

ENTERTAINMENT-EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATORY THEATRE IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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The Makamkaew theatre group in Thailand is a school theatre group that performs community theatre on social issues. Unlike most other theatre groups, they consciously apply a participatory entertainment-education approach in their intervention work. The performances which are the subject of this study were not just applauded by the village spectators; they helped generate significant discussions among the performers, facilitators, teachers, students, and the community as a whole.

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The sentences below may sound like love lyrics but for the Makamkaew theatre group in Thailand, these lyrics hold special significance. These are the first set of lyrics that they collectively wrote. These lyrics represent their rich cultural heritage which they once ignored, emerging from the participatory processes between the theatre group and the community members. These lyrics helped re-connect the participants of this theatre group with their family and community members.

*I miss you.
I love you.
I don't know if you share
the same feeling.
I want you
to think of me
the same way
as I think of you.*

— *Translated lyrics written by members of the Makamkaew Theatre Group in Thailand.*

The purpose of the paper is to share our experience with participatory theatre in reenergising a remote community in Mae Hongson Province in northern Thailand. We provide a background on the theatre group, as well as the steps undertaken in this participatory theatre exercise. Further, we analyse the extent to which participatory theatre influences the performers, community members, and other stakeholders. We end by distilling the key lessons learned

from this community-centered participatory E-E approach.

The Dramatic Groups: Makampom and Makamkaew

Makampom is the name of a tamarind-type fruit in Thailand. It is also a name of a social change group in Thailand that works closely with the people at the grassroots level. They decided to call themselves Makampom, signifying how local fruits can bring happiness to those who eat them. Established in 1981, it applies micro-level media — such as theatre and participatory workshops — to foster social change. Its founders were student-activists in Thailand in the 1970s, who believed that arts and culture have a key role to play in securing public involvement in societal change.

Makampom applies participatory methods to their dramatic works. According to Buaprakorn (2004), Makampom's work involves youth-oriented theatre and drama utilising a community-based participatory approach. The hero in the dramatic story is always a local character. By 2004, Makampom produced more than 441 dramatic stories and conducted some 9,000 shows in 52 out of 76 provinces of Thailand and in 16 other countries, including the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, India, Germany, England, the Netherlands, United States, and Australia.

Makamkaew is the theatric group in Mae Hongson Province, Thailand, mainly comprising of hill tribe minority students, who were trained by the members of the Makampon group. This hill tribe students, belonging to the Red Karen ethnic group, wanted to have their own name for the dramatic group, one that was associated to their producer, Makampom. So they called themselves Makamkaew, a candy made from the tamarind fruit.

Mae Hongson Province

Mae Hongson Province is a remote mountainous area in northern Thailand inhabited by ethnic minority groups. A government edict compels them to send their children to a government-run boarding school from grade one to grade 12. The ethnic youth who attend the government-run boarding schools face a number of problems: They lack self-confidence and self-esteem in their ethnic identity. They are hesitant to talk in their local language in public. Seeking to integrate themselves in the mainstream society, they usually speak in the standard Thai language. Also, they find themselves being estranged from their family members and community elders.

Given the above challenges, the director of the boarding school, the local NGOs, and Makampom members, collaborated to use participatory theatre to address youth issues in Mae Hongson. They wanted theatre to inculcate a feeling of pride among the youth in their cultural heritage.

Steps in Conducting Participatory Theatre

We applied participatory action research to conduct participatory theatre in Mae Hongson Province. This process included seven steps:

Step No 1: Preparation

In order to create an effective participatory theatre, we started with team preparation. Members of Makampom were asked to join one of three groups. The first group was engaged in formative research. Their task was to dig up detailed information that would undergird the conduct of the project, including information on the target audience, as well as the geographic area of the project. They could find out the above information from archival documents or through field visits. The second group represented the management team, who organised the various activities, events, and managed financial aspects of the project, including raising funds. The third group consisted of trainers, who worked closely with the other two teams. They used information from the other teams to design the theatre training. They sought to shape the training in a way that spoke to local culture and the needs and aspirations of the target audience.

Apart from preparing the staff members, Makapom worked closely with the local school in Mae Hongson Province. They organised a meeting with the school board in order to sign an agreement on the responsibility of each organisation. The school board helped recruit 15 youth from the Red Karen hill tribe, who were in residence in the school. The Red Karen, a minority hill tribe, lives primarily in the Golden Triangle area of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. Further, the school board provided training space and meals for the participants. Makampom also engaged local community groups to support the participatory theatre project; they identified spaces for the performance, and helped with local logistics.

