

The Representation of the Other in the Media, Part 2

This paper is to support the non-military and non-policing endeavor to secure Human Security. It points to close face-to-face communication/interaction (contact theory) between individuals/groups of different cultures, ethnicity, and race as a means to forestall, remedy or overcome ethnic, religious and ideological strife that can evolve into bitter antagonisms with devastating, fatal consequences. Secondly, and above all, it wishes to support the argument that the provision of elementary or basic “modern” living conditions for *all human beings* on this earth is the most effective approach to ensuring lasting/long-term and worldwide Security. My specific objective is to hint at the contribution performing arts in Africa, perhaps even distinct African cultures in general, can and actually do make to bringing about and sustaining humanity’s/this world’s Security at large.

Despite still vivid memories of white oppression and the extremely arrogant behavior of the European masters during “classic” colonization well into the 1960s, African performers do not, on the whole, “exclude” Westerners from acting in their very own productions. On the contrary, Western (“white”) actors are welcome, in many instances even “sought for” and easily integrated into ensembles. This does not only apply to groups/performance that refer to or portray Westerners. More important is the ease, the relaxed way Europeans/Americans are incorporated in performances that do not relate to the non-African world at all, that deal with “purely” (“internal”) African issues, environments, histories etc. What struck me most in Tanzania in 1969, in a country which had just got rid of British colonial rule (1963), that a young American student eager to perform was cast as a chorus dancer without ado, as if it was the most self-evident thing to do, in the drama “The Canker” thematizing the conflict between an African “evil sorcerer” and an African village community. In 1992, it went without saying that the Muungano Culturel Group, a traveling theatre company, had a white dancer in its ensemble of Tanzanian dancers of to feature selected “traditional” dance forms from several Tanzanian regional/ethnic cultures. In 1999, an African *and* a European were the two managers and leading directors of the Ivory Coast YMAKO Theatre playing in the Berlin World Festival of Theatre. YMAKO presented a story-telling performance, a modern version of the theatrical cultural production that, if any, is Africa’s very own, most characteristic theatre form, practiced in all parts of Africa south of the Sahara over centuries.

These instances should not only underwrite the point that peaceful, creative collaboration of individuals/strata/groups from entirely different cultural and ethnic

backgrounds does help in securing Human Security. They also show the considerable role performing arts, and in particular African cultural productions can play in averting or “defusing” conflicts between different ethnic groups, adherents to different ideologies (weltanschauung) and religious faiths which seem to be basically antagonistic as is the case today especially with regard to Muslims and non-Muslims, the Islamic and the non-Islamic western, Christian world.

A good case in point is the East African taarab performance culture. It can and actually does foster Human Security along the two lines mentioned..

Taarab is *the* specific music performance, if there is any, along the East African coast, emanating from Swahili communities in the 19th century; it is still a typically *Muslim* cultural production. Taarab is Swahili poetry sung and acted out/performed by orchestras, mostly but not exclusively female singers and male instrumentalists. Performing taarab is a way to negotiate in the public, in contests, at weddings etc., social conflicts and individual and social aspirations. The Kenyan non-Muslim, male researcher Mwenda Ntarangwi wrote on the “construction” and contestation of male and female “roles”, behaviour, and gender conflicts in Mombasa, the Kenyan port city:

“Through *taarab* we are able to see that activities and social relations that are regarded as private are often made public, thus opening up a discussion of whether such activities can be defined as distinct and representing different gender categories. For instance, when a *taarab* song challenges the masculinity of a husband by showing his inability to provide for the economic needs and then explains his wife is the sole provider for the family, that song challenges the very act of associating economic provision with masculinity.[...] A large portion of the texts analyzed in this chapter deal with marital conflicts as women deconstruct the images of a timid woman that have been perpetuated through socialization and through various forms of expressive culture. I explore how *taarab* as a popular music genre opens up public spaces that give women access to the forum of public addresses that is characteristically male. Through this forum, many women express and share individual experiences in ways that are important in social consciousness and change.” (Mwenda Ntarangwi: *Gender, Identity, and Performance. Understanding Swahili Cultural Realities through Song*. Africa World Press Trenton, NJ/Asmara, Eritrea 2003, p. 207)

