

UPPING THE ANTE: POPULAR THEATRE AS A MEDIUM FOR INCREASING VOTER AWARENES

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Abstract

The 2015 general elections have been largely adjudged successful. There are, however, indications of voter apathy in some places and in some cases total ignorance of the issues at stake in the elections. Furthermore, innovations (such as the card reader) aimed at enhancing the credibility of the electoral process were greeted with mixed reactions even as they created complexities in some places for both the ad hoc staff and voters alike. It is expected that in the next round of elections, there will be wide scale improvement and a consolidation of the successes recorded so far. This paper, therefore, articulates that voter education is key in achieving the desired free, fair and credible elections. It advocates copious utilization of popular theatre in deepening voter literacy. Drawing on the efficacious examples of how folk media, community drama and popular songs have been used in building social awareness and sensitivity on other critical issues, the paper submits that a robust voter literacy programme using popular theatre will build an educated voting population by the next round of elections.

Key Words: Voter, Awareness, Popular, Theatre, Credible

Introduction

The quest for free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria is one that has been on for a long time. Ever since Nigerians began to vote in 1923 (Nnadozie 2007:47), there have been concerns about getting it right, from the regulations through the process to the appropriate participation of the electorates. The essence of these concerns cannot be overemphasized being that elections are the central institution of democratic governance. Matter-of-factly, the authority and legitimacy a government derives to govern is solely from the consent of the governed. The primary mechanism for obtaining and translating that consent into governmental authority is through holding of genuinely democratic election. Naturally, democratic elections have readily identifiable features; this means that such elections must be competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive, free and fair, and generally adjudged credible. This is no doubt a herculean task to deliver hence the need to institutionalize an umpire body that will dispassionately regulate the process with all sense of neutrality.

It is important to note that there are several characteristics of free, fair and credible elections. One of which is an informed electorate; that is to say that voters are informed and interested in the broad range of political and governance issues. This is particularly critical because voter apathy makes a mess of the relevant tools for measuring credibility and legitimacy of the mandate and authority to govern over a given population. Considering the broad range of the effects on governance on the general population, it is always critical that eligible voters get issue – based guidance in making their choices as to who represents them in various public offices.

Within the matrix of the ever-changing complex of societal dynamism, theatre, and particularly its ‘popular’ genre, presents itself as a veritable medium not only reflecting this reality before its audience but also influencing the audiences to take a certain position (mostly radical) towards the reality. This throws up issue of theatre being an agent of social and political change, through education and edification to the issues of commitment in the sense of being for a particular line or form of social development. To Traore, “... the theatre is one of the elements which build up the consciousness of social groups as a means of education... The African theatre is the mirror of life. It registers each event; it expresses every essential action of life. Life in all its forms serves as inspiration to the African theatre”.

Extrapolating from the above, one can safely posit that the African artist creates spontaneously using topical issues or situations through the aesthetic techniques of improvisational approach to encode the philosophy of the African people, which is based on their cultural and cosmological given. This is usually done for onward transmission, enculturation and/or acculturation of the society’s values, norms and belief systems through aesthetically choreographed dance steps, songs and instrumentation, mime and pantomime, gestures and dramatization, all codified in festive ceremonies as festival theatres. This imperatively underscores the fact that the aesthetic dynamic of African philosophical perception is

carefully and creatively encoded in the incantations, songs and music rendered either in solo, duet or choral presentations; more so that the skillfully choreographed body movement in defined patterns during the performance provides reliable documentation of the society's historical artefacts based on the philosophy that embraces their sociology and anthropology. This explains why there is an instantaneous connection, that nativity feeling when an African experiences his own art; that is to say, a Tiv man with exhilaration responds immediately and naturally to Tiv performances, same for the Yoruba and the rest of the cultural clusters within the Nigerian geo – polity. The same way that these performances have existed since time immemorial yet remain fresh whenever their experiences are invoked, it is the same way that they make deep psychological penetrations into the general population and consequently influencing their outward behaviour. This paper harps on the cord of the psyche-penetrating potency of these popular performances to submit that issue – based voter education programmes can rely on this medium as a sure way to delivering their objectives.

Voter Education in Perspective

Education in support of the electoral process has become known as "voter education" where a voter is the primary target. There are a number of other areas of education required if an election is to be successful, but these can variously be conducted by political parties and election administration officials. Voter education, on the other hand, is considered to be a separate and discreet function. It is usually identified as a function of the electoral authority and is occasionally subcontracted by them to private companies and civil society organisations. It is also fostered by public interest organisations independent of any mandate from the election authority. At its core, voter education is an enterprise designed to ensure that voters are ready, willing, and able to participate in electoral politics (NDI of 2006). It has been assumed that this entails election literacy and confidence that the electoral process is appropriate and effective in selecting governments and promoting policies that will benefit the individual voter.

