

Centring the Community in Research: An Applied Theatre-Inspired Praxis in Qualitative Inquiry in Southwestern Uganda

By

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers recognise the significance of the community in the research process. Numerous studies have explored the use of participatory approaches in qualitative research. However, research that examines how the researcher's knowledge and experience in applied theatre harnessed their qualitative inquiry skewed towards historicisation in Uganda remains obscure. This article is a reflective examination of how the researcher integrated knowledge and practice of applied theatre to maximise data collection and experience for her doctoral research that sought to historicise the storytelling of the Bakiga in Southwestern Uganda. This article will draw on the field observations from the interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDS) to make the analysis. The article engages with Freirean dialogics and Richard Schechner's performance theory to make the analysis. The article argues that blending discipline-specific knowledges within the known qualitative methods provides an insightful engagement with the subjects of inquiry as opposed to a purist approach with qualitative methods. The conclusion is that integrating community-responsive practices for researchers facilitates procedures that emphasise the collecting of data reflecting local realities and positions research as a venue for transformative interactions between researchers and communities. The study advocates for scholars to adopt indigenous techniques and knowledge to enhance understanding that reflects peripheral cultures, thereby decentring knowledge hierarchies.

Keywords: Participatory, Community, Storytelling, Bakiga, Qualitative Research, Applied Theatre Praxis

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Introduction

The concept of synthesising praxis to harness heuristic engagements for researchers is not a novel occurrence. Some researchers inadvertently include their discipline-specific epistemologies during their studies, while others, as in my case, purposefully integrate their praxis for a robust research encounter. In this research, I discovered that what we consider banal may contribute to undoing extractive research engagements and enable critical conversations for qualitative researchers. The discussion in the article pays attention to the notion of centring the community in research, based on reflections from my doctoral project. The project investigated the evolving forms, applications, and performance contexts of Bakiga storytelling in Southwestern Uganda from 1930 to 2009. The study took place in Kabale, Rukiga, and Rubanda districts in Southwestern Uganda. The Bakiga are a Bantu ethnic group residing in many districts of Southwestern Uganda, including Kabale, Rukiga, Rukungiri, Rubanda, Kisoro, and Kanungu. Due to population shifts, urbanisation, and globalisation, the Bakiga are now dispersed throughout Uganda and beyond its borders. There are varying accounts of the origin of Bakiga. While Cantwell (2019, 24) points to indications of Bakiga as descendants of Congo tribes Ngologoza (1998) points us to the view that Bakiga came from areas in present-day Rwanda, as Karwemera (1994) links the origins of Bakiga to Cameroon.

The objectives were to interrogate the function of storytelling among the Bakiga, to assess how Christianity and formal schooling impacted the performances of the Bakiga, and to analyse how migration influenced Bakiga performances. By referring to performance, I borrow Margaret Drewal's (1991, 1) definition of performance, which 'is the praxis of everyday social life; indeed, it is the practical application of embodied skill and knowledge to the task of taking action'. Performance is essentially about 'taking space', assuming a right to position one's body expressively before an audience, and therefore proclaiming the significance of the embodied being (Plastow, 2015).

Various scholars have defined applied theatre in multiple ways. For this article, I use the definition by Prentki (2009, p. 9), which is 'a broad set of theatrical practices and creative processes that take participants and audiences beyond the scope of conventional, mainstream theatre into the realm of a theatre that is responsive to ordinary people and their stories, local settings and priorities'. I also draw on Wainwright's conceptualisation of the word 'praxis' to mean a form of activity that, when executed within a particular conjuncture, proves capable of transforming its conditions of possibility (Wainwright, 2022).

I ostensibly align with Wainwright's conceptualisation of 'praxis' because it resonates with the concept of transformation, which, as a researcher, is at the core of my research. Transformative pedagogy is central to Freire's arguments (Freire, 1992, 1996, 2005, 2020), and I seek to remind us that research is a transformative encounter between those who seek knowledge (researchers) and those who create it (subjects of inquiry). I also find it imperative to give us an understanding of what I mean by the term 'Qualitative Inquiry'. Aspers & Corte (2019) define qualitative research as an iterative procedure that enhances the scientific community's understanding by the formulation of new meaningful distinctions derived from a closer examination of the examined phenomenon.

