

NIGERIAN THEATRE JOURNAL

A JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF NIGERIA THEATRE ARTISTS (SONTA)

Vol. 23 Issues 1 and 2, 2023

ISSN: 0189-9562 (Print)

ISSN: 2971-6748 (Online)

Editor
Osakue Stevenson Omoera

2023

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The Nigerian Theatre Journal (NTJ) (ISSN: 0189-9562 Print; ISSN: 2971-6748 Online) is published by the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA), C/O The Editor, NTJ, Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Otuoke (FUO), Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

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**PERFORMING ON THE CYBERSPACE: THE *MUPUN*
NJINGKOOK EXPERIMENT**

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Abstract

In a networked society where the internet is an enabler, the theatre also takes in certain changes and continues to reshape itself in line with the dominant idea of the time. This paper examines the experiment conducted using *Njingkook* which is a *Mupun* storytelling performance. It argues on the frame that the experiment of capturing traditional *Mupun* stories as content using the video format, and uploading them on the YouTube platform is an avenue to create global audience for the *Mupun* people. Using the theory of the Networked Society (NS) by Georg Simmel, the paper contends that the world is a networked space and there is a newfound arena in the theatre known as “cyberspace.” The researcher observed that the content uploaded is still online and visible to all people across the globe and the number of views keeps increasing both on the content as well as the subscribers of the channel. The YouTube page created for the research has about 99 subscribers representing the dedicated viewers, with the indigenous language of performance with English subtitle. The cyberspace will enhance the scientific and cross-cultural analysis of African performance, with the *Njingkook* experiment as a beacon, because it is online, researchers with interest outside the community can observe and make a scholarly analysis of the performance.

Keywords: Performing on the cyberspace, *Mupun Njingkook*, Storytelling, NS, Performance.

Storytelling Traditions and Performance

Since the beginning of time, people in all parts of the globe have woven words into a simple narration, bringing to life an event or series of events to share with others. In ancient societies long before the existence of books, television and movies, storytelling was an important part of basic human communication, entertainment and education. Storytelling is a potent tool for value system reorientation, morality, cultural preservation, development and sustainability of cultural heritage. Storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience. Everyone in most African traditional societies participated in formal and informal storytelling. Nzewi posits that "storytelling performance is a communally derived performance, it is not one person's creative genius, and it was integrated into the programme of its community corporate being" (18).

Awoonor submits that "storytelling originated due to collective action of the multitude and cannot be traced to individual influence of great men" (73). This

approach naturally plays down the authorship of storytelling emphasizing only its collective nature against individuals. Passing down from generation to generation, storytelling reflects the wisdom and knowledge of the early people. Furthermore, storytelling is not only restricted to indigenous Africans. Ingle writing on storytelling says that: this traditional medium (storytelling) is not merely a form of artistic expression but a way of expressing knowledge in a manner which is acceptable and functional. The poorest man in the land has access to his culture expressed either in the story, poems, song, proverbs, custom, ritual, rites or a variety of other ways characteristics of folk culture (29).

It means that, as a cultural expression, storytelling and other oral performance arts which emanate from the people's socio-cultural context serve as channels and vehicles for the dissemination of knowledge and development in society. Obadiogwu claims the significance of storytelling to the growing child in traditional African societies:

As a reservoir of the culture of social values, the major preoccupation of storytelling revolves around improving the moral health of society. It reinforces their beliefs, values, aspirations and worldview. Storytelling exists to entertain, educate, inform and criticize human behaviour to point out morally accepted values upon which the community is built; the story is didactic and serves as pedagogy to growing minds with the sole aim of moulding the participants into acceptable members of their communities. (151)

It means that the propagation of these values through storytelling is to create a seemingly harmonious environment for the community. Storytelling theatre is like a mirror because people know about who they are through stories- culture and worldview. As a traditional art form, the aim is to teach moral lessons to the growing child in order to make the child conform to the value system of society while also compelling the child into good relationship with other members of the community through socialization. In a variety of situations, storytelling fosters confidence through discovery, rehearsing appropriate ways to survive in the social environment- showing respect for elders, and entering public places, among others.

