

A Case for Community Theatre Practice in Cultural Heritage Education and Preservation

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ABSTRACT:- This paper is the report of a community education project that employed theatre as the main approach for engaging the participants. The overarching aim of the project was to explore the potency of community theatre in the mobilizing and educating community folks on cultural heritage preservation and associated issues. The study was conducted in 2018 in Asebu Traditional Area in the Central region of Ghana. Data for the study was collected using qualitative interviews and observations while participants were purposively and conveniently sampled. The process of community theatre-story creation, scenario building, rehearsals, performance and post-performance were adhered to in the development and implementation of the theatre project. In the final analysis, the paper highlights some of the high and low points in the community theatre approach to community education, especially in the area of cultural heritage and preservation.

Key Words:- Community theatre, participation, cultural heritage, heritage preservation, storytelling, forum theatre, community participation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is what gives a people an identity and meaning. Culture takes many forms, including how we adapt to our natural environment; the institutions we create to express our social and political beliefs; the performing arts, visual arts, literature, crafts, and handwork; our history; and language and communication forms through which we express our beliefs (Kottak, 1991). At the heart of every society is their rich cultural legacy which is passed on from generation to generation. Branden and Mayo (1999), described culture as both what we create and the societal glue that holds us together or tears us apart. The relationship between every community and its culture cannot be underestimated, hence cultural activities have been identified as major economic force in many communities. Cultural development and planning according to Dunham, (1970) are regarded as valuable strategies to accelerate the process of community growth. Cultural heritage has been identified as a fibre that holds different generations of people together it is therefore imperative to safeguard these cultural heritages and its associated activities of every economy especially for the younger generation. The quest to finding creative and innovative ways of educating community folks in this regard has seen a major surge in many parts of the world. Countries, towns, local and international organisations have all joined in this pursuit to preserve and promote cultural heritage across the world. The UNESCO World Heritage Education Program seeks to give people the chance to voice their concerns and to become involved in the protection of their common cultural and natural heritage. It seeks to enable many people to partake in the decision making on matters concerning cultural heritage. This enablement UNESCO and other organisations seek can be realized through education; an indigenous form of education that is communal driven.

It was against this backdrop that this research was conducted to educate, create the awareness and offer a platform for the people of Asebu community to discuss and share ideas on the preservation and promotion of their cultural heritage. The Asebu Community, a traditional area in Ghana boasts of vast cultural resources both tangible and intangible. It also holds at its bosom a very beautiful historical account as far as its formation is concerned. The community with its numerous land sites, historical monuments and relics has the capacity of being turned into a little rural tourist site for its economic benefit. Successfully achieving this will open up the land space to receive the numerous clients that will visit there. Direct and indirect jobs will be created which may reduce the movement of the youth from the area to big towns and cities in search of non-existing jobs.

Community Theatre (CT) has been identified as one of the mediums towards the realisation of participatory education in rural areas. It has the potential for being a democratic medium, a platform which offers the audiences an active role in the education process. Theatre is capable of being more effective since it uses interpersonal channels that have been found to have more impact than the mediated channels of electronic and print media. Simsek & Elitok (2012) corroborated the efficacy of theatre in heritage education when he stated that “the use of drama has become a popular approach, particularly at heritage and museum sites to educate the general public and schools. Community theatre serves as bond that brings people in a community together. Theatre productions have been used in diverse ways to put an end to conflicts among warring

communities. It helps bring together antagonistic groups through discussions and theatre games. Osofisan (2001) gives an account of how Wole Soyinka through his play “*The Beautification of the Area boy*” brought a lasting peace among two warring youth groups in Kingston, Jamaica. He recounts that there was a fierce fight between the two groups but through the powers of theatre a lasting solution was found. By this theatre was seen as a social force for releasing tension among disparate groups by acting as a congenial means of dialogue.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Using local culture to create viable business opportunities and development projects has become one of the main approaches to sustainable rural community development. The re-use or utilitilisation of culture in both tangible and intangible forms can be at times best economic factors for many communities. They can be used to create businesses in local communities with proper management (Jamieson, 2000). However, the preservation and management of such cultural resources have become a mundane task to many smaller communities. A clear example is the Asebu Traditional Area in the central region of Ghana. Irrespective of the rich cultural heritage-tangible and intangible, the people in this community have not been able to fully harness to their development advantage. This community lives on the margins of poverty and are at risk of losing their cultural heritage resilience. Little is known about the community’s cultural heritage and its interconnectedness to the peoples’ life. One major reason accounting for this unfortunate situation is the lack of knowledge on proper preservation methods and the importance of these resources to their economic and social lives. Different forms of community education have been used in the past by way of cultural education but have not yielded the expected results. Most of these educational approaches do not actively involve the community folks in the process and implementation of the results. This project sought to use Community Theatre which is a culturally driven approach to community education, to create a platform where community members and other industry players in the cultural sector would share their experiences on finding indigenous approach to learning about their cultural heritage and its associated benefits.

III. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this community theatre project were;

1. To espouse the relationship between theatre and culture especially in the area of culture education and preservation.
2. To expose the community to the various ‘cultural ingredients’ that are vital to their development.
3. To highlight the potency of community theatre as an educational tool at the communal level.

IV. THE STUDY AREA

The Asebu Traditional Area can be found at southernmost part of the Abura/Asebu/Kwamankese District in the central region of Ghana. It shares boundaries on the west by the Cape Coast Metropolis, on the north by Abura Traditional area and on the east by Nkusukum Traditional Area.

The Asebu Traditional Area has quite a number of towns and villages with Asebu Amantsendo as the traditional capital. Other towns include Amosima, Akonoma, Mmiensa, Abaasa, Ohiaba, Old Ebu, Brafoyaw, Moree, Sordoful, Apewosika and Patase.

Subsistence farming is the main occupation of the people in the traditional area with crops like Maize, cassava, sugar cane, orange and yams as some of the main crops. Most of the women are into the production of “*Fanti kenkey*” The areas along the coastal side are also noted for fishing with a lot of settlers due to the fishing activities. The Asebu traditional area is blessed with a number of historic landmarks which are embedded in the history and cultural life of the people.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Theatre in Ghana

Community theatre, a form that speaks to the ordinary people in their own language or idioms and as well deals with issues relevant to their condition has been a practice in Ghana predating colonial era. This form of dramatic performances draws its inspirations and vision from the people’s own traditions, struggles, creativity and interaction with nature or their environment. At the heart of the peoples’ cultural practices and rites is this kind of theatrical performance; funerals, festivals and other life-related rituals. Community Theatre like most communal rituals in Africa is more of a purposeful activity for the entire community. A platform where community folks meet to share ideas in a playful or entertaining manner. It also serves as an avenue for enhancing the thoughts of the community-‘*a theatre devoted to community concern*’ (Okwori, 2004). Community theatre is seen mostly as part of a cultural activity; because it uses indigenous knowledge and materials. The connection between community theatre and the people’s rituals is what Turner sums up as *Theatre and human race are as related as mirror and reflection.....when one studies a particular era, he/she gets to know the religious, social, political and economic influences of the time you learn the people’s desires,*

ideals and needs and in fact get to know the present and past history. A comparison of the past eras not only emphasizes the evolution of drama, but it elucidates the theatre of today and prognosticates that of tomorrow (Turner, 2005).

Theatre as a means of community education has a long standing history in Ghana. During the early days of independence, Efua Sutherland, a stalwart Ghanaian dramatist through her *Kusum Agoromma* (Players) experimented with community theatre. The aim of her experimental theatre was *using theatre as a way of contacting and engaging with the greatest number of people possible and in using drama as a tool for social education and change* (Agovi, 1991)

A peoples' theatre should concentrate on awakening the latent capacity of the people to take part, and to make their own decisions, and to organize themselves for common action. The interaction between the performers and the community members to whom the performance is presented is always seen to be a mutual one, especially in community theatres. The interaction brings a kind of cohesion and affinity between the performers and the community folks. Theatre thus becomes part and parcel of a people's cultural heritage and common culture. This form of indigenous theatres found in the people's cultural heritage has the elements of education, preservation and conservation of the people's values, as well as the promotion of knowledge of all forms.

Storytelling Tradition

In Ghana, there is a storytelling art that can be found in almost every community within the ethnic group settings. This storytelling tradition which is referred to as *Anansem* (stories of the spider) had its name coined from the Ghanaian tale hero *Ananse*. *Anansem* which simply connotes *Ananse* stories. Anciently, *Anansem* were told during moonlit nights by the side of burning wood whose flames served as lights. The stories were told by the elderly in a smaller communal gathering. This tradition was interspersed with music, dance, mime and was very participatory. This storytelling tradition served as an institution that educated both the young and old about the customs and issues of the society. Therefore, being present and taking part was an obligation for all. This art of storytelling which involved a lot of quasi-dramatics is believed to be one of the basis for the development of community theatre in Ghana. Which has been used as means of education, entertainment and sensitization till date.

