

Navigating Cultural Governance and Leadership Complexities: A Discourse Analysis of Ahmed Yerima at the National Theatre (2006–2009)

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Abstract

Managing public theatre institutions in Nigeria is fraught with numerous challenges, ranging from political marginalisation to excessive bureaucratic interference. These interferences—often by multiple government arms and agencies—frequently result in the withholding of allocated funds, thereby undermining administrative efficiency. The National Theatre of Nigeria (NToN) exemplifies this dysfunction, struggling to meet its cultural and national mandates. This study critically examines the socio-political complexities involved in managing the NToN, with a specific focus on the leadership of Ahmed Yerima during his tenure as Director-General (2006–2009). Anchored in Downton's theory of Transformational Leadership, the paper investigates Yerima's leadership strategies and managerial style. Methodologically, it draws on data from in-depth interviews with Ahmed Yerima, focus group discussions with key stakeholders, and a review of relevant literature, all analysed using qualitative content analysis. Findings reveal that Yerima employed a transformational leadership approach characterised by professional consistency, strategic innovation, focused dynamism, and political diplomacy. These elements enabled him to mobilise a motivated and goal-oriented team, despite systemic challenges. The study concludes that Yerima's leadership offers a replicable model for effective administration in Nigeria's public cultural institutions, demonstrating that transformational leadership can reposition such agencies for socio-cultural and economic relevance, even within bureaucratically constrained environments.

Key Words: Cultural Governance, Transformational Leadership, Bureaucratic Interference, National Theatre of Nigeria (NToN), Ahmed Yerima,

Introduction

The need for visionary and resilient leadership in the public sector has become increasingly urgent in the 21st century, largely due to the complex transformations in governance and society. Milner and Joyce (2005) aptly argue that this necessity stems from the public sector's inability to keep pace with societal evolution. According to them, "in the process of adapting the public services, the managerial leader has not only to help their organisation change but also personally to learn how to manage their interdependence with elected politicians and apply political skills in the process of managing performance and change" (Milner and Joyce, 2005). Nowhere is this tension more pronounced than in public cultural institutions in Nigeria, such as the National Theatre. The National Theatre of Nigeria, envisioned as a premier cultural and performance hub, has historically struggled to meet its founding objectives. Despite being staffed by highly qualified professionals and led at various times by committed and competent individuals, the institution remains largely underperforming and structurally dysfunctional. Scholars such as Awodiya, (2006), Ohenhen, (2013), and Oguike (2020) attribute this underperformance not to the lack of expertise or commitment among cultural administrators, but to entrenched socio-political and bureaucratic pressures that stifle innovation, responsiveness, and institutional autonomy.

These challenges include, but are not limited to, political marginalisation, undue interference from multiple government agencies, irregular and inadequate release of budgeted funds, and overlapping oversight responsibilities. In effect, the leadership of public cultural institutions in Nigeria is often ensnared in a web of conflicting interests, weak policy frameworks, and debilitating resource constraints. As Ogundele (2015) notes, leadership in such institutions becomes "a constant exercise in negotiation, diplomacy, and institutional survival." These realities make the task of managing Nigeria's National Theatre not just a matter of administrative competence but one of political astuteness, strategic adaptability, and transformational vision. However, it is also important to acknowledge that while structural and systemic challenges abound, certain forms of leadership—particularly those grounded in transformational principles—have demonstrated the capacity to deliver meaningful change even within bureaucratically constrained environments. Transformational leadership, as articulated by Downton (1973) and further developed by Bass and Riggio (2006), focuses on the ability of leaders to inspire, motivate, and galvanise their teams toward achieving higher-order goals, often in the face of adversity.

This study, therefore, interrogates the leadership of Ahmed Yerima during his tenure as Director-General of the National Theatre of Nigeria between January 2006 and August 2009. Succeeding Professor Femi Osofisan (2000–2004), Yerima inherited a theatre institution teetering on the brink of institutional irrelevance. His tenure was marked by efforts to resist the threatened concession or sale of the National Theatre, revive its cultural and administrative relevance, navigate the entangled bureaucracy of multiple supervisory agencies, manage chronic underfunding, and re-energise a largely lethargic and over-bloated staff structure. Drawing on Downton's theory of transformational leadership, this study adopts a qualitative methodology, including one-on-one in-depth interviews with Ahmed Yerima, focus group discussions with key stakeholders, and a review of relevant literature. The paper examines how Yerima's leadership approach helped to steer the institution through a precarious phase, and explores the broader implications of transformational leadership in the administration of public cultural institutions in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Cultural governance in Nigeria has long been characterised by institutional neglect, overlapping jurisdictional controls, inadequate funding, and the politicisation of public cultural agencies (Ogundele, 2015; Oguike, 2020). The National Theatre of Nigeria (NTon), a national cultural symbol intended to serve as the epicenter of artistic and theatrical production, has

