

The Participatory Shift in Community Theatre: A Case Study of the 2025 Samaru Project

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Abstract

This paper discusses the metamorphosis of the migrant method to participatory migrant method in Samaru project. The paper argues that, over the years, there have been a norm for Samaru Theatre field project, that centers on the students, taking the theatre solely to the people. The paper notes that in recent times, there is a slight change in the normal that has made the theatre to be by the people, with the people and for the people. The participatory tools that were deployed are, community town hall meetings, interviews, songs among others. The paper concludes that result of the Samaru project brings development and unity between the community and the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts of the University.

Keywords: *Metamorphosis, Migrant method, Participation, Participatory Migrant method, Samaru Project.*

Introduction

The "Samaru Project 2025" primarily refers to a series of developmental and academic initiatives centered around the Samaru district of Zaria, particularly involving Ahmadu Bello University (ABU). Generally referred to as The Samaru Community Theatre Project (2025), it is a long-standing tradition at ABU where students from the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts engage with the local Samaru community for well stated purposes. In the project, students conduct research into local social issues (such as poverty, drug abuse, or infrastructure) and create "street theatre" performances to educate and spark dialogue among residents. Recent academic reviews of the project have highlighted the use of songs as metaphors for social criticism, aiming to trigger lasting social development and community engagement within Zaria.

The Participatory Migrant Method: Samaru Project 2025

There have been tremendous changes in Samaru project practiced today, since from the inception of the program in 1980s. This paper gives an appraisal of the involvement of the community members in terms of the verification of data by the community members and the involvement of the community members in the performance of Samaru project, which have never been since the inception of the course. From 2023/2024 academic section, the coordinator of the Samaru project, in person of Mallam Habeeb Salahudeen, suggest that we have a shift from the normal practice by having the community members verify the information gather by the students from the community and also get the community members to be part of the Samaru project performances. This is made possible because of the relationship that the community and the department have established over the period of time. Though, the students were thought how to gather data from the field, considering the people's cultural background.

Samaru community is an old settlement with new smaller communities springing out from it as a result of new settlers, people acquiring landed properties and expanding the community at all sides. Now we have pensioner quarters which is a new area that the retiree from Ahmadu Bello University staff both academy and non-academy staff have developed to be their new area of settlement. We have Samaru extension, Hayin dan yaro, kasuwa dere and others settlement. Samaru settlement, have become more semi urban settlement with more modern houses, schools, hospitals, market, motor pack, tarred inland roads, churches and mosques. They people of Samaru enjoys the present of the high institutions that are present within Samaru community, Ahmadu Bello University, Institute of Agriculture and teaching hospital in several ways, such as casual labourers, staff of the university, primary schools, health facilities, also in agricultural areas where the university adopt some neighbouring villages where they try out new research technique on seedlings and new invented technology.

Samaru community in recent times has transformed from the quasi-urban settlement as it used to be in the 1970s and 80s when the practice of Samaru workshop started with the first set of students who led the foundation of street theatre named Theatre about the People by an Outside Group. The aim of the group was taking theatre to the people. Kabwe Kasoma a Zambian theatre activist says; "the idea is that you take theatre to the people, instead of expecting the people to come to the theatre." (1974)

Ross Kidd as quoted by Abah (1984) says that this method refers to as ‘Outside-in and this can also be described as a Migrant Method’. This method describes how the 200 level students from the department of Theatre and Performing Arts are trained on how to go into the Samaru community and source for information from the community people. These data collected by the students are probed by the lecturers on the course and then turned into performances according to the theme of their findings. The performances are later taken back into the community for presentation and post-performance discussion with the people. From the foregoing, it is clear that the Samaru Samaru project is centered on students taking drama to the people, away from the theatre building, where the conventional theatre takes place.

According to Abah (1984) the challenges about this practice of Samaru project is that no skills are left with the community people to use as a tool for discussion. This is because, Samaru project is a form of street theatre where the students go into the community, and do their business then leave without establishing any relationship with the community people. Abah argues that, for Samaru project to be more effective, another method of approach is needed to bring a change. He suggested ‘Scattered method’ practice which also relates to migrant method. The scattered method proposes that the students should go into Samaru and Hayin Dogo community, one after the other at different times and locations for a period of two weeks for proper assimilation of the messages in the play. In addition to this scattered method as proposed by Abah, the coordinating team should introduce the series technique. This series technique has to do with the students picking a household character, which will represent the community people, how the community people see things within their community, how they agree and disagree among themselves, how they live their lives in general. Abah cautions that the household character should be flexible in order to elicit change if necessary. It therefore must be a growing and changing personality that should not neither be a stock nor a stultified character.

