

## **Nigerian National Theatre and the New Economy**

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### **Abstract**

The cultural and creative industries (CCIs) have become very contributory to the development of most economies, both in the developed and the developing worlds. They form the bedrock of the economies of modern societies. The contribution of national theatres of nations across the world, in the component of the creative industry and its contributions to the 21st century economy or new economy is expectedly, immense. More so, as the institution represents a critical phenomenon in the arts and culture sectors. It is against this background that this paper examines the quintessential role of the national theatre (NT) in Nigeria in the overall involvement of the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) to the 21st century economy, with a view to establishing how impactful the institution has been in the dispensation of such roles, identifying its challenges and making helpful recommendations. One-on-one in-depth interviews, focused group discussions and archival resources are largely relied upon, and data obtained subjected to content analysis. Indeed, the national theatre of Nigeria represents, like its counterpart in the developed nations of the world, an iconic pedestal for the CCIs and, therefore, contributes immensely to the Nigeria's economy.

**Keywords:** New economy, National theatre, CCIs, Arts and culture sector, Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

The national theatre in Nigeria has since its opening for business in 1976, played host to a good number of international music concerts, drama, film shows, symposia, exhibitions, conventions, workshops and even sports. By this role, the national theatre (NT) represents a hub for the activities of the cultural and creative industries, cutting across the visual arts and crafts, the performing arts and culture, architecture and tourism. By implication, the NT represents a major contributor to the socio-cultural and socio-economic development of the national economy. Incidentally, the contribution by this national institution has not been a consistent trend due to the various hiccups that its administration and operations have suffered over the years, with challenges cutting across cultural policy implementation somersault, bureaucratic miss-administration, under-funding, and under-maintenance due to reckless abandonment by government. This does not, however, minimize the huge potential or socio-economic values a typical national theatre represents to its host nation and indeed, that of Nigeria in particular. It is against this background that the role of the NT as a potentially representative midwife of the CCIs, towards the development of the economy, is examined in this paper.

## **Defining the Creative Industry**

Though the definition of the term creative industry (also called cultural and creative industries) is often limited within the context of whosoever is defining it, one singular theme that runs through the plethora of existing definitions is the fact that the creative industry is characterized by the input of creative individuals (Chaston and Sadler-Smith as quoted in H. Pecklerner et al. 2). They are those that have their origin in individual creativity, skill, and talent and they contribute to wealth and the creation of jobs through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property (DCMS, par 10). According to UNESCO, the term creative industries include a broad range of sectors and refers to architecture, and advertising with the main parts of the products and services consisting of creative or artistic work and activities (par 4).

To Hartley, the idea of the creative industries seeks to describe the conceptual and practical convergence of the creative (individual talent) with cultural industries (mass scale), in the context of new media technologies, within a new knowledge economy, for the use of newly interactive citizen-consumers (5). He posits further that the concept of the creative industries is a product of history which has evolved overtime

from conceptualizations of the terms 'creative arts' and the 'cultural industries, traceable to the 18th century and most recently from changes in technology and the world economy especially during the 1990s. The concept is, therefore, historical rather than categorical. Its meaning varies with each geographical location, depending on local heritage and circumstance (Hartley 5). As a bustling component of the emerging cultural and creative industries (CCIs), festivals/ carnivals/ theatrical activities have become a money spinner in many growing economies, including Nigeria. The CCIs refer to a range of economic activities that are concerned with the generation or exploitation of knowledge and information (Epochi-Olise and Omoera 6).

