

**Scenography and Cultural Preservation in Nigeria: A Study of
the 2023 Performance of Ododo's *Hard Choice* in Lead City
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Abstract

The concern for the promotion and preservation of indigenous culture in the face of globalization has a continued to gain the attention of scholars, as well as policy and non-policy-makers. Various approaches have been adopted in various places like in museums and libraries to ensure the preservation and promotion of the tangible and intangible aspects of indigenous cultures. This study recognizes scenography as one of such powerful media for promoting and preserving cultural expressions; especially drama whose content and material carry cultural elements. Scenography is one of the most effective visual aspects of the theatre that the audience encounters first upon entrance into the theatre to experience a live performance. A well-designed play makes statements on the location, period and experiences of the culture being dramatized and through this, the projected culture is

exhibited, promoted and stored in the memories of the audience. Using the performance of Sunnie Ododo's play titled "Hard Choice" staged on the 1st of December, 2023 by the students of Lead City University as primary datum, this study discusses how scenography goes beyond mere aestheticism to create and aid cultural awareness and preservation. It exposes the creative strategy and design techniques deployed to negotiate the interpretation of Ododo's "Hard Choice". In this regard, the study employs descriptive method which includes descriptive analysis and participant observation, coupled with interviews with the cast and technical crew members as sources of data. Moreso, constructivism was also romanticized in foregrounding the theoretical framework. The study concludes that theatre is a veritable means of promoting and sustaining African values and culture through effective and functional scenographic considerations.

Key Words: Culture, Performance, Preservation, Constructivism, Scenography.

Introduction

Scenography, the artistic practice of designing and creating environments for live performances, has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting and preserving cultural heritage (Baugh, 2013). Culture, which encompasses the unique beliefs, traditions, art forms, and ways of life of a particular group or society, plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the world and our collective identity (UNESCO, 2017). However, rapid globalization and modernization have posed significant challenges to the preservation of cultural diversity, making it imperative to explore

innovative approaches to safeguarding and celebrating cultural expressions (Kurin, 2004).

Scenography offers a unique opportunity to visually represent and artistically express cultural narratives, traditions, and practices. Through intricate set designs, meticulously crafted costumes and props, and thoughtful lighting choices, scenographers can transport audiences into immersive environments that vividly depict cultural contexts and narratives (Howard, 2009). This visual storytelling not only promotes cultural awareness and appreciation but also serves as a means of preserving and documenting cultural elements for future generations (McKinney & Butterworth, 2009). Moreover, scenography holds the potential to foster cultural tourism and generate economic benefits for communities. Well-crafted theatrical productions and cultural events that incorporate scenographic elements can attract visitors from around the world, contributing to the promotion and sustainability of cultural heritage sites and practices (Richards, 2021).

Therefore, using the 2023 performance of Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*, this study aims to explore the multifaceted role of scenography as a veritable tool for promoting and preserving culture. By examining the visual and artistic aspects of scenography, its educational and awareness-raising capabilities, and its potential for cultural preservation and economic development, this study will shed light on the invaluable contributions of scenography to safeguarding and celebrating cultural diversity.

Theoretical Mooring

This study exploits the anchor of the dynamics of semiotics which is the scientific study of sign language which encompasses codes, icons, symbols and how they produce meaning to the society.

Semiotics could be traced back to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) for whom 'semiology' was the study of the role of signs as part of social life and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) an American philosopher whose field of study was the 'formal doctrine of signs'. While the word semiotics and semiology study the role of signs, these two scholars have given a wide range of definitions and explanation on semiotics. Saussure sees semiology from a linguistic perspective as sign and what it does, Peirce sees semiotics from a philosophical view as signs that make meaning. The dynamics of semiotics as non-verbal language has compelled directors, actors and playwrights as communicators in the theatre to pay more critical attention to communicating to people of different race in different manner and forms of expression which could be easily interpreted and understood.

