



BEYOND THE EMPTY SEATS: REIMAGINING THEATRE PATRONAGE AND ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY WEST AFRICAN PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

The current situation on the live theatre practice in West Africa is defined by the dramatic transformations in cultural consumption, economic pressures, and lightning technological changes. Although the region has a rich performance history, audience attendance is on the decline and the administrative systems are weak, which is posing a risk to the live performance spaces. The current paper explores how theatre patronage can be reinvigorated in Nigeria and the West African region at large in an interrelated approach to the arts administration, audience development, cultural policy and digital adaptation. Using research on African performance studies and institutional frameworks as developed by organisations including UNESCO and the National Council on Arts and Culture (NCAC), the article is based on the argument that a sustainable theatre practice relies on the ability to coordinate leadership, work with communities and context-responsive communication practices. The paper presents a synthesis of the findings of cultural festivals like the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) and university-based events like the Akwa Ibom State University Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST) using a qualitative descriptive approach to provide an understanding of how administrative choices influence audience participation. The research concludes that theatre management in West Africa needs to balance cultural memory and modern outreach by enhancing the audience loyalty in the long term and improving the institutional capacity. This paper by suggesting an integrated and locally-based model of theatre management can be said to add to the current discussions on cultural sustainability in the context of African performance

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Introduction

Historically theatre in West Africa has served as a crucial location of cultural expression, social negotiation and community memory. Theatrical

expression of the African societies long before the modern space of performance worked as a form of storytelling, which was embodied and through which communities expressed their values, histories and collective identities. J. A. Adedeji and Karin Barber

both stress the point that African performance traditions dissolve the line between aesthetics and social life, making theatrical performance a collective cultural experience and no longer a spectacle (Adedeji 14; Barber 27). However, this rich vibrancy notwithstanding, the practice of live theatre in Nigeria and the West Africa in general is progressively facing the challenge of dwindling spectatorship, fluctuating funding frameworks, and diluted administrative frameworks. These issues have been exacerbated over the past few decades as globalization, economic precarity and post-pandemic realities remake cultural participation. Now audiences experience both performance on digital platforms which ensure convenience and immediacy traditionally at the cost of the communal experience (UNESCO 2021).

Consequently, the issue of West African theatre today goes beyond the issue of production of art to the issue of relevance, access, and even the institutional vision. Sustainability of live performance cannot be any longer assumed as a natural outcome of cultural tradition, it should be fostered by conscious administrative and policy interventions. The complexity of the moment is reflected in the fact that, as it is observed by Lucy Iseyen, theater administrators exist in a paradoxical role as both caretakers of creativity and negotiators of existence in the fading cultural economies (45). The work of theatre administrators is to not only open the gateway to artistic expression but also to maintain institutions within limited resources and changing demands of the audience (Bassey and Ekeke). The drop in patronage of the theatre in Nigeria, therefore, cannot be blamed on just audience disinterest. Instead, it is a symptom of weaknesses in the arts management, cultural education and strategic planning system. It is necessary to reframe the role of theatre administration as a cultural mediation in order to reestablish the state of public involvement and institutional sustainability. The concept of cultural sustainability being based on community

involvement, education, and innovation is reinforced by the policy frameworks designed by organizations like UNESCO or the National Council of Arts and Culture (NCAC) of Nigeria.

Traditionally, African performance was more successful since it was interwoven with social life in everyday activities, and the audience was not a consumer of performance (Ogunbiyi xii). The development of contemporary audience, then, should no longer rely on the marketing strategy but focus on education and civic engagement, as well as policy alignment. Theatre cannot exist on cultural nostalgia, it needs to adapt to evolving demographics, digital communication habits, and cultural transformation in the city. Theatre programs and festivals in universities can provide valuable information on how this can be done. Programs like AKSUFEST, national forums like NAFEST show how the institutions of performance can integrate community involvement and creative training. These shows represent what Iseyen terms the practical interface between art and administration where performance plays the role of both educating and having a cultural dialogue and engagement with the people (48–49).

In these spaces, the new theatre practitioners acquire competence in administration and audiences rediscover live theatre as a collective cultural event. However, structural support and professional leadership is what determines the long-term effects of these initiatives (Bassey Bassey). According to reports by the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA), such problems as insufficient infrastructure, uneven financing, and a lack of audience research remain unsolved. Even creative theatre initiatives will be susceptible without harmonious administrative structures through which outcomes of creative production can be connected to policy and audience realities.

