



Traditional Performance Environment and the Development of Nigerian Theatre: The Fattening Room Rites of Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

The traditional performance environment have played a significant role in the development of Nigerian theatre practice. These indigenous performance spaces served as a venue where dramatic performances like dance, music, ritual and communal festival engagements take place long before the introduction of modern theatre institutions in Nigeria. This study examines the Traditional Performance Environment and the Development of Nigerian Theatre Practice, by adopting the Fattening Room (*Nkugho/Mbopo*) Rites of Akwa Ibom State as the case study. The study evaluates the contributions of the Fattening Room (*Nkugho/Mbopo*) rites to theatre history and aesthetic evolution of Nigerian Theatre. Adopting ahistorical performance studies approach, this work explores the origins of rites, cultural significance and their theatrical dimensions through the analysis of performance space, costumes and body adornment, music and dance, community engagement, audience participation and ritual reenactment. Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, the Fattening Room performances occur within flexible communal spaces such as family compounds, village streets, market squares, and open arenas. These environments encourage direct interaction between performers and audiences, creating an immersive theatrical experience that differs substantially from Western stage conventions. By repositioning the Fattening Room (*Nkugho/Mbopo*) Rites within the discourse of theatre and performance studies, the study broadens the historiography of Nigerian Theatre and reaffirms the value of traditional performance practice as foundational sources of contemporary theatrical practice. It concludes that preserving and documenting traditional performance environments is essential not only for safeguarding Nigeria's intangible cultural heritage but also for enriching theatre scholarship and inspiring future generations of theatre practitioners.

Keywords: Traditional Performance Environment, Fattening Room Rites, Indigenous Performance, Ritual Theatre, Performance Studies, African Theatre.



Introduction

Theatre over the years has flourished in all cultures and has remained one of humanity's oldest forms of cultural expression. Historically, theatre has been in existence since when humans first gathered together to listen to someone else tell a story mostly in the evenings, sometimes called in the African context “Tales” or “Tales by Moonlight” (Ekaette Edem 93). This communal rituals gradually evolved into an organised performances that included storytelling, dance, music and songs, folklore and other communal practices. Although scholars differs in their documentation of its origin as many belief that theatrical performance emerged from human's desire to interact and communicate collective experiences through story telling and reenactment of life's daily occurrence. At other times some people say that theatre emerged from myth, ritual and traditional festivals/ ceremonies, which is the most widely accepted theories, traced to the origin of theatre. According to Oscar Brockett (1):

In seeking to describe its (theatre) origin, one must rely primarily on speculation, since there is little concrete evidence on which to draw. The most widely accepted theory, championed by anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, envisions theatre as emerging out of myth and ritual.

Brockett observes that one of the most widely accepted theories, traces the origin if theatre to myth and ritual, where repeated traditional ceremonial actions assumed dramatic characteristics. Although origin in ritual has long been the most popular, it is by no means the only theory about how the theatre came into being. In the African history, theatre evolved within the everyday life of the people, where performances are linked to birth, the coming of age and initiation, harvest, kingship, festivals, marriage, and death occasions carried out through traditional cultural practices as well as through Christian practices incorporating dramatic elements as dance, music, reenactment (drama), mime, costume, makeup, spectacle, storytelling and audience participation. Indigenous performances were deeply rooted in social, religious, political, and economic activities, serving as important vehicles for cultural continuity, education, conflict resolution, entertainment, and spiritual expression. The Africans have been kept alive for centuries through indigenous festival performances, which are peculiar to the person that celebrates it. And the life of a community is always renewed during festivals which also serve as a means of reunion between the old and the young, friends and family members. It is celebrated with cultural values, feasting, jubilation, entertainment, exchange of gifts, drinking and merrymaking with beautiful traditional



attire and make-up. It associates with dances, musical performances, incantations, prayers and sacrifices to the gods and the spirits of the ancestors (Ekaette Edem; 65).

The performances were done within the natural ambiance of the community, like the village square, shrines, market places and open arenas where there were clear distinctions between the performers (actors) and the members of the community who formed the audience members. The performance environment itself became an active component of the theatrical experience, influencing movement patterns, audience engagement, scenic composition, acoustics, and symbolic meaning. Theatre is seen as one of the earliest forms of cultural expressions in communities all around the world and is in the tradition of all cultures moreover it was used as a communication tool to disseminate information to the members of the community. Martin Banham argues that Africa's earliest theatrical encounters were rooted in indigenous languages and performance environments, where theatre functioned as an integral aspect of community life rather than a commercial enterprise.

According to Martin Banham; "... the earliest and longest encounter with theatre in African Countries is theatre and performance in the indigenous languages and in the indigenous environment" (4). This is an encounter that lasted for quite some time and even till date. At this point, the performers made use of indigenous language as a medium of presentation which was better understood by the audience for which the message was meant. As such, it was the most preferred method/tool for disseminating information to the local communities.

