

As contemporary theatre and new production models are now being evaluated with more regard to community empowerment, the importance of proper tools for evaluation of the process has increased. The article explored the community youth theatre practices of the Community Youth Cultural Centre (CYCC) of the National Commission on Culture (NCC) in Ghana. We examined the role of the youth theatre at CYCC in the light of community empowerment. Using the qualitative case study design, six artists with a minimum of five years and a maximum of thirty years of work experience with the CYCC were interviewed. Performance activities and documents of the CYCC were also observed and analysed. The findings revealed four themes: Objectives of the centre; Youth theatre practices; Abibigoro/puppetry theatre models; and non-formal and cultural education. It was found that staff and artists at the CYCC employed diverse theatrical modes to facilitate community empowerment processes. The study recommends that cultural and creative centres in Ghana should harness the potentials of the community youth theatre, develop community-specific and context-driven performance models to support artistic-aesthetic-cultural and non-formal education processes to enhance our collective strive for community empowerment in Ghana.

Keywords: community, empowerment, people, theatre in Ghana, youth theatre

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Youth Theatre and Community Empowerment in Ghana

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Introduction

Contemporary theatre and new production models have increasingly received emphasis in recent times because of the new and significant ways in which they contribute to community empowerment processes in Africa (Abah 435; Nyatuame 26; Yankah 87). Despite this recent emphasis, in Ghana, contemporary theatre practices like youth theatre are largely absent in existing literature. There is, however, ample evidence to the effect that youth theatre contributes to people's empowerment (Hughes & Wilson 57; Jensen 146; Leaf & Ngo 1; Michael Richardson 1; Shulamith Lev-Aladgem 291). Lev-Aladgem (277, 291) and Hughes and Wilson (57) affirm the socio-cultural, political and personal benefits of youth theatre, which have implications for community empowerment purposes. However, in the current state of the literature in Ghana, there is almost no study devoted to youth theatre practices, particularly on the experiences of the only state-owned Community Youth Cultural Centre (CYCC) in Ghana. Therefore, the article deals with an interesting and original issue since available literature on the CYCC of Ghana is almost non-existent. This article thus has the potential to become a significant contribution to the literature in this regard.

The rest of the article is structured into various sections. Firstly, we present the background and summarise the conceptual and empirical review to contextualise the study. In the second section, we introduce the methodological procedures to justify the relevance of using an interpretive case study to explore the youth theatre experiences of the CYCC in the light of community empowerment interests. In this section, we also justify our reasons for selecting the CYCC as a case for this study. Though we admit the limitations of this exploratory study which relies heavily on data mainly from interviews, observations and documents (online archives and sources), the article, nonetheless, provides insight into other theatre systems in the global south, particularly contemporary theatre practices such as youth theatre in a

developing nation such as Ghana in West Africa. In the final section, we present the results and discussions to inform conclusions and recommendations derived.

In this article, we explore the youth theatre practices of the CYCC, located in a deprived community in the Accra metropolis of Ghana, to examine the role of the youth theatre at CYCC in the light of community empowerment processes. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions were raised:

1. What are the objectives of the Community Youth Cultural Centre (CYCC) in Ghana?
2. How does the CYCC engage in youth theatre practices in Ghana?
3. What contemporary theatre models influence youth theatre practices of the CYCC?
4. How does the youth theatre of CYCC serve community empowerment processes in Ghana?

Theatre in Ghana

Ghana boasts of unique, rich and diverse cultural identity and heritage. These find expression in cultural forms and the creative industry. Key among creative offerings from Ghana's cultural industry is the performing arts, comprising music, dance, drama and masquerade performances, among others. A vital component of Ghana's performing art forms is the art of theatre, which plays significant roles in the socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental development of the country (Bello, 3, Commey Fio, 33; Asare, 10).

As is characteristic of many African countries, Ghana has a unique theatrical culture. Theatrical traditions in Ghana may be grouped under the following periods: pre-colonial, post-colonial, pre-independence and post-independence. Owing to this, theatre in Ghana reflects the nature and values of the Ghanaian society as are manifested in her art and culture. Different dramatic and theatrical forms could be identified in the theatrical culture of Ghana. Yankah identifies three distinctive forms of drama and theatre which have undergone an evolution, namely: literary theatre, commercial theatre, popular theatre and theatre for development (57). Asiedu also identifies traditional (indigenous) theatre, literary theatre, popular theatre/concert party and theatre for development as forms of theatre in Ghana (5). Traditional/indigenous theatre, literary theatre, conventional theatre, popular theatre, theatre for development can be recognised as various forms depicting the nature of the theatrical culture of Ghana. These theatrical forms are still susceptible to evolution as a result of the influence of colonialism and its associated Western cultural influences as much as demands of the changing circumstances and current times. Emerging from the current practices of theatre in Ghana is the youth theatre culture, championed mainly

by the CYCC, some centres of national culture (CNCs) and a few Senior High Schools in Ghana. The diverse theatrical forms and the evolution of indigenous theatre forms reflect the uniqueness of Ghanaian theatrical tradition and the nature of drama and theatre in contemporary Ghana. Theatre in Ghana plays significant roles in the socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental development of the country (Bello 3, Commey Fio 33; Asare 10), particularly in community empowerment efforts.

