Towards a Nigerian Theory of Directing: Synthesizing Indigenous Performance Aesthetics with Postcolonial Dramaturgy

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Abstract— *This research proposes a theoretical framework for a distinctly Nigerian approach to theatre direction, arguing for the conscious synthesis of indigenous Nigerian performance aesthetics with postcolonial dramaturgical strategies. It critiques the continued dominance of Western directorial models—rooted in proscenium arch conventions, psychological realism, and Aristotelian structures—as a lingering effect of cultural colonialism that fails to fully express the Nigerian worldview. The study posits that a decolonized Nigerian theory of directing must instead be architected from the principles found in the nation's rich performance traditions, such as Yoruba Alárìnjó, Igbo Mmanwu, and Hausa Wassan Kara. These principles include a non-linear narrative structure, the intimate and participatory relationship between performer and spectator, the integral fusion of music, dance, and masquerade with text, and the spiritual dimension of performance. By engaging with postcolonial theory (Fanon, Bhabha) and African theatrical paradigms (Soyinka's "Fourth Stage," Ngũgĩ's "Decolonising the Mind"), this paper constructs a new directorial lexicon. The ultimate aim is to move beyond mere adaptation and establish an authentic, foundational theory that empowers Nigerian directors to create work that is philosophically, culturally, and aesthetically rooted in their own heritage.*

Keywords: Nigerian Theatre Direction; Decolonizing Dramaturgy; Indigenous Performance Aesthetics; Postcolonial Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Nigerian theatre is a vibrant and complex tapestry, woven from threads of ancient performance traditions and the enduring legacy of colonial importation (Muritala, 2025). Since the formal introduction of Western-style proscenium theatre, the practice of direction in Nigeria has largely operated within a borrowed paradigm, one rooted in European aesthetic values and dramaturgical structures (Umoh, 2015; Anwana & Equere, 2022; Berebon, 2025). While this model has produced significant works and talented practitioners, a critical schism persists between the form of the theatre being produced and the indigenous cultural content it often seeks to express.

This paper argues for the urgent need to develop a conscious, theoretical framework for a distinctly Nigerian approach to theatre direction. This framework must move beyond the mere adaptation of Nigerian stories into Western forms and instead initiate a radical synthesis of indigenous Nigerian performance aesthetics with the critical strategies of postcolonial dramaturgy (Ayibam, 2024a). The current dominant model, which often treats indigenous elements as "flavour" added to a fundamentally European structure, is a lingering epistemic violence that continues to centre coloniality in African artistic expression (Ngũgĩ, 1986).

The objective of this research is not to discard the technical aspects of directing learned from global traditions but to subvert and decolonize the foundational principles upon which they are built. It seeks to answer a central question: How can Nigerian directors construct a directorial philosophy that is authentically rooted in the aesthetic principles, cosmological understandings, and participatory ethos of Nigeria's diverse performance heritage, thereby achieving a true postcolonial theatrical expression?

The significance of this endeavour lies in its potential to liberate Nigerian theatrical practice from its Eurocentric moorings. A Nigerian theory of directing would empower artists to create work that is not only *about* Nigeria but is also structurally and philosophically *of* Nigeria. It is a project of self-definition, crucial for the continued evolution and relevance of theatre in a postcolonial context.

This paper will proceed by first excavating and critiquing the historical foundations of the current directorial models in use, tracing their colonial genealogy. It will then delve into the rich reservoir of indigenous Nigerian performance forms, extracting key aesthetic principles that can serve as pillars for a new directorial theory. The theoretical lens of postcolonial thought, particularly the works of Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha, will provide the critical tools for deconstruction and reconstruction.

Furthermore, the paper will analyze the work of pioneering Nigerian theatre practitioners like Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, and others who, though perhaps not theoretical articulators, were instinctive practitioners of this synthesis. Their productions serve as crucial case studies and historical precedents. Finally, the paper

will propose concrete dramaturgical strategies for the contemporary director, culminating in a call for a reimagined directorial pedagogy that can nurture this new, authentic vision for Nigerian theatre.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE COLONIAL IMPRINT ON NIGERIAN THEATRE PRACTICE

The contemporary practice of theatre direction in Nigeria cannot be understood without first examining the historical forces that shaped its inception. Prior to the 19th century, performance in the geographical space now known as Nigeria was not a discrete "art form" but an integrated aspect of social, religious, and communal life. These performances—whether the Yoruba Alárìnjó, the Igbo Mmanwu masquerade festivities, or the Hausa Wassan Kara—were community-owned, ritualistic, and followed organic structures of organization led by elders, priests, or master artists, not a single "director" in the modern sense (Adedeji, 1971).

