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Development of Traditional Theatre Forms in Okunland, Kogi State, Nigeria (1900–1950)

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Abstract

The cultural and traditional essence of Okun societies is deeply enriched by the development of diverse theatre forms that mirror the people's collective consciousness and historical identity. These forms express socio-cultural behaviours that foster social cohesion, moral regeneration, and intercommunal dialogue within the Okun geopolitical landscape. This study explores the evolution of traditional theatre forms in Okunland, Kogi State, Nigeria, from 1900 to 1950, employing descriptive and historical research methods. Primary data were derived through interviews conducted with informed consent to ensure ethical compliance, while secondary materials were drawn from relevant texts, dissertations, and archival resources. Relevant scholarly works and histories associated with developing theatre forms in Okunland are also explored. The study adopts Stephen Greenblatt's theory of *New Historicism* as its theoretical framework, allowing for the interpretation of theatre as a cultural text shaped by the dynamics of history and power. Findings reveal that Okun traditional theatre forms – including folkloric performances, Oro theatre, Epa masquerades, Iregun chants, and Agado dance – serve as living repositories of the people's social memory and moral order. Reviving these traditions reflects the community's cultural identity, while documentation and education can help gain recognition beyond Nigeria. The study concludes that the development of traditional theatre forms in Okunland demonstrated the richness of the people's cultural identity. It recommends and also offers a framework for artistic education, heritage tourism, and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Development, Tradition, Theatre Forms, Okunland, New Historicism

Introduction

The evolution of traditional theatre forms in Okunland, Kogi State, Nigeria, represents a profound engagement between history, performance, and identity. Across generations, theatre in this region has functioned as a bridge between the living and the ancestral world, serving as a medium of entertainment, education, and spiritual expression. Within the larger Yoruba cultural complex, Okunland has maintained its distinctive theatrical aesthetics while absorbing influences from its geographic and political environment. These performances are not merely spectacles but communal acts of remembrance that reaffirm moral values and social unity. According to Kerr, "the notion of communal, sharing, pre-colonial society has found a theatrical equivalent in an aesthetic emphasis on African theatre's anonymous, participatory qualities" (2). In this sense, the theatre of Okunland mirrors the shared life of its people, translating oral tradition into dramatic action that continues to evolve through time.

Okunland, as a significant Yoruba settlement, celebrates the artistic ingenuity of its people while revealing how performance sustains cultural continuity amid historical disruptions. Theatre, as Adeoye observes, remains the meeting ground between art and life, where "science underpins knowledge, art embodies creativity and intuition" (2). For the Okun people, traditional performances

– ranging from ritual displays to masquerade pageantry – reflect a worldview that integrates spirituality, ethics, and aesthetics. These forms have often been misrepresented as primitive or fetishist within colonial discourse, yet they remain vital expressions of indigenous epistemology. The people's continued participation in ritual drama challenges the binaries of Western religion and African spirituality, asserting instead an inclusive worldview where both the sacred and the secular coexist.

The Okun region, located in western Kogi State, forms an ethnocultural frontier of Yorubaland. As Mercier explains, it represents "a frontier zone in Africa" that demonstrates cultural hybridity and a capacity for adaptation (18–21). Through storytelling, masquerading, and ritual entertainment, Okun people preserve their collective experiences while instructing the younger generation on moral responsibility. Folk entertainment among them draws from the rhythms of daily life – hunting expeditions, agricultural festivals, warfare reenactments, and communal storytelling under the moonlight. Ajayi affirms that oral traditions such as "myths, legends, songs, folklores, proverbs, poems, and festivals" remain indispensable for reconstructing Africa's early civilization (24). In Okunland, these oral forms have endured as both performance and pedagogy, blending artistry with education in the preservation of memory.

Ritual performances, often staged as sacred dramas, reveal the symbiosis between religion and theatre in Okun culture. Festivals, masquerade pageants, and ritual enactments operate within the community as cyclical affirmations of faith and identity. As Enekwe rightly states, the material and symbolic dimensions of costume and ritual "are essential to good drama, and that function determines the form drama in every culture" (185). These performances celebrate life's continuity through symbolic renewal, honouring both deities and ancestors. The aesthetic range of Okun theatre – from the solemnity of Oro rites to the exuberance of Agado dance – underscores the creative depth of a society that views performance as a mode of existence. In acknowledging this diversity, the present study examines the development of traditional theatre forms in Okunland between 1900 and 1950, a period when colonial contact reshaped indigenous expression while also stimulating new forms of cultural assertion.

