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Art Intervention and Activism towards Psycho-Artistic Reformation and Social Change

Subtitle: Mobilizing Children for Activism and Social- Reformation in Makoko Slum

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Abstract

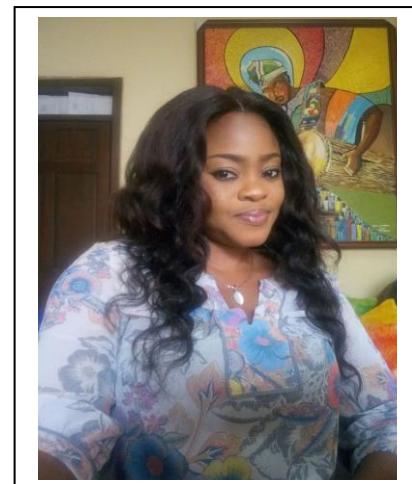
One reason the Makoko community became popular with an influx of visitors is not a condition of its state-of-the-art-technology, exotic monuments or its tourist attractions. This area is regarded as one of the major slums in Lagos where residents live in shanty accommodations, relying on polluted water for their livelihoods. These inhabitants are bonafide citizens, yet they constantly face threats of eviction by the Lagos state government who have withdrawn all infrastructural support for this community because the area supposedly constitutes a nightmare for the envisaged Lagos megacity. This study observes that the Lagos state government has failed in her responsibility to the people, hence the need to employ qualitative ethnographic research as a catalyst for social change. Studying these people, their cultural beliefs, practices and identities and then creating theatrical structures with children between ages 5 and 15 within the region constitutes the feat of the research. The study is supported by social activism and artivism as its theoretical points of reference and employs the performance interventional method in evaluating children’s participation. The study observes as findings that the Makoko children, in spite of their vastness in cultural histories, are beginning to divert their energies towards negativity, laziness and violence rode culture. This intervention, therefore, becomes expedient in preparing the children for mental reformation towards physical and social change through identifying methods within the conscious creative spaces which they negotiate unconsciously in their bid for survival and sustenance in the face of scarcity and deficient infrastructure.

Keywords - Art-Intervention, Dance, Makoko, Psycho-Artistic, Theatre.

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Research Area:-

African Theatre and Dance, Film and Gender Studies



INTRODUCTION

Makoko is a popular slum in Lagos that has attracted a lot of visitors because of the deplorable living conditions of the residents. The area is regarded as one of the bizarre floating slums in Nigeria, built on stilts within a waterlogged area along the Lagos lagoon. The area consists of six (6) different communities and is surrounded by black oily water where the inhabitants fish and sell to meet their daily needs. Aside from the fact that the water emits an unpleasant smell with layers of white scum, waterborne diseases are easily contracted and widely spread through the community owing to the cramped population of about 300,000, and the filthy environment surrounding the community. Some major areas needing urgent government support and intervention are social infrastructures including waste disposal system, drinkable water, electricity, transportation – good road networks, health facilities and schools. It is unimaginable that in this dispensation where education is key to social development, Makoko only once boasted of a floating school (image 4) designed to adapt to the aquatic lifestyle of the people. Prior the construction of this floating school, only one primary school which constantly faced the threat of flooding and demolition was made available for these young minds. Following the collapse of the floating school in 2016, not much has been done about education within the community. It is this neglect from these different quarters on the part of the government that has led to the increase in mortality rate within this region since the government has in addition failed to intervene through the provision of adequate health care facilities. It is in view of this that this study observes that the Lagos state government has failed in her responsibility to the people, hence the need to employ art interventions through qualitative ethnographic research as a catalyst for revolution. This type of theatre is centered on unmasking evidences of government's negligence and neglect of responsibility towards selfish aggrandizements. Therefore, the objectives of the study include;

1. To help children develop creative talents, psycho-artistic attitude and skills needed for social change in Makoko.
2. To provide insights into the ethnocultural patterns, identities and the living conditions of the select group.
3. Creating public awareness with the intention of addressing observable threats to life and the infrastructural needs of the Makoko community.
4. To develop theoretical framework and methodologies for children theatrical performance based activism for institutional and educational purposes.
5. To mobilize the children of Makoko community towards Psycho-Artistic Reformation and Social Change through theatrical interventions devoid of violence and attacks.



