

PRIVATE/PUBLIC FACILITY MANAGEMENT POLICIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GROWTH OF THE NIGERIAN THEATRE

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Introduction

The gross shortage of performance space for both the teaching and the practice of the art is one of the major problems confronting the contemporary Nigerian theatre. Where such facilities exist, it is either that they do not conform to the basic international standards, or they are multipurpose halls being merely adapted for theatrical performances. Although the concept of a performance venue is as old as theatre, scholars and professionals seem to have different perspectives of what should be the ideal venue for theatrical performances. For instance, Sarah Stanton and Martin Banham (1996) are of the view that

Theatre buildings are not essential for theatre performances;
The roots of drama lie in the interaction between actor and audience.

Such a position takes us back to the rudimentary stage of theatre practice, which is now clearly anachronistic, in the light of the technological advancement of the modern world. In the beginning, where theatre was unable to find the required performing space, it improvised around available facilities. It was not until 1893, when the Glover Memorial Hall¹ was declared open by Governor McGregor, did a venue built with live theatre in mind (at least to an extent) emerge in old Lagos. More than a century afterwards, and in spite of the completion of the National Arts Theatre in Lagos, in 1976, the problem still persists, such that Olu Akomolafe (1981) could observe that

about the greatest shortcoming in the Nigerian theatre scene today is
the unavailability of adequate playhouses (431).

The emergence of ultra modern theatre buildings in some of the first generation universities, and the pioneering role played by the then Bendel State (now Edo and Delta States) to build and operate a State-owned Cultural Centre², followed by those of the old Rivers

State, Cross River State and other States of the Federation, did not significantly improve the situation. This was the position of things when, in 1994, the MUSON³ Centre was opened to the public, essentially for the purpose of encouraging classical music performances and other social functions such as weddings, product launches, and Annual General Meetings (AGMs) of corporate organizations. Israel Eboh (2005), in an interview with *The Daily Sun*, expressed the view that

the ideal places for performance include MUSON Centre, Unilag Auditorium and the National Arts Theatre at Iganmu (26).

He went further to score the MUSON Centre high as the choice destination for theatrical productions specifically targeted at the elite audience.

The Gloryland Cultural Centre, Yenegoa, Bayelsa State, is wholly owned by the State government. It serves as the official performing venue for the State's Council for Arts and Culture, a parastatal under the Ministry of Information, Culture, Tourism and Strategy. The project was initiated during the military era by the administration of Navy Captain Omoniyi Caleb Olubolade. However, at the turn of democratic governance in 1999, the first Executive Governor of the State, Chief D. S. P. Alamiyeseigha, ordered the demolition of the structure, following reports by structural engineers that it was a death trap. Econ Associates were then contracted to build the present edifice, which has a seating capacity of 2,500 in the main auditorium, with additional provision for a gallery audience and an extra floor space that seats at least 500 more people. If more and more State governments could emulate this worthy example by putting up similar structures, the persistent problem of paucity of performance spaces in Nigeria would gradually become a thing of the past.

The Emergence of Theatre Facilities Management in Nigeria

The evolution of theatre structures in Nigeria can be traced to the traditional village squares, palaces or shrines. Writing on aspects of Kalabari Religious life, Horton (in Ogunbiyi, 1981) observes as follows:

Each village, however cramped, has nevertheless a large central space used for sessions of the village assembly and for religious festivals (81).

Similarly, Yemi Ogunbiyi (1981), while re-evaluating the works of Meki Nzewi and other Igbo scholars on traditional Igbo festival theatre, states as follows:

It is needless to add, of course, that the setting for these performances is generally an undefined area, usually the village square (12).

We know that the traditional secular theatre is communal in nature, and that our ancestors might have practised their theatre in any of the three mentioned venues. It must be noted, however, that what is today referred to as the evolution of theatre venues took full effect with the coming of the Europeans, who founded churches and mission schools across the country.