Community empowerment

Scholars in development studies and development communication observe that one's participation in development processes has largely influenced trends in development thinking, paradigms, strategies and practices in the 1960s and 1970s and gathered renewed strength in the 1990s (Balme 3; Yankah 15). Community empowerment interests continue to influence trends in development thinking, paradigms, strategies and practices (Balme 3; Yankah 15). Ghana's development agenda over the years and in recent times have been tailored towards people-centred or human-centred paradigms and, by extension, community empowerment (Nyatuame 218). Sloman intimates that the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a paradigm shift in the active use of theatre as a tool for universal community development due to the adoption of greater participation practices (8).

Grassroots participation and empowerment present alternative approaches to development theory (thinking and processes). The individual and the society and their cultural structures have become the focus of attention in contemporary discussions on community empowerment and development communication. Theatre presents a practical dimension to this development approaches as it is culture-related, people-centred and creative. Smith-Autard posits that: "Art is an important aspect of culture, and should therefore be valued not only for its aesthetic and artistic character but as a teacher of and about culture" (36). Reimer also draws attention to the influence of culture on a particular conceptual view of art (5). Artworks are associated with their socio-cultural contexts. They have culturally defined meanings, which inform the basis of expressions in such art forms. The youth need guidance to imbibe and apply culturally defined meanings, artistic traditions, styles and presentations in such artistic forms to reveal how such meanings, traditions and styles have evolved and developed over time. So cultural education seeks to emphasise the socio-cultural and political context of artworks as it pertains to all cultures. And this underscores the significance of context to the form and value, the processes, and the referents of artworks of all cultures at all times. Since artistic and cultural expressions are rich and diverse in Africa, particularly Ghana, it is imperative for the youth in Ghana to familiarise themselves with traditions and practices that underpin the theatrical

culture of Ghana. The implications are of much significance to this study in that cultural education is core to community empowerment goals as enshrined in the Cultural Policy [document] of Ghana (NCC 10).

Theatre as cultural education should aim at empowering all people in Ghana, particularly the youth, in recognising, exploring, understanding, and suitably applying their own cultural assumptions and values (Smith-Autard as cited by Nyatuame 75). The youth may thus imbibe values and attitudes that are consistent with the richness of their arts and culture. Theatre as cultural education empowers target communities and vulnerable populations like the youth to appreciate the transitory and dynamic nature of culture and society as well as the processes and potential for socio-cultural change (76). This change may be facilitated through positive cultural – specifically, contemporary theatrical – practices and models like the youth theatre experience.

The practice of youth theatre

Researchers on the practice of youth theatre have espoused different perspectives. Such views provide practical issues bordering on the concept of youth theatre; its nature and purpose; activities associated with the practice; benefits of youth theatre and its applications; conditions necessitating the practice; strategies for managing youth theatre in different contexts; types and range of contexts; and approaches to youth theatre. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem (291) and Michael Richardson (1) provide interesting and valuable perspectives on the practice to underscore the educational and social development benefits of youth theatre to project the field as a growing area of study in the broader discourse and practice of theatre arts. Hence, the concept of youth theatre practice has attracted significant attention in global scholarship in recent times (Hughes & Wilson 57; Jensen 146; Leaf & Ngo 1; Lev-Aladgem 276; Richardson 1; Pearson & Thomas 2).

The practice of youth theatre is described by some scholars as socio-culturally and politically related (Lev-Aladgem 276–277). Lev-Aladgem notes that the practice requires conditions that are shaped and motivated by social concerns, cultural issues and political perspectives (277). Disenchanted youth tend to need guided activity and are thus likely to see benefits from the socio-psychological advantages of participation in theatre-centred activities. Similarly, Hughes and Wilson describe the term “youth theatre” as “a wide variety of organisations that engage young people in theatre-related activities in their own time” (57). Consequently, Richardson considers youth theatre as “drama for life” (5) and also as a processual enterprise, requiring “proper tools for evaluating the process” (10). Thus, practitioners of youth theatre need to systematically contextualise structure and evaluate their practices

as a mode of “non-formal education” (10) as much as artistic-aesthetic-cultural education (Smith-Artaud 30-36; Nyatuame 223). Richardson thus argued that local authorities tend to lend support to process-based, voluntary, non-formal education artistic enterprises with the capacity to prioritise social and personal development. What modes of practice usually guide the practice?