The dynamics of semiotics is integral in a theatrical performance. Though, not all stage directors emulate this, but a few are doing justice and others should be encouraged to emulate and learn. Mehanwesh (2014) posits:

Semiotics is the study of signs. It is concerned with the ways we present our world to ourselves and others. It is a human endeavour. Humans can communicate verbally or non-verbally. They use signs, symbols, sound or paralinguistic means to communicate a message.

Based on the position stated above, the main principle of semiotics is that meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which function as signs in relation to other signs. Life basically is about communication which is as a result of man's interaction with other inanimate objects and meanings are derived from man's interaction and this leads to communication. Directors, actors,

costumiers, lighting managers and other production team members of the theatre, use scenery, action, costume, make-up and others as semiotic elements to enhance characterization and meaning making in a performance.

The Role of Scenography in Cultural Promotion

Scenography plays a pivotal role in promoting cultural heritage through its ability to visually narrate and represent cultural elements. The intricate set designs, meticulously crafted costumes and props, and thoughtful lighting choices employed in scenographic productions serve as powerful vehicles for storytelling and cultural representation (Howard, 2009).

Through the artistic manipulation of scenic elements, scenographers can transport audiences into immersive environments that vividly depict the cultural contexts and narratives of various communities. Set designs often incorporate architectural styles, symbolic motifs, and distinct visual cues that evoke a sense of place and cultural identity (McKinney & Butterworth, 2009). Costumes and props, meticulously researched and crafted, not only enhance the visual authenticity but also provide a tangible connection to the cultural practices and traditions being represented (Baugh, 2013).

Moreover, lighting design in scenography plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional and atmospheric dimensions of a cultural narrative. Through the skillful use of light and shadow, scenographers can highlight specific cultural elements, create a sense of time and place, and evoke the desired emotional responses from the audience (Pilbrow, 2017).

Beyond its visual storytelling capabilities, scenography also serves an educational and awareness-raising function in promoting cultural heritage. By bringing cultural narratives to life through

immersive and engaging performances, scenographic productions have the power to educate audiences about the rich tapestry of traditions, beliefs, and practices that define diverse cultures (Kurin, 2004). This exposure fosters greater understanding, appreciation, and respect for cultural diversity, ultimately contributing to the preservation and celebration of cultural heritage. Furthermore, scenography can play a significant role in fostering cultural tourism and generating economic benefits for communities. Well-crafted theatrical productions and cultural events that incorporate scenographic elements can attract visitors from around the world, contributing to the promotion and sustainability of cultural heritage sites and practices (Lowell & Massey, 2020). This influx of cultural tourists not only generates revenue but also raises awareness and appreciation for the cultural richness represented in these performances (Richards, 2021).

Visual Storytelling and Cultural Representation

Visual storytelling and cultural representation lie at the heart of scenography's ability to promote and preserve cultural heritage. Through the artful manipulation of various scenic elements, scenographers create immersive environments that transport audiences into the rich tapestry of cultural narratives and traditions. Set design and scenic elements play a crucial role in establishing the cultural context and evoking a sense of place. Scenographers meticulously research and incorporate architectural styles, symbolic motifs, and distinct visual cues that authentically represent the cultural setting being depicted (McKinney & Butterworth, 2009). For instance, in a production set in a traditional Japanese village, the set design might feature intricate wooden structures, shoji screens, and carefully curated natural elements such as bonsai trees

and rock gardens, effectively transporting the audience to that cultural milieu.

Costumes and props serve as tangible links to the cultural practices and traditions being represented. Scenographers collaborate with costume designers and prop makers to ensure that these elements are meticulously researched, crafted, and curated to reflect the cultural nuances and historical accuracy (Baugh, 2013). Whether it's the intricate embroidery on a traditional Chinese qipao or the intricate beadwork on a Native American ceremonial dress, these visual elements not only enhance the authenticity of the performance but also serve as a means of preserving and documenting cultural heritage (Howard, 2009).

