



Theatre-for-Development as Information Panacea for Rural Dwellers in Nigeria during a Pandemic: Lessons from COVID-19

Charles Okwuowulu^{1*}, Osakue Stevenson Omoera², Casmir Onyemuchara³, Ameh Dennis Akoh⁴, Charles Emokpae⁵, Christopher Akpa⁶, Michael Chinda⁷

^{1,3,4,5,6,7}Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

²Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Abstract

The subject of COVID-19 (coronavirus) in Nigeria emerged with various misrepresentations and conspiracy theories, such as the notion of COVID-19 as a forerunner of the Anti-Christ or the commencement of a 'New World Order' occasioned by the 5G network. COVID-19 information in Nigeria was managed by the Presidential Task Force through daily media briefings. This paper examined the PTF's information dissemination structure and its impact on four indigenous communities in south-eastern Nigeria: Ikwo in Ebonyi State, Iva-Valley Forestry Hill Camp 1 in Enugu State, Umualumu Old Road in Imo State, and Ogbagu Obukpa in Enugu State. Tfd was used during lockdown to inform indigenous communities and promote necessary health precautions. The project used Tfd and Brecht's Epic Theatre Theory in 4 Nigerian communities to show how Tfd can complement other media in informing rural residents about COVID-19. Tfd mobilized indigenous communities in southeastern Nigeria to understand Igbo and take COVID-19 precautions despite PTF's robust information dissemination structure. Tfd could have helped the PTF share vital COVID-19 info with rural communities in Nigeria. The Nigerian government should establish a robust infrastructure for raising awareness and combating COVID-19 and other pandemics in rural areas through Tfd.

Keywords: COVID-19, Media space, Epic theatre, Indigenous communities.

Paper type: Research paper

***Corresponding author:** okwuowulu.charles@funai.edu.ng

Received: 12 August 2023; Received in revised form: 29 October 2023; Accepted: 29 October 2023; Available online: 29 October 2023

Cite this document: Okwuowulu, Charles. dkk. (2023). Theatre-for-Development as Information Panacea for Rural Dwellers in Nigeria during a Pandemic: Lessons from COVID-19. *The Journal of Society and Media*, 7(2), 567-592. DOI: 10.26740/jsm.v7n2.p567-592.

Licensed under Creative Commons attribution-noncommercial 4.0 international



INTRODUCTION

Nigeria came slightly late to the internet social media space. Nevertheless, its citizens have come to make social media a way of life. The accessibility and relatively low price of mobile technologies served as a bridge to break the digital divide and open the door for accelerated growth (Forenbacher et al., 2019). Nigeria joined the web world in 1996 with full-time internet access in 1998 (Adomi, 2005, p. 3) after the deregulation of the Nigerian telecommunication system. Before this, telecommunication via fixed line achieved a population penetration of only 0.2% (Forenbacher et al., 2019). It was insufficient to support the nation's prospects of significant representation in the global telecommunications industry. With the ongoing reforms, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) granted licenses for mobile telecommunication operations to MTN Nigeria, ECONET Wireless, and NITEL Plc. in 2001 (Adomi, 2005; Onyeajuwa, 2017). The focus of the telecommunication giants at inception was the provision of mobile telephone service to the populace, leading to the proliferation of the use of mobile phones in the country. They also gave internet access to cybercafé operators whose services were instrumental in bringing the internet closer to the people. Some government initiatives, through its universal service provision fund under the Nigerian Communications Commission for providing ICT access for agrarian dwellers, offered support to some schools to access programs and community television centers (Abdulwahab & Zulkhairi, 2010).

The high point was the development of mobile data by licensed operators, which gave mobile telephone users immediate access to the web. It has helped Nigerians take their voices and visibility to social media. Nigerians have also gained access to educational, awareness, and entertainment opportunities on the World Wide Web, like their counterparts worldwide. The inherent features of the smartphone, photography, video filming, and internet access give ordinary citizens opportunities for innovative action. These activities (indirectly and unintentionally) expose government lapses in areas where development is most needed (Odorige, 2023). The researchers, therefore, draw significant attention to the UNICEF initiative (of which Nigeria was a beneficiary), which aimed at tackling health challenges, including pandemics such as the coronavirus (COVID-19), in developing countries. The initial efforts of this program were top-down radio and television-supported campaigns. The infrastructural challenges of erratic power

supply and poverty levels relating to the affordability of television sets led UNICEF to re-strategize by collaborating with a Nigerian playwright, Jimmy Solanke, who developed the “Facts of Life” (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001, p. 163). How the Nigerian government engaged with the population limited such structured initiatives for communication development, especially with engagement intended to inform rather than communicate (Gumucio-Dagron, 2008).

The challenges of corruption, lack of political will, and the way the government uses traditional means of information instead of communication media to broadcast information on development issues attest to this, especially in development initiatives to which they are not committed (Omoera, 2010a; Odorige, 2023). It is in this context that this paper considers the Presidential Task Force's (PTF's) information dissemination structure and its impact on four indigenous communities in south-eastern Nigeria: Ikwo in Ebonyi State, Iva-Valley Forestry Hill Camp 1 in Enugu State, Umualumu Old Road in Imo State, and Ogbagu Obukpa in Enugu State. It focused on sensitizing indigenous communities and how theatre-for-development (TfD) complemented other media platforms during the lockdown to keep rural dwellers abreast of the situation and take necessary health precautions. In 2020, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) entered into a partnership with the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to control the spread of COVID-19 and put an end to the dissemination of disinformation in Nigeria. Together with UNICEF, the NCDC had started a campaign using the hashtag "Take Responsibility." Messages from the #TakeResponsibility campaign were disseminated to the population of Nigeria via broadcast stations, television stations, short message service (SMS), and new media. The #TakeResponsibility campaign was launched in February 2020, and its primary emphasis was on informing Nigerians about the steps they need to take to protect themselves and others they care about from the pandemic (NCDC, 2020).