instead become emblematic of the state's inconsistent cultural policy direction and bureaucratic paralysis. Scholars such as Awodiya (2006) and Onuoha (2013) assert that the absence of a coherent cultural policy implementation framework has left public institutions vulnerable to administrative inefficiency and political manipulation. Cultural institutions, while ostensibly created to promote national identity and creative expression, are often treated as expendable or secondary in public policy agendas. The leadership of public institutions in Nigeria, particularly in the cultural sector, operates within a complex web of bureaucratic entanglements, inter-agency power dynamics, and shifting political interests. According to Ezeani (2006), bureaucratic red tape and overlapping oversight functions by different arms of government hinder performance and create a climate of uncertainty for institutional leaders. This situation is further complicated by chronic underfunding and delayed budget releases (Malomo, 2002), which significantly limit the autonomy and operational efficiency of public cultural managers. Even when visionary leaders are appointed, their efforts are often diluted or stifled by administrative bottlenecks and resistance to change (Adejumo, 2011).

In this context, effective leadership must not only embody administrative competence but also possess political diplomacy and strategic vision. The work of Milner and Joyce (2005) suggests that public sector leaders must continuously adapt to the shifting demands of governance, develop political acumen, and manage relationships with elected officials and civil servants in order to drive change. This is particularly important in contexts like Nigeria, where institutional leadership often lacks the statutory autonomy to make far-reaching decisions independently. Downton's (1973) theory of transformational leadership provides a useful analytical lens for understanding leadership within public institutions under stress. The model, later expanded by Bass and Riggio (2006), emphasises the leader's ability to inspire, motivate, and instigate organisational change through vision, personal charisma, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. In contrast to transactional leadership, which relies on compliance and maintenance of the status quo, transformational leadership fosters innovation, commitment, and long-term institutional development.

In cultural institutions particularly, where success is dependent not just on policy implementation but on creativity, adaptability, and stakeholder engagement, transformational leadership becomes a critical success factor. As Northouse (2016) argues, transformational leaders are able to reframe organisational goals, align team energies, and create environments conducive to innovation — even within bureaucratically constrained settings. The effectiveness of such leadership has been documented in cultural institutions globally (Schein, 2010; Mulcahy, 2011), but studies focused on African cultural management contexts remain sparse, thus underscoring the significance of the present inquiry. Existing literature on leadership in Nigeria's public sector generally focuses on education, health, and local governance, with minimal scholarly attention directed toward cultural institutions. Studies by Ohenhen et al, (2024) and Afolayan (2019) highlight a growing interest in cultural policy and arts administration globally, and particularly, in Nigeria, but there is a notable absence of empirical work on specific leadership case studies, such as that of Ahmed Yerima at the National Theatre. Yerima's tenure (2006–2009) represents a unique moment in the history of the NToN, during which institutional relevance was renegotiated amidst threats of privatisation and structural dismemberment. His leadership style, strategies for navigating governmental interference, and efforts to revitalise the institution offer valuable insights into the workings of transformational leadership in the Nigerian public cultural sector.

Discourse analysis, as a methodological and theoretical tool, enables the interrogation of leadership narratives, ideologies, and institutional practices (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2008). Through critical discourse analysis, it becomes possible to unpack how leaders construct meaning, justify decisions, and negotiate legitimacy within politically charged environments. In cultural governance studies, discourse analysis provides a means to understand how institutional actors communicate change, mediate conflicts, and frame leadership identities. By applying discourse analysis to the case of Ahmed Yerima, this study contributes to bridging the gap between cultural governance, leadership studies, and public policy in the Nigerian context. It not only illuminates how leadership operates under pressure, but also offers a template for strategic administration of cultural institutions in the Global South (Ohenhen et al, 2024).

