
PLAYING AGAINST VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY OF POPULAR THEATRE IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

African popular theatre has emerged as an alternative strategy through which the oppressed can discard the culture of silence and assert their desire for peace, justice and freedom. Taking cognisance of the belief that violence only begets violence, such theatre employs meta-communicative devices, like play, as non-violent means of protest against forces that have militated against the people's welfare. This article uses the case study of a popular theatre performance carried out in Zimbabwe to explore how the culture of violence has become a cyclical phenomenon that began with colonialism and extended through the time of the liberation struggle to the post-colonial period. The article focuses on how the cycle of violence can be understood in order to chart the way forward for peacebuilding and development in Africa.

Introduction

A 10-member delegation consisting mainly of South African clergy visited Zimbabwe and prepared a detailed report about what they had witnessed at first hand concerning the extent of human rights abuses in Zimbabwe. In the foreword, Bishop Kevin Dowling comments that 'When people speak to you, they are looking over their shoulders all the time' (Solidarity Peace Trust 2003:2). Twenty-three years after the attainment of national independence from Britain, ordinary people in Zimbabwe were yet to realise the meaning of freedom, peace and justice. The trust observed that torture and fear were rampant. In spite of widespread hunger and famine, food was reportedly distributed to supporters of the ruling political party (Amnesty International 2004). The farms that were being seized from white commercial farmers in the name of land reform were not benefiting landless peasants and workers, but rather the ruling party's political 'heavyweights'. Youth militia of the ruling party had been trained to unleash arson, rape, intimidation and terror on civil society (IRIN News 2003). Laws such as the Public Order and Security Act (2002), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (2003) and the Miscellaneous Offences Act (2001) had been passed to curtail freedom of expression, of assembly, of movement and of the press.

Since then, a political climate driven by personal expediency, economic corruption and absence of the rule of law has created a cumulative culture of violence that has not only led to the withdrawal of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, but also resulted in the virtual collapse of the economy. Due to a combination of Western sanctions, economic mismanagement and political patronage, the country is experiencing acute shortages of basic commodities such as food, fuel, water and electricity at the time of writing. The most recent report of Solidarity Peace Trust paints a bleak picture of a violent state

machinery faced with the crisis of infrastructural failure in health care, provision of education and the judicial system. What surprised Bishop Dowling most, however, was that, in the midst of all this pain and suffering, ‘... you hear them [the people] laughing, you hear them singing. Why should you be joyful when life is such a burden?’ (Solidarity Peace Trust 2003:1-2).

The Cyclical Nature of Violence

The University of Zimbabwe Theatre’s (UZT) popular theatre performance, entitled *Tinoendepi?* (Where shall we go now?), offers a possible answer to Dowling’s paradox. The co-directors of UZT, lecturers Owen Seda and Ethel Dhlamini-Maqeda, told the author in an interview that the purpose of *Tinoendepi?* was to alert the electorate to political violence and torture in the run-up to the April 2002 presidential elections. Workshops were conducted with victims and witnesses of political violence and the play was scripted out of their personal testimonies. The play was performed in both rural and urban areas during the weeks leading up to the presidential elections. Through what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the ‘hermeneutic circle’ in play discourse, *Tinoendepi?* explores violence as a cyclical phenomenon, beginning with colonialism and proceeding through the liberation struggle to neo-colonialism in the post-independence period. Gadamer argues that although we play for recreation, ‘play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness’ (1975:91). The seriousness of its purposes is circumscribed by its relation to the total life situation, the larger whole. Thus, in order to understand the prevailing culture of violence in Zimbabwe, we need to consider the circular movement of history. As Steinsholt and Traasdahl observe

It is impossible to understand the parts [relating to violence] without a certain understanding of the whole. Our consciousness typically moves back and forth between the part and the whole, and this movement constitutes the hermeneutic circle (2001:79).