Lighting design plays a pivotal role in shaping the emotional and atmospheric dimensions of a cultural narrative. Through the skillful manipulation of light and shadow, scenographers can highlight specific cultural elements, create a sense of time and place, and evoke desired emotional responses from the audience (Pilbrow, 2017). For example, in a performance depicting a traditional Diwali celebration, the use of warm, flickering lights could evoke the ambiance of the festival's diyas (lamps), while carefully orchestrated lighting changes could represent the transition from day to night, enhancing the audience's immersion in the cultural experience.

By weaving together these various scenic elements, scenographers create a multisensory experience that not only captivates audiences but also serves as a powerful medium for preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Through visual storytelling, scenography fosters greater understanding, appreciation, and respect for cultural diversity, ultimately

contributing to the safeguarding and celebration of intangible cultural expressions (Kurin, 2004).

Educational and Economic Benefits and the Fostering of Cultural Tourism

Scenography not only serves as a powerful medium for visual storytelling and cultural representation but also plays a crucial role in raising awareness and educating audiences about diverse cultural narratives and traditions. Bringing cultural narratives to life through immersive and engaging performances is a hallmark of scenography's educational and awareness-raising capabilities. By creating multisensory experiences that transport audiences into the heart of cultural contexts, scenographers have the power to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and histories that define various cultures (Kurin, 2004). For instance, a scenographic production exploring the cultural significance of the Igbo festival celebrations could incorporate vibrant set designs, intricate costumes and masks, and atmospheric lighting to bring the traditions and rituals associated with this festival to life, and therefore, educating audiences about its profound cultural and spiritual significance.

Moreover, scenography provides a unique opportunity to engage audiences with cultural traditions in a participatory and interactive manner. Through thoughtful set designs and staging, scenographers can create spaces that encourage audiences to immerse themselves in cultural practices, fostering a deeper connection and understanding (Howard, 2009). For example, in a performance celebrating traditional Indigenous dance and music, the set design could incorporate elements that allow audience members to participate in the rhythmic movements or musical

elements, fostering a sense of shared cultural experience and appreciation.

Beyond its educational and awareness-raising roles, scenography also plays a significant part in fostering cultural tourism and generating economic benefits for communities. Well-crafted theatrical productions and cultural events that incorporate compelling scenographic elements have the potential to attract visitors from around the world, contributing to the promotion and sustainability of cultural heritage sites and practices (Lowell & Massey, 2020).

Theatrical productions and cultural events that showcase exceptional scenographic design and execution can become major attractions in their own right, drawing audiences from far and wide. These performances not only provide a platform for celebrating and preserving cultural heritage but also serve as a means of generating revenue and economic opportunities for the local communities (Richards, 2021). For instance, a renowned annual theatre festival in a historic city, featuring scenographic productions that highlight the region's cultural traditions and architectural marvels, could become a significant tourist attraction, boosting local businesses and generating income for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage sites.

By attracting visitors and generating revenue, scenography plays a vital role in ensuring the longevity and sustainability of cultural preservation efforts. The influx of cultural tourists not only contributes to the local economy but also raises awareness and appreciation for the cultural richness represented in these performances, fostering a virtuous cycle of cultural promotion and preservation (Lowell & Massey, 2020).

Scenography as a Preservation Tool for Cultural Heritage

Scenography plays an invaluable role in the preservation of cultural heritage, serving as a means of documenting and archiving various cultural elements for future generations. Through meticulous documentation and archiving processes, scenographers ensure that the intricate details and nuances of cultural expressions are safeguarded and can be accurately reconstructed or referenced in the future. One of the primary ways in which scenography contributes to cultural preservation is through the creation of scenic designs and technical drawings. These detailed renderings and blueprints capture the architectural styles, symbolic motifs, and distinct visual cues that authentically represent the cultural settings being depicted (McKinney & Butterworth, 2009). By meticulously documenting these designs, scenographers create a lasting record of the cultural environments being portrayed, allowing for future study, analysis, and potential reconstruction of these cultural spaces. Additionally, the documentation of costumes and props used in scenographic productions serves as a vital tool for preserving tangible aspects of cultural heritage. Scenographers, in collaboration with costume designers and prop makers, carefully record and archive the intricate details, materials, and construction techniques employed in creating these cultural artifacts (Baugh, 2013). This documentation ensures that the cultural significance, symbolism, and historical accuracy of these elements are preserved for future reference and study, enabling the perpetuation of traditional craftsmanship and cultural knowledge.