Ahmed Yerima: Scholar, Playwright, and Cultural Administrator

Born in 1957, Professor Ahmed Parker Yerima is a distinguished Nigerian scholar, renowned playwright, and one of the most influential and prolific dramatists in Nigeria. Over the course of his career, Yerima has written nearly 70 plays, many of which address national and local issues, drawing on the diverse ethnic backgrounds across Nigeria. He is not only a celebrated playwright but also a teacher, mentor, and father figure to numerous junior colleagues and students in the field of dramatic arts. As highlighted by *The Culture Newspaper* (2019), Yerima's exceptional contributions to academia, his relentless efforts to advance theatre, and his service to the preservation of Nigerian culture were formally acknowledged when he received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the third Kaduna Book & Arts Festival (KABAFEST). The award recognized his decades-long influence on theatre, as well as his impressive publishing record, which has profoundly shaped the understanding of Nigerian dramatic arts.

Reflecting on his creative inspiration, Yerima noted in an interview:

"Nigeria is such a big country, and what my teacher, Prof Soyinka, taught me at Ife was that you can't sit down and write plays for plays or arts for art's sake. Nigeria provides a lot of challenges, and I think even by the time I die, there would be more plays that I haven't written than the ones I've written because Nigeria constantly gives me materials. So, as I finish writing, something new comes up, and my friends who push me in a very subtle manner say 'Prof, have you read what's going on? Try and write something about it.' I remember going for an interview for an ECOWAS job, and the man said, 'Prof, what have you written now? We just swore in President Buhari. I think you should write The Swearing since you are very topical,'" (The Culture Newspaper, 2019).

This quote underscores Yerima's commitment to writing plays that are deeply tied to the socio-political realities of Nigeria. He views theatre not merely as an art form but as a medium through which societal issues can be explored, critiqued, and hopefully addressed. His approach is driven by the constant flow of contemporary challenges that Nigeria presents, ensuring his work remains relevant and timely.

Yerima continued, explaining his dedication to multiculturalism in his writing:

"I also write multicultural plays, that's the truth about writing 60 plays. What I try to do is look for commonalities of themes, and I find that the problems with the Igbo in Odenigbo or Idemili, all those problems exist within the Yoruba society also; it's just the names. I also took people because I found that all the proverbs that exist in Yorubaland, also exist in Igboland and Hausaland. Only the symbols, motifs, and the imageries change." (The Culture Newspaper, 2019).

Yerima's observation highlights his belief in the interconnectedness of Nigeria's diverse cultures. He argues that the societal challenges faced by various ethnic groups—be it the Igbos, Yorubas, or Hausas—are fundamentally the same, though the cultural expressions and symbols differ. This broad thematic approach allows Yerima to address universal human experiences within specific cultural contexts, making his plays relatable across ethnic boundaries. Yerima's tenure as the General Manager/CEO of the National Troupe, and later as the Director General of both the National Troupe and National Theatre, marked a transformative period for Nigeria's national cultural institutions. Notably, he was the first Nigerian to simultaneously head both the National Theatre and the National Troupe, a role he held from January 2006 until his tenure ended in August 2009. His leadership faced significant challenges, especially given the deteriorating state of the National Theatre and the internal and external pressures on the organization.

The National Theatre, which was originally built to host the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77), had fallen into disrepair by the time Yerima assumed leadership. As Malomo (2002) notes, *"the lack of guideline or blue print for its managers"* left the Theatre vulnerable

to mismanagement, contributing to its decline in the years following FESTAC. By the time Yerima took charge, the physical infrastructure of the National Theatre was in a deplorable state, and the institution had been plagued by inefficiency, a lack of vision, and an absence of a consistent policy for its operation.

Bureaucratic Challenges in Public Institution Management: Complicating matters were the bureaucratic challenges that arose from the intertwining of politics with cultural governance. Yerima, in a candid interview, explained:

"But bureaucracy, you cannot beat that. If you want to work with government, you can't escape it. Because government is bureaucracy in the first instance. In my ministry, (Ministry of Arts and Culture), there is the arm that formulates policies, and you are to implement the policies. But the formulators want to implement. The formulators are not happy that you are the one people are hearing about. So they want to write some memos that will slow you down. Formulators believe that by turning the theatre around, you are showing that they have failed... As mundane as that is, the problem is that bureaucracy is there. You need to know that when you talk of bureaucracy you are talking of politics. You need to be able to handle it. The rules are there, but how do you work with the rules, to bend the rules in order to get what you want?"

