



DECOLONIZING THE STAGE: REHEARSAL PRACTICES, INSTITUTIONAL POWER, AND THE POLITICS OF NIGERIAN THEATRE MAKING

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Abstract

This article examines the rehearsal process as a critical yet under-theorized site of decolonial intervention in Nigerian theatre making. While scholarship on African theatre has extensively addressed questions of content, text, and representation, the rehearsal space where embodied practices, power relations, and aesthetic values are negotiated remains largely unexamined. Drawing on Samuel Ravengai's concept of "Afroscenology" (2024) and ethnographic research with theatre practitioners in Nigeria, this article argues that rehearsal practices are not neutral technical procedures but sites where coloniality is either reproduced or contested. It proposes a framework for decolonizing rehearsal through attention to embodied knowledge, the recovery of indigenous performance pedagogies from traditions such as Yoruba Alàrinjò and Igbo Mmanwu, institutional accountability, and the reconfiguration of directorial authority. The article contributes to emerging scholarship on decolonial praxis in Nigerian performance studies by offering both theoretical analysis and practical strategies for transformation.

Keywords: decoloniality, Nigerian theatre, rehearsal practices, institutional power, Afroscenology, indigenous performance pedagogies

Introduction

In the growing body of scholarship on decolonizing African theatre, one space remains curiously invisible: the rehearsal room. There are rich analyses of play texts that challenge colonial narratives, studies of performance events that mobilize communities, and critiques of institutional structures that perpetuate exclusion. Yet the daily, iterative process through which theatre is made; the rehearsals where bodies learn, unlearn, and transform; has escaped sustained scholarly attention. This omission is not accidental. The rehearsal process, precisely because it is hidden, temporary, and seemingly technical, has served as a conduit for colonial pedagogical practices to persist unexamined, even as theatre companies proclaim decolonial commitments in their programming and mission statements.

The Nigerian context presents a particularly compelling site for this investigation. As Morison (2021) documents, the establishment of the University College of Ibadan and later its School of Drama was deeply shaped by "Anglo American collaborations... via funding, training, and support from institutions such as the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations." Morison argues that "not only did sponsorship, funding, and training influence the trajectory of theatre practice and scholarship, but the legacy of colonialism and circulation of experts also played a crucial role in the battle for the future of the practice that manifested not only at Ibadan and Calabar but across theatre departments in most first and second generation institutions in the country" (2021, p. 3). This history means that Nigerian theatre practitioners inherit institutional structures and pedagogical methods deeply marked by colonial relations, even as they create work that engages Nigerian stories, languages, and communities.

Yet, Nigeria also possesses extraordinarily rich indigenous performance traditions that offer alternative models for rehearsal and training. As Effiom and Abeebe (2025) argue, "a decolonized Nigerian theory of directing must instead be architected from the principles found in the nation's rich performance traditions, such as Yoruba Alàrinjò, Igbo Mmanwu, and Hausa Wassan Kara" (p.



2). These traditions, they contend, embody principles including “a non-linear narrative structure, the intimate and participatory relationship between performer and spectator, the integral fusion of music, dance, and masquerade with text, and the spiritual dimension of performance” (Effiom & Abeebe, 2025, p. 2). The challenge for contemporary Nigerian theatre is to bring these indigenous pedagogies into productive relationship with the institutional structures inherited from colonial education.

This paper therefore addresses the following questions: What does it mean to decolonize not only what Nigerian theatre stages, but how it is made? How do rehearsal practices reproduce or interrupt colonial power relations in the Nigerian context? And what alternative methodologies might centre Nigerian epistemologies, embodied knowledges, and community accountability in the creative process?

This paper draws on published scholarship in Nigerian and African theatre studies, ethnographic observations of rehearsal processes in Nigerian theatre companies, and interviews with practitioners engaged in decolonial practice. The study is anchored on the theoretical frameworks of Afrosociology as developed by Ravengai (2024), decolonial theory from Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), and the growing body of Nigerian scholarship on indigenous performance aesthetics.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Theorize the rehearsal space as a site of embodied cultural knowledge and colonial reproduction in Nigerian theatre making,
2. Critically examine how colonial rehearsal pedagogies, particularly those derived from psychological realism and directorial authoritarianism, persist in contemporary Nigerian theatre institutions,
3. Analyse emergent decolonial rehearsal methodologies drawing on Nigerian indigenous performance traditions including Yoruba Alárinjò, Igbo Mmanwu, and the folkism of Sam Ukala,
4. Propose a framework for institutional transformation that addresses power, accountability, and sustainability in decolonial Nigerian theatre making.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design grounded in decolonial methodology. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues, decolonial research “must centre African epistemologies and prioritize the voices and experiences of African knowledge producers” (p. 89). In line with this perspective, the methodology combines participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival research. The researcher conducted participant observation of rehearsal processes with four Nigerian theatre companies in Lagos and Port Harcourt between January and August 2025. Twenty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with Nigerian theatre practitioners, including directors (n=10), actors (n=12), and company administrators (n=6). The study also examined rehearsal documentation, training manuals, and production records from the University of Ibadan’s School of Drama archives, the National Theatre archives, and personal papers of senior Nigerian practitioners.

The research engages critically with the decolonial turn in Nigerian and African performance studies, drawing on the work of Ravengai (2024), Effiom and Abeebe (2025), Mark (2026), and foundational Nigerian theatre scholars including Echeruo (1973) and Enekwe (1987). Data were analysed using thematic analysis, with member checking conducted with ten participants.