Richardson identifies diverse approaches to the practice of youth theatre. Emergent from these are four categories, which have been noted as the modes informing the practice. The first mode identifies theatre arts groups that privilege skill acquisition for creating and performing. The second is the community projects, concerned with the promotion of local collaboration and cooperation. Conversely, the third approach, youth arts groups, is mainly geared toward the social and personal growth of participants, while users of the fourth approach, applied theatre, employ it as a teaching tool to examine contemporary issues (3). Relatedly, Leaf and Ngo (3) explored community-based youth theatre practice in a social justice context, where youth participants confronted and grappled with issues of diversity and difference. The study sheds light on how artistic practice can be appropriated as a tool in the context of social injustices and to counteract educational contexts that reproduce inequality. The implications relate to the knowledge base of out-of-school learning contexts that inform contemporary approaches to learning in the arts (1).

Regardless of the diversity of the approaches, each of these methods to youth theatre has the potential capacity to generate purposeful educational and social environments drawing children and young people together in theatre-specific projects. Theatre-related processes encourage informal learning, activity and participation due to their learner-led and task-orientated nature (3, 16). The socio-psychological benefits of participating in theatre-centred activities (5) and as a model of empowerment (Lev-Aladgem 291) cannot be overestimated. Hughes and Wilson provide empirical insight into the impact of youth theatre on young people’s personal and social development (57). This insight lends support to the practice of youth theatre within the context of youth transitions, where the identified skills, capacities and resources that help young people make successful transitions to adulthood in the current social and economic climate can be explored and harnessed.

To support the benefits of youth theatre, Pearson and Thomas investigate the relationship between youth theatres and Connexions, a “new government initiative for 13–19 year olds [sic], designed to improve and enhance support for them at this key stage during their lives” (2). The study notes, “youth theatres are well placed to offer rich and rewarding experiences for young people. This process of ‘referring’ young people to a youth theatre for a variable period of time was a key concept which was tested in the research” (2). It is concluded that “youth theatres are in a strong

position to contribute to Connexions work and can do a great deal to enhance the opportunities for personal development for young people.” (3) The report further espouses the view that “youth theatres are in an excellent position to contribute to the work of Connexions partnerships” (3).

While related studies discuss youth theatre in a community-based context, Jensen’s perspective provides another range of context of the experience in professional youth theatre spaces, where diverse media forms and mediating technological systems of representation could be explored (146). Jensen explores participatory youth theatre performance within the discourse of convergence culture and learning. She “posits that new forms of performativity accompany convergence culture and provide opportunities for new types of learning and engagement in professional youth theatre spaces” (146). Attention is also drawn to conventional culture in educational theatre settings, which might not escape the culture of new media convergence and further considers youth theatre as a sense-making space for young audiences as they relate to their contemporary experiences. The need to examine applications of youth theatre as both an educational medium and means of creative expression in community performance (1) contexts toward stimulating community empowerment processes is thus brought to the fore to explore and reflect on the Ghanaian situation with youth theatre practices in the case of the CYCC in Ghana.

Youth theatre in Ghana

Commey, reporting in *Cultural policy and performing arts promotion: A study of the centre for National Theatre, Cape Coast*, notes that cultural festivals for junior and senior high schools were one of the major programmes on the calendar of the cultural unit of the Ghana Education Service in the National Cultural Festival event (54). This event is usually organised annually among first and second cycle educational institutions. Before the national event, the festival is generally organised at the zonal, district and regional levels, where outstanding participating schools and individual students are selected to represent their respective regions at the national festival. According to Aguri, the main objectives of the cultural unit under the Education Ministry are to achieve the following:

- a. Unearth those creative talents which otherwise would remain unknown;
- b. Guide and strengthen the capabilities of those inborn potentials in the young artists and nurture them into professionals;
- c. Use the arts as a tool to instil a sense of responsibility and strengthen Ghana’s national identity;

- d. Educate and create awareness in pupils/students on social vices through arts and cultural programmes and activities; and
- e. To encourage stakeholders of cultural education to have an attitudinal change towards Ghana's own culture through workshops, seminars, etc. (19)

Evidently, youth theatre practice in Ghana is rooted in cultural and artistic education to facilitate cultural intervention processes targeted at causing social change, especially among the vulnerable youth populations. Cultural education through formal and non-formal educational processes have been exploited by state institutions like the educational ministry in Ghana to whip up the interest of young people in cultural activities, as in the case of youth theatre. In Ghana, the practice has evolved into dynamic cultural interventions that blend art with action, aesthetics with pragmatism, and community participation in stimulating social change and transformation.