Ntarangwi relates an instance of the famous singer Sitara singing a defiant song at a wedding party in 1994, defiant in challenging the male/parental “right” to arrange their daughters marriages without considering their desires. A line ran: Why can’t you leave me

alone, to follow my heart? “Besides singing along with Sitara, some of the female audience members danced dances to the song while tipping Sitara At specific intervals whenever she and other members of the band sang the refrain line that asks ‘Why can’t you leave me alone, to follow my heart?’ Later after the performance, I was informed by some interviewee who had been at the wedding that one of the young women who were dancing and tipping during the song had an ongoing debate with her uncle over her marriage partner.” (214f.)

p. 215: In a song entitled *Baba* (Father), Zuhura explores the same theme of arranged marriage but depicts a daughter and her father engaged in a dialogue in which the daughter is refusing the choice of husband favored by the father. The song is sung by a man and a woman representing the father and the daughter respectively.”

Being freed from “forced” marriages is not only a vital to the “individual security” of women. A source of dangerous, disruptive societal conflicts is eliminated. Gaining more freedom, changing their “traditional”, patriarchal-determined roles, their “customary” habitus, women can play a creative, productive role in the public sphere, thus strengthening Community Security or, if under threat, prevent community conflicts evolving into devastating crises.

The most interesting case of close interaction as a sure means to secure Human Security I know of is an American female researcher’s participation in the Tanzanian taarab music scene in the 1990s. Askew worked as a musician and singer of a Tanzanian company mostly performing taarab for more than two years. In her Harvard-Dissertation on her experiences she stated that *taarab* is „a genre of sung Swahili poetry“ which represents in particular internal Tanzanian social, gender- and ethnic conflicts/tensions and thus is a major agent in shaping/”constructing” Tanzanian society. „*Taarab*’s metaphoric and multivalent poetry is manipulated by Swahili women to communicate ulterior subtexts and perform personal political agendas [...] The case of Swahili *taarab* performance as only one example of the continual negotiation of ,Tanzanian National Culture‘ reveals the contradictory and dialogic nature of cultural production.“ (IV)

K. M Askew: *Performing the Nation: Swahili Musical Performance and the Production of Tanzanian National Culture*. PH.D. Thesis Harvard University, 1997

Askew was fully integrated in the company, even in an elevated position – as keyboard player and singer. She could and did actually behave like a Tanzanian, without engendering any embarrassment and/or specific racial/religious/gender anger. On the contrary. Her „encounter“ with members of a rival company shows that she acted like an experienced

Tanzanian taarab performer as any can be. During a performance, two members of a rival taarab troupe “slighted ” her by a rude gesture, thus scorning her group on the whole. She responded in kind. „When I was singing the Digo song, Khlaid’s brother came with Rizuiki (the former keyboardist) to tip me [...] Khalid’s brother with great flourish waved a bill (200/ or 500/-) in front of me and around my head and at the last moment [...] suddenly withdrew it and with his other hand (significantly, his left hand – an insult there as well) gave me a 5/- coin [...] They came a second time to tip, but now I knew them for who they were. This *taarab* stuff has become too much a part of my own persona. Without thinking, I did a typically *taarab* thing: as they walked away – again having tipped me with coins – I was singing the refrain. The second line of the refrain says: *hiye muogove sana Mriche kumvumbia* (Kidigo for ,You should be very afraid of this one....‘ As I sang the first part of this line, I vaguely pointed at the disappearing backs of these two [...]“ (p. 211f.))

This was not an abusive act meant to hit a foreigner, a white, non-Muslim person – it was a normal attack of members of a success-envious rival group on an outstanding, successful member of another one, a quarrel, so to speak, within the own fold. It was received, and apparently relished by the Tanzanian audience, as one of many exchanges of “insults” rivalling taarab performers and in particular taarab companies competing for larger chunks in the “performance market” stage to impress audiences with their specific performing skills.