Findings

The study reveals five interconnected findings about rehearsal practices, institutional power, and decolonial possibilities in Nigerian theatre making.



1. **Persistence of colonial rehearsal practices** – Despite decades of discourse on decolonization, colonial rehearsal practices remain deeply embedded. Twenty-two of twenty-eight interview participants (79%) reported that their primary training was in Euro-American methodologies, particularly Stanislavski-based psychological realism. As one Lagos director observed, rehearsal rooms continue to rely on “Stanislavski techniques that have nothing to do with how performance works in Yoruba or Igbo traditions” (Interview 7, Lagos, 15 June 2025). This echoes Ravengai’s (2024) analysis of postcolonial theatre education across Africa, where universities inherited theatre departments “structured according to European models” (p. 477). A Port Harcourt-based actor reflected: “I trained at the university, so I learned all the Stanislavski techniques. But when I perform in my community’s masquerade traditions, none of that applies... The university training actually makes it harder to access that way of performing” (Interview 16, Port Harcourt, 3 August 2025).
2. **Director-actor power dynamics** – The research identified the director-actor relationship as a primary site where colonial power relations are reproduced. Twenty-four participants (86%) described rehearsal processes characterized by hierarchical decision-making. A Lagos-based actor described “aesthetic extraction”: “The director comes in with his concept fully formed... When I try to bring something from my community’s performance traditions... he either dismisses it or appropriates it without understanding what it means. We become informants rather than collaborators” (Interview 12, Lagos, 22 July 2025). The project-based nature of much Nigerian theatre exacerbates this dynamic, as one company administrator noted: “Each new project, the director comes in with their methodology, and the actors just have to adapt” (Interview 19, Lagos, 20 July 2025).
3. **Marginalization of indigenous pedagogies** – Only five participants (18%) reported any formal training in Nigerian performance traditions. This erasure operates through what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) terms “epistemic coloniality”—“the assumption that Western knowledge systems are the only valid frameworks” (p. 89). A veteran practitioner reflected: “My grandfather was a masquerade performer... That knowledge is gone now. Young actors go to workshops where someone teaches them ‘African performance techniques’ in three days... they don’t learn what it means to carry that knowledge” (Interview 22, Ibadan, 10 August 2025).
4. **Emergent decolonial practices** – The study identified significant emergent practices. Ola Rotimi’s “festival theatre,” as documented by Mark (2026), used a “pressure cooker” method to discipline “stamina, reflexes, and ensemble memory” (p. 12). A senior practitioner who worked with Rotimi explained: “Rotimi didn’t do character analysis around a table. He got you on your feet... knowledge isn’t something you think, it’s something you do” (Interview 5, Ife, 5 June 2025). Sam Ukala’s “folkism,” as Mark (2026) notes, “institutionalised improvisation and co-creation” (p. 12). Segun Adefila’s choreographic protest theatre combines ethnographic fieldwork with embodied performance scores. Bolanle Austen-Peters’ Afro-urban musical theatre, according to Mark (2026), exemplifies “hybrid adaptability” and “cultural grounding” (p. 12).
5. **Institutional barriers** – Twenty-three participants (82%) described how funding structures, production schedules, university curricula, and evaluation criteria discourage decolonial methodologies. A university-based director explained: “Our curriculum is still largely organized around Western models... Until we restructure the curriculum to centre Nigerian performance traditions, we’ll keep reproducing colonial rehearsal practices” (Interview 11, Ibadan, 20 June 2025). As Adesewo (2024) observed, “The greatest challenge is funding... The government is not investing in theatre in Nigeria” (par. 4-6). Regarding the renovated National Theatre (now Wole Soyinka Centre for Culture and Creative Arts), a Lagos-based practitioner noted: “If it only hosts commercial productions that can afford high rental fees... then it’s just another example of Nigerian elite culture” (Interview 13, Lagos, 5 July 2025).



Recommendations

Based on these findings, I propose the following recommendations:

1. Theatre departments should revise curricula to centre Nigerian performance epistemologies, moving beyond additive models toward curricula organized around traditions such as Yoruba Alárinjò, Igbo Mmanwu, and Hausa Wassan Kara (Effiom & Abeeb, 2025).
2. Training programs should integrate indigenous pedagogies, including extended, mentorship-based learning relationships and partnerships with community-based practitioners.
3. Institutions should support faculty in developing decolonial pedagogies and revise promotion criteria to value community engagement and practice-based research.
4. Companies should experiment with distributed creative authority, moving toward ensemble-based decision making and collective dramaturgy.
5. Companies should develop ongoing accountability structures with communities, including community advisory boards and long-term partnerships.
6. Drawing on Nigerian performance traditions, companies should integrate attention to practitioner wellbeing into rehearsal processes, addressing emotional, spiritual, and holistic health (Enekwe, 1987).

Conclusion

The rehearsal room, hidden and temporary, has served as a site where colonial pedagogies persist unexamined. Yet for the same reasons, it may be a site of transformative possibility. Practitioners like Rotimi, Ukala, Adefila, and Austen-Peters, and scholars like Enekwe, Ravengai, and others, are already engaged in this labour. Their work demonstrates that decolonial rehearsal is not merely theoretical possibility but lived reality. This article has attempted to contribute to that project by offering a framework for understanding and practicing decolonial rehearsal rooted in Nigerian performance traditions.

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