Taking a historical look at this development, Duro Oni (2004) recalls the facts as follows:

Beginning from 1880, the earliest recorded attempts at dramatic entertainment and concerts took place mainly in Lagos, Ibadan and Abeokuta. The performances were organized mainly by the Catholic and Anglican Church groups and were held mostly in school halls and in churches (87).

Gbilekaa (1997) provides additional information by stating that October 24 is regarded as a significant date in the evolution of modern drama in Nigeria, because, on that date,

an audience of merchants, churchmen, civil servants, students and artisans, sat in a small house at Awolola Street, listening to the first public concert of western music in Lagos (3-4).

Commenting further, Gbilekaa (1997) states:

Besides the Academy and other dramatic clubs, the Missionary schools in Lagos contributed immensely in promoting European culture and the arts. Foremost among these schools was Lagos Grammar School Entertainment Society, founded in 1873, a concert was organized in a schoolroom in which eighteen Europeans were in attendance, in 1881, and they gave a successful Easter Concert that revealed the craft of the principal and of the juvenile actors (6).

Citing from the pioneering works of Lynnn Leonard (1967) and J. A. Adedeji (1971), Gbilekaa (1997) reiterates that

The C.M.S. Girls' School, founded in 1872 under Reverend Adolphus Mann, also participated actively in concerts in the 1880s under the direction and inspiration of Robert Coker, the Mozart of West Africa. In 1862, the Wesleyans started a Boys' School and, by 1879, there was an Entertainment Society which mounted successful concerts, particularly in 1880, under C. A. Sapara Williams (6).

This was followed by another significant event as recalled by Gbilekaa in the same work as follows:

With the foundation of St. Gregory's in 1818, dramatic activities were stepped up. By 1881, the Catholics had built a hall that could seat 800 people, perhaps for the staging of concerts (6).

Duro Oni, quoting from Leonard (1967) sheds further light on this historical sequence in the following words:

The venues for these performances varied. Most of them were held in schoolrooms such as the St. Paul's Breadfruit, St Gregory's Grammar School, and the Holy Trinity, Ebute-Ero, all in Lagos. The Catholic Church, in 1887, motivated by the high attendance at these concerts, built a new schoolroom spacious enough to seat 800 spectators (Duro Oni, quoting Leonard, 1967:88).

There is a minor conflict of accuracy in the exact date that the 800-seater schoolroom was built. While Gbilekaa puts it at 1881, a much earlier work by Leonard, which is closer to the event, puts it at 1887. However, from Leonard's account, Duro Oni deduces the development of some form of competition between the missionaries in mounting theatrical productions as a direct result of the building of the 800-seater hall by the Catholics.

As witnessed in Medieval Europe, the involvement of the church missions in theatrical performances, and the use of church halls and schoolrooms for the purpose of drama, drew strong criticisms from within and outside the church, as Leonard is quoted as saying:

However, despite the popularity of these performances, some opposition began to emerge in the church concerning the desirability of the productions. Some clergymen and prominent members of the church felt that some of the entertainments were not only devoid of

religious tendency, but seemed to enter into undisguised competition with the music hall and theatre (Oni, quoting Leonard, 1967:87)

To show the level of public concern the controversy had provoked, Leonard is reported to have said:

Entertainment had become so popular in Abeokuta by 1883 that someone enquired if the schoolmasters of the C.M.S. were sent to Abeokuta to be promoters of "Drama Clubs" and "Dancing Clubs" (87).

So much antipathy had been created that the need for a separate venue for these entertainments, outside the places of worship, became quite imperative. This was the background to the eventual erection of the Glover Memorial Hall as noted below:

This demand for a public hall led to a meeting of eleven Europeans and twenty-eight "native gentlemen" in September 1884 to "discuss the scheme for the erection" of a public hall... On June 21, 1887, the foundation laying ceremony of the Glover Memorial Hall was held, and six years later, in 1893, it was finally declared open by Governor McGregor and his wife (88-89).

Previously, performances had taken place in some alternative halls and public buildings as identified below:

Halls and public buildings used for these concerts and entertainments, prior and after Glover, included The Academy on Awolola Street, the Phoenix Hall located at Tinubu Square, the Ilupesi Hall, the Court Hall in Tinubu, as well as the Lagos Club House (89).