During the first phase of the pandemic, the use of SMS on people's mobile phones became rife. The global system for mobile communication (GSM) includes the SMS as one of its components. GSM stands for "Global System for Mobile Communications." It is a digital telephone system that encrypts and compresses data to increase the speed of wireless mobile communication (Project Writers

Nigeria, 2018). The ever-present danger posed by COVID-19 compelled the governments of many countries to formulate responses to the outbreak. One of these strategies was implemented in Nigeria by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). It is in the form of a mobile phone message campaign (NCDC, 2021). Unfortunately, even though many commentators believe that the NCDC's mobile messaging campaign has the potential to reach a large number of Nigerians, others seem to consider the messages to be upsetting and superfluous (Omoera & Ogoke, 2020). Another issue is that many Nigerians already have preconceived notions about COVID-19, and as a result, they are not willing to believe what the media has to say about the virus (Chukwuorji & Lorfa, 2020). Also, many Nigerians, especially those who live in rural areas, are not literate and don't have access to electricity and other basic amenities (Omoera, Onyemuchara & Okwuowulu, 2020).

Superstitious beliefs have played a significant role in the formation of the majority of Nigerians' conceptions of the origin and etiology of COVID-19. Both in the modern civilization and in the period that came before it, many intellectuals have conducted extensive studies on the relationship between the media and health campaign concerns, as well as the perceptions and attitudes of people about how the media covers such matters. Reuben, Danladi, Saleh and Ejembi (2020) investigated the knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards COVID-19: An epidemiological survey in north-central Nigeria. Nwaoboli and Asemah (2021) conducted a study on the textual analysis of select online media use of fear appeals in promoting COVID-19 vaccination in Nigeria. Ghada and Aseel (2020, p.123) claim that mass manipulation can happen now using advanced technological tools. Previous research identified the tendency of conspiracy theories to arise during crises, such as periods of political instability, economic threats, and public health crises (Omoera & Ogoke, 2020; Omoera, Onyemuchara & Okwuowulu, 2020). This shows how harmful and deadly conspiracy theories can be. In other words, conspiracy theories can destroy social peace and harmony.

The growing need to address media (mis)information not only in Nigeria but in the global space is an issue of concern to various governments and institutions. There has been a persistent outcry on media regulation (social media) because of purported unverifiable news feeds, which create fear and panic in society. People's behaviors when such 'fake news' is broken leave much to be desired as the people take laws into their own hands and endanger the lives of others

(Omoera & Uwalaka, 2023). Following the announcement of the coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria, several 'conspiracy theories' sprang up, ranging from the idea of the non-existence of the novel virus, the 5G network saga, and the 'New World Order' *brouhaha*. Despite confirming a case in Nigeria and the continued reportage of the global pandemic ravaging lives, most Nigerians did not believe in its existence. If those in the cities had these biased feelings, then those in the rural areas must have been at high risk of the dreaded virus since they are wont to accept any information fed from those living in the cities line, hook, and sinker. This informed the motivation for this study. It is because of the need to find out the information the rural communities were getting during this period of the coronavirus pandemic, which calls for adequate measures for safety through sensitization and conscientization. Furthermore, the need to lend voice to the growing scholarly discourses on COVID-19 and new media (mis)information in the global space generally and Nigeria, in particular, will re-awaken the consciousness of believability among the people.

The arts have often found ways to address societal issues by problematizing and finding potent solutions to social ills. The theatre is one of such mediums as a product of humanistic sciences; it is a reliable interlocutor towards addressing societal problems. The COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the world, causing severe acute respiratory syndrome and other health complications. Its first incidence in Nigeria was reported on 27 February 2020 through an Italian citizen who came to Lagos. According to Nigeria's Minister of Health's press briefing of 28 February 2020 while announcing the first case of coronavirus in Nigeria: "We are here today to announce the presence of the first case of coronavirus disease confirmed in Nigeria. We are taking this step to give the clear fact to the public, which we hope you all report accurately, and be one step ahead of rumors, speculations, and fabrications that tend to occupy the space, particularly in social media space at this time." The case is that the Federal Ministry of Health has confirmed a coronavirus disease case in Lagos, Nigeria, known as COVID-19. The case was confirmed on 27 February 2020 and is the first to be reported in Nigeria since the beginning of the outbreak in China (Osagie Ehanire, Minister of Health, press briefing, 28 February 2020)

The above announcement by the Minister of Health indicates that so much is happening in the media space (with particular reference to social media) concerning (mis)information. If not handled effectively, it can underplay the efforts of the government and stakeholders, thereby putting the lives of people at risk. On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, this time a Nigerian citizen who presumably had contact with the Italian citizen. At the height of the health crisis, there were thousands of cases of the virus across the thirty-six states and the federal capital territory, Abuja, Nigeria. As the World Health Organization (WHO) reported an increase in the infected and death toll, the Nigerian government formed the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 for the management of various cases of coronavirus in Nigeria (WHO, 2020). Chaired by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Boss Mustapha, the PTF rolled out various activities towards controlling the spread of the dreaded virus. It also engaged in daily media briefings to sensitize the Nigerian public. In this daily media sensitization process, various protocols that were required to fight and prevent this virus were explored. However, the sensitization processes of the coronavirus might not have been adequately received in rural communities, which largely did not have electronic devices to access the media messages. This fact justifies this research, which embarks on a critical survey of the impact of the media reportage on COVID-19 on rural community dwellers, particularly the aged and the most vulnerable, including children and women.