Some theory also states that theatre evolved from dances which was conceived through the imitation of movements from animal's voices and sounds. Early societies perceived connections between certain actions performed by the leaders of the group, the participants, spectators and the desired result of the whole society. The actions moved from habit to tradition, and then on to ceremony and ritual. The formulation of these actions and their subsequent repetition and rehearsal broke the ground for drama and theatre in Nigeria. Despite the richness and diversity of Nigeria's indigenous performance traditions, there are limited scholarly discourse on the theatrical significance of indigenous ritual performances with broader focus on performance environments. Existing studies have extensively examined masquerade traditions, travelling theatre, and contemporary dramatic literature, yet comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how traditional performance environments contributed to the evolution of theatrical practice in Nigeria.

Traditional Performance Environment and Theatre Development

Theatre development in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without examining the traditional performance environments which the dramatic expression has evolved. Even before the



emergence of Western proscenium and thrust theatres as introduced in Nigeria through the literary theatre practice, African societies had developed organised performance traditions that incorporated actors, dance, music and instrumentation, ritual, storytelling communal participation, masquerade, costume and makeup. These performances were not only for entertainment and recreational activities, they played a role as a vital social institutions where communities preserved their history, transmit cultural values, reinforce religious beliefs, celebrate important stage in human existence and also communicate to the gods. Therefore, the performance environment became an indivisible component of the theatrical event, influencing both aesthetic expression and audience experience.

African Scholars like Martin Banham has argued that indigenous performances gave rise to the modern African Theatre practice. From Ekaette Edem, Africans in general are well known in the world for their rich cultural tradition which is usually manifested in their different forms of artistic performances through festivals and other oral art forms, such as folktales, folklore, and dancing, drumming, chanting, ballad and so on (91). Martin Banham further asserts that, “the earliest encounters with theatre in Africa occurred within indigenous communities where performances were presented in local languages and in traditional cultural environments rather than in purpose-built theatres” (4). These traditional spaces like the riverside, shrines, palace courtyard, sacred groves and many more served the people as natural performance environment in which the action took place before the communal audience who participate actively in the theatrical experience. African traditional performance space encouraged interaction, communal involvement and active participation of the spectators.

Spatial organisation is also determined by the performance environment where the performance were commonly staged in an open space, while having the audience surround the performers. According to Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb, “early ritual performances across many cultures were presented in circular arrangements that encouraged intimacy between performers and spectator” (86). This kind theatre formation and audience engagement gave birth to the theatre-in-the-round stage configuration. This kind of theatre configuration enabled unrestricted audience participation and eliminated the physical barriers commonly associated with framed stages. The environment itself, including trees, shrines, rivers, village compounds, and market squares often functioned as natural scenery, thereby integrating landscape with performance.

Within this environment, the actors and the spectators belonged to the same cultural community, with a very thin line of differences as they cohabited within the same space. Mervyn McLean observes, African performance traditions to emphasise collective participation rather than passive observation, thereby reinforcing social cohesion and communal identity (McLean 29). This



interactive relationship distinguishes indigenous African theatre from many Western theatrical conventions that maintain a clear division between stage and auditorium. In Nigeria, a good number of traditional festivals and ceremonies accommodate the intimate relationship between performance environment and theatre development. From the Yoruba Egungun masquerade performance to the Igbo Mmanwu, the Efik Ekpe festival, the Tiv Kwagh-hir traditional theatre to the Ibibio *Mbopo* traditional rites, combine some dramatic elements, ritual symbolism, dance and music, spectacle and audiences, costume and makeup within a carefully designed communal spaces. The performances possess many of the structural creativity and aesthetically characteristics as linked with theatre, such as rehearsals, replaying, costume design, dramatic sequencing and language communication (dialogue). Understanding traditional performance environments will provide a broader perspective on the evolution of theatre in Nigeria.

The Fattening Room (*Nkugho*/Mbopo) Rites of Akwa Ibom State as Performance

The Fattening Room Rites, known among the Ibibio, Annang, and Efik as *Mbopo* and among the Oron people as *Nkugho*, constitute one of the most elaborate indigenous performance traditions in Akwa Ibom State. Although commonly described as a cultural institution for preparing young women for marriage, the rites possess all the essential characteristics of theatrical performance, including performers, audience, costume, music, dance, movement, dramatic action, symbolic representation, staging, and spectacle. When examined from the perspective of performance studies, the Fattening Room Rites transcend their social and ritual functions to emerge as a carefully structured theatrical event that communicates communal values through dramatic enactment. Ekaette Edem asserts that “Festivals are common to all human societies, and they vary according to the ecology and the social structure of the people” (8).

The *Nkugho* festival as associated with the people of Oron and Okobo Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State is one out of numerous festivals organised yearly right from ancient times. Oron and Okobo share a common boundary and majority of the people in the two areas speak Oron language and form part of what they refer to as Oro Nation. The Oron and Okobo share similar traditions and culture, with a minor difference in some parts of Okobo. The people live like brothers and sisters and have almost everything in common. The Oron and Okobo people are known for their colourful festivals similar to those of the Efik/Calabar people of Cross River State as they share a common boundary separated by water.