The paper presents the case that the practice of theatre patronage in West Africa needs a multidimensional strategy that places the audience

development in the core of the arts administration. Theatre administrators should not only be managers but also cultural interpreters who need to put bridges between artistic practice and institutional requirements as well as lived experiences of audiences.

Conceptualizing Audience Development and Theatre Patronage in Africa

The development of the audience in the African theatre discourse has passed the period of promotion and publicity to demonstrate more extensive issues of cultural sustainability and responsibility of the institution. In the ancient African performance sphere, the spectators had never been regarded as remote observers; the sense of theatre was based on participation. It is to create audiences, then, in this context, to maintain the social relationships upon which performance is culturally relevant. According to Adedeji, the African theatre lies in the fact that people are involved and respond directly and immediately to the situation (18). In this connection, the development of the audience cannot be separated in the context of cultural education and shared involvement.

In contemporary times, the problem of the audience development in Nigeria is closely related to the dimension of policy, availability and topicality. The film, online movie platforms, and entertainment which are currently emerging as the culture of leisure compete with the space of the urban theatres in cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Calabar. Even though this competition is conventionally centered on the taste of the audience, its origin is institutional constraints. Lucy Iseyen is sure that well-being of the theatre administration determines the continuity of theatre audience, and she notes that the task of a mediator of culture like the administrator is to introduce the performance to the sphere of the direct experience (49). The development of the audiences thus emerges as a managerial activity and as a

communicative practice, which entails research, empathy, and understanding of the situation.

The theatre patronage in Africa traditionally had been transferred to the communal sponsorship to state and institutional sponsored models in the postcolonial period. The governments made investments in the culture and nation-building through the national theatres and festivals (Ogunbiyi xv). Nevertheless, these structures were destroyed in the period of economic crunch and reduction of government expenditure since the late twentieth century. In its turn, the modern organizations, such as NCAC and SONTA, started to pay more attention to decentralization, education, and community outreach as more possible forms of extending the audience (NCAC 22; SONTA 11). These tactics recast audiences as consumers no longer but as cultural producers.

The reconceptualization is also supported with the help of the cultural participation schemes at UNESCO. Defining the term of participation as the process of access, contribution, and co-creation, the audiences are positioned by UNESCO as the participants of the cultural ecosystems (UNESCO 24). This perception is rather in compliance with the African traditions of performance that involves festivals, masquerade and the ritual dramas that involve the community. Being the administrators of the theatres, the implication is clear: the growth of the audience must be premised on the necessity to integrate both the inclusive programming and educational outreach, as well as make the digital tools accessible without losing the cultural specificity (Nnanake Ekeke). In such endeavors, education is significant. Besides, culture experiences among young adults define the degree of engagement at the long-run, and both SONTA and NCAC emphasize the fact in their awareness campaigns to popularize theatre in school curriculum (SONTA 13; NCAC 25).

When audiences encounter theatre as a space of learning and identity formation, participation becomes enduring rather than episodic. Iseyen's insistence that administrators must "create environments that humanize management and sustain creativity" reframes audience development as an ethical commitment to cultural service rather than a purely economic objective (47).

Administrative Leadership and Audience Engagement in Nigerian Theatre

The combination of both art and administration has always been involved in the leadership of the Nigerian theatre. The theatre administrator has a special position between operating and being a visionary. According to Iseyen, the theatre administrator is the person who opens the doors to others to see art but he seldom sees it (The Paradox of the Theatre Administrator 45). This contradiction characterizes the self-deprecating work of artistic production, a stewardship, which helps the institution continue to exist even as the audience loses sight of it. Effective leadership in theatre is thus beyond managerial efficiency and requires morality purpose, emotional intelligence and cultural empathy.

In the Nigerian context, leadership has developed in theatre, with the help of indigenous systems of power and the Western system of administration. According to Ogunbiyi's Drama and Theatre in Nigeria, the performance organizations that existed before colonialism depended in collective responsibility and not in hierarchical control and this approach has also been carried through the years informing the African leadership values (xvi). However, the institutional funding pressures, policy adherence, and globalization have brought bureaucratic strata into the theatre, which tends to water down the collaborative nature of theatre. In her discussion of what she calls the dilemma of the negotiator where the administrators are called upon to serve the interests of the artistic world against the

economic restraint, Lucy Iseyen calls on ethical leadership based on transparency (46 47). Leadership is therefore a juggle between an artistic inspiration and a practical coordination.

