When Social Work Meets Theatre in Tanzania

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It seems like I have always been curious about people, places, and cultures. I remember growing up in New York with its diversity of peoples, cultures, foods, and communities. For me, at that time, I would look at the people wondering why they came to New York. Why would they leave India, the Caribbean, Africa, and other places on this earth to be in there? Of course, I knew little about the rest of the world, however, I was curious, and took every opportunity to speak with others about their cultures, native lands, and their likes or dislikes for life in the Big Apple. It was unimaginable that I might someday get an intimate view of life anywhere except New York.

Yet, the day did come after college and graduate school. I moved to the US Virgin Islands. From there I developed an even greater curiosity about other cultures because there were so many people from different island cultures living together in harmony. I worked in a mental health clinic where the manifestation of mental illness through diverse cultures was fascinating. The idea that various cultures celebrated differently, had different illnesses, which had to be treated with their cultures in mind encouraged me to study cultural differences. As an American social worker, I felt at a disadvantage because I had been educated as a social worker with very little insight into social ills impacting different cultures. I decided I needed to get better educated about culture, social development, and worlds other than the one in which I lived.

Turning the Corner of Cultural Awareness

Turning the international social work corner for me came during PhD studies. I had been fortunate to work as a social work in the Caribbean for several years, but had never taken any coursework pertaining to cultural diversity. I realised that I wanted and needed more in-depth insights into other worlds. The School of International Affairs was the telescope I needed to further expand my global knowledge and sensitivity. The experience was just elevating, and helped me to better understand social welfare from a global perspective.

I was able to participate in a summer internship with the Agency for International Development in South Africa in addition to two summer programmes in Tanzania. The latter opportunity came through Brown University. However, the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) had no social work programme, yet, there was the Institute of Social Work in Dar es Salaam. At that time in 2005, the Institute was transitioning into a four-year bachelor programme. Social work as a profession continues to grow, and although, degree social work programmes are abundant in the United States, it was not the case in Africa. However, there are now some schools that offer diploma and certificate programs, Tanzania is one of them. My most memorable insights come from my education in addressing social problems using Theatre for Development (TFD) as an intervention to ol.

Figure 1: The picture above shows a display for community theatre production in Dodoma, Tanzania. Such posters were developed by the actors involved in the production. They are used to encourage community members to come out and participate. Many people come to see the production practice. They frequently provide input by demonstrating how problem behaviours impacts the community, participate in the production as actors, as well as act out possible solutions in collaboration with university faculty and students.

Village Life

During my visits to Tanzania I visited several villages in preparation for research projects utilising TFD techniques. Many of the villages were very similar. Most had unpaved roads, no identifying signs, there were some mud-walled homes with grass-thatched roofs, and others with some concrete blocks. Only two village homes were fully furnished, equipped with flushing toilets or electrical lighting. However, there were a few well-off administrators. They had more traditional homes with many familiar Western amenities. Water was supplied from communal wells or distant springs.

Figure 2: The author discusses the day's activities with students and others participating in theatre for development. Notice the unpaved road in the background. There are no directional signs for streets or homes.

I remember holes dug deep into the sands for underground water carried in large pails on the heads of village women. Some lighting via gas piped into the homes from dong pits. The people were frequently poor, unemployed, uneducated but friendly and welcoming. Each home visited provided homemade stools for guest to use as we sat outside and shared information about who we were. They were willing to share information about their lifestyle, culture, and family or village history. There was no public transportation in the villages and only one shop was observed. People walked most places. Food was sparse; however, frequently there were fruit trees. I saw orange and soursop trees most frequently. Residents were generous and shared. Most often meetings were held with the women of the village; however, that depended on the time of day because nearing the evening men and children arrived—men from what work they could find and children from schools on foot. Often the children came home near dark. During these village visits there were times to speak with the women about the quality of their lives, families, relationships, and interests. Men were also interviewed by male students when the group visited the village during the late afternoon hours.

Figure 3: The lady in the green blouse worked with the university group all summer. Her name is Patience. Our community support guide assists in collecting water. The water is sand filled from a well. It was used to assist in repairing the home of an elderly lady. The water infused sand was mixed with dirt to form a mixture used to patch portions of a house that had fallen apart. She helped us to identify community concerns, locate community residents, as well as build walls for homes when needed.

My interests in the lives of village women began early during my travels to Tanzania. I remember prior to one of my first visits I prepared a questionnaire. I thought I would gather information about the lives of persons with whom I would speak. I soon learned that my questions had little to do with the lives of persons I interviewed. I had limited understanding of village life and culture. Therefore, I put my questionnaire away, closed my mouth, and paid attention to what I saw happening. I also listened to what people were saying as they went about their lives; they got to know me, and I them.

