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POPULAR THEATRE IN ETHIOPIA

Aboneh Ashagrie

Introduction

In the last few decades, attempts have been made by theatre artists, developmentalists and social work agencies to transcend the efficacy of the Theatre Arts far beyond the limitations of entertainment. It had been syllogized by many third world theatre scholars that this art could be utilized as a tool for socio-economic and political advancement when it is predominantly handled by the needy people themselves. Based on this new slant, many African, Asian and Latin American countries have experienced considerable practice in this sphere.

Ethiopian artists and developmentalists, though scarcely exposed to the advocates of the popular theatre movement, have been able to recognize theatre as a vehicle of social transformation. As a result, development-oriented plays have been produced by workers at the Matahara Sugar Factory, by peasants at the Yetnora Cooperative Farm, by health workers at Gobba Health Center, and by students at the Addis Ababa University and Menelik School.

This paper, thus, will steer itself to depicting and analyzing the features of such community theatre in Ethiopia with special reference to the process and effect of the end product of the performances produced by the above-mentioned organizations. Furthermore, basic ideas as to how theatre could best further the strides of community development in Ethiopia will be proposed in the conclusion.

Popular Theatre in Ethiopia

Ever since its emergence in Ethiopia, theatre to the utmost has been raising socio-economic and political issues, thereby rendering partisanship to popular causes. The first play written in Ethiopia in 1920-1921 by Teklehawariat Teklemariam,¹ and its production by

¹ Thomas Kane, *Ethiopian Literature in Amharic* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), p. 7.

amateur actors, targeted the reign of Empress Zewditu for criticism.² The consequence was an immediate ban of this pioneering play and impediment of theatre by the aristocracy.³ This incident is congruous with what Pru Lambert writes pertaining to popular theatre:

...the most successful *popular* theatre for conscientization can be gauged by the level of its *unpopularity* with authoritarian or military regimes which thrive on the perpetuation of centralized power and inequality.⁴

Emperor Haile Sellassie, however, was wise enough to lift the ban on theatre so that he could use the art as a tool to legitimize his emperorship, and later to justify his flight that had temporarily diluted the patriotic struggle against the Italian invasion. As a result, many school and court dramas were performed under strict supervision by members of the aristocracy. The Emperor even went to the extent of institutionalizing the theatre arts by establishing two playhouses in Addis Ababa that copied the European form and style.

Although this advanced theatre towards professionalism, it adversely affected the popular characteristics of the art. The managers of the playhouses had been carefully selected for their loyalty to the throne, and therefore did not allow theatre to draw source material from the popular base, or defend the popular interest. The government's monopoly over the theatres denied "the transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves might utilize them."⁵

Eventually, objective reality excogitated a peculiar interpretative link between performance and audience. Plays were written with double meanings, borrowing the "Wax & Gold" style from

² Aboneh Ashagrie, [The beginning of theatre in Ethiopia], (trans. from Amharic), (Paper presented at the Second National Conference on Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa: IBS, 1992), p.7.

³ Albert Gerard, "Amharic Literature," in *Four African Literatures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 287.

⁴ Pru Lambert, "Popular Theatre: One Road to Self Determined Development Action," *Community Development Journal* 17, no. 3 (1982): 249.

⁵ Augusts Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Urizen Books, 1979), p.122.

the classical Geez Qene poetry. The equivocal dialogues gave meaning, in their own way, to both the ruling class and the people. The overt meaning, or the "Wax," meant to satisfy the interest of the upper class so that the play would escape censorship. On the other hand, the lower classes enjoyed the underlying criticisms of the government and the authorities.

This trend continued until it reached a stage where extracting political meaning from any stage production, be it political or apolitical, became routine. Classical Greek and Elizabethan plays, especially the tragedies, adapted to Ethiopian stages, were not considered as plays of foreign themes, but as being related to the Ethiopian domestic situation. The suspicious leaders, who were wary of the messages of the classics, kept their eyes on transliterated plays, while the public craved them.

