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Cultural Engineering and Development

By David Kerr

Abstract

Development institutions have in recent years realised the importance of indigenous culture as an important vehicle for communication. This has led to the creation of programmes in which local cultural forms have been "recruited" as the communication process for "selling" development strategies. The paper draws upon the author's experiences of theatre for primary health mobilisation and awareness in rural Malawi. The advantage of performing arts as a medium for development communication are that: 1) they provide a more entertaining form than monologous media, 2) they can easily use local languages and cultural forms such as songs and dances, 3) they encourage participation and debate in the audiences. The main disadvantage is that such instrumental use of the performing arts can lead to a commodification of culture which is manifested in: 1) the professionalisation of cultural workers in a context which is not normally commercial, 2) the reification and trivialisation of community culture through the use of traditional external forms to convey messages totally at variance with their original context. Such cultural engineering, at its most insensitive can constitute a form of developmental imperialism which erodes rather than supports the cultural cement binding local communities. Suggested solutions demand agents' wide-ranging consultations, not only with development minded stake-holders, but also with those who possess cultural skills and interests.

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Techniques et Développement Culturel

Par David Kerr

Résumé

Les institutions de développement viennent de reconnaître l'importance de la culture dans la communication. Cela mène à la conception des programmes qui tiennent compte des aspects culturels, afin de rendre les stratégies de développement plus acceptables, aux communautés concernées.

Kerr s'inspire de son expérience dans les régions rurales du Malawi, où on s'est servi des pièces de théâtre, pour sensibiliser les communautés aux exigences fondamentales de la santé. A son avis, cette stratégie présente des avantages incontestables: 1) Elle se distingue des autres dans la mesure où elle permet d'apprendre tout en s'amusant, 2) On peut facilement y intégrer les langues locales et certains aspects culturels telles que les chansons et les dances, 3) Cela encourage la participation de l'audience aux débats.

L'inconvénient majeur de cette stratégie c'est que ça peut conduire à la modification de la culture concernée. Le changement de celle-ci se manifesterait: 1) Dans la professionnalisation des acteurs culturels, un aspect qui ne devrait pas se commercialiser, 2) La ridiculisation de la culture de référence, en essayant de faire véhiculer des messages, par celle-ci, qui s'accommodent mal aux réalités culturelles. De ce fait, l'abus des techniques culturelles peut constituer un impérialisme en développement, si on ne fait pas les consultations nécessaires avec tous les partenaires qui s'y impliquent.

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This paper examines some of the problems associated with the use of indigenous cultural forms and institutions for instrumental purposes within programmes of social engineering. I also attempt a brief examination of approaches which might address those problems.

The reasons why both Government and NGO change agencies have turned to indigenous culture are well-known. They derive largely from the failure of modernisation development models to provide economic "lift-off" for underdeveloped nations during the 1960s and 1970s. Numerous studies have condemned such development schemes for attempting to impose pre-packaged western models of development on alien cultures (Kerr, 1993 pp.55-56).

Since the 1970s alternative development models have emerged emphasising the indigenous element in culture, society and the economic base. Phrases such as "participation" "bottom-up" and conscientisation have become the shibboleths of such theoretical approaches. Cultural forms including songs, proverbs, dances, drama and stories are seen to play a crucial role in that they allow for communication to take place between the change agents and the "grass roots" of society.

In the crudest theories the cultural forms provide attractive entertainment which can sugar the didactic pill of the developmental message. In more sophisticated models, cultural forms provide communication channels by which subaltern communities are able to negotiate change with those institutions attempting to bring about innovations in society. There is no need for me to describe these models and the attempts to implement them, since the field has been quite thoroughly covered, especially for the medium of theatre (see Mda, 1993 and Kerr 1995:149-171).

Nor is it necessary for me to describe at length my own experiences with various projects to use drama for developmental purposes, as I have also recounted those experiences elsewhere

(Kerr 1989, 1991). Instead, I wish to move immediately to an analysis (partly arising from my own mistakes) of some major problems which I have been able to identify in the instrumental uses of indigenous cultural forms.

The major cause of problems in the use of culture as a "tool" for developmental purposes lies in the relationship between the indigenous community which supplies the forms of the culture and those agents (variously called "facilitators", "animateurs" and "catalysts") who attempt to mobilize cultural forms for developmental purposes. Much of the history of cultural mobilization can be interpreted as that of theorists and activists trying to provide increasingly more sophisticated (or, put another way, less exploitative) models for the relationship between change agents and communities.