Obafemi, quoting a UNESCO source, claims that the notion of 'creative industries' places emphasis on the individual and their creativity, innovation, skill and talent in the exploitation of intellectual property (126). Whereas 'cultural industries' is closely linked to, but slightly different from a categorization based strictly on the notion of intellectual property which is closely aligned with the concept of information-driven economies, and which include such activities as scientific and technological innovation, software and database development, telecommunication services, and the production of hardware and electronic equipment (Obafemi 126). In the Nigerian context, the concept of creative industries is not a new phenomenon; creative industries have always existed as expressions of the socio-cultural phenomena of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Within the Hausa traditions for example, there have always existed calabash decorators, creators of fine traditional works on leather and the Yoruba and Benin too have always had artistic and creative works on brass and iron which were common features of the people's traditional ways of life. In fact, the rich variety of Nigerian artistic expressions in arts, crafts, performance traditions and indigenous industries correlate with the ethnic diversity of the country. Onyegbu, as cited in Obafemi, noted that 'Nigeria is blessed with a variety of craft products and skilled crafts persons, as there is hardly any community in Nigeria that is not endowed with one form of craft or the other, and according to Obafemi: the quantum of jobs that can be generated from the craft aspects of the cultural/creative industries is phenomenal (Obafemi 135).

It must be stressed, however, that these works were initially done without any commercial intent and that they were taken for granted by those who practised them as part of the creative essence of the

communities. But with time and from interactions with foreigners who began to show appreciation for the beauty and finesse of the cultural products, people began to look inward to value what they have previously taken for granted. Globalization brought value and further appreciation as works of art and creative ventures started becoming symbols of identification. Africans realized that within the artworks, they could find themselves and eke a living. More attention, therefore, began to be given to them as part of the national economy by many in the developed and developing countries of the world who started to realize that not only can income be generated from them, but that gradually the industry could also be harnessed for employment and wealth creation. Hartley affirms that creative industries came to be seen as a worthwhile investment in public policy, the term was, therefore, picked up by different countries and utilised in different settings and it became adapted to meet various national and regional agendas (22).

Countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore got involved, Taiwan saw its involvement in the industry as a means of diversifying its economy and to strengthen its cultural output. Korea associated the term with the linkages between government and big business which provided infrastructure for local content production. In New Zealand the focus was on screen productions and national branding, while in Queensland, it was on movies and games. Australia focused on broadband content and the articulation of creative applications into health, education and business services while in Europe and the Americas the concept incorporates innovation, IP, local cultural outputs, advertising, architecture, art, antiques, markets, crafts, fashion, design, film, interactive leisure software such as video games, music, performing arts, television, radio, heritage, hospitality museums, galleries, sports, tourism among others. (Hartley 22).

The creative industries in Nigeria, with more emphasis in the fields of film, music, fashion, the beauty industry, arts, crafts, the performing arts, architecture, among others, is currently believed to be the second largest employer of labour, in the country after agriculture, employing close to 4 million persons (aggregated data sources quoted in [africa.businessinsider.com](http://africa.businessinsider.com)). According to a report by Jobber man, Nigeria's No 1 career platform, the creative industry has the potentials to produce 2.7 million jobs by 2025 with an additional projection of a contribution of 5 trillion naira to the country's GDP with further projections on its massive employability into other specialized areas like

videography, film animation, photography, graphic design, digital marketing among others. In other words, the creative industry has grown to be a massive industry whose potentials are yet to be fully understood and explored by the country

The national theatre (NT) in Nigeria has over the years played a huge role in acting as a centre or hub of the cultural and creative activities through employment, talent hunt, sponsorship and also as an international and local tourist activity, and a receiving house to various artistic and creative events like arts and craft exhibitions, musical concerts and various performing arts, representing various cultures both in Nigeria and other parts of the world. A case in point is the hosting of the second World Black African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77) which held the world in awe from 15 January to 12 February 1977. This iconic one-month long event characteristically celebrated the Black African culture, showcasing African music, drama, fine art, literature, dance, and religion, hosting about 16,000 participants from 56 African nations and nations of Africans in diaspora. The NT of Nigeria, specifically designed for the purpose was the chief host of it all. It was established to warehouse and provide opportunity for the presentation of the different Nigerian cultures and to provide avenue for the ventilation of ideas by artistes in Nigeria and abroad who may wish to share experiences. Its role as enshrined in the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria* (1988), section 6.3 is that of preservation and the celebration of Nigerian culture, which includes all Nigerian creative endeavours. The Act setting up the NT catalogues the following as its founding objectives:

- i. To present and promote arts, culture and other social activities.
- ii. Promote healthy cultural activities and habits in the society
- iii. Enhance and exploit the tourism potentials of the theatre complex
- iv. Promote the positive image of the National Theatre and that of the Federal Republic of Nigeria
- v. Provide technical and professional support service to the National and international performers and productions in the complex.
- vi. Ensure that the National Theatre is effectively managed as a commercial concern.
- vii. Safeguard the property of the Parastatal and specify the category of persons who may be admitted to the National Theatre premises.

