The Liminal Function of Orality in Development Communication: A Zimbabwean Perspective[1]

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Introduction

The search for more sustainable methods of communicating development to disadvantaged communities in Africa has preoccupied national governments, non-governmental organisations and international aid agencies for the past few decades (Mody 1991). So far, modern technological media like radio, film and television have been the most prominent approaches employed by development workers to address problems associated with malnutrition, sanitation, HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, family planning, gender inequality and political repression. However, these mass media have not been effective enough to address the needs of impoverished African communities (Breitinger & Mbowa 1994). As Everett Rogers (1989:68f) points out, instead of seeing development communication as a mass-media centred process based on technological innovations, development workers are increasingly turning to more participatory approaches that enable them to reach out to mostly rural-based populations. One of these alternative communication strategies is community-based Theatre for Development (TfD).

Yet even TfD itself has also recognised the ineffectiveness of applying an exogenous, also called 'top-down' or 'outside-in', approach to development. In the exogenous model, initiatives for development come from outside the target community. Development goals are designed without the involvement of the community, which is usually reduced to the status of passive recipient. As a result, the exogenous approach has been found to be rather mechanistic, externally-driven, lacking appropriate dialogue, reciprocity and feedback (Mda 1993; Kidd 1983).

Most TfD practitioners have come to realise that a more effective development strategy is the endogenous, also called 'bottom-up' or 'inside-out' approach. The endogenous model involves active participation of the target community in development. It recognises that processes of transformation are internal to the mechanisms of social systems and cannot necessarily be determined by external agents. In so far as it constitutes an internal process of action, reflection and praxis, the endogenous model has come to be characterised by a strong tendency to make use of the people's own local resources.

This paper will focus on how TfD has turned to orality in order to dismantle the oppressive structures of underdevelopment and create conditions for social change. Using the illustrative paradigm of a TfD workshop carried out in a rural district of Zimbabwe, the paper argues that far from being merely pleasurable entertainment, the liminal function of orality is central to the capacity building potential of the endogenous TfD model. Through the agency of indigenous performance genres like ritual, storytelling, poetry, music, song and dance, orality seems to act as 'folk media' for reconstituting a more conducive social reality. The signifying elements of orality will be shown to have the necessary ingredients for influencing change and development among marginalized communities in Zimbabwe.

Orality and Function

Isidore Okpewho (1992:5) points out that African oral literature, which is also referred to as orality, consists of what the people traditionally say, such as proverbs, idioms, chants, puns and riddles, and what they make or do, such as rituals, stories, poetry, songs, music, dances and masquerades. Austin Bukenya (1983:1) goes further to define orality as

> ... those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit an appreciable degree of artistic characteristics, accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression.

In this paper, the word 'utterance' will be taken to mean different ways of communicating messages through both verbal and non-verbal language. What particularly characterises such performative modes of expression is their undying presence within the contemporary African milieu. They tend to share functional qualities that enable them to continually adapt to changing circumstances.

Even in their present modified forms, the oral performance genres have remained part of the Zimbabwean people's everyday experience. The capacity of

memory to keep on extrapolating these art forms from the past testifies to their staying power. The oral forms point beyond the moment to exhibit an art-for-life's-sake function. This is evidenced by the fact that in many peasant communities today, orality continues to manifest itself in the ritual celebration of the people's life cycle. Through song and dance, people still celebrate child-birth, marriage, fertility, harvest, labour, death and ancestral presence. The same kind of celebration is evident in more secular performances such as children's games, storytelling, praise poetry and other recreational activities. In short, orality remains an artistic medium for producing and expressing the people's way of life, what Scott Kennedy (1973:73) has called the 'drama of life'.

The function of orality can also be observed in the people's tendency to want to 'return to the source' of indigenous poetics for more credible and enduring forms of popular expression. This can be demonstrated at political rallies, church gatherings and sporting events where people easily resort to poetry, narration, song, dance, chanting and drumming. For them, such 'folk media' create a greater sense of credibility and purpose. By using their own language idioms, the people find the messages more appealing, easier to express and comprehend. They feel incited and confident in creating their identity, and in the process, ensure the survival of their culture. More importantly, these 'folk media' bear the stamp of collective authority by encouraging more audience participation. As Mineke Schipper (2000:169) comments, the use of previous aesthetic knowledge makes people, just like computers, inclined to admit only compatible information. People tend to be 'programmed' by their cultural and social legacies.

