

Engagements & Transformative Knowledge: HIV/AIDS and the Arts in Harare
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On September 5, 2008, in collaboration with Pamberi Trust, and at the Book Café, <http://www.zimbabwearts.co.zw/> I presented some preliminary findings from my PhD dissertation research. As the title of the talk indicates, largely I study the paths and forums through which HIV and AIDS come to be understood. First are engagements, and by this I mean the various ways individuals and organizations frame and enter into work around HIV/AIDS, with specific interest in artistic, intellectual, and creative expressions. Second, I study knowledge production and the ways in which ideas about HIV/AIDS and its many interconnections come into play and circulate. Finally, I look at how HIV/AIDS represents a mediating factor in broader societal transformations. This is to say discussions about gender and sexuality, for example, are as much about HIV and AIDS as are any discussions which speak directly to HIV/AIDS. In fact, HIV/AIDS is something that has performed transformative labor in that it has opened up new spaces to speak more openly and honestly about gender and sexuality. As a result transforming how gender and sexuality are experienced.

As an anthropologist, I focus on people—what they do, what they are engaged with, how they produce knowledge, and how all of this happens within the contexts of past and present day economic, political, and socio-cultural circumstances. The people I study in Harare are those within spaces I call intellectual and creative currents. That term encompasses artists, scholars, activists and a wide range of words someone might use to identify themselves. To put it simply, I've focused on smart people and their use of words and performative engagements. In doing so, my research is guided by the question: How do intellectual and creative currents open up and reconfigure spaces of engagement as well as redefine what counts as knowledge and who counts as an expert? Through my two-year ethnographic investigation of the ways intellectual and creative currents engage HIV/AIDS and produce knowledge, I've studied processes of analyzing, mobilizing, and embodying HIV/AIDS where the result is HIV/AIDS being made an object of symbolic focus to perform transformative labor (particularly in relation to transgressing state-sanctioned hierarchies around gender and sexuality). Precisely because engagements position HIV and AIDS as a situation intertwined with societal dynamics, knowledge production takes hold discursively as well as through subjective experiences, corporeal actions, and performative engagements.

In this talk, I started from the base that Zimbabwean artists give us creative expressions to enjoy and ponder, just as AIDS Service Organisations (ASOs) provide assistance and information. From here, I sought to address several questions: What happens and what might be the broader meanings when artists play a role in how ASOs organize and implement their programmes? How might this increase our understandings of the ways HIV and AIDS are connected to a range of societal dynamics? Do we need to expand our thoughts on who counts as an expert as we consider not only, biomedical and economic realities, but also the contributions of art and intellect in the fight against HIV and AIDS?

What follows is the text of the presentation I gave.

Background and Data Collection

Like any researcher, I went into my project with a hypothesis. This being belief that engagements with HIV/AIDS contain great breadth and while work around prevention, care, mitigation, treatment are essential, they're not the only sites of knowledge production. In turn, my aim has been to look at the possibility that the role of intellectual and creative currents in HIV/AIDS-related knowledge production might be under-recognized.

AIDS Service Organisations or ASOs play a major role in knowledge production; therefore, I've sought to learn more about this space. Specifically, I conducted a survey in collaboration with the Zimbabwe AIDS Network. To date, 54 ASOs completed the survey and its questions concerning:

- 1) staff, sources of funding, focus areas
- 2) thoughts around terms such as multi-sectoral, gender, and sexuality
- 3) the role of the arts in HIV/AIDS programming

Aside from the survey, my research has been qualitative. Or in using the anthropological term, ethnographic. With either term, the approach has been being present. I've attended events, meetings, workshops, festivals that had to do with HIV, the arts, or both. I've interviewed nearly 50 people. I've collected data which illuminates the landscapes of intellectual and creative currents in Harare.

I'm grateful for the generosity people have shown in speaking with me. The ways in which various individuals have shared their thoughts supports one of the overarching arguments of my research. That when looking at intellectual and creative currents, I'm working with a set of experts. You might even say I'm in a precarious situation. I'm both learning from and studying a set of people; in large part, studying what makes them part of a current of expertise.