Furthermore, scenography's role in cultural preservation extends to the realm of lighting and multimedia records. Detailed

documentation of lighting designs, including light plots, cue sheets, and digital media files, capture the atmospheric and emotional dimensions of cultural narratives (Pilbrow, 2017). These records not only serve as a means of preserving the ephemeral nature of live performances but also provide valuable insights into the cultural contexts and interpretations that informed the lighting choices, enabling future generations to accurately recreate or study these cultural experiences.

By meticulously documenting and archiving these various elements of scenographic productions, scenographers create a comprehensive repository of cultural knowledge and expression. This repository serves as a valuable resource for future generations, enabling accurate reconstruction, research, and appreciation of cultural heritage (Howard, 2009). Moreover, these archival materials can be shared with cultural institutions, museums, and communities, fostering collaborative efforts in the preservation and dissemination of cultural knowledge (Kurin, 2004).

Reviving and Reconstructing Cultural Practices and Collaboration with Cultural Institutions and Communities

In addition to documenting and archiving cultural elements, scenography plays a crucial role in actively reviving and reconstructing cultural practices, ensuring the preservation of intangible cultural heritage for future generations. Historical re-enactments and immersive experiences are powerful tools employed by scenographers to breathe life into cultural narratives and traditions. Through meticulously researched and designed sets, costumes, props, and lighting, scenographers create environments that transport audiences back in time, allowing them to witness and engage with cultural practices that may have been lost or forgotten

(Howard, 2009). For instance, a scenographic production depicting a traditional Aztec ceremony could involve intricate set designs replicating the architectural styles and sacred spaces of ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, accompanied by historically accurate costumes, rituals, and lighting effects, providing audiences with an immersive and authentic experience of this cultural heritage.

Preserving intangible cultural heritage, which encompasses the living expressions, practices, and knowledge passed down from generation to generation, is a significant challenge that scenography can help address (UNESCO, 2003). By collaborating with cultural practitioners and community members, scenographers can accurately capture and represent the nuances, symbolism, and significance of these intangible cultural expressions. Through careful documentation and archiving, as well as live performances that showcase these practices, scenography ensures that the rich tradition of intangible cultural heritage is safeguarded and celebrated (Kurin, 2004).

Furthermore, effective cultural preservation and promotion through scenography often involves close collaboration with cultural institutions and communities. Partnerships with museums and heritage organizations can provide scenographers with valuable resources, expertise, and guidance to ensure the accurate representation and preservation of cultural elements (Lowell & Massey, 2020). These collaborations not only enhance the authenticity and cultural sensitivity of scenographic productions but also facilitate the exchange of knowledge and the development of educational programs and exhibitions that further promote cultural awareness and understanding.

Engaging with indigenous and minority groups is also crucial in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage

through scenography. By actively involving these communities in the creative process, scenographers can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances, traditions, and perspectives that must be accurately represented (Gómez-Peña, 2001). This collaborative approach not only ensures cultural sensitivity and respect but also empowers these communities to reclaim and celebrate their cultural identities through the powerful medium of scenography.

Through these collaborative efforts, scenography becomes a powerful tool for bridging cultural divides, fostering dialogue, and promoting mutual understanding and appreciation among diverse communities (Kurin, 2004). By working hand-in-hand with cultural institutions, practitioners, and community members, scenographers can ensure that the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage are undertaken with authenticity, sensitivity, and a deep respect for the rich diversity of human experience.