The influence of orality became more pronounced during Zimbabwe's protracted liberation struggle from 1966 to 1979 which later culminated in the attainment of political Independence from Britain in April, 1980. Even though successive colonial regimes tried to suppress indigenous forms of expression, a strong cultural revival was experienced, especially in the war front. In the words of Stephen Chifunyise (1994:55):

> The dynamic use of diverse and popular forms of indigenous performing arts, for instance ... ritual dances, poetic recitation, chants, songs and storytelling enabled the combatants to mobilise ... the peasants' solidarity with the liberation struggle.

This oral renaissance became popularly known as *pungwe* (all night celebration). Apart from being a carry-over of the pre-colonial performing arts, *pungwe* became an effective way of 'telling' the story of colonial injustice and nationalist resistance. While participating in a variety of oral performances, peasants had so much control

that Ross Kidd (1983:12) was persuaded to describe the *pungwe* as 'a theatre-with-the-people experience'.

Orality and Liminality

Apart from its function in contemporary cultural contexts, orality also tends to effect transformation within its participants through the process of liminality. The term *liminality* originates with the Belgian anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep (1960:65), who used it to refer to 'the making of change among tribal peoples'. The theatre anthropologist, Victor Turner (1988), later extended the use of the term to refer to a transitional phase in ritual events characterised by the symbolic death and rebirth of participants undergoing change. Turner (1988:76) associated the liminal state with conditions of uncertainty and possibility, the very source of change, yet felt that it did not have 'any hope of realisation outside the ritual sphere hedged in by strong taboos'.

However, later anthropological studies by Colin Turnbull (1995), Barbara Myerhoff (1995) and Don Handelman (1990) have come to view liminality as a condition of intense processuality characterised by fluid, shifting and dynamic energy. Because of its capacity to play 'betwixt and between' structures, the liminal state is best suited to conditions of social inconsistency, indeterminacy, conflict and contradiction. In its original ritual context, Turnbull (1995:76) argues that liminality enables willing participants to become something else. It has to be experienced rather than reasoned, hence the difficulty involved in expressing it in words. But when taken out of its ritual domain, liminality implies a way of 'seeing', 'perceiving' and 'knowing', experienced by participants as they move from one state to another during the rehearsal process. It involves the exchange of one state for another, a process of being transformed in performance. As Turnbull (1995:79f) concludes, the experience of consciously or unconsciously achieving transformation is the process of entering the liminal state. It is an 'other' condition of being in which 'this-ness' becomes 'that-ness'. It is not just a medial state of transition.

How does orality relate to liminality? Orality is the *process* by which liminality, and, by extension transformation, come to be realised. The genres of orality, like storytelling, for instance, are like codes that enable individuals to express themselves in the process of making meaning, and ultimately to think, act and feel 'as if' they were something else. According to Suzanne Langer (1953), symbols, in this case, oral codes, can fire the imagination, and call into play insight, feeling and belief that alter people's perceptions of themselves and others. The invisible referents to which the oral codes point may become realities made manifest through the rituals, stories, dances or songs. Thus orality plays a liminal function by

affording participants the opportunity of inscribing their fates, desires and beliefs in its frames of reference. New possibilities are brought into being as participants are transported to unfamiliar 'worlds', knowing full well what they are doing and why they are doing it.

Development Communication: The Murehwa Workshop
In designing development messages with target communities, TfD practitioners are making use of indigenous performance traditions. In other words, orality has become the means by which people's experiences are being framed to create an awareness of their predicament and, where possible, to act to change their circumstances. In Turnbull's (1995:248) view, members of the community perform to behold themselves, and want to become what they behold. Orality thus enables communities to design, express and interpret development messages through a kind of rehearsal for action. This form of 'action learning' is what has been variously termed the 'endogenous' (Epskamp 1989) or 'organismic' (Knowles 1984) model of education.