Yerima's reflection reveals the deeply political and bureaucratic landscape in which the National Theatre operates. His comments suggest a tension between policy makers and implementers, a tension exacerbated by the vested political interests of government officials. He also discusses the challenges he faced in reporting to multiple levels of authority, including the President, the Minister for Arts and Culture, the Chairman of the Board of Governors, and committees within both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This intricate bureaucratic structure often hindered decision-making and led to delays in implementing necessary reforms.

In an interview, Yerima described his experience reporting to various authorities:

"You report to the board? Yeah, I report to the board. And the board reports to government. But really, you find that you report to the board, and you report to the Minister. A board of governors. And you will find out that the board comes from the party."

This chain of command, Yerima explained, often creates a sense of disempowerment for executives like himself, who are caught between competing interests. The bureaucratic red tape not only drained the time and energy of leadership but also impacted the efficiency of the National Theatre's operations, ultimately stalling many of Yerima's reform efforts. Awodiya (2006) aptly captures this phenomenon, stating, *"the management of the National Arts Theatre cannot be innovative as long as it is tied to the apron strings of the civil service bureaucracy"* (Awodiya, 2006, p. 153). Yerima's personal experience validates this observation, as he struggled to reconcile the demands of political appointees, bureaucratic inertia, and the need for progressive change within the arts sector.

Bureaucracy plays a critical role in the administration of any public institution, particularly those that are centrally managed, such as the National Theatre. Awodiya (2006) asserts that the management of the National Arts Theatre is constrained by bureaucratic structures, preventing any meaningful innovation. This suggests that the deeply embedded bureaucratic practices within the public sector have long hindered the National Theatre's operational efficiency. Yerima, drawing from his own extensive experience, vividly described the challenges posed by bureaucracy in the interview.

Additionally, Yerima detailed the complex and hierarchical structure of authority he had to navigate as the head of the National Theatre. He outlined the five distinct authorities he was accountable to: the President, the Minister of Arts and Culture, the Chairman of the Board of Governors, and the Senate and House of Representatives Committees on Culture. These

multiple layers of oversight can create inefficiencies and dilute the authority of the manager. His direct responses on multiple layers of reporting during the interview reads:

Q: Who is the chair of that board?

A: Mrs. Hanatu Ibrahim.

Q: Do you report to the board?

A: Yes, I report to the board.

Q: And does the board report to the government?

A: Yes, the board reports to the government, but in practice, I find that I report to both the board and the Minister.

Q: Is the board a board of trustees or a board of governors?

A: It is a board of governors, and they are often political appointees. So, do you see the bureaucratic nature now?

Q: Absolutely.

A: Although I'm not a member of the party, I am part of the board. However, the board views me as a subordinate, a mere 'errand boy,' while the Minister sees me as an officer carrying out his directives. I hold my position at the pleasure of the Minister, but ultimately, the President's approval is required. If the Minister is dissatisfied with my performance, I could be removed.

Yerima's experience demonstrates the complexities and inefficiencies inherent in bureaucratic structures, especially when multiple political figures have overlapping authority. This creates a governance system that is not only cumbersome but often at odds with operational efficiency. His position as a manager becomes precarious, with external political pressures and internal conflicts undermining his ability to implement sustainable change. This bureaucratic web also raises significant challenges in terms of accountability and decision-making. As Yerima notes, in order to function effectively, one must constantly balance the interests of various political and administrative bodies, all of whom have their own agendas, which detracts from the focus on institutional improvement. This bureaucratic structure becomes a barrier to efficient governance, consuming time and resources that could be better spent addressing the National Theatre's operational needs.

Abandonment and Insufficient Funding: The abandonment of the National Theatre by the government, coupled with insufficient funding, presented significant obstacles for Yerima's administration. When Yerima assumed leadership, he inherited a facility that had been left to deteriorate. The National Theatre, once a symbol of cultural pride, had become a neglected and decaying institution. Yerima describes the state of the Theatre as "comatose" due to years of neglect and inadequate funding. He recalls:

"When I inherited the National Theatre, it was essentially comatose. There was a severe lack of vitality among the staff, management was unfocused, and the institution lacked any substantive programmes. The building itself had been in a state of disrepair for years—there had been no power for over two years, the water supply was cut off, and the roof was leaking. After the FESTAC '77, the government essentially abandoned the place, treating it as just another government property, which led to its decline. As the years passed, the facilities deteriorated while the rest of the world, particularly in terms of technological advancement, was progressing rapidly." (Ohenhen, 2014)

