

## COMBATING THE SCOURGE OF HIV/AIDS THROUGH RURAL DRAMA ENLIGHTENMENT CAMPAIGN

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### Introduction

**H**uman Immuno deficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) are twin diseases that have become very critical health issues, particularly in the developing countries of the world, which are worst hit by the incidence of the disease. Nelson-Twakor (2003) reports that seventy per cent of the people living with HIV/AIDS are Africans. This is a very deplorable situation, moreso that a vaccine is yet to be developed for HIV, neither has a cure been found for AIDS. Since it was first recognized, a lot more information has been made available, yet much remains unknown and unconfirmed about the disease. Intensive research is being conducted, both on the scientific nature of the disease and the virus, its mode of transmission, incubation, etc., and the social manifestations.

Considering the incurable nature of this disease, the only way of curtailing its spread remains through non-transmission, and proper management of infected persons. This is best achieved through public enlightenment and *enter-educate* programmes. It is against this backdrop that an Ibadan-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) embarked on a rural drama campaign to enlighten the people of the chosen communities about the nature of the disease. The focus of the campaign was informed by the fact that many people in the urban areas are believed to be sufficiently conversant with the causes, effects and management of HIV/AIDS. The NGO in question – *Action Against AIDS, Drug Abuse and Social Vices* (known for short as *Triple 'A' DS*) embarked on this campaign with the financial assistance of World Bank (HIV/AIDS Fund I).

A further justification of the project was the significant contributions of rural dwellers to national development, especially in the areas of agriculture and food production. Hence, nine rural areas from three local governments in Oyo State were chosen for this enlightenment campaign. The local governments involved were *Saki*

East, Oriire and Ibarapa. In Saki East, performances took place at Ago-Amodu, Oje Owode and Sepeteri, while the performances at Oriire local government wer in Ikoyi-Ile, Tewure and Ahoro-Dada. In the Ibarapa East local government, performances were held at Lanlate, New Eruwa and Eruwa Town.

### The HIV/AIDS status in Nigeria

Since the discovery of the deadly and incurable virus more than two decades ago, many governmental and non-governmental agencies have embarked on enlightenment campaigns on HIV/AIDS, to prevent the spread of the disease among the populace, and give adequate support to those who have tested positive to it.

Experts have it that Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is caused by Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which progressively compromises the immunity of the affected person, thus exposing him or her to greater risk of other infections. HIV is a tiny germ, invisible to normal human sight, and found in any of four body fluids, namely, *blood, vagina secretion, semen and breast milk*. Once the virus has been introduced into the body, it destroys the cells responsible for the body's immunity, making the person vulnerable to attack. The diseases that take advantage of the loss of immunity to attack the patient are called *opportunistic infections*. A person infected with HIV may show no sign or symptom of the disease for months or even years, ranging from between six months and ten years, or more. Symptoms usually associated with HIV/AIDS are: severe loss of weight, persistent fever, prolonged diarrhoea, persistent weakness, constant cough, and skin infections. Some of these present as normal illness at the initial stage, before a gradual deterioration. The issue of HIV/AIDS and its various consequences has become a major challenge facing human development today. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is capable of, and is indeed, reversing the progress so far made globally in every sector of the economy – health, education, agriculture, rural integration, and so forth.

The incidence of the disease is greater in the Sub-Saharan Africa. Quoting UNAID (2003), Olanrewaju (2006) informs that 'there are 3.1 million AIDS death yearly, while there are 14, 000 daily new infections. 12, 000 are persons between 14 and 49 years, and about 2, 000 are children.' Nigeria is ranked third in the world



today in the number of infected persons, while about 4.3 million belong to the category of "People Living With HIV/AIDS" (PLWHA), many of whom are, unfortunately, not aware that they are infected. The first case of AIDS in Nigeria was recorded in 1986. Since then, the adult HIV prevalence, using ante-natal parents as samples, has progressively increased from one year to the next. In 1991, the increase was by 1.8%, in 1993, 3.8%, in 1996, 4.5%, in 1999, 5.4%, while in the year 2001, it increased by 5.8%. There was, however, a slight drop to 5.0% in 2003, most probably due to an increasing public awareness of the nature of its spread.

