

HADITHI YA AFRIKA: A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT USING DRAMATHERAPY AND CREATIVE WRITING

Sarah Penny

Hadithi ya Afrika ('Stories from Africa' in kiSwahili) is a collaborative project between London-based novelist Sarah Penny and South African dramatherapist Paula Kingwill. Using a fusion of dramatherapy, creative writing workshop practice, and final co-writing consultation, Hadithi ya Afrika enables autobiographical story writing by participants who have had little or no previous access to formal training skills in writing.

Hadithi ya Afrika aims to work with communities who have undergone a shared transitional moment which has had a strong positive impact on the community. Through the Hadithi ya Afrika workshop process, personal stories of the transition can be created, recorded and disseminated to other communities facing similar challenges.

My interest in Hadithi ya Afrika was in many ways a response to eight years as a career creative writing academic in London. Initially, when I arrived here from South Africa, I found the world of literary London enormously exciting. Several years on this had paled. I was tired of the strong focus on European and American literatures, and especially the overwhelming focus on publication in the MA programmes. My path to writing came out of two disparate childhood experiences. One very strong and motivating path was the books that were shipped out from England and America and handed out for birthdays and Christmas. But an equally strong spur, and one which now found no echo in my adult life, was the African oral tradition – sitting around the stove with the Basotho nannies and house servants on my grandparents' farm, stirring porridge and roaring with laughter about everyday life – who was a shirker at work, who had eyes for which boy, and especially seditiously, fantastic character-work taking the mickey out of 'Medem', my irascible and autocratic grandmother.

I was increasingly aware of how vital communication is in Africa now, particularly across social, cultural and geographical barriers. Africa is urbanizing rapidly, and communities are making radical decisions about their life choices. In Kenya girls influenced by the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization are refusing female genital mutilation in increasing numbers. In Tanzania fifteen widows working with Action Aid have won a landmark legal battle to retain their husbands' property and not cede the land to his family. These acts of bravery are inspirational but they need to find pathways to inspire effectively.

Hadithi ya Afrika works through the fusion of dramatherapy (whose usual orientation is therapeutic) and creative writing (often pursued, particularly in the higher education context, with the aim of eventual publication). However, it is important to stress at the outset that publication is not a goal for Hadithi ya Afrika, although publication may happen. Nor is therapy a goal, although therapy may

be incidental. The goal of Hadithi ya Africa is to recognize when a positive community decision has been made, to enable written literature exploring how that decision came to be made, and then to disseminate that literature.

Theoretical Framework And Methodology

Hadithi ya Afrika is about communication in a specific context. To enable the writer to create a persuasive and convincing story that can convey choice and motivation, we need to use those tools of dramatherapy which can allow the writer to recollect and process her state of mind and circumstances before, during and after the seminal life event.

At the same time we need to distill the whole body of literary techniques that a writer in a first world environment might have at his disposal into the *most* vital communicative and descriptive principles.

Dramatherapy is the intentional and systematic use of drama and theatre processes to achieve psychological growth and change. The tools are derived from theatre but the goals are rooted in psychotherapy. Dramatherapy draws on five conceptual sources:

- Dramatic play (the kind of acting play that we all engage in as children)
- Theatre
- Role play theory (the playing out of the multitude of roles in one's 'role repertoire')
- Psychodrama (a form of psychotherapy where a person enacts personal issues rather than talking them out)
- Dramatic Ritual

From these sources Paula, the dramatherapist, needed to create an underpinning series of dramatherapy workshops that could introduce, contain and consolidate the new experiences to which the writers were being exposed, whilst at the same time underpinning and illuminating the core creative writing principles that I was teaching them.

On the creative writing side, I devised three workshops, focusing on three core techniques that I felt were essential for the stories to really communicate the experience of the writer.

- Character (Who is going to be in this story?)
- Dialogue and interior monologue (What do they say to others in the community? What do they tell themselves?)
- Setting (Where does this story take place?)

Finally, I made a decision to conduct the pilot programme and subsequent programmes in English. African languages could be used freely in the workshops but the final story would be written in English. My thinking in this was

strongly influenced by Chinua Achebe's essay 'The African Writer And The English Language' in which Achebe argues that the value of the inheritance of the English language as a shared currency among African nations far outweighs the 'package deal' of racial arrogance that came with it. Subsequent programmes might run in kiSwahili if my Swahili improves enough, and if it seems that using the East African lingua franca has advantages over restricting dissemination to the East African sub-region.