The impact of this neglect was profound. Without power, water, or functioning facilities, the National Theatre became a shell of its former self. Its inability to provide the necessary infrastructure for cultural events led to a decline in its relevance and effectiveness as a cultural institution. This was compounded by the fact that the government, in Yerima's view, had effectively abandoned the National Theatre, deeming it a "dead end." He further explains:

"The government viewed the National Theatre as a lost cause. They considered the cost of restoring the building to be prohibitively high, and there was no belief that the investment would yield any returns. When the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE) came up with the idea of privatisation, they identified the National Theatre as a prime candidate for sale. The

perception was that it was a failed project, not worth continuing to fund."* (Yerima, 2007; Iwuh, 2022)

The government's lack of funding and its attitude toward the National Theatre as a non-productive asset exacerbated the challenges Yerima faced. The facility's continued deterioration and the lack of political will to invest in its revival meant that Yerima had to rely on limited resources and find creative solutions to restore its functionality. Despite these severe challenges, Yerima took steps to upgrade the facility, bringing back essential services and improving the theatre's infrastructure. His efforts were met with initial skepticism, but over time, the improvements became evident, particularly as the National Troupe began performing again in the newly refurbished spaces. Yerima's resilience in the face of these challenges reflects the broader issues of institutional neglect and the complexities of public sector management in an environment of political and financial disarray.

Overstaffing and Employee Demotivation: Yerima also inherited a National Theatre where staff members were often under-engaged and demotivated. The institution, while fully staffed, faced widespread issues of absenteeism, inefficiency, and a lack of commitment from employees. Yerima had to address the morale of the workforce, which had been severely affected by years of neglect and lack of direction. As Leonard (2019) argues, "when employees are not motivated, they will do just enough to get through the workday." This was evident in the National Theatre, where many staff members engaged in non-productive activities such as frequent absences, long phone calls, and loitering. Yerima's leadership needed to overcome this culture of demotivation. He understood that transforming the work environment would require not only addressing structural issues but also inspiring the staff to become more engaged and focused on the institution's objectives. In his words:

"The staff were disengaged, and this lack of motivation led to a culture of laziness and procrastination. Many employees were distracted by personal activities, such as leaving the office at will or spending excessive time on the phone. This created a toxic work environment that negatively impacted both individual productivity and the overall effectiveness of the National Theatre."

Yerima's response to this challenge involved instilling a sense of purpose and urgency among the staff. He emphasised that the revival of the National Theatre depended not just on physical upgrades but also on a shift in the institutional culture. Staff had to be re-engaged with the vision of the Theatre, and Yerima worked tirelessly to instill a new sense of direction and responsibility.

Management by Transformational Leadership Strategy: Transformational leadership is a leadership approach that causes significant change in both individuals and social systems, with the ultimate goal of developing followers into future leaders. This leadership style is marked by its ability to enhance the motivation, morale, and performance of followers through various mechanisms. These mechanisms include aligning followers' sense of identity and self with the mission of the organisation, setting an example as a role model, encouraging greater ownership and responsibility, and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of followers to align them with tasks that optimise their performance.

The conceptual framework of transformational leadership was first introduced by James Downton in 1973 and later expanded by James MacGregor Burns in his 1978 research on political leaders. Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as "a process in which leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation" (1978). This dynamic, according to Burns, ultimately elevates human conduct and ethical aspirations, creating a transformative effect on both the leader and the followers. Burgess (2018) further emphasised that transformational leadership occurs when leaders and followers engage in ways that raise their respective levels of motivation and morality, fostering a mutual transformation that elevates the ethical standards of the group.

