

# **WOMEN'S VOICES AND AFRICAN THEATRE:**

Case Studies from Kenya, Mali, The Democratic  
Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe

**Article 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression**

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### INTRODUCTION

Theatre in most of Africa has for centuries been an important social phenomenon, playing a central role in religion, ritual and social practices, as an art form and as a vehicle for passing on information and traditions, as well as for expressing ideas. In recent years, theatre has started to play a role in development and as a means of political expression. Women and women's groups have also started to make use of this powerful expressive medium to promote equality in the home and in society, as well as to educate and advocate around their issues.

This report explores the significance of theatre as a means to freedom of expression for women in four African countries: Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It provides an historical overview of the development of theatre in those countries, as well as of the contemporary theatre scene. It also focuses specifically on how, and whether, women are able to access this form of communication, and the reasons it is particularly important to women in Africa. Finally, it provides recommendations for reform both generally in relation to theatre and more particularly for enhancing access by women to this important medium for social change.

The concept of theatre has particular connotations in Africa due to its historical use for religious and ritualistic purposes, as well as to celebrate social events. In the pre-colonial period, a combination of activities – including poetry, myths, songs, dance, acting, wrestling and even serving various dishes – took place over a period of time, sometimes days or even weeks, in one all-encompassing performance. Modern theatre, particularly popular theatre or theatre for development, has evolved from these traditional activities and the term in Africa has, therefore, a broader connotation than in other parts of the world.

Popular theatre has a strong cultural grounding in Africa, which makes it an important and powerful expressive medium. Most African societies have strong oral traditions, to which theatre is closely related, indeed of which it is part and parcel. Social traditions, at least in the rural areas where the bulk of the population lives in most African countries, are for the most part highly communal, involving the participation of people from the whole community, often outdoors. It is relatively simple to integrate popular theatre into these social traditions; the proverbial gathering under the Msasa tree. For these reasons, among others, popular theatre is an important communication genre in Africa, which has the potential, if nurtured properly, to make a very important social contribution. Indeed, in many parts of Africa, popular theatre, or theatre for development, is the most common form of theatre.

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This report takes as its starting point that everyone has a right to use theatre as a means of exercising their right to freedom of expression. This right is guaranteed in Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as follows:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.*

The right to freedom of expression is one of the most fundamental of human rights. Passed in the very first session of the UN General Assembly in 1946, Resolution 59 (1) noted that the right to freedom of expression is both one of the most fundamental of human rights itself and, in addition, that it is the touchstone of all other rights. The protection and implementation of all rights depend on freedom of expression in two ways. It is only in societies where the free flow of information and ideas is permitted that individuals will be aware of their rights and actively seek to protect them. In addition, freedom of expression is essential if violations of human rights do occur and need to be challenged.

The right to freedom of expression, however, means little unless people have access to both information and a means of communication, whether that is “orally, in print, in the form of art, through the broadcast media or through any other media of his or her choice.”<sup>1</sup> Thus the right to communicate is generally understood as one element of the guarantee of freedom of expression. This right places an obligation on the authorities to take positive steps to promote universal access to the means of communication.

The right to communicate is most often applied in the context of telecommunications and broadcasting. But theatre also has an important role to play as a means of communication, particularly in the African environment, and is hence protected under the right to communicate. Theatre can adapt to a wide variety of contexts and facilitate communication on a number of different levels, including informational, analytical, emotional, spiritual and physical levels. In Africa in particular, since other means of communication are relatively underdeveloped, theatre plays an important role in terms of preserving history, disseminating information and education, and also in facilitating participation, all key to the guarantee of freedom of expression.

One outcome of the importance in Africa of theatre is the dissemination of plays through the broadcast media. This practice is common in some countries in Africa and not only helps promote local content in broadcasting but is also extremely popular as a form of entertainment. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the theatre group

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<sup>1</sup> ARTICLE 19, Access to the Airwaves: *Principles on Freedom of Expression and Broadcast Regulation* (London: April 2002), Principle 1.1.



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Evangéliste has one of the most popular television shows, going on air daily for viewers in Kinshasa and Brazzaville.

There is potential for closer links between popular theatre and community broadcasting. It is an ideal form for these broadcasters, dealing, almost by definition, with themes and issues of local interest, using local participants. As such, it not only provides them with relevant content, but also promotes more active community involvement in their work. This relationship can also be beneficial for popular theatre, ensuring wider dissemination of its messages and a better network of support.

Theatre which has social change as its explicit objective goes by various names including popular theatre, theatre for development, community theatre or “théâtre utile” (useful theatre) in francophone Africa. While these terms are often used interchangeably, in general, popular theatre is the more inclusive term, with its widest definition encompassing any theatre which stands in opposition to classical, bourgeois or established forms of theatre. Popular theatre is also used to describe theatre that uses traditional media or is based in an indigenous culture.

Theatre for development, a form of popular theatre, is often used by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or community based organisations (CBOs) to promote social goals. They may, for example, sponsor, either alone or in partnership, theatre within a community as an educational tool or to facilitate the participation of that community in a development process. Community theatre also falls within the general category of popular theatre and normally indicates that there has been a significant measure of community involvement in the theatre process, as opposed, for example, to the entire process having been undertaken by outside theatre professionals.

There is a continuum in popular theatre that runs from largely didactic, educational or propagandist forms to those that are more participatory and which promote dialogue rather than top-down communication. At the didactic end of the continuum we have, for example, theatre used by governments to promote health education messages. A range of civil society organisations also use theatre in this way to disseminate information and as an educational tool. Used in this way, theatre does promote freedom of expression, but of relatively powerful actors - in the examples above, of governments and organisations – not of the dis-empowered or those with limited access to the means of communication.

At the participatory end of the continuum, the theatre process is often based on an analysis of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical process of conscientisation where the community is involved in voicing its concerns and discovering solutions to problems. A typical process in

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this case might begin with *group building and sharing*. In this initial stage, the animators or facilitators establish rapport with the community and help build an atmosphere of trust through the sharing of games and songs. This can also be an excellent time for local theatrical forms such as songs or dances to be introduced to the outsiders. The next stage is *research and information gathering*. To be able to understand the issues that are important to the community, research is necessary. However, in a participatory process the form the research takes is active and participatory, involving a combination of storytelling, theatre exercises and open discussion.

This stage is followed by *problem analysis and prioritisation*, in which all the participants in the process, but particularly the community members, are involved in determining which issues are the most important to focus on, what their root causes are, and so on. The material generated from this exploration is used in the following stage, *scenario building*. It is at this time that the stories and ideas are turned into dramatic material. The scenarios are rehearsed and the actors ensure that they accurately reflect the community's ideas before the *performance* stage. In some kinds of performances, for example, those based on Brazilian director Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre model, the audience is involved in finding solutions to the problems presented by taking on characters' roles during the actual performance. In other situations, discussion takes place after the performance is finished. In all forms of participatory theatre, however, the performance is not the end of the process but is followed by a stage of discussion, *evaluation and planning for follow-up actions*. The overall objective of participatory theatre is to use theatre as a method of democratic discourse that can lead to action and change.

While all theatre serves as a forum for freedom of expression, participatory theatre can make a particularly important contribution to the right to communicate as it gives voice to those who otherwise have difficulty making their views heard. It can help communities to articulate common positions around issues that affect them. It can also help women and other disadvantaged groups to raise their concerns within the community.

Popular theatre has a chequered history in most countries in Africa. During the pre-colonial period, it was rooted in local tradition, particularly of a religious or ritualistic nature. In the countries dealt with in this report, the colonial authorities attempted to control, or even ban local theatre as it was seen as promoting nationalism and as a potential rallying force against colonialism. Instead, the colonial authorities sought to import Western theatre concepts, symbolised perhaps most potently by the Kenyan National Theatre, which was built in 1952 and which featured among its directors the then British governor of Kenya.

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Since independence, African governments have had an ambiguous relationship with theatre. On the one hand, theatre had played a role in promoting independence and national pride, and it was seen as a useful means of propaganda by the new government. On the other hand, it could be used to rally popular sentiment against that new government, just as it had been used against the repressive colonial government. In many countries, laws were passed imposing strict controls on theatrical development and production. The Tanzanian Films and Stage Plays Act, 1976, for example, made it a crime to take part in the production of a play which had not been authorised by a government-controlled Stage Plays Authority. This Authority had the power to censor plays or refuse outright to grant a performance certificate.<sup>2</sup>

In many countries, a significant liberalisation accompanied the advent of multi-party rule in the early 1990s, and this has in some cases led to a renewal of the popular theatre sector. The extent of liberalisation, however, varies from country-to-country. In Zimbabwe, for example, the space for dissent has progressively narrowed in recent years, while in most other countries a range of restrictions, including harsh defamation laws and other content rules, apply to popular theatre as to other forms of communication.

All forms of popular theatre share the objective of using theatre to educate and/or empower people who might not ordinarily have access to so-called 'elite' forms of theatre. Popular theatre has the potential to engage people in exploring issues that are important to them, to challenge the status quo and to encourage an analysis of the barriers to change and development, while operating from within a cultural matrix based in people's reality and providing a powerful process of cultural validation.<sup>3</sup>

One of the strengths of theatre is its ability to portray ideas and conflicting opinions in a relatively straightforward fashion. Theatre, in effect, can present a microcosm of the world by having different characters represent different and conflicting positions. This personalizes, and often clarifies, the debate. Addressing ideas through the human context of character and action on stage also makes it possible to address difficult and even taboo subjects. The 'live' nature of theatre reinforces this ability, in part because theatre can be geared to a particular community, unlike television, for example, which is often geared to a generalised audience. A live performance creates a shared experience with a common community and takes on some of the qualities of a ritualised re-enactment, while also creating a sense of distance and safe boundaries where anything can happen within the confines of the dramatic act. Being live also

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<sup>2</sup> See Part V of the Films and Stage Plays Act, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Oga S. Abah "Perspectives in Popular Theatre" in Eckhard Breiting, Ed., *Theatre and Performance in Africa*, (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1994).

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means that the actors can be responsive to the audience's mood, and that appropriate 'distancing' techniques, such as humour or music, can be used to help deal with difficult topics. Shared humour is a powerful tool for addressing complex subjects and is often used to great effect in African theatre.

In addition, theatre is the only art form in which the whole human being is actually employed as the instrument for expressing or investigating the human condition. As a result, it allows for a dichotomising of the self, or objectification of reality, so that human beings can observe themselves in action. This act of seeing oneself allows one to envision alternatives – particularly since theatre is in its essence a communal activity, which facilitates a sharing of knowledge and experience that may lead to it becoming a “rehearsal for change”.<sup>4</sup>

There are a number of attributes of popular theatre which make it particularly effective in the African context. It is relatively inexpensive to create and requires little or nothing that is not available within the community. Furthermore, it is highly transportable, so that it is useable in areas where access to modern means of communication are limited. This is important in the rural areas where often no media apart from the national broadcaster, frequently an organ of government, is available. It is also highly adaptable, so that it can change to fit local contexts, including by incorporating local languages, local cultural values and local art forms. As a result, a play developed in one part of a country can be adapted for use in other areas, or even other countries, as long as the underlying issues it deals with remain relevant.

Furthermore, theatre is accessible to everyone, overcoming barriers posed by illiteracy and a lack of formal education. Its 'live' nature tends to facilitate retention of important information; it is usually much easier to remember images of scenes that have been acted out than information which is simply presented to viewers, listeners or readers. This is reinforced by the fact that theatre is also a form of entertainment, which makes it a pleasurable way to disseminate and receive information. In areas where there is little or no access to other forms of entertainment or information sharing, such as television, radio or the Internet, popular theatre is particularly attractive.

Theatre can also serve as an important means to promote participation in decision-making and policy processes. Through theatre, communities which otherwise would not be able to do so, can articulate their interests and views on matters of importance. In this respect, theatre can play a particularly important role in ensuring the presence of voices which are not usually heard. Theatre can, for example, help women and children present their perspectives

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<sup>4</sup> Augusto Boal, *Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (London: Routledge, 1995).

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when often they would find this impossible. As noted above, theatre can also play a key role in facilitating communities to discuss and deal with difficult, or even taboo issues.

It is thus clear that theatre in Africa has the potential to be very useful in exploring and expressing problems in a wide variety of contexts. Given this, how are women in Africa in fact accessing theatre as a means of communication and expression? On the whole, theatre is recognized as a potentially valuable tool for women. It is currently used by a number of community organizations and NGO's to deal both specifically with gender issues and, as well, there are theatre groups who occasionally create and perform plays dealing with women's issues. There are a small number of companies either composed entirely of women or dedicated solely to using theatre to voice and explore concerns of importance to women.

Popular theatre is frequently used as part of a broader educational and advocacy strategy by civil society organizations and public bodies. In this context, it has been used to address a wide range social problems and development issues focusing on women's dimensions. These include, among others, HIV/AIDS awareness, female adult literacy, women's and children's rights, health issues such as malaria, clean water and vaccination, the household shopping basket, and new agricultural techniques. Popular theatre is also used as a way to promote political participation, including through elections, and as a means to discuss contentious issues like the impact of commercial farming on food crops, female circumcision, foreign debt and prostitution. In some cases, performances have also focused on issues facing popular theatre itself, such as concerns about economic viability or female actors.