Fig. 1 – Map showing the location of Makoko, Lagos State.
<https://images.app.goo.gl/CGrVczLFVjy3dc6E9>



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4 – The floating School

Examining the dimensions of slum eradication, Nigeria, in contrast to other developing countries employs inhuman and devastating methods in her policy development and implementation. The framework of its policy with allegiance to international agencies like the World Bank, European Union, UN-Habitat, the City Alliance and different Non-governmental Organisations projections provides that the government of affected cities should accept and acknowledge slums and their importance (Mallo et al. 233); Nigerian leadership, however, may be exploring the situation to individual advantage. Rather than employ strategies for collaboration in the improvement and upgrade of this area, the Lagos state government plans to evict these settlers and demolish the community due to the horrifying living conditions, with no option for resettlement.

This project, therefore, presents a counter-motion based on the available evidence that the community is well established as a historic site with identified socio-political structures. Africans (Nigeria) should cease demolishing their historic sites, rather, employ restructuring strategies with improved life and infrastructural conditions to alleviate poverty and strife. This is the motivation for the project employing ethnocultural, social activism and activism as an avenue to

mobilizing not the adults in a usual fashion, but the children of this community towards a Psycho-Artistic Reformation and Social Change. As a dance lecturer from the University of Lagos, the rationale for this project is to employ dance and drama beyond the academia to contribute a quota to advancements within this community and development of inhumanity which will later inform the installation of a new concept – ‘Dancetivism’, a combination of dance and activism. This type of activism operating on resistance elements is tailored towards performance and may thus be referred to as ‘artivism’ incorporating the cultural belief, patterns, understanding and expectations of the people while staying within the boundaries of performance to reach desired goals. The research, contrary to the conventional approach of engaging youths and adults in community theatre, seeks a meeting point through engaging the minds of children age five (5) to fifteen (15) in a non-violence resistance theatrical form toward capacity and community building. This project commenced last year with ethnographic investigation to gather primary data about the culture and the living condition of the residents of this community, particularly how these conditions affect children. It then laid out strategies for art training involving dance and drama sessions with the children.

Beyond employing the form on its entertainment merits, this art intervention within the Makoko community is expected to develop and elicit psycho-artistic consciousness in the children, promote the children’s creative ability and communication skill, boost teamwork, self and group reliance, help develop children’s reflexes and confidence, nurture their ability of self-expression, promote healthy public speaking ability and create awareness of cultural norms, values and societal conditions. All these ultimately lead to Psycho-Artistic Reformation and Social Change within the region.

Theory and Methodology

This study is benchmarked on two pivotal theory and concept namely ‘social activism’ and ‘artivism’. The obvious *raison d’être* for the choice of these concepts is based on the type of research being socially motivated and inclined by the need to use the dance and drama (performance) as a didactic communicative tool for activism. Social Activism emerged as an offshoot of the constructivist school of thought and consists of actions directed to intervene in situations, impede a process, promote equality or employed in redirecting the paths of a chosen course be it socially, politically, economically, environmentally or otherwise. Tan (2006: 4-5) submits that Social Activism Theory was founded on the belief that “learning takes place in social environments where there are collaborative activities. Through these activities, learners communicate, interact, and learn from each other, as a result, constructing their own world of knowledge”. It is further upon the didactic functionality of experience that Conole (2004: 20) submits that “Experience is a foundation for learning which would then be transformed into knowledge and skill”. Social activism flourishes employing different methods in carrying out its

set goal; in this case, the conceptual methodology is ‘artivism’ because it is not merely described by social work but also performance.

