of these elements not only as political and ideological phenomena but as aesthetic processes as well.

Much of the controversy surrounding the role of the performing arts in development stems from an analysis of the art forms which are pointing in two directions. First, there is the question of performances as art forms. Secondly, there exists a dialectical relationship between these art forms and other activities of society. Like the other arts, the performing arts have been established to manifest man's work, needs and aspirations. But this manifestation is both peculiar and general. The performing arts demand to exist by their own laws, but at the same time they are part of the general activities of man. The aesthetics of the performing arts display this duality in both their function and their mode of existence. Under examination, the duality confirms the precarious balance between aesthetics and the sociology of the performing arts; between performances as entertainment and the existence of the use-value inherent in the art forms.

As man develops or evolves, so do his ways of expressing his needs and aspirations. The cultural outlets become proper manifestations in form and content of the position of society at each stage of development. The art forms are social in both their foundation and effect in that they arise as a response to specific aesthetic and functional needs, while their goal is an impact on the society to which they owe their allegiance; this allegiance being both parochial and universal, specific in its conception but general in application and effect. This is because,. as Vasquez has succinctly put it:

> ... art is made by men who are historically conditioned, and that the universality that art achieves is not the abstract and timeless that idealist aestheticians speak of after creating an abyss between... art and society, but the human universality that is manifested in and through the particular.

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This position follows the Marxian thesis that (I) the creators of art are men who are socially and historically conditioned, and (2) that in the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure, art belongs to the superstructure.[2] Pre-capitalist societies display the interaction between art expression and political organization very clearly. The existence in such societies of cultural expressions which correspond to communal organization and a low level technological presence is a testimony to this thesis. In his essay 'Peasantry as a Culture', Kazimier Dobrowolski observed: "Traditional culture is a reality *suigeneris* with its own specific dynamics. A low level of agricultural technology and stability of peasant settlement represents, perhaps, its most important foundation".[3]

In African traditional societies, then, the overriding role which is played by manual labour is the most important factor in the existence and transmission of theatrical activities and other performances. The product of labour is obtained almost immediately with no gap between the producer and the object of his labour. The only power is human labour, thus making the labour force dominant both qualitatively and quantitatively. Man satisfies not only his material needs through manual labour but his aesthetic needs as well. The form of his aesthetic outlets centres upon his own body, his movements, gestures, and speech. The body and voice are the major instruments for the transmission of cultural elements from one generation to the next. It is thus by using mostly oral methods that the handing over is effected. Oral performance and transmission become dominant in the form and content of pre-capitalist societies. Though Ruth Finnegan fails to provide reasons as to the predominance and importance of oral tradition in African pre-capitalist societies, she succeeds in laying bare the basic characteristics and the role of performance within these societies:

> There is no mystery about the first most basic characteristic of oral literature... This is the significance of the actual performance. Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion - there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product.[4]

The simplicity of oral art forms which depend on visual and audio-visual media is a reflection of the simplicity of the hand tool used in production. All labour, which is creative, catering to material and non-material needs depends on the living human being. Performances of a theatrical nature become closely intertwined with each other because of the communication structure which relies on man. Where pre-capitalist formations still exist the permeation of performances in other activities of man still lingers. This is because art, though a higher type of labour, is indistinguishable from other forms of labour. Creative labour becomes a manifestation of the practical activity of man by virtue of which he expresses and confirms himself in the objective world as a social, and creative being.[5] The 'Odwira' festival of the Akwamu of Ghana illustrates this point very clearly. This festival concerns itself with the economic and political structures of society which express themselves through various types of performances: ritual, dance, music, theatre, masquerades, etc. It is associated with the yam, the most important food item of the Akwamu.