Despite a vibrant popular theatre scene in all the countries covered by this report, in all four countries there are a number of impediments and barriers for women in the theatre. Significant among these are negative social attitudes towards women working in theatre, such as that they are 'immoral' and unsuitable for marriage. One problem is that the audience may confuse the character being represented on stage with the actual person. Women may also be under pressure to focus on family duties rather than on 'frivolous' activities like theatre. Indeed, the demands of home and family obligations mean that women often leave theatre if they get pregnant or married. It is possible that some of these attitudes also derive from the fact that women's participation in theatre is seen as being "outside the boundaries of male control".<sup>5</sup>

Another barrier is the religious and cultural attitudes which result in unequal treatment of women both by men working in the theatre and by men in community and family life. It is

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<sup>5</sup> Chitauo, Dube and Gunner, "Song, Story and Nation: Women as Singers and Actresses in Zimbabwe" Eckhard Breiting in *Theatre and Performance in Africa* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1994).

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far more difficult, and rare, for example, for women to assume managerial or directing positions in theatre. Material and financial constraints are also a serious barrier to women's participation in theatre. It is extremely difficult to obtain paid work in the theatre, particularly full-time work, so women who need to earn their living tend to look elsewhere. The lack of appropriate training is also a serious problem, with only university training, inaccessible to many rural women involved in popular theatre due to their lack of education, being offered in some countries.

Unfortunately, government policy in most countries has not supported the development of popular theatre. It is not a priority in terms of funding, and little public funding is generally available. Restrictions on freedom of expression still limit the use of this medium in some countries and more needs to be done to tackle the negative stereotypes which limit women's participation in theatre. Ultimately, women lack an equal share of power; theatres, on the whole, are managed by men, while in the communities "the whole process is controlled by the more powerful members of the community".<sup>6</sup>

This report looks at these issues from the perspective of four countries from different parts of Africa, namely Kenya, Mali, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These country chapters are the product of a three-month research process involving five different researchers. Information was collected in a number of ways, including questionnaires, documentary research and a series of formal and informal interviews with representatives of theatre organizations, women's groups, human rights organizations, government officials and individuals who are prominent in the local theatre scene.

A number of recommendations arise from the country chapters. These include, among other things:

- developing a better infrastructure of support for women in popular theatre, including through better networks and information sharing;
- enhancing the availability of appropriate theatre training opportunities for women, including through schools, so that women can participate as actors, but also as directors, animators and facilitators;
- promoting better funding for arts and culture generally, and for popular theatre in particular, including through government and NGO programs, and by exploring alternative sources of funding;

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<sup>6</sup> David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre* (Nairobi/Harare/Cape Town/Portsmouth, N.H./London: EAEP/Baobab/David Philip/Heinemann/James Currey, 1995).

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- advocating a public legal and policy framework that supports popular theatre and its use to explore women's issues;
- producing and disseminating more and better information about women and popular theatre;
- integrating the use of theatre into existing programs of civil society organisations;
- promoting local community ownership of theatre programs; and
- supporting regional activities in this area, including exchange programs between women working in theatre.

Popular theatre is an important communication medium in Africa, one that finds resonance in the local culture and traditions. It has become an important and effective means of both disseminating messages and information, and of encouraging and facilitating participation. It has particular potential to serve the real and pressing communication needs of African women. Supporting women in theatre is inextricably connected to supporting women in their communities, to enabling them to take part in democratic processes and to assisting them to address the problems that face them in their day-to-day lives.

## CHAPTER 1: KENYA

### 1.1 Historical Overview

Theatre in Kenya has had a chequered history. Prior to colonisation, theatre played an integral role for indigenous Kenyans, not as an isolated event but as an intrinsic social activity rooted in people's daily life. Activities such as "blessing the spear" and the warriors before they embarked on defending the community had many elements of ritual and ceremony but were also a form of participatory drama. When victorious warriors, for instance, returned from the battlefield "in song and dance they acted out the battle scenes for those who were not there, and for the warriors to re-live the glory."<sup>7</sup> Theatre also often took the form of ceremonies like prayer and rituals to various deities. Those ceremonies were traditional African theatre, complete with poetry, myths, prose, an assortment of dishes, an array of traditional attire, wrestling matches and other forms of performance that went to make one huge and all encompassing ceremony.<sup>8</sup> Theatre purely for the sake of entertainment, or of art, is thus a new concept in Kenya.

During the struggle for independence, African theatre began to be visualised as an instrument for enhancing African unity and for guarding against "outside" influences which threatened to permeate its culture. The colonial regime often imposed draconian bans on traditional forms of theatre, terming them primitive and un-Christian. Underlying this was the fact that indigenous theatre was seen as a barrier to colonization and a form of rallying for nationalism and the independence movement. Since it was difficult for the colonists themselves to pinpoint which particular "scene" was to be banned, colonial chiefs were given discretionary powers to license and censor performances. This form of control was carried on after independence when post-colonial chiefs were also given these powers under the Chiefs Act.<sup>[J M1]</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi/New Hampshire/Harare: East African Educational Publishers Limited, Heinemann Educational Books Inc., Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> *The East African Standard*, 19 December 1993.



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The Colonial authorities ‘contribution’ to the development of Kenyan theatre was in the form of the introduction of repertory theatre, modelled on British theatre. As a centrepiece of this development, the colonial government built the Kenya National Theatre (KNT) in 1952.<sup>9</sup> Then Governor Sir Philip Mitchell was one of the Directors of the governing council of KNT. The Kenya Cultural Centre Act, Cap 218, set out the mandate of KNT as being to “provide a centre for the use and enjoyment of the citizens of Kenya without distinction of race or creed and to provide for the performance of music, drama and dancing, for the exhibition of art and craft and for the holding of meetings for discussions of matters of literary, historical, scientific or educational interests of importance.” In fact, however, KNT was and has remained an elitist establishment far removed from the lives of ordinary Kenyans, a cultural white elephant, operating without artistic direction and not based in national culture.

After independence, foreigners still largely dominated Kenya’s national theatre with most performances featuring western plays.<sup>10</sup> The KNT has continued to devote itself primarily to foreign cultural performances, with the result that both professional and amateur Kenyan theatre groups have been forced to look for patronage outside KNT, in part because of the high rental costs for KNT facilities.<sup>11</sup>

The alienation this cultural domination caused was an important factor leading to the well-known Kamiriithu experiment in 1977, which began the modern community theatre movement in Kenya. In a dramatic and well-documented event, Ngugi wa Mirii, an adult educator from the University of Nairobi, along with his well known cousin, playwright Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, and a number of others moved to the settlement of Kamiriithu, Ngugi’s home village. This was in effect a challenge to KNT domination, with the goal of using theatre to promote literacy programmes. They worked with the community to design and build an open-air theatre, the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre, and developed a Gikuyu language play, *Ngahiika Ndeenda* (I’ll Marry When I Want). Both activities generated significant community involvement at all stages of the process. When the play was finally staged, thousands of people headed for Kamiriithu to witness the unique experiment.

The play – which dealt principally with a conflict between two families, and through them with class conflict – was a huge success. The aim of the project, Ngugi explained, was to try and reflect in a “positive manner” the culture and history of the majority of Kenyans. It

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<sup>9</sup> The *Daily Nation*, 6 February 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Moving the Centre: The struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1993).

<sup>11</sup> The *East African Standard*, 14 January 1994.

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also sought to challenge the foreign theatre and cultural establishment in Kenya by, in Ngugi's words, "Changing the whole terms of struggle – in location, audience, language and even style of production i.e. the communal participation."<sup>12</sup>

The government did not take kindly to this experiment and reacted first by banning the performance and then by detaining Ngugi without trial on the basis that the whole activity was seditious and subversive (events which led directly to his eventual exile).<sup>13</sup> The authorities also banned the performances and finally sent in three truckloads of armed police to raze the open-air theatre at Kamiriithu to the ground.

The period between 1982 and 1990 was marked by repression by President Moi's regime. Government critics were often jailed for sedition or treason, or detained without trial. The government also kept a tight lid on theatre performances, relying for legal authority on the Books and Stage Plays Act.[J M2] Plays were censored and performances vetted. The only active indigenous theatre during this period was the annual Kenya Music and Drama Festivals and the travelling theatre groups from the literature departments of the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College (now Kenyatta University). These travelling theatres were a major influence on the later development of popular theatre in Kenya. The University of Nairobi travelling theatre, for example, engaged in a process of 'radicalisation' in the mid-1970's, using local Kenyan languages and pitching plays towards popular audiences.<sup>14</sup>

With the advent of the multi-party system in 1991, however, the relative opening up of the democratic space allowed a resurgence of theatre. Some previously banned plays were granted licenses and indigenous theatre began to flourish. This local theatre ranged from street comedies to the mushrooming of formal theatre groups not only at the KNT but also at other venues in the main Kenyan Cities.

The re-emergence of community theatre was also closely linked to, and dependent upon, the rapid development of civil society from 1991. The creation of such groups as the Kenya Human Rights Commission and Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change provided the necessary infrastructure and impetus for popular theatre. Theatre, both formal and community-based, began to serve as a tool for awareness and to be used as an advocacy tool by civil society organisations.

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<sup>12</sup> *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, note 7, pp. 33-34.

<sup>13</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o was the first Kenyan playwright to be detained without trial for writing a play. His books and plays were also banned.

<sup>14</sup> David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*, (EAEP/Baobab/David Philip/Heinemann/James Currey: Nairobi/Harare/Cape Town/Portsmouth, N.H./London, 1995) p.240

### 1.2 Legal Provisions

Section 79 of the Constitution of Kenya<sup>15</sup> guarantees freedom of expression as follows:

*Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression, that is to say, freedom to hold opinions without interference, freedom to receive ideas and information without interference, freedom to communicate ideas and information without interference (whether the communication be to the public generally or to any person or class of persons) and freedom from interference with his correspondence.*

Although this does not specifically refer to theatre, it may be inferred that it covers this means of expression along with others. Section 79(2), however provides for wide-ranging restrictions on the right to freedom of expression:

- (a) that it is reasonably required in the interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health;*
- (b) that is reasonably required for the purpose of protecting the reputations, rights and freedoms of other persons or the private lives of persons concerned in legal proceedings, preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, maintaining the authority and independence of the courts or regulating the technical administration or the technical operation of telephony, telegraphy, posts, wireless broadcasting or television; or*
- (c) that imposes restrictions upon public or upon persons in the service of a local government authority, and except so far as that provision or, as the case may be, the thing done under the authority thereof is shown not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society.*

Section 80 provides that no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of assembly and association.

In practice, however, these rights are not respected. Civic education groups have been stopped and, on many occasions, arrests have been made and artists have been imprisoned simply for expressing themselves freely through theatrical performances. Indeed, the Constitution has fallen into such disrespect that a series of civil actions and violence have led to official agreement that the Constitution needs to be amended. The Constitution of Kenya Review Commission Act was passed by Parliament in November 1998, just prior to the presidential election in December of that year but was rejected by civil society and a year later, in

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<sup>15</sup> *Constitution of Kenya of 1992, Revised Edition* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1998).

December 1999, the Constitution of Kenya Review Act, Cap 3A was passed, providing for the establishment of a Constitution of Kenya Review Committee (CKRC). The process has dragged on for two years and cost huge amounts of money. In the final months of his rule President Moi attacked the Commission, throwing its future into doubt, however, the elections of December 2002 were won by opposition candidate Mwai Kibaki, and it remains to be seen what the future holds for the Commission.

Artists, however, have placed their hopes in the new constitution and, in particular, that the reformed Constitution might guarantee their rights effectively, including their freedom to perform anywhere they wish, in schools, in churches, in marketplaces and so on. With this in mind, a group of artists have provided a submission<sup>[J M3]</sup> to the CKRC on what they wish to see incorporated in the new Constitution.

### 1.3 Contemporary Theatre Activity

#### **A. General**

There are seven provinces and one capital area in Kenya and this overview covers all of them, namely Nairobi, Nyanza, Coast, Rift Valley, Western, Eastern, North Eastern and Central provinces.

Human rights organisations in Kenya have played a key role in promoting theatre as a tool of education. In a key development in January 2002, the Constitution and Reform Consortium (CRECO), of which most human rights organisations are members, put together national theatre teams in three organisations under its National Civic Education Programme (NCEP), an activity it dubbed Interactive Participatory Civic Education Theatre (IPCET).

The three organisations were the Centre for Law and Research International (Clarion), Release Political Prisoners Pressure group (RPP) and Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change (4Cs). Clarion's team trains theatre groups, while the RPP and 4Cs teams do performances and follow-up. The project was scheduled to end in June 2002 but, because of high demand, was extended by another two months to September.

The enormous success of IPCET was immediately obvious with community members being very receptive and responsive to the performances. NCEP now intends to include theatre as a permanent co-component in its ongoing civic education programmes.<sup>16</sup>

The research also established that the church in Kenya frequently uses theatre to dis-

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<sup>16</sup> CRECO Programme Review Report (Nairobi: 2002).

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seminate messages but it does not have a very strong artistic tradition when it comes to the stage and the screen. Furthermore, the church does not really base its use of theatre in the local culture or use it to foster cultural pride.<sup>17</sup>

What follows is an overview of the key developments in theatre in the different Kenyan provinces and area.