Before I delve further, I must share my experience of applied theatre, which is central to the conversation in this article. I was introduced to Applied Theatre during my undergraduate studies and have since pursued graduate studies in the applied theatre. I have participated in Community Theatre initiatives focused on social change in various areas of the country and valued the transformative potential inherent in community-engaged methodologies. I would like to clarify that for the research I conducted, I did not utilise applied theatre as research; instead, I included the concept of community participation and engagement in the project.

I admit that I am a Mukiga woman. My upbringing in a district other than the research site(s) and previous training in Applied Theatre would shape my research processes. Nonetheless, I recognised my positionality and practised reflexivity to ensure that my biases did not undermine the data collection procedure essential for the research.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional qualitative research sometimes struggles to acknowledge marginal voices, which are essential for comprehending the complexity of the subject under investigation (López-Deflory et al., 2022). Applied theatre has proven to be a community-focused engagement and has recognised embodied knowledge of the subjects of inquiry (Bamuturaki, 2016; Mcquaid et al., 2017, 2021; Plastow, 2007). What remains unresolved, however, is how researchers who seek to historicise their studies might utilise insights from the applied theatre in projects that depend on conventional qualitative methodologies and fall beyond the applied theatre realm. This research aims to discuss how knowledge from applied theatre enabled the researcher to undertake qualitative inquiry on the historicisation of performances of the Bakiga by placing the community at the centre of the research.

Review of Related Literature

Over the years, several scholars have recognised the need to recentre the peripheral people in discourses that shape their futures. Wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that Africa needs to re-centre its knowledge, indigenous languages, cultures, and peoples before engaging with European and other knowledge systems in its trajectory towards an African renaissance. Similarly, Murrey & Daley (2023) emphasise the importance of addressing the viewpoints and experiences of subaltern communities, which have been traditionally marginalised and silenced in development discourse. All the seminal scholars are alive to the argument in this article that the local communities and their ways of knowing and doing must frame the conversations in global knowledges. Substantial research has been conducted on the significance of methodologies that centre the community at the fore in knowledge production (Mcquaid et al., 2021; Mcquaid & Plastow, 2017; Odhiambo, 2001; Plastow, 2007, 2015; Wa Thiong'o, 2021).

Mcquaid et al. (2017) pay attention to a methodological approach utilised in Jinja, Uganda, to produce novel forms of environmental knowledge and action through various creative intergenerational practices situated within a comprehensive framework of community-based participatory research. Mcquaid et al. (2021) investigate how research-driven applied arts enhance participatory techniques to close the gap between participatory research and information exchange processes, linking policy-making with girls' lived experiences in Jinja, Uganda. Mbabazi (2024) interrogates the importance of hybridising local knowledge at research sites with the understanding of both local and global researchers. The studies are central to propelling the conversation about the potency of centring the participation of the communities in knowledge creation. However, the scholars cited draw

their views from contemporary research, and none of the studies cited historicises performance of ‘Indigenous’ people as provided by this article’s scope.

Adyanga & Romm (2022) evaluate an Indigenous framework for doing qualitative research in a Northern Ugandan context and contend that the unity and solidarity of marginalized communities are essential for promoting change. O’Donovan et al. (2020) also posit that integrating community-responsive methodologies in research enhances information retention and supports social change. They note that the use of photography, video, local languages, and music enhanced cultural sensitivity and encouraged audience participation. The studies situate the community at the heart of research, viewing them as co-actors in epistemological debates. However, the investigations employ techniques and contextual frameworks that diverge from this research.

Grant (2023) assesses deficiencies in decolonial migration and development literature, policy, and practice by emphasising the necessity of incorporating Indigenous knowledge to enhance the sustainable agricultural development and climate resilience of displaced Indigenous peoples and communities. Tusasiirwe (2022) discusses perspectives of decolonising research and ethics drawn from ongoing colonisation in research education and practice. In her study, she shares experiences of how she aligned her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) research to a decolonising agenda. The studies cited are cognisant of the need for local knowledge and the participation of research communities as not a mere methodological inclination but an ethical requirement. However, they do not engage with discourses in applied theatre.

