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By way of brief introduction, I am Oluwatoyin Olokodana-James (Ph.D.), a faculty member of the University of Lagos, (UNILAG) Nigeria with the Department of Creative Arts, an associate fellow of the Institute of African Diaspora Studies (IADS - UNILAG), and member/ Principle Investigator of African Multiple Cluster Centre of Excellence, Bayreuth, Germany. My research interests are in African studies, dance ethnography and criticism, film and gender identity in Africa.

MAKOKO – “Slum through Arts to School” Project

Camille Paglia writes:

A society that forgets art risks losing its soul.

Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi notes:

If, one day, the people wills to live, then fate must obey
Darkness must dissipate, and must the chain give way
And he who is not embraced by life’s longing evaporates into its air and fades
away. Woe to one whom life does not rip...
If to a goal I aspire, I pursue the object of desire and prudence obliviate
Neither the rugged canyons will I shun, Nor the gushing of the blazing fire
He who doesn’t like to climb mountains, Will forever live among the hollows...
Aspiration is the flame of life and the essence of victory
If to life souls aspire,
Then fate must obey

This study is drawn from the offering and thematic projections of the poem titled “The will to live” by Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi. To employ resistance performance art, an ethno-social theatrical

activism in the struggle for survival, to verbalize suffering and raise people's consciousness to the existing societal conditions, to mobilize children against government oppression and abandonment through demanding for their civil and social rights, all these fueled by the desire to live as individuals and as one body within the Makoko community in Lagos, Nigeria. With the said motivation being "**Slum through Arts to School**" project within the Makoko area, this type of dance and drama theatre is centered on unmasking evidences of government's negligence and neglect of responsibility towards selfish aggrandizements. Art herein becomes functional beyond aesthetic and entertainment culture employed to educate, create empathy and connections between the rulers and the ruled. Studying about these people, their cultural belief, art and practices, then creating performances with children between ages 5 and 15 to act as catalysts for change within the Makoko community constitutes the feat of the project.

Need I quickly mention at this juncture that it was during my data collection period for my Ph.D study titled "Performance Aesthetics and the Choreographic Patterns of the Ogu People of Badagry, Lagos, Nigeria" that I first came in contact with the Makoko community and the deplorable living conditions of the people. This community being one of the slums in Lagos state is somewhat disconnected from the activities and reality of the cosmopolitan city. This area is noted as a major settlement where people practically 'exists' dwelling in shanties, living round the year surviving on proceeds from the polluted water upon which this community occupy. Lives and living happen within this water submerged environment with dashed hope of government's intervention since the space is believed to either have been sold to one of the topnotch politicians in Lagos or earmarked for demolition following the condition of the place.

Despite the fact that these inhabitants are bonafide citizens, they constantly face threats of eviction; Nigerian government has withdrawn infrastructural supports for this community because Makoko supposedly constitutes a nightmare for the Lagos envisaged megacity. It is in view of this that this study observes that the Lagos state government has failed in her responsibility to the people, hence the need to employ art interventions through qualitative ethnographic research as a catalyst for revolution. Though legal rights though may have been curtailed, it could be reinforced through a non-violent yet pragmatic way of initiating dialogue between the government and the people through art interventions. Creating a platform through

which the people's voices can be heard, particularly of those considered as minors ranging between ages five (5) and fifteen (15) is considered the right path towards navigating the interdisciplinary link between creativity, theatrical intelligence and scholarship. This responsibility we have taken up, to conduct ethnographic research about the community while creating artistic means towards activating and implementing the rights to quality infrastructure and the rights to good life. This study as well as the teaching processes is undertaken by three volunteers, Oluwatoyin Olokodana-James (PhD) in charge of Dance and Drama, Florence Nweke (PhD) in charge of Music, and Chinyere Ndubuisi (PhD) for visual arts, and they are saddled with the responsibility of grooming the selected children in the different art choices.

This dance, music performance and visual art based activism/activism is already an ongoing project which commenced in November 2019 with gathering of primary data within the community and introducing the randomly selected children numbering up to seventy (70) to different dramatic, musical and visual forms. This not only constitutes one of new frontiers of theatre and performance research in urban Nigeria; it fits perfectly into the category of theatrical 'activism' and contributes to the discussion on different dimensions in humanities scholarship. The research and performance approach to this form of activism can be employed in the celebration of the international art education week; it could also be useful in the teaching and theorizing of children's theatre within the academics especially when this focus is art and activism.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