- viii. Provide venue and facilities for exhibitions and arts, paintings, furniture, building materials, science equipment, computer etc. (Decree 47, 1991)

In reviewing the activities of the National Theatre post establishment, Yerima, observed that perhaps, the period immediately after FESTAC 77, was the 'boom' period for the National Theatre as it played host to extremely important international performances by artistes like Eric Donaldson, Shaba Ranks, Jimmy Cliff, Cool and the Gang, Third World, among others, and it also hosted giants of the Nigerian Theatre like Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, , Moses Olaiya (Baba Salla), filmmakers like Ade Folayan (Ade Love) (Yerima "The Legacy of Festac'77" 16). It provided space for artistic performances like drama, music and dance and for the screening of films from different genres, exhibition of artworks and several artistic endeavours and was also used for other social functions like town hall meetings, weddings, Annual General Meetings (AGMs) and, among others (Yerima "The Legacy of Festac'77" 16).

During this period, the NT did midwife and performed its statutory role by contributing to the socio-cultural and economic development of the country like its counterparts in Europe and elsewhere. It indeed has great potential to be a performance venue, events center and a center for tourism development par excellence as envisioned by the cultural policy and its revenue generating capacity for the creative sector is phenomenal. This is however something that needs to be tapped into. The expectations of stakeholders are that the NT within the new dispensation would tap into emerging technologies that would enable it live up to its billing. This, however, has not been the case as the building has had to contend with some challenges.

### **The National Theatre and the New Economy**

The term 'new economy' refers to the ongoing development of an economic system evolving from the classical economy to a service-based economy, driven by new technology and innovations. It is, therefore, used to describe aspects of an economy that is using innovative or new technologies (Kenton 20). This definition forms the backdrop upon which the place of relevance of the national theatre in the new economy is examined in this study. In recent times, there have been explosions in innovations and new technologies such that any agency worth its salt and which wishes to survive must be part of it. Technology has become so

pervasive that it influences virtually all one does, both as individuals or corporate entities. There are now developments in digital technologies, as well as new trends and approaches in the media, including information and communication technologies (ICTs). There exists now, new channels for technological advancement that could make the marketing and advertising of cultural products of organizations easy. Social media channels, handles and other outlets now exist such that within a minute, organizations can reach millions of their subscribers or patrons at once. With these kinds of innovation in technology, every business is looking for ways to improve customer relationship and care, and to improve their productivity and relevance.

According to an anonymous commentator on *Them, You and Me*, a digital marketing site: “companies worldwide are relying more and more on emerging technologies to help improve their competitive advantage and drive strategy and growth” (par.3). How has the national theatre as an organization fared in incorporating or embracing these trends in its operations? The recent move by the Nigerian government to privatize the NT to a consortium of banks can be considered one of such moves. While signing the MOU on the transfer of the national theatre to the consortium of banks, Central Bank of Nigeria’s Governor, Godwin Emiefele remarked that: “the idea behind the project is to restore the glory of the building by aligning most of the fabrics, equipment and facilities with 21st century aesthetics and to develop an ecosystem of creative hubs on the adjoining 44-hectare land” (Iyatse and Oji, *The Guardian Online*). Perhaps, this move of government would awaken the edifice from its slumber and reposition it among the league of modern organizations employing the best of the new economy to enable it perform optimally.