Research in this field has shown that, over the years, stories were told to both children and young adult because they were often seen as the transporters of the community's ideas. Whenever there were people there were stories, and it was those stories that connected people from different villages and communities. In the past, stories were shared by different tellers around the campfire. Storytellers travelled with traders as they moved with caravans across ancient lands, stories were told by travelling Bards and Minstrels including African Griots who travelled from village to village. Different cultures and situations create different expectations for the roles of a storyteller. Tsaku paints a picture of the *Eggon* situation thus:

The *Eggon* storyteller knows that his skill and artistry are determined by his imagination and relation to his audience. Based on that, he tries to transform a tale into a unique experience to ensure a successful performance with a lasting impact on the audience most times the performer of the story proceeds the

narration with a philosophical statement; "don't depend on too much beauty"
etc (110)

Tsaku maintains that "Another powerful technique is the exploitation of words, proverbs, and symbols and images drawn from human, natural and supernatural worlds. Other techniques include empathy, repetitive device, and onomatopoeia and flashback" (109). The tellers of tales were called many names such as Bards, Minstrels, and Griots, all meaning storytellers. Prince and Jackson note that: storytellers tell of the past people's history, customs and religions. They tell of the future, the dangers as well as the dreams. Some storytellers are more skilled than others at telling stories. What is often noticed is the difference in quality and style. The tribal storyteller was often the oldest man or woman in the village considered wise and important. This person not only could tell a story but could explain the meaning. Thus the storyteller was a powerful figure both in the history of storytelling and in the history of humankind (316). Storytelling theatre uses the narrative voice, and it is this voice that carries the momentum of the tale. The performer must be good at the mastery of the language of performance and should possess an effective voice that can charm the audience's sensation and emotions.

Also writing on the functionality of storytelling theatre, one can contend that it is a spontaneous unit of social process and a fault of everyone's experience in every human society; it is the reflection of one's experience and challenges. Furthermore, Akoporobaro corroborates this position when he posits that "Life is a story, and stories imitate life and life imitates stories, life reflects stories and stories reflect life. When life is over it is celebrated by stories" (58). It means that everything human beings do, from the day they are born to when they die is shrouded in stories, which shows that storytelling performances have been analysed and interpreted as a representation and reflection of social reality or as a kind of sociological model of society. The characters in the stories represent traits and personalities which people recognize and fear, the vices they abhor the follies they condemn and the virtues they esteem and uphold.

This is in line with the postulation of Turner that "Oral performance is a social activity that confronts problems and contradictions of social process, difficulties arising in the course of social life in communities" (94). The implication is that children and adults in the past had a great deal of general knowledge of their environment (world) which they gained through storytelling theatre which empowered them to understand and conquer their environment. All stories are centred on human beings and their social environment. A folktale in traditional Mupun allows the audience to reflect on life and its essence portrayed through the characters' odyssey. It is also a moment of self-reflection, stock-taking, self-appraisal and communal balancing. A storytelling performance seeks to call the community to question. To this end, Adichie in a video on Ted Talk.Com titled *The Danger of a Single Story* asserts that there is colouration between power and stories; she further explains that:

It is impossible to talk about a single story without talking about power. There is a word an *Igbo* word that I think about whenever I think about the power structure of the world and it is *Nkali*. It is a noun that loosely translates "to be

greater than another" Like our political and economic worlds, Stories too are defined by the principle of *Nkali*: How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it the definitive story of that person. (n.p)

This assertion argues that inasmuch as stories matter, stories have been used to dispose of and to malign, but in the same vein stories can break the dignity of a people. Stories can also repair that broken dignity. Stories in this sense have been used to empower and oppress, and to define social roles and responsibilities. For example, the head of a family, what is the role of a mother in a family? Can children eat meat or is it meant for the elders? To what extent can you be an honourable member of a clan? What is honour? Who is a man or a woman? Which family is strong in the community? Who controls the politics of the community before and now? In Achebe's *Arrow of God*, the Chief Priest of Ulu trying to account for the source and legitimacy of his powers narrates thus:

At that time ... when lizards were still in ones and twos, the whole people assembled and choose me to carry their new deity.

I said to them:

" Who am I to carry this fire on my head? A man who knows his anus is small does not swallow an *udala* seed. '

They said to me:

"Fear not. The man who sends a child to catch a shrew will also give him water to wash his hand: 'so be it.'" (70)

Answers to these questions of power and storytelling because the seat of the Ezeulu cannot be said to be gazetted in any official government document, the community would rely on the stories as told by many bards and that gives it legitimacy in time and space. Illah opines that stories carry what he termed as an "Encrypted Mosaic". This encrypted mosaic can be harmful or the contrary, but it defines the ideology passed on from generation to generation. Stories still perform a significant role in shaping the values and beliefs, actions and behaviour of the people from time to time, *Njingkook* in itself carries many themes which can point to the values held today by Mupun people worldwide.