Furthermore, issue-based voter education and mobilization encourages voters to focus on the actual policies of the political parties and the candidates. It encourages them to make their voting choices based on what parties or candidates say they will do about certain key issues that will affect them in their daily lives long after the elections have come and gone. Issue-based voter education is about assisting groups to raise important issues, and discussing some of the methods that they can use. As a matter of fact, voter education is essential to ensuring that voters can effectively exercise their voting rights and express their political will through the electoral process. If voters are not prepared or motivated to participate in the electoral process, then questions may arise about the legitimacy, representativeness, and responsiveness of elected leaders and institutions. At the same time, voter education is a much focused undertaking. It is targeted at eligible voters and addresses specific electoral events as well as the general electoral process. While voter education is a necessary component of the democratic electoral process, it is not sufficient for democracy (NDI, 2006).

Voter education needs to be supplemented by on-going civic education efforts in order to achieve the democratic participation and culture that flows from and is, in fact, the rationale for periodic elections. Civic education employs a broader perspective than voter education. It is concerned with citizens, rather than voters, and emphasizes the relationship between active citizenship and democratic society. It is understood that citizens must engage the political process routinely, not just at the time of elections. Certainly, participation in elections and the status of "voter" have a special weight in transitional countries holding founding elections and where the right to vote has been obtained through social struggle. As the democratic world moves toward a universal franchise, however, voting is viewed as one of the many ways in which citizens participate in and support democracy. Traditionally, voter education aims to create a climate of knowledgeable participation by all potential voters in a forthcoming election. It also seeks to enable potential voters to cast their votes with confidence. These objectives may also be achieved through other interventions, and educators will want to establish programmes that work in conjunction with initiatives that address such issues as voter security, basic voting procedures, accessible voting stations, and lively but nonviolent and least intimidating campaigns on the part of candidates. It is important to note that international human rights standards embrace the right of every citizen to seek and receive information regarding elections, and to use the knowledge gained to make informed choices regarding the election of political representatives. In addition to being a fundamental right, when done properly, voter education can help increase voter participation before, during and after the polls. According to Ibeanu and Orji (2014), citizens who are engaged in the electoral process and knowledgeable about its proceedings are not only more likely to vote, but are more likely to hold their elected officials accountable for their actions. Citizens who understand issues vital to improving people's lives are likely to be more motivated to vote and to make informed electoral choices. Generally, voter education encourages political participation among citizens through three key facets:

1. Providing practical information on pre-election and election day activities, including the voter registration process;
2. Ensuring the integrity of the electoral process by emphasizing voter rights; and
3. Deterring voter apathy through issue based voter education and mobilization.

Helping citizens understand and participate in elections, other than as a contestant or supporter of a contestant (an important and under exploited form of education), requires concentration on a few key concerns. These seem to have somewhat universal significance, although each election may have its own special features. Various programme elements may be appropriate depending on the resources available and the objectives that have been set by the education organisation or, alternatively, by the organisation sponsoring the programme. Methodological variations demonstrate that voter education falls between "voter information" and "civic education".

There are four general messages that all voter education programmes communicate. According to Ibeanu and Orji (2014) this requires that educators work with content specialists to ensure that the messages are discussed in ways that have meaning for the particular country in which democracy is being developed. Each country has its own history, and this history provides organizing themes and democratic myths as well as procedural and principled nuances that will require a different treatment from that prepared even in a neighbouring country. It is possible, however, to outline the concerns that are likely to be addressed in each area.

Elections and democracy: It is impossible to conceive of democracy in a modern and complex organisation or society being possible without a system of establishing the choices of large bodies of citizens through voting procedures. Elections are one of the defining events of modern democracies, with periodic and fair elections come the additional prerequisites that citizens will have choices between individuals, parties, and policy options. They will also have the freedom to make these choices without undue intimidation, and will have the right to put themselves or others forward as candidates for office. Finally, they will have the necessary freedom to discuss policy options and to form associations that will either compete in elections, or endorse certain candidates or parties, and/or provide them with the information and discussion they need to make their election choices at the ballot box. They will also have the freedom of movement to campaign on behalf of their cause or candidate throughout the country.