As affirmed by Abah, the proposed argument of the scattered method was not realistic at the time because, majority of the people in Samaru community and Hayin Dogo were civil servants, farmer and traders. During the morning and noon hours they are at their respective work places, by evening this same people with whom the students are to work with are usually stressed from work coupled with

other engagement while the students on their own are back to the drama village for classes and other engagement at same time.

Over the years, The Samaru Project adopted the modified scattered method of practice as a result of community expansion and development as against the Kidd's Migrant method which is noted for going into the community at once and out after performance. The scattered method was adopted with some modification made as to what Abah (1984) proposed. Yes, the story is told from the community point of view, using different households' characters to discuss about their challenges ranging from insecurity within community, neighborhood, family, health, education, gender, politics, agriculture, etc. These issues are the data the students get from their interactions with the people of Samaru. The modified scattered method suggests that the practice is done for a period of two weeks. There are smaller groups with each group assigned the time to go into the community in a coordinated manner for the purpose of interaction and research.

Over the years, the practice has been that the students are divided into the numbers of the proposed communities where performances will be done. Areas like Baban Layin, Layin Makera, Pensioner Quarters, Bomo, kasuwa Dere, Daraka and others places within Samaru community. The students go into these communities one after the other as a class but the group productions are merged together based on the similar issues of discussion from their research data.

It is important to note that Baban Layin and Layin Makera may have similar challenges. This is because the two communities are not too far from each other, the settlers live close to one another. Examples of issues of discussions that come up are theft, drugs usage, gambling and poor hygiene. All these issues at the end of the day are merged as one full play for 10 minutes to 15 minutes. The students create household that represent members from the community and creatively situate the challenges from the community in the play which is performed in both communities while the other plays for the other area may not be performed. Sometimes, the plays will be performed if time permits. The reason is that, the issues or data collected during research from different locations within the community differs from one place to the other because of some certain factors such as religion, dominante culture, people and the area where the community is situated.

The use of household character is implemented as suggested by Abah (1984) but there is also some modification to the use of real names. The reason is that, a story maybe told about a household character mallam Ayuba for example, who steels, rapes, fights his wife or beats up his wives regularly or owns a provision store in the market or within the community, he uses the toilet without proper hygiene or one whose environment is dirty, etc. This may make the community people to begin to wonder how the students get access to such information, that they are actually talking about mallam Ayuba's true life story, how lives within the neighborhood. It is based on these arguments that the course coordinators decided that the students should use inanimate object names for household characters like spoon, hoe, pot, plate, cup, detergent, soap, sugar, etc., so that no one will accuse anyone that his or her story is staged. In this project, people's life styles are told in the stories and performances but their names are not mentioned for the safety of the community members and the theatre students.

Another area that the modified scattered method was adopted is the specific numbers of days that The Samaru Project will run within the community as proposed by Abah in his work titled *The performing Arts and Development: A case for Popular Theatre*. According to him (1984: 43), "by this method the groups should go into Samaru and Hayin Dogo one after the other, and at reasonable intervals say two weeks." His submission is that, different groups should engage with the community members at different times and location. This will give the community members the time to process the play performed, not like the migrant method which does not give the community the time to process the message in the play.

The recent practice of The Samaru Project (2025) takes at least three to five days and these days are carefully selected by the course coordinators after the students have put together the data collected from the field and after having undergone departmental dress and technical rehearsals for more critical audience to make valid suggestions on the numbers of communities where performances will take place before proceeding into the communities. It is worthy of note that the data collected by the students were verified by the course lecturers including the liaison officer of the department, who is a title-holder within the Samaru community as Waziri Makera. From the total number of the communities available based on the collected data, the numbers of days that the Samaru project will be performed within the communities will be determined.

Before scenario building, the liaison officer will use his position to organise a meeting with the community stakeholders such as the mai angwan, group heads, women leaders and religious leaders to set a date and time that the students will meet with the community members. This is called town hall meeting where the community members are invited to meet with the students. The coordinator of this meeting is the liaison officer. Each group from the students presents their data from their own community research while the representatives from those communities will verify the challenges and issues that the students have presented. This meeting serves as a validation of the students' findings. In most cases, the validity of the student's data (example, child education, use of substance and other issues) is further discussed by the community leaders,



Plate 1: (2025) 2001 students of the department of Theatre and Performing Arts, ABU Zaria. presenting their data before the community members, from different communities they have visited for their research.