### **Methodology**

There are two well-known approaches in the practice of Community Theatre or Theatre for Development (TfD): the *Homestead Approach* and the *Migratory Approach*. The Homestead Approach, otherwise known as the *inside-out* method, is reportedly the more effective because it enables the facilitators to spend more time in the community, interacting with them, knowing most of their problems, thereby gaining their confidence. Little wonder, then, that the TfD has been re-defined in several quarters as 'theatre of the people, with the people and for the people, aimed at using the people's cultural forms and expressions.'

Using this method, facilitators from Triple 'A'DS went to the aforementioned local government areas on a Training of Trainers (TOT) programme. Representatives from each town or community, comprising mainly local dramatists and musicians, were sent to be trained in the art of community communication through the theatre, and to discuss the specific issues at hand. Musicians were included because songs often go a long way in information dissemination. The facilitators were to discuss with the representatives the causes, effects and management of HIV/AIDS. The theatre artists among them were to be empowered on how to improvise drama sketches focusing on HIV/AIDS to be presented later to the various communities.

The Migratory Approach, otherwise known as the *outside-in* method, involves ready-made performances being taken to the targeted communities. This, as observed by Kasuma (in Obadiogwu, 2004), means moving theatre to the people, rather than expecting the people to come to the theatre. Having known the theme (in this case,



HIV/AIDS) a play is written and thoroughly rehearsed in advance. In this particular instance, the play chosen focuses on a widow, Abeni, who has to choose the person to whom she is to be made over, between the two brothers of her late husband. The older brother is Deegbe, while the younger brother is Olohun-iyó, who happens to be an HIV carrier. She eventually settles for the latter to the chagrin and anger of Deegbe. When Olohun-iyó is subsequently hospitalised as a result of the virus he is carrying, it is naturally attributed to the handiwork of Deegbe, for not being chosen by Abeni. Eventually, the doctor, a native of the town, clears the air on the issue. This play, skilfully scripted by the project director, treats several issues pertaining to HIV/AIDS, such as causes, ways of transmission, effects, management of infected persons, and some of the myths surrounding the disease.

Various campaigns have been taken to schools and colleges, motor-parks, market places, and a host of other venues in the community. It was only more recently that some of these sponsoring agencies began to realise the power of drama in the crusade against HIV/AIDS, especially in the rural areas, where majority of the people could neither read nor write. This method goes a long way in reaching out to the rural masses and enlightening them.

Blessed with seasoned theatre practitioners as members, Triple 'A' DS employed the techniques of Theatre for Development for this enlightenment campaign. The use of theatre as a vehicle for information dissemination enhances interpersonal communication, which goes a long way in promoting greater participation and understanding. Having been involved in both the planning and the execution, the community members become fully convinced of the good intentions of the facilitators. This is in line with Augusto Boal's (1979) belief that 'all revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people that should wield it.' This simply underscores the importance of involving the people who are expected to be directly empowered so that, in the absence of the facilitators, they will be able to solve their problems, from time to time, through drama. Etherton (1982) also observes the importance of involving the local people in the planning and implementation of the production. Realising the importance of the African tradition, he states that



drumming, dancing, story-telling, the masquerade and the festival are the traditional means by which all rural communities, and particularly in Africa, still communicate their awareness of their moral philosophy within the framework of which their problems are solved.

This observation highlights the ethics and aesthetics of theatre for development, which aims at stimulating a process of community awareness, problem solving and action taking, bringing the people together, building communal cohesion, raising important issues as they affect the people, creating forums for discussion, and stimulating collective action. Putting it more succinctly, Ross Kid (1992) informs that it is only

when the people are able to see and analyse their way of being in the world of their immediate daily life including the life of the village, and when they can perceive the rationale for the factors on which their daily life is based, they are able to see far beyond the narrow horizon of their own village and the geographical area in which it is located, to gain global perspective of reality.