Artivism which started as an experimental form has its roots in the wake of the 20th century avant-garde movements such as Surrealism, Dadaism, and Futurism which later conditioned its re-emergence as a 21st century global language and initiative of using the arts more instructively in urban and graffiti art. The belief founded on the assumption that artistic activities can be exploited for the purpose of instantaneous social intervention soon gained massive grounds employing different arts forms beyond graffiti art. Artivism may not necessarily criticize socio-political cultures and patterns of occurrences because it is not an oppositional art; rather, it works employing situations generated from specific conditions through the use of languages of images and metaphors, progressive characters and compassionate provocations defined and structured into visual or physical forms within public spaces. The strength of activism according to Aladro-Vico et al (no pg) in “Artivism: A new educative language for transformative social action” lies “...not merely in its aesthetic avant-garde, but in its catalytic power to point out injustice, inequality or emptiness in human development” thus, through the employment of different art forms such as literature and writing, dance, theatre, music, poetry renditions, visual arts etc. artivism challenges known status quos of prejudice and marginalization, inequality in order to promote peace, intersectionality, stability and understanding within different quarters. This study therefore thrives on the relativity of the theories and proposition of social activism and artivism in understudying Makoko inhabitants within their physical settings and generating meanings interpretively. The theories are also applicable as guides in exploring the language of artivism which hold no rigidity to any form nor fixed cultural rules to channel the living condition of the people, and also invite the government to improve living through poverty alleviation interventions within the community. The project challenges known status quos of prejudice and marginalization, inequality in order to promote peace, intersectionality, stability and understanding within Makoko.

Given the identified theoretical anchorage of this study, the methodology shall be three-way structured and will involve fieldwork, library research, and performance within Makoko. The field research involves the preliminary ethnographic data collection from the Makoko community through active participant observation, unstructured interviews, consultation, and surveys to gain in-depth knowledge about the culture and the socio-cultural condition in Makoko. The second methodology, which constitutes employed the active use of the library to draw relevant archival materials to justify or debunk existing knowledges on the thematic area of this study. These materials involve articles, books, internet sources, etc with data presented descriptively. The third phase shall involve the dance-theatre production and performance featuring Makoko children at selected sites within the community. The research methodology for this performance driven activism therefore adopt this paradigm structure;