From their numerous festivals, the *Nkugho* is the oldest and the most celebrated festival in the community. *Nkugho* festival as a ritual drama combines ritual elements and some dramatic elements, that makes the celebration beautiful and attractive. In an oral interview with Sylvester Bassey, a native of Okobo and the Principal Executive Officer (PEO) with Akwa Ibom State Council for Arts and Culture (CAC), Uyo, it was gathered that *Nkugho* or *Mbopo* means fattening,



and is usually performed by young maidens between the ages of fifteen (15) and twenty-five (25). The rites begin with the formal selection of young maidens who is recognised to attain marriageable age and are considered morally upright by their families and the community.

Traditionally, the selected maidens undergo a period of seclusion lasting several months, during which elderly women provide intensive instruction in domestic management, childcare, marital responsibilities, personal hygiene, traditional etiquette, and acceptable social conduct. The seclusion period functions as both an educational institution and a period of dramatic preparation, during which the maiden is transformed physically, psychologically, and socially before her public appearance. According to oral accounts documented by Ekaette Ime Ekpo, the confinement also symbolises the transition from adolescence to responsible womanhood and prepares the initiate for her new social identity (Ekpo 138–141). Sylvester also mentioned that: the maidens are usually confined between the period of nine months and one year, to receive traditional education on home management, cooking, childcare, relationship with husband, in-laws and other family members and general mannerism. The training is however, not compulsory for every female child, although highly recommended and regarded as criteria for becoming a good homemaker.

Throughout the period of confinement, the performance process extends beyond the secluded room into the wider community. Before entering seclusion, each maiden is ceremonially paraded through the village, accompanied by elderly women, relatives, young attendants, and community members as mentioned by Maria. Dressed in distinctive red attire and shaded beneath ceremonial umbrellas while their mother's wear *Onyoyo* (a traditional Efik Gown). The maiden visits prominent households where gifts and blessings are presented by members of the community. A child between five to ten years carries *Ikim* (a calabash pot) along on her head, to contain all the gift items to be presented to her in each of the houses visited. The essence of accepting gifts from the members of the community as part of the traditional rites is to seek support from the community by the families so that the maidens will be well taken care of during the period of their stay in the house. How they are well taken care of by the family will be the final result the people will witness on the day of their presentation to the entire community, since they are believed to be fat, fresh and beautiful.

This public procession serves both dramatic and symbolic purposes: it formally introduces the maiden to prospective suitors while simultaneously inviting communal participation in the forthcoming rites. The procession transforms ordinary village pathways into performance spaces in which movement, music, costume, gesture, and audience interaction combine to create a dynamic theatrical spectacle. According to Mrs. Maria, an elderly woman in the community, *Nkughò* is a celebration of womanhood and it stands as a mark of honour for the girl child and her parents. The *Nkughò* rites are performed by virgins in the community as a celebration of



womanhood, in other to discourage yearly pregnancy outside wedlock. According to Ime Ekpo , “in the pre-colonial era, every Efik-Ibibio maiden was expected to remain a virgin until she was given out in marriage and she had to undergo an operation of clitoridectomy” (139).

In preparations for the ceremony proper, the Nkuho’s hair will be barbed. The Fattening Room itself functions as a symbolic performance environment. During confinement, the room is carefully decorated with locally sourced materials such as white clay (*ndom*), white sand (*afia ntan*), and her body decorated with red chalk (*idud*), turmeric (*adan unen*), and palm oil, all of which carry cultural and aesthetic significance. Oko (2019) asserts that; the things needed in the room were bamboo bed, chair, mat, plates, mirror, combs, towel, chewing stick, wash-hand basin and bucket (66). At the provisions of these items, the maiden is placed on *ayah* (traditional mat) with her body well decorated with *idud* (red chalk) for the period she will stay indoors. *Idud* (red chalk), *adan unen* (turmeric), *ndom* (white clay), *adan mansang* (groundnut oil) and *afia ntan* (white sand). This will be applied daily by the elderly women to polish her skin for the number of days that she will be confined in the house. These materials are applied daily to beautify the maiden while the white clay (*ndom*) and the white sand (*afia ntan*) are used to transform the physical environment into a sacred performance space that reflects ideals of purity, fertility, beauty, and prosperity. The repeated application of these symbolic substances on her body fits in as theatrical makeup and scenic preparation, reinforcing the performative nature of the rites.



Plate 1 :Plate showing *Idud* (red chalk) on the right, *Ndom* (white clay) in the middle, *Uto* (red powder), *Adan Unen* (tumeric) on the left. Ekaette's personal collection.