Both Adedeji (33) and Barber (38) believe that the African theatre is as vital as its leadership is, which can foster participation. In this respect leadership is performative; it focusses energy in mutual vision. Theatre scholars in Nigeria; Hubert Ogunde and Femi Osofisan, have shown that the leader has a role of mobilising collective creativity and not exercising authority. According to Iseyen, administrative leadership thrives whereby communication holds more power than coercion, collaboration than command (49). In doing so, this puts leadership in a participatory context, in line with the UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators, which makes inclusive governance one of the cultural sustainability indicators (UNESCO 19).

Audience interest comprises one of the essential aspects of this model of leadership. Administrators have to develop audiences and relationships with communities. Lack of leadership in outreach planning and research-based audience data is detected by NCAC in their National Festival of Arts and Culture Report (42). Theatre heads that are not connected with the needs of the audience may risk losing the same publics that keep their institutions afloat. To correct such a situation, Iseyen suggests the concept of the empathic management, which combines the concept of community feedback, social accountability, and responsive programming (50). Such empathy transforms management from a control mechanism into an ethical partnership between theatre and society.

The digital era also reinvents the leadership role. Since live audiences are going online, administrators will have to change to virtual engagement strategies. The documents, Re-Imagining Cultural Participation in Africa after COVID-19 (UNESCO 28) covers the benefits of virtual performances and live-streamed

events in increasing accessibility but also adds the management challenges. Today, in addition to production of arts, arts enthusiasts can manage digital communication, intellectual property and data security. Oduaran (87) submits that cultural leaders have been advised that without digital literacy, they are likely to be running theatres that have a fading audience. Within this backdrop, Iseyen affirms his saying that the real incentive of the administrator is the success of the entire performance, rather than his own visibility (52-53).

It is therefore safe to say that leadership in Nigerian theatre must evolve from authority to facilitation. Administrators who cultivate trust, foster collaboration, and integrate community values will sustain both audience loyalty and institutional legitimacy even as Adedeji reminds us, “the theatre survives by the leadership that interprets the people’s dream” (35). In this vision, leadership is not confined to office or title but emerges through shared responsibility, ethical transparency, and cultural stewardship.

Festivals, Community Participation, and Theatre Sustainability

Festivals hold a key role in the cultural life of Nigeria, as the focal point where artistry, community and continuation intermingle. They are not only entertainment events but ceremonies of celebration in which identity is confirmed and reinstated. Adedeji submits that, festivals have been defined to be archives of the memory of the people that is reenacted with dance and dramatics, which is a very fitting description that helps to support the idea that they preserve cultural memory across generations (71). In this perspective, festivals can be considered as a body of cultural continuity and not a single act of performance (Bassey Ekpe).

Lucy Iseyen places the festival administration in the framework of applied learning as she remarks that the festival offers practical administration space

wherein leaders can experiment and experiment with the skills of coordination, finance and audience involvement. This observation is highly correlated with the purposes of such university-based events as the Akwa Ibom State University Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST). A 2024 press release from the Directorate of information, Akwa Ibom State University describes the festival as a cultural innovation lab, that fuses the traditional performance with the aesthetics of the present in a manner that promotes intergenerational sharing. Through such festivals, communities reclaim a sense of ownership over their creative heritage, while institutions simultaneously strengthen leadership capacity and public visibility (Ekeke and Ekeke).

Festivals also play an economic role in the practice of theatre in addition to their cultural value. According to the National Council of Arts and Culture, events like NAFEST encourage tourism and inter-state cooperation and make performance a part of a larger development strategy (NCAC 2022, 38). Properly conducted, festivals create jobs and help in the survival of small-scale businesses, as well as reviving people's interest in live theatre. The significance of combining artistic objectives with collaborations with communities and industries is brought about by an argument by the author of this article Iseyen, who argues that financial sustainability in theatre is not attained by only selling tickets but also the cultural relevance and multi-sectoral collaboration (50-51). This stance is consistent with the Framework of Cultural Statistics offered by UNESCO, stating the necessity of diversified funding patterns based on local engagement and connections with the industry of creation (23).