Meanwhile, the advent in the 60s of popular mass movements, particularly those of university students, gave an impetus to the utilization of drama in its more open and critical forms for the struggle against the feudal order. Students' theatre clubs that were organized at the Kotobie and Debrebirhan Teachers Training Institutes and the Addis Ababa University Creative Center staged a few critical realist plays that are assumed to have contributed to the political awareness of the people. Such dramas were performed under the pretext of academic freedom to circumscribe the monarchy's censorship.⁶

The intensity of the popular struggle during Mengistu Hailemarriam's dictatorial regime once more enhanced the relevance of popular theatre. A number of theatre groups spontaneously mushroomed in urban areas in the second half of the 70s to support the EPRP's struggle against barrack socialism. As a result, many amateur dramatists were arrested and executed. In fact, some were gunned down in Addis Ababa, Jimma, and Gobba while performing on stage.

In the rural areas as well, popular theatre had "been found to have a strong potential for people to organize and challenge the established system."⁷ Within the framework of the armed struggle for national liberation, the EPLF and the EPDM have extensively used

⁶ After attending the production of *Yalacha Gabicha*, at the Addis Ababa University Creative Center, Emperor Haile Sellassie refused to receive the author while receiving the director of the play and University officials.

⁷ Lambert, op. cit., p. 242.

musical dramas of *agitprop* types to expose the shortcomings and atrocities of the Derg, in the hope of mobilizing the rural population for the liberation struggle.

Furthermore, the intention of the military government to promote the theatre arts in its own favor has inversely contributed to the development of popular theatre. Undemocratic "governements are interested in distracting people's minds and lulling their critical sense"⁸ through the dramatic art. Likewise, the Derg recognized the importance of organizing amateur theatre groups in the regions to assemble the broad masses around "revolutionary" slogans. It was with this motive in mind that the Theatre Arts Department was established in 1977 at the Addis Ababa University, in order to produce organizers of amateur theatre groups and dramatists for the four state-owned theatres. However, the nature of the standardized courses and the regular agitations by a few democratic lecturers have saved most of the graduates from opportunism. Many plays written or directed by those artists have been victims of the censor; some playwrights were threatened and one was arrested.⁹ The five cases mentioned below will give insight into the popular theatre movement of the last two decades.

On-Campus Productions

Theatre and Society, a course added to the curriculum three years after the Theatre Arts Department was established, has shown a qualitative change in the application of theatre for socio-political betterment. Students who took this course became acquainted with Botswana's *Laedza Batanane* experience and were keen to try the participatory approach in "using popular theatre for non-formal education."¹⁰

The first attempt to use theatre for non-formal education was made in 1980. Students were sent to urban communities to explore major problems of the literacy campaign. Women who were invited to

⁸ John Hadgson, *The Use of Drama* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p.17.

⁹ The writer and director of *Belay Zilake*, Istifanos Admasu, was in jail at Bahir Dar until the collapse of Mengistu's regime.

¹⁰ Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, *Popular Theatre and Non-Formal Education in Botswana* (Toronto: Participatory Research Group, 1982), p. 2.

the discussion informed the students of the difficulties they faced in attending the literacy program. The students improvised using the materials, and a play entitled *Yetignaw New Mayet* [Which one is seeing] was ready to be performed for the community. The authorities, however, denied permission for the play to be performed, and the project failed. Another play, *Imba Aihon Mefithie* [Tears won't help], which dealt with the "woman question" was produced in 1981 in the same manner, but it was also forced to be confined to the university audience. The officials could not tolerate the play's mockery of the policy-makers, although some aspects of the themes fitted with the government's slogans-- "Education for all!" and "Down with Male Chauvinism!"

The carpentry and the overall production process of the plays seems to have lacked the desired "people's participation." Community members were not involved in the selection and analysis of major problems within their community, and they were not encouraged to suggest possible alternatives as to how their problems could be resolved.

On the other hand, the production of *Ye Cupid Kest* [The arrow of cupid] in 1989, appeared to have been rather successful in that this play about the university students' academic and social life was written and performed by the students themselves for the university community. The university administration and the academic staff were satirized for corruption, injustice and remissness, thereby prompting them to reexamine their positions.

Peasant Theatre: The Production of *Ye Inbuay Kaab (Solamum Incamum Pile)* at Yetnora Cooperative Center.