The endogenous approach allows TfD practitioners to make use of those parts of lived experience that are performed. According to Norman Denzin (1992:138), everyday life can be understood through mass-mediated performances that can render the imagined reality more real than the real. Culture becomes a performative act, a verb not a noun. As participants construct their own performance texts, they become the locus of power, agency and representation. They are active subjects rather than passive objects of the development process, being capable of exploring and interpreting their own situation and taking action to transform their lives. The development workers assume different roles as facilitators, catalysts, or even co-participants. As a participatory action learning process, therefore, the endogenous method enables TfD facilitators to communicate development through the performative functions of human experience.

The example of a TfD workshop held in Zimbabwe in August 1983 can perhaps illustrate the practicalities of the endogenous model and the liminal role played by orality in communicating development. In his report on what has come to be popularly known as the Murehwa workshop, the Canadian TfD practitioner and co-participant, Ross Kidd (1983) indicates that what became important during the workshop was the villagers' own contribution to the development process. Peasants were made to take control of the 'learning' process rather than remain passive recipients of ideas from outside. On their part, development workers also learnt to work *with* rather than *for* the community. They became facilitators and animateurs instead of directors, technocrats and performers. Kidd (1983:7) explains it as follows:

> Their job was to animate and facilitate a drama-making and analysis process: getting the villagers to do the thinking, to question their assumptions, to look for root causes, to strategise and ... to make plays and songs as a way of focusing, concretising and generating analysis.

The actual workshop process drew heavily from the villagers' *pungwe* experience. *Pungwe* had not only revived the community's oral traditions, it had also taught them to articulate their grievances. Most importantly, *pungwe* had created a forum for community celebration, decision-making, confidence-building and critical thinking. As guerrilla fighters tried to mobilise peasants for the liberation struggle, the villagers could also express their views and concerns through poetry, song and dance. Thus *pungwe* allowed room for popular participation in the conscientisation process.

The Murehwa workshop itself shows a clear shift in development communication strategy from an exogenous to an endogenous approach. This is evident from the different phases of the participatory action research process adopted by the TfD facilitators as follows:

1 Pre-Planning Stage

The development workers began by reviving the *pungwe* tradition as a way of harnessing culture for development. Preliminary meetings with villagers were punctuated by an exchange of games, songs and dances between peasants and TfD facilitators. This helped to establish rapport with the villagers and to make them responsive to the data gathering process. Problems confronting the Murehwa community were easily identified. These included water shortage, lack of capital, gender conflict, teenage pregnancy and youth unemployment.

2 Planning Stage

After building a relationship with villagers and identifying their problems, the next step involved mapping out ways of making villagers realise the need to solve these problems. Villagers were engaged in collective discussions to plan the course of action to be taken, a process that Kidd (1983:18) calls 'conscientisation'. They were participating in the shaping of their own learning.

3 Action Stage

The planning stage culminated in organised action by the villagers. This was perhaps the most crucial stage, where ideas were put into action. Oral performances were employed to express the villagers' problems and to search for solutions in a

histrionic way. Orality thus became both the medium and the message as storytelling, music, song, and dance easily turned into role playing and miming of the villagers' own experiences. It became easy for the TfD facilitators to take advantage of the spontaneous role playing to raise development issues with the villagers.

4 Observation Stage

To see if action was producing the desired results, TfD facilitators realised that role playing was actually a powerful medium for eliciting villagers' perceptions of their problems. During the act of performance, villagers were also discovering themselves through what Gareth Morgan (1986) describes as 'conversing with experience'.

5 Reflection Stage

The act of observing themselves in action formed the basis of critical reflection leading to a gradual shift in perspective. As the villagers observed and reflected in action, they could figure out the possibilities of solving their problems. Thus orality became the medium for a form of reflective practice in which villagers analysed their own experiences.

6 Evaluation Stage

This was a rather negative turning point for the whole workshop process. While villagers had been left free to contribute their ideas on development, TfD facilitators finally hijacked the workshop by excluding villagers in the evaluation phase. Instead of helping villagers to assess whether their action had made a difference to what they had thought and felt before the workshop, development workers went away to do the final analysis by themselves (Kidd 1983:72f). In a way, they were now imposing their own thinking on the development of the community instead of drawing conclusions from the views of the villagers.

7 Re-Planning Stage

Because the TfD team had usurped the final evaluation phase, they could not revisit the workshop site to assess whether the capacity-building process they had helped to erect could sustain itself in their absence. In the end, their development agenda became illusory because the people for whom it had been intended were no longer part of it. It is only when participants can identify with the development process that they are interested in its continuation.