Costume and body adornment constitute another important theatrical element within the performance. On the day of public presentation, the maiden is dressed by her mother and other married women in the family. She will be decorated with the Oron traditional *Nkugho* costumes which are all red (Oro Nation). Her body will be decorated with *idia adan* (palm oil) mixed with *idud* (red chalk) to have a smooth, shiny, reddish body surface, along with a whitish substance called *ndom* (white clay) for decorations on their faces and *uto* (a red substance derived from a tree) with symbolic meanings. She is made to appear in elaborate traditional attire comprising intricately beaded skillfully designed headpieces (*ating*), a tube-like top called *ufuk eba* (bra or breast cover) and *ofong isin* (short wrapper), necklaces, waist beads, wrist ornaments, ankle decorations, and other culturally significant accessories.



The hand-made beads are; *ekpakob nkwa* (shoulder cover beads), *etang iton nkwa* (neck beads), *esit nkwa* (chest Beads), *nkwa isin* (waist beads), *nwaha nkuho* (a piece of red cloth tied round the waist) and *mkpo ubok* or *nkua ubok* (hand or wrist beads). On their hands and legs also are *Ndidi* (made of wool and other materials). The visual richness of these costumes contributes significantly to the spectacle of the performance while simultaneously communicating social identity, cultural heritage, and ceremonial status. As Patrice Pavis observes, costume in performance functions as a visual language that communicates character, status, and cultural identity before a performer utters a single word (Pavis 87).



Plate 2 : Beautifully adorned *Nkughọ* maidens with the researcher and their mother Mrs. Maria Ekpenyong. Ekaette's personal collection.



Plate 3: Beautifully adorned *Nkuho* Maidens.

Ekaette's personal collection.

The younger dancers make use of a short cap different from the long one used by the *Nkuho* maidens, short *ofong isin* (wrapper for waist cover) and a tube-like blouse called *ufuk eba* (breast cover). The women tie a pair wrapper draped above the knee called *ofong isin* (waist cloth) and a



full blouse top to cover their body called *itong ofong* (top blouse) symbolizing that they are married. The mother uses *Onyonyo* which is a loose long flowing gown. The groom and the drummers use red caps (*igiera*), white chieftaincy, polo or singlets (*itong ofong*) and tie an expensive wrapper (*ofong-isin*) around their waist. According to Mrs. Maria, the *ating* (high long beaded and skillfully designed cap) is not sold in the market. She stresses that the cap remains a legacy in each of the families and could only be rented or borrowed.

Music and dance provides the rhythmic foundation of the performance. Throughout the celebration, traditional instrumental ensembles accompany every stage of the ceremony using indigenous instruments such as *Ntakorok* (wood block), *Obodom* (wooden slit drum), *Ibọrọ Ekọmọ* (hourglass drum), *Eka Ibit* (side drum), *Atang-Utang Ibit* (talking drum), *Nkong* (gong) and *Nsak Ubok* (hand rattle). Festivals are being considered to be important in the evolution of theatre in Nigeria, the *Nkughọ* festival could be classified as one. The musicians coordinate closely with dancers, singers, and performers to create carefully synchronised movements that sustain dramatic tension and audience engagement. Songs performed during the rites celebrate womanhood, family honour, fertility, and communal solidarity while simultaneously reinforcing the educational themes embedded within the ceremony. The close integration of music, dance, movement, and dramatic action reflects what John Blacking describes as the inseparable relationship between music, movement, and social meaning in African performance traditions (Blacking 28).

Audience participation remains one of the defining characteristics of the Fattening Room Rites. Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, where spectators remain largely passive observers, members of the community actively participate throughout the performance. Family members, elders, musicians, dancers, friends, children, and visitors contribute through singing, dancing, gift presentation, advice, applause, and communal celebration. The boundaries separating performers from spectators become fluid as members of the audience intermittently assume performative roles throughout the ceremony. This participatory structure corresponds closely with African indigenous performance traditions in which theatre functions as a communal rather than an individual artistic experience.



The climax of the rites occurs during the public procession and ceremonial dance performances at the village square or market arena. Having completed her period of seclusion, the maiden is carried ceremonially through the community by young men while musicians, dancers, relatives, and spectators accompany the procession with songs, rhythmic drumming, and choreographed movement. At designated performance points, including the compounds of respected elders and the village square, the maiden performs graceful dances that demonstrate elegance, maturity, confidence, and readiness for married life. Wrestling contests, additional dance performances, dramatic displays, and communal festivities further enrich the theatrical spectacle and transform the event into a multidimensional cultural performance.

From a theatrical perspective, the Fattening Room Rites exhibit clearly identifiable dramatic structures comparable to those found in conventional theatre. The selection of the maiden establishes the exposition; the period of seclusion represents dramatic development; the public procession and ceremonial presentation constitute the climax; while the acceptance of the maiden into married life provides the dramatic resolution. Each stage follows a carefully organized sequence of events governed by rehearsed conventions, symbolic actions, and communal expectations. This structured progression demonstrates that the rites possess a coherent dramaturgical framework rather than functioning as a series of unrelated ceremonial activities.