> The people celebrate this festival on the fall of the ninth Adae. The festival has a three-fold significance. First, it is a period of remembrance: a time when people are reminded of the warrior Kings who helped to found their state. It is also a time when the chiefs and their people bring sacrifices to their gods to thank them for the mercies of the past and to ask for their protection in the future. Above all, it is a time when people come together to renew their family ties. In other words, it is a political, religious and social festival.[6]

This ritual festival not only attests to the people's fundamental religious and ideological beliefs, but affirms also their ties to their mode of existence, the yam. In this ritual, the

economic base, the yam, brings together the past and future, the old and the new, the living and the dead. The concern here is the welfare of society. The reproduction of value systems, disciplines, taboos and political institutions is taken care of through such a ritual. Okot p'Bitek points to yet another significance in the performances of pre-capitalist African societies: unity.

> During the feast of Jok men and women and children from all parts of the chiefdom gathered together, offered sacrifices to Jok and prayed that certain dangers that threatened the chiefdom as a whole should be averted. They feasted together, sharing the sacrificial beasts and beer and dancing at the chief's enclosure. With its rites, symbols and sacred places the chiefdom Jok and its annual feast united members of the chiefdom, hence its political significance.[7]

In these societies, cultural content and institutions acquire an unusual importance because they not only carry the knowledge of the means of production but attest further to man's creative being and powers.

The argument that African traditional performances are communal, participatory and have a use-value cannot be isolated from an analysis of other pre-capitalist performances outside the continent. These are not peculiar traits in a peculiar situation. The reference point for cultural form and content is the organization of society around the mode of production. These performances are communal because the society is communal, organized around manual labour which requires working in groups. Collectivity becomes a force in both art and society because man's activities at this stage are dependent on containing the all-absorbing pre-occupation with survival. "Relationships of man to nature were simple, naked and direct." [8] Work is the responsibility of all and art, being creative work, is produced and consumed communally. All participate. The simple division of labour makes it difficult to separate mental and material product. Likewise, there is practically no separation between producers and consumers of culture as happened with the crystallization of classes.

"Only as society developed did mental production become severed from material production in the separation of material producers from thinkers and artists."[9] The communal and participatory nature of theatre performances has been retained in African societies because some of the structures which are responsible for their maintenance and transmission still exist. These have and will change as societies develop and change. In countries like Tanzania, some traditional formations have been used as a base for the structure of a new society, with repercussions in both political and social structures.

When the argument is put forward that traditional forms of African theatre performances have a use-value element, most advocates refer to pedagogical outlets.[10] The traditional forms have always been at the disposal of society to use them for instruction. The practical and utilitarian nature of rituals, dances, songs, theatre and the like have been clearly illustrated against the backdrop of man's struggle for survival. Performances such as story-telling, ritual, dance, drama and recitations were used as institutions for the reproduction and transmission of social values from one generation to another. These were used, as Dobrowolski notes, to fulfil two needs of human existence:

> (a) that of regulating and ordering of human relationships founded on a set of established values, skills and capacities...
> b) that of the improvement of human existence by the securing of greater mastery over the natural environment, by extending the knowledge of surrounding reality, by obtaining a greater security against hostile forces...[22]

This argument exposes the ideological nature of the performing arts. But this exposition of

the use-value of art is limited and narrow because how does it come about that certain forms of the performing arts have lingered while the ideologies that gave rise to them have died? The answer to this can be sought from both man and the art form itself.

There is an agreement that the perfoming arts, all art for that matter, have a function and fulfil a need in man. "Labour is thus not only the creation of useful objects that satisfy specific human needs, but also the art of objectifying or moulding human goals, ideas, or feelings." [12] Vasquez goes on to say that these products of labour express essential human powers and affirm man's self externally. There is an acceptance of the spirtuality of man whose needs art fulfils. Art becomes not only ideological but transcends ideology. Man has a need to express himself and through art he achieves this. This is clearly illustrated when looking at the early performances of man. Even though man translated his perception of the universe and phenomena into a utilitarian vehicle to support life's struggle, his imagination soared to endow such vehicles a separate reality. The movement from ritual to art and the performing arts is a manifestation of these activities refusing to be tied down to only a material use-value. Man's need to express and objectify himself through performances creates a duality of the use-value of the work of art:

> From the truly aesthetic point of view the work of art does not depend for its life on either the ideology that inspires it or its function of reflecting reality. It exists by itself with its own reality into which that which it expresses of reflects is integrated. A work of art is primarily a human creation, and it exists through the creative power it incarnates.[13]
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> This separate reality of existence of the work of art does not mean that art has itself as an end, that art is for art's sake. There is no such thing because the goal of art is man, a manifestation of his creative powers. This is so precisely because it is a superior form of creation, an exceptional testimony to creative existence. Humanity is present in every work of art."[14]

This is true especially in the performing arts where man is the constant reference point. The object of creation in this case is the performance which, unlike other objects of art, lives only during its presentation. As a separate entity, the work of art has a reality of its own and thus lives and can be judged according to its own laws. This is what Trotsky meant when he said that a work of art should be judged by its own law which is the law of art.[15] But what is this law of art? Vasquez notes: "The artist creates objects in accordance with the laws of beauty, transforming matter into a form which reveals his human essence in a concrete-sensuous object."[16]

What is missing in the discussion of African pre-capitalist theatre performances is a proper focus of the presence of this aesthetic sensibility - the humanisation of the senses and their objects. This is the basic element which underlies the autonomy of art. To a certain extent a useful object in the utilitarian sense can exist without demanding that it fulfil the demands of the sensuous. That art works within the parameters of the human senses elevates art to a higher form of creation.

The sensuous nature of art is made clear in the various activities found in the performing arts of pre—capitalist societies. The interdisciplinary nature and interdependence of performance elements can be seen in ritual, drama, ceremonials, theatre and dance. The impact that these performances aim at is aural, visual and spatial—through the physical to the mental. Harap has pointed this out very clearly:

> The materials of which each art is made have a logic and law of their own. One set of laws applies to spatial relations in the graphic arts, another to colours combinations, another to the relations of tunes in music, another to poetic imagery. The formal organization of such sensuous elements as pitches, colours, lines, spaces, rhythms and of ideas and feelings as well follow patterns dictated by the nature of these materials. The relations of notes in the scale, of colours in the

> prism, of tempos and rhythms, of the spaces in design, though seemingly infinite are fixed by nature and utilized by man for his artistic purpose.[17]

In the performing arts the appeal to the senses is made through the use of the body and voice: the relationship of the body to space and objects, one part of the body to the other parts, movement and its duration in space and within the body, rhythm in voice and body, feelings in relation to movement and ideas, and these in turn in relation to one performer and another. Included are all the elements mentioned by Finnegan which are "expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity, humour, receptivity to the reactions of the audience, etc."[18] It includes language in verbal and non-verbal enactment.

Man's need to express himself is very clear in the performing arts because he is not only the subject and object but also the tool of expression. Therefore, there can be no discussion about content without form. Like content, form is a social product determined by forces within and outside art and the emotion it arouses is the emotion not of the individual but of "associated men"[19]. In ritual, in dance, drama and other theatrical performances, images are evoked, expressed and communicated. One can say that the senses become provoked, aroused to participate in the creation of the new reality of art. When discussing the problems of modern African theatre, de Graft puts it thus:

> If we wish to quarrel with our modern African theatre, then let us direct our rage at its sloppy amateurism; its lack of discipline and a sense of purpose..."[20]