Video-films and theatre, labelled as Theatre for Development (TFD), Popular Theatre or Community Theatre, have become veritable “tools” to combat epidemics such as Malaria and AIDS that do not only kill millions of individuals but threaten to exterminate entire African communities, thus endangering the stability/security of a whole continent and, by implication, of the whole world.

Theatre and Video (Television) productions a major means, as a way to convey sound knowledge about dealing with epidemics such as malaria and as considerable assistance in improving general health hygienic standards.

Paul Nyoni, an outstanding Tanzania theatre activist, describes, for instance, two approaches to using theatre as a major means to enlighten the population of the HIV infection threat. First, mounting/doing a production that deals with the Aids issue, touring with it through the country, performing in many villages/small towns and discussing the problems raised by the plot/attitudes of depicted characters etc. with the spectators. Second, conducting workshops on the Aids theme in small communities Workshops are initiated/arranged by experienced theatre people from the outside who entice or “facilitate” (the term “facilitator” is used) community members to develop stories, plots, skits related to AIDS, to perform them and discuss the pertinent issues with the community. The workshops normally take two to three weeks. The objective is not only to raise awareness/ of the deadly disease and to show how HIV is contracted but, above all, to assist community members in finding most appropriate ways on their own to tackle the fatal menace, to get “immunised” against contracting it.

Frowin Paul Nyoni “Theatre for Development im Kampf gegen HIV/AIDS bei Oberschülerinnen in Tansania: Am Beispiel von TUSEME”, in *Kreatives Afrika*. Hg. S. Arndt/K. Berndt. Klaus Hammer Verlag Wuppertal 2005

And Ole Johanssen who has been involved in anti-Aids campaigns and pertinent theatre work in Tanzania, Ethiopia, and South Africa since 2001 holds that .partly due to local needs of cultural regeneration and partly due to the complex challenges of AIDS, TFD gradually shifted its modus operandi from expert formats to local designs. This shift over time roughly corresponds with two different modes of TFD, which have been employed concurrently in AIDS campaigns. “The first may simply be described as *performative* events, characterized by singular performances enacted by visiting theatre troupes or by individual appeals for particular media, occasions and audiences. The second kind may be called *community processes* and is distinguished by long-lasting collective projects involving local participants for social change.” It is especially the latter mode of Theatre for Development that he considers a “ritual alternative” for contemporary African communities. However, TDF-productions done by professional or at least experienced theatre people and performed in many different places around the country have played and continue to play an important role in certain epidemiological circumstances, especially in areas that have not yet broken the public silence on AIDS.

Johansson also points to the significant role other forms or occasions of performing arts play in enlightening African audiences on the AIDS issue. and especially in urging them to take preventive action against contracting HIV.

Individual appeals to take preventive action against contracting HIV may be expressed in class rooms, town halls, in bus stands, on murals, and through various other media. Hence it could be a lyrical depiction of private experiences, like Philly Lutaaya's "Alone and Frightened", a song that breached the AIDS taboo over the radio and gave the affliction a human voice at a time when Uganda was the epicentre of the epidemic in 1989. Johanssen wrote:

"Due to widespread stigmatization and discrimination, few African countries have had prominent people willing to reveal their sero status. In South Africa there has been a few, such as the young boy Nkosi Johnson and AIDS activist Zackie Achmat, who refused to take anti-retroviral medicine until they became publicly available in the autumn of 2003. However, there has also been reports of violence against individuals who have announced their positive status, such as the activist Gugu Dlamini who got stoned to death by a mob after World AIDS Day in 1998. In contrast, Lutaaya's lyrical testimony was encouraged by the uncommonly open and tolerant attitude of the Ugandan political leadership." The artist died of AIDS related diseases later that year.

Ola Johansson: *Performative Interventions: African Community Theatre in the Age of AIDS.*