### **Nairobi**

Theatre is fairly well developed in Nairobi with many groups using theatre to educate, entertain and exchange ideas. The inception of the Kenya Human Rights Commission 10 years ago boosted the appeal of popular theatre in Nairobi, and this later spread to other provinces. Many upcoming civil society organisations have started to use theatre for civic education. So far, approximately 18 NGOs are known to be using theatre for educational purposes. Nairobi serves as the operational base for many community theatre groups, like the 5Cs and the Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change, which uses theatre for civic education.

### **Nyanza Province**

Theatre has become an accepted art and communication form in Nyanza Province and many organisations are using it to educate people on a range of issues such as poverty and HIV/AIDS. People have come to appreciate it as part of the social and cultural framework in which they operate. A number of groups have interactive plays which tend to elicit positive responses from the target audiences. Groups like the Ugunja Community Education Centre, in Ugunja, and the Community Poverty Eradication Network (C-PEN), in Migori, have in particular done tremendous work supporting and promoting community theatre in Nyanza Province.

### **The 5 Centuries Theatre Activists (5Cs)<sup>18</sup>**

The 5Cs theatre company was established by the Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change as a community theatre group in December 1995, drawing its membership from traditionally disadvantaged communities in Nairobi's informal settlements. It was founded to lobby, advocate and create awareness around issues of governance, democracy and constitutional reform, workers and labour rights, and prison reform.

5Cs primarily targets grassroots urban and rural communities from all sectors of

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<sup>17</sup> The *East African*, 29 July 2002.

<sup>18</sup> See 5Cs, *5 Centuries Theatre Artistes: A Profile* (Nairobi: 2002).

society. In 1998, the 5Cs made a strategic decision to break into 3 sub-groups in order to have a wider reach and to be able to tackle many thematic issues simultaneously. The group has developed skits in both English and the national language, Kiswahili. As a result of limited funding, 5Cs has not been able to carry out all of its activities and has had to reduce its membership.

5Cs has performed in 60 of Kenya's 65 districts, and has worked with local human rights organisations like KHRC, ECWD, 4Cs, YAA, RPP, COVAW, FPPS, K-COMNET, NCEC, Abantu, EcoNews Africa and also international human rights organisations, like Amnesty International. 5Cs also disseminates video and audiocassettes based on their plays. The organisation has established over 15 local and national partners, who call on it from time-to-time to put on performances. 5Cs has trained rural and urban communities in Thika, Makueni and Korogocho (a large informal settlement in Nairobi) in community theatre techniques. These groups are now flourishing and have even been able to train other groups.<sup>19</sup> The operational environment has been difficult not only because of limited funding but also because of State repression including, on several occasions, the arrest by police of its members.

### ***The 5Cs contribution over the years has been to:***

- help mainstream participatory community theatre as a communications tool especially for civic society organisations working in the human rights, democracy and governance sectors;
- assist in the development of a theatre genre that responds innovatively to issues relating to governance, democracy and human rights;
- assist local communities develop local community theatre groups;
- reach out directly to over 15,000 people through its performances; and
- act as a resource base by developing a repertoire of scripts.

### **Coast Province**

Although there are relatively few theatre groups operating in Coast Province, there is a lot of theatre activity taking place through the school system. In fact, schools from this province are known for winning prizes in the major categories during the Kenya Schools Drama Festival Competition. There is only one community theatre group in this province, Ilishe Trust, which

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<sup>19</sup> The groups operate as Makueni Paralegal Co-ordinating Agency Theatre group, Ndula Community Theatre Group and Slum Dolphin Theatre Group.

uses theatre to carry out civic education.

### **Rift Valley Province**

There are a few popular theatre groups in the Rift Valley Province, such as Naivasha Youth Volunteer group, in Naivasha, and the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (CHRD) theatre group, in Eldoret. CHRD deals primarily with issues relating to the girl child, including female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriages, and education for girls. The cultural sensitivity of these issues means they have to be treated very carefully. Despite this, theatre has been instrumental in effecting changes in people's behaviour.

### **Western Province**

Western Province is well known for its heritage of excellently choreographed traditional dances. Perhaps surprisingly, there is little theatre activity outside of the drama festivals hosted by schools and colleges. This part of Kenya would benefit from the introduction of awareness raising on popular theatre. Theatre groups from outside do regularly hold performances in this province, using churches as venues, in part because the authorities in this province often harass civic educators, sometimes preventing them from operating altogether.

### **Eastern Province**

There is a significant popular theatre presence in Eastern Province, with many self-reliant theatre groups operating in Makueni, Mwingi, Machakos and Kitui districts. Theatre has been used as a key advocacy tool, especially on land right issues, a major problem in this province.

### **North Eastern Province**

This is the most remote province in Kenya, with a major security problem and hosting the largest number of refugees in camps. In the past, there was some community theatre targeting refugees and dealing with issues affecting them but this has now ceased due to lack of funding. Theatre in this province is also used to tackle culturally delicate and sensitive issues. The provincial authorities here have also shown some hostility to this kind of theatre activity.

### **Central Province**

Community theatre was first introduced in Central Province and it is well-established and respected here. This is perhaps the one Kenyan province where artists are truly respected and where theatre is really appreciated. In this province, support and encouragement is provided to artists in this field who, as a result, do not feel inferior. popular theatre groups are particularly dominant in the field of civic education.

### ***B. Women's Groups***

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Many women rights organisations in Kenya have used and continue to use theatre, suggesting that there is significant demand for this genre. Out of the 20 organisations sampled, 18 used participatory theatre, while another uses puppetry for educational purposes.

Most of the women rights organisations in Kenya carry out their activities in both rural and urban areas. They target not only women, but in most instances also men, youths and children. Key activities for these organisations include:

- providing legal aid for women;
- undertaking lobbying and advocacy around gender issues;
- counselling victims of domestic violence;
- campaigning against gender violence;
- monitoring violence against women;
- mainstreaming gender issues;
- preparing women to take a more central role in decision-making;
- providing civic education to women;
- assisting children orphaned by HIV/AIDS; and
- undertaking advocacy around reproductive health issues.

From among all those that use participatory theatre, however, only three have their own theatre groups. The rest hire artists as needed to perform works presenting themes that they wish to profile. The puppetry organisation has its own puppeteers, along with an extensive network of 40 established puppetry groups as part of a grassroots network established by the organisation.

Only one organisation supports a theatre group made up exclusively of women, namely the group Women in Participatory Education Theatre (WE-PET). WE-PET, according to their group profile, is a registered trust of young female artists, founded in June 2000 as a response to “the need for a forum for women artists to articulate development issues with a gender perspective”.

### **WE-PET Theatre Group**

WE-PET is an all-female trust which seeks to enhance the capacity of young women artists to participate in development processes and participatory theatre as a medium of community outreach, as well as to create a resource for young artists. It currently has eight members and focuses specifically on young women between the ages of 14 and 25 years. The group is primarily a service provider, which seeks to complement other organisations working on women's issues, but it also creates its own theatrical works on issues of social con-



cern. The group's key activity is training in participatory education theatre (PET), along with developing and performing plays.

WE-PET aims to carry out activities which dedicated theatre groups find difficult. The main reasons for these difficulties are financial constraints, lack of formal training opportunities in theatre and the lack of a clear policy and legal framework to promote performing arts in Kenya. Young women artists are especially disadvantaged because of social and cultural attitudes towards theatre as a profession and the limited opportunities available.

The longest running popular theatre play in Kenya was a Gikuyu play, *Ciagana ni ciagana*, (*Enough is Enough*). Sarakasi players staged it from 1992 to mid 1994, and then again in 1995 and 1996. The play was of particular interest as it raised a number of questions about how theatre groups could achieve economic viability. The main star was a woman, the late Ann Wanjugu. Asked about the popularity of the play, she is reported to have said: "If you do a play in a language that more people understand well, you can take it to where the people are and they appreciate it." She was also impressed by the fact that even very old people, who rarely attend theatre, came to the shows. This trail blazing play was to pave the way for more commercially oriented plays – often in local dialects and with social and political themes – featuring female actors in significant roles.

According to Naz Cocker, a Kenyan actress, theatre has begun to serve as a bridge to fill a gap for women in times of difficulty. She has been using the stage as a medium to promote closer understanding among and between different cultures and also finds personal solace in theatrical activities.<sup>20</sup> In the film sector, Kenyan women have continued to make positive contributions and some, such as Anne Mungai, have gained international recognition.<sup>21</sup> Women actors in Kenya are continuing to develop, though theatre in Kenya is still not really deeply rooted and accepted. Theatre generally is not seen as a serious profession, and women actors in particular are looked at with negative attitudes.

### 1.4 Role of Popular Theatre

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<sup>20</sup> The *Standard*, 10 April 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Female Kenyan thespians made history in the theatre field when film and stage actress Anne G. Mungai, the director of the Kenyan film *Saikati*, won two prestigious awards at the 13<sup>th</sup> biennial Pan African film festival. The 90-minute film scooped the Association of African Professionals in Communication award for Best African Woman Director and for the best projection of the African Woman's Image.

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Popular theatre in Kenya is regarded as the cheapest and best understood form of theatre. It is accepted in the communities because it is participatory and cost effective. Popular theatre has evolved into a very powerful medium because of the following factors:

- Theatre depicts real life situations and characters with which people can easily identify.
- Theatre is uniquely able to create strong memories of the content it portrays, regardless of level of education, literacy, social status or language differences.
- Theatre is a live tool, which the audience see and feel.
- Theatre can communicate difficult and vital information to large audiences in a simple, dynamic and credible manner.
- Theatre offers entertainment at the same time as it communicates, making it a people-friendly medium.
- Participatory theatre creates a forum for free expression, providing communities with new and powerful methods of getting their messages across.

Theatre in Kenya is now considered to be an important tool for promoting freedom of expression. Many people find themselves, through this interactive and entertaining communication medium, responding positively to exploring the issues that affect them without feeling inferior about their problems. Community performances are usually conducted after thorough groundwork and the artists perform plays that deal with the problems of that particular community. It is an effective medium because it draws from the experience of local communities and offers the community alternative perspectives, along with paradigms that mirror their own worldview.<sup>22</sup> During the facilitations that take place after theatrical performances, people tend to associate their problems with those of the cast/puppet, and are thus able to talk about the issues through the medium of the cast/puppet, thereby discovering solutions to the problems they face. Generally speaking, the more participatory theatre is, and especially if it involves the community intimately, the more effective it is likely to be.<sup>23</sup>

A significant number of organisations consider theatre to be an effective tool to pro-

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with FPPS/CHAPS.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with COVAW

mote their activities and deliver their messages. Theatre can reach out to both literate and non-literate members of the society. One advantage is that it can be used to deliver ‘taboo’ messages.<sup>24</sup> Popular theatre is seen as relatively simple to develop and administer compared to other forms of communication since the plays and skits are based on simple plots.<sup>25</sup> Theatre is also often entertaining thereby enabling greater retention of messages by the audience. The entertainment element in theatre gives audience a chance to participate, relieving potential boredom and keeping the audience engaged.<sup>26</sup> Finally, it is also easier to ascertain the degree of participation by, and response of, the target audience with theatre than with other forms of communication.<sup>27</sup> Due to these factors, theatre is generally regarded as a highly effective tool for grassroots mobilisation, for creating awareness, for disseminating information and messages, and for advocacy.

### 1.5 Challenges

Theatre in Kenya has evolved only informally without much institutional support or a clear legal/policy framework. In spite of Kenya’s democratic and human rights gains, the government continues to suppress community theatre and artists, on occasion disrupting performances, and arresting and even detaining artists.<sup>28</sup> Artists have been harassed and detained for political reasons, denied employment and jailed on trumped up charges. Artists and playwrights like Abdi Latif Abdalla, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Al-Amin Mazrui have been detained without trial. Others, like Micere Mugo, Ngugi Mirii and Kimani Gecau, have had to flee to avoid harassment and the threat of imprisonment. Wahome Mutahi served a jail term for “offences” related to his professional and literary work.

Some of the key challenges facing Kenyan theatre include the following:

- The government has no clear cultural, artistic or media policy, although the Ministry of Culture has indicated it is formulating one.
- Popular theatre has trouble mobilising audiences, in part because people tend to think they are not professionals and are suspicious about why they are performing for free.
- Theatre is seen as being trivial and removed from real life.<sup>29</sup>
- Women, in theatre, in particular, face prejudice, family pressures and discrimination.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with KCOMNET.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with ABANTU for Development.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with People’s Popular Theatre.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with KHRC.

<sup>28</sup> The Standard, 2 February 1992.

<sup>29</sup> The Standard, 21 February 1992.

- Financial constraints are a major problem for both individual community theatre workers and for theatre groups.
- There is a serious lack of appropriate training.

### 1.6 Conclusion

It is clear that there now exists a window of opportunity to further develop theatre in Kenya, and this applies with particular force to participatory theatre, and theatre with a focus on women issues. The nascent infrastructure for this form of theatre, which is at the moment largely anchored in civil society organisations operating in the human rights, democracy and governance sectors, has at least ensured that there is a pool of experienced, talented and established theatre practitioners.

