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Nigerian Theatre Journal:
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NIGERIAN THEATRE IN A DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

Within the last two decades, there have been diverse painstaking attempts by Nigerian theatre pedagogues, under the umbrella of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA), to underscore the germaneness of the theatre in society by constructing themes to address issues of concern in its yearly conference. One of such is the thematic preoccupation of SONTA 2022 which was headlined, “Nigerian Theatre in a Digital Era.” In this paper, we argue against the frame of apprehending the ‘digitalisation’ of Nigerian theatre from the lens of electronic or computerised technology as constructed by the West. We examine the historical boundaries of what it means for a theatre to be in a digital era and more so, at what point would we say that the Nigerian theatre entered its own digital era. The paper draws on historical analysis to contend that Nigerian theatre is caught betwixt the web of Eurocentric apprehension of ‘digitalisation’ and a functionalist logjam of finding relevance in a fast-changing world driven by the Western-styled technology. It submits that the Nigerian theatre is far behind in its attempt to catch up with the Western idealisation of ‘digital theatre’ as the West is gradually shifting from digitalisation to post-digital encounters with emphases on human beings. Hence, the call for a reinterpretation of the digital era in the Nigerian theatre based on a fresh understanding in light of the argument for a post-digital world.

Keywords: Nigerian theatre, Digital era, Digitalisation, Technology, Post-digital world.

Introduction

There is, perhaps, an assumed temptation of historical positioning and repositioning or what would be seen as a generational movement and shift in time, content, character, texture and, may be, in space as well, in relation to the theme of this conference, *Nigerian Theatre in a Digital Era*. This historical repositioning is arguably always manifesting in memories that are often provoked by such nostalgic feelings that habitually presume and argue that the days gone by are golden and are thus ever better than now. To speak of the Nigerian theatre in a digital era, is to speak in equal breath, of a theatre in a post-colonial situation. For the sake of the foundation of this keynote, we are indeed arguably speaking at this conference of a theatre in what is supposed to be an analogue Nigeria against a digital Nigeria. Of course, to perhaps categorically assume that we have already arrived at a digital Nigeria to be able to fully speak of a theatre in a digital Nigeria is also not without its own fundamental problems which this presentation equally hopes to address.

In essence, this paper systematically traces what I have identified above as representing a form of a generational movement and shift in time, content, character, texture and the space of theatre making in Nigeria from the so-called analogue Nigerian theatre to a digital era Nigerian theatre. Equally, hinted above, I will be paying specific attention to what I have identified as the temptations of human memories in easily writing off the contemporary for the old on the grounds of the hope of the rebirth of that which is always seen to represent the classical 'old' through its constant nostalgia, which is a way of attempting to delegitimize the present Nigerian theatre for the presumed golden past of the Nigerian theatre. My focus is not to legislate on any of the eras, but to argue for a reinterpretation of the digital era in Nigerian theatre especially based on a fresh understanding in the light of the argument for a post digital world. In time, I hope to be able to put in proper historical perspective how a digital era Nigerian theatre should be seen or understood in light of the emerging discourses around a post digital world. I will thus be taking a critical look at the place of Nigerian theatre in such a post digital world.

What is Nigerian Theatre?

First, by the theme of this conference, Nigerian Theatre in a Digital Era, we must assume that there is a Nigerian theatre. Perhaps, it is such a theatre about Nigeria, in Nigeria or by Nigerians anywhere in the world. I am not sure if we have ever taken time to define what 'Nigerian' theatre really is, or what constitutes a Nigerian theatre beyond our assumed understanding of, say, such generic notion as what is African theatre? I understand that we can fall back on the traditional forms of the ritual and festival theatre performances as discussed by Wole Soyinka, the Alarinjo theatre as identified by Joel Adedeji, the Emir Court performances as extensively analysed by Zikky Kofoworola, the Tiv Kwaghir by Iyorwese Hagher and the Folk theatre forms of Sam Ukala. We can also go back to discuss the works of Hubert Ogunde who has been identified as the doyen of modern Nigeria theatre (Ebun Clark 1) to make a case for the existence of Nigeria theatre. I have worked extensively on Facekuerade theatre. Nevertheless, I do not think these identified seminal works on theatre in Nigeria have fully defined what constitute a Nigerian theatre. For instance, would a theatre/drama by a non-Nigerian about Nigeria be seen or regarded as a Nigerian theatre? And, what of a theatre/drama by a Nigerian diaspora about the country of its residence, would that also qualify as a Nigerian drama or theatre today?

