

Culture and Communication Or How to name the unnameable?

The following chapter presents some reflections about ways to transmit a delicate message in a complex cultural setting. We hope that you will find them useful as a starting point for your own reflections on how to stage your play and how to find the appropriate way for your specific setting to transmit your message. There are no recipes for communication; there is no absolute “right” or “wrong” way of saying things. The public you will face and with whom you would like to develop a dialogue will be more or less ready for your message depending on numerous factors such as their age and gender, the place where they have grown up, the educational system they were exposed to, the language in which you communicate with them, the facility they have to express themselves verbally, what they have heard about HIV before, the background experience they have in relations with a partner and the situational context in which your play is embedded.

It’s paradoxical to clearly address facts and dangers related to the transmission of HIV / Aids in societies characterized by the existence of many myths and taboos around all issues related to partnership, marriage, sexuality and relations between men and women in general. The challenge of a publication such as this is to try to incite the activists who have a precise message to deliver to understand existing ideas and conceptions in order to find the appropriate way of delivering it. Talking about HIV and Aids demands a degree of clarity and straightforwardness, which can easily be perceived as culturally unacceptable.

How to explicitly name sexual practices in a society where many women are not supposed to have an opinion about their own sexuality; be it because it would be seen as improper for a woman to voice the practices, which procure her pleasure or in the extreme case in some areas because she is subject to FGM aiming at suppressing her desire altogether?

How to speak about condoms when many men view the very suggestion of using them as an attack against their masculinity?

How to stage a play where a woman clearly speaks out about her vision of sexuality in a society where little girls feel obliged to pay the material help of older “sugar daddies” with sex?

Power relations between men and women render such conversations even more difficult. In traditional societies women are not supposed to be too informed about sexuality as a proof of their righteousness and sane moral. A woman who knows too much can be seen as a woman too interested in sex and thus probably not faithful. The idea of men being hunters and women being a prey is very widespread on the globe; boys are brought up to prove their masculinity to the world and girls are kept uninformed and in fear hoping that this will hinder their entry into an active sexuality before marriage.

Of course everything said above is not generally true for everyone, there are more and more young, often urban women and men who have changed their way of approaching sexuality and don’t face the same taboos or inhibitions. Nonetheless for the great majority addressing sexuality is very delicate. These problems don’t exist in Africa only; everywhere in the world including the most Western society talking about sex, addressing intercourse explicitly is delicate. The difference is a difference of degree and of the sanctions, which can follow a behaviour which is judged as inappropriate.

The African continent is characterized by a great complexity in human relations. Issues such as hierarchy between speakers, gender, age as well as the situational context dictate the way a message can be transmitted.

HIV Aids threatens to paralyse or is already paralysing entire countries. Everything possible must be done to slow down the transmission of the virus or to hinder its propagation altogether. Scientists know today how the HIV virus can be transmitted and we therefore know which kinds of behaviour need to be avoided.

The dilemma is how to deliver a message, which is culturally undeliverable – how to name the unnameable?

The role of myths and taboos is very important in African societies. It is of course easy to say that a given myth is wrong. The problem is that every myth and every taboo has a function in society which is supposed to protect the members of the community and keep them from a behaviour, which would be judged as morally wrong. If you simply say a myth is wrong, it can be interpreted that you want to expose the community to a danger and that you are ultimately contributing to its destruction. You need to interrogate yourself about the underlying message of the taboo in order to separate what the taboo would like to protect and the way it suggests to achieve this goal.

[put examples in a frame?]

Let us give you a concrete example: in some African countries you can find the myth that having intercourse with a virgin can heal from HIV and that on the contrary having intercourse with a woman who has had a miscarriage or is pregnant can transmit the virus. Any scientist will confirm that this is wrong and we could content ourselves to clearly say this during a play. Despite the truth of the message some people may not be satisfied with this way of decrypting the myth .

It is useful to go further and ask oneself how such myths could come into being in the first place and what kind of behavioural prescription lies underneath. Many societies (African or not) attach an important value to virginity; the absence of sexual experience of a woman is seen as honourable and predicts that she will be a faithful and docile wife once married. In any case she will not be a threat to the man's masculinity (expressed among others through his sexual experience) because she has no way to compare the intimate experience she lives with him and will therefore not question his sexual authority. (In addition if the marriage was a traditional one she will usually also be younger and raised in the respect for men and for anyone older than herself so that she will not question his authority altogether...) Coming back to our example of false beliefs regarding the transmission, we understand how a virgin is seen as a symbol of purity and how then as an extension one could believe that someone who is "pure" should also be able to clean or undo what probably some other woman has transmitted.