It is, however, imperative that sufficient emphasis is placed on developing a concrete framework for popular theatre, as well as good support networks. At the moment, popular theatre does not operate as a coherent whole, and the sector is thus denied the opportunities potentially offered by information and experience sharing, training and identification of gaps in the provision of theatre. Furthermore, because performances in popular theatre tend to be free, it is essential that more attention be given to alternative means of mobilising resources for this important genre of theatre.

Theatre offers the best opportunity of reaching marginalized social groups, including women, especially at the grassroots level. Kenya lacks theatre houses in which this can take place. The few theatre establishments that do exist are concentrated in the urban cities, their repertoire is mainly elitist and their ticket prices are out of the reach of ordinary Kenyans.

## CHAPTER 2: MALI

### 2.1 Historical Overview

Theatre in Mali has very ancient origins and has since time immemorial been intrinsically linked to the development of Malian society. One particular form, the Koteba, began in the fourteenth century in the Bamana kingdom. At that time, King Bambara of Ségou, known as Da Jara, established a festival celebrated throughout the kingdom each year after the harvest, which involved the Maribayassa, the fetish symbol of Mariba and his wife Yassa, a couple who laboured greatly in life and who women ask to help them in times of trouble, such as a serious illness, sterility, to outwit a humiliating lie and so on. The women swear an oath and when they are satisfied and want to express their joy and gratitude they dance the Maribayassa, dressed in rags and using pieces of calabash as drums and musical instruments. They go around the village, finally stopping at the rubbish heap where they throw off their rags in memory of the couple and don other clothes before returning home. Bambara rituals, such as this, as well as various others, gave rise to the Koteba.

The Koteba is a secular drama, performed without masks, which consists of improvised satire about anti-social elements in the community, such as lazy or wicked farmers. Its function is to bring about a change of behaviour in the community, or a cleansing of society. Based on oral tradition, Koteba performances were held in the moonlight, in the main square of the village where the spectators were seated in circles according to age around the Kotèdenw (actors). Another form of traditional theatre, known as Sogolon, is a form of puppet theatre which celebrates the sowing and the harvesting of crops, and fishing. Both these vital forms of indigenous theatre have survived to the present day and they have had a strong influence on contemporary theatre in Mali. This is the case despite the fact that during the period of colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these forms of expression were often used by the colonial power to advance its ideology, and its policy of economic and cultural domination.

The 1950s were a decisive period in the Malian peoples' struggle for liberation from colonial rule. These years were characterised by a bubbling cultural cauldron which reflected the awakening of a national consciousness amongst young intellectuals who would constitute the vanguard in the fight for independence. No cultural medium worked better than theatre during this time to give impetus to nationalist tendencies in Africa generally, and in Mali in particular. Song and dance performed by griots (epic singer/poets) played a significant role in educating the people about nationalist opposition to French rule.

During the first years of independence, the political authorities in Mali promoted tra-

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ditional theatre, enhancing its capacity and employing artists in the National Ensemble and the Association for Traditional Artists, in part to assist in their policy of nation building. Artistic weeks were organised each year where current national concerns were dealt with by the artists in song, dance and dramatic theatre.

In the 70s and 80s, however, the government changed its approach and Malian theatre was subjected to censorship and other constraints, depending on the objectives of the governing regime. The ruling party during this period, The Democratic Union of the People of Mali (UDPM), had decided to promote the rights of women and children, including through theatre sketches which it put on during national festivals and other official events. The women's group within UDPM used the theatre as a means to convey its messages, the goal being to improve the lives of Malian women. However, as a result of its openly embracing this struggle, this group was often the victim of censorship, denied permission to travel around the country and even banned from appearing on national television. This is representative of women's freedom of expression through theatre in Mali under the regime of the Second Republic. At the same time, women's access to information was very limited.

In 1978, the national theatre company, the Groupe Dramatique, re-established the Koteba as a theatrical form in order to reach a public which had drifted away from the theatre because the works performed were either conventional European ones or the works of African literary artists, usually written in French, which did not attract the general Malian public. At this point, the Koteba left its public, open-air venue and took its place in more formal, presentational theatre settings. Biannual Artistic and Cultural events replaced the Cultural Weeks, but the original themes were preserved through these events until the advent of democracy, in March 1991.

With the coming of democracy, the theatre and playwrights were finally liberated as freedom of expression and freedom of initiative were now guaranteed. The mission of the new generation of Kotedenw is to raise awareness, inform and educate the public, since theatre is the most effective way to reach a population which is largely illiterate. The Koteba now plays a different, more socially active role, which could not flourish in the absence of respect for the right to freedom of expression.

## 2.2 Legal Provisions

Social life in Mali is based on tradition where a person expresses himself in accordance with the status assigned to him, so there has always been some right to freedom of expression,

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including for Malian women. With the advent of democracy in 1991, however, freedom of expression was formally guaranteed in Article 4 of the Constitution of the Third Republic, adopted on 25 February 1992, which stipulates:

*Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship, opinion, expression, and creation in respect to the law.*

Articles 7 and 8 of the Constitution are also relevant here, stipulating:

*Article 7:*

*Freedom of press is recognized and guaranteed.*

*This is expressed according to the conditions defined by law.*

*Equoorganization; that organization shall define the laws which assure such access.*

*Article 8:*

*Freedom of artistic and cultural creativity is recognized and guaranteed. This freedom shall be carried out according to the conditions defined by law.*

These rights are, however, only guaranteed within the framework of the law, so the State still has the power to restrict these rights, as long as it does so by law.

The Constitution also guarantees equality between men and women, paving the way for the establishment of several women's associations and NGOs, so promoting the blossoming of women at all levels and the creation of several women's or mixed theatre groups.[J M4]

## 2.3 Contemporary Theatre Activity

### **A. General**

Theatrical creativity in Mali, if lacking in financial resources, has extremely rich roots in an oral tradition which nourishes theatre and enables the development of dramatic art through improvisation, all for the benefit of the public, regardless of culture or age. Theatrical activity in Mali is characterised by its diversity and it is primarily based on theatre for development, commonly known as "useful theatre" (théâtre utile). Within the framework of "useful theatre", in addition to plays, the groups usually present sketches, almost always in national languages and mainly to rural audiences.

### **The Nyogolon Theatre Troupe**

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Created in 1985 by young graduates of the National Institute of Arts (INA), Nyogolon is the leading private theatre group in Mali. The group was able to create a new path for itself, which it calls 'useful theatre', a modernised form of the Koteba which aims at raising public awareness of the issues facing different communities.

Among its many challenges, Nyogolon had first of all to promote acceptance of the presence of women on stage. Of the 6 permanent members of Nyogolon, 2 are women and they take an active part in the activities of the theatre, while also attending to their role as mothers. In addition to its 2 actresses, Nyogolon relies on dozens of professional actresses for special occasions and performances.

Today, Nyogolon is sought after to convey the messages of national and international institutions which operate in various community development fields in Mali. It has already held more than three hundred performances since it was formed, including in other West African countries and in some European countries.

The Women and Development Project (PROFED), financed by the Mali Textile Development Company's (CMDT) Gender and Development Programme, for example, produced a 60-minute play in collaboration with the Nyogolon group on the theme of freedom of expression for women in the home. The play entitled *Baroni*, which means small talk, was performed in more than 600 villages and was later broadcast on national television. The play made an important contribution towards combating certain detrimental traditional attitudes.

Presently, the group is preparing a play on the consequences of female circumcision (female genital mutilation), with financing from World Vision, Mali. Some of the other topics tackled by the group are promoting literacy and reading at village level, the use of clean drinking water, child vaccination, polio re-education, the prevention of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, rice growing, the burden of poverty on women, women's rights in the home and in the village, decentralisation, capacity building in community health centres, corruption, savings and child trafficking.

Nyogolon obtains financing from a range of different bodies including the Ministry of Health, the Netherlands Embassy, the International Forum, the Ministry of Education, the Department of the Environment, the Panafrican Women's Organisation, World Vision and the French Co-operation Department. Despite this, Nyogolon, like most theatre groups in Mali, faces problems of a material and technical nature, as well as censorship and harassment from some conservative communities.

After the Koteba was transferred to the stage, the theatre took on a new lease of life



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and there are about thirty theatrical groups, professional and amateur in Mali, four of which are made up entirely of women.

The So, the Don, the Donko troupe and the Nyogolon players are notable professional theatre groups, although a number of other groups have fallen victim to economic hardship and no longer exist. The main financial backers for these groups are those NGOs who wish to convey awareness messages. Due to a lack of resources, professional companies which do not exist on an ongoing basis often come together on an *ad hoc* basis for a particular performance, directed by a specific person, at the request of one or another organisation. The Do and Nyogolon troupes, among other professional theatre companies, give hundreds of performances throughout the country tackling various topics such as health, education, the environment, and so on.

Alongside these professional companies, there are a number of amateur groups, such as Danayaso, made up entirely of prostitutes, Benkadi, based at Yanfolila, Kolondièba, supported by Helvetas, a Swiss NGO, and the Badenya players, based in Sikasso. Most professional and amateur groups are only operational during the dry season because, during the rainy season, there is too much work to be done in the fields and there is no time left over for activities like theatre. As a result, the rainy season is a 'dead' season for the theatre in Mali.

### **B. Women's Groups**

A social revolution is presently underway in Mali, as private theatre companies explode the myth of inferiority which women have for centuries endured. In the past, female *griottes* could only raise their voices in front of men to sing their praises<sup>[J M5]</sup>, songs which were handed down from one generation to another in order to pass on the history of the country. With the advent of the concept of "gender and development", women have finally realised that they have an important place in society. Women understand that this does not consist only of cooking or caring for children and men, but that they are equal to men and play a complementary social role to them. Decentralisation, which allows for a certain degree of autonomy to be enjoyed by various Mali communities, has led to new opportunities for women to enjoy their right to freedom of expression. A new wind is blowing for women and for the theatre in Mali.

In the Koteba era, only men could be Kotèdens (actors) and all female roles were played by men dressed up as women. It was only with the reinstatement of the National Institute of Arts (INA) in 1974 that women were permitted to perform on stage. Currently, as well as the four theatre groups made up of women, there are two female directors who teach

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in the Dramatic Art Department of the National Institute of Arts in Bamako, as well as two women who manage a theatre company. It is estimated that today some 120 women are involved in the theatre in Mali. The association of professional actresses of Mali (ASCO-PROMA) took the initiative of forming a private theatre company to tackle the problems faced by Malian actresses, but this venture did not survive due to lack of funds.

Some of the key topics handled by theatre groups addressing women's issues are mother and child health, schooling for girls, female adult literacy, the role of women in the electoral process, gender and development, HIV/AIDS awareness, care for those living with HIV/AIDS, child trafficking, malaria prevention, clean drinking water in areas bordering the river, involving women in the management of village life and associations, participation of women in community health care, the dangers of self medication, circumcision and women's rights.

The four women's theatre groups are:

Ntènènin is a group of 88 women in the village of Baguinéda to the North East of Bamako. Composed only of rural women, who generally undertake various activities outside of theatre, including farming, Ntènènin puts on small sketches depicting everyday life, addressing issues such as married life, vaccination of the children, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and so on. They deal with topics of concern to them and take their plays to all the 19 villages which make up Badinguè.

Badenya, of Sikasso, is a women's theatre group which was founded in order to give women a voice in that region. This group puts on performances on various topics of concern to woman in the Sikasso area, including HIV/AIDS, circumcision, malaria, child trafficking, pregnancy monitoring, women's rights and so on.

Danayaso is a theatre group made up entirely of former prostitutes. Mrs. Bagayogo, co-ordinator of the Danayaso project, sees it as having come into being in an atmosphere of respect for freedom of expression. The prime objective of the group is to raise awareness amongst prostitutes and to help them find other income-generating activities, with the idea of contributing to community education in Mali by promoting changes in behaviour. The women of the Danayaso troupe use the theatre to break the taboo of exploring sexual attitudes. When producing the play on HIV/AIDS, for example, they conducted a brainstorming session intended to develop and enrich the story, under the direction of Mr. Adama Traoré. Each of the prostitute-actresses related incidents they or their girlfriends had experienced and these slices of life were then put together into a play. The group, sponsored by NGOs, gave more than

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forty performances in brothels which were followed by discussion sessions. After the resounding success of this tour, they created another play about female circumcision and other forms of mutilation, which was equally well received.

With the Benkadi players, the women of Kolondièba initiated another experiment to accompany the process of decentralisation. This group continues to play in the rural communes of Kolondièba and Yanfoila with the support of the Swiss NGO Helvetas.

In addition to these theatre companies, there is also the Association of Professional Actresses of Mali (ASCOPROMA), comprising some thirty professional players, which is active in promoting the interests of its members. [J M6]More female than male students are now enrolled in the Dramatic Arts Department of the INA, with some 35 female and 22 male students in the 4 classes.

In addition, many NGOs and other organisations have realised the potential of theatre in assisting in the process of emancipating women. The theatre companies in Mali, therefore, are in great demand for their contribution to public awareness campaigns on issues of concern to women.