The quarrel here is not with relevant material which needs to be found and used, but with the utilisation of the proper tools of expression in the performing arts. The problem is that the sensuous nature of the art forms has been forgotten. The emphasis has been on finding the proper theme to expose and not on how to use elements of performance for the exposition. It is not enough to have the proper phrases which articulate the accepted ideological position thematically, without taking into consideration how and what images can be aroused and created. The problem here is not only negligence but a lack of understanding that the performance, like other objects of art, is a reality of its own. Though based on nature, man uses his experience and through his creative powers he brings into being a new reality. This reality is not the reality displayed by nature and phenomena, but a representation and translation of man's experience. Harrison has observed that at the bottom of art lies not the wish to copy nature or even improve on her, but rather an impulse shared by art with ritual the desire, that is, to utter, to give out a strongly felt emotion or desire by representing it.[21] The new reality which is art, then, imitates nature only in the fact that it is a form of creation. Vasquez also notes that:

> The artist sees before him the immediate, given, concrete reality, but he cannot remain on that level, limiting himself to reproducing it ... The artist makes art into a means of knowledge not by copying reality, but by creating a new one...[22]

Looking at the art form means looking at both technique and entertainment Technique is the special skill needed to translate subject matter into an artistic medium. This translation is based on the accumulation and transmission of knowledge of the skill. But this body of specialized knowledge does not work alone. The artist incorporates it together with his own experience and the accumulated knowledge of society. These act as guidelines in formulating the form and content of a work of art. The fact that form and content are inseparable does

not mean that technique can be ignored. In a good piece of art or performance one is not aware of the manipulative powers at work to arouse the spectator. One knows that one is being manipulated and the feelings, ideas and reactions one expresses are the result of this manipulation. Surely this is what one should understand by entertainment in the theatre?

There have been complaints about the entertainment bias which traditional forms of performances have received.[23] The argument here is that in countries like Tanzania, politicians have only seen fit to exploit performances to entertain visitors and use them as a preamble to political rallies and gatherings. There is validity in the repugnance shown towards this type of 'airport culture'. These banal performances invariably repulse one, not because the entertainment value has been emphasized, but because it has been ignored. The history of theatre is full of attempts to strike a balance between what Brecht called "reason and feeling": "It is quite clear to me that we have to get away from the antagonism between reason and feeling."[24]

On the same lines, Mao argued in favour of a balanced artistic production:

> What we demand is the unity of politics and art, of content and form, and of revolutionary political content and the **highest possible degree of perfection in artistic form. Works of art, however politically progressive, are powerless if they lack** artistic quality[25] **(author's emphasis).**

Entertainment in the peforming arts means that material has been used with such skill that it touches the emotions, incites thoughts and stimulates the imagination. The audience is sensitised by the signals and vocabulary of the dance, the drama, the music. The eyes and ears act as the proper agents of perception responding to specific stimuli given by the performer.[26] The interpretation of entertainment as performance that can make one laugh and make one "happy" is very narrow. Unfortunately, this is the definition which African theatricians, inherited from the West. The result has been to rob entertainment of its proper place in the performing arts. Playwrights would not write political treatises if they understood that theatre is a happening, an imaginative creation which thrives on the various signals sent to the spectator to arouse his physical, mental and psychological states. Audiences would be spared speech renditions and propaganda of the worst taste if performers believed that words needed oral performance. Dances would not be mere imitations of the traditional past but living signals that have a direct connection with the present performers and their audience. The performing arts, unlike some other arts, live only at the moment of performance and demand that they be created anew at each happening. This aspect of constant renewal gives the performing arts their unusual, illusive character but at the same time offers a challenge to the artists. This challenge must be answered at each performance, and it is only then that one can claim that the performance has been entertaining. Bad art offends not only because the eye is offended, but also because it short changes man in his capacity to create and express his powers. The imitators of Makonde carving are producing what Jengo calls "inauthentic art" not because they are often not "Makonde carvers such as the Wazaramo" but because these craftsmen have turned a process of creation into a non-creative process.[27] They are producing for expendiency following the demands of forces outside art creation, taking short cuts to earn as much as possible as fast as possible. The results are what Vasquez calls "mass art", putting man at the periphery resulting in art is trivial banal and a caricature:

> By mass art we mean art whose products satisfy the pseudo-aesthetic needs of mass or reified man, who is himself a characteristic product of industrial capitalist society.[28]