In other words, to understand the nature of violence in all its guises, we need a distancing space where we can let play happen. The closer we are to a particular phenomenon, the less critical we tend to become. But play, described as symbolic interaction expressed through performance, can create the distancing space through which we can gain particular kinds of knowledge concerning reality. The exchange of ideas that occurs within such a

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playful learning space can lead towards ‘an opening of horizons and an expansion of meaningful worlds’ (Steinsholt & Traasdahl 2001:80). This article examines *Tinoendepi?* in terms of how the discursive elements of play are operating in the process of performance. To do this, I look at violence as a cyclical phenomenon moving from an idyllic or non-

violent African communal life through colonialism to the liberation struggle and neo-colonialism, and back again to cultural regeneration. As Keyan Tomaselli (1989:121) points out, a study of play in performance produces other dimensions. It is in the process of making and performing that play reveals its purpose. In this case, my main interest in examining violence in all its forms is to find out how it has stifled peace and development through the violation of human rights. As Jan Pronk (1982) asserts, a guarantee of human rights is not merely related to development, but is integral to development. In other words, the abuse of human rights is incompatible with peacebuilding and human development. Thus violence is symptomatic of underlying structural injustices that need to be redressed if peace and development are to be established.

The 'Golden Age' of African communalism

Tinoendepi? opens with a song that evokes the 'golden age' of pre-colonial African communal life (Chiwome 1996). Performers act out a series of improvised mimes designed to create images of a romanticised communal mode of production. While some are clearing and tilling the land, others are hunting wild animals, planting and harvesting crops, threshing and pounding the grain. The simulated action depicts a harmonious community driven by a collective work ethic. This industrious spirit is aptly captured in the song, 'If you don't plough, you won't eat/So take your hoes and plough'. The song serves to show how people were living in balance with nature at a time when African society lived in harmony with itself. The individual was not separable from his or her social and cultural environment. Every person lived in accordance with a communal ethic described by the Ugandan philosopher, John Mbiti: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (1994:141). The survival of the individual and the community was conceived as 'a perpetual and universal movement of sharing and exchange of the forces of life' (Ramose 1999:57-8). Such a tradition placed the community rather than the individual at the centre of social existence and decision-making.

However, the harmony of the old song is broken by the intrusion of a new song. A clumsy-sounding drumbeat disrupts the communal work rhythms, and a black messenger enters to announce that Whiteman, a central character, wants everybody to come to a meeting under the *muhacha* tree, a traditional village meeting place. The work song recedes as voices of protest are heard from the performers-turned-villagers asking, 'What does *vasina mabvi* want from us?*' It is an irony that the coming of the white man is heralded by the drum, which is described by the African philosopher, Mogobe Ramose, as 'the basic instrument in the Bantu understanding of being as musical harmony' (1999:60). It is as if colonialism has turned the African 'talking drum' into a symbol of fragmentation of communal well-being. As happens to Caliban in William Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, Man Friday in Daniel Defoe's novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the curious 'natives' in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the new song takes away the people's language. By denying Africans their voices, colonialism becomes a primary de-centering force in the social construction of Otherness (waThiong'o 1986)

The contradictions of colonial violence

In the mould of the biblical John the Baptist proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, Whiteman arrives to tell the villagers:

It is not often that I get to address the natives.
Therefore I have a very important issue.
The Shona and Ndebele rebellions have been crushed.
We are now the supreme rulers of this land.
You shall follow the laws of the Crown.
You shall leave your pagan rites, sacrificial killings, sun gods, river gods,
moon gods ...
You shall avail your labour at all times.
Anyone who disobeys shall be dealt with severely.
I'm sure you all know what has just happened to that witch woman, Nihunda,
and that wizard, Kakuvi.
The same fate shall befall you if you disobey.

Whiteman speaks in English while his messenger translates the words into chiShona. The significance of Whiteman's speech must be viewed in the light of the primacy of the *word* in African verbal art as a mode of performance. Richard Bauman explains that in the word

there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the [audience], 'interpret what I say in some special sense, do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey (1984:9).

Thus the frame within which Whiteman's speech is delivered elicits a negative reaction from the villagers characteristic of the call-and-response technique in African narrative performance. For them, the word constitutes the action. As Ruth Finnegan (1969) observed, among the Limba of Sierra Leone, speech is used to perform an action. Speaking is like making a sacred contract: it plays with the forces of life. In Malaika Mutere's (2002) view, the order of creation begins with a creator whose powers of speech are able to bring a phenomenal realm into existence. Whiteman's words act to bring forth a 'new song' of organised violence. He stands for a much larger colonialist project, that of Europe's 'civilising mission' and the spreading of Christianity, but that project appears to be riddled with contradictions. It is carried out through violent conquest. It is premised on an occidental philosophy that regards the humanity of the Other as 'uncivilised and primitive' (Mudimbe 1988). Thus Whiteman's words are simply putting into action a violent modernity that is deemed a required and necessary step in the unfolding of 'modern' civilisation. That explains why Nehanda and Kaguvi, the legendary religious figures of the nineteenth century Shona uprising against colonialism known as the First Chimurenga (1896-7), had to be eliminated. According to Cheikh Anta Diop (1981:1), the negation of the history of Africa was accomplished when imperialism first killed its being spiritually, culturally and physically.