The formal introduction of European-style theatre is inextricably linked to the colonial project. Missionaries and colonial administrators established schools and colleges where Shakespeare and English melodramas were performed as a tool for cultural assimilation and to demonstrate "civilized" behavior (Ayibam, 2024b; Ayibam, 2024c). The proscenium arch stage, with its rigid separation between performers and a silent, passive audience, was a physical and symbolic imposition of a foreign worldview (Crow & Banfield, 1996). This model championed values of psychological realism, the primacy of the written text, and the director as the ultimate authoritarian interpreter—the "auteur."

The establishment of university theatre departments and arts councils in the post-independence era further institutionalized these Eurocentric models (wa Thiongo & Amkpa, 2004). The curriculum was, and in many cases still is, heavily reliant on Western theatre history, Stanislavskian acting techniques, and European dramaturgy. As Ogunba (1978) observes, this created a generation of artists trained to excel within a foreign aesthetic framework, often at the expense of deep knowledge of their own performance traditions. The director emerged as a figure trained to analyze text psychologically, block movement on a box set, and motivate actors towards naturalistic behaviour.

This historical trajectory has resulted in a persistent cultural dissonance. Many Nigerian plays, even those written by seminal figures like Wole Soyinka or Ola Rotimi, are often directed and produced within a staging grammar that is fundamentally European. The stories are Nigerian, but the container remains foreign. This creates an inherent tension, a schism that a Nigerian theory of directing seeks to resolve by questioning the very container itself.

The legacy is not merely architectural or pedagogical; it is epistemological. It privileges a Cartesian mind-body split over the holistic integration of spirit, mind, and body found in indigenous performances. It values individual genius over communal creation, and written text over oral improvisation. A postcolonial dramaturgy must begin by recognizing and deconstructing this deeply embedded colonial imprint on the very mindset of the director.

The work of early Nigerian popular theatre practitioners like Hubert Ogunde was a first wave of resistance against this pure importation. Starting with his first opera, *The Garden of Eden* (1944), Ogunde began to hybridize forms, incorporating Yoruba music, dance, and narrative motifs into a loose Western structure. While his work was revolutionary for its time, it often remained a fusion where the underlying directorial structure was still recognizably Western, demonstrating the difficulty of a complete break.

Therefore, the historical context presents a clear challenge: the default mode of directorial practice in Nigeria is one that was imposed and institutionalized. Developing an authentic theory requires a deliberate archaeological project to recover pre-colonial aesthetic values and a conscious effort to dismantle the hegemony of the colonial model, not through rejection, but through a critical and strategic synthesis.

PILLARS OF INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS

To construct a new theoretical framework, one must first identify the core aesthetic principles that characterize traditional Nigerian performances. These principles, diverse across ethnic groups yet often sharing common philosophies, offer a rich repository of alternative staging values that stand in stark contrast to the Western model.

The first and most crucial pillar is the **non-linear, integrated narrative structure**. Unlike the Aristotelian model of cause-and-effect leading to a climax and resolution, many indigenous forms employ cyclical, episodic, or ritualistic structures (Schasché, 2010). Stories are not simply told but are enacted through a combination of song, dance, incantation, and dialogue without a clear hierarchy among these elements. The narrative progression is often spiritual or symbolic rather than purely psychological (Gotrick, 1984).

Secondly, the **performer-audience relationship** is fundamentally participatory and fluid. The "fourth wall" is a non-existent concept in performances like the Alárìnjó or the Urhobo Udje, where call-and-response, direct address, and active audience involvement are central to the event's meaning and efficacy. The audience is a co-creator, and the energy of the performance is a dialogue, not a monologue. The space is often shared or

non-defined, breaking down the physical and psychological barrier of the proscenium arch.