Preliminary Survey Findings: The Role of the Arts in HIV/AIDS Programming

In conversations with Zimbabweans about my research, there have usually been discussions about fiction having the power to tell truths. Particularly truths that otherwise might not be told. Whether fiction in a poem, short story, theater production, song, painting, novel, or film, so often I've heard this type of comment: That a story which is not real helps people to understand what is real. That fiction represents an integral element in how reality or facts enter into the knowledge base.

When it comes to HIV and AIDS, there's danger in over-reliance on fiction as a means to unpack and articulate issues of concern. Too much fiction can slip into being denial.

But it's a fine line. As much as fiction tell truths, so too can fiction mirror societal dynamics. In fact, fiction which touches on HIV/AIDS often revolves around characters in denial. Thus, reflecting an existing dynamic. In fiction, sometimes denial hangs in the balance in the story's conclusion, likely purposefully to raise questions for audiences. Often questions concerning one's own spaces of denial. Whether or not fictionalized denial is resolved, the power of the words rests in their abilities to bestow ideas, insights, and clarity. Even as fiction, the words represent knowledge which aides in better understanding various issues. The issue might specifically be denial around HIV/AIDS, or something else such as violence, gender disparities, or difficulties in accessing education. In any of these cases, what happens is a process of unpacking and paving the way to address fact through fiction.

I see truth telling fiction as crucial in how understandings of HIV/AIDS take hold. As a starting point to understand the why and the how, this is where the value of the survey rests. As baseline data, it's an instructive way to look at the role the arts play in programming around HIV and AIDS. For example, of the 54 Harare-based ASOs surveyed:

- 92% use the arts in their programmes. And 72% state that integration of the arts is either central or significant. Meaning, nearly every ASO surveyed makes uses of the arts, and to some degree is using fiction as a way to convey fact.
- And this is something that ASOs find effective as 46% are of the mind that the people they work with or on behalf of are extremely receptive to the arts. While 44% claim that integrating the arts works often.

With this baseline data in mind, I'd like to highlight two ways the survey speaks to why artistically crafted words and images can be powerful and how fiction conveys truths.

First. In programming around HIV/AIDS, the use of the arts is not a token gesture, an after thought, or a form of entertainment. Not merely, the latest idea emerging from the donor world which ASOs

dutifully fall in line with. In fact, it appears to be the other way around. The arts serve as an interwoven organizing element. And ASOs do some convincing with donors, as only 17% of the respondents feel donors are extremely receptive to integrating the arts.

What I'm suggesting, as shown in the survey and beyond, is that artistic expressions represent a natural and effective way to tap into the ontology of individuals. In turn, making artistic endeavors a highly valuable form of knowledge production which informs and educates. I'm saying that often our ways of being and our ways of thinking absorb and respond when there's intellectual and creative expression in the mix.

When faced with something as complex as HIV and AIDS, knowledge, and developing understandings of that knowledge comes through a range of ways. HIV is hardly something where one sentence or one report tells the whole story. Instead, part of the process to soak in knowledge revolves around taking in and analyzing words, images, and expressions. This is to say art speaks.

Or in the words of the Australian anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998): Art has agency. What that means is that artistically crafted words are more than aesthetics or entertainment. Along with Gell, I would argue that too often there are quick assumptions that only passive understandings of art occur. The reverse seems more common as often understandings of art involve reflection around the contexts which shape and are braided into the expressions. Thus, what's happening is recognizing the intents embodied in an art project. Meaning it's possible to look at artistic expressions as forms of action or as social agents. The making and engaging with art (broadly defined) serves as a means for informing and influencing the thoughts and actions of others.

This is not to say that non-artistic endeavors fail in conveying information. Certainly, the many excellent ASOs in Zimbabwe effectively convey information without using the arts. Yet, often ASOs face the challenge of breaking down complex information. Overwhelmingly, Harare-based ASOs feel that the arts represent an effective avenue for meeting this challenge. In large part, the appeal of a song, drama, painting, or poem is its abilities to strike a chord on a personal level and place the information within the life of an individual. As one respondent comments: "The information will get to one's heart." While another respondent notes: "The arts have a lasting impression."

