

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ODOLU AND IFABO COMMUNITY THEATRES IN REVOLUTIONIZING RURAL EDUCATION IN KOGI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education is power and critical to individual and societal development. It fosters the growth of what is individual in each human being and harmonizes these potentials with other members of the society where the individuals belong. As a tool, education helps society to transmit and preserve its culture, norms, values and beliefs. Due to the prevalent of poverty in Odolu and Ifabo communities, where the study was undertaken, the study aims to interrogate the potentials of theatre, especially community theatre approach in revolutionizing rural education. This genre of theatre teaches community members to teach others, helps them deal with issues, and gives voice to the views of the silent and the marginal. The study adopts the qualitative research method in generating data for the study while also adopting the Sociocultural Theory as its theoretical framework. The study reveals that community theatre with its peculiar characteristics and techniques has the potentials to advance rural education.

Keywords: Education, revolutionize, community theatre, rural, participation

Introduction

From time immemorial, communities have taken practical roles in the education of their people. However, it is interesting to state that many communities have put in a lot of effort to ensure that the educational needs of their people at different levels are effectively and efficiently catered for. Before the intervention of the Western World, that is, the colonial era in Nigeria, an indigenous educational system was in place in different communities. Many other skills were imparted to children, youths, and adults to enable them to measure up to the responsibilities of life. The formal system which is Western education was introduced into Nigeria by Christian missionaries in the 19th century (Retour, 2008). The type of education to be offered by the Christian missionaries and their mode of operation was agreed upon by the influential persons in the various communities. In the same vein, the practice of theatre has been well established since the colonial days to date in Nigeria, and its capacity to not only entertain but to educate is not in doubt. Thus, the transformative power of theatre in education, according to Inyang (2016), has been widely acknowledged in academic discourse, particularly in rural settings where traditional teaching methods often fall short. Theatre intersects with education is both a pedagogical tool and a medium of empowerment, which fosters engagement, critical thinking, and cultural appreciation. Freire (2000) asserts that education should be an interactive process that encourages dialogue and participatory learning.

Community theatre, as participatory form of expression, provides such opportunities, particularly in marginalized and under-resourced communities. Theatre has long been recognized as an effective tool for education due to its ability to merge entertainment with learning. Boal (2000) argues that theatre can serve as a 'rehearsal for reality,' and offer the participants the opportunity to explore and understand complex social issues. In rural contexts, where access to resources and trained educators may be limited, theatre becomes a vital mechanism for addressing educational gaps. To this end, Omoera (2021) suggests that,

integrating theatre into educational practices can enhance learning by creating an interactive and culturally relevant environment.” Unlike conventional teaching methods, theatre can engage learners emotionally and cognitively, and foster a deeper connection to the subject matter. This approach is particularly effective in rural settings where education systems often fail to consider the unique cultural and social dynamics of the community. Community theatre is characterized by its focus on local participation and grassroots storytelling; it plays a critical role in addressing social issues and driving development. According to Epskamp (2006), community theatre is a form of participatory communication that empowers communities by allowing them to identify, discuss, and resolve their challenges collectively. This aligns with Freire's (2000) concept of problem-posing education, which encourages learners to critically engage with their realities and seek solutions. Typically, the primary purpose of theatre is to entertain as well as educate. It also has the power to inspire and unite people. To this end, A.B.C. Duruaku (2003) defined theatre as a place where dramatic performances take place or the art of putting a piece of dramatic work into action for people to watch. Community theatre conversely, is a distinct approach of theatre that deals directly with the rural communities who most often cannot afford the opportunity to participate in conventional theatre performances. It is a kind of theatre that is participatory in nature uses communal performance idioms and ostensibly democratizes decision making of the process of arriving at solutions to communal problems (Asigbo, 2005). It is a unique option to revolutionize education among the rural communities as it enables practitioners to take theatre to them rather than the other way round. To revolutionize theatre in this context is to dramatically and radically use the tools of Community theatre to conscientize, sensitize, and mobilize the target communities to help them solve their own problem(s). According to Colin (2022) the goal of revolutionizing is often to create positive change, drive progress, and shape the future. Therefore, the essence of using Community theatre in revolutionizing education will be our next discourse.

