

**Are We Answering the Right Questions?
Challenges for Communicating
Behavior Change through Community
Theatre among the Barbaig in Northern
Tanzania**

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Abstract

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In many cases, development initiatives are formulated away from those for whom they are intended to salvage. Quite often these initiatives are clearly and logically potentially useful and the receiving end would indeed benefit from such efforts. One of the challenges then becomes how best to interface with the community, and deciding on an efficient strategy to pass on the messages or know-how. This paper examines some challenges in communicating change and argues that participatory theatre is quite an efficient mechanism for information transfer and stimulating behavior change. It however raises the challenges the author met with when trying to work with a Northern Tanzanian ethnic group, on the sensitive issue of female circumcision and other related ills. The paper concludes that despite the inroads that the theatre made, development can only be a holistic undertaking where the theatre would be one of the major ingredients. The paper though does not go into debates about entertainment education as a genre, as this is a quite well covered subject

I. A Brief Overview of Communicating Change

The last half century has seen tremendous growth in the production and dissemination of information. This has been particularly so as society realized more and more that information was vital in the development process. Previously economic theory ruled "development" thinking with its "land, labor and capital" but experiments at industrializing and developing the newly independent developing world in the sixties and seventies indicated that the pure mechanics of "land, labor and capital" were not enough oil to the cog wheels of development in many of those countries. (Hedebero 1982)

This realization came about as both the donors and recipient agencies realized that it was not the quantitative strategies that made impact, rather what was more vital was trying to find a way for making the target groups for that "development" accept and adopt the proposed new ways apparently designed for their benefit. Successful development strategies therefore implied the local communities adopting new ways of doing things, new agricultural strategies, new health practices and so on. Some development workers even equated these processes with (direct) westernization.

Despite the heavy capital inflow especially in the sixties and seventies in the form of loans, grants and aid, many of the resultant monuments of such transactions remained isolated islands of lights and glamour with little impact on the neighborhoods. The discrepant living standards between those within that island and the surroundings led even to cynicism among the general population that sometimes burst out in anger and revolutions.

It is then that leading development scholars and other international agencies such as UNESCO and the United Nations began to realize (including Mwalimu Nyerere) that development had to be of people rather than mere piling up of artifacts and other paraphernalia characterized by material goods. This realization gave prominence to the thinking that what was important was not to give the people "things", rather to move along with them towards a mutual destination. Such change in approach brought to the fore the importance of information and communication as important ingredients in the galvanizing of people.

The intrusion of communication processes in development strategies implied again visiting the "source" at the development funders to "see" what was there in the form of theory with regard to communication. With particular reference to the use of media in the Second World War, sociology, psychology and communication scholars had come up with theories of the communication processes to explain the impact of mediated messages during the war. One major thing was agreed on: the media were important tools in persuasion and/or the socialization processes.

The communication strategies prevalent at the time however, were those based on the current theories: of *Sender – Receiver*, with the latter addition of a feedback loop from receiver to sender. The overriding sentiment in this theorizing was that the "sender" knew what was good for the receiver, but in case he was wrong, the receiver could write him a letter for example suggesting the difference, or he/she would ask questions or seek clarifications. (Klapper 1988, Schramm 1961, Rogers & Shoemaker 1973)

This was largely the communication strategy adopted in the seventies: Multiply the channels of communication, unleash communication and development

missionaries, and increase the reach of the media.... tell those people to boil water for drinking ... and so on.

These methods did not work. Evidence from work done in anthropology and sociology (Wolf 1966, Porter 1967) was showing that the so-called peasants were not *tabula rasa* and were not just lumps sitting there to be told what to do. Their central preoccupation was how to take care of their families, and stay away from trouble with governments. If therefore the information disseminated did not conflict with such central preoccupation then there was no problem, but if they were asked to take a chance , say, on a new crop whose sustainability was not known, then little could be accomplished via the information channels alone. These efforts to try and “revolutionalise” the economies of the third world and the intellectual background that gave birth to it also moved into the communication theorizing. Let not the people be simply told what to do. Let them be more involved in the processes of change. Let them be the tellers and the actors themselves.