The African practice of festivals still retains participation. African performance, according to Barber, is not spectated, it is experienced (41), and relates more to a participatory aesthetic that separates African theatre with more spectator-centred traditions. This collective focus promotes

inclusiveness where audiences are made the contributors and not consumers. According to the NCAC reports, the programming of the festival goes more and more in the direction of indicating youth and women performances, which stimulate the representation diversity and the processes of cultural transmission (NCAC 2022, 40). According to Oduaran, this interaction leads to lifelong learning and cultural confidence among the participants, which improves the educational benefit of festivals in society (84).

The recent advances in digital technology have further changed the administration of festivals. Lots of festival switched to hybrid mode during the COVID-19 period, relying on live streaming and digital archiving to engage diasporic and remote audiences. UNESCO recognizes that even though these practices increased access, they also created issues regarding the maintenance of authenticity of communal interaction (202, 31). Theatre administrators are then left to reach a fine balance between accessibility versus intimacy. Iseyen's submission that the administrator is the key to the theatre, offers his way to the audiences, artists and even employees, acquire a new metaphorical meaning: technologies need to open new possibilities of interaction, but not to degrade the communal presence that characterizes African performance.

Sustainability emerges most clearly when festivals align with cultural continuity, community ownership, and institutional learning. Both AKSUFEST and NAFEST illustrate the ways festivals may serve as a source of cultural diplomacy, professional training and administration development. They offer doable chances of developing competencies in logistics, budgeting, and marketing by maintaining creative experimentation. The postulation that the African theatre can continue to exist because of its periodical rejuvenation by means of communal celebration is as submitted by Adedeji also, the integration of administrative training and ethical leadership into the festival practice as proposed by Iseyen (52-53) will

help institutions to make sure that festivals will continue to be an artistic and an institutionally accountability.

Festivals represent a crucial convergence of performance, participation, and policy within Nigerian theatre. They sustain live performance by regenerating audiences, strengthening administrative capacity, and reinforcing collective identity. Within the Nigerian context, festivals thus extend beyond spectacle to become frameworks of cultural imagination, living theatres of continuity that reflect what UNESCO describes as "the cultural ecosystem of shared creativity" (27).

Policy, Funding, and Institutional Sustainability in West African Theatre

The sustainability of the theatre institutions in West Africa over time is directly associated with the power of cultural policy and good funding mechanisms. Governments within the region have since the post-independence era placed the performing arts as one of the means of cultural identity, social cohesion as well as international representation. This vision was officially defined in National Cultural Policy of 1988 in Nigeria, which stated the belief that culture is going to be the foundation of national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria 14). Nevertheless, cultural aspiration and policy implementation continue to be sharp decades after its implementation. Based on the observation of the National Council of Arts and Culture, despite the culture promotion remaining one of the dominant themes in the governmental discourse, the real funding allocation and proper policy implementation are still patchy (NCAC 39).

Lucy Iseyen describes such condition as an administrative precarity, when the institutions of theatre are so dependent on ad hoc subventions, individual leadership personalities, and temporary donor interventions (48-49). She claims that any meaningful sustainability must entail a radical break

in the sensational dependency to the institutional autonomy, with the help of financial literacy, strategic planning, and managerial innovation, in her word, “the true administrator is not only a custodian of culture but a strategist of continuity” (50). This point of view is consistent with the Culture 2030 Indicators developed by UNESCO that stresses the importance of measurable frameworks that would connect cultural investment with overall development objectives (16). In the absence of these planning mechanisms, most theatre organizations may remain temporary or seasonal organizations instead of being cultural institutions.

Funding challenges within Nigeria’s creative sector reflect broader regional patterns across West Africa. The Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists notes that less than five percent of the national cultural budgets are allocated to live theatre, so the institutions mostly rely on sales of the tickets and occasional sponsorships (SONTA 8). Iseyen avers that theatres which are maintained only on the basis of box-office money are still prone to economic shocks and argues in favor of the diversified financial frameworks that also encompass education, collaborations, and socially focused entrepreneurship (51). UNESCO also promotes decentralization of cultural funding and empowering communities to be direct funders of cultural production as a measure of enhancing resilience (21).

The frequency of hybrid funding and participatory administration is feasible as demonstrated by practical examples like the Akwa Ibom State University Festival of Performances (AKSUFEST). According to Akwa Ibom State University Directorate of Information, the AKSU festival is a joint effort that is facilitated by participation of students, local sponsorship, and institutional support. By integrating the educational goals with the community involvement, AKSUFEST will reduce its dependency on the unreliable state funding. The NCAC’s assessment of NAFEST likewise highlights the festival’s success in mobilizing both government

contributions and private-sector partnerships (41). Collectively, these instances reveal that sustainability is most possible where there is open management as it relates to involved funding plans.