The Fattening Room Rites therefore represent far more than a cultural institution associated with marriage preparation. They constitute an integrated performance tradition that combines ritual, education, visual aesthetics, music, dance, spectacle, costume, symbolism, and audience participation within an organized theatrical framework. Their continued practice illustrates the sophistication of indigenous Nigerian performance traditions and reinforces the argument that African theatre evolved from dynamic communal performance systems long before the introduction of Western theatrical conventions. As both a cultural institution and a theatrical event, the *Nkughọ*/Mbopo rites remain an enduring example of how indigenous performance environments have contributed to the historical development and aesthetic identity of Nigerian theatre.



Plate 5: Two maidens at the front with calabash for gifts, at the middle is a dancer, behind are the maidens and their mothers Performing at the square.

Ekaette's personal collection.



Plate 6: The Researcher at the middle with Mr. Sylvester Bassey standing beside Mrs. Maria Ekenyoung during the interview session. Ekaette’s personal collection.

Findings

Research by African scholars has pointed to the continuity, vitality and relevance of the genuinely communal theatre as manifested in festivals. The theatrical significance of the Fattening Room (*Nkugho/Mbopo*) Rites is most evident in the integration of its various performance elements. Every component of the ceremony including performance space, costume, music, dance, audience participation, and symbolism—functions collectively to create a unified theatrical experience. These elements are neither accidental nor decorative; rather, they are deliberately organised to communicate cultural values, reinforce communal identity, and dramatise the transformation of the initiate from adolescence to womanhood. Their integration reflects the



holistic nature of indigenous African performance, where dramatic meaning emerges through the interaction of visual, auditory, spatial, and symbolic forms.

Performance Space

Space is one of the most fundamental elements of theatre because it provides the physical environment within which dramatic action occurs. In indigenous African performance traditions, performance spaces are not restricted to purpose-built theatres and halls but include found spaces, village squares, palace courtyards, market places, family compounds, shrines, riversides, and open communal arenas. These spaces are therefore designed into theatrical performance environments to fit into the kind of event that will take place. According to Peter Brook, theatre begins whenever a performer occupies a space, regardless of whether the performance occurs inside a formal theatre building (Brook 9).

The Fattening Room Rites performance unfolds across multiple locations, each possessing distinct dramatic functions. The maiden's family compound serves as the point of departure for ceremonial activities; the seclusion room functions as a symbolic backstage where transformation occurs; village streets become performance routes during ceremonial processions; while the market square or village arena provides the principal performance venue for dance, music displays and public presentation. These spaces collectively create a dynamic performance environment that allows the action to unfold before an actively participating audience. The performance environment also determines audience arrangement. Spectators surround the performers in circular or semi-circular formations, creating what Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb identify as theatre-in-the-round, one of the earliest and most interactive forms of theatrical staging (Wilson and Goldfarb 86). This spatial configuration of the stage eliminates barriers between performers and spectators, thereby encouraging direct communication, spontaneity, and communal participation.

Costume and Body Adornment

Costume serves as one of the most visible forms of theatrical communication within the Fattening Room Rites. Beyond its decorative function, traditional attire communicates age, social



status, cultural identity, marital readiness, and ceremonial significance. Patrice Pavis argues that costume functions as a semiotic system through which audiences immediately recognize character, identity, and dramatic context before dialogue begins (Pavis 87). The Nkuho maiden appears in elaborate ceremonial attire that includes the richly beaded *ating* (ceremonial headpiece), *ufuk eba* (breast covering), *ofong isin* (waist wrapper), waist beads, necklaces, wrist ornaments, shoulder beads, and ankle decorations. The predominance of red in the costume symbolises vitality, fertility, honour, and beauty within Oron and Okobo cultural traditions. Married women, attendants, drummers, and the groom also wear distinctive costumes that immediately distinguish their respective roles within the performance.

Body adornment further enriches the visual aesthetics of the performance. Red chalk (*idud*), white clay (*ndom*), turmeric (*adan unen*), palm oil (*idia adan*), and natural pigments are artistically applied to the maiden's body to enhance physical beauty while simultaneously conveying symbolic meanings associated with purity, prosperity, fertility, and transition into adulthood. These body decorations function much like theatrical makeup, transforming the performer into a ceremonial figure whose appearance reflects the cultural ideals celebrated by the community.

Music

Music constitutes the emotional and structural foundation of the Fattening Room Rites. Throughout the ceremony, indigenous musical instruments accompany every phase of the performance, providing rhythm, dramatic continuity, emotional intensity, and ceremonial atmosphere. African theatre has traditionally maintained an inseparable relationship between music and dramatic action. As John Blacking observes, music in African societies is not an isolated artistic activity but an integral component of social life and performance, where sound, movement, and cultural meaning are closely interconnected (Blacking 28).