Collective decision in theatre for development is very important if one hopes to achieve success through it. It is important for the facilitators to understand this in order to avoid the misinterpretation that they are superior to the people. This is what informs the warning by Moitra (1989) that

We are not empty pitchers  
We have a mind of our own  
We can reason out things;  
Believe it or not,  
We also have dignity.  
Let those who will teach us remember this.

In view of the significance of this campaign, the sponsoring NGO, Triple 'A' DS, decided to adopt the combination of the homestead and migratory methods, as earlier described.

### **Preparations**

Although many TFD specialists do not advocate the use of set and lighting in dramatic presentations, especially in the rural areas, this writer is of the strong opinion that these should be employed where

possible and affordable. Not only does this give the play more aesthetic appeal, it also aids the understanding of the drama. Thus, performing on a raised platform will give the audience a better view of the action. To this end, a 4 x 8 x 16 collapsible stage was constructed with two four-foot step units, and a white backdrop as the cyclorama to complete the proscenium setting.

In view of the fact that the performances were to take place in the evenings when students, farmers, market women and other traders would have returned home, it became mandatory that the stage be lit. Therefore, a lighting stand, capable of carrying four fresnel lanterns was acquired along with the lanterns and a 6.5 kva generator for constant power supply. Realising that a nine-day performance in an open air theatre cannot be voice friendly, four big loudspeakers with three multi-directional microphones were acquired to prevent actors from losing their voices before the end of the project. Having thoroughly rehearsed the play for about four weeks, the twelve-man cast and crew finally departed Ibadan for Saki East local government on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 2006, to kickstart the performances, which lasted from 8<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2006.

### **The Performances**

As earlier disclosed, there were nine performances altogether in each of the nine selected villages from the three local government areas chosen for the enlightenment campaign. These were spread over ten consecutive days, with one day of rest after six days of performances. The diary of the campaign runs as follows:

#### **Day One: Ago-Amodu**

Having arrived the previous night, the stage materials were offloaded at the venue of the performance which was the biggest motor park in the town. On the day of the performance, the technical crew was there early to construct the stage, rig and focus the light and conduct a proper sound check on the sound equipment. Also, some members of cast went around the town with a public address system reminding the people about the play. Probably because it was the first performance, the stage was not ready until about 7.20 p.m. However, it is pertinent to remark that the members of the audience waited patiently for all that.



The performances eventually started by 7.50 p.m. with the local dramatists (who had been trained earlier by the facilitators from Triple 'A' DS). This was followed by the presentation brought by the visitors to complement that of the local dramatists. After both performances, one could say that the two methods of TFD, the inside-out approach and the outside-in approach, were effectively used in communicating the vital message. A post-performance discussion followed, during which questions based on causes, effects, management and other issues of HIV/AIDS were satisfactorily answered.

#### Day Two: Oje-Owode

The distance between Ago-Amodu and Oje-Owode is about 26 kilometres. Having dismantled the stage the night before, the technical crew moved out early to transport the set to the primary school playing field, which was the venue of the performance. Not wanting the previous day's delay to reoccur, all members of cast joined the crew (who also happened to be actors) in the construction of the stage. By this act, the stage was completed early and by 7 p.m. both light and sound were ready for use. The performances then started with the trained local dramatists performing first, followed by the presentation brought by the Triple 'A' DS actors. Again questions were raised by the audience, and further light was shed on the issue of HIV/AIDS.

#### Day Three: Sepeteri

Sepeteri is about 18 kilometres from Oje-Owode. Due to the proximity between the two towns, the transportation of the stage materials was not too hectic. The stage was also more rapidly constructed as it was ready by 2 p.m. which gave enough time for the artists to rest and have a line rehearsal. By 6 p.m. they were at the venue, ready for the performance, which turned out to be slightly different from the first two, in that the local musicians, who had been earlier trained, sang on HIV/AIDS to the delight of the audience. They were later joined by a lady singer known as Mama Praise. They were allowed to perform for 20 minutes each before the local dramatists took the stage. At the end of their performance, Triple 'A' DS actors then performed as usual, followed by the post-performance discussion which proved quite enlightening.