The issue of policy coherence is still a pressing issue in Nigerian theatre. The fact that Ogunbiyi wrote that theatre in Nigeria is not lacking a vision but rather lacks a system is remarkably relevant even in the decades to come (xix). This structural vulnerability is in actuality expressed in the form of fragmented cultural policy, overlapping institutional responsibility, and weak accountability infrastructure. Oduaran supports this issue with his argument that external funding programs are unlikely to deliver sustainable change in the case of an absence of professional management education and clarity in the institutional apparatus (87). Although solutions to the research problem have been established by international organizations, including UNESCO, ECOWAS, and the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, policy frameworks that encourage data-driven planning and capacity building have to be localized to fit the realities of local administration and cultural priorities (CBAAC 55).

An opportunity could be seen in the process of improving the connection between cultural policy and higher education. The NCAC and SONTA have also presented some joint proposals to establish university-based centres of expertise in arts administration and policy research that would bridge the gap between the theoretical study and the practice in an institution (SONTA 10). These would contribute to the development of the new generation of theatre administrators which would be able to maneuver through these creative processes as well as bureaucratic systems. Iseyen underscores the importance of this integration, asserting that “administrative education is the backbone of sustainable theatre” (52). The integration of policy literacy and management training in theatre learning

prepares practitioners to operate as artists and also as cultural ambassadors and organizational executives.

Transparency and accountability are also important to institutional sustainability. UNESCO's Framework for Cultural Statistics defines sustainable cultural management as a system in which financial processes, human resources, and community engagement operate in measurable and coordinated ways (26). Sustainability according to this definition is a broader term that goes beyond the economic sphere to encompass trust and ethical responsibility among the artists, administrators and audiences. At the end, Iseyen concludes that "the administrator's reward lies not in control but in the continuity of the art he serves" (53). That continuity, which is based on sound policy, sound funding, and sound leadership, is the surest sign of institutional maturity and cultural sustainability.

Education, Professionalisation, and Audience Renewal

Theatre development and sustainability in Africa is still pegged on education. It offers the model of passing on performance knowledge and developing new audiences through a systematic learning, apprenticeship and research. As Adedeji explains, the institutionalization of African theatre as he puts it made African theatre what was once communal skill become an intellectual discipline (African Theatre and Performance 21). This revolution made universities and training centres the centre of artistic revival. Since the 1960s, the introduction of theatre departments in Ibadan, Nsukka, Calabar and recently, Akwa Ibom State University etc. gave the structure needed to promote systematic talent development and scholarly study.

According to the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA 12), these institutions not only create performers, but also create the administrators, researchers, and educators who continue the life of theatre in the public. Management, directing and

digital production are all combined into the curriculum so that the students are aware of both the creative and administrative aspects of the art. This development is facilitated by UNESCO's Culture 2030 Indicators (18), which states that cultural education should not only be based on artistic education but must be enhanced with managerial literacy as a means of reinforcing the creative economy.

Iseyen notes an important conceptual connection between professionalisation and education. She insists that education in theatre should be a shift in learning in classrooms to administrative mentorship (The Paradox of the Theatre Administrator 46) stating that the graduates should be knowledgeable in leadership, budgeting, and strategic communications to establish strong institutions. The fact that she insists that administrative literacy is the way to guarantee that artistry is not neglected by system (53) is evidence of the need to educate managers in art as an element of the creative process. Similarly, the National Festival of Arts and Culture Report by NCAC (45) also highlights the need to instill professional management classes into the cultural training sessions so that upcoming artists can see sustainability as not only an administrative but also an aesthetic aspiration.

Nigerian theatre is practiced professionally not just through the acquisition of a degree, but also through a lifelong learning process and capacity building. Oduaran (84) submits that, malleability is the best skill in an unstable creative process. Continuing education Workshops, conferences, and international residencies etc. organised by CBAAC and UNESCO ensure that practitioners are up to date with world trends. Again, the African Cultural Heritage Review (CBAAC 59) states that, a managerial competence and intercultural cooperation have been increased as a result of such initiatives throughout West Africa. These programs do not only provide theatre professionals with skills in marketing, fund raising,

and analysis of audiences but also develop the type of international networks that help to maintain the creative exchange.