The tourists for whose whims the carvers produce their work do not create a real need that the carvers need to satisfy. The objective qualities of art are left out and entertainment in its most banal form is emphasised, the consumer sits back, watching uninvolved. The only connection he has with the object of "art" is the possession of it. This alienation of a work of art from its creator and consumer has permeated the performing arts as well, especially in industrialized class societies.[29] It exists in marginal forms in neo-colonial states like Tanzania and Kenya where the dilemma has been recognized as a pull between foreign elements and "national patriotic efforts". Ngugi sums this up succinctly:

> In the present cultural struggle between foreign and national interests, most Kenyans would take the view that a modern Kenyan national culture should reflect the strength and confidence of a people who have completely rejected the position of always being the ragged-trousered philanthropists...[30]

Even though theatre performances have so far escaped the commoditisation that sculpture and painting has gone through, they have nonetheless settled into uninspiring mediocrity and scarcity. They have become "imitative" and "unprogessive" in the artistic sense and not only politically, as Mukotani Rugyendo has put forward.[31] They have ceased to be creative and entertaining in its widest sense. In both these respects, modern African theatre can look at traditional forms and learn.

Two major elements which contributed to the creativeness and entertainment value of traditional pre-capitalist performances are their improvisational and satirical nature. Improvisation implies impermanence and change. This does not mean that performances were haphazard with no technique and a few set styles and forms. What it means is that performances were such that changes were part of the happening. A good example of the improvisational nature of traditional performances has been observed in the story-telling techniques of the peoples of East Africa.[32] Improvisation is an extension of the presence of constant change within African Arts - the tendency of art to show a state of flux in its forms and structures; a tendency here to avoid rigidity and ossification.

Improvisation occured in both form and content, giving the performing art forms an in-built capacity for change. In most cases the autonomy of art was reflected in the performances, even within societies whose structure has resisted change. Improvisation in theatre, however, does not work where the performers do not understand their medium, their material and their audience. Improvisation becomes effective because it forces the performers to be creative within the framework of the content and form. It is a technique which creates its own rules for the creative performer, opening up vast possibilities. In dance, in music and in drama, the traditional performer used his knowledge of the dance, the instrument and the theatre to weave new ideas, movements and rhythms in the performance. Improvisation needs skilled performers and not amateurs. This shows why there are apprenticeships in the performing arts and why most story—tellers are old men and women. Dancers learn their craft from childhood and are usually not given recognition until later in their lives.[33] Makers of musical instruments hand down their skill from father to son, uncle to nephew. Improvisation makes the performance immediate, unpredictable and exciting and gives the performers more manipulative powers to keep the currents of communication alive.

Traditional performance forms utilise ridicule, sarcasm and irony which are part of satire. Performances are used to expose reality, not only in its positive entirety but also in its false pretensions. This is an instance where man's capacity to penetrate appearance is used creatively. Performances where both rulers and the common man are ridiculed or made fun of are found in many African societies.[34] Finnegan, however, is not quite right when she sing-

les out the Mande comedies as exceptions rather than the rule in African performances with satiric elements.[35] It is true that more research need to be done on the subject, but there are more known examples than Finnegan gives credit for. The dance-drama of the Yoruba and Hausa, the Isinyago and masque dances of the Makonde of Eastern Africa, and the heroic recitations of the Bahima and Bahaya are ample testimony to this. Soyinka has pointed out that the satiric outlook is not confined to performances only. Satire and capacity to incorporate the comical within the serious exists within the general cosmological world view of the Yoruba, for example. The gods are taken seriously but their follies, pretensions and weakness are comically portrayed and exposed for analysis.[16] The comical, ironical elements are used not only to elicit laughter but to give man a different perspective of his activities. The sense of play which is inherent in all performances is heightened. Incongruities of behaviour, thought and ideas are shown through the words and actions of the performances. The desired result is a realisation of pretensions and satirised vices in order to attain corrective measures. This goes beyond the mere elicitation of laughter for its own sake. Modern African theatre performances seem not to have learned from the traditional forms the function and technique of comedy. Birhanze echoes many when he says:

> The function of theatre in society must change. Today it is hardly anything more than just another form of entertainment, something one sees for a laugh or a sniff for a couple of hours and then goes away...[37]

The reasons behind the loss of satire in the performing arts are many. E.N. Hussein touches upon one of them, **Vichekesho. Vichekesho** made the African ridicule himself to make the European laugh. This was laughter at the expense of the performer, who does not laugh with his audience; it was derogatory, it was negative. The end was not corrected behaviour but a widening of a racial gap and a prolongation of prejudices. **Vichekesho** has left a bad taste in the mouths of many.

Joe de Graft has pointed out another reason for the state of affairs in African theatre today. He calls modern African theatre "amateur" and lacking in discipline.[38] He points not only to a lack of seriousness but also of technique. Satire and other elements of comedy require the acquisition and mastering of skills in material analysis and performance technique. The provocation of laughter becomes a means to an end.

There is probably a more serious problem present which discourages self-criticism through comedy or any other kind of performance. This is that society has lost its sense of humor and with it any willingness for exposure and diversion through theatre and other performances. There is an intolerance, towards the invasion of the political and economic spheres by the performing arts. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and what has happened to him in recent years is a good example. In 1977, the government of Kenya banned Ngugi's **Ngaahika Ndeenda,** a production which looked closely at the problems of exploitation and neo-colonialism. Ngugi ended up in detention for his efforts. In 1981, his other attempt, **Maitu Njugira,** was quashed. The play has been described as follows:

> The play **Maitu Njugira**... is what may be called a dramatised documentary on the forced labour and "kipande" laws in the colonial Kenya of the twenties and thirties. It shows the attempts in one community to repulse these and other injustices and to survive as a unit despite tremendous official intrigue and brutality.. It shows indirectly the genesis of some of our people's subsequent political movement and the seeds of their defeats and partial triumphs.[39]

The licence to perform this play was refused and Ngugi left to lament, "we wish to denounce in the strongest possible terms the government's increasing intolerance and

repression of the Kenyan people's cultural initiatives. Secondly, we now question fundamentally the seriousness of the government's commitment to Kenyan culture".[40]

Ngugi's cry could be echoed in many countries where efforts at building the performing arts are being hampered by intolerance, mystification and ignorance from those who could help. Commenting on the Tanzanian scene, P.O. Mlama sees the problem much more broadly: "a lack of a clear—cut understanding of culture".[41] All these reasons have tended to prevent the performing arts from developing and make them hold a peripheral position in society. There is a pervading fear that the performing arts are capable of unleashing hidden demonic powers which are detrimental to some, while forgetting that this power can be directed. It is a powerful tool and weapon in the service of building, not only of destruction.

The vitality of the performing arts lies in the duality of presence of the ideological and aesthetic elements. If modern theatre performances are to advance and learn from the past, then an analysis of both the political and economic structure and the parameters of art creation must be penetrated. The desired result is not an imitation of the past, nor of other cultures, but a utilisation of all available elements in the creation of new realities, new dramas and theatre happenings, new dance and music. These elements can be acquired through the inspirations that other people's cultural performances incite, but more importantly from those traditional forms that display qualities both political and aesthetic from the immediate and distant past. Entertainment in the performing arts will then have come into its own. If development means the thrust towards man's total freedom, the performing arts are vehicles for the pursuit of that freedom. Not only can they cater for his basic, physical needs but more importantly they can cater for his mental and spiritual needs and for the expression of his creative needs. When man creates, man exercises his powers to assert himself and move away from physical and mental slavery. He produces to enable him to live a more creative life. Good performances can fulfil this function for man in that they unleash his imagination and creative powers more sharply.

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