Step No 2: Basic dramatic practice

This step involved providing basic dramatic practice to participants and was carried out over a few intense hours in the evening, after the school day was finished. It began with an ice-breaking activity, followed by a number of games to warm up the body and to get the youth engaged in participatory drama creation. For example, youth used eye contact to watch other members and then move their body accordingly to achieve certain symmetric formations. These games also helped participants to more freely express themselves, and build a cohesive team. Further, they learned basic dramatic principles including the practice of concentration, visualisation, self-confidence, body movement, and voice projection.

Step No 3: Information gathering in the community

In this step of information gathering, which was carried out on one of the weekend days, youth participants were assigned to return to their hill tribe community to find out local information on existing natural resources in the community, and the local traditions that were associated with the use of these natural resources. The youth are encouraged to answer a series of designed questions: (1) what kind of natural resources concern the local people; (2) how do people use these resources; (3) are there any traditions related to these

natural resources; (4) what are the concepts behind these traditions; (5) what folk story relates to these tradition; (6) what kind of problems does the community face with respect to these natural resources; and (7) what might be some culturally-appropriate local solutions to these problems. In order to collect this data, they engaged in a practice session on observation, interviewing and note-taking. Then they visited with members of their community, in order to talk to them, to listen to their opinions, and to make short notes on what they learned.

Step No 4: Dramatic production

This step of drama production lasted two days. It began with youth reporting what they found about their natural resources, their benefits, and their related local traditions. Then they were asked to analyse and make sense of this information in an information matrix (Table 1).

Table 1
Matrix of Data Gathered from the Mae Hongson Community

Natural resources	Purposes	Tradition	Concepts behind the tradition	Related folk story	Problem	Solution
Water	Drinking, washing, cooking, growing rice, etc	T-pillar festival, baby showers, etc	To apologise for what we have done wrong	Apologising to the water	Garbage in the water	Water preservation
Forest	Source of food, lumber to make houses, making pillars, etc	New house celebration, T-pillar festival	To apologise to the spirit who protects the forest	"Grand Mom and a Head-Only Grandson"		
Soil	Gardening, farming, making roads etc	Botemo festival, E-Lu	Rice festival	Making a home	Ineffective farming system	Natural farming

Trainers then encouraged the youth participants to find a folk story associated with a given natural resource. For instance, the culturally-based story titled "Grand Mom and a Head-Only Grandson" (which we discuss later) was the product of the above process. It is a story about a tradition called the T-Pillar Festival, which relates to preserving local water and forest resources.

After the youth discussed, negotiated, and agreed on the story, they turned these stories into dramatic emplotments. Through brainstorming, they helped frame the story. They agreed on the title of the dramatic show, its timeline, the key messages, the type of music and songs, the kind of characters, the nature of the dramatic conflict, and the resolutions at the end.

Finally, they practised the dramatic performance for a couple of days, further refining the plot and its execution.

Step No 5: The dramatic performance

The entertaining and educational dramatic performances were performed in the villages, where the performers came from, during one weekend. Over 100 local audience members actively participated in each show.

A few days before the show, the group members used hand-made posters to promote the show to the public. The message in the poster included the name of the show, its timing, and venue. Early in the afternoon of the show day, an announcer and a team of musicians went around the community encouraging the community members to attend the show. Another group prepared the open air performance area. The performance area was a open public area within the community. Cloth spreads were put on the ground and people were invited to sit on them.

The show began with an introduction of the performers. All performers stayed on the performance area all the time. They used their bodies to formulate the background of the stage, and moved from the background position to act as an actor when their turn came. When they finished their act, they returned to make up the stage background.

The performances included simple and short messages, and moved quickly from one act to the other in order to hold audience attention. After the show, audience members were encouraged to join the discussion session. Here everyone had a chance to talk, to discuss, or to propose new ideas for action.

Step No 6: The evaluation

The following day, trainers and performers engaged in a reflective evaluation session. They sat in a group and reflected on what they had learned during this participatory theatre exercise, and what it meant for their future actions.

Step No 7: Planning for next steps

Makampom encouraged the performers of Makamkaew and the school board to talk to one another to discuss next possible steps, including the prospect of supporting students to launch a dramatic theatre project.

Method and Data-Collection

To make sense of this participatory theatre experience not only do we draw

upon our intimate involvement in this participatory theatre exercise, but we also draw upon various types of qualitative data we collected, including participant observation and note-taking, in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews with audience members and performers. The first author served as an observer and a participant in the training event. The second author acted as a trainer and researcher, conducting in-depth and focus group interviews with the participants.