Nigeria is a country with diverse cultures, languages, and beliefs. It is the most populous black nation on earth, with a population of over 200 million people (Figure 1 is a Map of Nigeria). There are over 500 hundred ethnic groups, with almost equal number of languages spread across the country (Omoera & Bardi, 2020). The Igbo are mainly concentrated in the Igboland states of Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, and Abia. In this study, four rural communities in southeast Nigeria were examined to determine their notion of coronavirus. This choice was engendered by the fact that the rural population in Nigeria accounts for 49.66 percent of the total Nigerian population, according to the National Population Commission [NPC] (2019). Therefore, they constituted a good integer in the population's numerical strength. The researchers interviewed some of the aged population and women and children on their notion of coronavirus (COVID-19). Thereafter, we engaged in dramatic sensitization with them. This was followed by

re-interviewing/discussion with them to reassess their notions and (mis)conceptions of coronavirus. The researchers were mindful of the fact that the lack of impact of development programs brought the realization that development should sync with communication and participation. In this connection, Odorige (2023) claims that the existing errors of misunderstanding the differences between information and communication have reinforced this challenge. Information, a one-way linear form of content delivery, was often misconstrued to mean two-way communication. This misunderstanding of what constitutes communication has been a challenge to development. Development communication scholars have repeatedly drawn the attention of development stakeholders such as civil society groups, development partners, politicians, and governments at all levels to this error. They have put forward theories of development communication to either explain development assistance or to adequately shape development towards transforming communities by changing their behavior. Participatory communication, which identifies local participation as a great catalyst for development, is considered the best form of communication for achieving it. Radio, video, and community theatre, which have interactive elements, are considered media for participatory development because target groups for development can have a say in the process (Omoera, Onyemuchara, and Okwuowulu, 2020).

Figure 1.
Map of Nigeria



Communication and the Media Space in Nigeria

The importance of communication in every aspect of human existence cannot be overemphasized since every aspect of daily existence is dependent on the effective use of communication. It can be inferred that there is not a minute that passes without the use of communication in the daily activities of human beings. Without communication, the world would be a chaotic habitat devoid of civility, law, and order. Communication as a concept encompasses so many forms of information sharing, such as verbal (concerned with spoken words, language, expressions, etc.), non-verbal (concerned with gestures, signs, symbols, icons, etc.), not to mention the technologically assisted forms such as the conventional or mainstream media (which includes the radio, television, film and print [RTF&P]) and new media (which includes social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram, among others; the internet radio, TV, podcast and every other mass media invention facilitated by the invention of the internet). The new media is one of the latest technological advancements in human history, which in no small measure aids the advancement of information dissemination. According to Akhagba:

New media technologies are essentially virtual cultures with modern computer technology, digital data controlled by software programs, and the latest fast-developing communication technology. Most technologies described as “new media” are digital and often have characteristics of being networkable, dense, compressible, interactive, and impartial. (2014, p. 278)

Social media is a key player in the latest technology as far as the new media is concerned. Due to its accessibility and easy operational nature, especially in the area of interaction, it remains a sought-after communication platform in the world today. Social media is a dynamic online medium that has changed the way we work. Similar to traditional media, social media offers opportunities to collect and share news, communicate with audiences, and advocate for change. However, unlike traditional media, social media allows for this to happen on the Web in real-time through highly interactive global or regional social networks (Ehiemua & Omoera, 2016; Usman, 2019, p.1). The rate of information flow in the new media, especially the social media space, is humongous. The 'concocted' news often tended to relay false messages and communication as information was fed to the populace and often created fear and panic in the land. These types of information dissemination,

often tagged 'fake news,' are not only evident in Nigeria but across the length and breadth of the global media space.

In Nigeria, people tend to rely on the news shared on social media platforms more than those in the mainstream media of television and radio. The reason for this is not farfetched. First, it is often associated with epileptic or total lack of power supply, which renders access to conventional media (TV, radio, etc.) almost impossible. The second issue is that people are engrossed in the use of mobile phone technology because of its handiness. Hence, the overdependence on the feed from the different platforms as shared by bloggers and the likes. The information dissemination within social media platforms without rigorous confirmation of facts has contributed to some of the major challenges within various societies in the global space. Global societal issues such as communal hatred and clashes, the escalation of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, and the Boko Haram crises in some parts of Nigeria and West African countries, among others, are believed to have been 'triggered' and escalated as a result of unconfirmed news reportage. Aymanns, Jakob, and Co-Pierre (2017, p. 1) observe that a piece of fake news may be hilarious and might be shared for its comedy value; however, its attempt to convince users of a factually wrong claim is more worrying. Nigeria as a nation frowns at this unverified news, which creates tensions and anxieties amongst the populace. This led to the subsequent push for the enactment of the 'fake news bill', which the populace resented.

In his essay titled "The Nigerian Media Space and the Cost of a Bribe," Justine Dyikuk claims that the media practice in Nigeria today is in a deep crisis of credibility. This is because most of the cherished norms and values of the profession have been abused, violated, and debased as a result of individual, organizational, environmental, and societal challenges (2015, p. 15). Although there is institutional and/or organizational sponsored fake news in the polity that leads to most of the conspiracy theories, bloggers and/or the supposed freelance 'journalists' tend to be the major perpetrators of fake news. These groups of people do not take cognizance of the trouble and confusion generated by these news brands but engage in such practices because of their self-aggrandizement. There is, therefore, the need to sensitize, conscientize, educate, and mobilize the vulnerable in society – rural

dwellers. It is expedient that this research is carried out to unearth the cause and consequences of this media information) and construction) among the rural dwellers in some selected communities of southeast Nigeria.

Theoretical Prodding

Bertolt Brecht's Theory of Epic Theatre provided the notional infrastructure for this study. Behavioral and attitudinal changes in human beings are achieved through information and sensitization. Apart from the media involvement in the area of education and information dissemination, the theatre is an infectious approach to reaching people while also entertaining them. This is realized by getting them involved as participants who identify their problems and find ways of solving them. This is the standpoint of Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright, dramatist, theatre director, and poet who was born in 1898. Brecht criticized Aristotle in his poetics when he insisted that Aristotle's idea of tragedy negates self-consciousness and promotes self-pity. The audience/spectator forever remains in the doldrums while taking the place of the actor on stage. Unlike Aristotle, who delegates the spectator's power of decision to the character on stage, "Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place, but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character" (Boal, 2000, p. 122). To Brecht, who writes from the Marxist orientation, the purgation of emotion, especially in the case of the fall of the tragic hero, has not brought the positive energy required to change his situation but rather pity.

