

STANLEY ELIAS

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-BUILDING IN “POST-SOCIALIST” TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

The discourses surrounding the University Theatre for Development Movement (University TfD) in “post-socialist” Tanzania present a complex yet compelling story of how popular theatre forms respond to and deconstruct official or dominant narratives in nation-building projects in Africa. Frameworks of resistance, appropriation, and co-option alone do not fully capture the intricate power dynamics shaping how different actors of nation-building in “post-socialist” Tanzania engage within the University TfD. Drawing on literary sources, performance observations, archival materials, and oral interviews, this thesis interrogates the nature of power relations among actors of nation-building within University TfD practice. Emerging from both the institutional politics of relevance and discourses of nation-building at the University of Dar es Salaam, University TfD developed in ways that reflected these competing forces in its conceptualisation and its practice. This thesis explores how these competing forces shaped its logic, structure, and operations during a period of allegedly changing ideological posture marked by increasing marketization, cosmopolitanism, the flow of global capital, and growing parochial divisions such as class—all of which unsettled earlier understandings of the “National Question” in Tanzania. In particular, I show how University TfD unsettled the state and elite-dominant narratives of nation-building while re-centering everyday imaginations from grassroots communities and their contributions to the nation.

While advocates of University TfD often celebrate discourses of grassroots inclusion in nation-building, this thesis, in particular, interrogates the hierarchical relations among actors within University TfD praxis. It highlights how these hierarchies constrained the potential of grassroots communities to move from celebratory and symbolic inclusion to active participation in shaping their own narratives and those of the nation. Yet within these power relations, I argue that “spaces at the margins” emerge—what I term “spectacles of absurdity”—in which communities assert agency through what I describe as a “poetics of negotiation,” enabling them to transform and contest dominant narratives and articulate alternative imaginaries of nation-building rooted in everyday experiences.