How was this violence experienced by the colonised? The villagers in *Tinoendepi?* experience a peculiar form of ambiguity in which they are torn between the worlds of tradition and 'modernity'. The performance presents the irony of villagers trapped within a spiritual and cultural quandary. Some begin to side with Whiteman for bringing Christianity and an end to witchcraft; others opt to keep to their ancestral spirits. Chinua Achebe aptly answers this question. In his novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel, *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962), the central characters die because of their failure to

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reconcile their Old World with the New World. Likewise, with the passing of communal culture, villagers in *Tinoendepi?* enter what Kane (1962) describes as a 'strange dawn' born of cannon shots and shining glass beads. But while this colonial violence establishes a new order of time, the colonised yearn to replace it

with yet another violence that will bring forth their own order of time. As Frantz Fanon (1988) argues, just as colonialism interrupts the history of indigenous culture, the reclaiming of 'national time' is possible only with the demise of 'colonial time'. However, Fanon underestimates the cyclic nature of violence when he concludes that the demise of the coloniser means the beginning of a new history for the colonised.

Revolutionary Violence as Therapy for the Oppressed

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), which became a classic text for African nationalist movements, Fanon prescribes violence as a cleansing force for the colonised: 'violence frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless

and restores his self-respect' (1967:31). But while he embraces revolutionary violence as a therapy for the oppressed, Fanon seems to underestimate the extent of the internal struggle within the 'native', whom he describes as 'an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor' (1967:41). *Tinoendepi?* demonstrates the cyclical nature of violence by showing that within the structures of the *pungwe* (the all-night performances used by freedom fighters to conscientise people about the liberation struggle) were sown the seeds of organised violence that were to extend into the post-colonial period.

The first scene ends with the villagers singing a war song that reflects their desire to take up arms against colonialism. But it takes almost a century before the Second Chimurenga (1966-79) gets under way. Meanwhile African society has been transformed by what has been described as 'modern agents of social change' (Chinyowa 2003). These include the mission station, the money economy, the formal school system, the city, the factory and

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the mass media. By the 1930s, urbanisation and industrialisation had acculturated most Africans to a point where they had imbibed the values of the new ideological dispensation. The idyllic African communal life was being gradually superseded by values that were premised on violence as means of protest

against the negative effects of colonial imperialism. In Scene 4, *Tinoendepi?* captures the drama of *pungwe* taking place in a guerrilla camp at the height of the liberation war around 1976. The scene opens with the people singing and dancing with two armed guerrillas. There are occasional breaks as the people respond to the nationalist slogan, 'Black clothes! Black skin!' But amid the chanting, sloganeering, singing, dancing and ululating lurks a variant form of deep play (Sutton-Smith 2002; Blanchard 1995). In deep play, 'war is carried out in a sporting (or game-like) manner' (Sutton-Smith 2002:9). Blanchard offers the example of the Dani people of New Guinea, who occasionally make war in order to avenge the death of an ancestor or fellow villager:

The war is surrounded with much pomp and circumstance, shouting and enthusiasm; it is fought according to a set of understood rules; and it is marked by a playful or sporting attitude that seems to take precedence over the idea that eventually someone must be killed (Blanchard 1995:167).

