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POVERTY AND THE EMERGENT CULTURE OF VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA:
THE IMPERATIVE OF THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT (TFD) INTERVENTION STRATEGY

By

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Abstract

Recently, northern Nigeria is attracting global media attention, albeit negatively, on issues which border on leadership failure, ethno-religious conflicts, youth unemployment and official corruption. The attendant poverty in the region has created a climate of frustration and disillusionment on the part of the citizens, which, together with similar problems in other parts of Nigeria, are transmuting into threats to corporate existence. The hydra-headed phenomenon of Boko Haram, for instance, is for all intents and purposes a product of multifaceted social problems. To worsen the case, there appears to be complete failure of imagination going by the way in which both the Nigerian state and the northern establishment are handling what is turning out to be a deplorable situation. The security problems in the north of Nigeria are now threatening to engulf not only Nigeria but the entire Sahel region of West Africa if appropriate measures are not deployed to address them. Furthermore, the Nigerian state only promotes the spiraling insecurity by solely relying on security apparatuses and instruments of violence as the only viable means to overcome the Boko Haram conundrum. The attempt by government to complicate the Boko Haram saga by trying to involve the international community without addressing urgent social and economic realities is only diffusing the tense situation. However, this paper contends that alternative measures must be sourced to the deepening social problems in the region. Solutions should be sought through the implementation of realistic social policies as opposed to the current failed strategy of total reliance on force. In addition, government must show a convincing resolve to fight corruption; engage constructively with restive youth all over the country; strengthen civil institutions and encourage civil society initiatives. Above all, a robust pursuit of enlightenment strategies through the mechanism of Theatre for Development (TFD) which has had positive antecedents in conflict resolution and community development in Africa should be employed in order to create awareness and behavioral change in northern Nigeria.
Theatre for Development is a legitimate political objective to discover strategies and organizational skills for functioning politically and creatively within the context of crisis.  

(Aba and Etherton, 1982)

**Introduction**

The emergence of Theatre in most African societies has been principally linked with the idea of man trying to understand the social phenomenon within his environment. Theatre’s historical evolution from religious and ritualistic purposes can be exemplified from the Alarinjo performances of southern Nigeria to the religious order of *Egungun*. Similarly, the *Bori* ritual performance in northern Nigeria which transformed into an all-encompassing performance with a combination of activities - including songs, poetry, dance, acrobatic moves, puppetry and acting. Theatre in traditional African society plays a central role. It is an art form, which brings people together as well as a vehicle for passing on information and transmitting oral traditions.

In the early 1960s theatre became an established tool or vehicle for communicating developmental issues and conflict resolution in Africa. Communities were able to address issues of self-development through participation in a theatre process. Two pioneers would be mentioned in this context because of their efforts to connect theatre and development; Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, and Augusto Boal, the theatre actor and director. Freire experimented in Brazil with innovative and participatory learning methodology in the context of adult education and literacy training. Boal, on his part, applied forms of drama to stimulate the active participation of audiences in creating awareness. This he applied as a problem solving measure at the community level. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973) and Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) have contributed powerfully to the further development of what is known as Theatre for Development today.

The term Theatre for Development can be traced to Botswana in the early 1970s. The theatre performance in Botswana included puppets, songs, dance and the general idea was to use the theatre to bring community members together and focus on key local issues raised within a performance. The initial experiment was known as *Laedza Batanani* which involves attempts to use drama and other performance forms, combined with discussion, as vehicle for community education (Espkamp 2002). Espkamp also argues “most initiatives at that time (1970s) can be found at the university level.
Students took theatre courses in which they attempted to work closely with the population in mapping out local experiences of social inequalities. The ice-breaking games and stimulation and role-play models were derived from Theatre in Education (TIE) and the revolutionary dramaturgy of Augusto Boal” (Espkamp 2002:14). Unlike Popular Theatre or Community Theatre, Theatre for Development is facilitated by Theatre professionals and is more theoretically grounded. TFD recognizes indigenous performances and incorporates them in the play in order to address modern themes such as literacy, health, sanitation, corruption, communication and environmental education” (Gikanda and Mwangi 2007). Extensive documentation of both the Botswana initiative and the Kamirithu experiment in Kenya fostered further interest in TFD by university lecturers, one of which is a Canadian called Ross Kidd. The enthusiasm of people like Ross Kidd contributed to the fast spread and adaptation of TFD in the southern, eastern and western parts of Africa. This spread continued with the combination of theoretical studies with practical work in the field.