The new technologies are now key for the survival of businesses in this new age as they make for faster communications either between employees and management, or between management, the organization and its clients as organizations can utilise video conferencing technologies like Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, for meetings from any location they may desire. Other platforms like emails, newsletters, social media handles like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp can be utilised for advertising, publicity and the marketing of national theatre programmes. Employing the use of new technologies can also guarantee the national theatre the ability to safeguard its data flow, manage its contacts, staff records or client base and also help to streamline processes. Above all, the new technologies of the 21st century economy will help reduce the rigidity

in processes by saving time and money. It can assist in fund-raising activities of the theatre programmes and, of course, in audience development efforts on the part of management to either create awareness of its activities or even build up patronage or a client base for its activities.

### **Challenges**

The national theatre as a government agency operating within the bureaucracy of government, however, had impediments over the years which have impeded its performance as the warehouse and presentation or celebration house that it is meant to be for the cultural and creative industries. Dandaura stated in focused group discussion (FGD) that: 'The national theatre is supposed to warehouse and provide opportunity for the exhibition of the various cultures in the aspect of preservation, to curate the finest of our cultures for exhibition, but the place has been in decay and at some point, participants felt it was no longer accessible to them and so it wasn't a house where you could find all the cultural expressions in display anymore'. This of course was in reference to the state of the building before government handed it over to the consortium of bankers; and it is only hoped that this move will eventually strengthen and reposition the national theatre to become a 'service-based' organization that will drive by new technology and innovations. Some of the challenges the national theatre has had to contend with include but are not limited to the following.

**Competition from the Private Sector:** The national theatre as a government agency has had to grapple with competition from emerging, more organised private sector concerns that came across to be more dynamic in their management, and were showcasing the kind of programmes that the National Theatre ought to be exhibiting in the first instance... New theatre outfits like the MUSON Centre, Terra Kulture, and the new Glover Hall, among others, emerged which proved to be more proactive and better committed than the national theatre. There was an apparent inability by the national theatre management to hook up to emerging technologies as it were to enable it meet up with these competitions.

**Poor Funding:** The management of national theatre depended solely on government subvention as its source of funding and once this was not forthcoming exigencies and even matters of routine maintenance on the building could not be carried out. It is not surprising, therefore, the building came to a near total collapse before the privatization saga. With the lack of funds and the paltry and sporadic allocation from government,



no periodic form of maintenance was ever carried out on the massive structure - the major reason why the facilities broke down.

**Managerial Problems:** The national theatre has had to grapple with the appointments of incompetent chief executive officers or the wrong persons in position of headship. Till date, the national theatre has had nine chief executive officers of which only three have been theatre artistes, the remaining (some on ad hoc appointments) were drawn from other fields. These appointments of round pegs in square holes have not helped the progress and prospects of the edifice at all. Awodiya quoted in Ohenhen observed that “the national theatre had become a stereotype by institutionalized ineffective management...” (119).

**Inability of Government to Review the Cultural Policy:** The existing cultural policy for Nigeria, 1988, which gave backing to the establishment of the national theatre still remains unchanged and has not been reviewed despite two unsuccessful attempts. 30 years after it was launched, it still remains unchanged. A review of the policy document would have made parastatals like the national theatre confront new challenges of modernity such as embracing new technologies.

**Concession/Privatization Saga:** The inconsistency of the Nigerian government over what to do with the national theatre over the years in vacillating between concessioning, privatization or outright sale of the edifice has also been a major challenge to the ineffectiveness and unproductivity of the national theatre. This vacillation was a recurrent decimal in the continued existence of the building as a government agency, but in what looked like a move to save the edifice, government eventually handed over the complex to a consortium of banks headed by the Central Bank of Nigeria to renovate and develop the surrounding grounds into a creative hub - comprising hubs for fashion, music, ICT, commercial and retail facilities, among others. The Nigerian Bankers Committee ‘is to invest a whopping 22 billion naira in the redevelopment of the moribund iconic building for the creative industry to thrive. While many see this as a lifeline to save the ailing national theatre, others see it as government shirking its responsibility to protect what they see as the soul of the Nigerian nation and a historic monument worthy of preservation. Information and culture Minister, Lai Mohammed who performed the handover ceremony stated that: the hand over is a win - win for every stakeholder, as the National Theatre has to be transformed to its glory days and into international standards (Iyatse and Oji, *The Guardian Online*).