### 2.4 Role of Popular Theatre

Theatre is above all an art form through which one can express one's thoughts and views without restraint. It is also recognised by Mali NGOs as being an effective communication tool because it conveys a message, it teaches and it also entertains, all at the same time. It is able to reach out to everyone because it uses national languages. NGOs employ theatre because it has a strong impact on the masses, making it possible to educate, to inform and to promote changes in social behaviour.

According to Mrs. Traoré Oumou Touré, executive secretary of the Council for Women's Associations and NGOs of Mali (CAFO):

*The theatre appears to be an effective channel of information which is to be encouraged,*

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*because it is through laughter that one is better able to reach an audience. It must be said that, with the NGOs who work with rural women through awareness programmes in the form of theatre, a great step forward has been taken with regard to information. And so more and more women are speaking up and expressing themselves in organised meetings... The women of Mali are gradually awakening. The entire country is taking up the struggle, they are trying to organise around a co-ordinated effort. They are trying to participate in all the issues of concern to their communities.*<sup>30</sup>

The Association for the Promotion and Defence of Women's Rights (APDF), whose president is Mrs. Fatoumata Siré Diakité, recognises that even though fundamental freedoms are expressly guaranteed in Mali, in practice, and taking into account cultural impediments, women do not fully enjoy freedom of expression. To help address this problem, APDF uses theatre as a way to promote speaking out in public in order to overcome the fear and prejudice which prevents women in rural areas from expressing themselves. From there, APDF works to encourage rural women to debate, to defend their point of view and to uphold their ideas. It is eleven years since the APDF began to educate and inform women through the medium of theatre of their rights under national and international law.

The Mali Association for the Support and Guidance of Traditional Practices (AMSOPT), which fights female genital mutilation and other harmful practices, also uses the theatre to raise awareness among the principal players involved. Mrs. Sidibé Kadidia, Director of AMSOPT, maintains: "Today, even hunters who are the medicine men and defenders of cultural practices are helping us in the fight against circumcision. Thanks to the messages conveyed through the medium of theatre, which make us laugh while making us aware."<sup>31</sup>

According to Mrs. Coulibaly Tata Djiré, head of the Gender Department at CMDT, a textile development company, the Women and Development Project (PROFED) chose the theatre to support the Information Education Communication programme in part because of the limited availability of other forms of communication in Mali. Mrs. Lalaïcha Dicko runs PROFED programmes in the rural area of Bougouni. With more than 10 years experience in the field of rural development and the fight to promote women's rights, she notes that they resorted to theatre in order to breathe new life into this issue. To arouse community spirit amongst rural women, Mrs. Dicko points out: "One must recognise that there is an organisational dynamic on a social level depending on tradition, and this enabled us to put on a fabu-

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Mrs. Touré on 24 June 2002. CAFO is the federation of various women's organisations in Mali. It covers some 1000 associations and NGOs.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mrs. Kadidia on 25 June 2002.

lous performance in the context of the Gender and Development programme which greatly contributed to the blossoming of women in the CMDT areas which were visited by the Nyogolon Group”.<sup>32</sup> According to Mrs. Dicko, the first public meetings on the subject of gender, before they started using theatre, gave rise to some controversy. With theatre came better mass mobilisation of all levels of society. First of all, the performance itself brings people together. But most significant is the interpretation of the play in the homes and families from one village to the next. Theatre brought peace and harmony between two villages where previously there had been discord for years.

### 2.5 Challenges

Theatre, like all spheres of artistic and cultural endeavour, generally faces many problems and, in Mali, this is particularly true for women’s theatre. These problems – material, social and technical – constitute major barriers to the development of women’s theatre.

#### ***Material Constraints***

Studies show that Mali boasts virtually no halls which meet modern theatre standards. The French Cultural Centre has a small 200-seater hall but other venues are concert halls. The halls in the eight regional capitals are mainly cinemas which may be converted for different types of activities, including theatre. In the remote areas of Mali, performances are held in the open-air. There is also a pressing lack of transport for the actors who have to travel from one location to another to perform, as well as a lack of costumes, sets, sound systems, lighting and props.

There is also a serious problem of funding for theatre, a matter which actresses experience all too often since theatre in Mali rarely provides actresses with a living. Mrs. Catherine Koné is in charge of the Douga troop, consisting of both male and female professional actors, currently fighting for its financial survival. Mrs. Koné notes: “Being a female manager of a theatre company in Mali, is a problem in its own right. I’ve had to negotiate, bargain and plead just to secure some small funding from the Support Programme for Decentralised Cultural Initiatives (PSIC)”.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Mrs. Dicko on 29 June 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Mrs. Koné on 10 July 2002. The PSIC is part of the Cultural Policy Support Programme of Mali which is covered under Finance Agreement No. 6220/MLI between the European Commission and Mali. Its two over-arching objectives are to promote local cultural development and to provide support for the arts. It also specifically targets emerging, decentralised cultural players (municipalities, cultural organisations, arts groups, cultural entrepreneurs) able to devise and manage cultural projects which will contribute to cultural development at the local and national levels.

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Jigiya, a young theatre group made up of children and working youngsters (EJT) under the sponsorship of ENDA TIERS MONDE, financed by Jubilee 2000,<sup>34</sup> often appears at seminars and conferences organised by NGOs or women's associations (for example, CAFO). Its repertoire includes topics such as the condition of working children, begging, the effects of foreign debt on workers, lack of basic commodities, the effect of commercial farming on food crops, street children and HIV/AIDS and the household shopping basket. Mrs. Traoré, the manager of this group, has noted: "We are always looking for funds to be able to tour into the remotest corners of Mali."<sup>35</sup>

### **Social Constraints**

One of the most serious problems facing women in the theatre is social prejudice and women in the theatre are not generally viewed in a positive light by Malian society. One aspect of this is that the public tends to confuse the character being played on stage with the real character of the performer. Amongst other prejudices is the popular belief that women on stage expose themselves to men. As a result, they were not respected and were instead looked upon as women of easy virtue: no self-respecting man could ever marry an actress. Even if, in general, the social milieu for women in theatre begins to "look at them differently and with a little more respect, the actress does not have a good press".<sup>36</sup>

Mr. Ousmane Sow is a writer, director and professor of dramatic art at INA. According to Mr Sow, when one speaks of the freedom of expression of women artists in Mali today, one needs first to educate the public:

*I know that today the Malian public cannot make the distinction between the role played by the actress and her real-life persona. This immediately denigrates the artist. There is still much progress to be made before the concept of women's freedom is accepted throughout Mali. I write my book, without a second thought for the total freedom of expression I enjoy, and that is thanks to democracy. Like any writer, I am a slave to my subject and the canvas of my work, and we take great advantage of this freedom of expression in our dramatic works.*<sup>37</sup>

Another problem is pregnancy, which can remove women from the stage for long periods. In some cases, women are even obliged to give up the theatre altogether in favour of their

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<sup>34</sup> An NGO which works to have the foreign debt of poor countries cancelled.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Mrs. Traoré on 20 June 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Mr. Sow on 6 July 2002.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

home duties. The Nyogolon group has started to challenge these prejudices and increasingly one sees women in theatre being appreciated and respected by those around them.

### **Technical Constraints**

There are approximately forty theatre groups in Mali, of which only six are made up of professional actors and these employ just twelve women on a permanent basis. The other companies are made up of amateurs, and these companies generally use a great number of women. Not all of these women are skilled in acting, or have any formal theatre training, and this affects the overall quality of their work.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The theatre in Mali today is an important tool with which to raise public awareness. Given the high illiteracy rate in Mali, theatre is a highly effective means to exchange ideas, communicate, raise awareness, inform and educate the public. The theatre is also more attractive to local people than seminars or meetings, in part because it is a scene of giving and receiving. It allows women to speak out and today, thanks to the many theatre groups, rural women can finally express publicly what they feel, in a language that their friends and neighbours understand. Theatre allows us to express ourselves, while making us laugh. Theatre has assisted women in their struggle for liberation, by helping them express themselves through the characters they create on the stage.

It is now widely recognised by NGOs and other institutions, including international bodies, that there is a need to place greater focus on women in their development plans. All agree that, “any development action, in whatever country, must first go through the women”.<sup>38</sup> Women, and women’s associations, are now starting to achieve their goal of equality. A good number of women, for example, have been able to obtain positions of responsibility. In the last government, before the 2002 general election, there were 6 women ministers to 17 men. In 1999, there were 18 women in the National Assembly out of a total of 147 members whereas in 1992, there were only 3. There are now eleven female mayors in rural communities, in the very heart of conservative Mali.<sup>39</sup> It is remarkable that finally today in Mali, as the statistics above show, a rural woman can represent a whole village at a meeting and return to make her report before a united village.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Mali musow kun kow foli seben*, Commission for the Promotion of Women, pp. 8-9.

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Women's associations and organisations have sprung up all around the country. Their activities cover the spectrum of information, education and communication, and many use theatre to convey their messages. This, in turn, has given birth to several small theatre companies for women, even in very rural locations. These groups normally go on tour in their target areas during the dry season, between December and May.

Respect for freedom of expression is essential to the success of the goals espoused by these groups; this freedom enables citizens to publicly expose the social problems and issues the population has to contend with, with a view to finding concrete solutions. Today this freedom is fully exploited by female actresses who have become a reference point because, through them, all other women are reflected. Through theatre, the woman in Mali invites her fellow sisters to take the initiative, to educate herself and equip herself to be able to assert and promote her rights. This ongoing struggle, embraced by actresses in Mali, has helped women to cast off the cultural constraints which have restrained them for so long. The theatre, as a reflection of society, awakens women as well as men to their aspirations.

There is no doubt that women in Mali are fighting actively to have their rights to freedom of expression and access to information respected, through theatre and in other ways. The presence of women mayors, more numerous in rural areas, of women ministers and parliamentarians and other responsible positions filled by women, has shown the potential of Malian woman. This study confirmed that women do, formally, enjoy freedom of expression in Mali. This has given them the opportunity to be more active in theatre, creating a new focus and vision for theatre and challenging the prejudice associated with women in the theatre. The theatre is today finally open to women who are able, as a result, to express themselves freely.<sup>[J M7]</sup>

In effect, theatre has provided a means of communication which is starting to make the right to freedom of expression, demanded for so long, a reality for Malian women. Communicating inside and also beyond one's community is finally possible. It is now widely recognised, by actors as well as spectators, that theatre is an essential tool for promoting effective respect for the right to freedom of expression for women in Mali, despite the various constraints – of a material, technical and cultural nature – which it faces.



## CHAPTER 3: DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)

### 3.1 Historical Overview

Congolese theatre has its origins in various sources including myths, legends, and collective social experiences which were presented in the form of a ritual drama. If Western theatre, from which we draw the didactic model, revolves around real-life social experience presented in the form of discursive reasoning subdivided into dialogue, scenes and acts, African theatre, in contrast, normally revolves around a mythological, legendary, collective social experience, presented in the form of a ritual, collective drama. In this regard it is thus much closer to the origins of early Greek theatre.<sup>40</sup> A theatrical element was already apparent in early Congolese society, through the representation of a dramatic story or religious ceremony to honour the gods.

These early rites and customs cannot alone, however, explain the origins and evolution of Congolese theatre so we must look for this history in the notion of “popular entertainment”, a much broader concept than theatre per se. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), popular entertainment was already an established tradition before the arrival of Europeans.<sup>41</sup> It was more than a simple requirement to celebrate events such as a birth, a death, a marriage or the enthroning of a chief, all of which were associated with special rites which ended in local festivals (i.e. entertainment). All these rituals were followed by popular entertainment in which all the inhabitants of the village, and sometimes of neighbouring villages, took part.

A number of special rites may be noted including the Nkhanda, practiced by the Yaka and the Tshokwe of Bandundu, the Masobo, practiced by the Luba of Katanga, the Kuigula, practiced by the Bashi of Kivu, the Bikasa, practiced by the Luba of Kasai and the Bugalengi, practiced by the Babindji of Kasai. Mr. Kindu describes the Khanda ritual amongst the Yaka in these terms:

*One whole month was devoted to hunting and dancing. The entire village danced each evening in honour of those about to be circumcised.... This display lasts a whole day, a day without working for the organising village. They (the initiates) go from village to village presenting a series of spectacles, mainly the ritual Nkhanda dance. It can last one or two months in total and two or three days in each village.<sup>42</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> D. Midzgoriski, *Art du Spectacle Africain* (Bandundu: CEEB, 1980), pp. 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Nguisi Ngumponya-Bonzanga, *The Birth and Evolution of “Popular Entertainment” During Colonial Times in Kinshasa* (Kinshasa: INA, 1983-1984).

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Nguisi in *ibid.*

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A Belgian writer, M.J. Jadot, confirms that this type of performance was “not art for art's sake or for the sake of the artist, but follows traditional, religious, magical, social or political dictates.”<sup>43</sup> The arrival of Europeans in the Congo in 1885 under the authority of the Independent State of the Congo, as well as Belgian colonisation, lead to the suppression of the popular performances described above. The Belgians believed that the popular shows enjoyed by the Congolese people were not intended to entertain but were instead a reflection of their culture which could thus arouse the collective conscience. The colonial power routinely suppressed any public gatherings of the Congolese people, regarding them as a potentially disturbing influence on the established order. As a result, Congolese acrobatic games, animated dances, traditional races and fights, which have never been studied in depth, were neglected and even relegated to the very bottom of the merit scale.<sup>44</sup>

In 1944, on the initiative of the colonial power, cinema shows, along with sketches and games, were organised in the open air in large cities such as Leopoldville (Kinshasa) and Elizabethville (Lubumbashi). These performances were not based on specific topics but rather their aim was to entertain, and occasionally to educate, the masses. Through these shows, the icons of Congolese theatre – people like Ngombe and Mongita – were discovered. They were the real crowd-pullers among the performers when they visited the towns and cities of DRC.