I am raising these questions to probe the assumptions that we have already figured out and thus know and understand what a Nigerian theatre is. Nigerian theatre cannot just be a theatre in Nigeria, otherwise, any theatre by foreigners that are perhaps brought into and performed in Nigeria-by-Nigerian artists may become a Nigerian theatre because it has been performed in and on the Nigerian stage by Nigerian artists. If I may use footballing as an example: will a European team playing on the Nigeria soil be playing a Nigerian football? Or better still, will a Nigerian playing in a European league be playing a Nigerian football? And, will a European playing in a Nigerian league not be playing a Nigerian football? For instance, an Ulli Beier, a German, made several theatres about Nigerian myths and history, particularly the myths and the

histories of the Yoruba of south west Nigeria. Are those to be seen and accepted as representing Nigerian or Yoruba theatres or not? If they are accepted as being Nigerian theatre, then, arguably, a Nigerian diaspora artist who is making drama of the myths and the histories of their countries of residence is equally making a theatre of those countries and not a theatre of Nigeria. I must admit that the questions I am raising re-echo the questions around the conceptualization and definition of what is African literature. Perhaps, the cultural content, and not just the form, the space or the makers should determine what a Nigerian theatre is. This is an issue we may really want to take up against the backdrop of such theories as cosmopolitanism and globalization.

What is an Analogue Era Nigerian Theatre?

When we speak of theatre in a digital era, we have unwittingly invited ourselves to equally think about theatre in an analogue era, Nigeria as its presumed natural contrary, or opposite. However, on a closer reflective scrutiny, one may likely discover and agree that an analogue Nigerian theatre era is not the contrary or the opposite of an equally assumed digital era Nigerian theatre. It should rather be seen as a continuum; what is known as analogue, its self being essentially a historical-scientific computational development from the rustic or primordial approaches to doing theatre. In essence, what is called the analogue is not essentially the opposite of the digital. Being analogue is, arguably, appropriately a precursor to the digital. What is termed analogue itself is indeed a scientific and computational development from the rustic, the primordial, the ritual or festival theatre performances. The point being made here is simple: being analogue is not a pre-modern development. It is essentially a modern development. The pre-modern theatre, so to speak, in terms of historicizing theatrical performances in Nigeria, will, in actual fact, take us back to those traditional rituals and festival forms as can be seen in the works of most of the scholars I have earlier mentioned, the likes of Ogunde, Soyinka, Adedeji, Clark-Bekederemo, Ukala and others. Thus, arguably, the gradual transition from the pure ritual and festival forms of theatre in Nigeria to the modern theatre, what is being identified as the analogue theatre here, is perhaps signaled in the pioneering works of Hubert Ogunde, Moses Olaiya and the University literary/arts theatre.

Here, the change or the transition, is equally not so much of the cultural contents, but of a re-interpretation, a re-adaptation and a re-appropriation of the cultural contents to respond to new and emerging modern realities in the face of the shifting understanding of the traditional spaces, values and ways of life under new social-political configurations and realities. For instance, one of my recent works with Joel Fanyam entitled *The Mise-en-scene and Theatre Technology in Nigeria* (Ododo and Fanyam 444-452) focuses on such transition from the traditional ritual and festival forms of theatre *mise-en-scene* to the contemporary theatre forms in terms of modern technical equipment requirements for theatre making today as it affects developments in such areas of theatre studies as sound making, lighting, costume designs, and scenery designs, the total *mise-en-scene* as enhanced by new theatre technology. So, what may be called the analogue Nigerian theatre era is presumably the link, the moment of transition, between the traditional ritual and festival theatre performance form to the

presumed digital era theatre form that is the focus of this conference against the reality of emerging discourses around post digitalisation. Now, can we then go ahead to look at the Nigerian theatre in this identified moment of technological transition and development as we then move to discuss a post digital era Nigerian theatre?