The Space in a Cyberspace

Theatre is essentially a relationship between the performer, the spectator, and the space. Space in performance is essential hence, the works of Gay McAuley *Space in Performance Making Meaning in the Theatre* and Brook's, *The Space* underscore a point to this fact. Brook speaks of the theatre of the past and the present, and the changes, in its various forms while including the fictional places that are evoked also as forms of space for performance. Recently, with the development of information & communication technology (ICT), there seems to be a newfound space in theatre practice within the internet/ virtual space, referred to as 'the cyber space'. In this context, cyberspace is the notional environment in which communication over

computer networks occurs with the internet as an enabler in the digital age. Globally according to Africa Forbes, it is estimated that 4 billion people remain connected with about 525 to 800 million smartphone users in Africa is projected to rise in 2020 against 72 million users in 2013 (May 2016-volume 6 number 4).

Furthermore, the fourth Industrial Revolution ushered in the Internet of Things and big data with the year 2016 seen as the fourth industrial revolution. Historically, the first industrial revolution was the introduction of steam engine, the second was electricity and the third was electronics. Hopefully, the fourth comes with Robotics, 3D printing, and the fusion of physics and biology creating bio-manufactured materials and Nanotechnologies that are beginning to descend on the world changing the structure of society and life. In light of the above assertions, the Nigerian Entertainment and Media (E&M) industry has been on the rise and evolving even though with several challenges. For instance, filmmakers who are interested in telling African stories, in 2021 benefited when UNESCO teamed up with streaming giant Netflix to find and fund six short films “reimagining” folktales that premiered in 2022. Ben Amadasun, Netflix’s director of content in Africa, said:

Africa has a rich storytelling heritage and a wealth of folktales that have been passed down for generations. When you marry these very local stories with Africa’s emerging talent, there is no limit to fresh new stories to connect people with African cultures and bring the world that much closer to each other.

The dream of Netflix and UNESCO is to a large extent the significance of this paper. The paper shares the view that through the instrumentality of the newfound space-“Cyberspace,” African folktales can be performed, collected in videos and archived. Omoera agrees with this when he asserts that "There are so many untapped cultural, artistic, and economic potentials for Nigeria’s movie-making and entertainment industry in the ‘hinterlands’ which can further boost its ‘Unique Selling Point’ in the national and global areas" (259). This paper identified this newfound space in the domain of cyberspace driven by the internet. Currently, billions of performances are enjoyed using phone devices, computers and other smart gadgets. *Njingkook* performance is a collection of diverse storytelling traditions originating and evolving among the *Mupun*, originally passed down through generations by word of mouth based on their experiences and worldviews. It means folktale or story. For documentation and appreciation, the *Mupun* traditional storytelling performance was simulated, captured, edited and distributed to a virtual audience via YouTube and shared on Facebook, the experience is what this paper intends to document.

About the *Mupun* People?

Nigeria boasts of over 500 ethnic groups amongst which the *Mupun* people of Plateau State belong. *Mupun* as a term is composed of two phrases: *MU*, meaning "We" and "*PUN*" chase out of hiding. It is a term used by hunters when a game is chased out of its hiding place. A tradition of the *Jiblik* people has it that during their wars with the *Mwagavul* people, the latter discovered the hiding place of the former -laying ambush, *Mu Pun Mu*. This indicated that they had discovered their hiding place and intended to

flush them out (Danfulani and Fwatshak 6). The term *MU-PUN* could also denote "the thing of the father" or that which belongs to the father. The *Mupun* are found on the eastern edge of the Jos Plateau, Nigeria. The *Mupun*, like many other ethnic groups on the eastern part of Jos Plateau, speaks Chadic languages. Chadic-speaking neighbours of the *Mupun* include the Ngas, Mwangavul, Chakfem Tambes and Gung, Miship, Ron, Kofyar, Doemak, Mernyang, Jipal and a host of others. These groups trace their ancestry to the Middle East, and then to some areas of the Lake Chad Basin, down to the southern parts claimed by the ancient Kanem-Borno Empire. The implication of the Chadic relationship between Mupun and the others in the group cannot be underestimated because of many reasons ascribed to their heritage to the Kanem-Borno (Danfulani 28).

With the creation of Pankshin province in 1926, the Mupun area became known first as *Lankan* village and about 1922 and later *Lankan* district in 1934 (Danfulani and Fwatshak 7) predominantly found today in Pankshin south with a chiefdom and some part of Mangu local government area (LGA). The traditional title of the paramount chief is the "Mishkom." The *Mupun* Cultural Development Association (MUCDA) is a recent socio-cultural body that was established to unite Mupun across different villages and to advance both infrastructural and cultural development of the communities, this postcolonial initiative strategically unites the community through the annual *Vwang* festival. Apart from the *Vwang* festival which brings all villages together, other communities commemorates festivals like; Kagu-Larchwat, Jiblik- Pu'us kwat, Tokbet- TOCDA-day, Abwor Dyis- Tambes day and Kwat pas, Akong- Jilbang manshak festival, among others.