The declaration by UNESCO making the 1980s the United Nations’ decade for cultural development also further TFD a formidable methodology in Africa. Consequently, the 1980s witnessed further entrenchment of TFD practice in formal institutions. For instance, Ross Kidd organized series of training TFD workshops in countries like Bangladesh, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zambia and Zimbabwe, etc. In his work in Botswana Kidd says it was “a non-formal education project which attempted to follow a Freirean model (Kidd and Bryam, 1981). He states that the key feature of TFD is in its being a medium for encouraging participation, raising issues, fostering discussion and promoting collective action. People like David Ker also initiated similar TFD experiment in Malawi; Ngugi Wa Mirri was also exploring it in the University of Nairobi. The work in Botswana must have influenced Michael Etherton who pioneered Nigeria’s TFD experience in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in collaboration with indigenous TFD practitioners such as Oga Steve Abah. In Nigeria. TFD is used successfully to address various social issues, especially issues that directly affect the lives of individuals and communities all over the country. TFD can therefore be used to address the present unrest and violence in northern Nigeria.

**The crisis in Northern Nigeria**

Northern Nigeria is obviously attracting a lot of negative publicity due to the creeping culture of violence in the region. The violence which is engulfing society is everywhere heightened by the heinous crimes of a home grown Islamic group popularly known as Boko Haram. This group
challenges the legitimacy of the Nigerian State through its gruesome campaign of terror against the law abiding citizens and the security forces alike. A recent report compiled by *International Crisis Group* has however claimed that the Boko Haram quagmire is symptomatic of deep-seated social malady. According to the report, “the roots of the problems” in the North of Nigeria “are more complex and lie in Nigeria’s history and contemporary politics” (International Crisis Group, 2012). Politics is essentially based on the mobilization and promotion of ethno-religious sentiments and unhealthy contestations and rivalry amongst the quisling elites across the different geopolitical zones and sections of the country. The target is primarily for the control of power and resources for reasons of self-aggrandizement and not national development agenda.

The perception of the dominance of political power in Nigeria by northern Nigerian Muslims under the chains of military regimes has created an atmosphere which fosters ethno-religious sentiments, tribalism, nepotism and the climate of mutual suspicion among different groups and sections of the country. The resentment of other parts of Nigeria to the northern political domination has generated serious degree of chain reaction. The powerful southern media has effectively waged negative campaign against the Muslim North and everything that the region represented because it is perceived as the bedrock of military intervention and also as the bane of progress and development in the country. The media onslaught against the North was exacerbated by the activities of civil society groups and human rights organizations that received direct support from western governments, powerful NGOs and donor agencies. Although the efforts of southern press and southern-based NGOs were geared towards dismantling military rule in Nigeria and, by extension, the northern political domination of power and politics, they have however only succeeded in widening the gulp between the North and the South.

In public discourse waged in the print media also, particularly over the pages of the dominant Lagos-Ibadan press, the declaration of Shari’a was widely viewed as a divisive issue in Nigeria. It is seen as a response to the political power shift to the South as well as a bargaining chip by the Muslim elites in the North (Samuel 2007: 222); in other quarters it is seen differently as a strategy to Islamize the country by Muslims. Paden (2005: 178) has aptly captured the confrontational posture of Nigerian press when he states that “Nigeria’s media have often been a source of conflict than a mediating influence” in their handling of very contentious issues of
the day. The Shari’a that was declared is centred on issues concerning personal conduct such as unlawful sexual intercourse, theft, robbery and drinking of alcohol (Peters 2001: 8). But because “the symbolism of Shari’a has been so powerful, both in the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, it has stirred up a number of unintended consequences, including the violent conflicts in Kaduna state” (Paden 2005: 170) and Plateau and Bauchi states. This is the sense in which the Shari’a declared in most Muslim dominated northern Nigerian states really scared the Christian community and the resultant mutual antagonism, violent conflicts, destruction of lives and property.