Results

The participatory theatre process yielded many outcomes. An important narrative outcome of this exercise was the framing of a culturally-based story titled "Grand Mom and a Head-Only Grandson". This folk story was collectively written by Makamkaew group members and it linked local festivals, traditions, and preservation of natural resources.

The "Grand Mom and a Head-Only Grandson" story

The following story was crafted by Makamkaew members.

Once upon a time, an old woman lived with her grandson. The grandson had only a head and no body. One day he told his grandmother that he wanted to marry the daughter of a millionaire. He asked his grand mom to meet with the girl's father to seek permission.

The millionaire had three daughters. The older two daughters were already married to high-status men. The youngest daughter got married with the head-only man.

One day, the millionaire asked his three sons-in-law to find herbs from the jungle. The two older sons-in-law got the required herbs for their father-in-law. But not the head-only son-in-law.

The next day, the millionaire asked his three sons-in-law to go fishing. No one was successful in getting any fish as the head-only son-in-law had transformed himself into a hermit and kept all the living fish with him. The other two sons-in-law didn't know what to do; they really wanted to obtain fish for their father-in-law. They then asked the hermit to share the fish with them. The hermit was willing to exchange fish for the tips of their nose. They reluctantly agreed.

The parents-in-law then wanted to move closer to nature. They asked all three sons-in-law to build bridges over the water. Almost overnight, the head-only son-in-law built a gold and a silver bridge. The other two sons-in-law spent three months to build a bridge. They were getting very jealous of the head-only son-in-law. When they visited him during the night, they learned that the head-only son-in-law could transform himself into a man with a full body. The head-only figure was really the apparition of a suit. Once the suit was taken off, he was like anyone else. They decided to steal the suit and to burn it. The person inside was angry. He decided to take his wife and leave the planet Earth to move to stay in heaven.

The millionaire father-in-law finally realised the truth. He and his wife went to see their youngest daughter and his son-in-law. However, they

came too late. They could only catch one of the major pillars of their house while it moved to heaven. The pillar is a key cultural symbol of the Karen hill tribe and is called the T-Pillar. Every year, the Karen hill tribe celebrate their T-Pillar festival.

In addition to yielding a narrative outcome that was dramatised, the participatory processes and performances had some direct and indirect effects on the performers, the youth, and the community.

Effects on performers

What effects did the participatory theatre workshop and performances have on the participants? The participants gained in self-esteem, became better versed in community traditions, developed skills in working with others, and became proficient in the production aspects of participatory theatre.

Gaining in self-esteem : Prior to participating in the theatre workshop, the performers demonstrated low levels of self-esteem. Many did not believe that they could in any way enhance the identity of their local hill tribe community. As a minority marginalised group, they showed little pride in their community's history or heritage. Further, the youth showed little interest in returning to their community after finishing school. Instead, they planned to move to cities and live in urban settings.

During the focus group discussion, the performers told us that the participatory theatre based action project raised their self-esteem. The dramatic exercises brought them in touch with their innate feelings and thoughts. As a respondent noted: "Participatory theatre opens opportunities for us. It helps us know more about ourselves." It gave them hope that they had the capacity to serve their community as illustrated by the following statement: "By joining the theatre project, we know what we can do for the community." They also displayed self-confidence in training a younger generation of Red Karens in participatory theatre processes.

Learning about community traditions : Theatre workshop participants returned to their communities to dig for stories that could be developed as dramatic emplotments. By listening to their family members, including elders, they learned about their community's history, traditions, and culture. As one respondent noted: "Stories that we have selected provide us information on many things. From these stories we can learn about our own culture. We can also recognise the problems of our community." Another participant noted: "We did not know before that T-Pillar festival is linked with the moon and the earth. We did not know before why the T-Pillar is such a significant symbol in our community. Previously, we used to ignore these stories." Some workshop participants talked about the rich relational aspects of the participatory theatre research process, especially how it brought them closer to their loved ones: "I returned home and talked to my grand mom. I asked her how the story was developed. In the past, when my grand mom told us this story, I slept."

Developing skills to work with others

The performers noted that they developed skills in collectively working with others during the participatory theatre workshop and performances. As one respondent noted: "We learn how to work with others....how to form and function as a team. We can now practice empathy." Another respondent emphasised how they gained appropriate conversational skills: "We learned how to talk with the elders. We returned to the community to talk, to get to know one another even more closely." Another participant on the power of dialogic conversation in forging strong community ties: "By talking to others, we can make new friends and get to know people. I can find out characteristics of other people. Through dialogue in our theatre work, we create close relationships and strong ties. Therefore, we like one another."