A third pillar is the **holistic fusion of artistic elements**. Music, dance, drumming, costume, masquerade, and text are not separate components added to illustrate a story; they are inextricably linked and often inseparable. The talking drum (*gangan*) is a narrator, the masquerade (Mmanwu) is a spiritual embodiment, and the dance is a language in itself. This challenges the director used to privileging the spoken word and treating other elements as supplementary "spectacle."

The fourth pillar is the **spiritual and ritual dimension**. Much of traditional performance is not for entertainment alone but serves a ritual purpose: to commune with ancestors, to mark a rite of passage, to celebrate a deity, or to cleanse the community. This imbues the performance with a sacredness and a functional purpose that transcends aesthetic enjoyment. Soyinka (1976) conceptualized this as the "Fourth Stage," a metaphysical realm that the performance accesses, connecting the living, the dead, and the unborn.

The fifth pillar is the use of **heightened language, symbolism, and metaphor**. Language is often poetic, proverbial, and incantatory, not naturalistic. Costumes and masks are not attempts to resemble reality but are symbolic representations of archetypes, spirits, or social commentaries. The aesthetic is presentational and expressive rather than representational and imitative.

The sixth pillar is **communal authorship**. While there are master artists and trainers, the repertoire is often traditional and owned by the community. The creative process is more collaborative and less hierarchical than the top-down director-actor model. The director in this new framework would thus need to reimagine their role as a facilitator of communal creation rather than a sole authorial vision.

These pillars—non-linear narrative, participatory audience, holistic fusion, spiritual dimension, symbolic language, and communal creation—are not mere techniques; they are manifestations of a specific worldview. A Nigerian theory of directing must therefore be more than a stylistic choice; it must be an attempt to root the theatrical event in this worldview, using the principles as a foundational dramaturgy rather than as decorative add-ons.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTCOLONIAL DRAMATURGY AND THE TASK OF THE DIRECTOR

The deconstruction of colonial models and the recovery of indigenous aesthetics find their critical engine in postcolonial theory. This framework provides the director with the intellectual tools to understand the power dynamics at play in theatrical representation and to articulate a strategy for resistance and self-definition.

The concept of **decolonization**, as articulated by Frantz Fanon (1961), is fundamental. For the director, this is not just a political act but an artistic and psychological one. It involves a deliberate process of stripping away the internalized assumptions of what theatre "should" look like. It demands a critical examination of every directorial choice—from rehearsal processes to spatial design—asking whether it reinforces a colonial aesthetic or actively constructs a postcolonial one.

Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) ideas of **hybridity** and the **Third Space** are particularly useful. A Nigerian theory of directing is not about a pure, romanticized return to a pre-colonial past, which is an impossibility. Instead, it is about embracing the hybrid reality of the postcolonial condition. The "Third Space" is that fertile, in-between area where Western forms and indigenous aesthetics interact, clash, and transform each other to create something entirely new. The director's task is to consciously navigate this space, creating a hybrid form that is authentic to the Nigerian experience.

This relates to **interculturalism**, but with a critical difference. Rather than the often-criticized "shallow" interculturalism where Western directors mine non-Western traditions for exotic effect, this model advocates for a "rooted" or "critical interculturalism" driven from within the culture itself (Bharucha, 1993). It is an internal process of negotiation, not an external one of appropriation.

The theory of **postcolonial dramaturgy**, as discussed by scholars like Rustom Bharucha and Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, involves rethinking the very building blocks of performance from a postcolonial perspective. For the director, this means applying a postcolonial critique to:

Textuality: Questioning the primacy of the written text and opening up the production to oral traditions, improvisation, and non-textual elements.

Space: Reconfiguring the performance space to break hierarchical actor-audience relationships and create a communal, shared environment reminiscent of the village square.

The Body: Training the actor's body to express a Nigerian physicality that incorporates dance, gesture, and ritual movement as part of its core vocabulary, moving beyond psychological realism.

Time: Embracing cyclical, ritual, or "magical" time instead of strict linear causality.

The director, in this framework, becomes a **cultural architect** and a **critical synthesizer**. Their role is to curate a process that allows for this complex synthesis to happen organically. They must be deeply researched in both traditional forms and postcolonial theory, using the latter as a lens to strategically and thoughtfully deploy the former. This moves the directorial function from mere interpretation of a playtext to the active creation of a new theatrical language, making the director a pivotal agent of cultural decolonization.