This began a whole new outlook at the field of communicating change or development as it was more commonly known, and especially so for communication. Rather than create and send messages to them from central sources, let them be a party to the composition of the messages and including their transmission. This of course was ideal, but the highly centralized nature of the communication technology, especially the transmission technology and the enormous resources required in training and equipment made this approach difficult to adopt, despite its being seen as a more realistic approach to communicating information aimed at changing the target audiences.

This approach though rather novel was not actually new. From time immemorial traditional cultures had had very efficient communication channels to pass on their messages to their progeny. These often were through such

media as stories, proverbs, songs and dances, heroic recitations, dramatizations, ritualisation, apprenticeships and other rites and practices. These methodologies were in fact so efficient in that in nearly all the traditional societies everyone knew what was expected of them, and deviation from the norms was often frowned upon, and could even provoke new "songs or dances". Key to these processes were of course the participatory nature of it all. The songs were participatory, and the dances like wise. Many of these other channels inevitably called for closer proximity than the distances in the new media of transmitting messages (Mlama 1991).

Despite this shift in theoretical thinking and approach, it was not possible that all forms of communication be done this way. Moreover, the communication structures (newspapers, radio and television stations) could not so easily adopt to this approach, as it would create enormous logistical problems. The problems that needed dealing with did not get any less, and some of them were highly dependent on information. Problems in such areas as HIV/AIDS, family planning, breast feeding, and so on could best be dealt with by persuading people to look favorably at best practices. Debates then began to shift to what is the best way to *persuade/convince* people that new practices and behavior was worth while? This has given birth to the current debates on entertainment education, (Singhal & Rogers 1999, Ryerson 2003, Myers 2002) as a genre that lays special emphasis in producing messages in such away that they do not become a threat to people's views and beliefs. Instead people are challenged to weigh themselves with regard to the behavior being portrayed by others who face similar challenges.

This is indeed the hallmark for theater: it creates those other people, away from oneself, and as they "strut and fret" (Shakespearean phrase) their lives on stage, be it physical, aural or visual, the audience cannot help but take

sides, while being entertained as well. This paper examines one such case of “theatising” problems in a community in Northern Tanzania.

II. The Case for Theatre

The debate on the effects of theatre dates thousands of years back with philosophical stalwarts such as Plato dismissing the poets from his *Republic*, where theatre was discerned as likely to create intellectual instability among the philosopher kings. Plato advocated for an ideal Republic based on virtue and justice. He regarded theatre as a conveyor of heightened passions that would make the philosopher kings lose their calmness. He argued further, that theatre being a representation of a representation of the ideal it was far removed from reality and could not be relied upon as a conveyor of truth (Carlson, 1984).

His contemporary and student, Aristotle, thought differently. He saw theatre as a powerful weapon for creating empathy, and especially for tragedy, theatre was capable through this empathy – of making us see and choose between *good* and *evil*. The early Christian Church first adopted the *platonic* view of theatre. Citing St. Augustine, Carlson (1984) points out that the church saw the love of theatre as “miserable madness that ensnares man in the passions he should avoid...” and, as such, theatre could not go hand in hand with the pursuits of God. With the Roman Empire turning Christian, theatre was suppressed particularly because it was also seen as being more related to festivities of *devilish* worship. It did not take long for the church to realize that theatrical practices continued to thrive despite the ban, and the church itself realized that rather than ban such a *powerful organ* in conveying information, it should better adopt it to teach the illiterates who could not read the Bible about Christianity, and the life and ways of a good Christian. Hence the use of moral and miracle plays in the Middle Ages (Carlson 1984).

The tug-of-war about the role of theatre in the community continued through the ages with important philosophical schools and philosophers agreeing and disagreeing on the overall impact of theatre as a means of conveying information. The overwhelming result however was that theatre was a quite a powerful communication organ that could raise passions of all kinds among the population. This led to considerable legislation in Europe and of course in many other countries aimed at putting some control on theatre, some of which are still in effect up to this day. In many third world countries, for example, theatre is regarded with suspicion, and some leading theatre practitioners have seen their days in jail for daring to question the powers that be via the theatre (Lawson, 1966; Carlson, 1984; Courtney, 1968).