I have described elsewhere how Zambian "theatre for development" projects with which I was involved in the 1970s failed to live up to their revolutionary aims (Kerr and Chifunyise, 1984). When I first became involved with "theatre for development" work in Zambia during the mid-1970s, the teams of University animateurs of which I was a part, had a simplistic view that we merely needed to study the cultural forms of rural communities, and create plays containing a pre-packaged radical social message performed in the local language, as a consequence of which, the communities to which we took the plays would be wonderfully uplifted and transformed. Such a model of cultural engineering is still surprisingly common.

These theatre campaigns, despite some genuine achievements, did not, of course, radically transform society. To our dismay, we found that the "revolutionary" messages of our plays were coopted local community leaders (such as District Commissioners, village chiefs and councillors) as a way of integrating the plays into the dominant ideology which supported local power structures. In the late 1970s and early 1980s much debate among cultural activists centred on this issue, and a

series of more flexible models emerged which attempted to create cultural practices capable of empowering the communities themselves. The emphasis moved away from taking pre-packaged cultural forms to the people, and towards a model of catalysts helping communities revitalise their own cultural forms, in order to help them understand, negotiate and promote social innovation and change.

Even with this more sophisticated model, however, the results of participatory cultural projects have not always successfully empowered local communities. This was a lesson I learned in the late 1980s in the Liwonde District of Malawi, working on a project to use participatory theatre for the purpose of promoting Primary Health Care. The facilitators were a combination of University lecturers and students and professional PHC communicators, and the whole project was funded by the German agency, GTZ.

The Liwonde project was certainly a big improvement on my earlier Zambian experience. The facilitators did not pre-package any cultural forms, but helped local communities to establish Village Health Committees which used their own songs and dramatic sketches to analyse Primary Health Care strategies. The total Primary Health Care campaign (targetting water-borne diseases), did indeed create identifiable improvements in the lives of communities, and the cultural interventions made a significant contribution to them (Kalipeni and Kamlongera, 1987: 4-5).

There were some disappointments, however. I was expecting that once the Village Health Committees established their own cultural troupes, they would develop a strongly radical voice of opposition to local political and economic elites - that the PHC mobilisation campaigns would lead to movements of wider community conscientization. This did not happen. There were occasions when local communities used song and drama to attack local elites. In one incident, for example, embarrassing

revelations (through a community play) of an Area Health Committee's corrupt reselling of medicines intended for Village Health Committees led to the en masse resignation of the Area Health Committee, and the election of a new committee, more trusted by the community. Such incidents, however, only took place when there was a strong showing of external facilitators (as witnesses). When the VHC groups performed songs and plays in their own communities, they tended to recreate the stereotypes of political or developmental chauvinism.

What I was underestimating was the power of state institutions to co-opt radical movements in order to divert their potential for opposition. The Malawi Congress Party (in power at that time), with representatives and spies in every village, was perfectly capable, at least in the short run, of defusing any critical energy generated by the Primary Health Care movement.

Another problem associated with such campaigns of participatory cultural mobilisation is the nature of the facilitating agencies. Many of the agencies which are promoting change in Africa are NGOs which have international funding, and, in some cases, externally based administrations. In this sense change agencies are part of the rapidly expanding inter-national poverty industry.

Since the early 1980s, after the evident failure of Government-centered development policies to provide economic lift-off for African nations, (and thereby repay their loans to private and public transnational lending institutions) those states have become the objects of ever closer fiscal control by international funding agencies such as the IMF.

At the same time international aid agencies have linked themselves to African communities through a complex network of transnational and local NGOs. Many of these NGOs have adopted policies of privatisation in the poverty industry. That is, funding agencies have encouraged the professionalisation of development cadres, through training in entrepreneurial man-

agement techniques. Typically, this involves a senior NGO representative, who runs his/her NGO as an African franchise of an international corporation, sub-contracting various tasks out to middle and lower level local consultants or development workers.

That system seriously affects programmes of cultural mobilisation. Although cultural workers may start out as idealistic promoters of cultural indigenisation and social improvement, as soon as their effectiveness as facilitators is linked to the possibilities of financial reward, the honest relationship between facilitator and community becomes gradually traduced. The facilitator is under pressure to "come up with the goods" to fulfil his/her contract.

