

# People's Theater De-silencing the Culture of Silence in Bagobo Village

Joycylin Ayuste-Bastian

Kinjo Gakuin University, Nagoya City, Japan

**Abstract :** This manuscript is a compendious study on how People's Theater elaborately empowered the local people of Bagobo Village to finally take control of their own lives. After decades of silence and passiveness, theater proves to be an effective stimulus to de-silence these people who perceive themselves as powerless. This paper reveals that their being imprisoned from powerlessness takes roots from traditional Filipino values of "hiya" (shame) and "utang na loob" (gratitude), and the perennial political neglect that put them into poverty. Theater conquers to de-silence the people of Bagobo Village and leads them to become effective players in community development. Theater centers not only on body movements, but also as a useful tool to exploit by social change agents, in effecting meaningful community transformation. This is evident in Bagobo Village.

**Keywords :** people's theater, Bagobo, "hiya", "shame", participatory

**Research Questions :** Can people's theater break the culture of silence?

**Objectives :** The main focus of this research is to ascertain the effects of people's theater on the passive social behavior of the residents in Bagobo Village, Davao City, Mindanao, Philippines.

**Methodology :** This research utilizes three research methodologies such as field observation and note-taking, participatory-action-reflection, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Field observation and note-taking is carried out by the researcher in Bagobo Village for the period of three years. Relevant information are gathered and written in a logbook for reference. Participatory-action-reflection is done after the first three-day theater workshop, and in succeeding stage performances in the village. Here, the participants recall and analyze their stage presence, particularly on how it affects the spectators. The result is basis for future improvements. Focus-Group-Discussions are series of opportunities for the residents of Bagobo Village to come together and discuss specific concerns, as a result of stage performances depicting their situation. All of these are written in the logbook. The raw data are analyzed, decoded and validated.

## **Introduction**

Among the many communication media available, theater is unique because it is more easily grasped and communicated. It does not require large amounts of money to operationalize. Stages may be erected in rural areas, slums, schools, guerilla-controlled territories, places of worship, even studios. It can mobilize people in a spontaneous, accessible and participatory manner. People's theater as popularized by the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) traces back to the works of Freire, Brecht, Stanislavski, and Boal. Theatre of the Oppressed theory by Augusto Boal is a political, social, ethical and aesthetic work tool. The theater itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution (Boal 1975).

In theater, the senses are developed towards keener political perception and sense perception, toward augmenting the power and ability of the imagination. It is the active evolution of ideas, realities and situations. The ability to think is also developed along with spontaneity and flexibility. It stimulates thought and critical situational analysis.

Theater helps people articulate their struggle to free themselves from oppression and poverty. The traditional Philippine values of "hiya" (shame) and "utang na loob" (gratitude) may be fading but their power to silence people is still strong.

This paper describes how theater is brought to the small Philippine village of Bagobo and how it become a venue for interaction as well as tool for helping its people listen, learn and develop their prowess of communication in many levels.

## **Background of Bagobo Village**

Bagobo Village is situated in Calinan District approximately 28 kilometers northwest of Davao City, southern Philippines. The village is rurban (between rural and urban in ambiance) and scenic but extremely poverty-stricken. Residents have seasonal income. Many work on a contractual basis as banana plantation workers, drivers, hired laborers and farmers who do not own even a small parcel of land. Because their families are unable to earn regular incomes, children are forced to quit school and seek employment. Once, three children died without receiving medical attention painfully reminding the community of its poverty stricken state. Young girls are tempted to go to Japan to work. One woman from the village left her children and husband to work abroad and has not been heard of since.

In the 1950's, the Bagobo tribe dominates the village, hence its name. The Bagobos do not usually have formal education. Culturally, their women are the frontliners in earning a living. These ethnic differences separate them socially from others. They live on their own and seldom interact. Over time, however, people of diverse origins namely Bicolanos, Leytenios, Cebuanos, Illongos and others, migrated to the

village in huge numbers. Thus, Bagobo Village is now a virtual melting pot of various ethnic groups.

One characteristic which all households in Bagobo Village share though is poverty. Lack of opportunity to go to school and finish college prevents the residents from having a good regular job that pays enough to support a family. Since many of them are migrants, mostly they pay rents of 20 to 50 pesos (0.9 US dollars) per month for a few square meters. Each family has built its own wooden house on its rented lot. They live under constant threat of eviction. The land they live on is owned by others who, because of this, control their lives.