The audience/spectator is expected to take responsibility and action after watching a performance. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2015, p.7) calls this the "awakening of critical consciousness." After watching a performance, the spectators should be able to re-examine themselves, thereby isolating problems and looking for solutions. Brecht believes that theatre should not just appeal to the feelings of the spectators/audience or the people but should focus and/or appeal to their reason, which invariably should be able to make them take responsibility and actions and not arouse pity in themselves. As aptly captured in his technique of "Verfremdungseffekt" (alienation effect), "theatre should appeal not to the spectator's feelings but to their reason. While still providing entertainment, it should be strongly didactic and capable of provoking social change" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1995). This

means that passivity, which is the culture of silence, only encourages and perpetrates oppression, and the way out is to encourage active participation by the audience by making them reflect on actions presented in the theatre (Mbachaga, 2011, pp. 26-27). When theatre occurs, it takes the audience through the process referred to as the freedom of thinking (Emini, 2015, p. 297) while they (spectators) face life realities from what they have watched/seen or heard. The alienation effect allows one to detach oneself from the emotional attachment of the characters on stage but have one's thorough/deep criticism. Bertolt Brecht's Theory of Epic Theatre influenced and aroused consciousness in theatre, especially in the 20th century. In recent times, theatre directors now complement this with other techniques for a more fluid performance.

METHODS

This study is qualitative, involving the use of key informant interviews (KIIs), historical-analytic, participant observation regimens of theatre-for-development (TfD) methodology in the examination of the situation in four selected south-eastern indigenous communities in Nigeria to demonstrate how TfD could complement other media platforms available to the PTF in the dissemination of information on the coronavirus to rural dwellers. One of the major advantages of the TfD methodology is its ethnographic nature, which aids in first-hand information gathering through interviews and interactions with the people involved directly. In this connection, historical-analytic, participant observation, and key informant interview modalities of the TfD process were used to elicit relevant information for the study. To start with, theatre generally is a term used to describe activities involving all the elements of performance that appeal to the visual and auditory senses before a live audience at a particular place, often referred to as a stage. The theatre relies on and depends upon human interaction to solve problems through speech and actions. Asante and Yirenkyi (2018, p.590) claim that the theatre, which has been described by many as a representation of life, a slice of life, or an imitation of life before an audience, has been in existence right from the creation of human beings. As an ancient practice, theatre has been a part of humanity since its emergence in the cosmic sphere. "The theatre is not only the

building but the presentation of artistic forms for edification and entertainment” (Krama, 2006, p. 1). Apart from entertainment, one of the central objectives of the theatre is enlightenment. It brings information and education to the feet of the audience through entertainment.

Mbachaga (2011, p. 33) asserts that “theatre is power because it creates an aesthetic space in which issues are magnified and dichotomized. This art (theatre) can be said to be telescopic because it pulls and brings close things in the distance and enlarges small things.” One aspect through which this has been made possible and enriching is the theatre-for-development (TfD) methodology. TfD (also known as participatory theatre) is a participatory community-based theatre practice that involves the interaction of community/group in solving peculiar problems through dialogue and engagements. Theatre-for-development can also be referred to as community theatre, popular theatre, propaganda theatre, case drama, a developmental theatre forum, or sometimes, political theatre, agitprop theatre, alternative theatre, participatory educational theatre, etc. (Kamlongera, 1989; Omoera, 2010b; Kvam, 2014; Diang’a, Kebaya & Wangari, 2015).

Since its emergence in the 1960s and 1970s, it has been a precursor to developmental projects in most societies of the world, with particular reference to developing nations such as Nigeria. Theatre and/or drama as a developmental tool has often been used to address some pertinent issues ranging from social change, political propaganda, health, and educational promotion, among others. Epskamp (2006, p. 52) agrees with our submission when he avers that the main objective of this use of theatre is to inform people of the important developmental issues at the national as well as local levels and to persuade them to change their behavior. In this way, TfD has regularly served as a means of political advocacy and mobilization campaigns... Theatre-for-development (TfD) has relatively had a long history in Nigeria when it was first used as a theatre technique/methodology for interventions, especially in rural communities. It has also been used as a mechanism for social change in developing countries and is under the category of applied theatre (Siu, 2020, p. 6). Applied theatre is recognized as an effective method that makes social change possible. The immediate response from the audience creates room and/or environment where people can analyze their situation and their problems (Kvam, 2014, p.50).

It is, therefore, imperative to state that the theatre as a media of communication constantly mirrors and reflects society, including health situations such as the case of the coronavirus (COVID-19). This is an acknowledged power of the theatre, especially its role as a social mobilizer and, if you like, conscientious (Akashoro, Kayode & Husseini, 2010, p.110). Furthermore, Umenyilorah (2014, p.32) highlights the importance of Tfd to include... transformational because when it involves the audience, it is never a process that leaves off after the raising of a critical consciousness; rather, it leads to subsequent action. In its “popular” form, theatre can reach the unreachable – the dwellers of the rural areas. Popular theatre is the theatre of consciousness that awakens the rural folks to understand their societal configurations as well as build faith in them as vectors of change.

Tfd Approach and Community Wellbeing in Nigeria

Theatre-for-development has tremendously been of immense use to most developmental projects that are attracted to people, especially the vulnerable in society. When they lend their voice, they raise consciousness, which attracts the policymakers. Scholars and practitioners of theatre for development (Seda 2004; Omoera, 2010b; Nwadigwe, 2012; Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012; Ebewo & Inyang 2013; Kvam, 2014; Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2015) have variously reported, in their works, that applied theatre has contributed to community development in many developing societies in parts of Africa, with concrete evidences in communities in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroun, Malawi, Nigeria, among others.

The Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, would remain the catalyst to the transformation in theatre in Nigeria where the drama unit of the institution took intervention in some rural communities in Samaru, the community that hosted ABU and which was tagged the ‘Samaru Project.’ Influenced by the Botswana and Zambian alternative, theatre experiences geared towards addressing societal problems. Michael Etherton, in 1980, initiated the community theatre in ABU to address some pertinent health issues in Samaru. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2012, p. 683) claims that “the development of the practice of alternative theatre in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria ... started officially or was institutionalized on the platform

of the Samaru Project in 1980 after ... initial experimentations.” Hence, it is imperative to state that theatre-for-development (TfD) has emerged in Nigeria, as it has in many other parts of Africa, as an alternative practice to mainstream theatre. It has, therefore, developed as an interaction with ordinary people (Abah, 1996, p. 245).

As an advocacy and intervention project, theatre-for-development has contributed immensely to the safety and well-being of the rural dwellers and those living in township slumps. Nongovernmental organizations such as UNICEF and USAID, among others, are some agencies that have been involved in the crusade for the safety and well-being of the populace through support and sponsorships. The various cases of the HIV/AIDS campaigns carried out in most communities in Benue Valley where TfD was deployed is a case in point here. The research-oriented nature of theatre for development has made it possible to identify problems and proffer solutions in conjunction with the community people concerned. Today, the effectiveness of the TfD project has facilitated its inclusion into the curriculum programs of various institutions of higher learning in Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theatre-for-Development Engagement

Four communities were earmarked for the TfD program: Ikwo (the host community of Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike (AE-FUNAI) in Ebonyi State), Iva-Valley Forestry Hill Camp 1 community of Enugu State, Umualumu Old Road Nekede Owerri community of Imo State and Ogbagu Obukpa community in Nsukka of Enugu State. A critical survey of the rural dwellers in these rural communities in Nigeria showed that they had no access to modern means of communication or electricity, except occasional pieces of information that urban dwellers feed them from time to time. It was in this context we sought to determine the level of (mis)information and (mis)conception on coronavirus as influenced by unregulated media space, which the Nigerian Minister of Health (as previously cited) mentioned in his press briefing, alleging that the rumors, speculations, and fabrications that tended to occupy the space, particularly the social media space at a time and situation like the COVID-19 pandemic were worrisome.

Having identified the problem(s) as reported by the Minister of Health, the different groups set out for their various preliminary field investigations of seeking

permission to carry out interviews, record videos of their interactions, and take pictures. While some of the community members approached during the first visit accepted a formal interview from team members on an agreed date, others refused any form of an interview with the team, sighting instances of people coming to interview them for one problem or the other in their communities which often did not yield positive results. This scenario was captured in one of the communities as an elderly man, known as Mr Oko Joseph, reported to us that:

See, that was how one said that the government said he should come and interview us on our bad roads, but up till now, the roads are the same (Umualum, Nekede Old Road, 14 April 2020).

Being a project to be carried out in four different communities that are far apart from one another during the lockdown period in Nigeria, the group met through virtual interaction using media handles such as Zoom and WhatsApp chats to dialogue on the conceptual framework of the project as well as the consequential outcome of the first preliminary stage where certain resolutions were reached as the focal points of the investigation. These resolutions/objectives were that the project will:

Goals of the Tfd Project

- Assess what the rural dwellers know about coronavirus, their source(s) of information, and if there is misinformation and myths surrounding their beliefs on the pandemic.
- Enquire about the people's attitude towards the ethics as prescribed by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).
- Find out how COVID-19 observances and ethics (like social distancing) have affected their communal and social lives in the areas of traditional engagements like burial, traditional weddings, new-yam festivals, and other ceremonies.
- Employ Tfd methodology to dramatize/ (re)inform on COVID-19 safety observances to the rural dwellers.
- Reassess what the rural dwellers know about COVID-19 after the Tfd dramatization.

Having agreed on the objectives of the research, the team discussed other modalities – financial implications, language, method of participation in the performance, and target persons, among others. Since the team members resided across various states in southeast and south-south Nigeria due to the compulsory lockdown orchestrated by the dreaded coronavirus, it was agreed that the communities in the states where the team members resided should form research target areas. This was to cut costs and cope with the risk and challenge of transportation during the period. The adoption of an exogenous method of engagement in the execution of the drama presentations was also agreed upon.

The group targeted the age range of 60-90 years who dwell in rural communities. The choice of this age was due to their level of education and poverty, which limits access to some necessities of life (with particular reference to electricity/and traditional media content). Hence, the majority of the rural dwellers relied on rumors, a product of new media space. The group decided to use Igbo ezue (central Igbo) as a mode of communication. The next stage was the community findings/research. On 2 May 2020, the different groups with their team leaders swung to action for interviews. On the source of information and knowledge about coronavirus, those interviewed in the different communities, as reported by the team leaders, have these to say under the heading hereunder:

Information and General Knowledge of Coronavirus

Question:

Igbo : kedu ihe ima gbasara coronavirus?

Translation : What do you know about coronavirus?

Answer:

Igbo : amaghim maka ya, ndi mmadu na ekwu maka ya, mana ahubeghim ya.

Translation: I don't know; people say there is coronavirus, but I have not seen it.

(Report from Umualumu Nekede Old Road).

The same questions were also asked at Iva-Valley Forestry Hill Camp 1 in Enugu, and the following response came from one of the respondents;

Igbo : Anunam maka coronavirus, mana ahubeghim n'anya onye ogburu.

Translation: I have heard about coronavirus, but I have not seen a dead victim.

At Ogbagu Obukpa community, Nsukka in Enugu State, it was a different report as the response appeared in the negative of the knowledge of the virus as seen hereunder;

Igbo : Onweghi ihe dika coronavirus ebe obula

Translation : Coronavirus does not exist anywhere.