A question that begs asking therefore is why, if indeed theatre is a powerful conveyor of information, especially in the traditional setting, why then has theatre not simply been adopted and used to solve the modern day problems of communicating change?

Several problems are identifiable that have acted as major intervening variables in getting messages across that are common even via other delivery methods. One of the constraints, as Felstenhausen (1973) contends, has been our failure to understand well communication and development. Felstenhausen argues that most of those engaged in communication often are not experts in development issues, and those whose main task is "development" equally often do not have sufficient grounding in communication. Mda (1993) adds to this debate by arguing that most communication and development workers are quite often alienated from the very people they are trying to serve, to such an extent that the community members see them as strangers whose information may be seen with some skepticism. Mloma (1991) makes the same point when at one point in time during a theatre for development exercise in Cameroon the

visiting participants rather than sit with their hosts who had organized a welcoming party, they chose to go to a nearby modern bar for cold beers.

Another setback in the communication with rural communities is that rarely do the development workers or communicators begin their work from the knowledge bases in the community. They tend to approach the community in a condescending manner knowledge-wise: there is something to be done in that community and those trained to do it have come to pass on their knowledge. They rarely consider that they are working with people with a history of doing things in a cosmos they understand and know better. The traditional approach in development thinking on the other hand presupposes that these are people who have to be changed, and the sooner the better (Wolf 1966, Porter 1967)

Peasants, however, understand clearly the contradiction between them and the smooth operators that come in shiny cars and white clothes. They know that they will either want to collect taxes from them, solicit votes or waste their time at the village square in public meetings, consuming much of their time when they could be looking for something with which to sustain their families. Any information that interferes with such premise is weighed carefully against that principle. Going with this argument, for example, is the fact that if a woman were to get richer than the man, this could even cause family problems. Hence a community may reject a campaign that promotes women getting into cooperatives, because all of a sudden the social relationships would be affected.

Another serious shortcoming are the communication strategies that we have adopted. Most communication research has been initiated by the west (Hedebro, 1982; Hamelink, 1984) and, as such, the way communication and information flows are conceptualized revolve around the western tradition of

seeing. The rise of the diffusion of innovation by Everett Rogers and F. Shoemaker (1973) appeared like a breakthrough in the conceptualization of reaching the very disadvantaged *information-wise*. The idea was that in every community there were opinion leaders, such as leaders, teachers, medicine men, traders, religious leaders, rich farmers and et cetera. These leaders who were more enlightened in the community would see advantages more easily in adopting *new and better* methods of doing things and, hence, could be role models oiling the cog and wheels of community development. The adoption of this communication strategy, based on the experiments in the forties and fifties with the farmers of rural America did not produce the electric results expected in developing countries, and Rogers (1976) acknowledged later that the methodology had not produced the required results.

Mda (1973), analyses communication theories and strategies that are in use, and makes a striking point that knowledge by itself does not necessarily lead to change. He argues that for change to take place, it is important that the subjects for the change understand the root cause of the problem at hand and are able to recognize alternatives that can help them resolve the problem. He further points out that while there has been much work in communication theorization, communication research and communication dissemination, some of the strategies used have not been able to provide sufficient opportunity to the subjects of the information efforts to delve into the root causes of their predicaments. He argues that Community Theater, which he *defines as a theater that emanates from the community itself and is performed by the community members for a community audience*, holds promise in giving the community members an opportunity to discover and dialogue about their predicament.

There is now a growing body of literature and practice reflecting the importance of theatre for educational purposes, especially in the rural

communities. Nearly all the studies converge on one central issue about theatre: that it can bring to life issues in and to those communities, despite some shortcomings inherent in it as well. For the purpose of this discussion, we are retaining the broad definition given to theatre (Mlama, 1991) that encompasses even the traditional literary kinds. Studies such as those by Kamlongera (1989), Frank (1995), Mlama (1991) and Mda (1993), all give extensive bibliographies and review numerous case studies so that we feel it unnecessary to review the same studies over again.