The aspect of audience renewal cannot be separated from educational engagement. The traditional African context was a place where spectators learnt by doing; it was pedagogy and ritual. According to Barber, African performance is an educative activity by performance in the sense that it trains its audience on how to become part of it, and how to remember (The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics 49). To restore that participatory learning to contemporary realities, it is necessary to ensure that theatre education is implemented in the community programs and in schools. The audience development projects suggested by SONTA (14) and NCAC (48) involve direct contact with performance by outreach, touring productions, and youth festivals. These activities make sure that theatre is affordable and culturally relevant to the new generations.

The UNESCO's Framework of Cultural Statistics (24) still adds that cultural literacy is a prerequisite where societies that initiate arts appreciation early in life raise citizens who appreciate performance as belonging to a group. As community-based educational institutions, theatre organisations contribute to the reconstruction of audiences through the linking of the arts education with the civic education and the development of learning communities instead of spectacle consumers. Iseyen (47) adds that administrators should "create environments that humanize management and sustain creativity," a call for ethical leadership that views audience engagement as a moral duty rather than a marketing challenge.

Such a combination of education and professionalization is reflected in university-based festivals such as AKSUFEST. According to Akwa Ibom State University Directorate of Information (2024), defines festival as a living classroom where students learn via their hands-on experience in

production management, publicity, and intercultural teamwork. Such events, which, as NCAC (46) submits, combine pedagogy with community outreach, allow viewers to experience education in motion as the artistic process. These engagements deepen appreciation and convert casual spectators into informed supporters of live theatre.

And finally, the revival of theatre audiences in West Africa will rely on the ongoing education of artists, administrators and publics. As Adedeji concludes, the African theatre is not strong with preservation but with the ability to learn itself again (African Theatre and Performance 74). Education then becomes a metaphor and a process of sustainability: it reproduces knowledge, sharpens professionalism and brings the audience back to life as a participant of a living tradition.

Digital Technology and New Pathways for Theatre Patronage

Digital technology has greatly changed the form, reach, and financial opportunities of theatre practice in Africa. Although live performance is still based on physical presence and sharing of space, the digital innovation has increased the visibility and coverage of theatrical production in other locations than those used in the past. As it is highlighted by UNESCO in Re-Imagining Cultural Participation in Africa after COVID-19, technology has "redefined audience access, transforming geography from limitation to opportunity (30). This has been especially the case in Nigeria, as universities and community-based theatres have resorted to online streaming and social-media interactions to sustain patronage during and after the pandemic. However, there remains a fundamental question; how can theatre maintain the closeness of live performance and tap into the vast opportunities of the digital contribution?

This tension is well captured by Lucy Iseyen who says that "the administrator holds the key to the theatre, granting access to audiences, artists, and

staff" (50). This key in the digital age is not only in the physical space but also in the virtual space, digital archives, online networks that expose local performance cultures to the global audience. Theatre administrators are thus faced with the challenge of balancing between accessibility and authenticity. Sustainable digital participation should support the integrity of art and the inclusion of diverse individuals through the uptake of new technologies, as indicated by UNESCO's Culture 2030 Indicators (22). Negotiating this balance has become a priority to creative life and institutional survival to the theatre institutions in Nigeria and the rest of West Africa.

Digital technology serves the theatre sustainability in various critical ways especially in documentation, communication and audiences' analysis. According to the National Council of Arts and Culture, digital archiving allows festivals like NAFEST to document a performance that would otherwise be overlooked and enhance an institutional memory (NCAC 47). Similarly, in the report about AKSUFEST, Akwa Ibom State University Directorate of Information notes that digital documentation has established a permanent history of student ingenuity and community engagement because shows can be revisited for both artistic and scholarly purposes. These archival practices re-brand theatre as something that is more than a transient event into a new cultural asset.

The use of communication technologies has also changed the way theatres institutions interact with audiences. According to Oduaran, "digital competence has become a prerequisite for leadership in the performing arts" (85), signaling an increase in the significance of online literacy in the arts administration field. YouTube, Instagram, X (previously Twitter) are not only promotion sources but also interactive platforms where audiences are engaged in creating the life of theatre. The Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization also claims that the interaction with social media has become an

informal place of education and audience development (CBAAC 57). Administrators who identify these dynamics will be in a better position to build hybrid communities, which would support both face-to-face attendance and online interaction.