With the publication of the African Consciousness Manifesto in 1956, and with political independence in 1960, there was an evolution in “popular entertainment” and the country saw the birth of several forms of theatre – including school theatre, university theatre and amateur theatre – although there was still no professional theatre. Only the Sambolé Popular Theatre, under the direction of Maestro Ngombe (known as the Bull), had any real structured form.

The Congolese government gradually created several institutions able to provide training for performers and to promote their companies, namely the National Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (1967), Lokole Productions (1969) and SONECA<sup>[J M8]</sup> (1969). During this period, theatre companies born out of various secondary school and university drama groups blossomed. Examples include the Mwondo Theatre, in Katanga, the Théâtre de Mille, in Matadi, the Little Negro Theatre, in Kikwit, and the Theatre on the Hill, at the old Lovanium University in Kinshasa.<sup>45</sup> The Little Negro Theatre in Kikwit, created and directed by

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<sup>43</sup> M.J. Jadot, quoted by Nguisi, *African writers of the Belgian Congo and Rwanda-Urundi* (Kinshasa: INA, 1983-84), p.13.

<sup>44</sup> Muka Muyombo, *The Pinnacle of Zairian and African Sport*, quoted by Nguisi, note 41, p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Mila Bosinga, *Problem of Admission of an Actor to the INA Within the National Theatre* (Kinshasa: INA Research study, 1988-1989).

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Mikanza, was so successful when it was invited to perform in Kinshasa that its director was engaged and given an overwhelming mandate to create a theatre company in Kinshasa. This led to the birth of the Congolese National Theatre (TNC) in 1969, which has made its mark both nationally and internationally.

In August 1973, the Congolese government resurrected the National Institute of Arts (INA) out of the ashes of the National Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and shortly afterwards, in 1977, the INA set up a Centre for the Promotion of the Arts (CEDAR), aimed at creating links between its principal function, namely teaching, and research. Since that time, numerous stage actors and cultural workers have been trained and some, in turn, have created local theatre companies. The INA has thus effectively served as the nursery for dramatic art in the DRC, to the benefit of Congolese society.

As with the Malaika theatre, which experienced great success in the 1980s, today, thanks to the support of institutions such as INA and university arts faculties around the country, there are many professional actors who promote drama groups. Beyond those promoters, who have had drama training, there is a veritable blossoming of so-called popular or street-theatre groups who excel at all sorts of improvisation, adapted to every occasion.

### 3.2 Legal Provisions

Congolese women are guaranteed equality with men under the Constitution of the DRC, which states: “All Congolese people are entitled to equal rights and dignity.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore:

*All Congolese people are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection under the law.*

*No Congolese person may, in the matter of education and access to public office or in any other matter, be subject to a discriminatory measure, whether resulting from a law or an executive act, on the grounds of his religion, tribal affiliation or ethnic background, gender, birthplace, residence or political convictions.*<sup>47</sup>

However, despite this general constitutional guarantee, which takes formal precedence over other national legislation, there are a number of legal limitations on the rights of married women. In general, the legal status of women under Congolese law is the same as for men, except for the case of married women who fall under the legal incapacity regime, according to which they may undertake certain activities – such as being in business, being a party to legal proceedings or even simply submitting valid legal documents – only with the permission

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<sup>46</sup> Article 27, par. 1

<sup>47</sup> Article 11 of the Transitional Constitution Act, April 1994.

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of their husbands. In contemporary Congolese society, many people are critical of these provisions, calling them unconstitutional and noting that they stifle the initiative of married women.

An example of the legal incapacity regime is Article 215 of the Congolese Family Code, Law No. 87/010 of August, 1987, which specifies:

*The legal capacity of the married woman is subject to certain limitations in terms of the present law.*

Article 448 of this law goes on to stipulate that:

*The wife must obtain the permission of her husband on all legal documents which require her to provide a service that must be given in person.*

The right to freedom of expression is also guaranteed under Congolese law. Article 8 of Law No. 96/002 of 22 June 1996 governing the press in the DRC, declares:

*Every individual has the right to freedom of thought and expression. Freedom of thought and expression is understood to mean the right to inform, to be informed, to have one's opinions and feelings and to communicate them without hindrance, regardless of the medium used, subject to observance of the law, public order, the rights of others and accepted standards.*

This law applies to both men and women without discrimination. It establishes that the right to one's own opinion and the freedom to express it is an inalienable right and no-one may be permitted to stifle, prevent or undermine this freedom. This right is also guaranteed by the constitution, which also, however, provides for limitations on this right, for example to protect law and order and accepted moral standards. Although the preservation of the State, as guarantor of human rights, justifies certain limitations on this right, the problem remains of how to define the boundaries beyond which neither law and order nor the safety of the nation can justify restrictions on freedom of expression.<sup>48</sup>

There is, unfortunately, a difference between the wording of the constitution and laws, on the one hand, and daily reality on the ground, on the other. For example, repressive extra-

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<sup>48</sup> Ntirumenyerwa M. Kimonyo, "The UN system for the Protection of Human Rights: Protection Mechanisms Established by the United Nations Charter, ECOSOC, HRC, UNHCHR", in *Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law*, (Kinshasa: University of Kinshasa Press, 1999), p. 80.

judicial measures may be taken against those who articulate views that do not coincide with, or that challenge, those of the authorities. However, in the field of theatre, no case of arrest or questioning seems to have occurred as the result of remarks made by an actor on stage.

### 3.3 Contemporary Theatre Activity

#### *A. General*

Theatrical activities in the DRC fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, and more particularly the Department of Arts and Culture.<sup>49</sup> As the result of the current economic crisis, which is more pronounced because of the war, the Congolese government no longer has funds to promote artistic endeavours. Any protection offered by the authorities is now on a purely morale-boosting level. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Culture does encourage private initiatives to promote art in general, and the theatre in particular.

It is difficult at the present time to give the exact number of theatre companies in the DRC because of the war, which makes communication between the provinces difficult. However, in Kinshasa alone there are about forty drama groups, although those which are viable can be counted on one hand. A far greater number of groups have come into existence briefly but then disappear for want of financial support.

Generally speaking, theatre activity in the DRC can be categorised as either conventional theatre or popular theatre, with the popular theatre companies performing in national or local languages and with conventional theatre normally performed in French. The language division means that the general public tends to be more oriented towards popular rather than classical or conventional theatre. Popular theatre also occupies a prime spot on television in urban areas, while classical theatre has largely retained the theatre house tradition. The conventional theatre includes both the National Theatre and the National Institute of Arts Theatre Company, as well as conventional private companies. Plays performed by popular theatre groups are often based on daily events and issues such as polygamy, HIV/AIDS, corruption and the proliferation of religious sects. Although popular theatre deals with contemporary issues, and occasionally overtly political ones, it is not generally participatory, although there are often open discussions after the performances.

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<sup>49</sup> The offices of the Department of Arts and Culture are located on the Avenue de Forces Armées Congolaises, in the Gombe district, Tel. +243 98113 859

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In the past, it was rare to hear drama groups expressing themselves over the airwaves, with the exception of one group, the Mufwankolo troupe from Lubumbashi (Katanga). But with the advent of the new press law in 1996,<sup>50</sup> which had the effect of liberalising both the print and broadcasting sectors, several private television networks have sprung up. Currently, every evening in Kinshasa, there is sure to be a play on one or other of the ten channels and these shows are extremely popular. The *Evangéliste* drama group has star billing status, attracting a large number of viewers around Kinshasa to its regular televised performances (the RAGA network, which broadcasts *Evangéliste*'s plays, is only available in Kinshasa and Brazzaville). *Evangéliste* broadcasts plays on a daily basis, drawing on themes from everyday Congolese life, but also inspired by mystical-religious reality, in the manner of Nigerian films.

The National Theatre Company, the Marabout Theatre, the Ecurie Maloba, the Tam-Tam, the Théâtre des Intrigants and the Congolese Radio and Television Theatre Company (RTNC) are among the so-called professional companies and the actors who perform for these companies are all professionals who make a living only from their art. These companies regularly put on performances in French and in local languages. The RTNC Company is the most well-known because it stages productions for national television which are shown throughout the country.

In the South-eastern province of Katanga, theatre is well developed, with about thirty theatre groups in total and about twenty groups in Lubumbashi alone, the country's second largest city. The Mufwankolo Group is the best known in the province and has been performing in Swahili on national radio and television since the early 1960s. Other groups in Katanga include the Katanga National Theatre, Griffé Theatre, les Elites de Bon Samaritain, Mukuba and Trio Kadiombo. There are also local actors, such as Kadiombo, who generally perform plays in local languages based on stories depicted from daily political and socio-economic life.

From 23 August to 19 September 2002, the National Federation of Theatre in Katanga organised a theatre festival in Lubumbashi. Many theatre groups from the province attended the festival, with groups coming from as far as Kipushi, Likasi and Kolwezi. Groups based in the northern part of the province could not attend due to the conflict situation in that part of the country.

In the Bas-Congo province, the National Federation of Theatre organised a workshop on Theatre Scripts, Performances and Production from 10-13 April 2002, in Matadi, which

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<sup>50</sup> Law No. 96/002 of 22 June 1996 governing the press.

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was attended by about one hundred artists from Bas-Congo and Kinshasa. Theatre groups operating in Bas-Congo province include Nkau, Lotus in Matadi, Les Drageurs in Boma, La Canne Sucrière in Kwilu Nkongo, a town with large sugar cane fields and a big Sugar Cane Company, and the theatre group formed by students at the University of Kongo in Mbanza Ngungu.

Despite the ongoing hostilities that have ravaged the Equateur province, the representative of the National Federation of Theatre in that province, Mr. Marius Bonana, manages to organise some performances from time-to-time. He also attends other theatrical events organised at the national level.

The Bandundu province is well known for hosting the largest number of renowned secondary schools, which have produced a developed school theatre scene. The few non-school based theatre groups in this province include Le Théâtre du Petit Nègre, the Troupe des Masques, the Théâtre Kamikaze, the Théâtre Toupamaros and Kindundu.

The most active and established theatre group in the Kasai Oriental (Eastern Kasai) province is the Troupe Mbongo, which is part of the diamond mining company MIBA. It is located in Mbuji-Mayi, which is where the performances take place.

In the province of Kasai Occidental (Western Kasai), the theatre industry is dominated by a comedian, Bobo Tshibangu, who does solo performances in Kananga and its surroundings.

Due to the war in the eastern part of the DRC, namely North and South Kivu, Oriental Province, and Maniema, information related to theatrical activities in these provinces was difficult to obtain.

The following is an incomplete list of the main theatre groups in DRC, divided into conventional and popular theatre.

### **Conventional Theatre**

- The National Theatre with its two sections:
- Ballet – National (music and dance)
- National Theatre
- The National Institute of Arts Theatre Company

### **Conventional private theatre companies**

- Les Intrigants (political satire)
- Ecurie Maloba (light comedy and social comment)
- Marabout theatre (committed theatre)

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- "M" Majuscule (resistance theatre)
- Les Beijarts (resistance theatre)
- Tam-Tam Theatre (all topics)
- Geteki of the Kimbanguiste Church (socio-religious themes)
- Crasa (committed theatre with political themes)

### Popular Theatre

- Salongo (social reality)
- Simba
- Theatre Plus Masumu (social reality)
- Sans Soucis (socio-religious themes)
- Muyombe Gauche (mystical-superstitious tragedy)
- Evangéliste (religiously inspired actuality)
- Lis Boy (comedy)
- Kadiombo (comedy drawn from social reality)

### **B. Women's Groups**

It is relatively rare to come across an exclusively female theatre group, created by women, and managed and run by them. In so-called resistance theatre, however, one frequently hears women's voices. A recent occasion was at a performance organised on 2 August 2002 in front of the People's Palace in Kinshasa to mark the 4th anniversary of the outbreak of war in the DRC. The director, Mwambay Kalengay, professor at the INA and head of the CRASA theatre company, put on a performance exclusively by women who conveyed a message of peace as the 'mourners' from the INA.

Most of the theatre groups named in this report, although they have both male and female actors, have the capacity to perform with women only. Various schools and colleges for young women also have drama groups, although these groups only put on occasional performances and do not have permanent staff.

There are, however, a number of organised women's theatre companies, as described in the box insert.

#### **The Women Players from the Arts Promotion Centre (FCEDAR/INA)**

FCEDAR is part of CEDAR, the Centre for the Study and Promotion of the Arts, an official State institution run by Mrs. Mavesse Moanda, the first woman graduate of the INA.



FCEDAR works in co-operation with CORFAC, the Guild of Women Performers of the Congo, as well as with various other partners such as the Ministry of Arts and Culture, the Ministry of Social Services and the Family, through the National Council for Women, the Department of Health, the Ministry of Human Rights, UNICEF and the World Health Organisation. These partners provide FCEDAR with the bulk of sponsorship for its activities but support is limited and theatre remains marginalized as a recipient of local or international funding.