The Role and Benefits of Community Theatre in Rural Education

Education remains one of the most powerful tools for social and economic transformation, particularly in rural communities where access to quality education is often limited. The challenges facing rural education ranges from inadequate infrastructure and limited access to teaching resources to cultural and socio-economic barriers that hinder effective learning. In response to these challenges, Inyang (2016) reasons that, innovative and participatory approaches have emerged, with community theatre playing a significant role in fostering learning, critical thinking, and social awareness. Prentki and Preston (2009) argue that, community theatre acts as a catalyst for social change by fostering dialogue and collaboration among diverse groups. In rural education, this method has proven particularly effective in addressing issues such as gender inequality, health awareness, and youth development. For instance, the Odolu community in Kogi State of Nigeria theatre experience (2021) demonstrates how community theatre can illuminate critical issues like teenage pregnancy and inadequate educational infrastructure, calling for collective action.

Rural education faces unique challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, untrained teachers, and cultural barriers to learning. According to Epskamp (2006), these challenges are aggravated by a lack of community involvement in the educational process. Many rural schools operate in isolation from their cultural contexts, which results in a disconnection between the curriculum and the life experiences of the students. Theatre provides an opportunity to bridge this gap by incorporating local narratives, customs, and languages into educational practices. The integration of theatre into rural education can also

address socio-cultural issues such as early marriages and child labour, which often hinder educational attainment in these communities. By creating a platform for dialogue and collaboration, theatre empowers communities to take ownership of their educational development.

On the other hand, rural education presents significant opportunities for innovation and community-led development. Boal's (2000) "Theatre of the Oppressed" shows how participatory drama can transform passive learners into active participants, and foster a sense of agency and self-worth. Participatory drama, a hallmark of community theatre, involves the active engagement of community members in the creative process. According to Omoera (2021), this approach is particularly effective in rural settings where traditional methods of communication and learning dominate. Participatory drama allows communities to explore their challenges and envision solutions in a safe and collaborative space. In their research, Prentki and Preston (2009) argue that participatory drama fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills by encouraging participants to engage with real-life scenarios. This was evident in the Ofabo experience in Kogi State of Nigeria, where community members were actively involved in developing and performing dramas that addressed pressing issues such as healthcare and water scarcity. Through this process, participants can gain a deeper understanding of their challenges and also develop a collective commitment to addressing them. Moreover, participatory drama has the potential to transform rural education by making it more inclusive and culturally relevant. The use of local languages, customs, and storytelling techniques in participatory drama fosters a sense of identity and pride among learners and enhances their motivation to engage with educational content. This is in line with Freire's (2000) vision of education as a process of liberation, where learners are empowered to take control of their development.

Understanding the Impact of Community Theatre in Education

Community theatre has increasingly become an essential tool in education, serving as a platform for social engagement, participatory learning, and the development of critical consciousness. Scholars argue that community theatre fosters education by facilitating dialogue, engaging emotions, and empowering marginalized voices (Boal, 1979; Inyang, 2016). The foundation of community theatre lies in its ability to merge artistic expression with social engagement. Theatre theorists such as Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal emphasize that theatre should not merely entertain but should provoke reflection and inspire action (Boal, 1998). In the same vein, Inyang (2016) notes that community theatre serves as a mechanism for sensitization and mobilization, making it a valuable educational tool in diverse contexts. The theory of Theatre for Development (TfD) further supports the notion that theatre can be instrumental in facilitating community learning, particularly in rural and marginalized settings. Community theatre in education is also linked to Paulo Freire's (2022) philosophy, pedagogy and practice of the oppressed, which advocates for participatory learning where students actively engage in knowledge production. Traditionally, theatre should be a participatory process, allowing individuals to explore their creativity while promoting intellectual and emotional growth. These perspectives align with Inyang's (2016) assertion that community theatre be inclusive and allow participants to develop their narratives based on lived experiences. Lewandowska (2023) re-echoes this idea that, active theatre participation significantly improved participants' empathic abilities, social communication, tolerance, and social interactions, with the largest pooled effect size for social communication. Theatre-in-education particularly uses interactive theatre/drama practices to help aid the educational process (Robson, 2018). This underscores the fact that

community theatre enhances education by engaging participants in interactive learning processes. This method enables students to explore social issues, develop critical thinking skills, and cultivate empathy.