The second key finding that I take from the survey has to do with paradigms. Or more I should say the ways particular types of donor funding shape approaches to HIV/AIDS. Certainly, there's need for public health-oriented interventions and services around prevention, care, and treatment. Still I wonder why the donor world tends to shy away from engagements with HIV and AIDS which are intellectually and artistically rich. Why there might be hesitations to expand what and who counts as expertise. This is not to argue against drawing on donor dollars, or to launch a critique of the AIDS Industry. Rather it's to ask: If the survey tells us something that's already largely known—that the arts is a central part of HIV/AIDS programming—why the hesitations to better recognize that, with programming and beyond, the words and images of painters, poets, writers, gay rights activists, and feminists are incisive and a valuable aspect of HIV/AIDS-related knowledge production.

To me the answer to my musings is simple: Preoccupation with economics. And this preoccupation seems evident in looking back at the path funding around HIV/AIDS has tended to followed.

Around 2000 or so, donor thinking and funding underwent a shift: from biomedical-oriented public health to multi-sectoral. This shift importantly extends work beyond the health sector and in broad strokes; the idea is to frame HIV/AIDS as a threat to economic growth and development, largely by mitigating economic impacts and sustaining economic factors across various sectors. Such as: agriculture, education, governance, the military, transportation, and informal businesses. Without diminishing the need to understand economic impacts, a multi-sectoral approach tends to consider only the macro and micro economic profile of sectors with larger and more tangible economic orientation. What such an approach often fails to consider adequately are the

interconnections of hard and fast economic sectors with more cultural-oriented or intellectual and creative engagements.

Consider both how society tends to view the arts as a sector and the arts sector in the context of growing emphasis on multi-sectoral approaches. The economic preoccupations of multi-sectoral approaches divert attention from spheres of human activity less easily quantified into economic indicators. A series of concerns then arise around what an economic-oriented multi-sectoral approach might omit. For example, artistic knowledge production, the roles intellectual and creative currents play in work around HIV/AIDS. The impacts HIV and AIDS has on intellectual and arts sectors, which in turn impact both the economy of the country and the country overall.

In summary, my immediate reactions to the results of the survey have been:

- Being excited about having some concrete evidence that the arts represent an integral part of HIV and AIDS programming. And not just anecdotal evidence, but actual statistics about the degree that Harare-based ASOs integrate the arts into their programmes.
- Second. That multi-sectoral approaches perhaps fall short in recognizing the role of the arts because in actuality the more apt term is multi-economic, not multi-sectoral. And that's multi-economic with a narrow view of what counts as an economic sector.
- Thus, in turn, what ASOs have to say about the arts lends insight into the broader meanings of intellectual and creative expressions on-going in Zimbabwe. And the ways these meanings and interpretations are not always passive. Instead, artistic expressions have lasting impressions and can serve as agents of transformation and change. In fact, of the 54 ASOs surveyed 64% say yes the arts have played a role in inspiring behavior change while 36% say maybe. No ASO said no.

Reverse of the Survey: Expanding Who Counts as an Expert

I want to conclude with a few comments about why it's not only ASOs making use of the arts which is significant. Equally as important is the reverse: The ways HIV/AIDS itself makes its way into artistic, intellectual, and creative expressions. My aim is to make two points along the way.

- First. When the term HIV/AIDS is not explicitly stated, there are sometimes tendencies to see only silences, that there is no engagement. But possibly, instead of silence evident are intricate and more integrated ways of engaging and producing knowledge. Even without direct mention of HIV/AIDS, the insights and knowledge are no less significant. After all, how often is it that insights concerning gender, sex, power, politics, economics, are indeed also about or at least related to HIV and AIDS. .
- Second. Intellectual and creative expressions represent commanding ways to unravel HIV and AIDS precisely because, by combining analyses of daily life experiences and larger ideological agendas, these types of expressions signal and intervene in the transformations occurring because of HIV/AIDS and its impacts.