Interestingly, although the Glover Memorial Hall was specifically built to host secular shows, it suddenly became the choice venue for church productions. Of all the structures built for the purpose of theatrical events during the colonial era, this hall was, unarguably, the most outstanding, in terms of the volume of productions it hosted and the quality of the audience. From its inception in 1893, the Glover Hall became the favourite venue for most of the play productions that were later to shape the history of Nigerian theatre, starting with D. A. Oloyede's *King Elejigbo and the Prince of Kotangora*⁴, in 1894, to Hubert Ogunde's *Worse than Crime*⁵, staged in 1945. Gbilekaa (1997) captures the historical perspective thus:

On April 22, 1894, the Egbe Ife gave a public performance of the play (*King Elejigbo and the Prince of Kotangora*) at the Glover Hall before a teeming crowd of about one thousand people. Apparently, they were the first church drama group to perform in a public hall (11).

He observes further:

Engulfed in the euphoria of success, the Egbe Ife staged yet another play, *The Jealous Queen Oya of Oyo*, again at Glover Memorial Hall, in 1905. This was closely followed by *Penelope*, written by A. A. Obadina, in 1908, also at the Glover Hall (11).

In the light of the above facts, the axiomatic catchphrase, "the venue makes the event", which became true of famous venues such as the National Theatre, had even been truer of the Old Glover Hall. No major production of this period was considered worth its salt if it was not taken to the Glover Hall, so much so that after a church production might have been held in a Church Hall, it was still taken to the Glover Memorial Hall for public consumption. Gbilekaa (1997) recalls one such memorable show thus:

The early plays, which exposed Ogunde's immense theatrical talent and brought him to the limelight were: *The Garden of Eden* and *The Throne of God*. These were first produced for The Church of the Lord, Ebute Metta, Lagos, on 12 June, 1944. The production was opened to the public at Glover Memorial Hall under the chairmanship of the Late Nnamdi Azikiwe. It was well received by the audience (16).

In her account of the rise of Hubert Ogunde's Theatre, Egun Clark (1981) reproduces a letter written by an expatriate British Officer, Major Anthony Syer, and published in *The Daily Service*⁶, which reads thus:

Since my arrival in this country, I have seen many African plays and operas...but I had the greatest surprise of my life when I attended the rehearsal of the African opera entitled *Mr Devil's Money* by the African Music Research Party, written, composed, and produced by Hubert Ogunde,...staged at the Glover Hall in May, 1946 (Major Anthony Syer, in Egun Clark, 1981:296).

However, other halls of similar significance sprang up in some of the major cities of the young Nigerian nation. One such hall, as Oni

(2004:98) readily recalls is Obisesan Hall in Ibadan where Dexter Lyndersay⁷ recollects watching an Ogunde performance in 1966.

In 1975, the Nigerian government undertook its most ambitious project, so far, in the Arts and Culture sector, by the erection of the National Arts Theatre in Lagos, as part of its preparations for the hosting of the 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (tagged FESTAC '77). The magnitude of the project is captured by Oni (2004) in the following graphic description:

The National Theatre of Nigeria, situated in Iganmu, Lagos, is a huge multipurpose Complex occupying an area of 1.2 sq. km. It has a main hall which seats from 3,500 to 5,000, depending on whether staging is arranged in a "proscenium" or "in the round". Other venues in the complex include a Conference/Banquet Hall, two Cinema Halls, an Exhibition Hall, a Press Conference Room, Restaurants, a Bookshop and a Clinic. Originally built for the hosting of the 2nd World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77), the National Theatre was formally opened on September 30, 1976, by the then Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo (114).

This project was later to inspire various State governments to construct befitting Cultural Centres in their States.