Developing skills in producing participatory theatre

Through participatory theatre processes, performers felt they developed their capacity in critical thinking. As a respondent noted: "Theatric work does not only give us knowledge, but it also trains us in how to think critically. That critical thought need not be necessarily initiated by us. The audience can help us to think critically with their reactions, while we are on stage." They also noted they gained skills in managing theatre processes, ranging from finding collective stories, writing their emplotments, using locally resonant languages in the stories, and the like.

Further, while the Makampom theatric group is no longer present in the Mae Hongson community, its off-spring, Makamkaew, continues to conduct its activities in the community and in the high school. In the community, the Makamkaew participants encourage other youth in hill tribe communities to learn and preserve their rich cultural heritage. They serve as role models for other youth, encouraging them to join theatre activities. A number of new students have joined Makamkaew's theatre work and hence the effects of the participatory theatre action-based project continue.

Effects on community

Our research suggests that the participatory theatre action project not only affected the performers, but also had palpable effects on the community. The dramatic processes promoted connections between and among community members, enhanced the dignity of local cultural practices, and encouraged policy makers to see the application of participatory theatre in spurring social change.

Fostering connections among community members. As noted previously, to attend school, youth members of hill tribe ethnic groups move out of their community. The participatory theatre project encouraged hill tribe youth to return to their community, reconnect with their people, and to learn the significance of their indigenous stories. This process helped the elders to feel closer to these "estranged" youth. As an elder noted: "I felt confident to talk to the children about old stories from the past."

Enhancing dignity of local cultural traditions. During the performances, we noted that a number of older community women cried when they saw their children and grandchildren performing a local story. In Thailand, the national government has deemphasised local ethnic traditions in their quest for national unity. Participatory theatre provided a means for the minority groups to think about their rich cultural values. As an audience member noted: "The performance give me a chance to see our roots and I now realise that I have to preserve it."

Applying participatory theatre for social change

The Makamkaew theatre project has attracted the attention of development officials and policy-makers in Maehongsorn Province. They have already supported the Makamkaew group and high school students to use participatory theatre to run a number of campaigns in protecting the local community from drug abuse, HIV and AIDS, and others. They have also encouraged the application of participatory theatre in addressing issues of inequality and discrimination. As a development official noted: "In the past, we used to tell others through words and lectures. Now we realise how important the performance is for conveying the messages in the form of a story. It helps me create new projects in the community, especially ones that encourage them to learn and share information among themselves."

Lessons Learned

1. Participatory theatre is an important entertainment-education tool to foster social change (Singhal, 2004). It can serve as a source of entertainment and empowerment for the performers while it builds their capacity to perform in front of the public. In addition, the audiences can be entertained by enjoying a culturally-resonant show. At the same time, such participatory performances can educate both the performers and the audiences on their cultural heritage, traditions, and festivals, encouraging them to seek local solutions to their problems.
2. Participatory theatre emphasises horizontal learning. There is almost no teacher who teaches or preaches. But all participants act as teachers and learners at the same time through a dialogic process, while making a critical reflection on the problem of their own community (Freire, 1970, Singhal, 2004). It is somewhat like August Boal's (1979) Theatre of the Oppressed that show the power of conversational dialogue in reflecting the problem and finding the solution (Singhal, 2004).
3. The key to participatory learning lies in a willingness to "open" one's heart, mind, and soul (Freire & Faudez, 1989). Participatory theatre makes it possible for such to happen, for instance, when the youths learned from the elders during the stage of information gathering, and when the elders learned from the youth during the performance.

4. Participatory theatre is an illustration of what some call "communication by design" (Sthapitanonda, 2004). To make the participation effective, one needs to decide on the communication goal, the approach to be taken, and how to involve all actors. The facilitators apply an interactive and dialogic approach which encourages participants to find their own voice, scripts, and emplotments. This interactive communication approach needs to be skillfully integrated to collect formative data, and to apply its findings to build a culturally resonant dramatic stories.
5. The participatory theatre process is both a science and an art. The scientific part of the process is somewhat like the research process, beginning with the questioning step when they gathered information about their community, analysing step by step when they began to develop the story line, and ending with the application step, when they began to practice the performance based on the gathered information. The artistic part, on the other hand, is about adapting the participatory process to a problematic situation, in which the facilitators had to be flexible, and culturally sensitive to the issues.
6. In participatory theatre, the completion of the performance does not signify the end of the process, but the awakening step of the process. It helps awaken people (as was the case with the Red Karen) to think and talk about the issues in the performance, and how to act on the issue in the future.

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