

Oga Steve Abah: Performing Life, Gender, and Cultural Economics

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The dynamic relationship between theatre, identity, politics and society and the power of performance cannot be underestimated. Theatre, storytelling, as well as popular media embody a conscious social perspective and plays important roles in defining national and cultural identities, critiquing women's status and articulating appeals for attention to political freedom and human rights.

Dawn Chatty, 'Foreword' to *Casting Gender*, xi-xii)

Introduction

This paper results from Oga Steve Abah's avowal on the need for 'step back and reflection' on the Akpa TIDE workshop book *Performing Life: Case Studies in the Practice of Theatre for Development* (xiii). While Abah vehemently exposes the dialectics between writing and righting, it becomes pertinent now more than ever to uncover and even 'rediscover' the workshop via the report presented in *Performing Life*. He further urged the challenge of the textual document which this paper is about. His assertion that Theatre for Development projects normally occurs among ordinary men and women' (xii) helps this writer to connect a gender perspective to the Akpa project. Gender and performance have common characteristics and are related; hence theorists like Judith Butler consider gender to be performed or performative. The workshop engaged three communities and their peoples – Onyuwei, Adankari and Otobi – all of the Akpa District of Benue State, Nigeria. The communities are culturally related and exhibit similar affinities in the areas of language, diet, agricultural, political and economic realities. The project gave vent to the people's worldview including their challenges. It brings to mind Richard Schechner's view that performances that are community based provide audibility to the voices of those "who were not previously heard" (130).

Performance

The Concise Oxford Companion to Theatre provides a succinct definition of performance. In the definition, we are told that performance is group effort, as it is "group of persons working together to develop a production" (97). This enactment is from "the initial concept to the finished performance through research, discussion, improvisation, writing and rehearsal" (97). As mentioned above, there are spectators who see, perform in the enactment and become active, and those who see the performance 'third hand', or who 'saw' what they were told was performed. Both groups are crucial in performance as they contribute to performance effects and change. We must hold here that within the Nigerian

cultural context, in performing, there are spectators that engage with what is performed and shift from the periphery, to the centre of the performance space.

Within historical contexts, a reading of *Performing Life* becomes iconic and warrants an 'unpacking' especially with regard to the skits developed for performance and the contributory factors to the vicissitudes of the peoples' lives. The people of the communities are assisted and moved to reconnect to the initial expose of their lives through the intervention that helped (re)shape their lives with their active involvement.

Performing Life

The aim of the workshop was four-fold as regards the livelihoods of the Akpa people. It dwelt mainly on agriculture, as food is central to life. The challenges faced by the three villages as regards agricultural production were therefore central to the workshop proceedings. The use of popular theatre to mitigate community problems and organize the people to achieve development on the bases of agriculture and people's needs was another area of focus in the project. According to Abah (1997), "by feeding himself, the farmer will keep healthy and also derive energy for more work. In addition, the ability of the farmer to feed himself and his family provides psychological stability" (4). Here, the assumption is that the farmer is male only! Apart from the domestic and communal implications of farming, its national imperatives are highly significant in terms of the economies of scale. On getting to the communities, the project team confronted myriad problems on social, economic, infrastructural, cultural, political and several other fronts. It is the consent of Abah that "Theatre for Development nearly always occurs in the context of crisis" (16).

On another level, it is pertinent to note that from the Akpa workshop, developmental theatre operates in different parts of the world. One can no longer ascribe to it a local significance based on the proof provided by the different participants from different countries. Furthermore, it becomes evident that the practice of Theatre for Development has assumed a global scale and can be employed by development workers and even community members to improve and revolutionize communities' quality of life and their livelihoods. What is central to the performance of life are the built scenarios which evolve after the project team and animateurs' stay in the village for about ten days.

Performing Gender

In terms of performing gender, it is worthy of note that among the three communities, certain groupings and types determine action and interaction along gender lines. These stand to control or engineer' the space of gendered (in)action especially as regards strong/weak, audible/silent, visible/hidden, private/public, secular/religious, insider/outsider, among several of such categories. In furthering the look at male-female in the three villages, fusion and fission in relationships become pertinent. In the performance exposure is made of market, social and relational actualities that refer to the political, religious and inter-communal. The public performance of gender in the communities relate