The Emergence of University Theatres in Nigeria

The growing access to performance spaces received a boost with the building of purpose-built theatres in our tertiary institutions, beginning, of course, with the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan. As Duro Oni (2004) submits,

...the emergence of Theatre Departments and Centres for Cultural/African Studies in Nigerian universities boosted the art and practice of stage lighting in contemporary Nigerian theatre. The universities that established these departments, starting with the establishment of the School of Drama in Ibadan, included the Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly University of Ife), University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Jos, University of Calabar, University of Port Harcourt, Ahmadu Bello University, and the University of Uyo (104).

The list has grown even larger as most universities in Nigeria (excluding those of Agriculture and Technology) run one

programme or the other in Creative Arts, Drama, or full-fledged Theatre Arts. Considering the fact that the institutions are normally the centres of research and scholarship, the need for suitable theatre buildings as academic laboratories cannot be over-emphasised. As Duro Oni (2004) points out,

most of the early performances that Lyndersay designed the lighting for, were at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre, which is often described as the first purpose-built theatre in Nigeria, even though it was initially completed as a Lecture Theatre in 1955 (108).

He observes further:

Since the inception of the Arts Theatre in 1955, numerous productions have been staged there. Prominent among those staged by the faculty and students, however, are: John Osborne's *Luther* (1969) directed by Uriel Paul Worika, Wale Ogunyemi's *Kiriji* (1971) directed by Dapo Adelugba, Elroy Flecker's *Hassan* (1972) directed by Bayo Oduneye...*Red is the Freedom Road* (1989) written and directed by Femi Osofisan and Bode Sowande, respectively...and J. P. Clark's *All for Oil* (2001) (Oni, 2004:108).

Thus, the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan became to Ibadan, what the Glover Memorial Hall was to Lagosians⁸: the choice centre for performances, not only for purely academic productions, but also for the professional theatre troupes, like those of Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo. Duro Oni (2004) provides further details as follows:

Of note are also productions by outside groups at the Arts Theatre. Some of these include the earlier works of Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola such as *Oba Koso* (1968) and *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1968). Others are *Ipitombi* (1976) by the South African Group, Fred Agbeyegbe's *Woe Unto Death* (1984), directed by Jide Ogungbade, Sam Art William's *Home* (1988) directed by Chuck Mike and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in a 1991 production by the London Bubble Theatre directed by Peter Rowe (111).

However, in spite of the historic significance of the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, the University of Lagos Main Auditorium, an imposing 2,000-seat structure, remains one of the best equipped in the country to host productions of international repute, as Oni points out in the detailed description below:

University of Lagos Auditorium has a 2,000-seat theatre made up of 1,300 seats at the gallery level with 700 seats at the balcony. It has a motorised revolving stage and orchestra lift, coupled with a 20-way counterweight flying system, four of which are motorised. Some of the equipment installed in the Auditorium include a 120-channel Rank Strand Three set Dimmer Board, with lighting equipment that include 500 watts, 1,000 watts and 2,000 watts spotlights, fresnels, flood lights, strip lights and cyclorama lights. For years after its completion in 1977, the University of Lagos Auditorium, was a two lighting bridges and four lighting bars. Most groups that have performed in the University of Lagos Auditorium, including the 1993 hi-tech production of *Sikilu*, have found the stage lighting equipment and facilities quite adequate.

Structural Challenges

One of the early challenges of these new theatres was structural – how to suit the theatres to the peculiar needs of the African total theatre. In one of the earliest articles on this issue, Wole Soyinka (cited in Ogunbiyi, 1981) comments on one of them as follows:

Since I saw the foundations, I have not dared to move near the completed Theatre at Nsukka. Before the “theatre” of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, was built, the designer pilgrimaged to the then University College, Ibadan, to seek inspiration from the Arts Theatre. In vain did a few producers plead with them to avoid a repetition of existing crime – a replica was built and the “ARTS” was superseded in drabness and tawdry. J. K. Randle Hall, now the latest boil – would some imagination have cost it more? And these abortions will continue to rise all over the country, offensive to the eye and repressive of the imagination. It is surely because the structure controls, even manipulates, the artist (457).