#### Day Four: Ikoyi-Ile

The performance at Sepeteri brought to an end the performances scheduled for Saki-East local government. The next destination was Oriire local government in Ogbomoso area of Oyo State. The distance between Sepeteri and Ikoyi-Ile is about 320 kilometres. Leaving Sepeteri a bit late due to transportation problem, we arrived Ikoyi-Ile around 5 p.m. and went to the venue of the performance which was the town hall, this time around. The construction of the stage, the rigging and focusing of the lights, as well as the checking of the sound system did not finish until about 6.30 p.m. By the time the local musicians – ‘Tu Pac’ from Ikoyi and ‘Professor’ from Tewure – finished their performances, it was past 9 p.m. The local dramatists then took the stage before the actors of Triple ‘A’DS rounded off the action for the night. In spite of being fagged out from the long journey, the actors did well to the delight of the audience, who took active part in the discussion that followed.

#### Day Five: Tewure

The distance between Ikoyi-Ile and Tewure is about seven kilometres. Arriving at Tewure early, all technical preparations were ready by 5 p.m., and the performance started with the local artists’ presentation. Then the Triple ‘A’DS actors mounted the stage for what turned out to be an inconclusive performance. A sudden heavy sandstorm that made the audience members run for safety in anticipation of a heavy downpour brought the performance to an abrupt end, before the last scene could be completed. Consequently, the members of the audience were also denied the opportunity of asking questions since there was no post-performance discussion.

#### Day Six: Ahoro Dada

Although Tewure and Ahoro Dada fall within the same local government area, they are quite far from each other, at least fifty kilometres apart. By the time we disembarked at Ahoro Dada, our complexion had turned brownish because of the extremely dusty and bumpy road. However, our hospitable reception by the Baale (Chief) and his subjects, made up for the ordeal of the journey, and lifted our spirits. Soon, all the technical preparations had been completed. The usual order was followed: local artists first, followed by those of



Triple 'A'DS, which was so thoroughly enjoyed that the Baale gave money to the actors in appreciation. The post-performance discussion was also successful.

#### Day Seven: Rest Day

Having performed for six consecutive days, this seventh day was set aside as a day of rest before proceeding to the last three performances in the third local government area. The day was also used to take a critical look at the previous performances, with a view to plugging all loopholes that were discovered.

#### Day Eight: Eruwa Town

The performance at Ahoro Dada had brought to an end the performances scheduled for Oriire local government. The distance between Ogbomoso and Eruwa is about 220 kilometres. We arrived Eruwa around 5 p.m. and proceeded to the town hall, venue of the performances. By 6.30 p.m. the technical preparations were over and the local musicians were ready to perform. They are Ola Mike, a *juju* musician from Eruwa town, Elebolo, a *fuji* musician from New Eruwa, and Gelede, from Lanlate. It is worth commenting that, of all the local musicians who had been performing, it was this group that really focused their lyrics on issues of HIV/AIDS. After their performances, the trained local artists performed, followed by that of Triple 'A'DS.

#### Day Nine: New Eruwa

The venue of the performance at New Eruwa was the motor park which was about five kilometres from the Town Hall. In fact, the technical work did not commence until 3 p.m., and by 5 p.m. we were through, and merely waiting for the arrival of the audience. The performance eventually started at 7 p.m. with the trained local dramatists performing before the Triple 'A'DS artists. As with the previous performances, much light was shed on the grey areas of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