Additionally, youth theatre activities in Ghana usually occur in locations such as community centres, centres of national culture (CNCs), community youth cultural centre (CYCC), educational settings (Senior High Schools, [SHSs]), churches, prisons and rehabilitation centres, with which marginalised youthful groups are usually engaged. In the model/practice of the Community Youth Cultural Centre (CYCC) in particular, facilitators and volunteers mobilise a group of youths into an ensemble of performers to create and improvise community performances through creative processes of group consolidation, improvisations, play development and rehearsals, and productions of public/community performances. Poetry recitals and drum appellations were reported to have been some of the theatrical activities performed by some of the Senior High Schools in the Cape Coast metropolis of Ghana during the 2016 edition of the Central Regional Cultural Festival in Cape Coast (Commey Fio 56). Also, some of the programme activities, which are reported to have been organised by some of the Centres for National Culture (CNCs), particularly in the Cape Coast metropolis, are Students' Drama Festival (91). Popularly referred to as STUDRAFEST, the Students' Drama Festival started in the late 1980s as a result of a paper presented by the late Efua Sutherland in 1980. The idea for the establishment of STUDRAFEST was to launch a process whereby with or without formal training in playwriting and acting, students would write and act out a play for appreciation. The best play, actor, actress and others would then be harnessed for further training and to keep the tradition going (91). Though the Centre for National Culture (CNC) in Cape Coast has suffered some setbacks in organising the STUDRAFEST event over the years, the programme has since become an annual event held on a competitive basis for second cycle schools in the Central Region of Ghana (92). The rationale has been to offer a medium for talents to be exposed. The festival works towards achieving this objective by guiding youth to exhibit their potentials more usefully. Some senior high schools have made efforts to constantly participate in STUDRAFEST since its relaunch in 1995 (92).

Efforts have been made to involve some of the youths of Ghana in theatre-related activities. Traces of youth theatre activities may be observed in formal educational activities and programmes of some Ghanaian high schools as well as in youth theatre practices of the CYCC. The need to examine the case of the CYCC in the light of youth theatre and community empowerment purposes is thus pertinent given that the CYCC is the only cultural centre in Ghana explicitly devoted to serving community youth interests. However, in the current state of the literature, there is almost no study devoted to the CYCC. Therefore, the article deals with an interesting and original issue since available literature on the CYCC in Ghana is almost non-existent. The study thus has the potential to become a significant contribution to the literature in this regard. The following section presents a brief historical account of the CYCC to place the discourse in proper context.

The Community Youth Cultural Centre (CYCC)

The Community Youth Cultural Centre (CYCC) was established in 1989 in Accra, Ghana, under the mandate of the National Commission on Culture and the Ministry of Youth and Sports at the time (CYCC 1). At present, CYCC is a cultural agency of the National Commission on Culture (NCC) under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Creative Arts in Ghana. The motivation is to embark on a community youth cultural programme designed to address the socio-cultural needs and aspirations of the young people of Ghana. This is further to create conditions that will enable the youth to develop their creative abilities and empower them to contribute meaningfully to the nation's development. Such recognition is to tap the potentials of the youth as a very crucial social category for the national interest. It is anticipated that CYCC will respond to the daily aspirations and anxieties of the youth population in the country and in the long term to create the basis for the evolution of a Youth Cultural Movement that is national in character and identity as well as internationalist in outlook (Ibid.). The initial thrust of the programme is to concentrate on fruitfully engaging young people during their recreational and leisure times. Today, programme events of CYCC are mainly out-of-school activities, which are creatively and culturally inclined.

The functions of CYCC are to respond to the needs of the youth, identify and nurture talents and creative potentials of young people, promote positive values among the youth and prepare them as responsible human resources and a resource for development and set the basis for the evolution of a youth cultural movement in Ghana (Ibid.). The target population of CYCC are the entire youth in the country, with the main focus being the socially vulnerable population of the youth in Ghana. The activities of CYCC include regular, weekend, and special programmes. Regular programme activities include orientation sessions; performing arts (traditional and

contemporary dance, music, drama, poetry and puppetry); fine art and cottage craft; physical culture, library provisions; excursions and environmental activities; and video shows. Weekend programmes are mainly diverse community outreach activities comprising various artistic events organised particularly on weekends to whip up community participation and interest in youth programmes (6) with the centre. As an important component of the activities of CYCC, special programmes mainly involve vacation camps purposely organised to fully engage the attention and interest of the youth during holiday periods. Special programmes also include programmes for special occasions and youth festivals (7).