To notable culture enthusiasts and commentators like Mabel Evwierhoma, the arrangement with the consortium will stifle the building because the shylock structure would come in and without the profit coming in, the banks will become bloody eyed, they will want return on investment and if that doesn't come in, forget the national theatre as it is now. Commerce will be atop life cultural expressions (Evwierhoma in an interview, May 2021). The issue of the concession of the edifice has been a recurring decimal in the annals of the history of the national theatre but the recent move of government and the arrangement with the consortium of bankers may just have put it to rest, albeit temporarily. Only time can tell. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that recent explosion in technological development as well as the general way of doing business has changed and any agency of government (the NT inclusive) that wishes to stay afloat in the business terrain must change its orientation in the way it conducts its business. It is hoped that the bankers will bring in their dynamic and commercial business approach to the administration of the anticipated re-invented national theatre when completed. This should bring in better patronage and more visibility to the edifice as well as reposition it to fulfill its responsibilities to the artistes, patrons and indeed the creative community.

### **Recommendations**

The national theatre management has to be proactive in terms of generating and creating programmes that would elicit more support and patronage for its facilities. This recommendation is germane in view of the aggressive competition offered by newer, more modern events centres like Terra Kulture, MUSON Centre, and Film One which have been able to build up compendia of artistes and programmes that constantly keep them busy and vibrant. With the concessioning, it is envisaged that there will be an update in equipment and facilities, better maintenance of the structures and the galleries within. As a tourist attraction, a lot still needs to be done to add to the surroundings of the NT to increase its allure. Apart from the architectural design of the building which is its major attraction as a tourist site, there is nothing to it to attract and sustain the interest of the visitors around it. It is hoped that the ongoing repairs and re-structuring at the NT, takes this into account.

To enable it play its dual role of not only being a performance space and a tourist attraction, the NT management may need to create a detailed calendar of events and activities around the complex to attract tourists. Inadequate programming and managerial expertise seem to be its

bane for now. Festivals, mini-carnivals, gaming activities, hotels and play areas should be created around the complex to generate interest and give people a reason to visit. It is apparent that technology and emerging new economies have come to stay and they will continue to play very cardinal roles in the business environments. In fact, it is becoming increasingly inconceivable that businesses can now survive without, video conferencing, emails or even the internet. Any agency, the national theatre inclusive that wishes to develop or expand must embrace them as a matter of necessity.

Good and sound management of not only the facilities but of the resources both human and otherwise are cardinal to the success of the national theatre. In the words of Muyiwa Awodiya, 'a well-run theatre institution with good management is similar in many respects to a business organization (126). To him, "to build a new order at the national theatre, a process of transformation should begin. The theatre must take on the characteristics of a business organization, introducing generic management principles and creating the framework for entrepreneurial activity" (Awodiya 126). In other words, the NT must be run with a view to generating revenue. It is hoped that the coming of the consortium of bankers will usher in an aura of flourish and will bring with it a new order in the management of both human and material resources at the NT. It is hoped that with the coming of the consortium of bankers, a fresh private sector vive which will be based on professionalism and merit will be imbibed. A review of the cultural policy for Nigeria is long overdue. As the 1988 cultural policy which is pre-digital still remains the extant document. Such a review will make government agencies such as the national theatre to confront the challenges of new economies or technology.

## **Conclusion**

The article highlighted the fact that national theatre was set up as a government funded edifice to subsidize the arts and showcase Nigerian cultural and creative essence by providing venues for artistic performances and displays or exhibitions. Government for a long time was comfortable running the building by providing subventions. However, with poor funding and the gradual lack of care, maintaining the gigantic structure became a problem for government, hence, it opted to concession it. The concessioning according to government is intended to be a bail out for the structure. So far, the first phase of the repairs has commenced and it is only hoped that this move will help to eventually

reposition the building among the league of other similar but more modern structures all over the world that are embracing and utilizing new economies, technologies and innovations in their operations.

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