A major observation coming from their works is that theatre works best when the people themselves are fully involved in the preliminary discussions, the identification and research on and about the incidence of those problems, the creation, the performance, the dialoguing and discussions that go on concurrently or after the performance, which usually lead to a plan of action by the community themselves. Mlama (1991), for instance, describes how community members who were about to lose their land drew up a plan of action which enabled them to recover their land from an administration that had 'vested' interests in the community losing that land. Frank (1995) details how plays performed on the subject of AIDS in Uganda have led to considerable change of attitudes, while Mda (1993) describes several plays that were performed in Lesotho whereby he argues that they had an impact on the communities in which they were performed.

Mda however raises other important considerations for the theatre to be effective. We have noted above the need for full participation of the community in the whole process, but he also insists that when such plays are integrated and embellished with local songs and dances, they are even more effective. Reviewing their experiences, Mda notes that when they designed a play and took it to a village to perform, the impact was not the same as when the community members created the plays themselves. Furthermore, when they

performed the plays without local colours from traditional songs, dances and recitations, the impact was not as when the members of the local community themselves joined in with their songs, dances and poetic recitations.

What Mda seems to be saying is that participatory experiences whereby folk and traditional media are part of the whole theatre process attract the community more in the communicative process than simply dry presentations. This ties in with the observation by Kamlongera (1989) that when in Malawi artists used puppetry, the community reception of it was not as enthusiastic as for the dramas with local songs and dances.

Mlama, Mda and Kamlongera, all agree that such participatory communication through theatre, created and performed by the community members themselves seems to work best as it provides the most essential element in the learning process: discovering the problem, explaining (dramatizing) the problem as it is understood and proposing solutions for resolving the problem. Mda calls it a theatre of conscientization, owing to the fact that it does not only call on the community members to participate in identifying problems of common concern, it also provides an opportunity for discussing problems democratically, each contribution having the same value as any other. The process of learning becomes democratic as such, but it still requires what Mda calls a catalyst to help the community members in such things as aesthetic dramatizations, a more in-depth analysis of problems, and so on. Participatory theatre, therefore, seems quite well suited for programmes of sensitization and mobilization that require the people to take a leading role in their conscientisation that could lead to their own development. The inherent problem however in all communication strategies is that while information is vital, often there are deep rooted structural issues that require other inputs, rather than information, as is described below.

III. Participatory Theatre Experiences Among the Barbaig in Northern Tanzania

The Barbaig are a nomadic ethnic group that leaves and moves with their livestock in Northern Tanzania, especially in the Arusha and Manyara regions, but they can now also be found further south as they follow grazing areas and water for their animals. The work in theatre was part of a strategy adopted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) to try and use the participatory theatre methodology in its work to sensitize women in particular about their rights. Previous such work had been done in Morogoro in Central Tanzania, and in Tanga, along the Coast. The central themes of these previous experiences centered around issues such as domestic violence, girl education, property inheritance for women, HIV/AIDS and women, early and forced marriages as well as girl education.

The work was done through women's paralegal units in those areas, but the theatres produced included non-paralegal members from the communities where the theatre was to be based. The strategy to use theatre as a methodology in the sensitizations had come about as result of research done by their unit on gender issues, in that whenever they called for public rallies or even seminars, the number of women reached was quite small. Hence based on other previous theatre work which they had sponsored in civic education, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation felt that they could attract women to come to such performance sessions, in numbers larger than they were used to. Indeed, when the performances were held in villages, women who came in subsequently to seek advice overwhelmed the paralegal offices. The issue to tackle, among the Barbaig was that of female circumcision, emotionally referred to as "***Female Genital Mutilation***", forced marriages, domestic violence, and not allowing "girl-children" to go to school. All very serious problems!

As indicated above, FES's intervention in communities was through already established women's organizations in those communities. In this case the host organization was HAWOCODA (Hanaang Women's Counseling and Development Association) formed in 1993. This organization based in Katesh, Hanaang District, had been trying to work with the Barbaig community in order to try to sensitize the women (and men) about the problems the women faced through public rallies, seminars, workshops and visits to the communities. By the time we worked with them in 1999, they had dealt with 388 cases related to women's problems, among which were:

- 115 cases for rape
- 87 cases for domestic violence
- 56 cases for abandonment, sexual abuse and divorce
- 44 cases of inheritance problems
- 16 cases of property conflicts
- 17 cases of child custody and maintenance
- 11 cases for early and forced marriages
- 20 diverse civic cases.

