



Citizenship: the role of the performing arts in Uganda

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Abstract

Uganda as a country contends with aspects of religious, gender, age, class, cultural and racial variances, and if these issues are not addressed, they will continue to affect the cohesion of our society and the development of a common identity. The performing arts are a crucial conduit for empowering the youth with knowledge, skills and understanding that every learner requires to comply as active and responsible citizens. Citizenship at this level will not only require a perception and subsequent application of skills achieved, but also a commitment and purpose, ensuring sustainable dialogue and a critical probing of the consequences with the community and the need for citizens to work together with fellow citizens to develop their community. The performing arts are central in bridging this gap as they indeed provoke the mind with their precision and obscurity to foster good citizenship through collaboration and teamwork necessary for artistic projects and mission at institutions of learning and especially in the communities. This paper discusses how the integrated performing arts as an expression of culture foster the act of citizenship amongst the various categories of people within the community. It discusses two Community-based performing arts establishments including Ndere Foundation and Watoto Child Care Ministries as interventions in fostering citizenship.

Introduction

Performing arts are an integral part of life and a crucial factor in the determination of the worthiness of humanity both at the individual as well a community level. This is to the extent that as members of the community and not necessarily professional practitioners, each person regards, responds, and gets involved with the arts and subsequently with each other, in one way or the other, thereby accessing opportunities to demonstrate citizenship at various levels. On a more professional level, citizen artists reimagine the traditional notions of artmaking and contribute to society through the transformative power of their artistic abilities and subsequently through the proactive social engagement with the arts in daily life. These artistic endeavors convey a sense of collective responsibility as a community



and also amongst each other as individuals. With that in mind, if performing arts are not well instituted, coordinated and nurtured in both the school curricula and community centers, young people will grow up with no opportunities to express themselves artistically in a world where there is heightened disrespectfulness and insensitivity to one another.

Various research studies have investigated the influence of performing arts programs at educational institutions. However, not much attention has been given to community organisations outside school that also nurture artists efficiently. Research further suggests that performing arts education involving music, dance and drama, and subsequent engagement, empowers the youths to advance their overall well-being, encompassing their academic engagement, mental health, and subsequent self-image. Research further alludes that engagement with the arts by less privileged children, correlates with strong measures of perseverance and academic motivation (Holochwost et al., 2016; Zimmerman, 2002), leading to learners' experiences of positive progress by studying and engaging with the arts. (Kaufman et al., 2014; Respress & Lufti, 2006; Wright, et al., 2006).

Berman and Newman suggest that citizenship education through the performing arts, embedded in the academic curricula, ought to be enhanced through experiences both within and outside the classroom environment that increase students' understanding of society, illustrating mechanisms through which they can create social change, and foster the development of student relationships with society (Berman, 1990; Newman, 1990). According to Giles et al., the performing arts as an approach to citizenship development are the most important outcome of involvement in community service (Giles Jr. & Eyler, 1994; Moely et al., 2002; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Unfortunately, research suggests that there is a decrease in the commitment and purpose of higher education institutions to the fulfilment of civic purposes, including nurturing students into engaging leaders critically (Boyer, 1987; Boyte & Kari, 2000).

Marja-Leena and Heidi Partti (2022), argue that arts education, including music, dance, and drama, presents strong ways to explore ethical responsibility, values, and attitudes of global citizenship using interdisciplinary, intersubjective, and embodied participation and experience. Thus, music, dance and drama can potentially support students' growth towards global citizenship, including awareness, care, and understanding of, as well as active and responsible engagement in current global challenges and social issues.

Uganda is endowed with a dynamic performing arts culture, with many initiatives in the application of theatre for educational and development purposes. The musical arts and dramatic performances are significantly applied to influence society led by performing artists, including music composers, dance choreographers and playwrights who have established strong reputations in producing artistic works for community consumption. These works bear central elements of the integrated artforms, including music, dance, mime, comedy and theatre. The end product is that the arts impact the development of skills in many young people and are constantly used as effective conduits to disseminate moral and sensitisation messages on issues like the outbreak of ebola, AIDS, malaria, COVID and polio.

It is important to note that citizenship as an academic subject is not directly constituted in the Uganda school curricula as is personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) in the Western world.