Methodology

The research was qualitative, utilising a phenomenological design (descriptive and interpretive phenomenology) informed by a constructivist lens. The methods included interviews, embodied inquiry, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), online sources, analysis of written folk stories, autobiographies, document analysis, audio-visual recordings, and archival records. The categories of participants encompassed storytellers, educators, religious leaders, migrants, community members (including older people and younger people), cultural conservators, and radio presenters. I engaged fifty-seven (57) participants in the research using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. For the reflections in this article, I use observations drawn from interviews and FGDs. I used thematic and narrative analysis to make meaning from the data collected.

Results and Discussion

Nothing About Them Without Them: Community Voices in Research

I have engaged in applied theatre initiatives since 2006 and acknowledge the significant role that community-focused research plays in the knowledge economy. I employed this awareness to interact with selected participants from the study sites to inform the design of my methods and tools. Freire’s theory of dialogic engagement in pedagogical discourses resonated deeply as I planned the research. I viewed the communities as educators in the sense that they possess the knowledge that researchers seek; hence centring them in knowledge production underscores impactful results. I was constantly aware of the fact that the process required shared engagement. I remained the researcher and established the direction for my research whilst in consultation with the people at the centre of my learning. Participating in dialogic interactions with persons during knowledge creation fosters reciprocal dialogue and collaboration (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Mbabazi, 2024). The

centrality of the local people in shaping knowledge production is highlighted by O'Connor & Anderson (2015). They advocate for research that involves marginalised individuals as authors of their narratives, co-researchers, and equal collaborators.

Embodied Knowledge and Experience as part of Method

I employed a method that allowed the community to share their viewpoints through performance. Leigh and Brown (2021, 34) note that Embodied Inquiry is a research methodology that centres the body as the focal point of the inquiry. The body inscribes with a large, blunt nib or a delicate flowing hand, employing capital letters and minuscule type, bold and italicised text, concise sentences and extensive paragraphs (Morgan & Saxton, 2000, p. 12). Through the applied theatre engagements I had participated in before, I was aware of the body as a site for archiving experiences. With the conviction of Freire's (1996, 2005, 2020) co-intentional methodologies, I integrated the application of Embodied Inquiry in Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), In-depth Interviews (IDs), and some FGDs. Thakur (2013, p. 5) observes that the dynamic 'participation of local people, the use of local languages and dialect and addressing local problems increase the acceptability of theatre'. I recognised the potency of a creative method whose execution is entrusted to the people, as Thakur postulates. The strategy ultimately facilitated the acquisition of nuanced data by encouraging participants to express themselves in many manners, as I will elaborate later in the article.

Researcher-Audience Duality in the Process of Research

Embodied inquiry entailed engagement with participants, fostering a collective environment for exploration and interpretation of the phenomenon under study. During the interviews or FGDs, I took on a dual role of researcher-audience. When the participants transitioned into performance, I engaged as an audience member, often applauding or singing songs integrated into the stories. In instances where participants recounted the folk tales, they commenced with a 'Call and Response' structure, emulating the traditional narrative style of the Bakiga. They went thus:

Storyteller: *Mbaganire Mbaganire* (Let me tell you a story, let me tell you a story).

Audience/Me: (would answer) *Tebere* (indicating my readiness to hear the story)

Upon the utterance of the 'Call', I answered with the phrase '*Tebere*', meaning 'Tell Us'. The 'Call and Response' format thus contributed to cultivating a communal atmosphere that temporarily transitioned the research environment to a performance context. The atmosphere, in turn, created a beneficial alliance for exchanging knowledge between the researcher and the participant. Robert Farris Thompson (cited in Smitherman 1977, 109) terms call and response as 'perfected social interaction' with all individuals performing and listening.

In Bakiga storytelling, social interaction and voluntary participation have consistently served as essential elements in theatrical processes that enable a transformative journey for communities. In this context, the voluntary involvement between the participants and I created an empowering experience. In some stories, the phrase '*Tebere*' is mentioned each time the narrator articulates a phrase in the story. The shared experience, in this case, enhances the narration, enabling the performer to convey the narrative effectively, as the word '*Tebere*' indicates a build-up of anticipation for the listener to engage with the story.