This conceptualisation of transformational leadership aligns well with the leadership approach adopted by Ahmed Yerima during his tenure as Director-General of the National Theatre. Yerima's leadership can be described as eventful, dynamic, and ultimately successful in terms of management, although short-lived, which is characteristic of government appointments. By implementing transformational leadership and participative management strategies, Yerima was able to achieve significant improvements in the National Theatre's infrastructure and internal culture from 2006 to 2009. Yerima's leadership was particularly focused on change management, recognising the necessity of transforming the attitudes and practices of both the government and the staff at the National Theatre. Acknowledging the deep-seated lethargy among staff, Yerima worked tirelessly to foster a culture of innovation and accountability. In his own words, he explains his focus on transforming the work environment:

"I live in Maryland. Instead of crossing the bridge to go to the Galleria in Victoria Island, I go to the National Theatre. I will still eat popcorn. The National Theatre has popcorn, the National Theatre has parking space, what else? We just try to make the atmosphere of the place conducive. Now, it's just a year that I put those carpets up. But I want to change them now. People are saying 'Oga, no...' But I say 'yes.' We are not going to wait for them to tear. We have got to change and put up a maintenance culture. By the time they are painting the entrance C down to the Conference Banquet Hall, they are changing the rugs. I have done the chairs. These are part of the management thing. Let people just see that things are changing." (Yerima, 2007)

Through these actions, Yerima instilled a maintenance culture and a visible sense of progress that resonated with both the staff and the public. His attention to detail, such as the strategic placement of carpets and the renewal of physical spaces, symbolised a larger commitment to reinvigorating the institution. Yerima's emphasis on creating an environment of visible change helped shift the morale of the staff, as he recognised that small, tangible improvements could significantly impact the larger organisational climate. Moreover, Yerima's leadership approach extended beyond simple administrative tasks to actively engaging staff at all levels. He was keen on fostering ownership among his subordinates, ensuring that each individual understood their role in the transformation process. Yerima explains:

"Well, I allow ideas to grow from me. Basically. I am a playwright, and I found out that ideas grow from individuals when you write plays. I am lucky to have been around this building for close to 18 years. So it is easy for me to identify. I have seen this building go towards the place of glory, to becoming a real slum. So I also know that what the building needed or that management needed was leadership. Dynamic leadership. One that would bring up ideas, discuss them and at the same time, be able to carry them through, carry the staff through." (Yerima, 2007)

Yerima's approach reflects a key principle of transformational leadership: empowering followers to actively participate in decision-making and to contribute their ideas to the overall vision of the organisation. He fostered an environment where his staff felt that their ideas were valued and considered. This participative approach is exemplified by the numerous meetings Yerima held with his management team to discuss projects and resolve issues collaboratively:

"So my management staff and I are like, looking at the big picture together. First, building a sort of confidence between me and them, and at the same time, letting them know that I am in charge. This is where I want us to go, and taking them along. We have series of meetings: on a project, we can have up to 30 meetings, trying to get it right. And everybody becomes important because whatever you say must be taken into consideration." (Yerima, 2007)

This level of engagement not only inspired confidence in his leadership but also helped establish a sense of shared responsibility and collective ownership over the institution's success. Yerima's participative style and his focus on dialogue ensured that his staff remained motivated and committed to the overall goals of the National Theatre. Furthermore, Yerima's emphasis on creating a sense of purpose and direction extended to the external stakeholders as well, particularly the private sector and governmental bodies. He leveraged his leadership to secure

sponsorship and private partnerships, ensuring that the National Theatre had the resources necessary for its revival. He recalls:

"For example, when Mr. President said, 'I am ready to let the Federal Government officers or public servants, like me, run the place, but I need a solid partner for them,' I had to go and look for Ford Foundation, who luckily, through their new programme officer, accommodated the re-installment of monumental icons. I had to log in on that and got them to look at it critically, convince my Ministers to meet with them, convince my Ministers to convince the President; you understand? This is the politics of it which you will not learn in Theatre or business schools." (Interview with Yerima, 2007)

In this instance, Yerima's diplomatic skills were instrumental in bridging the gap between governmental directives and external stakeholders. His ability to navigate political dynamics and secure necessary resources showcases his adeptness at utilising transformational leadership principles to engage both internal and external parties effectively. Yerima's leadership was not only about achieving physical upgrades to the National Theatre; it was about instilling a sense of collective pride and accountability among his staff, as well as aligning external stakeholders with the Theatre's vision. His strategy of participative management and transformational leadership led to the revitalisation of the institution during his tenure, breaking through years of stagnation.

However, as Yerima himself acknowledges, the gains achieved during his tenure were short-lived due to the transient nature of governmental appointments. Despite the tangible improvements in the National Theatre's infrastructure and operations, these changes were not sustained after his departure. Yerima's leadership was marked by the ability to inspire, engage, and transform the National Theatre's culture and operations, yet the continuation of this transformation depended on institutional and political support that proved difficult to maintain beyond his term.