The Institute of Primary Health Care-Davao Medical School Foundation (IPHC-DMSF) implemented the Community Health through Integrated Local Development (CHILD) Project in a effort to decrease the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) as well as to organize people. The recruitment of Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) and the establishment of Child Survival Action Plans (CSAPs) were of prime concern to the organizers. The villagers, however, do not show interest in the program.

Our reception in Bagobo Village is distinctively lukewarm. This itself is an indicator of the village situation. The first few responses to our consultations are pessimistic. About 90% of the interviewees say that the program being introduced is another political ploy. They had grown passive and “manhid” (numbness, detached or lack of feeling). The plight of the village was made even worse by their unsanitary water source, lack of facilities for health services, increasing number of malnourished children, and the disinterest of self-seeking politicians who only see the village as a source of political support and nothing more.

Gloria Nayal and Mayette Macapagal (1994) summarize the situation in Bagobo Village well “The development process of the village is quite slow perhaps, due to the diverse ethnic background, principles and beliefs of its people. At first people never show any concern for the community, not even for its cleanliness. The residents would just leave litter anywhere without regard of the consequences. A number of gamblers and drunkards contribute to petty squabbles and conflicts in the community” (Nayal and Macapagal 1994).

There is a man in the village named Freddie who typified the village character. Freddie always blames the government for the services that the villagers do not receive without taking into account the residents’ failure to help themselves. His pessimism soured the entire village’s attitude toward the organizers. The struggle still continues, except now, the same Freddie has learned to be more optimistic. He became the leader of the cluster that has been successful with its hog raising project. His co-villagers are following his lead. Ely, for example, also joins the hog raising project.

### **The Culture of Silence in Bagobo Village**

The effect of poverty in Bagobo Village tends to silence its people. One of the women, Linda Rodriguez said: "We do not have property or possessions, therefore we have no right to say no." Shirley would echo her sentiments: "Maayo pa sila kay kuartahan man, kami intawon looy kaayo dili paminawon." (Speaking up is for the rich people who are powerful, no one listens to the poor.)

### **Theater Theory and The People's Experience**

As theater participants, the Bagobo Village residents begin to directly verbalize their problems. Theater enables them to explore inner resources, express their ideas, speak of issues they had long been silent about and gives suggestions on how to bring about change for the better. Theater develops human resources and creativity in articulating socio-economic realities in concrete ways and showing how these realities directly affect individuals and communities. Theater builds self-confidence and makes participants realize their potential to analyze their own political and economic situation.

Because theater makes private emotions public, it creates an atmosphere of trust. While working in theater groups, the community discovers that trust and confidence are a good foundation. Theater productions in villages, especially those that raise political issues, involve risk-taking. Safdar Hashmi of Delhi was killed on a stage while performing in a play which questioned government policy. The theater is a context in which participants share risk and work in order to realize their objectives. According to the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA): "Once the participants in theater discover the real truths of their own capacities and strengths through theater, there will grow a spirit that shall eddy out from the depths and recesses of their being and culture, outward reaching to catapult into the limelight of reality, a consciousness that will serve as fire in a people's process of actualizing creativity, their dream of security, liberty and peace. Theater, at that point, becomes a communal celebration of such a struggle and process" (PETA 1989).

### **Tracing the Roots of Theater**

Theater in the Philippines is a hybrid of diverse cultural sources. Some forms of theater are attributable to the Spanish presence following their conquest of the Philippines in 1521. The most well-known of these Hispanic-Filipino forms include the Panunuluyan, the Komedia or Moro-Moro, the Zarswela and the Senakulo. Mojares (1985) traces the Komedia and the Moro-Moro to lowland Christian traditional play which can run for nine nights or longer. "It can involve a cast as many as 100 people using plot materials drawn from, or freely modeled after European romances. Rendered in a formal vernacular heavily mixed with Spanish, the Linambay in particular unfolds a highly elaborated story of war, love and supernatural enchantments against abstracted background of distant foreign kingdoms" (Mojares 1985). Mojares also

notes that: “Komedya is a transitional and polygenetic form and at the same time, history and folk romance, liberate and oral, foreign and native, modern and traditional. In its themes and style of composition, it partakes of the world of oral culture (both that of foreign countries from which the narratives were derived and the Philippines into which these were assimilated).” Komedya or Moro-Moro typically depict the conflict between the Moors and the Christians. Panunuluyan depicts a pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph seeking shelter after their long journey until Mary delivers Jesus Christ in the manger. It is usually staged every year during the advent season. Zarswela, on the other hand, is a dance-drama depicting the past incidents. It is usually staged for town fiestas.