I have felt this temptation in Malawi, where, as an academic working on a local salary spectacularly below international standards, I felt the strong seductive power of NGO cultural consultancies. Lower down the donor chain, my students were glad to accept small payments for vacation cultural mediation work, in order to pay for IMF-imposed, cost-recovery student loans. However innocent such payments may be, there is always a temptation for facilitators to become mercenaries in the process of cultural mediation.

The cash nexus is also capable of affecting the communities themselves. Participants selected for workshops (even if the only reward is free food and the excitement of a visit to town), are liable to become objects of envy in the rest of the community, and their interpretation of the community's culture may become skewed by a desire to project those aspects of culture which the donors expect.

Material incentives can affect a community's cultural forms in subtle ways. Facilitators are under pressure to mobilize the communities to transform their culture along lines which will promote the NGO's specific sectoral interests. Thus, indigenous wedding or initiation songs may have their words changed (and,

in the process, usually simplified) to exhort fellow members of the community to dig pit latrines or use condoms (Kerr 1994:24-28)

I am not saying that oral culture always remains unchanged, but that if a song, for example, is to remain part of a community's culture, changes need to develop organically within the community itself. Heavy-handed, tendentious interventions by external change agents do not constitute a revival of indigenous culture but a form of reification which is tantamount to developmental imperialism.

The social (not to say aesthetic) cost of such aggression can be high. When a community feels itself exposed to cultural invasion, there are strong temptations for it to over-valorize the "traditional", by lapsing into forms of cultural fundamentalism ("muti", traditional weapons, witch-hunting etc). These act as a debilitating, but understandable, psychic defence against perceived assaults from an alien culture.

I would like to conclude this brief and perhaps rather gloomy assessment by looking at some possible ways to counteract the excesses of cultural engineering.

I have perhaps overstated my case against Government and NGO interventions into community cultural processes. Clearly, Government and NGO agencies are, at present, a fact of life. I believe, however, that an awareness of the dangers I have outlined can lead to a greater sensitivity in the all-important relationship between facilitator and community.

The tendency in the past, whether he/she was based in a government department, an academic institution or an NGO, has been for the facilitator, owing to his/her class position, to assume, wittingly or unwittingly, a position of superior knowledge (Eyoh 1984). If campaigns of cultural revitalisation are to be linked to effective programmes of community renewal, they must take place in a relatively egalitarian context. That implies a radical rethinking of the way facilitators are trained, so that they are able to conduct cultural campaigns not from a position

of superiority, but in an atmosphere of mutual cultural exchange. For this purpose, facilitators not only need the skills of social analysis and communication, but also those of cultural analysis and aesthetic appreciation.

In addition, facilitators have to realise that culture is vital and organic; it cannot be reduced to a reified expression of a specific message. Professional facilitators have to cultivate an attitude of humility, acknowledging the limitations of their own inputs.

At present, when sectoral agencies explore the potential of indigenous culture, they tend to ghettoize the problems of underdevelopment. Facilitators need to be aware that the problems of literacy, primary health care, agriculture, crime, AIDS, drugs and so on are not discrete; they are all connected, not only to each other, but also to social stratification at the community level, and ultimately, even to fiscal imperialism at an international level. If communities are to make sense of their under-development, their culture cannot be reduced to that of a vehicle for simplistic sectoral campaigns. Communities must retain or develop cultural forms which contain the complexity required to identify linkages between very different areas of human activity.

Ultimately, the best solution to the problems I have raised is for cultural mobilisation to be taken out of the hands of mediating institutions and to be grasped by strong civic organisations created by the communities themselves. In that way the dangers of facilitators promoting financial or class-based distortions, sectoral reifications and neo-imperialist interventions would be much reduced. Indigenous culture would be in less danger of assaults by external agents, and might also be less tempted by atavistic forms of ethnic or religious fundamentalism. Culture would be available to communities to negotiate change from a standpoint of social confidence and cohesion.

The challenge is, that at present in Southern Africa, existing

civic organisations (such as trade unions, credit cooperatives, and community development clubs) are not very interested in cultural mobilisation. Strategies are required to build the cultural capacity of civic organisations so that they can appropriate the cultural mobilisation functions which have hitherto been abrogated by government agencies, academic institutions and NGOs.

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