

Puppets, women and health in Togo

An interview with Vicky Tsikplonou, Togo

Interviewed by Cariad Astles (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of Exeter)

Vicky Tsikplonou is one of a handful of African women puppet theatre directors. She founded her company in 1996 to present and discuss themes relevant to women. Much of the work has concerned issues relevant to health, such as healthcare education, marriage, behavioural issues, and so on. The interview focuses on the company's work in relation to health.

Cariad Astles: Could you explain a bit about your puppet theatre company?

Vicky Tsikplonou: The company is called Evaglo and is based in Lome, Togo. It is one of very few black African women's puppet theatre companies: it is comprised of only female puppeteers. We make all kinds of shows. The puppets are used as substitutes for actors on the stage, although the puppets are manipulated or directed by actors in reality on stage in the performances. The company was founded to promote social development through raising awareness of key themes. When I was young I saw puppeteers from Ghana performing in the streets and became interested; later on I joined the National Puppet Troupe of Togo in 1983. We travelled a lot and I noticed that there were many more male than female puppeteers. This motivated me to form my own company.

CA: Could you talk about the company's work which is specifically related to health and wellbeing?

In 2015 we set up a project called "*Marionnette et Territoire*" ["Puppet and Territory"] which consists of using the art of puppetry to target issues that affect the most impoverished people in the 5 regions of Togo. Some of these issues include increasing awareness among women, young girls as well as boys, about health issues such as how to avoid cancer, STIs/AIDS, Ebola or diarrhoeic sicknesses stemming from the lack of basic rules of hygiene and sanitation. Other ways in which the puppet promotes awareness focuses on the motivation of women to opt for breastfeeding, by not missing prenatal consultations, preventing malaria during pregnancy, and sleeping under a mosquito net after pregnancy.

One of the best activities is raising awareness about the *Gestion de l'Hygiène Menstruelle* programme (GHM) [Management of Menstrual Health (GHM)] for young girls which we have been doing since 2015; we started this with students during their holidays and apprentices in all job fields. We also involved boys so that they could help their sisters and girlfriends, but especially to help them understand when they were going through incapacitating periods.

Wellbeing:

The principal mission of our artistic engagement is social wellbeing; we dedicate much of our work to this aim. Several of the shows under the auspices of the *Marionnette and Territoire* project are intended to reinforce the wellbeing of the beneficiaries. Within the project, we set up some training workshops during the holidays for young people aged between 11 and 18 in within the Complexe Culturel Vilmar. There, we performed shows in the children's garden and ran training for primary school teachers. We also staged shows to raise awareness about social taboos and create dialogue about some of these.

Disability

The biggest part of this project is devoted to promoting awareness of disabled people. In the context of this project, we worked a lot with people living with a physical motor disability, but to different degrees of permanent or temporary infirmity. The use of the puppet in the framework of this section of the project consists of training the beneficiaries in making techniques and also teaching them how to animate puppets. The aim is to allow them to create puppet shows that make the public at large more aware of the violation of rights and the stigmas of which disabled people are victims.

We have trained them to create themed shows based on what they have witnessed in relation to the stigmas and the marginalisation from which they suffer in order to make the wider population more aware of their rights. Since its creation, the project has been able to fight against the violation of human rights of disabled people and to promote the talents and ingenuity of disabled people in the arts sector.

CA: What do you think the puppet brings specifically to this agenda?

VT: In the social context of a population that is often illiterate and marked by entrenched societal stereotypes and prejudices, puppets play a large role in heightening awareness of sensitive people in the targeted populations. Puppetry is a powerful creative medium using

cognitive imagery that favours the appropriation and the assimilation of disseminated messages more than many other mediums. The power of puppet shows to attract as well as to present catharsis contributes enormously to visibility and awareness of illness; most particularly, it has a role in consciousness raising, fomenting acceptance and promoting clear messages. Using puppets means that messages are easily and clearly transmitted because people pay a lot of attention to puppets. Audiences are fascinated by puppet shows and this means that we can communicate healthcare messages clearly.

I think that traditionally the history of puppetry in Togo and in other parts of Africa, is correctly associated with an interaction between certain social groups or communities and figurines that represent divinities or the deceased (the case of the twins in Togo, for instance). In a context of social change marked by the advance of imported religions and the rejection of culture or local traditions, certain communities with which we have worked have expressed unexpected reactions by rejecting new ideas and refusing to collaborate in our activities, notably in the Maritime Region. This situation which is due to ignorance of our projects has been resolved thanks to increased visibility of puppetry and a growing local awareness of our work. As a result, dozens of young people in the regions where we have worked have participated in our training activities to do with puppet-making and performing with puppets. We have made many puppet shows and toured widely. We have, for instance, created shows about marriage (what is expected; what is unacceptable; appropriate behaviour from both genders); disability (what it is like; how disabled people are treated; what is appropriate behaviour); children who are hyperactive, shy or have other social communication problems. And other themes.

CA: What specific skills are needed in your local context?

VT: There are numerous, diverse skills needed to work with puppets in these particular settings and working with these aims. Firstly, it's important to know how to work with a puppet; secondly, it is essential to be able to listen to and accept others. Following that, you need self-confidence to know how to transmit and share information and finally everything should be crowned by the love of the art and work well done.

In health centres, our aim is to develop the capacity in staff to listen to and accept others. The special conditions to do with working in care centres, dealing with the moods of patients, and so on, mean that these social skills could significantly benefit the health staff to better understand those that are sick.

Contributor details:

Vicky Tsikplonou

Vicky Tsikplonou is a Togolese marionnettist. She trained in theatre and joined the National Puppetry Troupe of Togo in 1983. In 1996 she set up the company Evaglo which was formed uniquely of female puppeteers. The company has toured widely in Togo and internationally, using puppets of different types, but mainly including string marionettes and giant puppets. The company is often funded to carry out educational projects to do with healthcare awareness or social issues. In 2015 the company set up the Village de la Marionnette (puppet village) which is located at 4 km distance from the capital, Lome. Here they have set up a training workshop, a performance space and a puppet museum.

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(see previous biography)