Developing these arguments is essential, as it is possible that there will be those who may think that elections could be conducted without such conditions being in place. In India, the election authority must determine whether such conditions are present before allowing an election to proceed. But there have been other times, in other places, when elections have been used to develop credibility and apparent legitimacy for a government that has no intention of ensuring that the necessary democratic rights are present during an election period.

1. *The role, responsibility and rights of the voter.* The second message area provides citizens with motivation for participation in elections. They learn how individual participation in elections establishes representative government and ensures accountability by those who are elected.

It is not enough, however, to merely concentrate on roles and responsibilities. Educators must also consider the rights to a free and fair election. Helping voters understand these rights facilitates election monitoring by all citizens and not just specialised groups. It ensures oversight of both candidates and the election administration.

2. *Your vote counts.* While all systems present the principle that every vote counts, there are some nuances in message depending on the electoral system used. In first past the post systems, electoral success or failure may be determined by a small number of votes where there will be a marginal winner and loser. In systems that use proportionality, every vote counts toward building up the proportional representation of the voter's preferred candidate.

Apart from the numbers game, voters need to be made aware that each vote has weight in determining the rights that they have over the elected party or representative once the election has been won or lost. If a representative relationship cannot be formed between citizens and elected officials, citizens may begin to feel that their vote does not, in fact, count for much.

3. *Your vote is secret.* There are many circumstances where it is essential that voters be protected from intimidation and fear of subsequent political and personal consequences. In such circumstances, the message that a vote is secret has to be conveyed and, possibly, proved. Secrecy has both positive and negative connotations, and in societies that value community, secrecy may be suspect. Or there may be societies that consider secrecy to be impossible, whether as a result of dysfunctional administration or prevailing belief structures.

In these circumstances, examples of matters that are secret, or that cannot be found out, provide educators with potential metaphors for the voting process and there may be alternative approaches. Perhaps the most

powerful is when elections are repeated and no dire consequences befall voters. But election legislation will have to back up the message by considering carefully the manner in which counting of votes takes place and results are announced. An individual vote may be secret, but a community preference may not, and this can have equally important consequences.

Carrying out voter education is a critical assignment that needs address itself to some core issues that electorates do not know about. It is not surprising at all that a significant number of voters are completely unaware of issues in elections. Issues ranging from those of regulations on who is qualified or disqualified to contest, rules guiding electioneering campaigns, who qualifies to vote and the voting procedure, vote counting, how election disputes are settled, etc. to the broad base economic issues of agriculture, clean water and sanitation, corruption/integrity, crime/security, education, women's empowerment, employment, health care, HIV/AIDS, housing, infrastructure, privatization, and transport; these seemingly elude the knowledge base of several voters, especially those in the rural areas. It is only when there is a full grasp of these issues and their implications by the voting public that informed choices can be made. It is in driving this key objective home that this paper proposes the popular theatre methodology.

Popular Theatre as Intervention Strategy

Popular theatre as a method of enhancing social action and development has been built upon the dramatic and participatory theories of Brecht, Friere and Boal and further popularized particularly in Africa by activists like Ross Kid, Martin Byram, Michael Etherton, Brian Crow and Nwansa. Bertolt Brecht, a German born dramatist and theatre theoretician (Encyclopedia Americana, 1989: Vol. 4, p. 493), viewed theatre as an instructional medium and advocated active participation by audience in the theatre through reflecting on the actions in the theatre so as to discover the social and moral implication of performance. According to Alachi (1994), Brecht was influenced by Erwin Piscator, an exponent of political theatre whose approach turned the theatre into a forum for discussion. Brecht's influence on popular theatre is further strengthened by his conception of the term "popular", which he relates with people and culture. According to Crow and Etherton in Kidd and Colletta (1980, p.514), Brecht sees conceives "Popular" as "people who are not fully involved in the process of development but are eventually taking it over, forcing it, deciding it..."

Advancing on Brechtian Epic theatre model, a Brazilian, Paulo Freire, developed his philosophy of revolution in the Third World which began with radical literacy programmes. Freire expressed in the notion of conscientization, a process whereby the "have nots" are made aware of their position in such a manner which will assist them along the path of improvement. Freire recognizes conscientization as a process enabling the vulnerable to identify their problems as consequences of a given social order. Against this background, the learning process was therefore conceived to necessarily reject the fatalistic view of the universe and of a mechanistic concept of society which are the way the vulnerable view their world and their place in it. Freire's major concern was that as people moved from 'a semi-transitive state to a naive transitive state of consciousness', progressive social workers equally experience an up and coming critical awareness on their own (Alachi 1990).