In spite of its final shortcomings, the Murehwa workshop demonstrates the

extent to which orality functions as a medium of communicating development using the endogenous approach. In Victor Turner's (1995:10f) taxonomy of the shift from ritual to theatre, orality constitutes the *limen* phase of community action. The Murehwa villagers, for instance, made use of orality to address their problems. Song and dance created a threshold of possibilities in which villagers could act out their experiences and forge an *identity* for themselves. As Christopher Odhiambo (2001:85f) points out, TfD engages its participants in 'fixing', 'un-fixing' and 're-fixing' people's attitudes, habits and behaviours. The human condition is not permanent but a social construct capable of being 'un-fixed' and 're-fixed'. In a sense, the 'un-fixing' process is made liminal by the medium through which people's problems are articulated and redressed.

Orality also manifested itself through the *imaginative* recreation of games and stories that afforded workshop participants the joy of creating new ways of 'seeing' the world through play. As Turner (1995:11f) argues, play is not just fun but a liminoid mode, the source of the 'as if' or 'subjunctive mood', the mood of maybe, might-be, fantasy, desire and conjecture that ultimately triggers thought, feeling and intention. The aesthetics of play are a storehouse of *creativity*, a striving for new forms and structures, a gestation process and an anticipation of post-liminal existence. Among the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe, the equivalent for play would be *mutambo* (game). A defining characteristic of *mutambo* is the way it gives power to the weak against the strong as reflected in the popular adage, *chihwerure hachiendi kumba* (playful jibes should not be taken home). In other words, the weak are given licence to vent their grievances against the powerful for as long as it is done through play. In the process, play becomes the most appropriate medium of self-affirmation, self-discovery and self-recognition. It performs the liminal function of transforming the indeterminate, unfamiliar and uncertain into the determinate, familiar and certain, enabling people to free themselves from their unfavourable conditions and realise their potential for change.

At another level, the use of orality during the Murehwa workshop had a *regulative* effect on the villagers' way of behaving, thinking and feeling. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1998:123) realised during his experiences with the Kamiriithu community in Kenya, ritual, narrative, song and dance represented a process of being and becoming. They were a domain of culture that embodied the people's moral codes and aesthetic values. Their enactment could transform the performance space into a self-contained arena of struggle, tension and conflict that eventually shaped the people's memory, history and culture. Likewise, in the Murehwa workshop, orality not only helped to transform the *dandaro* (open space) into a site of communal regeneration but also effected mental, emotional and behavioural change within the villagers. The open space allowed information and events to be

played out in a very free form and also provided an opportunity for almost infinite variability in terms of movement, participation and expression. Thus orality's potential to equip villagers with the confidence to assess their needs was greatly enhanced by the familiarity of the village setting.

Perhaps a more striking feature of orality's liminal function was its application as an *inter-textual* activity, the way in which the different oral genres intertwined in a mutually supportive, enriching and interdependent manner. Messages were communicated through a variety of 'folk media' channels, each complementing and reinforcing the other. For instance, when performing their stories, villagers would combine narrative with music, poetry, song and dance to create different levels of meaning and interpretation. The music and song also helped to vary the action, to bridge scenes and to boost audience participation. Inter-textuality may therefore be regarded as a holistic means by which villagers expressed their thoughts, feelings and actions. It was a clear demonstration of a multiple process-oriented communication strategy.

Conclusion

This article has shown that orality constitutes the 'logics of design' (Handelman 1990) behind the endogenous approach to development communication. Because of its liminal capacity, orality has become the paradigm of process in TfD workshops. It is the means by which messages are composed, delivered, perceived and interpreted. Orality is the *how* of the TfD workshop, the generative process behind the development product.

During the Murehwa workshop, orality manifested itself as a form of interactive reflective practice by means of which participants were able to create and negotiate development *by* and *for* themselves rather than having it brought to them from outside. Orality was the driving force behind TfD's desire for redressive action, being the medium through which villagers questioned, grappled with and confronted their problems. As a culture-based communication strategy, therefore, orality transforms development communication into an almost 'natural' outgrowth of the existing social system.

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