Research indicates that theatre-based learning facilitates a deeper understanding of the subject matter by allowing students to embody different perspectives and explore complex narratives. Barlow & Skidmore (2025) posit that, Community theatre fosters a community for everyone for everyone involved by creating bonds between actor, crew members, and theatre leadership. One significant aspect of community theatre is its ability to integrate multiple forms of learning, including verbal, visual, and kinesthetic elements. Inyang (2016) discusses how community theatre projects in Cameroon successfully engaged local populations in environmental conservation efforts, demonstrating that theatre can serve as an educational platform beyond traditional classroom settings. Moreover, Boal's (2000) concept of the "spect-actor" suggests that audiences should not remain passive observers but should actively engage in performances to explore solutions to real-world problems. The concept "spect-actor" is derived from the words "spectator" and "actor." Boal believes that after Community Theatre experience, the participants would no longer be mere observers but become immersed, active, and have ownership of the theatre project. This approach is in line with the principles of experiential learning, where students learn through direct experience rather than rote memorization (Kershaw, 2019). In educational settings, this model fosters agency and encourages learners to become proactive problem-solvers. This model will be fully discussed underneath.

Methodological Approaches in Community Theatre Education

The effectiveness of community theatre in education largely depends on the methodologies employed. Inyang (2016) identifies two primary approaches: script-based performances and improvisational theatre. While script-based performances allow for structured storytelling, improvisational theatre encourages spontaneity which makes it more adaptable to community needs. A notable example from Inyang's (2016) study is the use of participatory theatre in environmental education, where performances were developed through focus group discussions, community meetings, and informal dialogues. This method ensured that the plays reflected the community's concerns and cultural context. Additionally, participatory theatre methodologies often incorporate forum theatre, where audience members intervene in performances to propose alternative resolutions to presented conflicts (Boal, 2006). Participation is a key component of community development. It is an informed, autonomous and meaningful involvement of a community in influencing decision making and action. It is also about providing meaningful structures that allow individuals to direct their energies toward communal interest. Encourages the 'bottom-up' approach to development which enables community members to actively partake in a programme or project necessary to improve their standard of living from its conception to the execution. This form of theatre involves critical engagement and allows participants to explore different perspectives, and makes it a valuable educational tool.

Challenges in Implementing Community Theatre in Education

Despite its numerous benefits, community theatre faces several challenges in educational contexts. One of the primary obstacles is securing funding for theatre initiatives (Inyang, 2016). Unlike conventional educational programmes, theatre-based learning often requires resources for training, production, and logistical support. Erven (2001) notes that, "funding is more readily available when theatre projects align with broader community development

goals, such as health education or environmental conservation.” Another challenge is the lack of political support for community theatre initiatives. Inyang (2016) recounts instances where theatre projects faced resistance from local authorities who perceived them as politically subversive. This challenge aligns with Boal’s (1998) observation that theatre can be a powerful tool for social critique, often making it a target for censorship.

Community theatre practitioners must carefully navigate cultural sensitivities to ensure that their performances resonate meaningfully with local audiences. As Inyang (2016) observes, the success of community-based theatre projects often hinges on respecting traditional and political institutions, even while subtly advocating for necessary social reforms. Achieving this delicate balance is essential for the long-term sustainability of such initiatives. This dynamic is exemplified by the 2021 Odolu and 2022 Ofabo Community Theatre Initiatives carried out in Kogi State. These projects reflect the transformative potential of theatre in addressing community-specific challenges and fostering grassroots participation. Both initiatives were executed by Theatre Arts students from Kogi State University and served as platforms for education, dialogue, and collective action. Situated in rural parts of Kogi State, Odolu and Ofabo are characterized by inadequate educational infrastructure, limited access to healthcare, and pressing socio-cultural issues such as teenage pregnancy. These conditions provided fertile ground for theatre interventions aimed at promoting sustainable development and community empowerment. The Odolu Community Theatre Initiative, conducted over a ten-day period, followed a structured methodology that included initial visits, data gathering, scenario development, live performances, and post-performance discussions. The performance addressed three key areas: education, healthcare, and electricity. The play highlighted the community’s concerns regarding a lack of qualified teachers and poor learning environments, reflecting a growing discontent with the declining standard of education. It also dramatized the consequences of limited healthcare access, particularly the dangers of self-medication and the absence of professional medical personnel. Electricity shortages were another central theme, as the lack of reliable power supply negatively impacted business operations, educational pursuits, and general quality of life.