Likewise, *pungwe* can be viewed as a peculiar form of deep play. It possessed the features of play – enjoyment, rules, secrecy and disguise – but it also reflected a paradox in the contrasts between the extremes of danger and the protection of rules that were selectively applied (Chinyowa 2006). The *pungwe* also contained its own paradoxes of violence. While the nationalist struggle relied much on 'the unwritten artistic codes such as songs and folktales' (Pfukwa 2001:36), the same mediums of expression were used to bring pain, suffering and even death to those who did not play according to the rules of the war game. A freedom fighter-turned-academic, Pfukwa writes that it was through the 'unwritten code', the spontaneous forms of cultural expression within the people, that the guerrillas were able to acquire the identity of a people's army. But in *Tinoendepi?* even the name of one of the guerrillas reflects the existence of a Manichean relationship between the 'comrades', as the freedom fighters called themselves, and the people. Comrade Killem takes the lead in torturing two villagers suspected of being 'sell-outs', Sinyoro and Muchadakurwa, soon after they are tortured by the Rhodesian security forces for giving food to the freedom fighters. It is after they escape from the Rhodesian army camp to seek refuge in the guerrilla camp that they are accused of 'selling out' to the enemy. The paradox is accentuated by the close parallels between the two forms of torture. For instance in Scene 3, the Rhodesian army captain asks the captured villagers:

Where did you spend the whole night on Wednesday last week?

(The two villagers, Sinyoro and his wife, look at each other and remain silent) I said where were you on Wednesday last week? Come on, hurry up! Speak now!

Sinyoro: *(Sheepishly)* I had gone to Madhlambudzi to claim *lobola* (bride price) for my daughter, Keresia, who eloped last year, but up to now they have not bothered to pay me.

Captain: *(With rage)* Don't start playing games with me. You are going to speak out today! Now, get out of my way! *(addressing his colleague)* Have these people gone for electric torture as yet?

Soldier: Not yet ...

Captain: *(To Sinyoro)* Old man, I want you to pour this whole container of paraffin on your wife's clothes until they are soaked. Hurry up! *(Sinyoro carries out the instructions)* Now, light her up!

The captain names this torture 'Operation Gehenna' after the Old Testament hell. It is not unlike the torture that awaits the villagers when they escape and seek refuge in the guerrilla base.

Comrade Killem: Does anyone have a question ?

Villager 1: We understand what you are saying. You say we are like water and you are the fish. It means we have to cooperate in order to win this war. But what do we do with people who go behind our backs to report to the (Rhodesian) soldiers and the police?

Comrade Killem: You have asked a good question, *amai* *(begins to chant a slogan)* Black skin!

Villagers: Black clothes!

Comrade Killem: *(refers the question to his colleague)* You answer this woman, comrade!

Comrade: We call such people sell-outs, *amai*. When sell-outs do that, we cut off their heads, or drown them in a drum of hot traditional beer, or burn their homes. We don't bury them in graves but let them be eaten by dogs or wild animals. We do that because they are sell-outs. They are called what?

Villagers: Sell-outs!

Comrade: They are what?

Villagers: Sell-outs!

It is at that moment that Sinyoro and his accomplices arrive on the scene. Comrade Killem promptly orders them to come forward and undergo 'Operation Limpopo', a form of torture in which victims' heads are dipped in buckets of water until they faint or die. While the torture goes on, the villagers are singing, dancing, clapping and ululating as if to celebrate the suffering of the 'sell-outs'. The song, *Chenjera, chenjera* (Be careful, be careful), attests to the systematic nature of revolutionary violence:

Leader: Be careful! Be careful!

Chorus: Be careful. Be careful.

Leader: The comrades will kill you!

Chorus: Be careful. Be careful.

Leader: They kill with knives!

Chorus: Be careful. Be careful.

Leader: The comrades will beat you!

Chorus: Be careful. Be careful.

During the torture of Sinyoro and Muchadakurwa, a villager comments in a hushed voice, 'How shall we win the struggle when they do this to us?' But the question is drowned out in the song and dance. As Sutton-Smith comments, 'there are even more extreme deep play-like kinds' (2002:9; Geertz 1975). In the case of the *pungwe*, the game's rules are carried out in a playful atmosphere that belies the pain and suffering of the co-players.

Both Operation Gehenna and Operation Limpopo may be viewed as manifestations of deep play, described by Jeremy Bentham as 'play in which the stakes are so high that it is irrational for men to engage in it at all' (Counsell & Wolf 2001:222). But when deep play is a war-like game, people do engage in it, in spite of the risk of physical, mental and emotional trauma (Sutton-Smith 2002). In a war like the Second Chimurenga, the deep play happens according to a set of rules that take precedence over the possibility of pain or death. Fanon likens such revolutionary violence to a 'ripening process':

Just as the seed or fruit in ripening brings out of itself what it inherently is, in like manner the colonised, in resisting, makes itself what it inherently is – a community of human beings – by effectively negating its *thingification* and bringing out of itself the historicity that accentuates its thus far thwarted humanity (1967:69).