Nigerian Theatre in Moments of Technological Transitions

We can easily assume that the purpose of Nigerian theatre from its very traditional ritual and festival forms are well understood, if such an assumption would not be too presumptuous. We perhaps know that theatre, in its ritual and festival forms across cultures, seems to be concerned with the performance for/of the historical search of/for the human essence and purpose against such cosmic forces and realities of famines, sundry natural disasters, pandemics, and death ultimately (Brockett 19). And, theatre through the ages, be it the Classical era, Dark Ages or the Modern avant-garde traditions, has always been concerned about this same search for the human purpose; the meaning of the human life, only that the search keeps changing in approaches and forms. Therefore, arguably, what has been changing in theatre forms through the ages is not the purpose for which theatre is deployed but the ways, the manner and the medium of doing theatre. In essence, the transitions in theatre making in Nigeria, just as elsewhere in the world, are perhaps in the introduction of modern scientific methods and technological tools/developments to enhancing the forms. Of course, there is always the educational and the entertainment values of theatre all along within the said historical search for the purpose of existence as is pursued in ritual and festival theatres.

The argument, therefore, remains that before our identified analogue and ‘assumed’ digital Nigerian theatre eras performances, ‘the early theatre practices in Nigeria were traditional performances which “made use of local technologies fabricated and created with local materials available in the society” (Ododo and Fanyam 447). This was when ‘the scenery of traditional African performance was without platforms’ and were not enhanced or supported with any modern Western scientific or technological tools (Ododo and Fanyam 447). Talking about the historical transition in theatre making through the deployment of modern scientific and technological tools to/for the enhancement of theatrical performances, it is on record that: some Romans amphitheatres, such as the Coliseum, made extensive use of elevators, moving platforms, and trapdoors to raise animals, people and scenery from the basements underneath the amphitheatre’s floor to the arena level (Gillete 39-40 cited in Ododo and Fanyam 445).

In our assumed digital era Nigeria theatre, one can only try very hard to remember the numbers of such theatre platforms in the country with such facilities as elevators, moving platforms and trapdoors that can raise objects and sceneries from the basements underneath the theatres’ floors to the arena. In fact, most of the scientific and technological tools that we are still struggling to have to enhance theatre making in Nigeria today have been developed and have been in use in the West as far back as the period of the Italian Renaissance (Gillete 42 cited in Ododo and Fanyam 445). But, again, that is only in relation to arts theatre forms. Unfortunately, even though we often discuss the incorporation of early digital tools like audio-visual recording through

projectors, animations, digital voice-over and other media forms into the experimental Epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht and that of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, we do not normally assume that the theatre in the West has indeed entered its digital era as far back as the period of those theatre makers because we were, and perhaps are, still in an analogue Nigeria arts theatre era. As for the ritual and popular festival theatre forms, they have mainly remained a kind of 'street theatre performance' affair to date.

The point I am making is that: to be able to fully position and discuss the Nigerian theatre in a digital era, we need to critically appraise whether we have truly arrived at a digital Nigeria and how such digital Nigeria can be deployed to support and enhance, not only the arts theatre form, but the traditional street ritual and festival theatre performance forms. Let me explain the issue further within the historical appraisal of the analogue and the digital era theatre argument that I have been pursuing in this keynote. Arguably, most of the scientific and technological tools that are yet to be available for theatre making in Nigeria as we speak have been in use in the West since the period of the Italian Renaissance as I have observed above. The major but little changes in/to our mode of traditional ritual and festival theatre making only began, as noted in Adegbite (cited in Ododo and Fanyam 445) at the point of our contact with the Europeans to the period of the establishment of the first University Arts Theatre in Ibadan.