The impact of the Odolu project was significant. The participatory nature of the performance encouraged audience involvement, with many community members actively contributing suggestions during the post-performance discussions. Local leaders took note of the issues raised and pledged to advocate for improvements in education and health services. The event also inspired a renewed sense of collective responsibility among the youth, motivating them to take active roles in addressing local problems. Encouraged by the outcomes in Odolu, a similar initiative was launched in Ofabo in 2022. While the structure mirrored that of the Odolu project, the Ofabo performance placed greater emphasis on social issues affecting young people. Central themes included teenage pregnancy, water scarcity, and economic hardship. One particularly compelling performance told the story of a young girl who became pregnant due to the lack of sex education, sparking open conversations around reproductive health and the need for such education in local schools. Another performance focused on the daily struggles of fetching water from unsafe and distant sources, which led to discussions on the urgent need for boreholes and other water infrastructure. Economic challenges were also addressed, particularly the struggles of small-scale traders, with calls for market expansion and improved economic opportunities.

The community’s response in Ofabo was equally positive. The performance on teenage pregnancy prompted interest in developing school-based sex education programs. The dramatization of water scarcity captured the attention of local government representatives, who began to consider potential infrastructural solutions. Additionally, the

economic themes inspired local traders to form cooperative groups as a means of enhancing their business resilience and financial security. A comparative analysis of the Odolu and Ofabo initiatives reveals both similarities and distinctions. While both projects adopted a participatory, research-driven approach, the thematic focus differed based on the specific needs of each community. Odolu's performance centered largely on infrastructural deficiencies, whereas Ofabo's focused more on social and personal issues. Notably, the Ofabo project demonstrated a deeper level of community involvement, especially in the development of the performance script. This aligns with Boal's (1998) concept of the "spect-actor," where community members shift from passive spectators to active participants in the theatre-making process. In both communities, theatre proved to be a powerful tool for stimulating critical reflection, enhancing social cohesion, and catalyzing local action.

Despite these successes, the projects encountered notable challenges. Financial constraints limited the ability to sustain long-term community engagement. Some sensitive topics, particularly teenage pregnancy, initially faced resistance from traditional leaders and required diplomatic engagement to gain approval. Additionally, sustainability remained a major concern, as most community theatre interventions lack structured follow-up mechanisms to reinforce and monitor their long-term impact. Several important lessons emerged from these experiences. First, early and meaningful engagement with community leaders and members is vital for securing local buy-in and participation. Second, performances should not merely highlight problems but must also propose practical, community-driven solutions. Lastly, for such initiatives to have lasting impact there must be follow-up strategies that enable ongoing dialogue, support, and evaluation. Hence, the Odolu and Ofabo Community Theatre Initiatives stand as compelling examples of how participatory theatre can contribute to rural development. Through dramatization, these projects effectively addressed critical social issues, stimulated dialogue, and empowered community members to take ownership of their collective challenges and aspirations.

Ethical Considerations in Community Theatre for Education

One of the primary ethical concerns in community theatre is ensuring informed consent and active participation. Inyang (2016) emphasizes that theatre should be "of the community, by the community, and for the community," meaning that participants should not only be involved in performances but also in the decision-making process. Ethical theatre practice requires that community members fully understand the purpose of the performance, its potential impact, and their roles within it. Participatory theatre should empower local voices rather than impose external narratives. In some cases, however, community members may feel coerced into participation due to social pressures or financial incentives (Erven, 2001). This raises ethical questions about whether participation is truly voluntary or if external forces shape individuals' involvement. To address this concern, theatre practitioners should ensure that participation is based on informed consent, where individuals are given clear information about the project, their rights, and the option to withdraw at any stage without consequences (Margoluis & Salafsky, 1998).

Representation and Cultural Sensitivity: Ethical concerns also emerge in how community theatre represents cultural narratives and identities. Inyang (2016) discusses how theatre can serve as a platform for community expression but warns against misrepresentation or the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. When external facilitators design community theatre performances, there is a risk that they may impose their interpretations of local issues rather than authentically representing the community's experiences. To mitigate this risk, theatre practitioners should engage in collaborative script development and ensure that performances

reflect the voices and concerns of the community (Boal, 1979). Inyang (2016) highlights an instance where local authorities resisted a performance due to its perceived political undertones, emphasizing the need for careful navigation of cultural and political landscapes. Practitioners must balance artistic freedom with respect for local customs, ensuring that performances foster dialogue rather than division.