However, it is assumed that performing arts education, as research and practice, carry that weight indirectly, contributing incredibly to the creation and support for transformative global citizenship processes. This is achieved through engaging learners with various competing viewpoints, identities and indeed values. While a few international schools in Kampala dispense curricula that foster citizenship through engagement with the arts, several local institutions of learning are yet to effectively stimulate students to generate positive social change through engagement with the arts. There is no doubt that the government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Education and educational institutions, intends to promote arts education, as per the Education Investment Strategic Plan (1999), a government white paper (cf. Barasa, 2016). However, this is yet to be actualised on the ground. Once this intention is realised, we might see opportunities for learners to critically interrogate the existing state of affairs and engage in collaborative efforts to foster ethical responsibility. The arts will then be placed centrally at institutions of learning and the wider community level to explore the coherence between real-life situations and subsequent applications versus knowledge and competencies. Citizenship will take root in schools and wider communities.

The arts and physical education

It is important to note that a few years back, the performing arts were a study area designated as an essential part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools in Uganda. This act was assumed to be a conduit of artistic citizenship. The noble idea of having the arts in the designated curricula was later dropped before being repackaged under production skills, encompassing an integrated approach to the arts in school. The recognition of the need for arts education prompted the inquiry into arts education by the then country's Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). The outcomes of performing arts as a subject were the statement and profile for the Performing Arts and Physical Education syllabus (PAPE, 2000). Merging the arts and physical education might have appeared as a step in strengthening the opportunity through which learners develop a sense of citizenship. This, however, did not last long as the focus, because of changes in government policies, prioritised the sciences over the arts, with generous funding for national benchmarks and testing programs in only these areas. There is a challenge of high levels of unemployment as well as increased retention rates in training colleges and schools, was an opportunity to stimulate growth and promotion of vocation education programs to promote artistic competencies as a bridge between education and employment. Currently, there is a sense of fragmentation in what has become an overcrowded curriculum in trying to address the learning outcomes in the performing arts. While arts educationists consider their role as one that aims to educate their students as artists, this is not generally viewed by those in authority to be of great importance in a period where economic productivity is the measure of success. Performing arts events are however, increasingly recognized as significant in the development of artistic citizenship.

Community-based arts organizations

While various studies have expressed the positive effect of the performing arts at educational institutions, little has been mentioned in acknowledgement of private community-based arts organizations. The private Community-based arts organizations are usually resources available to children and the youth who live in under-developed communities going to poor schools. In the prevailing circumstances of little or no funding surrounding the arts, artists and arts educators have had to reassess their roles in the community and education respectively. This is because they feel an artistic duty to preserve the performing arts presence, as well as articulate their roles as artistic citizens in the context of government 'scientific' priorities and policies. In imagining this new politics of the



arts, organised community-based entities are better positioned to bring about positive social change through nurturing accomplished performance artists than current educational institutions would be. However, to continue fostering artistic citizenship, performing artists and educationists should share both spaces in practice, the school, and the community. Whenever we share space collectively about engagements in performing arts-based activities, we foster fundamental psychological basic human needs (Ryan et al., 2007).

Beyond the academic performing arts training, several local community-based arts organisations dispense various artistic initiatives crucial to the development and well-being of citizens within the communities. By providing this infrastructure, the local arts groups and centres create secure influences for citizens within the community, which subsequently positions both the young and adults to pursue of various forms of leadership opportunities in other areas across the country. I look at how featuring performing arts activities within the community spaces contributes to forming a secure environment for participants that is crucial to fostering collaborative engagements across participants and the subsequent process of self-improvement. This outcome enhances citizens' motivation to trust as they invoke the need to belong and foster behaviours that maintain relationships.

Amidst numerous political, social, and economic hardships due to the unstable political conditions that led to harsh economic conditions across the country and collisions between the authorities and the citizens, various organisations have sprung up and used the arts to give hope to the communities. This kind of artistic citizenship is portrayed in theatre for development within the community, the work of the Watoto Child Care Ministries and the Ndere Foundation. These Community-based arts interventions demonstrate how engaging with the performing arts, especially musical arts, invigorates trust amongst participants building a strong sense of belonging amongst each other. The community interventions are among many others with similar objectives and missions. Even though distinct, they share common features in how they weave the community's political, social and economic life situation.