In light of the preceding, the need to explore the current situation of the CYCC regarding how it is employing youth theatre practice towards community empowerment in marginalised settings in Ghana is brought to bear. The article considers the CYCC as one of the settings for youth theatre activities in Ghana in light of the Ghanaian model of cultural centres/centres of national culture (CNCs) as CCIs for cultural education (Asare 291).

Methods and procedures

This interpretative case study explored the role of the CYCC in promoting youth theatre for community empowerment in Ghana. The case study was justified by concerns raised on the increasing importance of proper tools for evaluation of contemporary theatre and production models toward community empowerment, particularly on criticisms of the role of cultural and creative arts institutions (CCIs) in the socio-cultural political needs of Ghana (Asare 5; Bello 3; Commey 4). Data was collected and analysed from interviews (of key informants), observations of programme activities of CYCC and, available documents (print and online archives of CYCC) regarding youth theatre activities of the CYCC in light of community empowerment in Ghana.

The study was undertaken at the CYCC in the Accra metropolis of the Greater Accra region of Ghana, during the 2018/2019 youth camp activities, within a time frame of approximately two years. The centre was purposively selected since it is arguably the only community youth cultural centre established by the government of Ghana through the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Arts and Culture with the mandate to address the needs and social aspirations of particularly the youth in some of the underprivileged settings in Accra, Ghana (CYCC 1). Some of the staff (administrator) and artists (dancer, drummer, choreographer, puppeteer and actor) of the centre participated in the study. A total of six respondents (five males; one female within the age group of 29 to 56 years) were available for interviews. They were the personnel with the CYCC and directly involved in the daily activities of the youth theatre practice

of the centre at the time of the study. The artists may be described as experienced personnel since they had been practising their art with the CYCC for a minimum of five years and a maximum of thirty years. The six respondents participated in the interview sessions about how the CYCC engages in youth theatre practices to support community empowerment processes. On average, about 250 youth participants were involved in the programmes observed and described; 110 teens and 140 children. The artists and administrator were interviewed at one stage or the other during the period of the study. The interview arrangement was a semi-structured interview guide enabling all the participants to respond to the same set of basic questions bordering on the study's key research questions.

To minimise any form of biases, the participants at CYCC were given the opportunity to respond to the same set of basic questions. The responses, observations and documents of the artists and personnel on the youth theatre culture of CYCC were subsequently linked to broader concerns. However, the newly emerging issues from the interviews and observations were further probed during the interviews.

The interview responses of each participant, based on the role of CYCC in promoting youth theatre for community empowerment in Ghana, were transcribed. Pictures and video recordings of some of the programme activities of the centre were also reviewed (and described) in line with the nature (type), purpose, place/venue/location, time/period/occasion and context of performances. Codes and broader themes were then generated to inform meanings derived from the data. Specific themes were subsequently developed based on the emergent meanings derived from the participants' explanations, which were analysed and further discussed to affirm and or counter perspectives espoused in the related literature that was reviewed.

Results of the study

The research questions sought to explore the role of CYCC in supporting youth theatre for community empowerment in Ghana; leading to four themes or categories as were identified in the qualitative interviews, observations and documents, namely:

1. Objectives of the centre;
2. Youth theatre practices;
3. Abibigoro/puppetry theatre models; and
4. Non-formal and cultural education.

Objectives of the centre

The extracts from the interviews and documents highlight the knowledge the participants have about the youth theatre practice at CYCC. Many of the accounts given by the facilitators show that they share the view that many of the training, skills and capacities developed at the CYCC go a long way to support the goals and objectives of the cultural centre as mandated by the NCC and the government. According to the Cultural Policy of Ghana, this is “To enhance Ghanaian cultural life and develop cultural programmes to contribute to the nation’s human development and material progress through heritage preservation, conservation, promotion and the use of traditional, modern arts and crafts to create wealth and alleviate poverty” (NCC 10). Thus, the youth development and training programmes of the CYCC, in particular, support the socio-cultural needs and aspirations of the youth in Ghana. The participants were familiar with the CYCC in general and the youth theatre practice in particular at the centre. This familiarity is because one of the facilitators had been with the CYCC for nearly thirty years, two for ten years, two for six years, and the other for five years. The Concept Note document on CYCC as developed by the centre in 2020 notes the following objectives of the CYCC:

- a. To respond to and satisfy the out-of-school recreational and leisure time need of the youth.
- b. To identify and realise the latent talents of the young people.
- c. To enhance the creative and indeed cultural abilities of the youth and channel their energies into positive use.
- d. To promote the positive values of patriotism, cooperation and internationalism among the youth.
- e. To prepare the youth as an important human resource for development.
- f. To set the basis for the evolution of the Youth Cultural Movement in the country (CYCC 2).