More so, the return to democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 apparently exposed the underbelly of the age-old neglect of the development of northern Nigeria by the different segments of its power elites - the political, military, educated and business elites who, after attaining high status in society, opt to neglect the wellbeing of their various communities and the region in general. The northern politicians in particular have been manifesting an incredible poverty of ideas, vision and mission in the discharge of their responsibility as leaders in their own states and local governments. Between 1999 and 2012, the North had collectively realized a colossal sum of money from the federation accounts as revenue, but there was nothing to show for it by way of investment in human capital development, infrastructure, industry, agriculture and education; areas in which the North has comparative advantage and can rely upon for social regeneration. A recent report has it that the “sum of N8.3 trillion accrued to the North from the Federation Account in 11 years” was all embezzled (Daily Trust, Monday, January 7, 2013: 1). The fact that agriculture is the mainstay of northern Nigerian economy, authorities should have facilitated taking it to respectable and sustainable levels. Total reliance on oil revenue within the current context of political jostling over resource control also killed the spirit of self-reliance, industry, accountability and transparency leading to the culture of embezzlement and corruption at all levels of governance.

Similarly, the collapse of public school system in Nigeria has created its own pool of disgruntled youth in urban locations. As recent as February 2013, the Commissioner for Education of Kaduna State revealed that out of 1,599 teachers tested in the area of Mathematics and Basic literacy, up to 1,300 of the total number scored below 25 percent (Daily Trust, Friday, February 15, 2013: 1). Lack of quality education has indeed increased the number of school dropouts
roaming the streets of northern Nigerian towns and cities. The unfortunate children and youth who are unable to make it to tertiary institutions or get some training in skills are in their large number exposed to so many anti-social behaviors like theft, armed robbery, rape, kidnapping for ransom, drug addiction and violence in the streets. The worst dimension of it all is in the frequency with which desperate politicians are drafting the youth for criminal activities against their opponents. They use the vagrant youths to cause mayhem, to intimidate, to assassinate and to engage in arson.

The *Almajiri* (itinerant child beggars) culture is also compounding the menace of unemployed youths in northern cities. The specter of *Almajiri* is becoming intractable. According to the estimates carried out by the Ministerial Committee on *Madarasah* (Islamic school) Education, “the enrolment for the North-East is 2,711,767 *Almajiri*, North-West has 4,903,000 and North-Central 1,133,288, with a total enrolment of 8,748,055 *Almajiri* for the three Northern geopolitical zones” (Bobboyi 2010: 2). The children that have been forced into begging are proving to be a serious menace to society. They are sometimes believed to be the cannon fodder in the ethno-religious and communal clashes that have become a recurring decimal in the region. All efforts to address the menace of *Almajiri*, including the federal government intervention to domesticate them and integrate them into society, are more or less not proving effective. There is also lots of disagreement among the Islamic clergy on the desirability of the *Almajiri* system. While the Sufi Islamic order is sympathetic to *Almajiri* practice, the Salafi group frowns at it and, in fact, they are even advocating the eradication of the culture of begging in society. However, the increasing rates of poverty in northern Nigeria and the overwhelming indifference of the elites to this social hazard are evidently increasing the number of *Almajiri* and crime in the streets.

**The Boko Haram Conundrum**

The group is called Boko Haram (Western Education is prohibited) because of its inclination and tendency towards attacking everything, which carries the insignia of western culture and values. In the logic of the group everything western is uncritically considered as something that is antithetical to Islamic way of life and values. The Boko Haram members believe that their position is backed by principles and exegesis, which are codified in the Quran and the Sunnah (the exemplary life and traditions of the Prophet of Islam). Therefore the faithful must strive to
rid Islamic society of the adulteration and corruption of alien influences. The circumstances surrounding the emergence of the group are more complex than the picture that Nigerian media is painting about it. No matter how one likes to view the evolution of Boko Haram as a group couched in Islamic ideology and intent, one will always discover some social and political undertones associated with their agitations. Boko Haram is more or less a local insurgency which is fuelled by deep-seated social dysfunction in northern Nigeria where the predominantly Muslim communities are still ensnared by feudal structures and values.