Scenographic Interpretation of Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice*

Sunnie Ododo's *Hard Choice* presents a rich cultural narrative that lends itself to a compelling scenographic interpretation. The play delves into themes of tradition, sacrifice, and the complexities of human choices, offering scenographers an opportunity to create immersive environments that transport audiences into the heart of the Emepiri Kingdom. The set design for "Hard Choice" drew inspiration from traditional African architectural styles, incorporating elements such as thatched roofs, intricate wood carvings, and symbolic motifs representing the cultural heritage of the Emepiri people. The use of natural materials like clay, bamboo, and woven textiles created a sense of authenticity and grounding in the cultural context.

Central to the set design was a representation of the Oguguru; the gods to whom Princess Azingae is sacrificed. This took the form of a sacred shrine or ceremonial space, adorned with symbolic elements and this marked a sense of reverence and spiritual significance.

The costumes for "Hard Choice" were meticulously researched and crafted to reflect the cultural traditions and customs of the Emepiri Kingdom. Traditional fabrics, intricate beadwork, and symbolic accessories were employed to convey the social status, roles, and cultural identities of the characters. Props such as ceremonial masks, ritual objects, and traditional weapons further enhance the authenticity of the cultural representation, serving as tangible links to the belief systems and practices depicted in the play.

The lighting design played a crucial role in shaping the emotional and atmospheric dimensions of the 2023 performance of "Hard Choice." The use of warm, flickering lights evoked the ambiance of traditional ceremonies and rituals, while strategic lighting changes represent the transition from day to night or the passage of time. Furthermore, lighting was employed to highlight specific cultural elements, such as the symbolic significance of the coral beads bestowed upon Prince Oki. It created a sense of tension and foreboding as the conflict between the Emepiri and Igedu Kingdoms escalates.

During the 2023 performance of "Hard Choice", multimedia elements were incorporated. The sound design enhanced the immersive experience of the performance. Traditional music and chanting accompanied ceremonial scenes, transporting audiences into the cultural traditions being portrayed. Sound effects, such as the clashing of weapons or the echoes of war drums, heightened the dramatic tension and accentuated the looming conflict. Projection

mapping and or video installations were utilized to create dynamic backdrops and environments, such as depicting the lush landscapes of the Emepiri Kingdom and the battlefields where war is threatened.

To ensure the authentic representation and depiction of cultural heritage in the 2023 performance of "Hard Choice," the set designer or scenographers collaborated closely with the costumier, make-up artist, cultural practitioners, community members, and heritage organizations. This collaborative approach did not only ensure cultural sensitivity and accuracy but also foster a deeper understanding of the nuances, symbolism, and significance of the cultural elements being portrayed. By faithfully recreating the cultural landscapes, traditions, and belief systems presented in "Hard Choice," the scenographer had the opportunity to transport audiences into a rich narrative that celebrates cultural diversity while also prompting thought-provoking discussions about the complexities of human choices, sacrifice, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Challenges and Considerations

The production of Ododo's "Hard Choice" made it clear that while scenography offers a powerful tool for promoting and preserving cultural heritage, it is not without its challenges and considerations. Navigating the complex landscape of cultural representation, authenticity, and inclusion requires careful thought and sensitivity. Balancing artistic expression with cultural authenticity was a delicate act that the scenographers for the performance navigated thoroughly. On one hand, scenography is an art form that allows for creative expression and interpretation. Scenographers may seek to bring their unique artistic visions to life,

experimenting with innovative design elements and interpretations of cultural narratives. However, this artistic freedom must be balanced with a deep respect for the cultural heritage being depicted and a commitment to authenticity.

Scenographers for the performance were very mindful of the potential for cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, which can arise from a lack of understanding or sensitivity towards the cultural contexts they are portraying. Hence there was continuous consultations from cultural groups from within and outside Ibadan and it was time consuming and not pocket friendly. Inappropriate or inaccurate depictions of cultural elements, such as costumes, rituals, or symbolism, can be deeply offensive and perpetuate harmful stereotypes, therefore, the scenographers were extra careful. To address this challenge, the scenographers engaged in thorough research, consultation with cultural experts and community members, and a willingness to adapt and refine their work to ensure respectful and authentic representation despite the economic demands.