Hadithi ya Africa's pilot project 'Amabali isiKapa' ('Coming to Cape Town' in isiXhosa) was funded by the Brunel University BRIEF award scheme and took place at St Francis Adult Education Centre in Langa, Cape Town, in March 2011.

We had six learner/participants and the project ran over five days. The shared experience was a background of growing up as a Xhosa speaker in the Eastern Cape/ former Transkei Bantustan and facing massive educational challenges, either during Bantu Education or its aftermath. All the learners migrated to Cape Town in search of job opportunities and further education. Their stories focused on this transition and its impact on their lives.

The workshops

Each day began with a dramatherapy workshop. The workshops lasted all morning, beginning with a 'check-in' – a brief assessment of how the students were feeling – and ending with 'closure' – a chance to share and discuss any concerns that had cropped up during the workshop. This structure is a fundamental containing process in dramatherapy. I learnt an enormous amount as the week progressed about how dramatherapy actually works. The most fascinating aspect for me was the re-enactments, where the students chose members of the group to play the characters in their story, including themselves, selecting one of the story episodes to work with.

The photograph included is of an enactment directed by a student called Mavis. Mavis's story was about moving to Cape Town in the teeth of apartheid in search of work. Because she was the eldest in the group by a good thirty years, she had been the most badly afflicted by Bantu Education. The photograph shows the enacted moment when Mavis first arrived from the Transkei at her uncle and aunt's house in Cape Town. Her enactment was very, very plot-driven with almost no character detail or scenery detail. Paula is trying to elicit description. Are there windows? Is it summer or winter? Mavis's story as she presented it at the co-writing workshop was also very plot-driven but we were able to flesh out the detail much more because of the material that came to the fore working with Paula in this enactment.

After the dramatherapy workshop, there was a lunch break and then we went into the creative writing workshop. I'm not going to talk about the creative writing workshops in any detail because the process will be so familiar to NAWÉ

members. What I did discover through working in this forum was that in-class writing exercises have to happen very differently from Brunel. With Brunel students I'll set them an exercise and then step back completely. With the St Francis learners I needed to supervise the exercises constantly – walking around the room, constantly encouraging and checking that they understand what they were being asked to do. Another on-the-hoof adaptation was that when I put the programme together the exercises were wide-ranging in terms of topics they could choose to write about. Paula suggested after the first day that I keep the focus as tight as possible so that every aspect of every exercise linked back to the story aim. I found this a much better way to develop the stories quickly.

The co-writing workshop took place over one day, on the second to last day of the project. It wasn't enough time at all – I was severely shattered by the end of the day by sustaining that level of concentration over so many hours without breaks. It was the part of the project that I found most challenging but also most rewarding. Challenging because I had to handle it on my own without Paula's support and experience but also rewarding because it was just so gratifying and exciting to see the stories taking shape. I had a long talk with Paula after the last workshop and before we went into co-writing. She reminded me that the learners were coming from a background which would bring them into a direct clash with what we were asking them to do. Where older generations had once had wonderful story resources, our generation and the younger generation had been actively silenced by Bantu Education and its aftermath. Bantu Education – the official apartheid policy of educating blacks strictly for entry into the unskilled labour market – has had a terrible and enduring legacy. Students, even now, are taught by teachers who themselves were appallingly badly educated. These limitations are compounded by a culturally imposed restriction of always being 'positive'. Black South Africans are coming from a place where it is considered right and good to deliver generalized, inspirational narrative.

In contrast, we were actively imposing a western ideal. We were telling them that the self and details of the experiences of the self are important and interesting. We were saying – this process is not the voice of the people – it's your voice. You are interesting as an individual.