Power Dynamics and Ethical Facilitation: Another significant ethical consideration in community theatre for education is the power dynamics between facilitators, participants, and audiences. Boal (2006) warns that theatre, if not properly managed, can become a tool of manipulation rather than empowerment. Similarly, Inyang (2016) observes that, “external sponsors or facilitators may exert undue influence over the content of performances, shaping narratives to align with their agendas rather than addressing the genuine concerns of the community.” For instance, some organizations fund theatre initiatives with the expectation that performances will promote specific messages, such as conservation or health education (Inyang, 2016). While these messages may be beneficial, ethical dilemmas arise if they do not align with the community’s needs or if they silence alternative perspectives. Theatre practitioners must therefore ensure that their work is driven by the community’s priorities rather than external directives.

Political Sensitivities and Censorship: Community theatre often addresses pressing social issues, making it inherently political. However, political sensitivities can lead to ethical challenges, particularly in environments where freedom of expression is restricted. Inyang (2016) recounts instances where authorities viewed community theatre as a subversive activity, leading to censorship or even threats against practitioners. Theatre should challenge oppression and inspire social change, but in politically volatile regions, this can place performers and audiences at risk (Boal, 2006). Ethical theatre practice requires a careful assessment of potential dangers and the implementation of strategies to protect participants. This may include obtaining legal permissions, engaging in dialogue with local authorities, or using allegory and symbolism to convey messages subtly. Moreover, ethical dilemmas arise when community theatre is used to promote government agendas. If theatre becomes a propaganda tool rather than a space for critical dialogue, it loses its ethical integrity.

Emotional and Psychological Well-being of Participants: Community theatre can be emotionally powerful, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as trauma, violence, or discrimination. Inyang (2016) notes that, “theatre engages audiences on an emotional level, sometimes leading to intense reactions.” While this can be strength, it also raises ethical concerns regarding the psychological well-being of participants. Bentley & Charles (2025) emphasizes that facilitators have a responsibility to create a safe space where participants feel supported. This includes providing adequate debriefing sessions after performances, especially when dealing with heavy themes. Additionally, theatre practitioners should be trained in trauma-informed approaches to ensure that they do not inadvertently re-traumatize participants or audiences. Ethical concerns also arise when children or other vulnerable groups participate in community theatre. Special precautions should be taken to protect their well-being, including obtaining parental consent, ensuring age-appropriate content, and providing emotional support. Practitioners must recognize that while theatre can be a transformative educational tool, it must be implemented with sensitivity to participants’ emotional limits.

Sustainability and Long-Term Impact: Ethical considerations extend beyond the immediate performance to the long-term impact of community theatre initiatives. Inyang

(2016) argues that, “many theatre projects are short-lived due to funding constraints, leaving communities without continued support.” Ethical theatre practice requires a commitment to sustainability, ensuring that projects do not create dependency but instead build local capacity. One approach is to train community members to facilitate their theatre projects, allowing them to continue using theatre as an educational tool independently (Erven, 2001). Additionally, funding models should prioritize long-term investment rather than short-term interventions. Margoluis and Salafsky (1998) argue that monitoring and evaluation should be an integral part of community theatre programs to assess their effectiveness and adapt to evolving community needs.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The study interrogates the impact of Community Theatre in rural education and found it to be appropriate and beneficial for social engagement with an informed consent and active participation of the community members, who are the most important stakeholder in the project. The cultural sensibilities of the people were not taken for granted because it is the nucleus through which the message is conveyed, the people’s language and idioms. Community theatre also addresses pressing, socio-cultural, economic as well as political issues which ultimately bring positive change and sustainable development to the people. Sustainability enhances capacity building. Training local facilitators and educators in theatre techniques enables them to incorporate drama into their teaching methodologies. Additionally, digital platforms can be leveraged to document and disseminate community theatre performances, expanding their reach and impact. Moreover, continuous monitoring and evaluation are necessary to assess the effectiveness of community theatre in education. There is the need for systematic data collection to measure audience engagement, behavioral changes, and long-term community impact. This aligns with Margoluis and Salafsky’s recommendation that educational interventions should include clear assessment metrics to ensure their efficacy. The major challenges to the study, however, are funding and cultural sensibilities of the people. Limited funding has always been a great challenge to Community theatre projects which most often than not adversely affect the outcome of the project. This also limits the long term engagement with the community members. On the other hand, the cultural sensibilities of the people were of much concern to the facilitators in order to avoid conflict of interest or stepping on their toes.

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