This paper seeks to explore how Okun theatre evolved as a response to shifting social, political, and spiritual realities during this transformative era. Specifically, it investigates how historical experiences – migration, colonialism, and religious encounter – shaped theatrical representations of identity. It further interrogates how ritual and performative practices acted as instruments of resistance and continuity in a changing world. Employing both descriptive and historical methods, the study situates Okun theatre within broader African performance traditions while drawing upon Stephen Greenblatt's *New Historicism* to interpret its interrelation with power, culture, and memory. By doing so, it contributes to the discourse on Nigerian theatre historiography, demonstrating how performance encapsulates both historical consciousness and the aspiration for cultural renewal.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Stephen Greenblatt's theory of *New Historicism*, as reinterpreted by Jan Veenstra (1995), which underscores the symbiotic relationship between literature, culture, and history. Greenblatt's approach emerged in the 1980s as an intervention against the purely formalist view of texts, proposing instead that art should be understood as a product of cultural and ideological forces. The framework allows this research to situate Okun traditional theatre within a network of social practices, viewing performances as cultural texts shaped by political, religious, and communal experiences. New Historicism emphasizes the circulation of social energy through artistic forms, revealing how history and creativity intertwine to produce meaning. As Veenstra notes, the theory "emphasises the cultural context of literary texts, highlighting how history, culture, and tradition are conveyed through various mediums such as literature, drama, and music" (175). Within this model, the theatre of Okunland is not a passive reflection of culture but an active participant in shaping collective consciousness and social transformation.

A distinctive feature of *New Historicism* is its critique of absolute historical truth. It posits that history, like performance, is mediated through discourse, perspective, and ideology. Veeser (1989), cited in Xiaotang, outlines the movement's key assumptions, among which is that:

1. Every expressive act (including literature) is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. literary and non-literary "texts" circulate ins*epa*rably;
4. no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature; and
5. a critical method and language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe (1077).

These principles resonate with Okun oral traditions, where myth, song, and ritual intersect with daily experience to construct social memory. By applying this theoretical lens, the study interprets Okun performances not merely as entertainment but as historical documents embodying the community's struggle for survival and dignity. The performative acts of chanting, masquerading, and ritual dramatization thus become spaces where history is enacted rather than narrated, and where identity is negotiated through artistic renewal.

However, Greenblatt's model, while illuminating, has been critiqued for its Eurocentric bias and its limited engagement with non-Western epistemologies. African performance theorists such as Wole Soyinka and Oyin Ogunba argue that historical interpretation in African theatre must account for metaphysical dimensions beyond textual analysis. Soyinka's concept of the "Fourth Stage," for instance, insists that African performance operates in a liminal space where ritual, myth, and art converge to mediate between the living, the dead, and the unborn. This view complements but also challenges New Historicism by expanding the notion of culture to include the spiritual continuum that undergirds African dramatic expression. When applied to Okun theatre, this synthesis reveals that historical meaning in performance is not confined to the textual or material but extends into metaphysical relationships sustained by ritual and ancestral invocation.

Veenstra's engagement with Greenblatt enriches this discourse by asserting that "the relations between textual and other forms of social production are more complex than is dreamt of in formalist philosophies" (176). This observation is particularly relevant to Okunland, where the boundaries between religion, politics, and art are fluid. Theatre here functions as both a social mirror and a moral compass, reflecting human experience through the intertwined languages of gesture, music, and myth. By situating Okun performances within Greenblatt's cultural poetics, this study demonstrates that acts of theatre are embedded in the power structures, beliefs, and emotional economies of their time. The performances of Epa, Oro, and Iregun, for instance, embody not only aesthetic sensibility but also the negotiation of authority between the human and the divine.

Furthermore, later critics such as Hickling (2018) and Spiegel (1990) have nuanced the scope of *New Historicism* by emphasizing that history is "nuanced, imbued with emotions, and written from the perspective of ordinary people" (Hickling 55). Spiegel expands this idea by arguing that historical interpretation is "mediated by linguistic codes" rather than offering direct access to reality (190). In Okunland, such mediation is visible in oral narratives that translate collective trauma and triumph into symbolic performances. By adapting these perspectives, the present research aligns *New Historicism* with African historiographic traditions that privilege communal memory over archival documentation. The theory thus becomes a flexible instrument for reading Okun theatre as a living text – an archive of embodied knowledge that reclaims marginalised histories from silence.