Facilitators highlighted several personal and social development opportunities and skills in the interviews as arising from CYCC. These include: to enhance the creative abilities of the youth; promote cultural values; prepare them as an important human resource for development; good training grounds for professional development for youths in the creative arts economy. Some of the facilitators noted that they are convinced about the mandate of the CYCC as a centre for youth development. For instance, Kuuku explained:

CYCC is a community-based centre that involves community leaders, stakeholders, schools and the general populace to ensure an alliance and a base for community engagement and discussions. Its objectives was [sic] to enhance the creative abilities

of the youth, promote cultural values, the spirit of patriotism, and prepare them as an important human resource for development. (Respondent 1, CYCC)

In agreement, another artist and facilitator of the centre observed in an interview that attaining these objectives is becoming much more challenging due to inadequate support and less commitment from the state authorities. Nuno, for instance, related:

In my view, the CYCC could have or can easily pass as a good training ground for professional development for youths in the creative arts economy. But, unfortunately, lack of a realistic commitment towards developing our creative and cultural art forms is challenging it as an engine of social and economic development (Respondent 2, CYCC).

Youth development and theatre practices

Many artists and facilitators invest a great deal of time and energy in the affairs of the CYCC. Best practices require cultural centres to provide the needed opportunities to harness and support the potentials of marginalised youths in underprivileged communities. Arrangements to put in place a conducive and work-like, professional and creative environment and provisions to support expectations, self-motivation, and commitment from the youth are brought to bear. Vacation camps, reading clinics, study sessions, sporting activities, skills development and total theatre experiences provide the youth with the needed structures to tap, harness and exploit their latent talents. To the extent that adequate provision is made for these facilities, the youth are most likely to be committed, enthusiastic about having a share, prepared, participate, perform, team up with peers from all walks of life, exchange ideas and feelings, take risks, be decisive, consistent and responsible. The following pictures are evidence of some of the programme activities of the CYCC.



Sporting (basketball) activities at CYCC

(Source: <https://www.facebook.com/CYCCVOCATIONAL/>)



Bead making training: CYCC Vacation Camp 2019, CYCC, Accra.

(Source: Researchers' Archive (fieldwork), 2019)



Library programmes at CYCC: Reading and study sessions, homework exercises, extra tutoring session and literacy work

(Source: Researchers' Archive (fieldwork), 2018)

Such programmes include but are not limited to the following: performing arts, fine art and cottage craft, physical culture and library programmes. Performing arts activities comprise lessons on traditional and contemporary dances, music, drama poetry as well as puppetry. Per the context of this study, the operational definition of youth theatre encapsulates all these forms of performances. Youth development

programmes of the CYCC thus comprised any internal and external training that enhanced capacity building and community empowerment for the youth.

Abibigoro and puppetry theatre

Explicit in CYCC theatre practices is Mohammed ben Abdallah's abibigoro concept and technique (Abdallah 23; Afful 4; Appiah-Adjei 4). Mohamed ben Abdallah, the Ghanaian playwright who happened to be a student of Efua Sutherland, developed the Abibigoro concept, which drives on African aesthetics of storytelling tradition, particularly the use of the narrator technique, music, dance, drama, audience participation and other elements to heighten actor/audience interaction and conceptualise this black (African) theatre. Abdallah, in the process, has expanded the frontiers of Sutherland's Anansegoro concept (Addo 50) and theatre-making practice. According to Respondent 1, an artist (actor) with the centre, "CYCC combines contemporary African theatre, storytelling, musical forms and dance into a modern form of theatre. Its unique style is based on the Abdallah concept of Abibigoro, which infuses music, dance and drama to bridge the gaps between the traditional and the modern."

In addition, one of the most experienced artists and staff members of the centre, a puppeteer, says:

They [CYCC] teach the children a lot of things. Yes, that one too [theatre and the performing arts], they teach it. They teach drumming, dancing, and theatre, too. Why puppetry? Puppetry does attract the children, and puppetry does send [informative and educative] messages. At the same time that you are entertaining the crowd [the audiences], the children, they are learning something from it. Puppetry is so special in terms of educating the public. So the reason why puppetry is so special is that with puppetry, we do it in such a way that it represents art and reality in the form of human needs. And it is something that is very interesting, and the children love it (Respondent 4, CYCC).