Igbo : Hapum aka. Oburu maka coronavirus na goment, enweghim ike itinye onum.

Translation : Leave me alone; if it is about the coronavirus and the government, I will not get involved.

This is also reiterated by one of the respondents at Ikwo. According to this 68-year-old man, there is nothing like coronavirus. In his words, coronavirus is a scam used by the government to embezzle the people's money:

Igbo Umum, asim na enweghi ihe dika coronavirus na ododo anyi a bu Nigeria. Ahubeghim udi oria nke ha si ozuru uwa nile onu. Ha na ako akuko asi na enwere onye ocha butere ya, ma kedu onye bu onye ocha ahu? Asikwa na ogbuola imerime madu, madu ole ka ogburu n'ala Igbo.

Translation: My children, I said there is nothing called coronavirus, and it does not exist in this country. I have never seen a sickness like this that they said is all over the world. They are just telling us fabricated stories, telling us that a 'white man' brought it; who is the 'white man'? That it has killed many people; how many has it killed in Igboland?

Furthermore, the report from the Ohankwu Ikwo community of Ebonyi State also suggested that they have heard about coronavirus and how it has ravaged the world. They, however, decried the mode of communication, even when some of them had transistor radio sets. They frowned at the consistent use of the English language to pass the information, which most of them do not understand. This is captured in one of the narratives by one of the female respondents aged 65:

Igbo : Anunam maka coronavirus na ike ona ‘kpa na uwa nile. Anukwaram maka ihe onwere ike ime na ezi na ulom oburu nam emeghi them nkwesiri.

Translation: I have heard about coronavirus and how it is ravaging the world. I also heard that it could harm my household if I did not do the needful.

Igbo : Ihe na ewutam bu n’anighim anucha ihe ana ‘kowacha gbasara ya na ihi asusu beke ndi ‘radio’ ji ekwu okwu.

Translation : My anger is that I don’t understand most of the things they say on the radio because of the use of the English language as a mode of communication.

Some of those interviewed also reiterated the earlier positions of others stating that they had not seen a person infected with the virus or any dead victim.

Misconception, Religion and the Theory of the ‘New World Order’

It was discovered that issues of the conspiracy theory making rounds in the country had permeated the rural areas, and the team tried to capture this in the interviews below. The various communities where the interventions were carried out showed that they seem to know about the novel virus and its deadly effects on the global space but insist that its emergence is not ordinary. For most of those interviewed in this study, “the anger of God has befallen mankind.” This group believes that the wickedness of man, coupled with the ‘atrocities’ happening around the world, is the reason God has visited the world with this coronavirus. These views are captured in some narratives by the respondents in the various communities. Thus, for one of the aged at the Enugu axis:

Igbo : Ahubeghim udika oria nka ruru uwa n’ile. Iwe Chineke dakwasiri anyi. Anyi ga’kpachara ‘nya na uzondu anyi.

Translation : I have never seen any disease like this that has ravaged the world. The anger of the Lord has fallen on us. We all have to be careful with our ways.

At the Nsukka axis of this investigation, the team also encountered the same response from an elderly woman aged 75. According to her:

Igbo : Obim na agwam na iwe Chineke adakwasiwo nwa nke madu na ihi mmehie ya. Nria nria zuru uwa onu ga adakwasi kwa uzo na ihi na iwe Chineke di oku. Iga na Abuoma (Psalm) 81, iga ahu ebe Chineke na ebe akwa na ndi a ahupula ya.

Translation: My mind tells me it is the anger of God because man has sinned. Another pandemic after this one will come because the wrath of God is hot; if you go to Psalm 81, you will see where the Lord is crying that His people have left Him.

The religious belief about coronavirus as recorded in the various communities is summed up by an elderly clergy aged 68 who was interviewed around the Owerri axis (Umualumu, Nekede Old Road). He spoke to the team in English:

If there is a coronavirus, it is the church that will pray against it because it is God that heals sicknesses. The church should not be closed. I want them to open the church so that people can be free to pray in the church. It is through prayer that God will intervene and heal anyone with the illness if at all we have it in Nigeria. Drugs do not cure illness but God. Closing down churches means that the government is fighting with God.

The narratives, as stated above, indicate that there is apathy and unwillingness to accept the emergence of the dreaded virus. This is a risk to the individual, community, and the nation at large. It means that urgent attention is needed in addressing this quagmire. Hence, the rationale for this intervention. On the observance of safety protocols and the effects of social distancing, the people maintained that it is a difficult task to observe in the communities because of the way they live. What has helped them during this period is farming. "Since this is the farming season, we do not have anywhere to go except going to the farm," some of them retorted. The people informed the team that the coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown have affected them economically, socially, and otherwise. They maintained that it has brought untold hardship to the people as they can no longer go about their normal businesses, attend functions, and participate in their cultural festivals and the numerous engagements in the communities.

The team retreated to their various points to discuss based on the interviews and responses, which culminated in the third stage of the project – the data analysis

stage. The team agreed to produce performance skits in the various communities based on the information on hand. The drama scripts/performances address the following issues, among others:

- Basic information on COVID-19, dispelling the rumors surrounding it.
- Behavioural attitudes of people about COVID-19 and the effects of the consequent lockdown.
- Measures to address the disease with particular reference to the safety protocols.
- Participating in social responsibility by donating some of the necessary materials that could assist the community dwellers in keeping safe from the disease.