Mohammed Yusuf, the late leader of the group, started attracting his followers from the pool of unemployed youths when he started criticizing the massive corruption of political authorities, criminal mismanagement of public resources and the excesses of Nigerian police who are being used as the hunting dogs of corrupt political leadership. Corruption, social injustice and the aura of disillusionment and frustration have become the driving forces of Boko Haram recruitment patterns. One of its daring and spectacular terror campaigns was when they shifted their targets of attacks westward to Kano, the largest commercial nerve centre of northern Nigeria. Christian worshipers in Bayero University Kano, including some Professors were killed in one gruesome attack on the city campus when they are having their Sunday service. The worst attack was on the Kano State Police Headquarter and several lower level police stations across the city when more than 186 people lost their lives following about 4 hours of fierce gun battle with security agencies. On the whole, the Boko Haram violence has so far consumed more than 3000 lives (Crock 2013).

Other Muslims, leaders and groups have roundly condemn the group. The consensus among Nigerian Muslims who have the courage to speak out was that Islam does not sanction wanton destruction of lives and property. The dominant position in the debate raging in the mainstream media, over the pages of Facebook and other social media groups is that Boko Haram is projecting Islam in bad light and have misconstrued and misrepresented the concept of Jihad. The group has completely alienated itself from other Muslims and society in general and they never hesitate to assassinate anybody who criticizes them. The response of Nigerian government to Boko Haram insurgency however leaves much to be desired. Nigerian government indeed shows, in its handling all crises, a one track minded approach to crisis, including Boko Haram insurgency, which is to use brute force to quell agitations. The
government is more inclined to police and armed forces tactics as the only antidote to social challenges. Consequently, force and more force seems to be the only answer Nigerian government has for Boko Haram, even when that approach was tried and had failed in the case of Niger-Delta insurgency which was eventually resolved through dialogue and constructive engagement with the restive youths of the area. In fact, as more force is applied people witness corresponding hike in Boko Haram terror attacks, and the group seems to be multiplying by the day. The general fear is that their insurgency may spread to other unstable Sahel region like Mali. According to Andrew Walker (2012) of the United States Institute of Peace:

Tactics employed by government security agencies against Boko Haram have been consistently brutal and counterproductive. The reliance on extrajudicial execution as a tactic in “dealing” with any problem in Nigeria not only created Boko Haram as it is known today, but also sustains it and gives it fuel to expand (Walker, 2012:12).

Similarly, the Nigerian government is, through its security outfits, desperately attempting to internationalize Boko Haram conundrum. Crock (2013) has validated this position when he states that “President Goodluck Jonathan is interested in highlighting the connection between Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda’s North African wing – as evidence that Nigeria is facing global Jihadist Threat”. In any case, the government has effectively shied away from addressing the problems of grinding poverty and massive corruption of public officials afflicting northern Nigeria more than in southern Nigeria where you find some degree of social mobility. It is common knowledge that even the U.S. government has consistently sounded warning signals on the potential instability in northern Nigeria resulting from official recklessness, corruption, misplacement of priorities and mismanagement of public finances by government. Bill Clinton has, in a recent visit to Nigeria, attributed the Boko Haram insurgency to grinding poverty in northern Nigeria. Therefore, if the problems of Boko Haram are caused by poverty, as experts and opinion leaders see the situation, social solutions must then be carefully thought out. Solutions should be sought through the implementation of realistic social policies as opposed to the current failed strategy of total reliance on force. In addition, government must show a convincing resolve to fight corruption; engage constructively with restive youths all over the country; strengthen civil institutions and encourage civil society initiatives. Above all, a robust pursuit of enlightenment strategies through the mechanism of Theatre for Development (TFD)
which has had positive antecedents in conflict resolution and community development in Africa should be employed in order to create awareness and behavioral change in northern Nigeria.