The dismal picture painted above was reinforced by Uwa (1986) in a later article in which she gave her first impression of the National Theatre:

My personal experience on my return from Ghana in 1977 was most traumatic. On rushing to embrace and feast on what I had thought would be the dream of all dramatists in its thoughtful composition of African derived and traditionally informed structural idioms and flexibility that would give full rein to the playwright's imagination; I was confronted with an amorphous parody of Bulgarian gymnasium! (Uwa, 1986:61).

She had a brief chat with the Bulgarian site technician, which merely worsened her personal distress:

When I asked (with tears in my eyes) if this was what they call a theatre even in their own country, he elatedly announced in his little English: "Madam, it is not a theatre, it is a gymnasium!" And went on to rhapsodise and extol the push-button virtues of the "Bowl" which would reveal all the wonders of technology that would transform it into a boxing-ring or a skating-ring here in Africa! (61).

It is appalling that, over and over again, the government contracts out the construction of theatre facilities, without due consultation with the practitioners or theatre technocrats, resulting in the perpetuation of the same errors. The Gloryland Cultural Centre, in Bayelsa State, fared no better, as discussed below. Last-minute changes had to be made to correct some embarrassing errors noticed too late.

Gloryland Cultural Centre and MUSON Centre: A comparison

Easily one of the outstanding landmarks in Yenegoa, the capital of Bayelsa State, the Gloryland Cultural Centre Complex is situated at Hospital Road Junction, Ovom-Yenegoa, in the heart of the city. The edifice stands in the very location where the first one was demolished for reasons earlier provided. The Centre, which is under the management of the Bayelsa State Council, has a large auditorium, which was said to have accommodated as many as 4,000 people during the African Movies Academy Awards (AMAA)⁹ hosted there, a few years back.

The Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) was formed in October, 1983, and was granted a certificate of incorporation (No 3392) on the 22nd of March, 1985, under the Land (perpetual succession) Act, Cap. 98. The inspiration to form the Society came from Sir Mervyn Brown, the British High Commissioner accredited to Nigeria, from 1979 to 1983. During the four years of his sojourn in Nigeria, Sir Mervyn Brown and his wife organized musical soirees and concerts to which prominent Nigerians and expatriates were invited. These activities stimulated interest in the appreciation and enjoyment of classical music among those who attended. As the time of his retirement in 1983 drew near, it was feared that, unless positive steps were taken, the noble tradition he had set might not be sustained after his departure. Thus, with his assistance, MUSON was

formed in mid-October, 1983, for the principal purpose of promoting the understanding and enjoyment of classical music and other types of serious music in Nigeria.

The Gloryland Cultural Centre, on the other hand, was established for the main purpose of serving as a Centre for the promotion and propagation of the culture of the people of Bayelsa State, through the State's Council for Arts and Culture. By extension, it also serves as the official residence of the Arts Council and the performing troupe.

Like the Arts Council, the MUSON Centre also has a resident Choir, founded in 1994. The major difference here is that activities at the MUSON Centre tend to evolve from a set of visions inspired by the founding fathers, and sustained by the discipline and commitment of a workforce whose major function is to keep the Centre going. This is not so with the Gloryland Cultural Centre, which was not conceived as a business venture, but more as an edifice for cultural propagation. There is an implicit clause in its establishment, which mandates the Cultural Centre to work in conjunction with the Arts Councils of other States, and support any meaningful projects, by individuals or groups, aimed at the promotion of arts and culture.

As a matter of deliberate policy, the MUSON Management does not go into collaboration with theatre companies. Instead, they prefer the 'cash and carry' option, where the producing company pays for the space, while MUSON provides the facilities and the enabling environment for a successful performance. In the case of Gloryland Centre, there is a provision, within the office of the Marketing Division, for troupes to be brought from outside the State to perform for Bayelsa audiences. However, there is no clear-cut policy on how the proceeds from such collaborative ventures would be shared.