Four-play scripts that captured the above-listed scenarios were put together independently by the four teams. In a bid to observe the safety protocols of the COVID-19 pandemic, the performances engaged a minimalist approach – few casts, no sets, and few props, among other theatrical components, to realize the productions. The teams returned to their various communities for the proposed performances between the 20th and 21st of May, where the play skits were performed to the admiration of members of the various communities who were in attendance. Brecht’s theatre technique was adopted to ensure that these performances achieved the desired result. According to Brecht, as earlier explained, theatre should not just appeal to the feelings of the spectators/audience but should focus and/or appeal to their reason to enable them to take responsibility rather than arouse pity on their situations. Thus, while providing entertainment, the Tfd plays in various communities were performed to ensure that strong didactic messages capable of re-educating the rural dwellers were evident in the performances. At the end of the performances, the team presented to the communities some of the personal protective equipment (PPE) against COVID-19 for their personal use. The documentary of the entire process titled “The Marginalized Ears” can be accessed at https://youtu.be/JGDNPUpgr_0.

At the end of the enlightenment drama presentation by the four groups in different Igbo communities, the team embarked on the reassessment of community-based knowledge on COVID-19. It was observed that most aged persons who were reassessed after watching the Tfd drama demonstrated a better understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and were willing to take responsibility for taking care of themselves by observing the safety protocols as announced by the World Health

Organization (WHO) and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Thus, issues of ascribing it as the ‘wrath of God,’ the ‘5G network,’ and the commencement of a ‘New World Order’ became doused and farfetched. The scientific underpinning of COVID-19 was evident in some of the responses received at this second interview, as the people now saw it as a disease rather than a curse from God. Important, too, is the realization that COVID-19 was more than a pandemic. Citing Richard Horton (2020), Baker (2023) argues that COVID-19 is not a pandemic but a syndemic. Syndemics are “interacting, co-present, or sequential diseases and the social and environmental factors that promote and enhance the negative effects of disease interaction” (Baker, 2023). Everyone must pay attention to this critical fact in dealing with present and future pandemics in human society.

CONCLUSION

The chief idea of this study is to ensure that the populace or rural dwellers have access to the right information at the right time on pandemics, using the case of COVID-19 in four indigenous Igbo communities in Nigeria. At the end of the process, it was discovered that the apparent exclusion of the high percentage of rural dwellers in the PTF's information structure outwardly made them susceptible to abject fallacies surrounding the pandemic, which was largely the product of various unregulated internet media space. Even though the WHO has declared the world COVID-19, many rustics in the communities under investigation still hold erroneous beliefs and misconceptions about the virus, as evidenced in the study. Therefore, there is a need for the relevant government agencies such as the PTF and NCDC, among others, to use the TfD, participatory video techniques, and indigenous language to reach out to the rural communities on health-related matters, including pandemics in future scenarios in the communities investigated and elsewhere in Nigeria. This is because the TfD method proved very effective as a means of interactive communication and development among the indigenes of the studied communities; it dealt with them directly through participation and equipped them with adequate information.

Funding Acknowledgement

This study was self-sponsored by the researchers. We acknowledge the contribution of the people of Ikwo in Ebonyi State, Iva-Valley Forestry Hill Camp 1 in Enugu State, Umualumu Old Road in Imo State, and Ogbagu Obukpa in Enugu State communities for indulging us with the opportunity. We also thank the reviewers for their observations and comments that have helped to improve the quality of the paper.

About the Author

Charles Okwuowulu, Casimir Onyemuchara, Ameh Dennis Akoh, Charles Emokpae, Christopher Akpa, and Michael Chinda from the Department of Theatre Arts Faculty of Humanities, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. That is Osakue Stevenson Omoera from the Department of Theatre and Film Studies Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

REFERENCES

- Abah, S O. 1996. "Theatre for development as a non-formal method of education in Nigeria."
- Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 1(2). 245-260.
- Akashoro, G. O., Jimi, K. & Shaibu. H. 2010. "Theatre and development: Opportunities and challenges in the developing world." *Journal of Communication*, 1(2). 107-112.
- Akhagba, O. M. 2014. "New media technologies and advertising practice in Nigeria." *Estudos em Comunicação*, 17. 277-308.
- Asante, E. & Yirenkyi, S. M. 2018. "Engaging communities for development action: The theatre for development (TfD) approach." *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, 7(2). 589-603.
- Aymanns, C., Foester, J., & Georg, C. 2017. "Fake news in social networks." *arXiv:1708.06233 [cs.AI]*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1708.06233>
- Baker, M. 2023. "Ethnic health inequities have persisted across a century of pandemics in Aotearoa, New Zealand." A paper presented at the Indigenous Peoples & Pandemics Conference held at the Centre for Advanced Study at

the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, Oslo from 12-18 May 2023.

Boal, A. 2000. *Theatre of the oppressed*. (trans.) Charles A., Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer. London: Pluto Press.

Chukwu-Okoronkwo, S. O. 2012. "Trends in the development of alternative theatre practice:

The Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria example." *Academic Research International*, 2(3). 682-689.

Chukwu-Okoronkwo, S. O. 2015. "Theatre for development paradigm as a trend in socio-aesthetic

dynamism: The Zimbabwean 'TfD' workshop example." *Journal for Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1(1). 6-13.

Chukwuorji J., C. & Iorfa S. K. 2020. "Commentary on the coronavirus pandemic: Nigeria." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(S1). S188-S190. 10.1037/tra0000786.

Diang'a R., Kebaya, C. & Wangari, M. 2015. "Community theatre and development practices in the Nyanza region of Kenya." *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 8(6). 107- 121.

Dyikuk, J. J. 2015. "The Nigerian media space and the cost of a bribe." *Journal of New Media and Mass Communication*, 40. 13-22.

Ebewo, P. J. & Inyang, O. E. 2013. Folk culture and theatre for development (TFD) praxis in southern Africa. Retrieved May 15 2023, from https://www.academia.edu/20612295/Folk_Culture_and_Theatre_for_Development_Tfd_Praxis_in_Southern_Africa

Encyclopaedia Britannica. 1995. *The new encyclopaedia Britannica*. London: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Ehiemua, K.I. & Omoera, O.S. 2015. "Social media platforms of reality drama: A study of selected Facebook accounts." *Journal of African Media Studies*, 7 (2). 185-201. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.7.2.185_1

Emini, Z. E. 2015. Brecht's epic theatre. *Academic Journal of Business, Administration, Law and Social Sciences*, 1(2). 297-302.