But Fanon failed to foresee how violence would progress cyclically from its form in a liberation struggle and take another form of violence in the period of post-colonial independence.

Neo-colonial Violence and the Futile Gains of Independence

The attainment of national political independence in Zimbabwe on 18 April 1980 was celebrated with euphoria but greeted with anxiety about the fulfilment of promises made during the liberation struggle. Those who had fought and supported the revolutionary effort had high expectations of entering a 'new heaven and a new earth'. But in *Tinoendepi*? the gains of independence are depicted as futile and paradoxical. The 'playful revolution' that started with the *pungwe* during the armed struggle assumes mythical proportions.

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What emerges is a new political game built on a series of myths, which Kwame Nkrumah (1965) aptly termed 'neo-colonialism', a new form of colonialism. In the process of articulating the violent discourse of neo-colonialism, play brings forth myths associated with ideologies like nationalism, socialism, democracy and philanthropy. In

other words, play and myth function to mediate neo-colonial ideology. For instance, while the liberation struggle was fought to fulfil the people's aspirations for freedom, justice and peace, the post-independence period was fraught with the betrayal of promises made during the revolution that now sounded like myths.

For Keyan Tomaselli (1996:66), myth is a mode of signification that offers explanations of why the world is as it appears to be, and why people act as they do. Play and ritual for Don Handelman (1977:189) are complementary frames of meta-communication, and myth also acts as a meta-narrative discourse that shares characteristic features with play. Like play, myth functions to bring forth a symbolic model of reality. The different discursive frames of play, such as make-believe, paradox, flow and inversion, or reversal, are also manifest in myth (Chinyowa 2006). Above all, myth and play make use of meta-messages

that cast doubt on the validity of the social order to suggest how it can be reconstituted. Like play, myth manifests itself as a double system, an ambiguous signifier, an ubiquitous form. It is defined more by its intention than by its literal sense. The myth-consumer will simply take the myth for a statement of fact. As Mary Reichling argues in relation to play, 'there are illusions created in play' (1997:43), it makes the players imagine the non-existent. But paradoxically such illusion can ultimately make present the absent as players come to believe in the illusion. Hence myth and play have more in common with each other, being analogous but not completely identical. They complement each other in terms of what they meta-communicate. Myth constructs its own reality, which can be made to appear as the archetype of people's experiences. It functions to validate what comes to be believed as

a statement of eternal fact, truth, obviousness, naturalness, common sense, rightness, reasonableness, already-there-ness – it just needs to be named ... by anyone, hence the apparent 'legitimacy' of myth (Tomaselli 1996:67).

For those who may not recognise the artificial 'constructedness' of myth, it will be seen as true in itself and believed as real, or as a deeper reality. This is where it tends to differ from play, whose operative frame is known to be 'not real'. The make-believe frame in myth helps to articulate the problem of neo-colonial violence in *Tinoendepi*? The character, Mysterious Man, who emerges to replace Whiteman and becomes the leader of the newly independent nation state, turns out to be a petty bourgeois mythologist. Barthes (1972:156) describes a bourgeois mythologist as one who participates in the making of the world not as it is, but as he or she wants it to be. His or her speech is a meta-narrative, at best a political act. The message communicated by such speech can be understood as a 'map' for a much larger 'territory'; that is, the words have greater implications beyond themselves. As Barthes explains:

His task always remains ambiguous, hampered by its ethical origin. He can live revolutionary action only vicariously; hence the self-conscious character of his function ... The mythologist cuts himself off from all the myth-consumers ... [he] must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth ... in the entire community (1972:157).

Like a fictional Other of the African political leadership, Mysterious Man, accompanied by bodyguards, comes to address the jubilant masses at a political rally. The people have been singing a Ndebele song of praise for his heroic leadership. The song is entitled *Ubaba wethu, somlandela* (Our father, we shall follow you). If taken as a meta-message of the mythical frame, the song serves to communicate Mysterious Man's duplicity as evidenced by his address after a brief appearance from the shadows:

Mysterious Man: Black skin!

Crowd: Black clothes!

Mysterious Man: (*Bodyguard translates as Mysterious Man addresses the crowd in siNdebele*) We are happy today because we are independent. What remains now is to work together and rebuild our country. During the war, there were leaders and followers. The same thing is going to happen now. I don't have much to say because I have no time left. I have a very important meeting to attend in Zurich ...