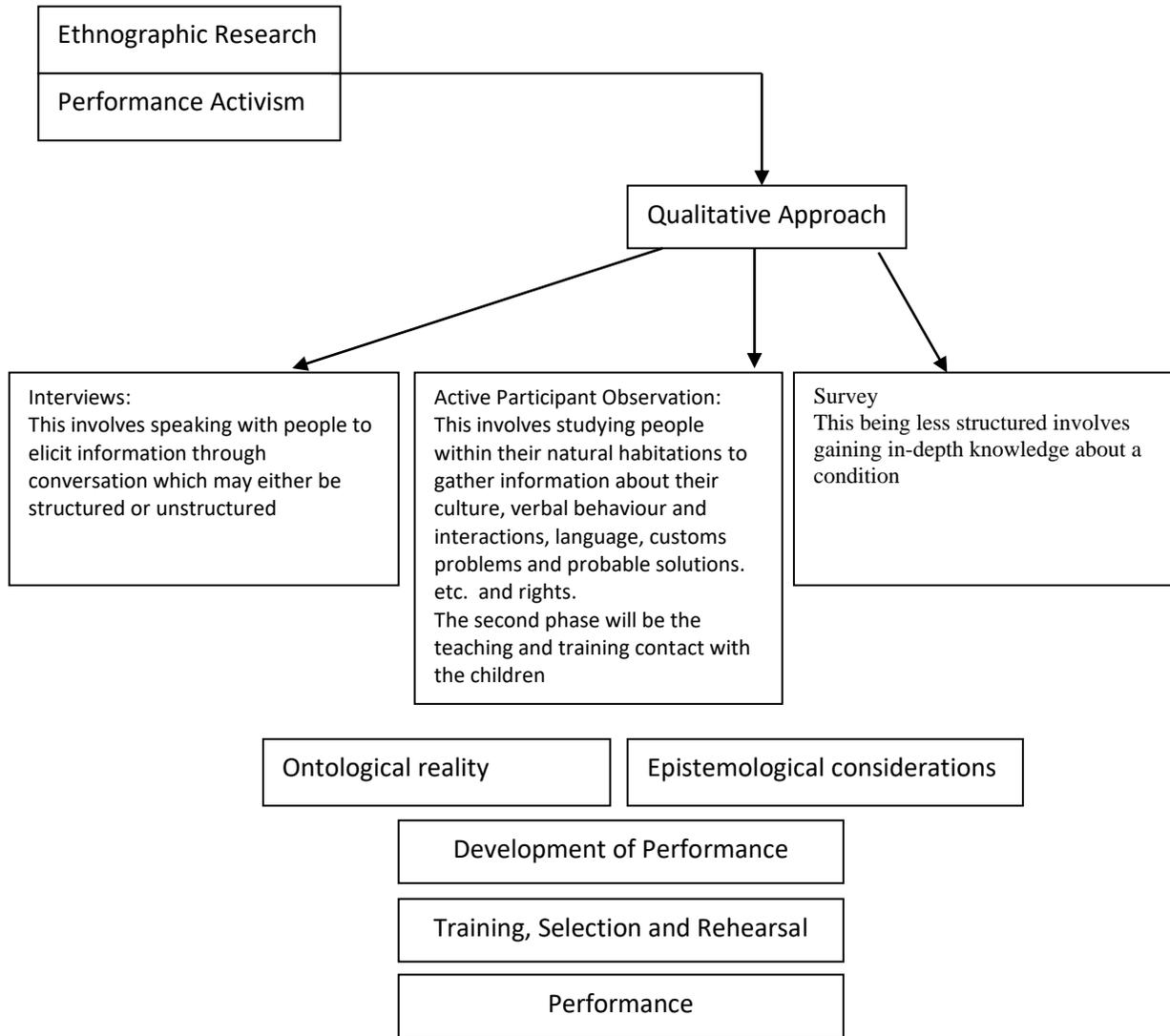
Figure 6

These images show the deplorable condition of the selected community in Makoko, Lagos Nigeria. Figure 1 shows that the only available means of transportation to this site is by canoe through the water ways. The floating school which collapsed in 2018 is pictured in Figure 2 while figure 3,4 and 6 were taken during some of the training sessions. Figure 5 shows the three researchers and volunteers during one of the visit to the selected area prior the commencement of the training.