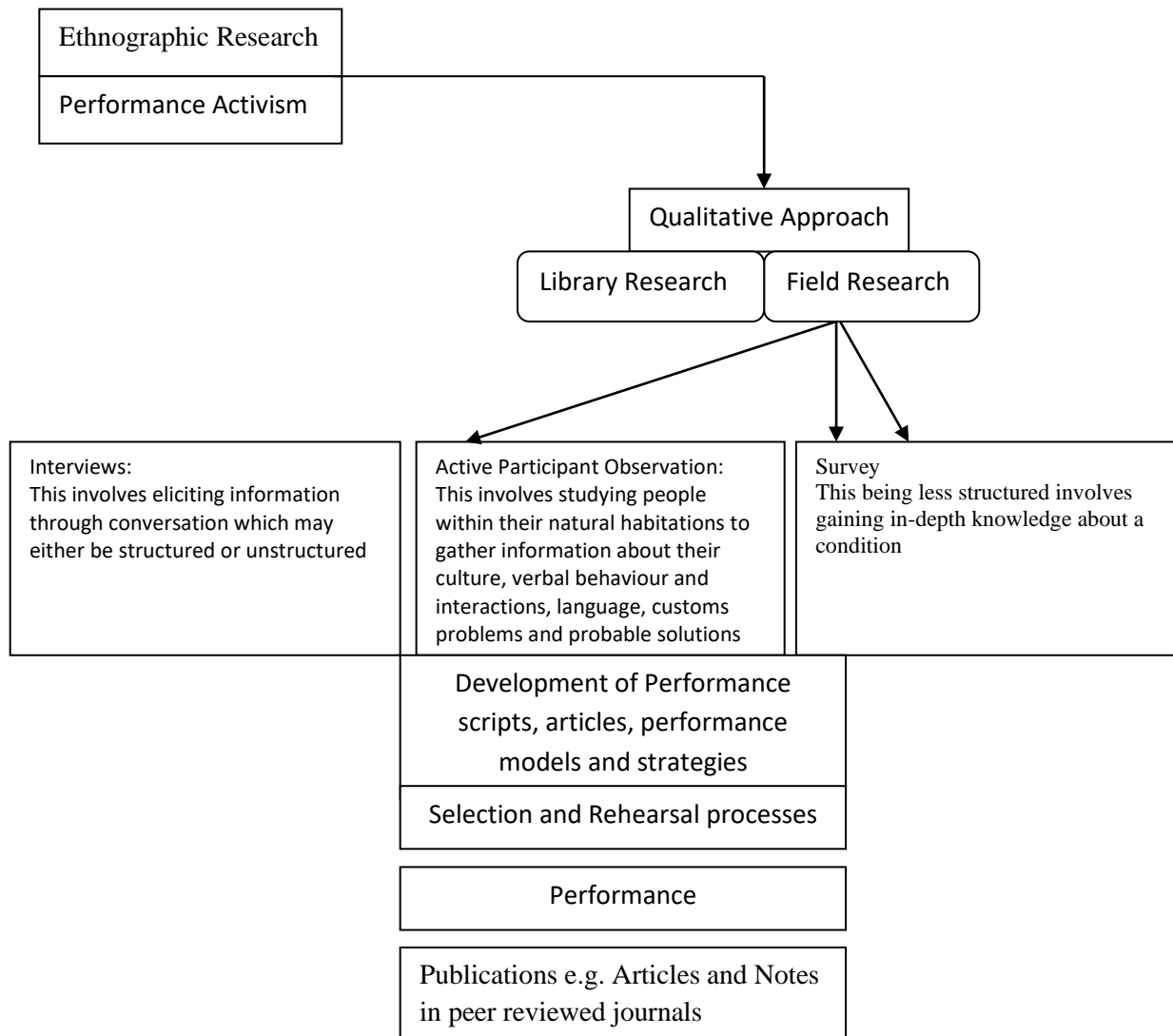


Fig. 5

Report on Theatre (Rehearsal) Experience in Makoko

The Makoko theatre was proposed as an art interventionist tool to help develop children’s creative talents, psycho-artistic attitude and skills needed for social change in Makoko. This theatrical form was also meant to unravel the deplorable living condition of the Makoko inhabitants with attempt to re-direct the attention of the Lagos State government for reformation to take place within the region. The project commenced in November 2019, proposed to run for 12 months with performances scheduled from November to December 2020. This calendar was however truncated by the emergence and spread of global coronavirus pandemic which brought about many uncertainties crumbling social activities in Nigeria for a long period of time. The project came with many challenges which to some extent were surmounted before the breakout of the pandemic.