Defining Cultural Heritage

Tylor (1871) defined culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" This means culture is seen in the various aspects of communal lives; their views about what they hold to be most desirable for their lives, their beliefs about nature, their forms of worship, their relationship with their ancestors and even their personal relationship with others within the community setting; what has been passed on from their ancestors to them. The Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary (2015) states that culture is "the characteristic features of a civilisation including its beliefs, its artistic and material products, and its social institutions."p. 244). The beliefs, social institutions and other artistic materials are most often passed on from generation to generation which forms the basis of the people's cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is seen as the legacies and other intangible attributes of a society. The definition given by Wikipedia (2019) is more profound. It describes *Cultural heritage* "as the legacy of physical science artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations". It goes on further to list some aspects of cultural heritage which includes tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art, and artifacts), intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge), and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity). The culture of a people is what makes them unique from other groups of persons, therefore if these unique cultural items are well packaged people who belong to other cultural settings will want to come and see how 'unique' yours is. And this takes us to the field of cultural heritage tourism. Cultural heritage tourism is frequently quoted as being one of the largest and fastest growing segments of global tourism (WTO, 2004). Cultural heritage according to Bowitz and Ibenholt (2015) is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. Cultural heritage manifests itself in diverse forms, from historical landmarks, dances, songs, monuments and artefacts of a group of people. Effective preservation of these resources helps in safe guarding the identity of the people as well as rekindling the passion of the current generation into learning about the past. Tyler (2000) stated that, historic preservation properly approached serves to ensure that critical perspectives of the past are not ignored as communities move forward into the future. Looking at our heritage should be collective and common responsibility of all folks and therefore must employ easy but effective methods. Stories and storytelling have proven to be one of the best ways of preserving cultural heritages especially the intangible ones as posited by Agyekum (2013)

VI. METHODOLOGY

In the view of Asiama (2014), community theatre as an engagement tool for communication largely depends on the application of the peoples own indigenous knowledge forms. Community Theatre practice with a development aim is a process for social transformation that uses performance as a participatory tool to help individuals and marginalised groups share and partake in the development process of their communities. This community project was divided into two phases; phase one was dedicated to data collection while the data collected became the source material for the community theatre performance which was the second phase.

Data Collection Stage

This stage was used for the collection of both primary and secondary data. Data collected included, the history of the people, community profile, various cultural practices and their cultural heroes. Data collection instruments included interviews, direct observation and focus group discussions. Participants were purposively and conveniently selected. There were field visitations to the various heritage sites to give the researcher an appreciable level of understanding and knowledge of the peoples' heritage and their culture as whole. The researcher observed through participation a number of the rituals and other cultural activities of the people.

Theatre for Engagement

As already espoused, Community Theatre was chosen as an approach for this community education with the idea of actively involving many community members as much as possible in the cultural education process. The project sought to use the entertaining advantage of theatre as means of bringing the community together for local level informal education on their cultural heritage. It was also to create an enabling atmosphere that allowed for the community's open involvement in sharing and discussing their experiences and knowledge about their culture while learning new ways of preservation as well as other cultural business opportunities that may accrue from them.

Story Creation

The project employed the story telling tradition, an art form which is at the heart of the Asebu Community as the main tool for the creative drama. The cultural setting of the Asebu Kingdom revolves around *Amenfi* who is regarded as its founder. Research shows that, the noble people of Asebu are migrants from Egypt who were led by one Amenfi, a man who is believed to be the founder of the Asebu Kingdom. Oral data gathered from the study suggested Amenfi was a giant, a man whose physical appearance was out of the ordinary. Amenfi was part of the army who were in pursuit of the children of Israel on their way to the Promised Land. As seen from the biblical account, many of these men drown in the Red Sea but those who survived could not return to Egypt. They wandered about for years and eventually settled near Lake Chad from where they subsequently moved to their present abode in the then Gold Coast. In the Lake Chad territory, they lived by the side of a River Sabou from which they derived the name of their traditional area; *Asebu*. River Sabou has thus become one of their main gods of worship till now. As a people they have gone through series of cultural metamorphosis which has added to their rich cultural repository.

The above narratives became the crust of the story created for the community performance.

The story created involved most of the cultural landmarks and monuments that are associated with the legend Amenfi. Important landmarks like the Obokesedo, the Cover Stone, and the areas around River Asokwa were captured as the setting of the play. Artifacts like Twen Kobina (the sacred drum), Amenfi Sword, the Kingdom's staff of authority were represented as props in the line of the story. The story created included the various cultural expressions of the people, their songs, clothing (costumes), rituals and other religious activities were all encapsulated in the body of the play. Characters in the play represented persons the community folks described as *cultural heroes*-persons around whom the history and foundation of the traditional area revolves. There were characters like Amenfi, Amenfiwa, Okyeame, Ako and of course a Story teller. In the cultural history of the people, all these characters are very relevant.