What further progress have we made as a nation towards a full modernization of the process of our arts theatre making to be able to lay any strong claim to a digital Nigerian theatre even as practised by say, Brecht in his Epic theatre form? As we speak, aside from a number of towns and villages that are yet to be electrified or linked to the national electricity grid, even the major cities that have been electrified hardly can boast of 12 hours stable electricity supply in a day. This is also the reality in most of our universities offering arts theatre courses. And, that is just electricity, what of the need for a constant internet connectivity that is a major requirement of/for a digital presence and activities in the universities and other places of works to enhance the making and the sustenance of such virtual or digital theatre? The implications of the realities above, of epileptic power supply and of virtually no equipment for stable internet connectivity in the country, particularly on our campuses, and of the continuous relevance of street ritual and festival theatre forms among the locals, demands that raise the question that 'Are we truly in a digital Nigeria to be discussing Nigerian theatre in a digital era?'

Are we in a Digital Nigeria?

To raise and answer the question of if we are now in a digital era Nigeria demands that we understand what digital technology means and what a digital Nigeria truly is or should look like. Digital technologies are those devices that enable the creation and storage of information and processes in digital form with the potential for delivery across electronic networks (Nasura 9). This connotes an ecosystem highly dependent on electronic and digital forms in which access to the attendant digital gadgets is guaranteed for all players. Reflecting on this, I will attempt to provide an understanding of what a digital Nigeria is or should look like. I know I have come across such reports as credited to the Nigerian Communication Commission claiming

that Nigeria now has about 204,578,953 telecommunication users (95) to justify the claim that we are already in a digital Nigeria. But, a simple check on the internet on the total population of Nigeria, as can be seen in figures 1 and 2 below, places the Nigeria's population figure between 206.1 and 218.5 million as of September 3, 2022.

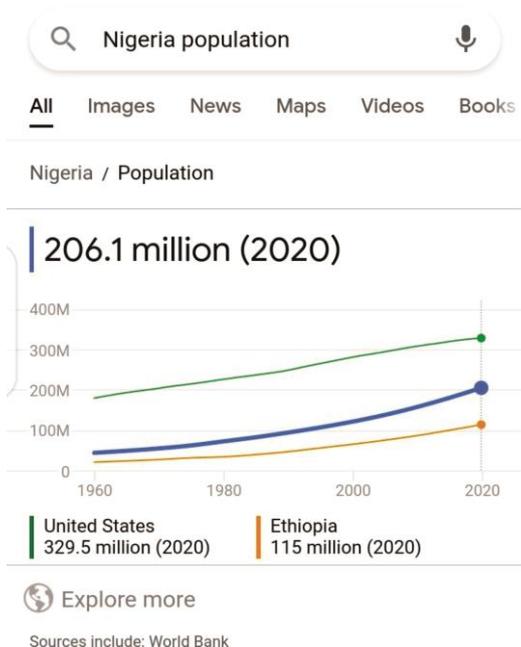


Figure 1



Figure 2

Now, when you consider such a report against the world Bank March 22 2022 on poverty rate report on Nigeria (Mansir 2), as can be seen in figure 3 below, which

claims that ‘4 in 10’ Nigerians, about 95.1 million, are living below the national poverty index line, you cannot but query where the Nigerian Communication Commission got its data of 204.6 active internet/digital communication users? There is a big question mark over 204.6 million active digital users of a people who are struggling to feed themselves. But then, there is a September 2022 newspaper report that claims that ‘subscribers fail to use 98.75 million SIM cards’ in Nigeria (Jaiyeola par.4). The same report agrees that ‘...a lot of people carry more than one phone. Some have an office line; some have private lines but use one more often than the other. Some are in the diaspora, who though they hold Nigerian SIM cards, are not resident there (Jaiyeola par.6). These claims can only rightly suggest that the number of SIMs that are registered in Nigeria do not really translate to any real or functional digital presence.