These instruments regulate movement, accompany songs, announce dramatic transitions, and sustain the rhythmic energy of the performance. The drummers demonstrate considerable technical skill, often rehearsing extensively before the ceremony to ensure coordinated interaction



between music and dance. Songs performed during the rites communicate praise, advice, moral instruction, and communal values. Through call-and-response singing, performers and spectators collectively reinforce the educational objectives of the ceremony while sustaining audience participation throughout the event. Indigenous drumming is a vital part of Nigerian culture, playing a significant role in music and theatre performances (Ime Ekpo, Ekaette Edem and Margaret Edet; 190).

Dance and Movement

Dance functions as one of the principal modes of dramatic expression within the Fattening Room performance. Every movement executed by the maiden, attendants, drummers, and supporting performers is culturally codified and symbolically significant. Rather than existing merely for entertainment, the dances communicate grace, dignity, discipline, maturity, and readiness for married life. Following the completion of the seclusion period, the maiden performs carefully choreographed dances during the ceremonial procession and public presentation at the village square. Her movements emphasize elegance, controlled posture, rhythmic coordination, facial expression, and graceful waist movements that publicly demonstrate the successful completion of her traditional training. The younger maidens, elderly women, and musicians accompany these performances through synchronized movement patterns that create visually compelling stage pictures.

Dance also contributes significantly to the dramatic progression of the performance. Individual dance displays alternate with ensemble performances, wrestling exhibitions, musical interludes, and ceremonial processions, thereby sustaining audience interest while gradually building toward the climactic presentation of the maiden. This carefully organized sequence reflects sophisticated indigenous choreography comparable to modern theatrical staging.

Audience Participation

Audience participation distinguishes indigenous African performance from many conventional Western theatrical traditions. Rather than remaining passive observers, members of



the community actively contribute to the performance through singing, dancing, gift presentation, applause, verbal encouragement, advice, and spontaneous interaction with performers. Richard Schechner argues that participatory performance dissolves the rigid distinction between performer and spectator, transforming theatre into a communal event characterized by shared experience and collective meaning (Schechner 73).

Within the Fattening Room Rites, elders offer blessings and moral instruction, family members participate in ceremonial activities, musicians respond to audience reactions, while community members accompany the procession through the village. Spectators become co-creators of the performance by responding vocally to songs, applauding dance displays, presenting gifts, and celebrating the successful transition of the maiden into adulthood. The audience therefore functions not merely as observers but as indispensable participants whose presence validates the cultural significance of the ceremony.

Symbolism

Symbolism constitutes the philosophical core of the Fattening Room performance. Virtually every object, colour, movement, costume, gesture, and ceremonial action communicates deeper cultural meanings beyond their immediate visual appearance. According to Victor Turner, ritual symbols possess multiple layers of meaning that communicate social values while guiding participants through important stages of transition (Turner 21). The period of seclusion symbolises transformation and preparation for adult responsibilities. The procession through the community signifies public acceptance and social recognition. Red chalk represents vitality, honour, and fertility; white clay symbolizes purity and moral integrity; beads communicate beauty, wealth, and prestige; while the ceremonial headpiece (*ating*) signifies dignity and cultural continuity. Similarly, the repeated processions, communal dancing, gift exchanges, and public blessings collectively symbolize the integration of the individual into the wider social structure.

The performance itself therefore functions as a symbolic drama through which the community reaffirms its cultural beliefs concerning family, marriage, womanhood, morality, and communal responsibility. Every performance element contributes to this symbolic



communication, creating a theatrical event that educates, entertains, and preserves cultural memory simultaneously.

Performance Synthesis

The effectiveness of the Fattening Room Rites lies not in any single performance element but in the harmonious integration of space, costume, music, dance, audience participation, and symbolism into one unified theatrical experience. These elements operate interdependently to produce a performance that is aesthetically compelling, culturally meaningful, and dramatically structured. Their synthesis demonstrates the sophistication of indigenous Nigerian performance traditions and reinforces the argument that the Fattening Room Rites constitute a complete theatrical system rather than merely a social or religious ceremony. As a living performance tradition, the rites continue to exemplify the creative ingenuity of indigenous theatre and their enduring contribution to the historical development of Nigerian theatre.

Contribution of the Fattening Room Rites to Nigerian Theatre

The Fattening Room (*Nkuho/Mbopo*) Rites occupy an important position in the historical development of Nigerian theatre because they embody many of the artistic principles that characterise theatrical performance. Although traditionally regarded as a cultural institution for preparing young women for marriage, the rites incorporate dramatic action, spectacle, music, dance, costume, symbolic communication, audience participation, and carefully organized performance sequences. These elements collectively demonstrate that indigenous ritual performances constitute significant foundations upon which contemporary Nigerian theatre has evolved. Consequently, the Fattening Room Rites should be recognised not merely as cultural ceremonies but also as sophisticated indigenous theatrical traditions that have enriched the aesthetics, performance practices, and creative philosophy of Nigerian theatre.