In 1987, an amateur theatre group was formed at the Yetnora Farmers' Cooperative Center in Gojjam administrative region. Yetnora was given the government's maximum attention, and was to serve as a model farmers' cooperative. For this reason it was busy hosting top government and party officials, visitors from international organizations, and representatives of peasant associations from all over the country. At the request of the chairman of the cooperative, the Ministry of Culture and Sports sent a professional dramatist to the

center to organize a cultural troupe that would entertain guests visiting the village. The organizer was provided with food and shelter by the cooperative during his stay at the village. He trained the recruited peasants with the fundamentals of acting and playwriting. Meanwhile, the trainees were encouraged to discuss the socio-economic problems of the village, and later to improvise them. Indolence, drunkenness, adultery, and extravagance emerged through improvisation as factors which cause the deterioration of agricultural productivity. A sketch was written on these subject matters by the organizer, and the chairman of the cooperative was consulted for approval. The chairman rejected the attempt. Rather, he advised the organizer to produce a play that would praise the revolution and mention the success of his leadership that had decorated him with Mengistu's gold medal. The organizer, however, preferred to stick to his own idea.

Before the opening of the show, the executive committee members of the cooperative and officials from the Ministry of Culture and Sports had to see the drama for the final go-ahead. Again, the organizer was strongly urged by the chairman to change the title and the ending of the play. The reasons for the desired changes were that the title *Solanum Incanum Pile* denoted instability susceptible to political connotation, and that the wife-characters should not have abandoned the drunken-lazy husbands at the end of the dramatic action.¹¹ The performance was given only to the party and government officials without the proposed alteration. Therefore, the effort made by the coordinator and the peasants' theatre group to use dramatization as a tool for socio-economic development had missed its target.

Yembuay Kaab was a drama for the people by the people. The peasantry had full participation in the play-making process. Every idea in the play regarding the socio-economic problems of the village was rendered and acted out by the peasants themselves. The organizer was limited to leading the discussion, giving an aesthetic touch to the overall production, and coordinating the rehearsals and the

¹¹ The Benue State Workshop conducted in Nigeria by the drama collective of Ahmadu Bello University registered a similar case. After the performance of a wife-desertion sketch, "the male villagers insisted that a final melodramatic scene be added showing the wife returning to the village." See Ross Kidd, "Didactic Theatre," *Media in Education and Development* (March 1983): 37.

performance. The peasants became more reflective about their lives through discussion and improvisation and explored ways by which they could solve their problems.

Proletarian Theatre: Production of *Simibbit* [Farewell] at the Matahara Sugar Factory.

In 1989, at the request of the Ethiopian Workers Association, the Ministry of Culture and Sports sent an expert to the Matahara Sugar Factory to form a proletarian amateur theatre group. Sixty workers were given training in the basics of theatre arts, and four themes that revolved around the life of the proletariat were selected through discussion. The workers were then divided into four groups, each to write a scene on one of the four situations.

One of the subject matters examined was the desolate life of retired workers. The theatre group felt that the expulsion of workers from the factory's residential compound within two months of their enrollment on pension was one of the major factors that drove workers to despair. This scene was written to make workers aware of the imminent problem, and to warn them that they should save for their old age.

Another group treated labor intensity and its impact on family relationships. It was assumed by many of the workers that the only means of relaxation and entertainment for the workers were alcohol and sex, which in return increased extra-marital affairs. This section illustrated the degradation of the proletariat and cautioned family-heads to sacrifice their personal interests for the well-being of their families.

Issues of family planning were handled by another group. The theatre expert conducted research which indicated that the average fertility rate of the workers exceeded seven percent, a high number that had adversely affected the life standards of the workers. This fact was highlighted in order to introduce the value of birth control. In addition, money-saving was another theme that drew the attention of the workers' theatre group.

The scenes treated by each of the four groups were then synchronized by the theatre expert into a full-length didactic play. Finally, it was performed for 1200 proletarian audiences.

The tragic play *Sinibbit* had the effect of critical realism in portraying and commenting on the life and the working environment of the proletariat. The training and the production process which took seven months to complete was more significant in changing the workers' attitudes than its exhortation for social change. It was not seditious enough to provoke the workers to seek a political solution for their economic and social problems. The coordinator and the theatre group must have thought that such an advance would have been suicidal under the Derg's dictatorial rule.