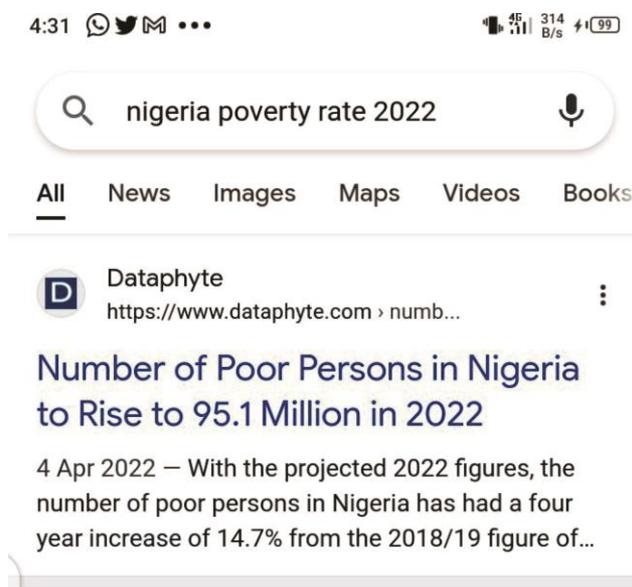


Figure 3

Thus, the reality, arguably, is that even though a lot of people have registered SIMs in Nigeria, the number of active SIMs are negligible compared to the number of the actual population. Thus, aside from few people who are into skit making, which arguably is more like the film or a cinema than a digital theatre in the mode of TikTok solo performances or a full Zoom experimental digital theatre, there is perhaps no concrete attempt at the making of engaging and sustainable digital theatre in Nigeria. And, of course, even if there are attempts at such experimental activities, particularly in terms of theatre making, a people who are largely struggling to live above the poverty line index, including university academics who are themselves equally struggling to maintain 24 hours internet presence, and who can hardly maintain any stable private electricity supply to support their required digital presence, cannot afford the luxury of such a digital theatre making.

Of course, going by the data claim of the Nigerian Communication Commission about the number of registered SIM in the country, to raise the question of what is a digital Nigeria may, superficially, appear superfluous as we may pretend that we have already arrived at a digital Nigeria because we have access to such number of mobile telephone lines in a country without constant electricity and uninterrupted internet connectivity as are essential and required for a true digital presence and experience. I hope to raise and address some critical issues that will perhaps guide us to determine whether we are already truly in a digital Nigeria to be able to speak authoritatively on what is Nigerian theatre in such an era. But, I need to sound this note of warning against the imaginations of those who seem to be dreaming of the death of popular theatre forms like Imiti noted that some of us seem to be oversimplifying the issue around what is loosely being identified as the Nigerian theatre, especially, the digital theatre, to the exclusion of the evergreen popular ritual and festival theatres whose demands and practices are steeped and bound in the spiritual-essence imaginations and the temper of mind of the locals (93).

To understand how deep and resilient those ritual and festival theatre forms could be one needs to read such a work, *A Masquerade Performs the Pandemic on the Margins of Death and Cultural Dislocation* where the local, within their worldview and existential temper foreground the place and the roles of local masquerade cults in the maintenance of cosmic balance (equilibrium) in a pandemic through rituals, unleashes a popular masquerade to the street in Ogun State Nigeria in violation of the government lockdown rules to cleanse the streets, their town, their world, of the Covid-19 virus (Ojoniyi 45). One also equally needs to be familiar with the notion of post digitalism (Svich 1) to know that digital tools are mainly instruments of theatre making; they are not in any ways a replacement of/to the arts theatre and festival theatres. I will return to the challenges of the resilience of popular ritual and festival theatre forms to, not only survive because of their roots in the ritual essence imagination of the locals as explained in their cyclic world view (Soyinka 154; Sofola cited in Ododo 109-114; Ododo and Okoye 1), but to, through their dynamism and fluidity, accommodate and incorporate new/contemporary realities into their mode.

In the meantime, I think we would agree that there are practical and scientific indices or parameters to judge and assess the current state of our educational and technological growth and development in relation to such assumed ideal digital compliance as obtainable in the developed world. For instance, we are aware that there are such practical and scientific indices and parameters for adjudging certain countries as being developed, developing and underdeveloped. And, I think we should add underdeveloping to the list so as to indicate such countries that are actually losing such grounds of development they had initially attained or covered. Let me cite an example of what I mean here. Under the colonial government in Nigeria, Nigerians could travel to Maiduguri by train. But, as we speak, that development has been lost. Today, what remains of that colonial historical legacy is the relics of the rail line that used to link Maiduguri to the rest of Nigeria. There are also cities and towns that were connected to the national electricity grid before but, which, as we speak, have been cut off the grid.