Performance and Forum Session

The essence of using theatre for such community education program was to allow the integration and involvement of community members in the process as much as possible. The story created was rehearsed and performed by selected community members. The period of rehearsal was also used as an avenue to educate the performers and other community members who constantly came around on the need to preserve their cultural heritage and opportunities that may come with them. Performance was done in the local *Fante* language to allow for wider understanding and discussion during the *forum* session. Indigenous communal dances preceded the community theatre performance. The play ended with an open forum, where community members had the opportunity to ask questions and also contribute to the story they had just witnessed. Resource persons and other

cultural development activists used the platform created to share more insights on pertinent issues raised in the performance and answer questions from community members (audience).

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some of the key issues and concerns raised with regards to the community's inability to harness the great potentials of cultural business were;

- Lack of ready, willing and able cultural people in the community.
- Limited awareness on various cultural business potentials.
- Lack/limited interest in cultural related businesses.

Another barrier to local cultural business evident in this study is the inability of a successful collaboration or partnership between different development agencies. Local cultural business undoubtedly thrives on collaboration therefore, ensuring successful involvement of wide range of actors concerned in the development, planning and execution of cultural business is key to this kind of communal development approach. These people may include public sector players such as the District Assembly, Cultural Ministry, Tourism Commission, Private Sector players such as hoteliers, travel agents, restaurants, tour operators, Non-Governmental players like tourism groups, environmental protection groups and community base groups. However, what is seen on the ground is that, there seem to be no collaboration among these groups to establish a common business where each can attain a certain level of economic advantage.

The cultural resource persons together with the community folks sought for indigenous ways of addressing these concerns. Some ideas that emerged as possible solutions from the forum were;

- Constantly creating awareness on the cultural heritage of the people. This they suggested could be achieved by setting up a local body that will see to the organization of culturally related activities as well as take oversight responsibility of all heritage resources.
- Traditional leaders rethinking of their cultural monuments as economic resources not just as objects of worship.
- Clear cut out preservation plans for cultural heritage sites must be included in community administration and basic education.
- Community folks who are ready to enter into cultural businesses must be given the needed financial and technical support.

Simple community based preservation plans for cultural heritage identified by the study includes repackaging intangible cultural practices in a way that could be safeguarded for future generations. This can be done by creating poems, songs, games and stories around such intangible cultural practices. Cultural heritage must always remain relevant to the community and must regularly be practiced among different age groupings to allow for smooth transmitting from one generation to the other without losing their core values.

Through the power community theatre, this study was able to bring together local government officials, traditional rulers, community members and others to collaborate and discuss the community's cultural assets and legacies and particularly brainstorm on how to preserve them for future usage.

The immediate impact of the study was that, the chiefs, traditional leaders and other development partners as a matter of urgency promised their support to the building of the cultural industry within the community and its environs. Community members were reactivated on the need to uphold their cultural history and resources. After the play simple phrases like, *'this is our culture let's uphold it'* *'keep our heritage safe'*, *'our heritage is our pride'* were mentioned by the community members. This showed how they had understood, embraced and imbibed the messages the play carried. Through the play and the forum, community folks were taught the economic importance of cultural goods and how they can take advantage of them to better their lives. Cultural heritage belongs to the people and they deserve the right to know about it and this project did just that-exposing the people to their cultural heritage. When people know about the importance of their cultural heritage, they will go a long way to protect and preserve them. The play which was created from this study has become a source document for the heritage preservation for the Asebu community.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Community theatre transforms lives both within and outside of a community. It is able to develop the creativity of a community at both the individual and communal level. It creates a common platform and a good one as such for communal education at all levels hence its suitability for cultural heritage education. The strengths community theatre wields against other forms of social learning is that, it mostly does not have any kind of affiliation; be it political, religious or any of those practices that may restrict access to people. More so, it does not really have an age limit or bracket, unless of course the issues being addressed are of age specific or

importance. In short, it is a theatre created by the community and for the use and benefit of the community. This approach creates a common platform for all community members to share ideas on their cultural resources amidst having fun.

Alongside community theatre performances, community workshop and lectures can also be organized at community centers to conscientise members on the importance of their historical resources. Short lectures, animations, exhibits of historic photos and relics can be of high interest to a larger audience. Effective programs require strong and sustained local participation and leadership along with the recognition that indigenous culture heritage can be used to stimulate development. Successful communities use variety of tools to leverage their culture for today's benefit including tourism promotion, education and rural rehabilitation. Providing a local linkage and cultural basis for development is very important especially for rural communities who value their culture. Community folks are likely to take part in and remain committed to development efforts to which they have a direct connection. Therefore, actively involving them in any development process of their community is a greater step towards ownership and sustainability.

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