- Epskamp, C.P. 2006. *Theatre for development: An introduction to context, applications and Training. 1*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Ghada, M. A. & Aseel A. T. 2020. "COVID-19: Virus or viral conspiracy theories?" *American Journal of Biomedical Science & Research*, 8(2). 122-126. 10.34297/AJBSR.2020.08.001252.
- Gumucio-Dagron, A. 2001. *Making waves stories of participatory communication for social change*. New York: Rocky Feller Foundation.
- Gumucio-Dagron, A. 2008. Vertical minds versus horizontal cultures: An overview of participatory processes and experience. In J. Servaes (Ed.), *Communication for development and social change* (pp.68-81). London: Sage.
- He, W. 2019. "Bertolt Brecht's theatrical concept of alienation effect and the Chinese application and transformation." *Neohelicon*, 46. 53-67. 10.1007/s11059-018-0468-3
- Health Minister Osagie Ehanire gives update as Nigeria confirms 1st coronavirus case. February 28, 2020. Retrieved June 25 2020, from <https://www.cnbc africa.com/west-africa/2020/02/28/health-minister-osagie-ehanire-gives-update-as-nigeria-confirms-1stcoronavirus-case>.
- Jimada, U. 2019. Social media in the public sphere of accountability in Nigeria. *Global Media Journal*, 17(32-178). 1-9.
- Kamlongera, C. 1989. *Theatre for development in Africa: With case studies from Malawi and Zambia*. Bonn: Education Science and Documentation Centre
- Krama, I. C. 2006. *African traditional theatre and drama: Themes and perspectives* (2nd ed.). Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Kvam, H. 2014. "Theatre for development – A Tanzanian road towards citizenship and cultural renewal." *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 5. 44-53. <https://doi.org/10.14456/jucr.2012.5>
- Mbachaga, J. D. 2011. *Theatre for development: An approach to safer sex education. A guide for teenagers, parents and practitioners*. Makurdi: Bookmakers Publishing.
- NCDC. 2020. "First case of coronavirus disease confirmed in Nigeria." Retrieved November 12 2022, from <https://ncdc.gov.ng/news/227/first-case-of-corona-virus-disease-confirmed-in-nigeria>
- NCDC 2021. COVID-19 cases in Nigeria." Retrieved November 12 2022, from <https://COVID19.ncdc.gov.ng/>

- NPC. 2019. *Nigeria demographic and health survey 2018*. Abuja: NPC.
- Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. 2020. Frequently asked questions on coronavirus. Retrieved January 10 2023, from <https://COVID.ncdc.gov.ng/FAQ/>
- Nwadiigwe, C. E. 2012. Theatre for development: An alternative programme for reproductive health communication in urban Nigeria. *African Sociological Review*, 16 (2) 102-118.
- Nwaoboli, E. P. & Asemah, E. S. (2021).” Textual analysis of select online media use of fear appeals in the promotion of COVID-19 vaccination in Nigeria.” In E.S. Asemah (Ed.), *Communication, pandemic and civil unrest in Nigeria* (pp. 5-18) Enugu: Franklead Printing Company.
- Odhiambo, J. C. 2004. Theatre for development in Kenya: In search of an effective procedure and methodology. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch.
- Odorige, C. E. 2023. “New media and its ability to engender effective communication among development actors.” In O.S. Omoera (Ed.), *Media, culture and conflict in Africa* (pp.81-97). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Omoera, O.S. 2010a. “The import of the media in an emerging democracy: An evaluation of the Nigerian situation.” *Journal of Social Sciences*, 22(1). 33-38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2010.11892781>
- Omoera, O.S. 2010b. “Theatre for development in rural Nigeria: The Andaha community experience.” *AMA: Journal of Theatre and Cultural Studies*, 5(1). 45-58.
- Omoera, O.S. & Bardi, J. 2020. “International public relations as tool for rebranding a nation: The Nigerian experience.” *The Quint: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly from the North*, 12(3). 223-247.
- Omoera, O.S., Onyemuchara, C.E. & Okwuowulu, C. 2020. “Nigerian rural communities and media marginalization on COVID-19: Perspectives on participatory video.” *The Journal of Society and Media*, 4 (2). 385-405. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26740/jsm.v4n2.p385-405>
- Omoera, O.S. & Uwalaka, T. 2023. “Fake news as disruptive media: A digital age challenge in Nigeria.” *Studies in Media and Communication*, 11(6). 208-221. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v11i6.6240>

- Project Writers Nigeria. 2018. Security short message service (SMS) and English language usage in selected secondary schools in Nsukka urban vigilantism and crime. Retrieved November 12 2022, from <https://www.projectwriters.ng/project-topic-on-security-short-messageservice-sms-and-english-language-usage-in-selected-secondary-schools-in-nsukka-urban-vigilantism-and-crime/>
- Reuben, R. C., Danladi, M. M. A., Saleh, D. A. & Ejembi, P. E. 2020. Knowledge, attitudes and practices towards COVID-19: An epidemiological survey in north-central Nigeria. *Nature Public Health Emergency Collection*, 7(2). 50-65.
- Seda, O. 2004. Transculturalism in post-independence Zimbabwean Drama: Projections of Zimbabwean theatre at the onset of a new millennium. *Zambezia*, 1(11). 136 -147.
- Siu, J. W. Y. 2020. An investigation: “Theatre for development – when is it successful?” Dissertation, University of Toronto. Retrieved May 15 2023, from <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/95205/1/TfD%20final.pdf>
- Umenyilorah, C. U. 2014. Theatre as a tool for development in Nigeria. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 19(6). 34-40.
- WHO. 2020. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Retrieved 25 June 2020, from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-Coronavirus-2019>.