Another Latin American theatre activist, Augusto Boal, advocated the involvement of people in theatrical productions. As orchestrated by Etherton in Kidd and Colletta (1980), Boal carries the meaning of 'popular theatre' in the direction of making the people not just audiences but also the actors and creators of drama. He sees theatre as a language capable of being utilized by anybody with or without artistic talent. Boal sees drama as a weapon which the people must always use for their protection at all fronts. Total involvement of people in the making of interventionist drama for any given purpose, therefore, becomes a must, especially when reconciled against the ancient Chinese proverb: "Tell me, I will forget. Show me, I may remember. But involve me and I will remember" (Madza 1997).

Against the background of the analytical concerns of this paper, popular theatre is seen in the light of Saint Gbilekaa's (2013, p. 64) conceptualization. Gbilekaa conceives popular theatre in several perspectives. These include:

1. Performances, scenarios and dramatic skits dedicated to solving certain social problems of a select community;
2. Performances by catalyst groups – adults and social workers – done before a group of people or select communities to educate them on ways of improving their life-styles and environment through communal action;
3. Tele-guided performances that aim at conscientizing the working class and the peasants by first seeking dialogue with them instead of taking to them finished theatrical products as is conventional of the traditional western drama. The aim is to mobilise them for political and economic objectives;
4. The conscious use of theatrical elements not only to create entertainment but to enhance the achievement of the above goals.

The idea here is to ensure that the theatrical experience so created and shared is one that seeks solutions through an objective analysis of the people's problems, in a non-terminal process as long as the problem persists. Abah (2013) has noted, "it is a continuing process of analysis and action. A play is therefore a collection of ideas, issues and perceptions in the process of being realized" (p.5).

According to Crow and Etherton, (1982) "emerging experiments in popular theatre as a tool for social development have differed in objective and methodology, but they have all started with the notion of taking theatre to the people, instead of expecting people to come to the theatre" (Kidd and Colletta 1980, p. 573). Three major stages have been identified by these activists who have been involved extensively in the attempt to take theatre to the people. The first stage is when well-made and established plays are taken to various communities; the second stage includes the staging of bureaucratically inspired plays for rural and urban slums to get the people to embrace certain government programmes or social politics. The third stage is that which emphasizes the potency of theatre in terms of the people developing their own theatre rather than on social change of state propaganda.

In another light, Etherton is able to categorize the process of taking theatre to the people: the traditional performances; the concert parties; folk operas and popular travelling theatres; taking theatre to the people; folk theatre and development; theatre and self-help; and drama as a means of achieving political development. On the whole, popular theatre is instructive theatre. It is a dialectical and didactic art which speaks to the truth in the social issues confronting the generality of the people in the daily struggles for a better life.

Intervention Paradigms

The song mode of the theatre has been in the fore front of using popular genre to promote social change. Folk songs have been used for campaigns against social vices, government programmes promotion, disease control and sanitation programmes, and even the propagation of faith based ideals. Intermittently, community drama has been employed sparingly and toured with in target communities to drive home salient messages. At the end of the performance of such drama which most times feature members of the target community, discussion is opened based on the issues in the drama and key messages are disseminated into the community.

As early as the 1979 elections, a Tiv popular folk song artist, Tarker Golozo did a song that was popular amongst the voting population and helped encourage voter participation. In the song, Golozo opined:

...i cia i ka or ta ye le, me kera votu or me nan a yam mato nan a haam ihundu ga, i cia la ka i gban tar; ... nongu u na iti you, he kwa ne ka kwagh u nyoron a iyenge pati ngu ke hemen oo.

This song addressed the apathy question where voters refused to participate, claiming that the elected persons will usually buy cars and raise dust on the roadside for the electorates each time they pass them by. Politicians have over the years employed the song medium to promote their campaigns and at the same time malign their opponents using abusive lyrics to poison the minds of the electorate against them. In the recently concluded 2015 general elections, a former Commissioner for Lands and Survey in Benue State was alleged to have lost elections into the Federal House of Representatives for the Makurdi/Guma Constituency as a result of the incursive potency of the popular song medium. A song to malign his person and aspiration went in parts thus:

Idyu ka nya i teen ga, ... komishina u teen nya... shagen ka nya i teen ga... Hide se a nya ya se ooo ... u ngu or u dedoo ga... votu wase ka u Tarkighir... Dickson an ooo... tyo you soo u... or a soo bikon i zenden manden, yô nan alu her a amande, yemen Abuja je ne oo... Dickson u za idyu keng keng.