Settlements were clan-based. A household comprised a man, his wife/wives and children and their families. The household is called *Ngu lu* while the clan head is called *Pup lu*. The household is the smallest unit of the political, social and judicial structure. The larger unit is the village head. Most villages derived their names from geography, for instance, Asa derived from Saak –Stone traces on farms, *Asa* is on a sloppy terrain, which provided erosion control through terracing. *Abwor* village derived from *Bwor*-dust. *Jing* village from *Jing*- (red) loamy soil. And *Kagu* from *Gu*, cactus, which suggests the heavy use of cactus.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study adopts the Network Society (NS) theory as its theoretical anchorage. The NS was first coined by Georg Simmel in 1991 vis-à-vis political, social, economic, and cultural changes caused by networked, digital and communication technologies. Later, sociologist Manuel Castells popularised this theory in his different works with how information technology led to an alteration in the different political processes. In Castells' networked theory, he examined social movements and revolutions across different countries in 2012 as well as the analysis of social movements that took place between 2013 and 2014.

Castells tries to find the similarities and the triggers of these movements, as well as explicate the vital role played by digital technologies (namely, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter...etc.) in influencing change. Castells argues that the internet is not

a ‘physical instrument but a potent communication device that enables and spreads social movements (Mansour 15). The advancement in technology which births different social media pedestals gives an unusual avenue for social movements and ‘creative and performance artists to create a brand and earn money performing online. Naturally, social performances on the internet are not originated by technology, but technology is deployed-it is not just a tool but a platform, a space, socially constructed with its attendant gain and implication.

In Nigeria, like a social movement, young content creators dissatisfied with the old ways of making videos coupled with state policies on the media took the newfound cyberspace, popularizing social media with all sorts of content that government cannot control. Today, the movement has generated interest, a force globally and a creator of wealth to the teaming of unemployed young Nigerians made possible through the changes caused by networked, digital and communication technologies. The prospect of the market has generated debates in the government circle, with a variety of themes, the movement is influencing public opinion and shaping a new industry.

Research Methodology

For this paper, the qualitative research method is used. The researcher employs videography as a qualitative technique or tool. Videography refers to the process of capturing moving images on electronic media (e.g., videotape, direct-to-disk recording, or solid-state storage) and even streaming media. The researcher also employs the use of this technique to capture the performance and upload it on YouTube thereby creating a set of the viewer (virtual audience) who through the instrumentality of the video and the internet watch and appreciated the performance, also forming part of the focus groups because the platform of the YouTube permits raising questions which can be answered.

From Oral Performance to the Cyberspace

Tsaku and Ufyam in their study of *Eggon Ta Erkor* Performance titled “From Primary Orality to Secondary Orality: Internationalizing Eggon Ta Erkor Performance in the Age of Globalization” conclude that despite the challenges, losses and threats inherent in globalisation, there are also significant gains, opportunities and benefits the advent of globalisation has offered. It, therefore, becomes imperative for the *Eggon* people to key into these numerous benefits and opportunities provided to internationalise and promote their culture and indigenous performances across the globe” (88). Making a case for the *Eggon* traditional performance from its original face-to-face format into the digital format, Tsaku and Ufyam identified the television, video film format and the internet as key drivers of primary orality to secondary. Ostensibly, Omoera and Atuegbe did a similar thing in their “Packaging the Dramatic Contents of Igue Festival for National and International Audience: The Small Screen Option.” The gap, however, in these submissions is that they tend to be academic exercises of theorizing with experiment, hence, this study shall bridge the gap identified.

Globalization consists of processes that lead towards global interdependence and increased rapidity of exchange across vast distances. Globalization itself is quite new, but the actual process towards global interdependence and exchange started a century ago. By the definition above, "interdependence of nations" and "exchange across vast distances," the exchange in distance according to Mazrui is controlled by: I. Religion II. Technology III. Economy IV. Empire (rise metropolises). These have not necessarily acted separately, but often, have reinforced each other. And with the internet space, society is one in cyberspace. Here, we shall try to describe the process of capturing *Njingkook* from its primary space to the networked global spaces and the implications so far.