At independence, the new black leaders in Zimbabwe sought to create a new social and political order by adopting the Marxist-Leninist ideology of scientific socialism to replace the existing colonial capitalist system. Commitment to socialist transformation, they believed, would ultimately lead to the creation of an egalitarian society. But for the new black leadership

represented by Mysterious Man, the liberation struggle is only a means to an end. There are murmurs of disgruntlement from the people during and after Mysterious Man's speech. Already the masses are beginning to sense a betrayal of the nationalist revolution. As Fanon and Amilcar Cabral (1982) both point out, during a liberation struggle, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence. But as soon as independence is won, the leader will reveal his inner purpose to become the president of a new company of indigenous profiteers. In *Tinoendepi?*, the myths of nationalism and socialism are exposed by Mysterious Man's lack of commitment to the wishes and aspirations of the people. Even the former freedom fighters, Comrade Killem and his colleagues, discover that they are 'less equal' than their leaders. Comrade Killem is ordered to leave the front seats reserved for 'superiors' and sit among the masses. New black T-shirts are distributed to only a selected few. In short, the nature of the structural violence that emerges in the new political dispensation is akin to that in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Tinoendepi? also shows how neo-colonial violence has 'mythologised' the meanings of democracy and philanthropy. When Mysterious Man realises that his political support base has diminished, he resorts to corruption. He bribes Comrade Killem to force the villagers to continue wearing 'black clothes'. Meanwhile, a new opposition party has emerged whose slogan is '*Pfeka! Chero chawada, pfeka!*' (Wear whatever you want). Even Sinyoro, alias Baba vaRameki, can no longer get along with his wife and friends. He opts to put on 'yellow clothes' instead of black, because 'These days you must wear what you want'. Those who do not support Sinyoro's new 'democratic' party are tortured. The political divisions wreak so much havoc that ruling party supporters, led by Comrade Killem, and opposition party supporters, led by Sinyoro, burn each other's houses, prevent children from attending school and beat up opponents. In the end, both Comrade Killem, now mentally deranged, and Sinyoro, now physically disabled, become inmates at an urban rehabilitation centre. An ambiguity arises when Mysterious Man, the cause of all the suffering, pays an official visit to donate funds for the rehabilitation of victims of organised violence. In the end, democracy, in the image of the opposition party, and philanthropy, symbolised by Mysterious Man's donation to victims of torture, are shown to be implicated in the perpetuation of neo-colonial violence. As Fanon (1967) concludes, neo-colonialism replicates colonial violence by proxy – what is true of the colonial situation applies with equal force to the neo-colonial setting. Perhaps the major difference lies in the skin colour of those responsible for perpetrating the violence, as Fanon implies in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

'Return to the Source' through Cultural Regeneration

Cabral (1982) has proposed that the challenges of Africa's rebirth lie in a 'return to the source' of its cultural heritage, what Tsenay Serequeberhan (1998:250) calls 'the development of a *praxis* of concrete communal self-creation'. The war against neo-colonialism needs a realignment with the people's cultural struggle for survival and freedom, to rediscover their languages of struggle, their heritage of exuberant performance – their songs, dances, narratives, talking drums and rituals (waThiong'o 1986). But as Aime Cesaire's tragic hero warns in the play, *The Tragedy of King Christophe* (1969), what Africa needs to reclaim is not the culture of the 'whip' but the effort to transcend or surpass its historicity.

Tinoendepi? ends by suggesting a means of resolving the problem of organised violence and torture. The protagonist, Sinyoro, leads other actors in a song entitled *Nyika yedu yauraiwa nemhirizhonga* (Our country has been destroyed by violence), whose words demonstrate the extent to which violence has traumatised the people:

Our country has been torn apart by violence
Gentlemen, violence has destroyed us
In Mutare, they have been tortured
Gentlemen, do not commit violence
Come and see how much we have suffered
Ladies, do not commit violence

Stories, songs and dances are at the heart of how colonised and formerly colonised people project their own identity and the nature of their place in history. In this song, the formerly colonised voice their grief against state-sponsored violence at a time when they should be enjoying peace, justice and freedom. The shadow of Empire and its colonial manifestations continue to haunt the post-colonial state. The contradictions of an independence that lacks freedom only serve to thwart the growth of genuine democratic structures through its blatant violation of human rights. In the end, what prevails is the replication of imperialist binaries of self-other or us-them, which are not conducive to peacebuilding and development. In the epilogue, the song is followed by a replay of Scene 1, the pre-colonial setting.