Another point Paula made to me in the lead-up to co-writing that I found personally very important was that I needed to acknowledge the value of what I was doing. She stressed that they would never have had this opportunity before. I was giving them a skill they couldn't possibly have accessed on their own. She underlined that the learners were coming out of the aftermath of Bantu Education with all that that entailed. They were supposedly grade 12 learners (equivalent to AS level) but most of them still didn't know what an adjective was. It was good for me to acknowledge the importance of the project to them because it had taken me more than three years from conceiving the idea for the project to actually standing in the classroom with the funds, Paula and the learners lined

up. Part of me was just overwhelmed with relief and gratitude that everyone turned up every day.

Initially I had a very loose idea of what I needed to do in the consultation, but over the course of the day it became clearer how to achieve what we wanted: ie an engaging and impactful narrative, facilitated by Paula and I, but which the writer would still very strongly feel was her own story. The eventual structure of how we achieved this worked as follows:

- The principal writer brings all of her notes and scribbles from all the workshops.
- The principal writer begins to dictate the story.
- The co-writer types up the story.
- If the co-writer reaches a point in the story which feels more thinly described or robbed of material that the co-writer was aware of either in the dramatherapy or the writing workshops, the co-writer asks permission to pause.
- The co-writer reminds the principal writer of the relevant material or experience.
- The co-writer asks the principal writer whether she would like to use the material the co-writer has suggested.
- If the principal writer agrees, the co-writer facilitates incorporating the material. If the principal writer disagrees, the co-writer moves on to the next part of the story.
- In the first case scenario, after incorporating the material the co-writer reads back the new material and asks the principal writer's permission to use it.
- The principal writer continues with the base story.
- At end of the process the co-writer reads the entire story back to the principal writer and ensures that the principal writer is satisfied with the story.

There were recurring problems in the co-writing process. Foremost among these was the relentless prevalence of the plot line – I did this and my sister did that and then my father came in so we went to the police station ... etc. A strategy to counter this was to pause the writing process as a major or significant plot point came up. I would then remind the learner of material that had surfaced in the workshops and ask them if they want to incorporate the material. A similar process worked with the relentless positivism of the stories. I needed to intervene – is that what you felt? 'No', the writer often said. 'Of course not. Who would feel that? But can I say what I really felt?' And I would stress that it was all right to be negative and reinforce a sense of permission to voice a negative experience. The story needs to be about what you really felt - not what you think you were supposed to feel!

Another difficulty, and one that needed sensitive handling, was the constant repetition of words because of translation difficulties and a limited vocabulary in English. A strategy to counter this was to ask the student at the outset for permission to suggest an alternative word or phrase. I would make the suggestion, explain exactly the meaning of the new word in context, and if the student gave permission I would incorporate the change.

Feedback

- I didn't know you can stand in another person's shoes, and they can explain how it felt.
- I never ever knew that I could write a story.
- For me, a very big experience. You think you are the only person with problems. Everyone else is looking fine. But if they made a box, and you put everyone's problem in the box, you might not want to take another one's problem out of the box. The problem – you need to deal with it.

The feedback was overwhelming positive, both in discussion in the final dramatherapy closure workshop and in the questionnaires we asked the students to complete. I was particularly interested in the feedback from a student called Aluta. In the dramatherapy workshops she seemed very tightly wound and often defeatist and angry. She frequently said things like 'What's the point' and 'Nothing can change.' Her story was about her father's death. With his passing, her relations with the rest of her family had become very distant and she was still traumatized. When I was working with her, I was very aware of something else that came up in discussion with Paula – that the stories didn't need to come to resolution. It was okay to be negative and it was okay to end on an unresolved note. They could be open-ended if the emotional place where the learner currently stood was open-ended. In the co-writing Aluta allowed this and the story ends with the words: 'For now, I am just waiting for the answer.' When Aluta read her story out to the group on the final day she was overcome and had to stop and hand over to Paula. She cried throughout while the story was being read. But afterwards, in the closure session, she spoke about how good it was to revisit these buried feelings and how relieved she felt.

The pilot project was an extraordinary experience and Paula and I are both really excited about moving forward with Hadithi ya Afrika. The next phase of the project will be more ambitious – not just facilitating and recording stories but working out how to disseminate them effectively as well so that these personal records can have a real impact on communities. We are hoping to work with Action Aid and the fifteen widows in Tanzania who have been able to retain their deceased husbands' property so that these women can be peer educators to the many other Tanzanian widows facing the loss of their inheritance rights.