First Stage: Primary Space (Oral-Stage)

At this stage, the performance in the local community and the language of the performance take place, using the arena stage. The performer sits while the audience listens to the stories with mixed feelings, sometimes joy, and sometimes happiness. The introduction of the video camera captures the performance in detail.



Plate 1: above shows the performance in action, at the same time, the performance is captured using a video camera. This is the first stage in content creation.

Second Stage: Creating a YouTube Page

- ✓ Sign in to YouTube on a computer or mobile site.
- ✓ Click your profile picture. Create a channel.
- ✓ You'll be asked to create a channel.
- ✓ Check the details (with your Google Account name and photo) and confirm to create your channel.

Third Stage: Upload Content

- ✓ Open the YouTube app

- ✓ Tap “Create” and then upload a video
- ✓ Select the file you’d like to upload and tap NEXT

Note: If your video is 60 seconds or less and has a square or vertical aspect ratio, it will be uploaded as a ‘Short.’ (Optional) If your video is longer than 60 seconds and has a square or vertical aspect ratio, you can tap “Edit into a Short” to trim your video and upload it as a Short.

Note: If you close the upload experience before you finish choosing your settings, your video will be saved as a draft on your Content page.

Fourth Stage: Share Content

- ✓ You can copy the link or the share link to share the content with other people

Observations

1. The content uploaded is still online and visible to all people across the globe and the number of views keeps increasing both on the content as well as the subscribers of the channel. As it stands now, we have about 99 subscribers, who are now dedicated viewers.
2. The subtext in the English language gives room for other people outside *Mupun* to relate to the material online. While the original *Mupun* language of performance also is preserved for future references.



Plate 2: shows the details per number of subscribers, the video and how the subtext on the screen. It also shows that about 18 people liked the content.

In terms of viewership and feedback, the content had about 433 views within 845 days of upload. The implication certainly shows that there is a rise in the views

every day. The platform allows downloading the content and sharing, that's not inclusive of the number of views.

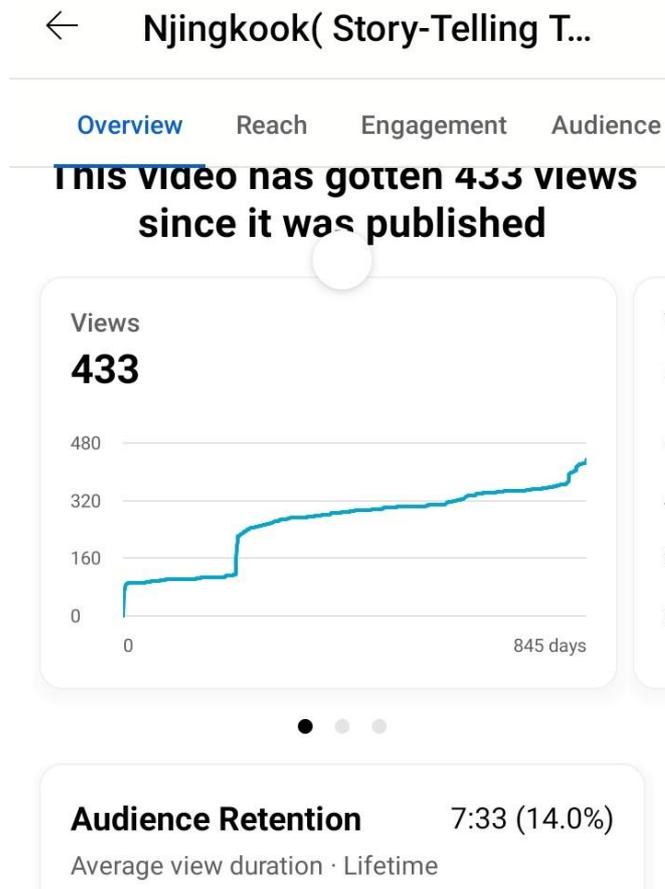


Plate 3: described the views in a graph. This shows the capacity of the platform to also analyse the activity on the platform and gives feedback.

Cyberspace will enhance the scientific and cross-cultural analysis of African performance like *Njingkook* because it is online researchers outside the community can observe and make a scholarly analysis of the performance

Conclusion

The paper examined the performance space in cyberspace, using the *Mupun* storytelling (*Njingkook*) performance. Regarding the new cyberspace, the researcher observed that the content uploaded is still online and visible to all people across the globe and the number of views keeps increasing both on the content as well as the subscribers of the channel. To this end, the study submits that societies are connected through the interface of computer networks with many performances on the internet space of social media around the clock. The cyberspace also creates a space for scientific observations and consumption of *Njingkook* traditional performance.

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