Village Ladies

I remember speaking with an older lady, she did not remember her age, and asking her about her life. She told me, through a student interpreter, all she did, pointing to her husband in another small home, was to take care of her husband. As we sat in her partially built thatched home, I asked about her life and ambitions. I was told that she always wanted to progress, to move forward, and more but that had not been possible. I was curious about other women feeling something similar, so I asked if she knew other women who felt the same. She told me yes but few women spoke about their ambitions. As I sat with her in her shanty, I noticed that she had wild rice spread out on a mat in front of her husband's shanty. I explained that the rice was a delicacy in the United States. I said that she could make some money selling it to some people I know. We had a good laugh as I moved on.

Figure 4: This picture represents a typical home when complete. Mother and daughter clearing the outside of the home; however, the inside of these homes are sparsely furnished with no inside plumbing, refrigeration or electricity.

I got to know other women in Mlonganzila and Mtumba villages. Several were Muslims who did farming during the day. I became particularly close to one Muslim family. The wives of Bakari Chobo were Rehemia and Thombe. Between them there were three children. They were very nice to me. Their husband Bakari gave me permission to speak to them about his treatment of them. He also admonished me to spell his name properly whenever I wrote about him. I accepted his offer as I wondered why I needed his permission; I was still learning about the culture, family and customs.

Figure 5: I am enjoying a conversation with this village resident. Through a law school translator she told me about her life, her dreams of a better life for herself, and the facts of village life. She spends her days taking care of her husband, and wishing for a better life. She had no idea when her house would be finished because there was no money to pay for anyone to assist. Her husband had become disillusioned with the project. His residence was nearby and complete with walls for shelter.

Rehemia and Thombe verified that their husband did not beat them. He also helped them with other chores, as well as using his bike to carry water from the stream. Otherwise, they would have to carry a five gallon bucket on their heads as they carried another by its handle. During another visit to the village, one wife cut wood for the fire, carrying it on her head, as the other cooked. This family was a little better off because Bakari had land, a small farm, and a relatively large compound with rooms for each wife, as well as an outdoor toilet.

Figure 6: Bakari Chobo came to say goodbye on the day I was to travel back to the US. We spoke of the visit, what I had learned about him and his family. He told me that he had once lived in the city but preferred the village for his two wives. He is of the Muslim faith and feels he has better control of his life and relationships in the village. He sews and grows much of his own food.

It was in this village that I had my first chance to chat with women in a group. Women and men did not meet together in Muslim groups. The women met with me in a corner of the village centre. We sat on a fallen tree and spoke about various aspects of village life. The men met with a male student of the university group under a shade tree. Later, I learned a more about the stratification system in the village while speaking with a non-Muslim resident.

Figure 7: Mr. Msonganzila, village resident, with Dr. Terri Moore-Brown Department Chair Social Work Fayetteville State University during one of the many meeting held with students to review project objectives each week.

Mr. Msonganzila had played a very important part in helping our group understand some of the social dynamics of village life. He was an educated man, worked at the UDSM in agriculture, and lived on the opposite side of the village. He felt that Bakari Chobo and family would have a better life if he were not a famer, spoke English, and lived on the opposite side of the road so, his children could interact with English speakers.

For some reason, I assumed the group of women would be very similar in interests, as friends, supporters, and more. I think this was because of my inexperience somehow thinking that relationships would be different. They were not a cohesive group. They did not work together on any communal efforts to earn money or other projects to better their lives. When I identified money-making projects, such as joint mat-making, which they did for themselves, they had not thought of any such joint projects.

When we spoke about their farming efforts, the ladies told stories of sexual abuse by nearby soldiers. The soldiers were stationed in proximity to the village.

This particular ward of Mnlonganzila village had about 200 residents with an average income of $100.00 a year. They described sexual abuse by soldiers. Frequently, soldiers would surprise the women, as they worked on their farmland away from the village centre. Descriptions were of several types. One was soldiers forcing sexual favours when they were alone and defenceless during farming activities. Sometimes the officers would ask for food; sometimes even offering chickens for sexual favours. During other times a soldier would actually come into the village and forced a lady to come with him. This was done when the men were away from the village; husbands had never been informed. I asked why they had not spoken about this with their husbands. I was told that they would not be believed by the spouses, and would be accused of willingly co-operating. Our TFD research was supposed to identify and address, using village residents and students as actors, problems within the community. However, this situation was a common traumatic experience which could not be shared with the community. The military was planning to take over parts of the village land without compensation. In addition, the Muhimbili hospital planned an expansion in the area for which land owners might receive compensation. Some of the village concerns were beyond the scope of our short-term project.

On another day, we visited the village to find that someone had. We had to cancel our activities for the day, and visit the family. We took up a collection for the family. During such a time the women of the family stayed in the house for three days as a part of the mourning ritual. Others visited, cooked, and supported the grieving family. However, women were not allowed to attend the burial, for cultural and religious reasons, even though it was a female being buried. The men carried the casket and officiated over the burial.

Young Females

Children of the Village were cheerful and played with one of our group most of the time. We were told stories of female students suffering sexual abuse from male instructors. Tanzania also has children's theatre projects to help identify, and address problems of the school system. There is an annual children's theatre conference every year in July. Children's theatre projects help students learn how to manage educational, social and economic issues

as they relate to students of all ages. School-girls frequently get pregnant. This happened to the family that I was closest to. This young lady was not fifteen years old when she was a mother. She lived for a while with the parents of the young man who impregnated her; however, after she became pregnant again she was returned to her father's home. She had refused to return to school after the first birth.