Funding and resource constraints also presented significant challenges in the realm of scenography for cultural preservation and promotion. Creating immersive and authentic scenographic productions often requires substantial financial resources for set design, costume and prop construction, lighting, and multimedia elements. Limited budgets restricted the scope and quality of the performance potentially compromising its ability to effectively convey cultural narratives and engage audiences.

The process of community engagement requires open communication, a willingness to listen and learn, and a commitment to shared decision-making and co-creation. It also involves addressing potential power imbalances and ensuring that

communities have a voice and agency in how their cultural heritage is portrayed and preserved. It was very tough to really know which account of some cultural narratives that was right or wrong. Atimes different accounts arte given with the production crew not knowing which one to adopt.

Conclusion

Scenography stands as a powerful and multifaceted tool for the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage. Through its ability to visually narrate, educate, document, revive, and economically sustain cultural expressions, scenography serves as a bridge between the past, present, and future, ensuring that the rich tapestry of human cultural diversity is celebrated and safeguarded for generations to come.

As our world continues to grapple with the challenges of globalization, cultural erosion, and the need for greater understanding and appreciation of diverse narratives, scenography emerges as a vital medium for fostering cross-cultural dialogue, promoting mutual respect, and safeguarding the intangible and tangible elements that define our shared human experience. By embracing the transformative potential of scenography and addressing the challenges and considerations that accompany its practice, we can collectively work towards a future where cultural heritage is not only preserved but celebrated and shared on a global scale, enriching our lives and fostering a deeper appreciation for the vibrant mosaic of cultures that shape our world.

Recommendations

1. Increased Funding and Resource Allocation: To fully harness the potential of scenography as a tool for cultural preservation and promotion, increased funding and resource

allocation from governments, cultural organizations, and private sponsors is crucial. This investment will enable the creation of high-quality, authentic, and impactful scenographic productions that effectively communicate and preserve cultural heritage.

2. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Knowledge-Sharing:** Foster greater collaboration and knowledge-sharing among scenographers, cultural practitioners, and heritage organizations by establishing networks and platforms for interdisciplinary dialogue. This will facilitate the exchange of best practices, innovative approaches, and ensure the accurate representation and preservation of cultural elements.

3. **Prioritize Community Engagement and Empowerment:** Actively engage diverse communities and stakeholders, particularly indigenous and minority groups, in the scenographic process. Seek their perspectives, involvement, and co-creation to ensure authentic and respectful cultural representation, while also contributing to the decolonization of cultural narratives and amplifying marginalized voices.

4. **Develop Educational Programs and Initiatives:** Leverage the educational and awareness-raising potential of scenography by developing educational programs, workshops, and initiatives that promote cultural awareness, understanding, and appreciation. These programs can target diverse audiences, including students, educators, and the general public, fostering a deeper connection to cultural heritage.

5. **Integrate Emerging Technologies:** Explore the integration of emerging technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, into scenographic productions. These technologies can enhance the immersive and interactive experiences, reaching wider audiences

and facilitating global cultural exchange while maintaining authenticity and cultural sensitivity.

6. Foster International Collaborations and Cultural Exchange: Encourage international collaborations and cultural exchanges among scenographers, artists, and cultural institutions from diverse regions. These collaborations can promote mutual understanding, cross-cultural dialogue, and facilitate the sharing of best practices in cultural preservation and promotion through scenography.

7. Establish Comprehensive Documentation and Archiving Practices: Develop comprehensive documentation and archiving practices for scenographic productions, including scenic designs, costume and prop documentation, lighting and multimedia records. These archives should be accessible to cultural institutions, researchers, and future generations, serving as invaluable resources for accurate reconstruction, research, and appreciation of cultural heritage.

By implementing these recommendations, the artistic and cultural communities can collectively harness the transformative power of scenography, ensuring the preservation, promotion, and celebration of our diverse cultural heritage for generations to come.

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