**Theatre for Development Imperative**

Theatre for Development like in many other African countries, mentioned earlier, has been very successful in lending itself to addressing critical social problems when employed by practitioners in both urban and rural parts of Nigeria. While Ross Kidd played a significant role in the development of TFD in Botswana, Michael Erherton fostered the growth of TFD in Nigeria with his work with students of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. The idea “was to first awaken the minds of the residents of this place to the need for knowing their rights and demanding fair attention from the government. Abah (2006) characterized TFD as “a methodology for understanding complex problems while at once providing a tool for overcoming them” (Abah and Owkori). Samuel Ebewo explicitly posits that TFD is an instrument of empowerment for the socially deprived individuals. It serves as the people’s media, it is participatory and interactive in character, democratic in outlook; it utilizes the idiom of orality, and enlighten people in a society to change or modify their thinking and discover ways of combating challenges (2001:94). In other words, Theatre for Development is a theatre of action whose output results from participation and interaction.

A typical process of TFD would normally begin with group building and sharing. In this initial stage the facilitators would establish familiarity and understanding with the community members. This process can be achieved through the homestead technique or frequent visits. This process allows for trust to be built particularly when local traditions, theatrical forms like storytelling, local games and songs are shared. The next stage is research and information gathering. The form this type of research takes is active and participatory in nature, involving open discussions, focus group and interview with theatre games and exercises. This stage is followed by the problem analysis and prioritisation in which the participation of community members is absolutely necessary. They will be involved in determining which issues are most important to focus on, what their root causes are and so on. In this
case, Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) tools such as community mapping, matrix ranking, and Venn diagram are appropriate because they are easy tools that can be constructed with indigenous materials.

The ideas generated from this process are used for scenario building. It is often at this stage that stories and ideas are turned into dramatic materials. The scenarios are built and rehearsed by community members with help from the facilitators. In some cases, the facilitators can also take up roles within the performance. In some performance method, particular those based on Augusto Boals’s Forum Theatre, the “audience” is involved in finding solutions to problems presented by taking on character roles during the actual performance. This is what Boal referred to as the “spect-actor”. In other situations, discussions are postponed until after the performance. In all forms of TFD, however, the performance is not the end of the process but is followed by a stage of discussion, evaluation and planning for follow-up action. The overall objective of TFD is to use theatre as method of democratic discourse that can lead to action and behaviour change.

Illustratively, the TFD technique is employed by the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) and the Theatre for Development Centre (TFDC) in addressing community conflicts in Nigeria. The Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance was established in March 1989 as a full-fledged Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) using Theatre for Development as a tool for creating community awareness and conflict resolution. The Organization is based in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria and its emphasis is on communication and development through alternative means for rural and urban populace (Okoronkwo 2012). NPTA’s projects have been variously supported by organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Canadian University Services Overseas, The Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex and recently the Development Research Centre based in the United Kingdom. Although the role of NPTA, according to Oga Steve Abah who is the founding President of NPTA, is “twofold”: One, it identifies and cooperates with grass root organizations working as change agents with their communities. Two, the NPTA uses Theatre for Development workshops. Each workshop discusses development problems of selected communities. Such workshops provide forum for members of NPTA and communities to share ideas on problems identified (Networker, 1989). While NPTA has successfully carried out several TFD sensitization workshops all over Nigeria,
two examples will suffice in this paper to portray the efficacy of TFD in the area of conflict resolution.