CASE STUDIES: INSTINCTIVE PRACTITIONERS AND PIONEERING MODELS

While a fully articulated theory may be new, the practice of synthesizing indigenous aesthetics with modern theatre has instinctive pioneers in Nigeria. Their work provides invaluable practical case studies and proof of concept.

Hubert Ogunde is often called the father of Nigerian modern theatre. His operas, beginning in the 1940s, were groundbreaking for their use of Yoruba language, music, and folklore. While his narratives often followed a simple moral structure, his directorial genius lay in the integration of vibrant Yoruba *apala* and *sakara* music and dance as driving forces of the drama, not just interludes (Clark, 1979). Productions like *Yoruba Ronu* (1964) demonstrated the power of theatre as social commentary,directed in a style that resonated deeply with popular audiences through its familiar aesthetic codes.

Duro Ladipo took this further, creating a more consciously ritualistic form. His masterwork, *Ọba kò So* (*The King Did Not Hang*), about the legendary King Ṣango, is a prime example. Ladipo's direction treated the performance as a near-ritual. The chanting, the intense, repetitive drumming, the majestic costumes, and the powerful, declamatory acting style were all designed to evoke the sacred aura of the Ṣango cult (Adedeji, 1971). The director's role here was that of a high priest, orchestrating a total sensory and spiritual experience that transported the audience beyond everyday reality.

The University of Ibadan Traveling Theatre, led by scholars like Ola Rotimi, took this synthesized model into the educational sphere. Rotimi's direction of his own plays, such as *The Gods Are Not To Blame* (a reimagining of *Oedipus Rex*) and *Kurunmi*, brilliantly adapted Greek and modern European dramatic structures to accommodate African performative elements. In directing *Kurunmi*, for instance, the war scenes were

choreographed like a powerful, rhythmic dance, and the use of proverbs and incantations was central to the directorial texture, rooting the political narrative in a distinctly Yoruba worldview (Ogunbiyi, 1981).

These pioneers operated largely on instinct and practical necessity rather than a written theory. Their case studies reveal both the potential and the challenges of this approach. Ogunde's work was sometimes critiqued for its simplicity; Ladipo's was powerfully spiritual but perhaps limited in its scope of themes. Their legacy shows that the synthesis is not only possible but can be profoundly powerful and popular. The task for the contemporary director is to build upon this foundation with a more conscious, critically informed, and theoretically grounded application of these principles across a wider range of narratives and styles.

TOWARDS A NEW DIRECTORIAL METHODOLOGY: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES

How does this theory translate into concrete practice for the contemporary Nigerian director? This section proposes a set of practical strategies and methodological shifts across the directorial process.

Reimagining Text and Narrative: The director must approach the playtext not as a sacred blueprint but as a score—one element in a larger symphony. This could involve: *Workshopping with actors* to integrate oral histories, proverbs, and songs relevant to the play's themes. *Deconstructing linear narratives* and reordering scenes to reflect a more cyclical or ritualistic progression, perhaps using a chorus or storyteller as a structural device. *Treating the text as inherently fluid*, allowing for improvisation and adaptation based on the specific audience or context.

Choreographing Space and Audience: The director must consciously design the performance space to break from the proscenium. This could mean: *Staging in the round or in a promenade style*, forcing physical proximity and interaction. *Creating a "village square" atmosphere* where the audience is acknowledged as part of the community being addressed. *Designing entrances and exits through the audience*, blurring the lines between the fictional world and the real one.

Directing the Actor's Body and Voice: Movement and voice coaching must move beyond Stanislavski. The director should: *Collaborate with masters of traditional dance and music* to train actors in the specific physical and vocal languages required. *Encourage a presentational, energy-based acting style* that can project to a non-proscenium space and communicate archetypal or spiritual states. *View the actor's body as an instrument capable of expressing metaphor and symbol*, not just psychological realism.

Integrating Music and Sound as Dramaturgy: Music should be a dramaturgical partner, not a mood-setter. The director should: *Use live drumming* to directly respond to and influence the action on stage, as a character in its own right. *Weave song and incantation* seamlessly into the dialogue, making it the primary mode of expression at climactic moments. *Treat silence and ambient sound* with the same importance as music, drawing on the rhythmic patterns of the natural and spiritual world.