Some of the challenges include having to travel that water path for visitation and every time the rehearsal took place. The second challenge was with certain group of persons who were convinced that the project was sponsored and as a result made very high demands during some sessions of training. However the researchers were ably assisted by the Baale (Chief) Francis Agoyon who welcomed us wholehearted. The third challenge was rehearsal/ training space. At the initial stage, a primary school (image) built with planks was used but as the number of interested children grew each week, the available space became too small for the number of participants. This necessitated the relocation to an uncompleted building and later to a space provided by the St. Andre Du Lac Catholic Church, Makoko. However, the major challenge was funding for the project. For lack of funders, this project was privately funded by three academics who only wanted to contribute their own quota to the development of the Makoko community. The project initiators are Oluwatoyin Olokodana–James (Ph.D.), Florence Nweke (Ph.D.), from the university of Lagos and Chinyere Ndubuisi (Ph.D.) from Yaba College of Technology. Olokodana–James (Ph.D.) was the creator and instructor for dance and drama, Florence Nweke (Ph.D.) took charge of the musical aspect while Chinyere Ndubuisi (Ph.D.) was charged with the responsibility of teaching and creating different fine arts with the selected children. For the theatre unit comprising dance and drama training sessions, the children were selected from the group but it seemed that nearly all of them wanted to be involved in the dance and drama segment. Practices were held mainly on Saturday between 10am and 12pm. Training mostly started with exercises, singing and dancing. The script was to be created through improvisational method with scenes built around the evidential culture and traditions within the region. This art intervention in the face of scarcity and deficient infrastructure therefore could be described as a timely intention dedicated to develop children’s Psycho-Artistic consciousness and skills with the vision for reformation and social change; this was largely received and accepted by members of the community. The success of the process, however in evident in some of the findings of the study.

The findings of the study from data collected prior the commencement of the field work and over a period of three months of training before the lockdown was imposed in Nigeria show some interesting things about the participating children within Makoko. The trainer and choreographer discovered at the initial stage that many of the children could not understand a word of Nigerian lingua Franca - English, because they mostly communicate in their native Ogu dialect, and sometimes French. This placed them at a disadvantage position. It took the presence of some of their teachers who could pick some English lexicon to be able to communicate the intentions of the choreographer with the children, so this sort of slowed down practices a little. In addition to these, the children were timid and lacked self-confidence and esteem. But as the training progresses, they picked words jokingly which they later employed when communicating or interacting with themselves and with the trainers and choreographers.

Secondly, the study also observes that children in Makoko in spite of their vastness in cultural histories were already beginning to divert their energies towards negativity, laziness and violence ridden culture. Some of them already abandoned schooling talking up their parent's side hustle of fishing and selling to neighboring community and the markets just to make ends meet. One of the ways they were motivated was the introduction of theatre to them as the researchers also prevailed with them through providing welfare packages at every rehearsal. This was perhaps the reason some residents thought that the research was largely funded by the government. Thirdly, the study shows that the artistic ingenuity of the children living within this region remains untapped particularly with level of artistic skills and inventiveness exhibited during rehearsal for performance. The researcher discovered that during the week, some of the children would gather to practice while assisting those of them who had not picked the previous training. They not only rehearsing, they created movements and dances blending what they had been taught with dances abstracted from their residual knowledge of the culture of the region. The children became aware that knowledge about life and state exists outside what they had always known.

Significance of the Project

There is an urgent need for a paradigm shift in the construction of social activism, community theatre orientation and development which has always considered youths and adults as voices of change. This project and all its engagements not only help to develop children's Psycho-Artistic capacity building, creative ability and communication skills, the emotional empathy which children action create through self expression is employed in this study as the catalysts for social change within the Makoko community. Any attempt at breaking the walls of inequality, starvations and social or class marginalization can never constitute a futile effort of humanity in the avoidance of brutality and violent confrontations.

The project locally creates and institutionalizes a model and canon for raising the consciousness of children by involving them in activism and studying children's theatrical education through their engagement in dance-tivism. This is not to say that Nigerian children have never been involved in theatrical creations, but that which incorporates activism into mainstream urban children theatrical experiences is seldom employed locally. This model can be used in the further study of children's theatre as a course of study in higher education, thus an added advantage to the development of dance theatre in Nigeria.

With the language and actions of protesting government neglect, negligence and abandonments being performance base and theatrical demonstrations, the participating children learn to be vocal with children led activists movements. It creates in them a sense of belonging as well as responsibility to other children and the environment at large. One of the expected outcomes of the research work is to drive traffic of Lagos state government to this infrastructural deprived

community, promotes healthy negotiations and navigation through the paths of creating more sensible and human friendly environment.



Fig. 6 – Children during rehearsal



Fig. 7 – Rehearsal in the catholic school



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

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