On the other hand the example of a woman with a miscarriage or who is pregnant highlights other values in traditional societies: motherhood is a sacred state for a woman. The fact of being able to have children (especially boys) is almost seen as a personal capacity or achievement of the parents who deserve this grace. On the contrary the incapacity to procreate or the loss of a child have a deep impact on a woman's value in a traditional society. In the light of the absence of children, a man has the right to divorce or take an additional wife. In traditional societies "destiny" or "God's will" is often an explanation for any positive or negative event in one's life. A miscarriage can be attributed to a faulty lifestyle of the woman. Maybe there is something she did wrong, maybe she doesn't deserve children, etc. The step is short from this view of things to an idea that she is faulty altogether and having intercourse with her is dangerous. The idea of female witchcraft and the capacity of women to throw a curse onto other people is never far away in this kind of reasoning.

The idea of intercourse with a pregnant woman being dangerous can also be taken back to its roots: motherhood being sacred, a pregnant woman needs to be protected. In addition, the very fact that a woman is pregnant is a proof of the fact that she is already "taken". Having a sexual affair with a pregnant woman is therefore a double sin and the threat that this could entail bad consequences such as the transmission of the HIV virus can be a way to warn the potential lover from playing with the social rules.

Of course what we say is not necessarily specific to Africa only and is not true everywhere and for everyone in the same way; the idea of women being “faulty” almost by definition is as old as humanity and goes back all the way to Adam and Eve all around the globe. Myths are the expression of complex beliefs, destined at establishing rules for the community to live together.

African societies are based on the respect for the community. The good of the group is more important than the good of a given individual. Many rules govern the relations within the group, everyone has his or her place depending on age, gender, family hierarchies and other elements. It is important to find a way to transmit a message, which is compatible with the respect for the group and is not seen as a way to disturb its functioning. This is why any dignitary who is respected within the group should be included into the strategy to transmit the message as much as possible. If the way the message is transmitted is seen as an intrusion into the rules, which guarantee the functioning of the group it will be rejected.

The way out of too delicate a message often chosen by African activists of the cause is to suggest the absence of intercourse before marriage and faithfulness during marriage as the only recipe because these are the only recommendations which are culturally acceptable and coherent with the general image of morality. The problem is that this discourse doesn't take reality into account and can therefore not be effective: prostitution (mostly out of economical necessity) exists, relations outside marriage are a reality, the sugar daddy phenomenon is also real (see above) and adolescents engage in sexual practices no matter how strong the recommendation to be faithful. The major obstacle to an explicit discourse and information is the wrong idea that the very fact to name what is dangerous, what to do and how to do it, will incite young people to have sex and will make faithful women but also men curious to have an affair. In fact, this vision suggests that rather than protecting the population from a disease, it will pervert their moral and ultimately destroy the society through alienation from its traditional values. This is why occidental campaigns with a clear message are often doomed to fail. The very fact that the message comes from the global “North” risks to be perceived as yet another try to pervert the moral and the colonize the souls of the people.

The real difficulty of talking about all the issues related to the transmission of HIV is that the questions touched go far beyond the medical sphere. The questions at stake when it comes to discussing HIV/Aids are questions about the power relations between men and women, questions challenging the functioning of the community but ultimately also questions about the relation between the global “North” and the “South”, the former colonizers and the former colonies and the negotiation between modern and traditionalist views within the continent itself. The spread of HIV has accelerated a debate about morality and modernity and alters its progression.

What to do?

Forum theatre helps the transmission of the message because it enters into a dialogue with the public. The joker can establish an atmosphere in the beginning, which signals that the troupe is not there to paternalise people or to judge them, nor to alienate them from their culture or to incite them to behave in a morally reproachful way. It must be clear that the scenes are examples of scenes which we know exist in daily life without suggesting that all of it is applicable to all the people in the public. Forum theatre allows the public to speak on behalf of the character of the play; they don't need to expose their own convictions directly (I

think...) but can withdraw to a more neutral position (in this situation the character could do the following...) Nonetheless whatever they say and whatever they know may be judged by the others in the public and even if they don't express themselves on their own behalf, they will be identified to some extent with the ideas they advance.

There is no recipe of how to transmit such a delicate and yet such an essential message in a culturally appropriate way. We hope that this manual helps you to define your own way of communication depending on the context in which you will be active.

As activists attached to the truth we cannot remain silent in front of dangerous practices and behaviour which favours transmission and we cannot invent a counter myth to balance the myths that are incorrect. We have to find a way to transmit our message in an acceptable way without putting people off. Your task before each performance is to analyse your public, the rules governing their behaviour and the situational context of your presentation. Who is in the public? Have they chosen to come? Are men and women together? How old are they? If possible you should discuss with dignitaries of the community as well as people involved in the care of people living with the virus. This will allow you to better understand the false beliefs which need to be addressed, the fears connected to the message you might deliver, the message generally delivered in schools and in the public sphere as well as the specific situation of the place. It will then be up to you to find the appropriate way to establish a sense of confidence with the public and to deliver your message as clearly as possible. As the German poet Max Frisch puts it "One should present the truth to the other like an open coat, ready for him to slip into and not slap it around his ears like a wet rug". (M.Frisch, Tagebuch 1966-1971, Frankfurt a.M., page 30)