Despite these opportunities, the digital turn raises serious ethical and infrastructural issues. Lack of equal access to the internet, intellectual, and lack of adequate technical facilities are some of the challenges that inhibit most theatre institutions. SONTA reports that majority of the university-based theatres do not have the equipment and training to create high quality digital content (9). Iseyen cautions that "technology without ethics becomes spectacle without soul," and encourages administrators not to think of using digital tools as just a sign of visibility rather than meaningful inclusion (52-53). This argument resonates with that given by Barber as well as Ekeke's who argue that "African performance should not lose its participatory essence even in the mediated form of technology" (43).

Another area of prospective growth of theatre patronage is through digital education and research. There is a growing online workshop, webinar and hybrid conference engagement between African theatre practitioners and international scholars, collaborators and funding agencies. The UNESCO also highlights the significance of digital literacy to be incorporated as a component of the cultural education process, which is essential to future engagement and sustainability (27). In reaction, Nigerian institutions like Akwa Ibom State University have started to implement digital stage design, multimedia storytelling and online ticketing systems in their theatre programs. These changes are indicative of a wider change in focus to creative entrepreneurship, where students are trained to work within theatre as both an artistic and digital business.

Data analytics also enhances the capacity of administration, as the new insights into the behavior

of audiences are provided. Surveys, ticketing systems and social-media metrics enable theatre managers to gain a better idea of audience preferences and demographics, which is useful in supporting evidence-based programming. The NCAC supports the implementation of data systems within the festival planning as the tool of assessing cultural impact and enhancing accountability (49). According to Oduaran, observes that “Digital education and research represent another promising avenue for expanding theatre patronage” (88). These analytical instruments put theatre in a more solid position in the modern creative economy (Ekeke and Ekeke). However, the fundamentals of African theatre are still present, participatory, and experiences. UNESCO warns that exchanging the emotional immediacy of live performance may be achieved through the use of technology, but not by the same approach (33). Theatre administrators should thus seek hybrid solutions to reach more audience using digital platforms and maintain authenticity of live experiences. The aspect of the reflection by Iseyen that the real reward of the administrator is the success of all performances (53) acquires a new meaning here where the success now means that the technology should play the role of a tool to help the artists instead of being the one overshadowing them.

In all, digital technology provides African theatre with the possibilities to renew and grow in a way never been seen before. Handled in a strategic and ethical manner, it will widen access, enhance cultural heritage, and enhance institutional sustainability. The question of the modern theatre administrator is to work out how to utilize these tools without losing the communal pulse of performance. The future of theatre, then, lies neither in forgetting what it has been rooted in but in paraphrasing them through mindful digital invention, into formats that will reach out to audiences around the world, without losing its African identity (Iyorza and Iseyen).

Conclusion

Theatre practice in Nigeria and the West African region is currently at a perilous crossroads, with the artistic vitality having to be balanced with administrative vision and cultural attentiveness. As this paper has shown, live theatre sustainability does not only lie in creative perfection but in the frameworks that sustain the theatre, run, and report to viewers. Loss of patronage is not a symptom of cultural indifference but a signal of leadership and policy problems, as well as inability to connect with the audience.

This paper has presented an argument that arts patronage in the theatre needs a multidimensional and context-sensitive approach in order to revitalize the situation. Effective administrators act as cultural intermediaries who are in charge of both artistic integrity and institutional survival, and are responsible to the communities to which they belong. Festivals like the AKSUFEST and NAFEST are examples of how performance can operate simultaneously as cultural expression, educational and dialogue with the people when designed using open leadership and open participation systems.

Education and professionalisation becomes central to this discourse. Universities still need to keep on generating not just performers but administrators who are managerial, digital and policy literate. In the same vein, sustained professional development guarantees that theatre professionals are dynamic in the changing cultural economy and that policy coherence and diversified funding mechanisms is also crucial since theatre institutions cannot count on short-term grants or symbolic recognition. Digital technology has brought in new avenues of visibility, documentation, and audience development but it should be used in an ethical manner so as to retain the communal nature of African performance. A combination of live experience and digital outreach is the most feasible way to go. Finally, the sustainability of the theatre in West Africa is anchored on the capacity of the institutions to integrate the cultural memory and the modern

realities; when it is in harmony with administration, education, policy and audience interaction, then theatre would be able to reclaim its role as a strong, inclusive and socially significant art form.

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