Embodied Inquiry allowed me to get insight into the narratives performed inside domestic settings and other peripheral contexts. The process presents as a ‘laboratory’ and the participants as ‘specimens’ under study. In the absence of this strategy, reconstructing the performances based on verbal interactions would have been difficult.

I allude to Boal’s (2016) notion of the ‘spect-actor’, constantly moving between the realms of being a spectator and ‘acting’ within the performances. Boal’s view of a spect-actor involves obscuring the distinctions between the passive observer (spectator) and the active participant (actor). Boal contended that theatre ought to serve as a platform for social transformation and empowerment rather than merely as a display for unresponsive consumption. These views remained alive in my consciousness as I undertook the research. Below, I show how I employed Embodied Inquiry with a respondent in an interview held on January 27, 2024, in Rubanda district:

Researcher: Please describe how your grandfather used to perform about different people in one story.

Respondent: He used his voice and body to show that he referred to a different person in the story.

Researcher: Can you give me an example of how exactly he did this?

Respondent: One day, he told us a story about *Ruyooka Rwa Magana*¹. When Grandfather got to the part where the spirits stopped Ruyooka from proceeding to fight the Bajingwe, he imitated the supernatural forces by speaking in a deep, slow way. Then, afterwards, he changed his voice to show how Ruyooka talked. He raised his voice and said (the respondent cleared his throat and articulated in a deep voice): ‘Shyaa! *Nyowe Ruyooka rwa Magana nooha oransingura? Ndagyenda!*’² Even the mother of Ruyooka said: ‘*Kyo! Mwana wangye wagyenda!*’³ (At this juncture, the respondent modulated his voice to emulate a woman’s. The respondent went on and told the whole story).

In the interview excerpt above, we can see that the participant embodies four distinct voices to express the various characters whilst giving an entry into what transpired in their homestead many years ago.

Schechner (2002, 143) emphasises that ‘performing on stage, performing in special social situations (public ceremonies, for example), and performing in everyday life are a continuum’. I argue that the research participants, through Embodied Inquiry, reflected their lived experiences despite embodying distinct elements. Schechner suggests that the environments in which performances occur across different contexts facilitate a ‘showing-doing’ dynamic. This very dynamic then becomes a critical space to read history, to understand it, and to step into realms from which interviews or FGDs would be limited. Oral performances integrate audience participation, which the actors accomplish through the use of laughter, questions, exclamations, and remarks from the audience (Finnegan, 1970; Okpewho, 1992). The attributes identified by Finnegan and Okpewho not only enhanced the performances during data collection but also enabled my continuous transition from audience member to the researcher by questions and remarks. I would pose a question to the performance when I needed to delve more into understanding a specific discourse.

Denzin observes that participatory performance endeavours to honour local customs, knowledge, and practices, integrating their values and beliefs into participatory inquiry (Denzin 2005). However, the researcher must recognise the necessity of ensuring voluntary

involvement and obtaining informed consent from participants. Researchers must also be cognisant of the power dynamics at play as they navigate the distinctions between researcher and audience, ensuring the establishment of a supportive and secure atmosphere for all participants. Datta (2018) reminds us that academic research can exert significant if sometimes unseen, power on practical applications, encompassing the explanations, prediction, and discourse surrounding participants' lives, cultures, and values. In addition, the distinction between researcher and performer may become ambiguous, enticing the researcher to be influenced by exceptional performances, which may result in biased assessments that favour presentation over substantive discourses, worldviews, or perspectives inside the performance.

Debriefs: Unlearning, Learning and Relearning

I conducted debriefs with the participants. Debriefs are work meetings in which teams analyse, assess, and derive insights from recent collaborative experiences (Reiter-Palmon et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2015). The implementation of debriefs has been essential in all the applied theatre projects I have previously undertaken. The debriefs executed in this research project were empowering for both the participants and me. The participants noted that the research stimulated reflection on endangered knowledge through their storytelling traditions. Most respondents indicated that they had ceased sharing stories at home; nonetheless, the study provided them with the opportunity to relive the knowledge that supported their families during their upbringing. They indicated a desire for change by making deliberate steps to revive the storytelling practice in their homes. The realisation that the debrief meetings allowed me to comprehend the sample population's sentiments regarding the study topic beyond the inquiries posed by the research instrument was rewarding. It enabled me to appreciate the study more profoundly and to contemplate the potential for a renaissance that it unveiled.