FCEDAR aims to raise community awareness by promoting the involvement of women in society and urging the elimination of all forms of discrimination against them. It also produces resistance theatre, performing at special occasions such as socio-political demonstrations, conferences and seminars. FCEDAR also tackles various themes appropriate to the occasion and the context of the moment. For the world day against abuse of women, for example, FCEDAR presents a play reflecting the theme of the day.

### **The Feminata Theatre Company**

The Feminata Theatre Company was created in 2001 by the Jus Cogens Asbl Association with the aim of popularising human rights in general, and women's rights in particular. The group is made up of 12 people, all students at various university colleges in Kinshasa, and is managed by Douglas Nkulu Numbi, a male lawyer.

Feminata puts on a performance every two months. On 10 August 2002, for example, the company presented the play *Panic At Makobola* in the Our Lady of Fatima auditorium in Gombe. The play recounts the socio-legal situation of rural women in the Congo, as well as the impact of the war on women, including the obligation which has fallen on them to manage entire villages on their own because their men-folk have been conscripted into the war effort.

Feminata is funded, among others, by the Department of Arts and Culture, the Ministry of Human Rights, PAREC/the Ecumenical Programme for Conflict Resolution and Peace (University of Kinshasa), the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, the National Council of Women and the High Commission for French-speaking communities.

### **The Etoile Theatre Company**

The Etoile Theatre Company is quite new and is in the process of getting organised so that it can establish itself in a sector virtually unexploited in the DRC, namely, using puppets as

a means to convey messages and entertain. Given the high rates of illiteracy in the DRC, there is great potential for puppet theatre, a genre which has so far been relatively neglected.

The company is managed by Mrs. Malvine Velo Kapita, from the INA, and has 3 actresses. Its aim is to offer anyone keen to become a puppeteer a practical introduction to the art of puppetry, and to contribute to the creation of puppet companies. It is committed to operating without discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, religion or political opinion.

### 3.4 Role of Popular Theatre

Theatre can help communities to overcome violence, trauma from the war and other problems they face. Theatre in the DRC has adapted itself, with a good sense of humour, to various socio-political changes and challenges. Despite many technical difficulties, theatre in the DRC has managed to deal with social prejudices and constraints, and has also effectively eluded official censorship.

Many writers have expressed opinions as to the role of theatre in society. A. S. Toure, in his work *The Cultural Revolution*, maintains that theatre can draw its inspiration from the present by embracing the current realities of the people, in order to extract and extol that which is positive and to condemn negative tendencies which impede the progress of society.<sup>51</sup> According to Sophie Lecarpentier,<sup>52</sup> in recent research work done on theatre in Kinshasa, theatre is a live form of art. It is a media, a means of communication and a means of expressing one's opinion on daily social conditions.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In the DRC, mixed theatre companies are the rule and all-women companies the exception, although a few of the latter do exist. However, women can communicate through theatre in a very specific and personal way. Because of the high rate of illiteracy, the use of national languages as a means of communication in theatre helps to bring the messenger closer to the listener, especially when the latter is from the rural areas.

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<sup>51</sup> *La Révolution Culturelle* (Kinshasa: Patrice Lumumba National Printing Works, 2M Publishing, March 1969).

<sup>52</sup> *Un Théâtre en Devenir*, in Gallimard, Ed., Congo Kinshasa (France : Titouan, 2001).

## CHAPTER 4: ZIMBABWE

### 4.1 Historical Overview

Theatre in Zimbabwe has developed in three stages, namely the pre-colonial period, the colonial period and the pre- and post-independence period.

Performing arts during the pre-colonial period was community oriented and participatory. As a result, women had a significant role to play. In fact, women were the custodians of arts and culture, which they passed on to the rest of the society as they nurtured the children. There was no discrimination in festival dances to celebrate the birth of a child or a good harvest.

During the colonial period, theatre institutions such as the National Theatre Organization (NTO) grouped together “white only” clubs operating from playhouses in the main urban areas – Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, Mutare, Masvingo, Kwekewe and Kadoma, along with a few others – as well as in mining towns. These theatre clubs focused on policies that encouraged a separate cultural life and stressed a common “European heritage”. For example, the practice of bringing adjudicators from Britain for the annual theatre festival was intended to ensure that Rhodesian theatre was consistent with that in Britain. Traditional black theatre was discouraged during the colonial period as local performing arts were seen as a threat to colonial authority.

The colonial powers were correct to be concerned about theatre because performing arts, cultural beliefs, African language and cultural heritage greatly influenced the struggle for independence. For example, in the guerrilla camps in Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia, and in the liberated zones in Zimbabwe, theatre was performed at night to boost morale and as an educational tool to mobilize the masses to support the struggle. The all-night theatre entertainment, called a Pungwe, was accompanied by dances and war songs called *nziyo dzechimurenga* and has been described as “a highly participatory form of cultural celebration, learning and mobilization”.<sup>53</sup>

At independence, theatre was used to dramatize the victory and local languages were used to make it more effective and acceptable. There is, however, very little documentation of theatre performances during this period, probably because of the spontaneous nature of the theatre groups and their low levels of sustainability.

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<sup>53</sup> Ross Kidd, *From People's Theatre for Revolution to Popular Theatre for Reconstruction: Diary of a Zimbabwean Workshop* (The Hague/Toronto: CESO/ICAE, 1984), p. 9.

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After independence, white cultural associations responded to the new policies of reconciliation with extreme caution. Over time, the urban theatre playhouses started to bring in black artists in order to 'promote' nationalism and to continue receiving support from the new government. There were, however, no significant changes in these associations' objectives and the plays continued to deal with Western themes and content.

By the late 1980's, however, groups such as The People's Theatre, which presented challenging material intended for the Zimbabwean audience, were on the rise and by 1988 the non-participation of many white theatre clubs in the NTO symbolised the changes that were taking place. Another trend in theatre in Zimbabwe through this period was university theatre, which began in 1984. The university productions, which involved both university and non-university people, have addressed diverse themes including the liberation struggle, the struggle for majority rule and the struggle against racism and colonialism.

The development of nationalism in the post-independence period also led to the development of drama clubs in many communities. These groups were often funded by development NGOs to perform theatre around development issues. It was during this time that Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT) was established, along with other associations to coordinate theatre nationally in Zimbabwe

### 4.2 Legal Provisions

In recent years, the Zimbabwean government has acknowledged the importance of women's rights and pledged to advance them. It has made some progress towards ensuring the full development of women, guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the basis of equality with men. The Zimbabwe Constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender. Amendment 14 of 1996 provides:

*No person shall be treated in a discriminatory manner on the grounds of race, tribe, place of origin, political opinion, colour, creed or gender.*

The same amendment further prohibits the enactment of discriminatory laws.

Despite having ratified the Convention on the *Elimination of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), Zimbabwe is yet to pass legislation which incorporates the Convention in its entirety into domestic law. Zimbabwe has, however, made great strides in enacting laws which attempt to improve the lives of women but implementation of some of these laws has been sporadic and selective, which has affected women in theatre as in other spheres of life.

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Parliament has, for example, passed the Sex Discrimination Removal Act and the Labour Relations Act, but discrimination is still rife, even in the theatre industry. As a result of the lack of will to implement laws prohibiting discrimination, women in theatre do not get the same opportunities as men. Evidence of this can be seen in the failure to include women among those selected to attend theatre courses abroad in one theatre group. One of the respondents to the interviews noted: “If a person is to be chosen for overseas training, it always has to be a man, because women easily fall pregnant, there will be no continuity, and the capacity acquired will not be used.”<sup>54</sup>

Despite the government’s formal policy of affirmative action, which encourages increased of women’s participation in most sectors, culture has helped to confine many women to basic household roles and traditional women’s roles in the employment sector. Cultural beliefs and practices, conservative discriminatory male attitudes and government policies that trivialise women’s issues have in certain circumstances seriously undermined constitutional and statutory guarantees of women’s equality. Zimbabwe lacks clear guidelines on the application of customary law, especially when it conflicts with statutory or international obligations.

Zimbabwe’s recent political and financial woes have also added to the hurdles to be overcome to improve the status of women and the advancement of women has also fallen victim to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These factors have affected the advancement of women in all sectors of life including the theatre industry.

Freedom of expression in Zimbabwe is entrenched in section 20 of the Constitution as follows:

*(1) Except with his own consent or by way of parental discipline, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression, that is to say, freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, and freedom from interference with his correspondence.*

The following provisions, however, allow for restrictions on the right to freedom of expression for a variety of interests, including defence, public safety and public morality, as long as these restrictions are reasonably justifiable in a democratic society.

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<sup>54</sup> Information provided during the interviews. The interviewee has requested anonymity.

It became apparent during the interviews and from the responses received from the questionnaires, however, that the average Zimbabwean woman is not aware of the existence of the right to freedom of expression. The few who are aware of this right are wary of exercising it, owing to the political climate prevailing in the country and customary practices which are a part of the lives of a substantial percentage of Zimbabwean women. 55% of those surveyed confirmed that ignorance by women of the law has limited their use of theatre as a means of communication and for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Most questionnaire responses reflected the view that women are not aware of their legal rights and some do not even know about the constitution. One prominent respondent at interviews admitted that, "even media women were known to be oblivious of some of their rights and of the law".<sup>55</sup>

### 4.3 Contemporary Theatre Activity

#### **A. General**

Zimbabwe has a very vital theatre scene. The Zimbabwe Association for Community Theatre (ZACT) is a national organization that has successfully incorporated education into its activities, using theatre as a form of dialogue into all aspects of its theatre making and structure. ZACT uses trainers from the local communities in which the development projects are located and the organization has been vigilant in maintaining a close connection with the communities it works in, despite the international recognition accorded some member theatres. Although ZACT receives a substantial portion of its funding from a Dutch development agency, and smaller monetary and in-kind resources from membership dues, the Zimbabwean government and businesses, it has so far managed to retain its grassroots focus.<sup>56</sup>

The success of community theatre has however been challenged by Western culture, which is accessible through television and films. This is beginning to change, especially among school-going students, who pay very little for performances in both urban and rural areas and who are realizing that theatre can provide both education and entertainment. Theatre is also popular in most rural and high-density locations as a means of communication and of expression through entertainment. Most theatre performances in Zimbabwe are adapted for different places and to suit different occasions. Theatre groups in Zimbabwe focus mainly on contemporary topical issues, with current performances focusing on issues such as land rights, children, women and HIV/AIDS.

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<sup>55</sup> Information provided during the interviews. The interviewee has requested anonymity.

<sup>56</sup> Dale L. Byam, *Community in Motion: Theatre for Development in Africa*. (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999).

### **B. Women's Groups**

Plays that deal with issues relating to women and children have been part and parcel of theatre in Zimbabwe since independence, in part because women and child rights organizations have used theatre to address issues such as sexual abuse of children, rape and violence against women, and women and the law, particularly inheritance and wills, as well as issues related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Due to the high prevalence of cases of child sexual abuse and rape, the Zimbabwean High Court has established friendly victim courts to deal with these issues. Children who have been abused can express themselves in these courts through art, such as drawings, as a way of giving their evidence. Short plays have been used by different organizations and government ministries to educate against child abuse. In addition, theatre is common in the schools as a form both of entertainment and of education. In this context, it has been used to address issues like children's rights to satisfaction of their basic needs, such as education, health and food.

#### **Chembira Women's Theatre**

Chembira Women's Theatre, formerly known as Glen Norah's Women Theatre Group, started in 1990 as an all female theatre group. The purpose of creating a unique, women-only theatre group was to promote theatre among women so that they could express themselves freely and help each other in solving their problems. The group uses theatre for development, for education, to raise awareness of the social problems faced by women in different communities and to explore ways to solve these problems. Chembira Women's Theatre has developed skills in creating theatre pieces on any theme and has worked with various donors on topical children's and women's rights issues such as gender, women and law, teenage sexuality and HIV/AIDS. They generally use their plays to initiate discussion and to elicit active participation from the audience through the integrated use of song, dance and drama. The plays put on by Chembira Women's Theatre have generally been successful and in touch with the communities in which they were staged.

The group has five members, with two of them, Beaular Nyoka and Tisa Chifunyise, having been part of the group since its inception. The group has a treasurer and a national coordinator, and this has facilitated the effectiveness and coordination of the group. When the group started they had twelve women members but most have now left the theatre for other, more remunerative professions, such as teaching and public relations. Despite financial constraints, the group has produced many plays on women's and children's issues.

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Other constraints facing the group include culture, social norms and gender inequality.

The first production put on by Chembira Women's Theatre, *Who is to Blame*, was performed in either English or Shona, depending on the target audience. The play, which was, among other things, performed at the YWCA World Assembly in Norway in 1991, focused on how a young lady overcame prostitution in an urban centre. In 1994, the group produced a play called *Tseu Yaamai*, dealing with women and land rights. Although this play did not go on tour in the rural areas, it was performed at many workshops and provoked discussions at the end of each production. In 2001, the group staged a play on child sexual abuse. The play was taken to clubs, schools and churches in local communities.