When we went to the village, however, to begin work with the community and we started discussing problems in the area, our **order** of problems did not feature at all. While of course embedded in their list one could read in ours, their presentations were quite different from what we had as problems.

The first issue raised at our meeting with them was whether we had come to help them regain their grazing lands taken over by a Canadian wheat farming company. Of course we had not gone there for that, nor was it anywhere in our "repertoire" of problems, and that took some air from within us. The second problem they raised was that of grinding poverty. They no longer had enough livestock from which to get milk, and so they needed to supplement

their food with corn, which had to be bought, and this is an area where sources of cash are very limited. Worse still, if something was sold, say a goat, cow, etc, the men controlled the money and the women had no say on what it could be used for. Hence the women's state of poverty was even more difficult to deal with, and information *per se* certainly could not provide an answer.

Another issue raised was that of alcoholism, especially among men, related to the above, in that when the men made some money they ended up in bars in the towns and market centers, where they even went around with other women, leading to venereal diseases. As most of the families were polygamous, this meant the spreading of such diseases among the other women folk. Information about such diseases was scanty and so it often led to much misery and suffering to those caught in such web.

Women also expressed the problem of excessive work. They had to look after the young animals, cook, fetch water often from as far as 10 kilometers and look after the small garden and many other domestic chores. On top of that, if a woman made an error it was quite acceptable that she would be beaten and many confessed to have scars criss-crossing their backsides. If of course the woman got maimed from one reason or another, the husband would marry another one and would abandon her. The same was also true if the woman had no child. The community was very strict though if a man abandoned a woman or children, or even mistreated them for reasons not acceptable in the community. That one would be brought in for public caning by fellow men. As women did not own any property, an abandoned woman faced enormous difficulties, unless she had a son old enough to care and to look after her.

What was surprising to us, however was that the problems and approach to them that we had taken to the community were not seen in the same light. We have mentioned above, for example that something like wife beating was an

expected phenomenon. Not that it was seen to be good, but that it was seen as an ordinary event and in fact we were told that if a man was beating his wife, it was unlikely that even those who saw him would interfere. With regard to girl education, the community said that they saw no value from the end products of such schooling as instead those who went through school brought them enormous embarrassment and shame when they took jobs of “washing dishes” for rich people. Even when they did not take up such jobs, it was not easy for them to find husbands in the community hence, becoming a burden and an embarrassment to their families. Moreover schools were so far, and the domestic tasks of survival required every child to put in their part. Education therefore was not seen to have any special place in their lives.

When it came to early and forced marriages, the community members said they do not marry their children below the age of 15 on the average, and one can see why in their homesteads, girl children at 15 probably ought to be married. The house structures allow little room for privacy and once girl children mature, they cannot sleep in the outhouses like the boys, so it might be better for them to get married that early. The problem of course is that the girls have very little say on who they will marry, and if/ when the husband dies, the wives are inherited within the family. But an oddity among the Barbaig is that when a husband dies, someone from another ethnic group has to sleep with all the wives of the dead man to cleanse them. One can then imagine the implications for this for HIV/AIDS.

The major problem that had taken us to the community, that of sensitizing them on the nefarious effects of “**female genital mutilation**” gave us even more problems. *That problem did not exist in the village!* Of all the problems raised and discussed for over three hours, this issue was not raised even once. When we tried to raise it as a problem we got in trouble as their points of view about it were completely different. Following are some of their responses:

- Where you come from you have no cultural practices, which you think are important and you have not changed them?
- All the people you see in front of you were born that way, and as you can see they are all alive and well, why should there be a change?
- We are not the ones who started the practice, and the people who did are not alive and here with us, whom can we now ask why they started the practice?
- How can we be protected from the anger of the ancestors/gods if we change?
- What are the alternatives for the rite of passage for the girls?
- Who are we, coming from outside to question a “private” cultural practice which they value very highly?