Methodology

Although the ultimate aim of this project is to lead the children of this slum community through art to school by speaking actively through different arts forms, the process is preceded by

preliminary forms. Therefore, the research methodology for this ethnographic study and dance performance driven activism adopted this paradigm structure;



In view of the ultimate aim and the methodology discussed above, a lecturer, choreographer and professional artiste in person of Oluwatoyin Olokodana-James was saddled with taking up the task for dance and drama training in pursuit of the goal of the “slum through art to school project”. My action amongst others was instigated by the need to children to lead change within their given community, to create a world devoid of children marginalization owing to social class and status of parents and to inspire the ‘art’ of activism in children so that every child is given equal opportunity, confront children stereotypes and oppressive governance, and challenge an

unjust law where it affects the physical and social wellbeing of children as participants of a given society. With this revolutionary agenda and social action, I first came in contact with the community prior the commencement of this specific project in October 2019 and we were well received by the community leadership. To quickly note herein, while the Baale welcomed us with open arms, some members of the community raised a brow because they thought that we had only come to conduct a study which will in turn yield no positive monetary gains for them in the end. This huddle was easily navigated through the help of the Baale who more than anything wanted the children exposed to art on one hand, while on the other hand hoping that an avenue to reaching the government for the betterment of the community can also be achieved through the program.

To state the simple fact herein also will be to mention categorically that these indigenes particularly the children within the above mention age brackets are deprived socially because of the living condition of this area. Though charged voluntarily, the responsibility of creating art which will incorporate drama and dance culled from the living culture and experiences of the people as a form of transformative community theatre project gained top priority. I not only came in contact with children who had a lot to say and do, I also discover children with uncultivated potential vast in the culture of the people comprising the Ijaw and Ogu people. These potentials were merely waiting for the right connection and exposure because as observed, all that I needed to do at the initial stage was to introduce the children to very simply traditional and contemporary dance movements; this however led to the exhibition of the children's creative ingenuity and expressions as different movements and patterns evolving from the whole experience. The children demonstrated knowledge of Nigerian pop culture through singing and exhibiting popular music and dance tunes. This made dance training an easy task, and in no time, we started blending traditional unadulterated dance forms with contemporary movements to create a hybrid dance genre which the children enjoyed. Although the songs employed initially were religious gospels, the children ended up culling up dance movement styles and patterns from the Ijaw, Egun and Yoruba tribes which are the dominant tribes within this slum and everyone wanted to participate in the art forms.

The commitment level from the children acted as motivations for us to want to continue despite the fact that the volunteers had no sponsor and funding at some point became difficult, the children were unbelievably present in all the training sessions and as a matter of fact the number began to grow beyond our expectations. Although this training has now been truncated by the break of the coronavirus pandemic, we hope to continue this project for a very long time so that the ultimate goal can be achieved.

Significance of the Project

(Deleuze 226) writes

We can know by reasoning that the power of action is the sole expression of our essence, the sole affirmation of our power of being affected. But this knowledge remains abstract. We don't know what this power is, nor how we may acquire or discover it. And we will certainly never know this, if we do not concretely try to become active.

The above summation is the driving force of the actions and motivations for this study. There has been a vacuum and urgent need for a paradigm shift in the construction of social activism, community theatre orientation and development which has always considered youths and adults as voices of change. This study and all its engagements not only help to develop children's capacity building, creative ability and communication skills, the emotional empathy which children action create through self expression is employed in this study as the catalysts for social change within the Makoko community. Any attempt at breaking the walls of inequality, starvations and social or class marginalization can never constitute a futile effort of humanity in the avoidance of brutality and violent confrontations. This effort and study at instituting social change within the select region is therefore significant in the sense that:

- i. The project beyond the above mentioned acknowledges that children are part and parcel of the Nigerian community, they should be given a chance to learn and to exhibit their potentials artistically while creating an avenue where their educational needs can be channeled to the appropriate government quarters. This however is one of the feats of the project.

- ii. It locally creates and institutionalizes a model and canon for raising the consciousness of children by involving them in activism and studying children's theatrical education through their engagement in activism. This is not to say that Nigerian children have never been involved in theatrical creations, but that which incorporates activism into mainstream urban children theatrical experiences is seldom employed locally. This model can be used in the further study of children's theatre as a course of study in higher education.
- iii. With the language and actions of protesting government neglect, negligence and abandonments being performance base and theatrical demonstrations, the participating children learn to be vocal with children led activists movements. It creates in them a sense of belonging as well as responsibility to other children and the environment at large.
- iv. Beyond children's exposure to activism and activism, this study documents and places emphases on the cultural life of the people within the Makoko community. The study reveals and archives the multiplicitous cultural identities of the Makoko community created mainly through a hybrid process of intercultural exchanges between the Egun, Yorubas and Ijaws. This can be described as an ethnographic process of integration and inter-culturalism.
- v. One of the expected outcomes of the research work is to drive traffic of Lagos state government to this infrastructural deprived community, promotes healthy negotiations and navigation through the paths of creating more sensible and human friendly environment.