Key Findings and Discussions

The research reveals that Ahmed Yerima's leadership strategy at the National Theatre exemplified a strong application of transformational leadership principles, resulting in significant changes both within the organisation and in its interactions with external stakeholders. Yerima's leadership approach focused on revitalising the National Theatre, which had been operating at a near-comatose level prior to his appointment as Director-General. Central to his success was his ability to inspire and motivate his staff, creating a work environment that was dynamic, engaging, and forward-thinking. Yerima's leadership was deeply rooted in his capacity to align the mission of the National Theatre with the identities and values of his staff. By fostering a sense of collective ownership, Yerima was able to transform the culture of the institution, which had been plagued by lethargy and stagnation. His approach included open communication, participative decision-making, and a focus on providing a vision that resonated with all levels of the organisation. He demonstrated his belief in empowering his staff, stating that ideas should grow from individuals and that every member, from the cleaner to the board chairman, had a role in driving the institution forward. Through this inclusive approach, Yerima cultivated a sense of unity and purpose among his staff, leading to improved morale and productivity.

In addition to his internal leadership strategies, Yerima effectively engaged with external stakeholders, including governmental bodies and private organisations. His ability to navigate the political and institutional landscape was crucial in securing support and resources for the National Theatre. He was able to convince stakeholders like the Ford Foundation to collaborate with the institution, thus securing crucial partnerships that contributed to the Theatre's revival. His political savvy and diplomatic skills allowed him to negotiate with ministers, the president, and private sector partners, ensuring that the National Theatre remained a priority despite the broader political landscape. Yerima's transformational leadership also included a strong focus on change management. He recognised that for the National Theatre to thrive, it needed not only physical upgrades but also a shift in attitude, particularly among the management and staff.

Yerima's commitment to change was reflected in his emphasis on improving the physical environment, such as enhancing the aesthetics of the Theatre with new carpets, chairs, and well-maintained facilities. These changes were symbolic of the larger transformation he sought to achieve within the organisation. By focusing on tangible improvements and creating a culture of maintenance, Yerima set a precedent for sustained upkeep and growth.

Despite the significant improvements made under Yerima's leadership, the research highlights the challenges of sustaining these changes in the long term. Yerima's tenure, like many government appointments, was short-lived, and the structural changes he implemented did not endure after his departure. This transient nature of leadership in governmental institutions presents a challenge for long-term organisational change, especially in cases where leadership transitions occur frequently. The research underscores the importance of leadership continuity and institutional support in maintaining the momentum generated by transformational leadership. Ultimately, the study illustrates how Yerima's leadership style exemplified the core tenets of transformational leadership theory, including inspiring and motivating followers, fostering a shared sense of mission, and creating a culture of change and improvement. However, it also highlights the limitations of this leadership style in contexts where political instability and leadership turnover undermine efforts to institutionalise change. Yerima's achievements, while significant, were ultimately hindered by the lack of sustainable support structures, underscoring the need for a more enduring framework to support transformational leadership in public institutions.

Summary and Conclusion

Ahmed Yerima's leadership of the National Theatre exemplified the transformative power of effective leadership in navigating complex institutional and political landscapes. His application of transformational leadership strategies, marked by a focus on motivation, diplomacy, and participatory management, resulted in a significant revitalisation of the National Theatre during his tenure as Director-General. Yerima's ability to influence both internal stakeholders—by fostering a culture of ownership and accountability—and external ones—through skilled navigation of political and bureaucratic dynamics—demonstrated the effectiveness of his leadership style. This research, based on in-depth interviews, highlights key success factors underpinning Yerima's achievements, including his strategic focus, diplomatic acumen, hands-on approach, and ability to build consensus across diverse and often competing interests. His leadership not only breathed life into the National Theatre but also set a precedent for how cultural institutions can be managed successfully, even in challenging political environments.

The research concludes that Yerima's success underscores the importance of transformational leadership in public institutions, particularly within the cultural sector. It further argues that the bureaucratic challenges within Nigeria's public institutions should not be seen as insurmountable obstacles to effective governance. Yerima's tenure serves as a compelling example of how visionary leadership, even amidst political turbulence, can drive institutional success. Therefore, future leaders, especially in the public, and even more particularly, cultural sectors, would benefit from emulating Yerima's approach—emphasising focus, adaptability, and a commitment to empowering those around them to achieve collective goals.

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