Figure 8: Sisters sit together and chat as one about 14 years old (right) cares for her young son. She went to live with the baby's father but his family sent her back to her people when she became pregnant with a second child.

Divorced Women

On another occasion, I spent some time speaking with a divorced Arab woman. She ran a small shop in the village to support her mother, and children. We discussed care for her children and that the village had no day-care services. As we spoke my thoughts were on the lack of services for average village needs. However, then I remembered a small dry goods shop run by the wife of a gentleman who worked in the Maintenance department at the university. As we continued talking we were approached by an elderly woman. She asked for money to assist her with a trip back to Dodoma. Apparently she had come to Mnlonganzila village from Dodoma, a six hour trip, to live with her son. Yet, her son fell ill and was hospitalised. She had no means of support or return. She felt that family in Dodoma would assist her if she returned.

Utumba

Fifteen miles outside Dodoma, the capital, is a village named Utumba. The women there impressed me as being more progressive than other women I'd met; I thought perhaps it was because they were nearer an urban area. In any case, some women in Utumba had formed a co-operative of twenty-five with the assistance of a British non-governmental organisation (NGO). They got assistance in obtaining gas light for homes using cow dong and water. The gas was piped into the houses lighting them utilizing small torches attached to the walls.

Those women were of the GoGo ethnic group. I was told they were known for their talents in drumming, and acapella style of singing. I also learned that they are distant cousins to the Maasai and have some of the same customs. One of these customs is that the male married GoGo are permitted to have sexual relationships with women outside their marriage.

The GoGo ladies were ambitious. They worked on some group projects, such as pottery-making. Clay posts were made in various yards. The clay is fired over burning wood instead of a kiln. Homes were made of brick but seldom had furnishings. The women of this village managed to get a well and pump so the village could have water. However, they had not had water in years because they, in deference to the males of the village to my thinking, turned the management over to the male village leadership. After which, the money for the oil needed to make the pump work disappeared. They no longer trusted the leadership or designated pump manager. The peculiarity surrounding this water management system seemed a mix of power, politics, and superstition.

Figure 9: Community discussion on HIV/AIDS in the community; some of the group members had been diagnosed positive with women saying that they had been infected by their husbands.

The manager had six fingers on one hand. Villagers believed he was a very powerful man. In addition, he was married to the daughter of a very powerful

figure and spiritual leader. Although the leader had passed away, in the minds of the villagers he was still powerful and most present spiritually under the African traditional belief system. Therefore, although most of the village residents said they were of the Anglican faith, they still had a fundamental belief in traditional spiritual powers.

The practice of female circumcision still persisted in secret although against the law in Tanzania. I was told by a good friend in the village that girls were taken into the bush to be circumcised in secret. When discussing the practice with a local Anglican priest, he stressed that the locals felt they were really doing something good for their girls. He also stressed that we in the West had made a mistake by naming it wrongly (as female genital mutilation [FGM], for example), and making so much fuss over it instead of handling it in a more subdued manner.

Figure 10: HIV diagnosis and treatment centre; worker explains medication clients take and how they work to limit symptoms.

In my opinion, there was a kind of quiet world of women maybe a shadow world or underground of sorts. I imagined this to be the case in many places where women are powerless, economically and educationally disadvantaged. Women are held hostage by their femaleness. I approached the subject of the role and rights of women with the male school principle of Mtumba village. He told me that women have no power in the village and things were not likely to change anytime soon. This was corroborated by a village friend who spoke English. Her husband was a retired banker who owned the little shop. He and I spoke freely about village life. She also spoke to me freely about village secrets, such as liaisons, circumcisions, and criminal activity. However, I also noted that she stressed that I was to greet her husband well, and make conversation with him. I felt my attention to him is what encouraged him to see our relationship as a positive instead of a threat. However, many men in the village took the opposite view and not only stopped any interaction with our group. Others forbade their wives from speaking to us.

Figure 11: Programme end picture of the Chobo family, Fayetteville State Department chair (end left) and five MSW students.

As our three-month stint came to close I had many thoughts about what social work meant in the village environment. Once I was walking through Mtumba village with a local professor who headed our team. We saw a woman on the ground near a group of homes. I could not tell if she was ill, so I waited for the professor to say something or attempt to inquire. However, he kept walking and so did I. We did not stop to help nor did we inquire from other villagers about her situation; apparently, no one was helping. I thought about the value of her life as we passed her by. I had a series of thoughts as if to sum up my experiences; why had we not stopped? Why had the Anglican clinic for the village closed even though fully equipped still? I thought about the needs of the elderly, the poor, and the sick. The problems were many with few resources. There are people with education and position who want to help but progress is slow, and the battle is uphill against, culture, poverty, politics, and the enormity of the problems.

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