A number of writers recognized these origins of theater in the Philippines, but also insist that Filipino theater also has roots in the rituals, songs and dances or a tribal culture which existed prior to the Spanish occupation. This hybrid of theatrical influences came together between 1940 and 1960 as alternative forms of expression in a colonial-dominated media. This renaissance of locally-inspired theater to have occurred all over Asia, but was particularly true in the Philippines. It emerged as an appeal for liberation from American occupation at first and later from Martial Law. It is a tradition - a tradition infused with a social message - which continues to be practiced in rural areas, where community workers use theater to inspire community action.

Senakulo is a depiction of Jesus Christ's death. It recalls the sufferings of Jesus Christ at the hands of the Jews. It is normally staged during Lent. Much of the credit of transforming traditional Hispano-Philippine theater into popular theater goes to the Philippine Theater Association (PETA), which in 1967, began to promote the use of theater as a form of popular education.

During the period of Martial Law imposed by Marcos, the popular theater movement of PETA flourished as a form of political opposition. Now, PETA continues to organize workshops and symposia to encourage the use of popular theater as a medium for spontaneous political expression. Theater as an alternative medium emerges in Mindanao to confront the alleged oppressive regime of

Marcos. Community-based groups sprout. People found in theater a vehicle of expression of depicting their plight and helping them articulate mechanisms of resolving their powerlessness. It serves as a means of facing realities and engaging participants and spectators alike in political action. Horfilla (1993) has referred to theater as a part of the struggle for social transformation, “to assist the Poor, Oppressed, Deprive, Awakened, and Struggling (PODAS) in Mindanao in becoming vigilant and breaking the walls of silence”.

### **The Introduction of Theater to Bagobo Village**

In 1989, a group of Community Health Volunteers (CHV) decide to make the residents in the village organization more aware of the need to organize the community, and break their silence as a first step

toward appreciating their role in determining their own economic situation. The question is how. They eventually decide to conduct a theater workshop in the village - an intense three-day theater skills training.

Selected community members were trained in basic theatrical skills. The number of participants was limited to 30 due to financial limitations. The training was conducted in the community. Some were hesitant to join because they said they lacked time. Others said they were not interested. As the training went on, some of those who had originally volunteered quit because they were afraid people would laugh at them. But there was pressure to continue. As the participants said in chorus: "Kay naligo na man ta, manabon na lang sab." (Since we have already gotten ourselves wet, we might as well take a bath.) They had committed themselves to the task so they might as well finish what they started.

The participants are also initially hesitant to join because, they think that one must have an inborn talent in order to qualify. Gossipers make fun of them, husbands and wives even quarrel as husbands question their wives' attendance to the workshop. As the training continues, many raise their brows, laughing at what they observe: body movements, voice development, skits, plays, simulation and many more. The participants are even branded as crazy. But the detractors are ignored.

The group prepare a play depicting the situation in their community, addressing topics such as the lack of opportunities to earn, unsafe drinking water, the high incidence of malnutrition, the morbidity among children and adults, the deaths of three children, even the weakness of community leadership. The play also depicts the passivity of people. All the ups and downs of their lives are portrayed. The most exciting part is the finale wherein Danny presents his masterpiece drawing of a seed, a seed sprouting, a tree, and a tree bearing fruits. The seed symbolizes their organization which nearly become dormant because of the people's passivity. The sprouting seed stands for the potential of their organization to become aware of their situation, start to emerge and move. The tree represents the village organization that is becoming stronger and more involve in many activities. The tree bearing fruits symbolizes the organization that has become active and productive.

The play is staged several times, and on occasion for visitors to the village. The residents also watch the play in these different instances and little by little it captures their hearts. They admit having become "manhid" (numb) mentally and emotionally. This apathy is partially healing through self expression or by watching others express what they feel but could not say.

### **Changes After Theater**

In the past, the Bagobo Village experiences factionalism. Rivalries start with political party affiliation. Whenever someone is identified with a political party, that person is automatically pitted as against members of the opposing parties. Because of this, it is considered risky to express an opinion

or to show interest in political affairs.