Theatre for Development

Historically, drama, as a performing art, has been used to define communities and inspire action within the confines of Theatre for Development (TFD) pioneered by Rose Mbowa in Uganda in 1998. Mbowa cites two understandings of development as moral and structural development, emphasising that developing infrastructure and economic policies is of no benefit if people's attitudes are not 'improved', first and foremost, through the transmission of specific behavioural approaches. Mbowa cites a case where HIV-AIDS prevention approaches were taught to communities in Eastern Uganda, but because men did not appreciate how useful the sensitisation program was to them, they prevented even their wives from attending the sessions. To simplify the message for the men, Theatre for Development groups decided to organise and put on arts performances integrating music, dance and drama to sensitize communities of the dangers of contracting HIV-AIDS and how to avoid the scourge. In many of these kinds of scenarios, Theatre for Development has become an effective weapon for the importance of the moral development first, and then structural development projects and how the community can benefit from them.

The integration of the performing arts in teaching, research and practice has made the use of the performing arts development projects more legitimate within the confines of fostering artistic citizenship. Gregory Barz highlights the importance of music and musical arts in his study on the



centrality of music as a mode of encouragement for AIDS patients in Eastern Uganda (2006). In his book *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda*, Gregory Barz centres his study on examining the link between the decline of the infection rate in Uganda and Uganda's local grassroots efforts, i.e., its local groups that perform music and drama to lead people to behavioural change.

The outstanding element above shows that behavioural change and improvement or development are brought about by directly contacting the performing arts and, indeed, artists in the Theatre for Development educational campaigns. While many vulnerable people may reject reading newspapers, looking at posters, and the like, it is hard to escape the power of culturally embedded live performances on stage. This notion demonstrates the secret behind the performing arts as medicine or medical interventions and even treatment, as may be understood culturally by the indigenous people. Whether musical arts and other art forms may cure or support the healing process, it is linked with practices and strategies developed by citizens within their communities to respond to different types of disease, illness, health and healing, which are culturally conceptualised.

The Ndere Center

The *Ndere Center* is the home of the *Ndere Troupe*, a musical arts performance ensemble in Kampala. The *Ndere* enterprise comprising the ensemble and the Center started small, is continuously reconfiguring its external and internal spaces to improve how they respond to the community's needs. *Ndere* performances happen almost daily in the residential suburbs of *Butikiro*. The *Ndere Troupe* has influenced the growth of several major pan-African cultural groups and subsequent performances across the country. The positive influence and significance of *Ndere* within the community precipitate positive shifts in cultural dispensation and art consumption, prompting the creation of the *Ndere Center* as the home for the troupe. Musical and theatrical arts are celebrated at the *Ndere Center* daily, making the *Ndere Centre* one of the most respected and revolutionary platforms for artists in Uganda and the around the world.

The kind of home for the ensemble has caused the group and its management to take a proactive and central role in urban life by establishing an indoor performance theatre and an amphitheatre making it an excellent venue to experience the musical arts performances live on stage regularly. The ultimate purpose is to use the performing arts to develop better approaches to handling public social and cultural impacts. This specific ingenuity to experiment, re-create and continually reinvent the service and have the premise into a multiple-use civic resource, *Ndere Center* as a performing arts arena, is a significant example and, indeed site of cosmopolitan citizenship. In addition to providing recreational services using the performing arts as the focal point, the centre hosts conferences and workshops for the youth and upcoming artists to learn and be nurtured.

The Watoto Childcare Ministries

Back in the day when the AIDS epidemic hit the country at a time when there was a war in Northern Uganda. This situation precipitated the humanitarian crisis leading to Watoto Childcare Ministries' birth. Watoto demonstrated relevance by assisting the masses mortified by the prevailing adversities. The Watoto Child Care Ministries, a Christian Non-Governmental Organization, has, over the years, invested in progressive and developmental projects that address the quality of life of the less privileged. These include abandoned and orphaned children that are cleaned up and placed in adequately built homes under the care of recovered vulnerable women. The Watoto Child Care



Ministries operates under the Watoto Church, with a solid connection to the Christian faith. Undoubtedly, this background strongly informs how Watoto Childcare Ministries sets out to conduct and execute its interventions.