I relate the libertarian discourses in these engagements to Freire's notion of co-intentional education. Freire (2005) observes that educators and learners, united in their pursuit of understanding reality, are both subjects, engaged not only in the endeavour of revealing that reality and acquiring critical knowledge but also in the process of reconstructing that knowledge. Through collective contemplation and action, they recognise themselves as continual re-creators.

I also conducted debriefs with the gatekeepers and research guides in the communities. I continually requested the gatekeepers and research guides to offer feedback to me regarding my entry into the community and the perceptions of the people, which they felt were helpful to me at each point of the research. Thambinathan & Kinsella (2021) observe that adhering to participants' cultural protocols is a crucial factor for researchers aiming to authentically include and acknowledge other(ed) epistemologies. In this way, I contend that my alignment with practices in my discipline, specifically the debriefs, is akin to a ritualised form of performance. Schechner (1988, p. 7) considers performance as an everyday engagement, as a ritual, or as performance of the stage. Performance is ritualised conduct influenced or infused by play (Schechner, 2020, p. 122). The debriefs followed a structured format as a ritual would, involved specific roles and expectations from both me and my guides, and aimed to achieve a particular function, which was to enhance the data collection engagements. To this end, I perceived the debriefs as conversations that entailed continued learning. Freire & Macedo (1995) postulate that comprehending communication as a learning and knowledge acquisition process necessitates an inherent epistemic curiosity regarding the fundamental components of the dialogue.

Conclusion

The integration of knowledge and practice drawn from applied theatre significantly facilitated access to individuals and, subsequently, a supportive data collection process. Collaborating with communities as partners in knowledge creation promotes culturally pertinent interpretations. It validates the information generated by communities and repositions narratives from the Global South into the broader global knowledge economy. This method necessitates a deliberate mindset for attainment. It necessitates that the researcher undergoes disavowal of top-down research paradigms to recognise the communities as active partners in the research process. The process necessitates an honest recognition and examination of one's positionality and biases, as well as a deliberate awareness of the power dynamics that emerge from research processes. Placing the community at the core of research enables local populations to recover their narratives, contest prevailing discourses, and determine their futures. It converts qualitative research from an exploitative approach into a collaborative effort that facilitates transformative conversation within communities.

Recommendations

I recommend that qualitative researchers employ methodological strategies that are culturally relevant to the communities they investigate. Knowledge production should originate from a sincere quest, wherein researchers assume the role of learners and communities act as instructors, thus dismantling entrenched knowledge hierarchies established via the adoption of methodology derived from Western paradigms. Developing a research framework that acknowledges the cultures and traditions of communities necessitates collaboration with partners from those communities to mitigate the cultural disconnection from the populations under investigation. The partnership should not be a singular event but rather a synergy that can rekindle interest in research among local communities. Engaging with culturally relevant methods necessitates rigorous ethical awareness to safeguard participants' confidence and foster networks for collaborative participation. Furthermore, conducting research that acknowledges the significance of the community's ethos, knowledge, and traditions necessitates ongoing negotiation of the power relations that shape research processes.

Notes:

¹ *Ruyooka Rwa Magana* is a familiar folk tale told among the Bakiga, of a fierce warrior among the Bahimba (a sub-clan of Ba Mugiri) and was hailed for never failing at any battles. He got killed by a physically disabled man when he went to fight the Bajingwe over grazing land.

² ‘Shyaa! Nyowe Ruyooka rwa Magana nooha oransingura? Ndagyenda! Means ‘Huh! Who can conquer me, Ruyooka, son of Magana? I will go.’

³ ‘Kyo! Mwana wangye wagyenda!’ means ‘Oh my! My son, you have gone!’

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Statement of Ethics

All respondents were fully informed about the purpose of this research, and they consented to the interviews and discussions as well as to the use of the data for academic publications.

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