Both MUSON and Gloryland Centres have marketing units or departments that seem to perform similar duties. At the Gloryland Cultural Centre, there are two box offices through which tickets are sold for an event. However, MUSON Centre is often not too keen to undertake the sale of tickets on behalf of the performing troupes. However, the in-house rule requires producing companies to send in some tickets (if they so wish) to the Marketing and Sales Department

of the Centre, about two weeks before a show, and that the sold and unsold tickets must be collected a few days before the event.

Considering the specific purposes for which they were set up, it is obvious that both Centres were not conceived with live theatre in mind. This is not surprising as most of the theatrical structures we pride ourselves in in this part of the world are not purpose-built. However, with a few adjustments here and there, the MUSON has proved to be adaptable to stage productions. With Gloryland Centre, a lot of readjustments are needed in the areas of lighting, acoustics, safety and conveniences, to comply with the minimum requirements for live theatre. The major drawback has to do with the obstructive pillars which stand in the way of audience's sightlines, thus preventing adequate vision. This is a permanent problem, which can only be solved by pulling down the entire structure and re-building it.

Conclusion

From the information gathered in the course of this study, it is obvious that the issue of purpose-built theatres in this country has not been fully addressed by those in authority. It is an unpardonable waste of the tax-payers' money to put up structures in the name of the arts, without taking into consideration the specific requirements of the arts concerned. It is strongly recommended that politicians, and those in authority, should learn to share their vision with the experts before implementing their projects, for maximum benefits.

Furthermore, government should realize that theatre is big business for which genuine investments through the provision of the right physical facilities is now imperative. Such structures, once completed, should be freed from the stranglehold of the civil service bureaucracy, and placed in the hands of experts who can run them most creatively and profitably. The MUSON Centre should reconsider its attitude towards live theatre, particularly with regard to the high hiring fees, which tend to discourage prospective clients. As Israel Eboh (2005) pointed out in the interview earlier cited,

most often, a show that is taken to the MUSON Centre struggles to recover the hiring fee for the Centre; and so at times, one is compelled to run three shows in a day, just to re-coup the money spent (26).

This is not encouraging enough. A more acceptable and realistic hiring cost should be worked out, so that more and more producing companies will find it convenient to patronise the Centre.

The Marketing Divisions of both Centres should consider locating, and discussing with, theatre companies, the possibility of fruitful collaborations, so that theatre productions can be used to fill up the days of idleness, when there are no events taking place at either venue. This will not only keep the Centres busy and more financially solvent, but might also serve as a new initiative towards the resuscitation of live theatre, which went under with the ascendancy of the video film in this country. Most theatre practitioners cannot afford what it takes to put up live performances in befitting venues, especially with the prospect of poor attendance, before the old tradition of live theatre patronage is eventually regained. The MUSON Centre and the Gloryland Cultural Centre can provide leadership in this area. Meanwhile, it is hoped that more and more people will be encouraged to invest in the provision of theatre facilities, as a way of boosting access to performance spaces, thus enhancing the growth of the Nigerian theatre.

NOTES

1. Glover Hall was the major venue for most of the theatre performances that took place in Lagos between 1894 to the mid 1960s.
2. Work on the Benin Theatre Complex started in 1974 under the Military Administration of the then Lt. Col O. Ogbemudia. The principal architect was Demas Nwoko.
3. MUSON is an acronym for the Musical Society of Nigeria.
4. Seen by most theatre scholars as the first Nigerian play to be staged at the Glover Memorial Hall on April 22, 1894, a year after the edifice was commissioned.
5. One of the series of highly political plays that brought Hubert Ogunde in constant conflict with the colonial authorities.
6. *Daily Service* was one of the major newspapers in pre-independence Nigeria.
7. Dexter Lyndersay spent over twenty years in Nigeria, during which he traversed the entire country, and functioned

variously as Technical Director, Set Designer and Lighting Designer for over 250 productions. He also helped in the purchase and installation of stage lights in many educational institutions in Nigeria.

8. A citizen or resident of Lagos State.
9. An award for movie practitioners in Nigeria, once hosted at the Gloryland Cultural Centre, Yenegoa.

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