Clearly, puppetry theatre emerges as a key contemporary performance model that informs the youth theatre works of the CYCC. In the process, the performing arts experience and the theatre-making process provides a unique opportunity for the youth to explore feelings, thoughts, experiences, attitudes and behaviour in a lively context that is reflective of their everyday life. Such platforms become avenues for the youth to be assisted in expressing and managing difficult feelings. The concept and process of community youth theatre provide the youth with positive attributes as self-development, confidence, tolerance and the likes as they benefit from the role-playing experiences. Such levels of participation and engagement with

familiar and unfamiliar people and experiences are thus crucial to the transitional development processes of the youth as they advance toward negotiating socio-cultural exigencies like coexistence and diversity in the contemporary world. In effect, participation in the youth theatre experience becomes a means to an end for the youths of the CYCC. In an interview with participants on the theatre forms of the CYCC, an artist (an actor) related thus:

CYCC combines contemporary African theatre, storytelling, musical forms and dance into a modern form of theatre. Its unique style is based on the Abdallah concept of Abibigoro which infuses music, dance and drama to bridge the gaps between the traditional and the modern. This technique has processes, which has its fundamentals in role-play, games, storytelling, musical forms, etc. Improvisation is central in the practice of Abibigoro. (Respondent 2, CYCC)

In support of the above view, a choreographer and theatre director and facilitator of many of the dance theatres of the CYCC recounted the following:

Mohamed Ibn Abdallah, the Ghanaian playwright who happened to be a student of Efua Sutherland, developed the Abibigoro concept to heighten actor/audience interaction and conceptualise the African theatre. I have been using these techniques for the past fifteen years as a dancer, choreographer and theatre director to date. (Respondent 1, CYCC)

It is clear from the above views that the youth theatre culture of CYCC is influenced by the total African theatre configuration, Abibigoro performance aesthetics, popular theatre, community theatre for change outreach, and community participation. Consequently, theatrical activities of the CYCC take the form of traditional and contemporary dances, music, drama poetry as well as puppetry. For facilitators, the youth theatre experience provides a significant source of support by facilitating access to training and capacity building in the performing arts. The youths tend to benefit from the creative experiences and expertise of artists and professionals in the creative arts sector. Peers also become supportive mates to other participants within the time and space of the improvisations, rehearsals and performances in a collective context of informal education and empowerment through the artistic-aesthetic-cultural processes. The following photographs demonstrate some youth theatre performances of the CYCC, including total and puppetry theatre.



CYCC Puppety performance at Jall & Jill International School, Accra, 2019
(Source: Researchers' Archive (fieldwork), 2019)



Dance theatre rehearsals: CYCC Vacation Camp 2019, CYCC, Accra.
(Source: Researchers' Archive (fieldwork), 2019)



CYCC of NCC, located at Kawukudi, Kanda – Accra, Ghana.

(Source: Researchers' Archive (fieldwork), 2018)

Non-formal and cultural education

Cultural and creative centres serve as cultural structures for exploring issues and challenges of everyday life. Youth theatre thus offers a valuable creative process and means to support and attain such ends. Artists of CYCC emphasise the importance of community works, empowerment, creativity, fellow feeling and teamwork through professional and creative experiences with the centre. Some of the past participants (products/graduates) of the centre describe CYCC as somewhere they felt welcomed, accepted, appreciated and supported. So the centre assumes a means by which positive identities and relationships could be established with peers and adults. For some of the volunteer facilitators with the centre, the youth theatre had provided a significant source of empowerment for them to be trained as creative professionals. In an interview with an artist of the centre, the following claims were made:

As a training ground, CYCC has produced some influential performing artists and sports personalities. Sherifa Gunnu [famous Afro musician in Ghana]. Anas Aremeyaw Anas [ace international investigative journalist in Ghana], the Ayew brothers [Andre

Dede Ayew and Jordan Ayew – both as Ghanaian professional footballers who are privileged to be part of the National Football Team of Ghana – the Ghana Black Stars], etc. (Respondent 3, CYCC)

In affirmation of the above claim, a volunteer associate and facilitator of the centre noted the following:

Some of us are products of CYCC. We have taken it upon ourselves to volunteer to help CYCC to get going, even without getting paid. The youth need to be motivated, and you know how volatile the area is, areas like Nima, Mamobi ... So CYCC is to help the youth to be hopeful and see opportunities for today and tomorrow. CYCC is to help empower the youths of the community to have something doing; even the famous Anas Arameyaw Anas [international investigative journalist] is a product of CYCC. (Respondent 2, CYCC)

Another artist and volunteer of the CYCC in charge of dance and dance theatre relates the following experience at the centre to corroborate the works of CYCC:

The centre used to help underprivileged people a lot, but that vision has been killed as a result of partisan politics. If we the products haven't changed positively then it becomes difficult for the people to learn something from us. We have formed a group called Africana Dance Ensemble, and the majority of us are products of CYCC. And I am the current leader and director of the African Dance Ensemble. So, even though CYCC is facing tremendous challenges, it has contributed tremendously to nurturing people like myself and others to become role models for the people [youth]. And that is one of my reasons to continue to volunteer to support the programmes and activities of CYCC, to be there for them. (Respondent 5, CYCC)

Discussion

The findings have shown that community youth theatre is a cultural practice that fits the model of contemporary theatre and has the potential to trigger community empowerment processes. The practice, as demonstrated in the study, provided the Ghanaian youth with participatory, meaningful activities and roles through which they acquired the skills of theatre and teamwork, and achieved recognition from their family members, community people and local and school peers. This finding is consistent with the assertion of Lev-Aladgem that youth theatre identifies a model of empowerment that can serve as a preventive intervention for many of the problems of the youth (291).

The finding on the participation of Ghanaian youth from the Kawukudi, Mamobi and Nima enclaves demonstrates that some Ghanaian youth have their own unique feature as a marginalised and underprivileged specific group. The contemporary epoch of globalisation is characterised by a mass prevalence of marginalisation, unemployment

and poverty, constituting new forms of oppression. Groups of marginalised youth-at-risk are a widespread phenomenon today in many underprivileged settings of Ghanaian towns and cities and, as such, share a common life and behavioural styles. The youth theatre collective at the CYCC, Ghana, is indeed part of this global phenomenon. Nevertheless, marginalised youth find refuge and solace at the CYCC, where they see opportunity in the youth development-oriented programme activities like the youth theatre tradition and the likes in order to live in harmony with the cultural centre, which provides them with fairly comfortable conditions. This finding supports Lev-Aladgem's suggestion that "participating in positive, meaningful activities, learning useful and relevant skills, and being recognised, are the basic aspects of the empowerment cycle" (291).

From the findings on the works of CYCC, it becomes clear that the community youth theatre of the CYCC that was basically initiated as a recreational, yet empowering (educational and developmental) activity, succeeded in generating a more elementary, fundamental tool for everyday life and identity formation of the local people. This discovery is consistent with Leaf and Ngo's observation that youth theatre contributes to the knowledge base of out-of-school learning contexts that inform contemporary approaches to learning in the arts (1).

Emerging from the finding on youth theatre as an avenue for sustainable community empowerment processes is the observation that the community youth theatre of CYCC was an opportunity to manage, present and problematise the uncertainties in the lived experiences of marginalised youths of the lab site. The centre enabled the youth to perform as local subjects and provided them with a critical, reflexive site from which to confront these existences. Community (local) experiences, as this theatre practice revealed, are not essential or pure but heterogeneous and diverse. Thus "community", "empowerment", "youth", "belonging" or "identity" are not solid categories as underprivileged Ghanaian narratives might imagine, but "processes" always in change and always mediated by issues of community, culture, creativity and sustenance. The community youth theatre practice of the CYCC clearly demonstrates that community-based theatre, regardless of the challenges, is, nevertheless, a unique "third space" that facilitates creativity, identity formation, and cultural negotiation; and always engenders hope for a better society. As Richardson professes, the youth theatre of CYCC is an avenue for creative expression in a non-formal educational range of contexts (1). As opined by Hughes and Wilson, the findings here also suggest that "youth theatre has a number of important functions for young people, positively contributing to their personal and social development" (57). So, the findings can be situated within the context of youth transitions research that has identified the skills, capacities and resources that help young people make successful transitions to adulthood in the current social and economic milieu.

Conclusion

In this article, we found that the CYCC, as a cultural agency under the NCC, was established with the statutory mandate of serving as an avenue for youth empowerment processes in Ghana. Among other interests, youth theatre practices inform the works of the centre. Diverse performance (artistic) modes – music, dance, dramatic, Abibigoro technique and puppetry theatre forms were used as creative avenues to facilitate community empowerment processes, particularly for youth development purposes. Thus, the centre has the potential to trigger community empowerment processes through non-formal and cultural education processes. The community youth theatre practice, in particular, offered Ghanaian youth meaningful creative opportunities towards personal and social-educational and development processes in an informal context. This way, the centre has opportunities for young entrepreneurs in the performing arts, skills development, sporting activities, and sustainable empowering processes for the marginalised. The CYCC in Ghana also serves as an enterprise for harnessing talent, imbuing the discipline for patriotic and culturally viable youth and holistically nurturing youth.

The study thus recommends that cultural and creative centres in Ghana should harness the potentials of the community youth centres, develop community-specific and context-driven performance models to support artistic-aesthetic-cultural education and non-formal education processes to enhance our collective strive for community empowerment in Ghana.

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