Chembira Women's Theatre seeks, among other things, to change negative attitudes towards women theatre artists and to encourage women to use performing arts as a source of livelihood and as a means of communication, particularly among women. It has also addressed a wide range of issues including family law and wills and inheritance, child maintenance, sexual abuse of children, employment, health, education, human rights, violence against women, depression and HIV/AIDS.

Some groups have used theatre to demonstrate the vulnerability of women and to advocate in favour of laws to protect women against sexual harassment in the workplace. Legal organizations have used theatre to question some male chauvinist customs, traditions and dominant cultural attitudes, for example relating to wills and inheritance. An example of this is the Just for Women theatre troupe, which was composed of professional women and was in existence from 1984-1993. One of their prominent productions was called *Waringa*, an adaptation of *Devil on the Cross*, a novel by Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Another group, composed primarily of females, called Vashandi Theatre Group, has been using theatre to communicate messages related to the plight of women in Zimbabwe. It produced a play inspired by the founding members of Women's Action Group (WAG) in response to the roundup by police of women on the streets in the evening, on allegations of prostitution. The theme of the production was that "all women had a right to be in the streets by choice".<sup>57</sup>

Some legal organisations have also used theatre as a research tool, for example to assess levels of knowledge about legal issues. One such organisation which deals with women's issues, Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust (WLSA), confirmed dur-

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Ngugi J. Mirii, Executive Artistic Director, Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre.



ing the interviews that they have successfully used theatre in communities to provoke discussion on issues that affect women and children.

### 4.4 Challenges

Theatre groups in Zimbabwe face a number of serious obstacles and this is even truer for women in theatre. Most of the theatre groups that emerged after independence failed to develop their economic potential in line with the cost of living, particularly as this rose from 1984-1987. 50% of those surveyed felt that theatre is unable to provide groups with sufficient regular income to sustain their families; income comes only after a performance and most of the proceeds are usually needed simply to cover administrative costs. Others were of the opinion that if theatre is properly coordinated, it can provide a sustainable livelihood. The survey indicates that theatre is not generally recognized as a professional industry and, as a result, parents discourage their children from working in theatre.

Most theatre groups are composed of more men than women, with men being particularly dominant in the role of director. Questionnaire respondents revealed that, “women are given positions where they are weak characters, sometimes as sex objects and economically dependent on men”.<sup>58</sup> Most scripts are produced by men, despite the generally-held view that men are less able to express through plays the needs and feelings of women, and this contributes to making it difficult for women to express themselves freely through theatre. One prominent actress noted: “It is better to have women as writers of scripts on gender sensitive issues because they know how we feel as women”.<sup>59</sup> Others disagreed, including one community theatre director who stated: “It is not true that only women can articulate female problems. There are male artists who are extremely gender sensitive such as Pandare whose main objective is to sensitise men on the equality of women and men”.<sup>60</sup>

All the available information, including 70% of those surveyed, confirmed that the role of women in the development of theatre is limited. 25% were of the view that women who find themselves in theatre are labelled as having loose morals and that men are not encouraged to marry them. Only one female theatre group, Chembira Women’s Theatre, was referred to as having been sustainable, as having been successful in expressing women issues and as having worked with various development organizations.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Mrs. Ethel Dhlamini, Lecturer, University of Zimbabwe.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

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A very reputable theatre group in the country, which has managed to survive over time, has about twenty performers, of whom only two are women. 35% of the questionnaire respondents were of the view that women's participation in theatre was limited due to cultural barriers. Several have dropped out due to marriage and pregnancy, whereas others were frustrated by the prevalence of gender inequality. The attitude of men in theatre has also prevented women from using this medium to express themselves freely. Theatre groups do not have policies prioritising the recruitment of women, an important means of promoting gender equity.

### ***Family Obligations***

Ninety seven percent of those surveyed noted that women's obligations in the family have from time immemorial played a role in reducing or hampering women's participation in theatre. Most participants had to choose between the family and participating in theatre. Mrs. Dhlamini, lecturer at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Zimbabwe noted during the interviews: "One of the main reasons for women not staying long in theatre is that family obligations called for most of their attention making it difficult or impossible for them to come for rehearsals and let alone shows". She lamented the fact that marriages and subsequent pregnancies often led to women leaving acting all together. Few women continue to act after getting married, in some cases because their husbands were artists in the same field as well. The same lecturer also noted: "Even though the University of Zimbabwe has theatre arts as one of its subjects, there is no follow-up of graduates, most graduates from theatre classes end up teaching other subjects that are not even related to theatre." This has also contributed to the fact that theatre is not well funded and hence there are relatively few paying theatre jobs.

One prominent and reputable actress, producer, professional and founder of the only women's theatre group in Harare pointed out that even though she enjoys theatre and her academic knowledge is in theatre, "she still has to balance family obligations with her acting but her husband is supportive".<sup>61</sup> After many years of working full-time in theatre, she had to find another full-time job to enable her support her family, although she still occasionally provides support to a women's theatre group.

### ***Social, Religious and Cultural Practices***

Traditional religious beliefs and the lack of social acceptance of women as equal players have been key constraints on women's advancement in theatre, as in other aspects of life. Culture

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Tisa Chifunyise, Actress. It has also been noted by Beulah Nyoka, Actress.

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has shaped the attitudes of both men and women towards theatre. One organisation dealing with women's issues said: "These three factors [social, religious and cultural practices] affected both participation and often the reactions to the theatre production itself".<sup>62</sup> In rural areas, where tradition still plays an important role in people's lives, women often refuse to take part in local dramas, fearing reprisals from members of the community. Cultural, social and religious traditions often dictate that women remain backbenchers. It is interesting to note that although women's theatre often depicts issues that are relevant and pertinent to local women, these same women are critical of female artists because of their negative preconceived notions about women in the arts.

### ***Discrimination Within Theatre***

Approximately 87% of those surveyed were of the view that discriminatory attitudes towards women harboured by fellow male members of theatre groups have done much harm to the level and quality of women's participation in theatre. Women performing in dramas on the electronic media also have a low status. According to one female artist, this has, "lowered the women's self-esteem, resulting in them abandoning theatre. Often, on visiting some theatre groups after a performance, some women are found cleaning up dishes and the premises while the male members are rehearsing."<sup>63</sup> Women in theatre also rarely have the possibility to lodge complaints, since the directors are usually men.

### ***Government Policies***

Government policies have been of limited assistance in promoting women in theatre, despite general policies of affirmative action. The theatre industry has gained limited financial assistance from government and funding agencies, in part because of the economic hardships in Zimbabwe. Even though government has an interest in promoting women's issues, freedom of expression is still under threat. The political climate has resulted in limits on the freedom of expression of theatre groups, although some groups do raise awareness on issues such as violence against women and empowerment of the girl child. Lack of a clear government policy on arts and culture has also undermined the theatre industry.

### ***Economic Constraints***

The current economic crisis in Zimbabwe has had a very negative impact on theatre. Research showed that most women's theatre groups in Zimbabwe have either folded or failed to devel-

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust.

<sup>63</sup> Information provided during the interviews. The interviewee has requested anonymity.

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op, as they are unable to sustain themselves due to the ailing economy. Women use most of their income to look after their families and would, as a result, prefer to be involved in income generating activities than in theatre. Most women interviewed were more worried about financial issues than about freedom of expression and the questionnaires suggested that women working in theatre cannot make a living out of acting as the groups they work with lack funding and are not financially self-sufficient. Most donors have now withdrawn funding from theatre and people are no longer able to afford shows owing to other financial obligations. While some well-established groups have managed to attract affluent members of society to their performances, most groups have been marked by an increasingly low turnout.

### ***Politics***

The theatre industry has not been spared by the political situation in the country. Theatre groups – both male and female – have been reluctant to perform political plays. Vulnerable female groups have shied away altogether from performing in certain parts of the country, in particular those which are a hotbed of political intolerance.

### ***Training and Education***

Close to 55% of the results of the survey showed that little emphasis has been placed on theatre training. Most people who have taken part in acting have never received any formal training. This lack of training was apparent even in some of the theatre productions that have appeared on national television. It is only possible to receive formal training in drama through courses at the University of Zimbabwe, which significantly limits access as only students who have obtained sixth form qualifications can enrol. In practice, however, the majority of actresses are school leavers, some of who are extremely talented.

### ***Documentation and Marketing***

Very limited records have been kept of the performances of most theatre groups, with unfortunate implications for research and marketing. There is some limited marketing of women's theatre groups in Zimbabwe but in general, those groups that do have documentation on their activities have failed to publicise this information. This, in turn, results in a situation where some groups have remained unknown and unnoticed by potential donors. The absence of good records keeping has also meant that there is virtually no self-evaluation done by these theatre groups, which could be an important self-improvement tool.

### 4.5 Conclusion

Theatre is extremely important as a tool of education, development and communication, including on human rights. Although theatre is an effective means of communication, it is not often used to raise awareness about freedom of expression itself, due in part to political intolerance, ignorance of the law, and social and economical factors. Many governments are afraid of the power of the arts and especially of theatre, as the authorities are aware that people can very easily be conscientised through theatre. Once people are aware of their rights, they will fight to have them respected. This helps explain why colonial governments in Africa suppressed the arts, a policy that was continued in most countries after independence.

Most women interviewed were ignorant of their legal rights, including their right to basic needs such as health. Some are not even aware of the constitution, given their low levels of education. Those who are aware of their rights were often not at liberty to practice them, due to factors such as political intolerance, culture and religion. Culture, religion and social expectations have, in particular, restricted the development of women's theatre, inhibiting women's freedom of expression and making it almost impossible to start successful, long-term theatre groups. Gender inequality and discrimination has also confined women to domestic chores and to inferior roles in theatre. Women who do work full-time in theatre are confronted by financial constraints. This is, in part, due to the lack of government policies regarding culture that prioritise the arts as a profession deserving of funding.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Creating a Supportive Policy Framework*

- Governments should put in place a legal and policy framework designed to promote the development of community theatre, and especially theatre for and about women. Theatre should be recognised as a profession that makes an important contribution both to national cultural life and to human rights. Cultural policies should encourage the use of theatre to promote national identity, heritage and pride, as well as the integration of human rights into cultural activities. Gender policies should recognise the potential of theatre to promote the empowerment of women.
- Officials should respect constitutional and legal guarantees of gender equality and of freedom of expression.
- To help create the political will to achieve the above, women and women's groups should use theatre as an advocacy tool.
- Ministries with responsibility for theatre, as well as the one responsible for human rights, should be encouraged to lobby more actively in support of theatre.

### *Funding*

- Alternative sources of funding for community theatre should be explored, particularly to provide support to fledgling community theatre groups. This should involve donors, the private sector, civil society and government.
- Government ministries and donors should be encouraged to provide adequate resources for theatre activities, and in particular for women's theatre.
- Efforts should be made to exploit more effectively the private sector's use of theatre to promote their products to the advantage of community theatre.
- Self-financing initiatives should be encouraged.
- Theatre groups should realize the importance of aggressive marketing and of good documentation of their productions.

### *Networking and Information Sharing*

- Community theatre groups, as well as groups from both the theatre and civil society sectors focusing on women's issues, should develop better information sharing and networking systems.
- Better information on theatre, both nationally and regionally, should be developed.
- Exchanges should be facilitated between female theatre groups in different African countries, as a way of sharing experiences and lessons learned. International organisations and NGOs should be encouraged to support these initiatives.

## Case Studies from Kenya, Mali, DRC & Zimbabwe

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- NGOs and development agencies that use theatre as a tool of communication should facilitate stakeholders meetings among theatre groups.
- Theatre groups should be sensitised about the importance of collaboration.

### ***Training***

- Far more training, and more appropriate and accessible training, should be provided in the area of theatre, and women's theatre in particular. Training should address, in addition to the more traditional theatre subjects, communication, marketing and finances. Where this is not already the case, a specific institution with responsibility for training in the area of theatre should be established.
- Theatre should be integrated into the school curriculum from the primary school level, and it should be given the same importance as other subjects.
- Training opportunities should be provided to women who have shown exceptional courage in becoming actresses, as well as to young actresses who show promise.
- Sub-regional meetings should be promoted with a view to sharing experiences on training. The idea of establishing sub-regional theatre education/training centres should be explored (The Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT) has already proposed the establishment of an International Community Theatre College (ICTC) for the SADC region but this initiative has not yet received funding).

### ***Support for the Profession***

- Civil society organisations should integrate community theatre more systematically and more effectively into their existing programmes.
- Professional bodies should formally recognise theatre artists as professionals.
- International organisations and NGOs should formally recognise the important role of theatre, arts and culture in development, and as a means of ensuring respect for human rights.
- The media should play a more active role in the dissemination of theatre.

### ***Developmental Activities for Theatre Groups***

- More effort should be given to promoting local community ownership of theatre, with a view to spearheading advocacy and educational activities by these communities. Local communities should be sensitised to the potential of theatre as an effective means of communication and to promote freedom of expression.
- Community theatre should be derived from the experience of the target community and should respond to the needs of this community.

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- More productions should be produced which focus on women's and children's issues and more performances of these productions should be staged.
- New ideas for using theatre to promote women's rights, such as puppet theatre, should be explored, particularly in rural areas.