Over the years, Watoto has used the performing arts to strengthen their existence and relevance. Their music training and teaching, as a concept of equipping recipients with skills and giving back, follow the precepts and patterns of the Christian faith, which is at the heart of their mission. The Watoto Child Care Ministries dispense musical arts training at the Watoto schools to develop the performance skills of orphans and abandoned children. At the centre of their Ministry is the children's choir, which is used to raise awareness and funding to create the infrastructure to enhance the living conditions of the orphans and support them in becoming productive citizens that are also self-sufficient.

In all fairness, Watoto Childcare Ministries ensures that more people, whether poor, women, or children, can access social justice. By training and organising international performance tours of their recipients to the USA, Australia, and Europe, they instil values that are fundamental to the formation of a good government, and therefore, Watoto is using the power of the musical arts in preparing good citizens for the future of an egalitarian society.

Discussion

It is observed that practising, learning and actual performance of musical arts as coordinated within the settings and structures of the non-governmental organisations significantly impact the living conditions of the intended recipients. The musical engagements conceived by non-governmental organisations create opportunities to improve the lives of the targeted groups, turning them into more productive community citizens. The above examples allude to the fact that music and the performing arts and their spaces are recognised as significant artistic citizenship channels for empowering the young generation. The local arts foundations employ the performing arts as media to establish trust with the less privileged young people. This crucial connection allows the local arts organisations to provoke change in the communities, especially among the youth. Besides improvements in personal life, societal engagement and employment, these arts organisations succeed in influencing and inspiring young people to pursue a positive lifestyle.

The performing arts are, therefore, a robust and valuable tool in developing and enhancing self-expression amongst the young generation. This is more so because of their nature as aesthetic activities, providing room and a broader scope for creativity (Arnold, 1986; Kaeppler, 2000). Self-expression is encouraged within artistic subjects like dance because they demand the ability to find possibilities in "expressing ideas, moods, (and) emotions" in an aesthetic way (Arnold, 1986, p.4). Community performing arts groups offer rare opportunities for the young generations within those communities to come out in a more formal environment, improving their academic successes and, subsequently, their employment prospects.

Having studied and practised dance regularly, John, a dance student at the Department of performing arts and Film of Makerere University, has had his self-expression enhanced along with a notable development of his communication skills. Sylvie, another dance student, says she was once a self-proclaimed introvert. Still, after working with 'teacher Semaganda' for a whole year, it is now easier for her to communicate. Moreover, she is considered one of the most outgoing people



in her environment. Sylvie has started to take dance out to a children's home in the community every week to instill hope through dance. According to her, improvisation sessions inspire spontaneity and creativity solely because one can move beyond the choreography and instruction of others. The outcome has significantly boosted her self-esteem and confidence, compelling her to think outside the box and impact communities positively.

Conclusion

In defining the role of the performing arts in fostering artistic citizenship, we must emphasise that the performing arts set the stage for lifelong perception of what it means to be observed, contrasted, and evaluated as fundamental life skills inevitable for the development, growth and maintenance of our welfare, a sense of community. The engagement with performing arts, including music, dance, and drama, teaches citizens in communities to contribute to their love of others and self, and they indeed nurture capabilities and the prowess to process the inherent benefits of the arts, thereby fostering acts of artistic citizenship.

Citizen artistry and musicianship are largely founded on the ideals of empathetic connections between artists and communities, inspiration, imagination, and transformation. Artistic citizenship is further recognised when, within us, internal intrinsic artistic dialogues become vessels for the artistic expression of the 'inexpressible' or 'untold' and do not hold painful and heavy emotions, especially during such times as when the pandemic struck. This act leads to health outcomes.

Every day, as artists, we continue to develop our internal dialogue with embodiment, movement, sense and meaning-making, creativity, and expressive forms on how these are understood and communicated. Discovering a universal form of communication that is understood, embraced, empathised and ultimately released in this manner helps us care for ourselves and each other to prevent ill health.

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