Collaborative and Facilitative Leadership: The director must reconceive their role from autocrat to facilitator of a communal creative process. This involves: *Embracing a more democratic rehearsal process* where actors, musicians, and designers contribute ideas from their own cultural knowledge. *Positioning themselves as a curator* whose job is to harness the collective creativity of the ensemble towards a unified vision, rather than imposing one from the top down.

Design as Symbolic World-Building: Scenic, costume, and lighting design must reject European realism. The director should guide designers to: *Draw inspiration from indigenous art, symbolism, and mythology* (e.g., Adire patterns, Nok terracotta aesthetics, uli designs). *Use costume and mask to represent archetypes, social status, or spiritual forces* rather than individual character psychology. *Employ lighting to evoke mood and spirit* rather than to simulate naturalistic sources.

By adopting these methodological shifts, the director actively constructs the "Third Space" in rehearsal. Each decision becomes a conscious act of decolonization, building a production that is not just a play, but a uniquely Nigerian theatrical event.

CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

While the proposed theory is vital, its application is fraught with challenges that must be acknowledged. The first is the **risk of superficiality or exoticism**. Without deep cultural understanding and respect, the use of indigenous elements can devolve into cliché or mere tourist spectacle, perpetuating the very stereotypes it seeks to overcome. The director must be a researcher and a cultural insider, avoiding a "cut-and-paste" approach.

The second challenge is the **sheer diversity of Nigeria**. A "Nigerian" theory must be careful not to homogenize the distinct performance traditions of hundreds of ethnic groups. A director working in a multi-ethnic cast or for a national audience must navigate this diversity with sensitivity, perhaps focusing on shared philosophical principles rather than specific, isolated cultural expressions.

Audience expectations pose another significant hurdle. Urban, educated audiences are often acclimatized to proscenium-style theatre. A radically different form may face resistance or misunderstanding. The director must therefore also function as an educator, gently guiding the audience into this new contract of participation and symbolism.

Economic and infrastructural constraints are real. The commercial theatre circuit is built around proscenium arches. Creating alternative spaces and funding the intensive workshop process required for this model can be prohibitive. This necessitates innovation and a perhaps a gradual, rather than sudden, integration of these principles.
Finally, there is the challenge of **training and pedagogy**. Current institutions are not equipped to teach this synthesized model. Implementing this theory requires a revolution in theatre education itself, where students learn *gangan* drumming alongside Stanislavski, and study Fanon alongside Aristotle. Overcoming institutional inertia is a long-term project.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has argued that the development of a conscious Nigerian theory of directing is an essential project for the decolonization and authentic evolution of theatre in Nigeria. It is not a call to reject global influences, but a demand for a critical, strategic synthesis that centres indigenous Nigerian performance aesthetics as the foundational dramaturgy. By deconstructing the colonial imprint through postcolonial theory and reconstructing a new methodology from the pillars of traditional forms—non-linear narrative, audience participation, holistic fusion, and spiritual purpose—the Nigerian director can transform into a cultural architect.

The work of pioneers like Ogunde, Ladipo, and Rotimi proves the potency of this approach. The practical strategies outlined provide a roadmap for its application, even as challenges of diversity, audience reception, and pedagogy remain. To move forward, the following are recommended:

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Theatre departments in Nigerian universities must urgently decolonize their curricula, placing equal emphasis on Nigerian and African performance traditions, languages, and postcolonial theory.
2. **Artistic Research:** Directors should engage in deep, practice-based research, collaborating with traditional artists to document and experiment with integrating their forms into contemporary theatre.
3. **Critical Discourse:** Scholars and critics must develop a new critical language to analyze and appreciate productions that operate outside of Eurocentric standards, focusing on their success in achieving a synthesized aesthetic.

4. **Documentation and Archiving:** There must be a concerted effort to document both traditional performances and the pioneering modern works that have attempted this synthesis, creating a repository for future directors to learn from.

The task is vast but necessary. By embarking on this path, Nigerian directors will cease to be imitators and become true innovators, crafting a theatre that is a profound and authentic expression of its time, place, and people. They will not just direct plays; they will direct culture.

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