The question remains, however: Does the aesthetic closure influence how the problem of cyclical violence as a continued violation of human rights can be solved? The co-facilitator of the Tinoendepi? project, Ethel Dhlamini-Maqeda, explained in an interview:

Ideally, when you are working on a popular theatre project, especially for development purposes, the community should be part of every step, including creating the play, even acting in the play ... like the one on political violence that we did; it was not possible because the communities were in hiding. So we couldn't get them ... to act in the play, because we would have gone on tour with them (Interview, Harare, October 2002).

When asked why members of the community had refused to act in the play, she replied, 'Some people [government agents] were after them, so we couldn't expose them to that [political] danger.' Dhlamini-Maqeda's words raise the problem of how popular theatre can become a security risk, as happened with the Kamiriithu Theatre experiment in Kenya (waThiong'o 1986). It is plausibly argued that popular theatre workers should not be

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seen as reinforcing the culture of silence, or using theatre as an anaestheticising or domesticating instrument (Ahura1991). Rather, all necessary means should be found to use the liberating power of the theatre to improve the lives of a suffering majority. Play as a meta-communicative device for such theatre creates a safe space for

interrogating sensitive issues associated with political violence. In the context of popular theatre, play acts as a non-violent tool for 'unfixing' and 'refixing' reality within neutral boundaries. Thus the theatre becomes a kind of 'laboratory' in which different modes of repression can be exposed and questioned, and in the process, possibilities are created for building peace and development.

The rationale for returning to the source of a culture from the pre-colonial period tends to ignore the complex configurations of a post-modern global culture. Perhaps the option is for popular theatre to demonstrate how the past, as the people's cultural frame of reference, can remain compatible with the needs of the present, and possibly the future. How can the

communal ethics of the past, for instance, contribute in solving problems associated with neo-colonial betrayal and disillusionment? Moreover, as David Kerr and Stephen Chifunyise (1984) found during their involvement with the Chikwakwa Travelling Theatre at the University of Zambia, the lifespan of a university travelling theatre is too short to sustain a popular theatre project. Ultimately, as the authors suggest, the ability of a university travelling theatre to connect with popular audiences depends on the extent to which it can build lasting links with the people (Kerr & Chifunyise 1984).

Conclusion

African popular theatre is a forum for an oppressed people's involvement in the shaping of its own destiny. It helps to awaken people's consciousness of social justice, self-determination and political freedom, as is clearly shown in the way that the cyclical nature of violence is portrayed in *Tinoendepi*? Hussein Bulhan (1985) argues that true liberation requires the simultaneous transformation of the oppressed as well as the social circumstances that create the conditions of oppression. Popular theatre affords an aesthetic space for those who would be the agents of peacebuilding and development to be directly implicated in the making of their own history. Although such theatre may not be the revolution itself, it is 'a rehearsal for the revolution' (Boal 1979:122).

However, there are inherent paradoxes within the popular theatre movement. While it thrives on a participatory strategy that regards the community as the bearer and creator of culture, it may tend to mobilise the oppressed to participate in their own domestication. The article has shown how play discourse can serve as a safe medium for popular theatre

The capacity of popular theatre to expose a culture of violence shows how social change can be debated without resorting to violence.

to communicate messages that cannot be easily transmitted in politically repressive situations like Zimbabwe. Yet such theatre only creates the conditions for exposing the effects of organised violence, not for resolving it. Nonetheless, the capacity of

popular theatre to expose a culture of violence shows how social change can be debated without resorting to violence. Far from reinforcing a culture of silence, African popular theatre takes cognisance of the fact that violence only begets violence. It is therefore necessary to capitalise on the non-violent power of popular theatre, its capacity to instigate a 'playful revolution', in order to create possibilities for peace and development. As Shifra Schonman (2002) concludes in her analysis of the nature of peace education in the conflict zones of the Middle East, the people who get on in this world are those who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, then create them.

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Endnote

* *Vasina mabvi* translates as 'those without knees', Shona people's first impressions upon seeing white men wearing long trousers.

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