Health Theatre: Production of *Zewdu* at the Gobba Health Center.

In 1991, a play on the subject of the HIV/AIDS virus was performed by an amateur theatre group in Balie administrative region. The project was jointly sponsored by the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and the Ministry of Health to assist the preventive program against AIDS. The regional coordinator of the amateur group conducted research on the lives of HIV patients, and discussed the clinical and social aspects of AIDS with medical personnel, in order to obtain material for his play. The story of the play revolved around a character who showed symptoms of HIV and was socially avoided as a result. The objective of the production was to give the public insight into the transmission of the disease and the role the community should play to stop the spread of the disease. Surprisingly enough, it was mandatory for all government employees in the town to attend the show. The production of *Zewdu*, similar to the production of *Fertilizer Bush*,¹² lacked the participation of the community members. The relationship between the drama and the public was merely that of teacher-student.

School Theatre: Production of *Saikattel Ba Kittel* [Extinguish the flame before it burns]

In 1986, *Saikattel Ba Kittel* was produced at the Menelik II High School in Addis Ababa by the school's drama club. With the help of a volunteer professional dramatist, members of the club were taught

¹² Kristin Cashman, "The Fertilizer Bush Drama," *Development Communication Report* (74): 7-9.

some techniques of acting and playwriting. Many improvisations related to the situation of the school were made by the students to explore substantial materials for the composition of the final script. The play incorporated numerous minor themes such as student-teacher relationships, school-parent relationships, and the morals of the school community.

There was disagreement between the principal of the school and the drama club at the initial stage of the project. The principal felt that the students' enthusiasm for such an extra-curricular activity might divert the full attention of members of the club from their regular academic studies. However, he was eventually persuaded by teachers to remember the interrelationship of curricular and extra-curricular activities. The promise given by some teachers to guide members of the club to manage both activities was the strongest point that convinced the principal to allow the production of the play.

The performance was opened on the last day of the academic year. Parents and teachers who were invited to the show laughed at themselves when their weaknesses were pointed out on stage. The drama became so popular among the students that it ran for more than ten days.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the awareness of theatre as a tool for socio-economic betterment is developing in Ethiopia. Many government and non-governmental organizations have become conscious of the didactic power of the art in changing attitudes of people for the well-being of society. Recently, many TV dramas and radio dramas have been produced by the Ethiopian Family Guidance Association and the Ministry of Health in order to educate the people about aspects of physical and family health. The ability, however, of TV and radio to reach the most needy people is questionable.

It is the urban population, particularly those above the lower-middle class, who have access to radio and television. These people are more aware of socio-economic problems in areas such as family planning, health care, deforestation, etc. than the rural population who is without mass media equipment. We see that most of the energy and

finances that are supposed to serve the rural population have not been directed to the proper channels.

The other shortcoming of media play production is its characteristic of restricting popular participation in the play-performance making process. Radio and TV drama productions tell the audience to do something instead of initiating a practical reaction for change. Hence, adequate attention ought to be given to stage or open field drama productions whereby the mass exercises its right over the entire production. The process must be taken as an educative, problem-identifying and problem-solving practice, not solely as an artistic accomplishment.

Although what has already been accomplished in this sphere betokens the appropriation of popular theatre as a popular tool, much remains to be done in order to transform it into a material force, a force that would not only make problems and solutions lucid, but actuate prompt developmental action. This calls for research to be conducted in areas of traditional performance where folk media supplies the incentive and energy for material production in rural Ethiopia. There is a lot that the dramatic art could learn from folk music and dance that has been used by peasants during agricultural production activities.

More attention should also be given to producing multi-disciplinary extension workers and amateur theatre organizers who could be assigned to development-oriented ministries, such as the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Industry. Development extension workers must acquire knowledge of theatrical techniques, and theatre artists ought to grasp the general ideas of the field that they are expected to dramatize. These experts have to bear in mind that it is only with the full participation of the people that they can attain their goal. Popular theatre should get its material from the people; it should be organized and performed by the people, to the people, for the people.