It is within this type of unfortunate progressive loss of initially attained modern development and of, arguably, virtually non-existence of scientific and technological developmental tools that are required as of (what is obtainable in) the developed and the developing nations that one cannot fully discuss an ideal digital experience in the Nigeria theatre space. Thus, it is arguable that for the most part, digital tools, and internet connectivity and gadgets are largely absent, or where they exist, not functional, when Covid-19 pandemic came upon us in the country. In essence, the truth is that, just as argued by Fuchs in *Theatre of Lockdown: Digital and Distance Performance in a Time of Pandemic* what is known as ‘digital or virtual performance existed before the 2020 pandemic. It is only that it has always ‘remained largely in the realm of the experimental and avant-garde’ form of theatre. This claim agrees with the point I have been making that whatever is a digital theatre is not against the arts theatre or the ritual and the festival theatres. As such, reconsidering the purpose of theatre in its holistic essence, digital theatre is arguably not a replacement of the arts theatre or the ritual and the festival theatre as seemingly being argued or claimed by the likes Aghogho L. Imiti (93).

Digital theatre is rather to be seen as an essential part of the progressive history of modern or contemporary experimental theatre whose relevance is not necessarily an alternative theatre, but an essential part of the history of the growing body of universal theatre. A tool upon which it leverages is new technological apparatuses to sustain and preserve the culture of theatre making and theatre going. This understanding of digital theatre also agrees with how Nasura perceives it: “a rich and varied art form evolving between performing bodies gathered together in shared space and ever-expanding flexible reach of the digital technology that shapes our world (12).” She equally argues that, ‘it is such a theatre that uses and explores live theatre performances which incorporate video projection, animation, motion capture and triggering, telematics and multisite performance, robotics, VR, and AR” (20). The point is that a tool does not replace or displace a trade. A tool only enhances the performance and the delivery of the trade.

In any case, from some of the available data and research on digital theatre, transmediality and/or trans-media dramaturgy across the globe as seen in the works of Magda Romanska, Barbara Fuchs, and Caridad Svich, digital theatre largely remains an experimental theatre. Nevertheless, what remains to be seen, against the background of the argument I have been pursuing in this paper, is whether Nigerian theatre can boast of a body of digital theatre knowledge and experiments as are currently available and on-going in the West? Do we have such digital theatre experimental performances as identified and discussed by Romanska (2) and Fuchs (1), for instance, in Nigeria currently? Or is Nigerian digital theatre just a discussion of what is going on in the world of digital theatre in the West and across the globe?

Conclusion: Musing on a Post Digital Era Nigerian Theatre

Perhaps one of the challenges of the focus of the theme of this conference is its being caught in the rapidly spinning wheel of knowledge generation, for as we are speaking here of the Nigerian theatre in a digital era, some scholars have already moved

on to speaking about post-digitalism (Svich 1; Gallagher, Nicol and Breines10; Wilson 3). It thus arguably appears we are seemingly running behind in meeting up with the speed at which the currency of knowledge is travelling across the globe in Nigeria. Post-digitalism has undeniably put a stop to the illusion that our shared humanity has perhaps become a victim of its digital tools in that just as the post in postmodernism returns the creative right and ingenuity of the commoners to them against the elitist vision of the art, while the post in post-colonialism gives the colonial subjects, the subalterns, the voice to speak and rewrite their stories and histories, the post in post-digitalism also seeks to give back the right of place to those things that make us human beings like our cultures, values, and norms, the total rituals of our shared relational experiences.

In essence, in post-digitalism it is perhaps clear that the computer and all its technological derivatives, all the digital tools in our hands and around us today, are only as relevant and important to the extent that they help to secure and promote our common humanity. That is, our shared cultural values and experiences. Thus, digitalism remains such useful instrument in our hands to the degree that it enhances and upholds how humanity continues to interact and dominate its environment without compromising such values that separate it from mere animals and machines. In closing, therefore, I can only hope that the reality of the supremacy of our common humanity, the knowledge of our shared common culture and values, those things that make us human like love, empathy, care, and our passion for the wellbeing of the others, the things that separate us from mere robots and common animals, as being championed in post-digitalism, will, indeed, mediate whatever is our argument and position on the Nigerian theatre in a digital era at this conference without our being unnecessarily romantic or nostalgic about the past.

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