**Working with Muslim and Christian Youth in Kaduna**

Between 2007 and 2008 the NPTA through its research and training unit, the Theatre for Development Centre (TFDC) worked with Muslim and Christian youth and women in Kaduna State, Nigeria. Colette Harris and the founder of NPTA Oga Steve Abah developed the project using TFD to help “uncover what lay beneath the surface and gain an understanding, both of the issues involved and why so many young men came to be involved in violence”. Northern Nigeria, Kaduna state in particular, has been the site of major sectarian riots and violence, the worst being the clashes in 2000 over the prospective introduction of Sharia law. This particular project was done in the wake of recent inter-sectarian riots and tension. The possibility of new outbreaks of community violence was said to be eminent (Harris 2009). The project was therefore organized to “open up for reflection and citizen action at community level and increase participants’ ability to analyse the local political situation in order to reduce violence in the community”. Theatre for Development was employed as a methodology in conjunction with transformative education methods. According to Harris (2009), “in relation to the outside, our main aim was to increase participants capacities for political analysis to enable them to think through the implications of future calls to violence by political elites and religious leaders who see their interest in being able to manipulate poor young men.”

The project consists of three participant groups. The first was a mixed religion women group. The other two were mono-religious men’s group, Muslims and Christians. Although these groups had their sessions at different locations within Kaduna, the facilitators employed similar TFD techniques. The project gave the women a forum to interact and address questions of the status of women, as well as gain tools to help them tackle socio-political and health related issues. In a review session held in August 2008. Harris (2009) reports that the women had improved their health and that of their families and have managed to convince their husbands to send both sons and daughters to school; and radically revised their approach to raising their children by encouraging the boys to eschew violence and keep away from rowdier peers (Harris 2009). The Muslim men on one hand directed their attention to analysing issues of social interaction. The popular concept that the male characteristic of bravery is best performed through violence or aggression was countered with proposing a more Gandhi like approach to reducing rather than encouraging violence. The Christian group on the other
hand spend several sessions dissecting religious and political issues and analysing the Sharia riots. They discuss whether or not it was useful to conceptualise the main social divide in Kaduna along religious lines. The reflections done through TFD methodology help to transform previously believed notions that Muslim masses were the beneficiaries of special political favours. However, the fact of the matter is that adherents of both religions have suffered in equal terms from corruption perpetrated by public officials.

The Niger Delta intervention

TFD intervention was carried out in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in 2003 by Theatre for Development Centre (TFDC), the research arm of NPTA, with funding from the Development Research Centre. The Niger Delta region is well known for its rich oil wealth. However, the region has suffered from neglect, inadequate infrastructure, high unemployment and environmental pollution. Frequent oil spills has diminished forest and fishing activity which is the major traditional occupation of most communities in the Niger Delta. Most of these problems can be traced to corruption amongst community leaders, government officials and international oil expatriates. Consequently, members of the communities in the area started agitations which subsequently degenerated to insurgency. The most high profile agitation was the one organized by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, (MEND). This group claim they want to win a greater allocation of the oil wealth for their impoverished people, but some of their members have become armed bandits using political grievances as an excuse for personal enrichment or have formed gangs committed to terrorizing their perceived enemies (Abah and Okwori 2009).

TFD facilitators went into eight communities; four within Bayelsa State and four within Delta State. The facilitators worked with key participants such as teachers and community leaders over the course of three days. The participants explored corruption and accountability issues, which culminated, into a performance. The performance involved community members and a community action plan was put forward in each of these communities.

Conclusion
Many of the regional and local conflicts in Nigeria are easier resolved at their earliest manifestation. Theatre for development can help communities in averting and overcoming conflict because it is a method that fosters mutual understanding and conflict resolution. This underscores the importance of replicating similar TFD projects like the ones mentioned in this paper, in both rural and urban communities in Nigeria. The government must eschew corruption, and as a matter of urgency concentrate on developing education, agriculture, arts, science and technology, particularly in northern Nigeria.

**Recommendation**

- The Nigerian government needs to put in place policy framework designed to promote TFD, particularly for conflict prevention and resolution. Such support would be beneficial for national development.

- Alternative sources of funding for TFD should be explored to provide support for community based theatre organisations.

- Civil society organisation should integrate TFD more systematically in their existing programmes.

- More effort should be put in place to promote community ownership of TFD projects.

- Both government and donors should fulfil their promises to communities particularly after TFD findings have been submitted to them.

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