One of the most significant contributions of the Fattening Room Rites lies in their preservation of indigenous performance traditions. Before the introduction of Western theatrical conventions, African societies had already developed complex systems of dramatic expression



rooted in communal life. The rites preserve these traditions by integrating oral narratives, ceremonial songs, indigenous dances, symbolic gestures, ritual actions, and communal participation into a unified performance structure. Martin Banham maintains that African theatre originated within indigenous cultural performances that combined ritual, music, dance, and spectacle long before the emergence of literary drama (Banham 7). The continued practice of the Fattening Room Rites therefore safeguards theatrical conventions that have been transmitted across generations and remain relevant to contemporary performance practice.

The rites have also contributed significantly to the evolution of performance aesthetics in Nigerian theatre. Their elaborate use of costume, body adornment, choreography, ceremonial movement, and visual symbolism demonstrates sophisticated artistic principles comparable to those employed in contemporary stage productions. Costume is carefully designed to distinguish social status, ceremonial roles, and cultural identity, while body decoration using white clay, red chalk, beads, and natural pigments enhances the visual spectacle of the performance. Patrice Pavis argues that visual elements such as costume, makeup, and stage imagery communicate dramatic meaning before performers speak, thereby functioning as essential components of theatrical semiotics (Pavis 87). The visual richness of the Fattening Room Rites has therefore provided valuable aesthetic models for Nigerian costume designers, scenographers, and directors seeking to incorporate indigenous artistic traditions into modern theatre.

Another major contribution of the rites is their demonstration of indigenous staging techniques. Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, the Fattening Room performances occur within flexible communal spaces such as family compounds, village streets, market squares, and open arenas. These environments encourage direct interaction between performers and audiences, creating an immersive theatrical experience that differs substantially from Western stage conventions. Peter Brook observes that theatre exists wherever performers occupy a space before an audience, regardless of whether the venue is a formal theatre building (Brook 9). This understanding reinforces the theatrical legitimacy of indigenous performance environments and has influenced many Nigerian theatre practitioners who continue to experiment with environmental theatre, arena staging, and community-based performance.



The Fattening Room Rites have equally enriched Nigerian theatre through their integration of music and dance as essential dramatic elements. Indigenous songs, drumming, instrumental accompaniment, and choreographed movement are not merely decorative additions to the ceremony but serve important narrative, emotional, and symbolic functions. Music regulates dramatic rhythm, announces transitions between performance episodes, reinforces communal participation, and sustains emotional engagement throughout the ceremony. Similarly, dance communicates ideas relating to beauty, maturity, discipline, and social responsibility through carefully coordinated bodily movement. According to John Blacking, music and movement in African societies constitute integrated forms of cultural communication that cannot be separated from dramatic performance (Blacking 26–28). Contemporary Nigerian theatre continues to draw extensively upon these indigenous performance traditions in musical theatre, dance drama, and festival productions.

Audience participation represents another enduring contribution of the Fattening Room Rites to Nigerian theatre. Indigenous African performance traditions reject the rigid separation between performers and spectators that characterises much of Western theatre. Instead, audiences actively participate through singing, dancing, gift presentation, verbal responses, applause, and spontaneous interaction with performers. Richard Schechner argues that participatory performance transforms spectators into collaborators whose involvement contributes directly to the meaning and effectiveness of the theatrical event (Schechner 73). This communal performance philosophy continues to influence contemporary Nigerian theatre, particularly community theatre, popular theatre, festival performances, and theatre-for-development initiatives, where audience involvement remains central to performance practice.

The educational function of the Fattening Room Rites has also influenced the social orientation of Nigerian theatre. Throughout the period of seclusion, initiates receive instruction in family life, personal discipline, cultural values, conflict resolution, morality, childcare, and communal responsibility. These lessons are subsequently reinforced through public performance, enabling the wider community to participate in the transmission of cultural knowledge. Theatre scholars have consistently recognized education as one of the primary functions of performance



within African societies. Augusto Boal argues that theatre serves as a powerful instrument for education and social transformation because it enables communities to examine and negotiate their lived realities through performance (Boal 122). The Fattening Room Rites illustrate this educational role by combining entertainment with moral instruction and cultural preservation.

Furthermore, the rites have inspired contemporary Nigerian playwrights, directors, choreographers, and designers to explore indigenous cultural materials in their creative works. Since the post-independence period, many Nigerian dramatists have incorporated traditional ceremonies, rituals, music, dance, folklore, and symbolism into modern theatrical productions as a means of asserting African cultural identity. The performative structures evident in the Fattening Room Rites—including ceremonial processions, ritual choreography, symbolic objects, communal singing, and audience participation—have become important creative resources for contemporary stage productions seeking to synthesize indigenous and modern theatrical forms.