Bebe recalls (smiling) hiding when the first batch of visitors come to their village. She is too shy to show her face or talk to the people who hold such high positions in society. She feel paralyzed because of poverty, and think that she has nothing to be proud of. She feel “hiya” or shame for her meagre livelihood.

After the training, each participant reflects on what they learned. Majority say that they feel “lighter” upon getting rid of their inhibitions. Theater, they say helps them recognize their untapped potentials. Self-confidence means being able to interact with other people, rich or poor, literate or not. They said: “Kaya man diay!” (We did it!). They had broken the culture of silence.

They begin to believe in their ability to take responsibility. Theater, they say, arms them with processing and organizational skills. Their participation in meetings, especially in decision-making, visibly increases. Bebe compares the present situation with that of the past, remembering how she had been “too emotionally sensitive.” Her attitude changes for the better after the theater workshop.

The residents cooperative in community undertakings more effectively. Shortly afterward, the residents work together to install a village water system. Adults and children alike gather sand and stones from the river and bring them to the water project site. Each one has a task to perform. Women prepare and cook the food, men do the heavy tasks, and the children do a variety of petty jobs. They also engage an engineer from the Department of Public Works and Highways, a government office, to provide technical assistance and ensure the proper installation of their water system. In the end their efforts pay off. Water finally flow into faucets of the villages.

A creative mechanism for resolving conflict is also put in place. Whenever conflict arises, the leader of a cluster of houses call a meeting. Most conflicts are easy to resolve now that people are willing to speak openly with each other. The change in village disposition is evident in different ways. A village committee decide to initiate the Filipino tradition of serenading birthday celebrants in the early dawn and bringing some flowers and food along. At the feast, they would tell jokes to make the celebrant happy. The feeling of belongingness in the village is enhanced. A spirit of camaraderie emerges. At one point, the relative of one of the community members died, and everybody contribute either cash or in kind. This also offer the bereaved family their moral support.

This was something new for Bagobo Village.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation of the social behavior of Bagobo Vilage from passive - numb to active - participative

proves that people's theater can dismantle a long silence that certain communities have lived for generations. The deep rooted sets of value may envelope the people to embrace them and dare not change. This, without trying, can put the village into eternal powerlessness. People's theater is a potent antidote for the villagers silence, lack of concern, conflict, and fading trust among themselves and with the government. Once theater is effectively applied at the village level, a significant positive change occurs as manifested by the story of Bagobo Village. The de-silencing process enables them to regain trust, delineates weak values, allows them to engage in income generating activities, and promotes the spirit of cohesion.

## References

- Bappa, S. et al 1983 *Third World Popular Theater: Voices of the Oppressed*, Commonwealth
- Berger, P.L. 1977 *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change*, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books
- Brandon, J. R. 1967 *The Social Role of Popular Theater in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press
- Bruyn, Louise 1980 *Theater for the Living Revolution*, Theater Work 1, No.1
- Courtney, Richard 1969 *Play, Drama and Thought: The Intellectual Background to Drama in Education*, London
- Cassell de Oliveira, Catarina S. 2014 *Empowerment labs: Gender Equality, Employability and theatre Catalyzing Social Change*, Science and behavioral Sciences 161, pp 56-63, Elsevier Ltd, Science Direct.
- Enriquez, Virgilio G. 1979 "A Core Concept in Filipino Social Psychology", *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review*, Japan: International Christian University Press
- van Erven, Eugene 1988, *The Playful Revolution*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
- Fajardo, B. et al 1989 *Basic Integrated Theater Arts Workshop (BITAW): PETA Workshop Manual Series 1*, Manila: PETA Press, Philippines
- Freire, Paulo 1972 *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Mojares, Resil B. 1985 *Theater in Society, Society in Theater: Social History of a Cebuano Village, 1840-1940*, Ateneo de Manila University Press, Philippines
- Nayal, Gloria and Macapagal Mayette 1994 *Project Evaluation and Impact Assessment Report, Community Health through Integrated Local Development (CHILD) Project*, Institute of Primary Health Care, Mindanao, Philippines
- Waheduzzaman 2010, "Value of people's participation for good governance in developing countries", *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy*, Vol. 4 Issue: 4, pp. 386-402, <https://doi.org/10.1108/17506161011081345>, Emerald Group Publishing Limited.