The meeting between both parties opens up further relationship between the department and the community members. Some of the community members indicate interest in what the students are doing and volunteer to participate in the scenario building and production. For two years now, the course has witness about seventeen community members taking parts in the Samaru project exercise. The 2022/2023 Samaru project as a course experienced six community members who

participated in the dress and technical rehearsals as well as field productions. The role played by these community members were, community chief, household members, community police (yanbaga) and sankira meaning jester.

This role played by the community members were, prominent roles in the performance. Roles that require the community members talking to their community people on serious issues and challenges featured prominently in the play. The reason is that the community members in the play should be the one talking to their own people about these issues and challenges not the students as it is practiced since the 1980s.

Outcome of the Samaru Project in the Communities

The involvement of the community members in the Samaru project has shown a massive shift from the migrant method which Kidd called the outside-in theatre where the students only come from outside the community to present a theatre for the people and leave them without the tool of drama to discuss their issues. This recent practice has shown three levels of community participation and engagement. Firstly, the interaction between the students and the community members in the place of research. Secondly, at the community town hall meeting, there is another level of participation of the people with the students in verifying the data before the building of the stories and scenario building process. Thirdly, the community members are invited to participate at the stage of rehearsals where they also make their inputs and contribution to the building of the play before the production is taken to the people in their various community settlements selected at the beginning of the Samaru project.



Plate 2. (2025) Community member reacting to the data gathered by the students, validating what have been shared by the student.

In 2024/2025 academic session, the Samaru project maintains the involvement of the community members in the process of project workshop, following the previous year workshop relationship established between the department and the community people. During the verification of data by students and lecturers at the town hall meetings, the women spoke extensively on the issues that concern them: issues of rape, female genital circumcision, menstruation, VVF issues and gender-based violence.

All the issues mentioned are some of the challenges that students gathered as data during the course of their interactions within the community they were sent to research on. This town hall meeting gives the students more information within their area of discussions. It is important to note that as a result of the collaboration between the community members and students, this year's project experienced more community participants who voluntarily participated in Samaru theatre workshop. Examples abound. There is the case of the mai anguwa where Mallam Sabi'u from Samaru community who had his teenage children participate in the Samaru project. He also offered to play the role of the mai anguwa in the play. He made valid contributions during the rehearsal process such as bringing to the notice of the students and lecturers the sitting arrangement within the mai anguwa palace where critical family issues within the community are usually resolved. According

to him, the mai anguwa uses wisdom and patience to settle issues within the home, so that the home will not be divided but be strengthened. He further made it clear that each person involved will be made to acknowledge her short comings and the way forward on how she should behave within the home and the community would be suggested.



Plate 3. (2025) Mai Angwan from Samaru describing how challenges within the home are handled by the mai angwan within the community during the rehearsal by the students and some of the volunteered community members.

Another example is one of the women's leaders Hajiya Binta from Bomo community who came around during the Samaru project rehearsals and production. She assisted in the area of pronunciation of some Hausa words within the play like sanitary pad "aduga mata" and others. There were also community members who played the role of "mai shayi" (one who sells tea and bread), "dan sanda" (policeman), "mai anguwa" (household), "sankira" (town crier). Each and every one of them played important roles in the production. The roles gave the community members the opportunity to talk to their people through the play. Seeing one of their own talking to them to desist from committing the crimes shown in the play (example, rape, gender-based violence, early marriage, menstruation and female

circumcision), was an opportunity for the community members to change their attitudes. As earlier mentioned, the involvement of the community members in rehearsals and production created interest in the post-production evaluation and questioning section where issues that happenings within the community are discussed.



Plate 4. (2025) A community member playing the role of a police officer, addressing the issue of rape within the community as shown in the drama. Telling the youth to desist from this act and the law will punish anyone caught in the act or any case reported to the police.

The Post Samaru project Discussion

The Post Samaru project discussion is the high point of the exercise during which the students and the community people have an intensive interactive discussion on the issues raised in the performance. The students alongside the community members who participated engage in these discussions, interrogating the issues and challenges raised in the play. This further creates a bond between the students and the community people. The community members who participated will encourage their fellow community members how could redeem their own community from the vices presented in the play and make their own community a better place to live and raise their children. For the community members who participated, there is the feeling of satisfaction and sense of responsibility that they have been given the opportunity to address some key issues about their community. They further see

themselves as being part of community dialogue in creating solutions to their own challenges.



Plate 5. (2025) showing the discussion section led by one of the community members from Bomo, wearing brown Baban riga, mai angwan Bomo in ash Baban riga, discussing issues raised in the play and the female student standing as the delaliya in the play.