Meaning:

Legislation is not land selling... land-selling Commissioner... election is never land selling... Return to us our land (plots)... you're never a good man... Our vote is for Tarkighir... Dickson ooo... your kinsmen love you... onward to Abuja... Dickson you will attend parliament unfailingly.

The topicality of the song amongst the people was such that made it so popular amongst the electorates that it was potent enough to cause someone to lose elections. The same composer did another song which was a campaign against electoral violence. It went thus:

*Gum or a lu or a kaa a we ye, we za wua or yô kaa a nan we...
Wan wou a hemen me dondo eee...
Tile her venda... wan wou a hemen me dondo eee...*

Meaning:

*Young man if anyone tells you, go kill someone; just tell them...
Your child will lead and I will follow...*

Stand your ground and refuse... your child will lead and I will follow.

This song formed a kind of signature tune for all the campaign songs for this composer.

The paradigm of community drama actually combines a lot of these modes. Songs and dances can be built into drama as their plots unfold in order to further accentuate the messages therein. More so, in the present day world of social media, issue based voter education messages can be packaged in their popular form and spread across the various platforms of the social media. While short digital messages (video and pictorial) can be developed and uploaded unto the social media for general access. Every social media platform allowing for adverts too can make these messages mandatory introductions before the main advert plays. Gbilekaa (2013, p.72) avers that in building a community based intervention drama, the following steps are usually taken:

1. Training the participants
2. Village research
3. Data analysis
4. Scenario formulation
5. Rehearsal/performance
6. Post – performance evaluation
7. Follow – up

This is the Ross Kid and Bryan standard methodology. It is not fixed and can be amended depending on the circumstances and the situation. It is important to stress here that popular or community theatre represents a process whereby intellectuals try to awaken the consciousness of the disadvantages in society by presenting dramatic sketches in which their problems are articulated from the dialectical perspective to help them visualize their society. In this kind of approach, the relationship between the audience and the performers is informal. Contact is established with the audience before, during and after performance. Sometimes, members of the audience are involved in the plays. This kind of theatre again encourages the use of the indigenous languages as well as artistic institutions. The use of indigenous languages eliminates the communication gap and elitism of formal theatre and enhances a spirit of belonging and identification. This helps in breaking down barriers and allowing messages to penetrate. The idea is to locate the local theatrical idiom of the people, be they puppetry, masquerade, dance, song or narrative traditions instead of forcing the stereotype European model on them. If this procedure is adopted, the rural communities and their voting population will begin to grasp graphically the dynamics of contemporary change especially regarding issue – based voting thereby guaranteeing credible elections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The general discourse in this paper has been the concern to increase the knowledge base and literacy levels of the voting population in Nigeria through the popular theatre medium. Usually, the campaign for issue based voting has been largely domiciled with civil society organizations. Identifying organizations and associations of citizens that take an interest in such issues and that are concerned with pursuing specific approaches to addressing the issues is an important step in building issue-based voter education and mobilization. This has been the practice. Efforts must be increased in taking these issues to the people and through a medium that connects with them naturally. Political parties, perhaps as their corporate social responsibility, must be seen to do more to educate the electorates rather than merely focusing on innovative strategies to win elections. It was observed in the last 2015 general elections that a political party took to using popular Nollywood stars to sell their candidates to the electorates. The expectation was that since members of the voting public idolize some of these stars, they would naturally go for what they were representing. While this was powerful innovative thinking, such tact could better be applied to make these stars' ambassadors of issue – based voter education. Rallies and community tours could be organized for them to relate with the locals on the issues at elections.

Against the background of the foregoing discourse, these recommendations are made:

1. INEC and civil society organization should adopt the popular theatre model of mass education which has direct connection with the people in the quest to deliver on the objectives of their voter education mandate;
2. Political parties must be compelled to carry out proper and thorough voter education campaigns using this community based approach as part of their responsibility in the quest for credible elections;
3. Social media platforms must be compelled to dedicate a segment of their space for issue – based voter education messages that will be run periodically. The process must be a continual one and not only during elections periods;

4. Electronic and print media outfits must be restricted as per the amount of airtime given to political parties for campaigns while at the same time giving equal airtime for voter education at each instance of campaign message, at the expense of the party sponsoring such a campaign message;
5. Aspirants must be compelled to include issue – based voter education messages in their manifestoes, rallies and publicity messages.
6. Penalty and sanctions must be enforced on violators of regulations guiding political campaigns by parties and their aspirants.

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