The Fattening Room Rites also contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. In an era characterized by globalization, urbanisation, and changing social values, many indigenous performance traditions face gradual decline. Documenting and studying the theatrical dimensions of the rites therefore contributes not only to theatre scholarship but also to the safeguarding of Nigeria's cultural heritage. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization recognises traditional performing arts as important elements of intangible cultural heritage because they preserve collective memory, cultural identity, and artistic knowledge across generations. The continued practice and scholarly documentation of the Fattening Room Rites therefore support broader efforts to preserve indigenous performance traditions for future generations.

Finally, the Fattening Room Rites expand scholarly understanding of the origins and evolution of Nigerian theatre. For many years, discussions of Nigerian theatre emphasised literary drama, colonial theatre, and modern institutional performance while giving comparatively limited attention to indigenous ritual performances. Examining the Fattening Room Rites from a theatrical perspective demonstrates that sophisticated systems of dramatic representation, performance



organization, visual design, music, choreography, and audience engagement existed within indigenous societies long before the establishment of formal theatre institutions. This perspective broadens the historical narrative of Nigerian theatre by recognizing indigenous performance environments as legitimate sources of theatrical knowledge and creative practice.

The contribution of the Fattening Room Rites to Nigerian theatre therefore extends beyond cultural preservation. The institution has enriched theatre through its performance aesthetics, environmental staging, costume traditions, music, dance, symbolic communication, educational philosophy, and participatory performance techniques. These contributions continue to influence contemporary theatre practitioners while affirming the importance of indigenous performance traditions in shaping Nigeria's theatrical identity. Recognizing the Fattening Room Rites as an authentic form of indigenous theatre not only strengthens the historiography of Nigerian theatre but also reinforces the need to preserve and promote traditional performance environments as enduring sources of artistic innovation and cultural continuity.

Conclusion

In the African society, the past has been kept alive for centuries through indigenous festival performances, which are peculiar to the person that celebrates it. And the life of a community is always renewed during festivals which also serve as a means of reunion between the old and the young, friends and family members (Ekaette Edem; 93). The Fattening Room (*Nkughò/Mbopo*) Rites represent one of the most significant indigenous performance traditions in Akwa Ibom State and constitute an important foundation for understanding the evolution of Nigerian arts and theatre. Although the institution has traditionally been examined from anthropological, sociological, and cultural perspectives, this study has demonstrated that its theatrical dimensions are equally deserving of scholarly attention. Through its carefully structured integration of performance space, costume, music, dance, ritual, symbolism, procession, and audience participation, the Fattening Room Rites embody the essential characteristics of theatre and illustrate the sophistication of indigenous performance traditions.



The study has further shown that traditional performance environments were not merely venues for communal ceremonies but dynamic theatrical spaces that nurtured dramatic creativity long before the establishment of modern theatre buildings in Nigeria. Village squares, family compounds, market places, and ceremonial arenas functioned as performance stages where artistic expression, cultural education, and communal participation converged. These indigenous spaces encouraged flexibility of performance, close interaction between performers and spectators, and the integration of natural surroundings into dramatic presentation, thereby establishing performance conventions that continue to influence contemporary Nigerian theatre.

The analysis of the Fattening Room Rites also reveals that indigenous theatre is characterised by a holistic integration of artistic elements rather than by the compartmentalisation commonly associated with Western theatrical traditions. Music, dance, costume, body adornment, oral poetry, movement, ritual symbolism, and visual spectacle operate collectively to communicate cultural values relating to womanhood, morality, communal responsibility, and social continuity. The educational function of the rites demonstrates that theatre within African societies has always served purposes extending beyond entertainment, functioning as an important medium for cultural transmission, socialization, and community cohesion.

Furthermore, this study establishes that the Fattening Room Rites have contributed significantly to the development of Nigerian theatre by preserving indigenous performance aesthetics, inspiring contemporary theatre practitioners, and providing enduring models of environmental staging, participatory performance, choreography, costume design, and symbolic communication. These contributions challenge the misconception that Nigerian theatre originated solely through colonial or literary influences and instead reaffirm the central role of indigenous performance traditions in shaping the nation's theatrical heritage.

In an era of rapid globalisation and changing cultural values, many indigenous performance traditions face increasing threats of decline and extinction. There is therefore an urgent need for systematic documentation, preservation, and scholarly investigation of performance traditions such as the Fattening Room Rites. Theatre scholars, cultural institutions, universities, and



government agencies should continue to promote research, archival documentation, community festivals, and performance-based studies that safeguard these invaluable cultural resources for future generations. Ultimately, recognising the Fattening Room (*Nkugho/Mbopo*) Rites as an authentic theatrical tradition broadens the historiography of Nigerian theatre and enriches contemporary theatre scholarship. The rites demonstrate that indigenous African performance possesses sophisticated artistic structures capable of informing modern theatre practice while preserving the cultural identity and historical memory of the communities from which they originate.

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