Collectively then, I'm suggesting taking stock of several questions: If we consider the scientific and public health communities engaged in work around HIV and AIDS to be public intellectuals, are artists actually all that different? Any less a public intellectual? Any less an expert? When medical professionals take part in, for example, treatment literacy programmes, is it not of the same weight to listen to a poet speaking to the complexities around transactional aspects of sex?

With these points emphasized, I do think it's important to acknowledge that, like many places in the world, there are taboos around speaking directly about HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe. And there is need now, and there will continue to be the need to break through these taboos and promote dialogue which speaks directly to and about HIV and AIDS.

Yet sometimes hesitations are less about taboo and perhaps more about information overload. Throughout my research, I routinely ask questions such as: What do you know about HIV? And where do you get your information? The responses have never been complete silence as if someone is unaware. Very much the opposite in fact.

Responses have been that HIV/AIDS is everywhere. On TV. On the radio, the internet, billboards, films. In the newspapers. You can't help but know about it. People generally have had experience with a cousin, a sibling, a parent, an aunt, an uncle, a friend... someone who is living with HIV or has died from an AIDS-related illness. Common are jokes that AIDS is the largest employer in this country. Oftentimes there have been sighs and a comment that a day never goes by without seeing or feeling something about HIV and AIDS. AIDS just is. It's there. It's a situation we live with.

These types of comments provide evidence that HIV/AIDS exists at the level of daily life. As do statistics also support the notion of omnipresence. When something is this embedded and contained in the fabric of life, it's also entwined, a part of the complex world in which we live. A world where HIV/AIDS is as much a set of biomedical realities and economic concerns as it is a set of ideological entanglements. Looking at and critically examining complexities and the trickle down effects of how and why ideologies are proffered is often at the heart of artistic engagements. Many artists seek and maintain a relationship with the public realm through heightened awareness of dominant paradigms. Audiences try to understand how the expressions might possibly relate to the public realm and if a challenge to the status quo exists.

My arguments have been to suggest that artistic expressions can and do serve as agents of change. First, by outlining the contours of on-going transformations, and next, by conveying knowledge which speaks to truths as a way to advocate and guide transformations toward peaceful and equitable resolutions. Precisely because intellectual and creative engagements position HIV/AIDS, not as an epidemic, but as a situation interwoven into already changing dynamics the results are poignant insights, which may in part be fiction, but this fiction powerfully informs.

Conclusion

In this talk, I've avoided statements along the lines of: HIV/AIDS is interconnected to gender because... to sexuality because.... HIV/AIDS is political and a matter of economics because.... Analyses of these interconnections are certainly important, but to me, equally as important is the need to examine more thoughtfully the breadth, vibrancy, and affect of the current of artists and scholars who are involved in completing those sentences. As I've said several times, to expand who counts as an expert and tap into the ways such analysis and knowledge is contained in poems, short stories, novels, theater productions, songs, painting, films as well as in the work of gender, human rights and gay rights activists. Many such artists and intellectuals are in this room. You have been an integral part of my research and I thank you for that. In my research and in this presentation, I've tried to highlight that use of the arts in ASO programming is significant. Significant in the sense that ASO's find doing so an effective endeavor. And significant in the sense that HIV/AIDS might possibly be one of the most profound events in our lifetime; it represents a site of broader knowledge production. Examining the intellectual and creative breadth of this knowledge provides an avenue to understand the human potential to think and act creatively, critically, and resourcefully in the world.

For a similar version of this talk see: SAfAIDS News Volume 14 Issue 1 March 2008
<http://www.safaids.net/?q=node/14>

Following the talk two of Harare's top poets, Comrade Fatso www.comradefatso.com and G.O.D. Obori <http://www.toyitoyi.blogspot.com/> performed. Through a mix of Shona and English, they convey what Zimbabweans experience in daily life as well as analyze the paradigms which hinder paths to social justice. Along the way demonstrating that, the art of poetry is a valuable tool in the fight for liberation.

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