The Plate 5 above is a display contrary to the principles of the ‘Theatre about the people by an Outside Group’, which is also known as migrant theatre that Ross Kidd called Outside-in, where students move into a community, stage their performance and leave without leaving behind the tool of *showing doing* as Steve Daniel called it *drama*. The outside group comes, stages its performance based on the people’s complaints and leaves them without a solution. At the end of the day, the people benefit nothing from the outside group. Instead, they depend on them. With the metamorphosis from the initial practice which has been theatre for the people, we have Theatre with the people and for the people at this level.

Songs as Tools in the Samaru Project

The use of songs is one very key important element in the Samaru project. This is because songs are educative, informative and entertaining. The songs are raised to invite the community members to the venue of the performance from their homes and work places, using the people cultural musical instruments. These songs teach

moral as much as the performance. We have song that addresses, girl child education. Especially, when one of the issues discussed is on the matter of girl child education.

Hausa version (I want to go to school)

Baba zani karatu, ba zan je aure ba
Mama zani karatu, ban zan je aure ba
ba zan je aure ba, ba zan je aure ba
Baba mama zani karatu ban zan je aure ba

English translation

Daddy, I want to go to school, I don't want to get marriage
Mummy I want to go to school, I don't want to get marriage
I will not get married; I will not get married
Daddy, mummy I want to go to school I don't want to get marriage.

These songs go with the issue discussed in the play. Urging and encouraging parents to see that their female children are educated and become positive members of the community. As much as the boy child is sent to school same should be done for the girl child.

Further, there is a song that talks about the evil of female genital circumcision and why the practice should stop during the performance.

Hausa (Female circumcision is not good)

Kaciyar mata ba kyau iyaye ku lura ku gane(2x)
Kaciyar yan mata ba dole ba ne yan uwa

English translation

Female circumcision is not good, parents know about it and understand (2x)
Female circumcision is not a must my brethren

This song talks not only about the disadvantage of female genital circumcision, it equally sounds a note of warning to parents and guardians to stop the practice. The song was used in the play, to help build the emotion around the drama. Thus, the song serves as a tool of change that helps drive the message of the circumcision to the people. Community members learn the songs as it is being presented in the performance and continue to sing them even as they leave the arena to their homes, work and worship places.

Hausa (My no is no)

Ina ce a'a a'a na a'a ne(2x)
Kada ku taba ni a'a na a'a ne
In mun ce a'a a'a mu a'a ne
Kada ku taba mu a'a mu a'a ne

English translation

If i say no, my no means no
Don't touch me, my no remains no
If we say no it means no
Don't touch us our no remains no

The song above is used to discuss the issue of rape, sexual advances and other related issues within the play. From the students' research, this issue is one of the greatest concerns of the community members. This is because incidents like rape, if not properly managed, could lead to stigmatization of the victims. Some of the issues need to be treated with all sense of urgency. This is why the issue of rape in the drama is addressed by a community member who plays the role of the police officer.

Songs are not only used in the play, but they are left behind like seeds by the actors because the community members continue to sing these songs at different times. After listening and learning the songs, the songs stay with the community members for days, weeks, month and even years as the case maybe.

Theatre for the people vs Theatre with the people

The Theatre for the people is a performance for the people in which the community members become the active audience by responding to the issues discussed in the performance. The people are not involved in the process nor in the performance. The performance is centered on the people, using their songs, dances, language, food and ways of dressing to discuss issues that concern them. In brief, the people are separated from the process, all they witness is the outcome of the research which is presented in form of play.

On the other hand, the Theatre with the people is a form of theatre in which the people participate. The people are not just there to assume the role of active audience, they are equally an integral part of the process. This theatre is more of people centered because the community members play crucial role in the process

of building the play. At this stage, the Samaru project is metamorphosing from theatre for the people to theatre with the people. This process is different from community theatre, where the students are catalytic agent of change, allowing the community members to do build their play and performed it themselves. According to the principles of the Samaru project, the aspect of Theatre with the people is the involvement of the community members in quasi building of the stories together with the students from the stage of data collection by the student up to the verification of the data the community members. This involvement gives the community members the understanding of how drama can be used as a tool for social change within the community. It is a Theatre that brings exchange of knowledge between both parties. The students learn many cultural norms and values about the people from the community participants likewise the community members.

Conclusion

Since its inception till date, the Samaru project has metamorphosed from the migrant method to quasi-migrant method which is otherwise referred to as the participatory migrant method. This is a shift from the migrant method which leaves little or nothing behind for the community members. The quasi-migrant method eventually introduced songs and community characters like sankira and hajiya which represent the community members in the plays that are staged from three to six days in different locations within the Samaru community. The art of community involvement empowers the people to use drama to communicate their challenges and proffer solution to them challenges thanks to involvement, the people get equipped with tools for social change which Ross (1984) advocated for.

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