As one can imagine, we did not have answers for the above questions, answers that would really correspond to the core of such questions. We tried as much as possible to explain how dangerous and hazardous the practice was, and that it often led to deaths. Their response was that they knew there were some deaths, but again where was it in the world that there were no deaths? In the end, however, we did put together a play about the practice, in which a young girl is taken unwillingly to undergo the practice, over bleeds, but her life is saved at the hospital. Together with this central theme we included alcoholism, and the importance of girl education, as the father later abandons the mother, but her daughter who had continued in school builds a house and buys some cows for her.

When we showed the play in the village and other villages, some of the mothers cried, and in post performance discussions as well as personal discussions with individuals, some of the community members indeed agreed that it is important to start thinking about ways to change or even abandon the

custom. We later turned the play into a film, and it has won accolades in places where it has been shown.

IV. Lessons Learnt

The experiences we got working among the Barbaig go further to raise the “problematique” of well thought out development issues and their conceptualization on the ground. They also showed us that the “colors” with which we approach problems may give a completely different picture altogether, leading to possible distortions when we go to the ground. As we said, “*female genital mutilation*” did not exist in the village, rather there was a **very** positive practice of female circumcision, equated with purification, which a woman, to qualify as a woman had to undergo. Yet our coloring of the problem was completely different and getting the two sides to meet on common ground was not easy.

Another lesson that comes from our experiences working in that community is the priority given to problems by the communities themselves. Most people who work in development agencies have their agendas, which they wrote in their funding proposals. When they go to a community they go to execute those agendas in their “mother” documents. The irony is that those agendas may not be the agendas of the community, and even when some of them are indeed real problems, they may not be the top priority for such communities. Equally here the problems may be couched in a language or an approach that does not correspond to the ways of seeing in that community. For example female circumcision is indeed a nasty practice. But how can we put it in such a way for both parties to see it that way, and feel the same urge to do something about it?

There is also the issue of necessary structural changes that are necessary for change to occur. For example it is foolhardy to tell people to grow a cash crop for which there is no market, or they cannot transport to that market. Likewise among the Barbaig, it does not make immediate sense for them to take their girl children to school when after that school they go "to lick" the plates of the rich in towns. Besides their main preoccupation is animal husbandry, and the primary schools as we have them now do not take that as a priority. It also occurred to us, for example that talking of sending girl children to school will remain relatively futile when the mothers have so many chores at home for which they need their daughters help. One such chore is fetching water from wells that are so far for feeding the young cows. This an essential chore for the women, and consequently the mothers will definitely want all their daughters around to help. Water wells could help release such energy, but who is going to provide them?

One other lesson we learnt was that we could not actually provide good enough answers to some of the issues they raised. For example we could not answer adequately what the ancestors might do in case they abandon female circumcision. We had no explanation why circumcision began in the first place, nor were we able to say with confidence that where we come from we have abandoned all our bad customs and practices. This issue may be subject specific with regard to female circumcision, but many change agents and programs often lack real answers to such concerns.

While there we were also faced with a problem of not being able to make promises for follow up action. For example they wanted to know what was happening to their land case. They also wanted to know when a school would be built nearby. They wanted more care taken of their livestock, and more medicine made available and cheaply when they get sick. With our agenda that had taken us to the community, we could not promise any logical answer to

their questions. And this is what Wolf and Porter again say leads to peasant cynicism about the smooth city operators.

With regard to what had taken us to the community therefore, we can once again affirm that theatre works, at least to raise the issues and start discussions. It rarely causes immediate revolutions, but I can still see some of those old women crying when they saw what happened to our main character as she suffers and almost dies from the effects of female circumcision, and the animated discussions both during the performance, and when the show ended and they were walking home. At least a seed had been planted.

V. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to look at challenges in communicating behavior change in a Northern Tanzanian community, while making a case for participatory theatre methodologies and their promise. The paper argues that despite some shortcomings inherent in theatre, it is a good methodology for raising consciousness among communities, especially if and when the theatre is conceived and produced in that community. One final thing to note, however, is that human change is an integrated process and can succeed best with a wholistic approach. Theatre therefore can only be part of that wholistic approach.

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