#### Day Ten: Lanlate

The journey to Lanlate, from New Eruwa, is about 7 kilometres. We arrived at the motor park, the venue of the performances, early and in very high spirits, considering that this was going to be the last

performance. The technical preparations had been completed by 6 p.m., and by 7 p.m., the performance started in earnest. After the presentation by the trained local artists, Triple 'A'DS actors also performed, at the end of which, questions were entertained from the audience members. One interesting question asked by a man who was about 64 years in age is worth recollecting. Speaking in the local language (Yoruba), he asked: '*Se e ni ki a ma do eniyan mo bayi ni o?*' meaning, 'Are you now saying we should no longer have sexual intercourse?', a question that sent the audience reeling with laughter. It was a good question, nevertheless, and it provided opportunity for further clarification on safe sexual habits in relation to the disease. This performance brought down the curtain on the nine-day rural drama enlightenment campaign programme, embarked upon by the Triple 'A'DS non-governmental organisation.

### **Observations, Recommendations and Conclusion**

The use of Tfd has once again brought to the fore the importance of theatre, not only as a medium of information dissemination, but also as a vehicle of enter-educating the masses, especially the rural dwellers, most of whom are not only illiterate, but do not have the means of acquiring a transistor radio. By and large, it is this writer's candid opinion that the project undertaken by Triple 'A'DS was a positive step in the right direction. The contributions to the post-performance discussions were quite illuminating. It was quite clear that many people were still ignorant about the nature of the disease, while some regarded it as merely the sickness of rich people. This play went a very long way to shed light on the various misconceptions about the disease.

Contrary to the opinion of some Tfd scholars that the use of constructed stage should be de-emphasized, its use actually contributed to the success of this particular project, as it gave better aesthetic view to the audience, and boosted the performance of the actors. The audience could still see the action clearly from any part of the auditorium. As a dusk performance, the use of lighting was inevitable, and this was provided by the four fresnel lanterns and a dimmer board procured for the play. This provided both illumination and aesthetic effect, through the manipulation of the dimmer board.



Also, the use of loudspeakers and microphones was justified as the audience did not need to crowd on the stage to hear the dialogue, with the speakers strategically placed around the auditorium. This also prevented the actors from having to shout themselves hoarse and strain their voices in the process.

However, even though the performances were, on the whole, successful, they did not go without some concomitant problems and challenges. By the time the performances got to the end, most of the collapsible four-foot risers were in a state of disrepair. This was largely due to the fact that, being made of planks, they could not withstand the rigours of loading and offloading, hammering and dismantling on a daily basis. In future, risers made of metal would serve better. The heavy sandstorm, which disrupted the production at Tewure, on the fifth day of performance, also affected the lanterns. In fact, the sandstorm lifted the lighting stand and destroyed three lamps in the process. It took the technical director an emergency journey to Lagos (a distance of about 270 kilometres) before a replacement could be got.

On the whole, it was a worthwhile effort, considering the positive impact it had on the lives of the people concerned, who were empowered to identify their problems and take necessary measures to solve them. One of the goals of the Tfd is to encourage active participation of the people in addressing issues affecting them as a community. This will lead to further development, which, according to Adelugba (2004) 'has to be engineered and sustained.' Stressing the importance of keeping the theatre group focused for further development and upliftment of the community, Bamidele (2004) warns against resorting to performing at naming ceremonies and other trivial social functions, which could lead to a possible loss of focus.

It is hereby recommended that more support be given to theatre practitioners to enable them achieve more in their efforts to develop the individual communities and the nation as a whole. In this regard, the government, international donors and philanthropists, need to pull their resources together to

achieve a common goal. Post-production visits are necessary to complete the TFD process and assess its impact. This, of course, implies additional funding, which, in the case of this particular project, would be substantial, considering the distances that had to be covered.

Conclusively, everybody involved in the project benefited, one way or the other. The rural dwellers involved became more enlightened about the scourge of HIV/AIDS; the trained local dramatists gained a lot of artistic expertise and revealed the potential talents in them; while the non-governmental agency that undertook the project, the Triple AIDS, with the financial support of the World Bank, derived psychological satisfaction from the successful completion of a worthwhile community project.

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