to art and ways of life of the people. Here, we note in particular, Omanogo, the aged 'spontaneous' performer who created a happening at Onyuwei. Worthy of mention also is pregnant Etta, who cannot access primary health care services to get her unborn child delivered. Etta also doubles as the singer, who punctuates the action between episodes or interventions as referred to in the text. Insurgent Aladi is reminiscent of the Aba women rioters when she declares the feeling of the community against taxation. It is Aladi who spreads the development agenda on the workshop for action. She; it is, who makes the disconnect between government and the governed, national headquarters and community, to be felt and concrete. I wager that the Onyuwei process had more vigour because of the female participants who generated presence and involvement, without being initial parts of the action. Here, Omanogo is the inspirer to action and the inspiration to other women performers in the Onyuwei enactment. At the inquest in Otobi, it was possible to educate the youths on safe sex, abstinence and issues concerning risky sexual behaviour. What if it was HIV/AIDs and other STIs that Akpa and Okada contracted and spread in Otobi?

In terms of post-workshop impact, the remaining 'worst' portion of the Adankari road was filled with laterite paid for by a female member of the community. Gendered economics is therefore saliently performed in the interaction dynamics of the people. The economic control wielded by the men over women is also gender in performance, which seeks the economic subservience or subordination of the women. When 'conflictual' relations emanate in the communities, the men are seen to generate it as seen in the case of the grinding machine.

Cultural Economics

It is at Adankari that the way market forces implicate development through the people's ways of life is however dimly enacted. We see farm produce that do not get to the market. The women of Adankari play traditional domestic roles unlike the insurgent ones at Onyuwei. Two wives are at home, the stranded pregnant woman is seen, but not heard. The road is significant to the conveyance of goods and services to the consumers. The social categories of Adankari became monolithic unlike in Onyuwei, where the protest could be sorted out into groups and types along age, gender, occupation, roles, as well as other sets of identities, especially in the aspect of naming. The force of cultural economics is evident in the 'Ochideche' system which is for thrift and savings. Mr. Topsy husband claims it is the secret strength of many housewives who use the savings to empower themselves and not the family. Ochideche faces a ban. The community elders do not embrace the advantages the credit system provides first at the domestic, then at the communal levels because women are perceived to gain power from such activities, which threaten the position of men. The credit culture is practiced in many communities and at a larger scale functions like a cooperative organization. The housewives see the creation of income through this system as germane to development. But to the men, "Ochideche... was putting too much money in the hands of the women, thereby giving them a new power and the audacity to challenge their husbands" (89). Farming is central to the economy and

if the older generation is not succeeded by the younger ones typified by Akpa, (the youth and the linguistic group) then sustainability is endangered and the financial system gradually gets eroded. Taxation is accepted by the people, but the monies are not used to improve the lives of the people. It means the gap between what the people contribute fiscally to make development real and the unreal or undelivered development is wide. This makes taxation an alien index to the people and their protest against government reveals this.

The impact of the workshop was felt in Otobi during the follow-up, where the team found that the ban on Ochideche did not happen as the meeting was restricted to a monthly occurrence.

In terms of leaving legacies behind for the three communities, the monetary grant to the communities furthered their cultural economics in terms of farming and income from it. For Otobi, the grinding machine procured had gender implications as the women 'lost control of the machine' (75). Just as it was in the case of Ochideche, male hegemony was drawn in where and when women attempted to control resources. In the words of Abah:

The chairperson of the income-generating project is a woman.... This investment of women with control and power which were new in the community was, and is still perceived as an erosion of male power and dominance. In the village structure it is the elders (who are always understood to be men, not women) that make the laws and regulations (89).

Ironically, in Adankari where we deemed the enactment not to be as strong as the one in Onyuwei, their post-workshop projects thrived better. The income generated was ploughed back into other projects like a health centre (87). Nevertheless, the female consciousness in agrarian economics was evident through Obitiye and Aladi in affirming the crop the women wanted to farm. To the women, production is not for consumption alone, but income generation as well. The reverse was the case in Otobi, where according to Abah, 'where the women had been silenced' (87). This was as a result of the conflict the machine generated. However, in resolving the conflict, women had 40% of the proceeds, 40% was for the salary of the machine operator and 20% to the men (88). The grinding machine epitomized gender and its performance which leads to the affirmation of the women.

In the rural economy of these communities, men had control over land in terms of access, use, disposal and management. This is corroborated by the assertion that the 'authority' and this means the male, regard land as 'a viable commodity'.

Contextual Tracking

It is worthy of note that in this performance of life, many of the participants have extensively furthered their excursion into TFD, as regards life, gender, and cultural studies