Ultimately, *New Historicism* provides a useful, though not exhaustive, lens for analyzing Okun traditional theatre. It foregrounds the dialectic between power and performance, showing how historical experience is re-enacted through art. Yet, its integration with African theories of ritual performance ensures a more holistic understanding of Okunland's theatrical heritage. The interplay between Greenblatt's emphasis on cultural context and Soyinka's metaphysical continuum illuminates the dynamic structure of Okun theatre as both historical and transcendental. This fusion justifies the theory's adoption for the study, offering a framework through which Okun performance practices can be interpreted as complex negotiations between the material and the spiritual, the colonial and the indigenous, and ultimately, between the self and history.

Literature Review

The literature review for this study is divided into two sections. The first section explores the geography and cultural history of Okunland, situating it within the broader Yoruba cultural system. The second examines the development of traditional theatre forms in Okunland from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. Together, these perspectives reveal how geography, migration, religion, and performance intertwined to shape Okunland's evolving theatre traditions. This review draws on interdisciplinary sources in history, anthropology, and performance studies to illuminate how Okun theatrical forms emerged from local experiences while resonating with pan-African artistic expressions. By engaging both primary sources and established scholarship, the study positions Okun theatre as a site where cultural identity and historical consciousness converge through performance.

A Review of the Geography and Cultural History of Okunland

Identifying similarities in symbols, patterns, designs, and archaeological findings have confirmed Okunland's relation to Yorubaland. The cultural and traditional characteristics of Okun's neighbours have directly and indirectly influenced the settlement pattern of their residential areas.

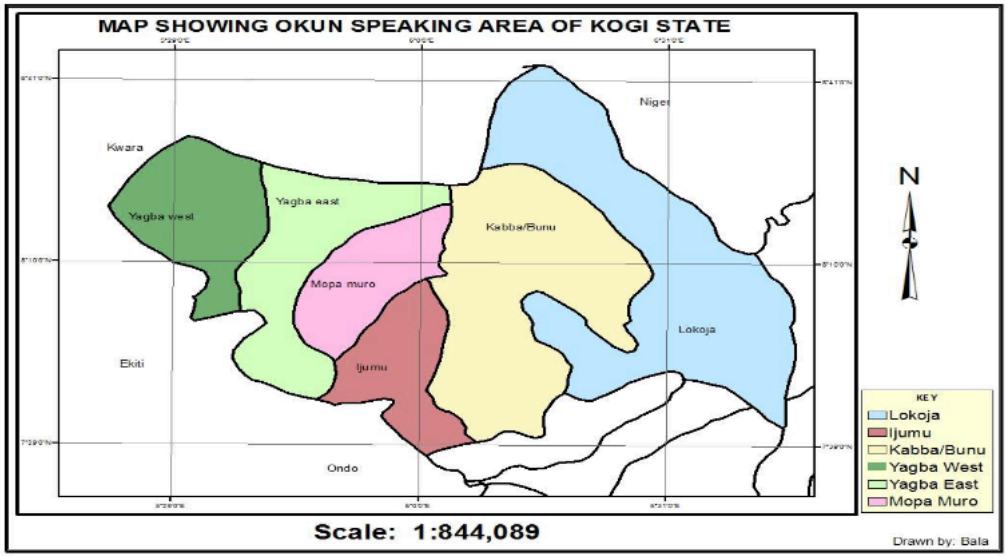

Figure 1: Map showing Okun-speaking Local Government Areas of Kogi State (Tubi, 2015)

The Okun group, according to (Towns & Villages, 2024) is situated in the Northeast of Yorubaland. This is located in the Northwest part of Kogi State. The Okun people are situated within six local government areas in Kogi State. These are:

1. Ijumu, with its headquarters in Iyara, houses towns like Ayetoro Gbede, Iyah-Gbede, Ayegunle Gbede, Ayere, Okoro Gbede, Ekinrin-Adde, Iyamoye, Ikoyi, Oton-Ade, Origa, and others;
2. Yagba West, with its headquarters in Odo Ere, houses towns like Egbe, Odo Eri, Igbaruku, and others within Yagba West;
3. Yagba East, with its headquarters in Isanlu, has towns like Ijowa, Isanlu-Itedo, Isanlu-Makutu, Ilai, Ejuku, Isanlu Mopo, and others that make up Yagba East;
4. Owe/Kabba/Bunu, with its headquarters in Kabba also accommodates towns like Aiyedun, Odo-Bata, Okedayo, Ayetoro Kiri, Iluke, Odogbo, and others;
5. Lokoja, with its headquarters in Lokoja, has towns like Adankolo, Eddo, Akpata, Felele, Gbebu, Ekan, and others; and
6. Mopa–Muro with its headquarters in Mopa, houses towns like Efo, *Takete-Ide*, Aiyedayo, Otafun, Ileteju Aiyedaro, Okagi, Orokere, and others.

According to *The Nigerian Gazette* (2009), the population census of 2006 confirms a total of 906,244 indigenes reside within the current geographical location of Okunkand. Okun settlements house numerous groups with diverse personalities. According to Hambolu, “It could be stated that the Okun area is not an area of recent immigration as most oral traditions seem to portray” (287).

The geographical identity of Okunland plays a critical role in understanding its theatrical and cultural evolution. Scholars such as Ekundayo have noted that the region, located along latitude 7°15' to 8° North and longitude 5°30' to 7° East, “covers an area of about 28,032 square kilometres” and represents a vital intersection between Northern and Southwestern Nigeria (60). The Okun-speaking communities – Ijumu, Yagba East and West, Kabba-Bunu, Mopa-Muro, and parts of Lokoja – constitute a distinct Yoruba subgroup with deep-rooted traditions and a shared linguistic heritage (Tubi, 2015). As Mercier’s ethno-demographic mapping suggests, Okunland’s position as a “frontier zone in Africa” enabled it to absorb cultural influences from both Yoruba and Nupe civilizations (18–21). Oral histories indicate that these interactions fostered hybrid religious and artistic practices, later manifested in Okun’s unique theatre forms. The region’s ecological diversity and its agrarian economy further contributed to the formation of performance genres tied to agricultural cycles, spiritual worship, and community festivals.

The cultural narratives of origin in Okunland remain varied, yet they consistently affirm a strong connection to Yorubaland. Hambolu asserts that the Okun region “is not an area of recent immigration as most oral traditions seem to portray” (287). Instead, the people’s settlement patterns reflect centuries of migration, internal displacement, and resistance to external incursions, including the Nupe raids of the nineteenth century. These experiences were subsequently memorialised through ritual enactments and masquerade performances. Iyekolo’s (2000) oral accounts describe how the Yagba people trace their descent to a princess called *Iya Agba*, whose

migration from Old Oyo became the symbolic foundation of Yagba identity (1). Similarly, Bakinde (2013) references Ijagbemi's narrative of a "mysterious man at Iya" whose descendants spread across Okunland, thus grounding collective memory in mythic genealogy (56). These stories, while not historically verifiable in a Western sense, operate as cultural texts that inform Okun's performative imagination, illustrating how myth and theatre coalesce to sustain identity.

Counterarguments exist regarding the historical authenticity of these oral traditions. Courlander (1973), as cited in Iyekolo, argues that such accounts may reflect metaphorical representations of political legitimacy rather than factual ancestry (4). However, from a New Historicist standpoint, the veracity of these stories is less significant than their cultural function in shaping identity and continuity. Okunland's mythic histories, like those of many African societies, translate memory into performance – where song, dance, and masquerade become the vessels of historical truth. Olayemi underscores this point by linking culture, environment, and development, arguing that Okun performances often mirror ecological and social realities of survival (23). The interdependence between geography, belief, and performance underscores the Okun worldview in which every artistic act embodies both historical experience and metaphysical resonance. In this light, Okun theatre can be seen as a living archive of human geography – a dynamic mode of storytelling through which the people reassert their place in Nigeria's cultural landscape.

Development of Traditional Theatre Forms in Okunland

Traditional theatre in Okunland occupies a central role in expressing communal values and cosmological beliefs. As Julius-Adeoye notes, "drama evolving out of religious or ritualistic worship is not in doubt" (7), indicating that Okun theatre, like many African traditions, originated in sacred ceremonies. The theatre's performative essence reflects its rootedness in oral traditions that merge aesthetics, history, and spirituality. Ododo reinforces this view by observing that "performance is an important cultural event for Africans because of its ancestral manifestations" (105). For the Okun people, theatre serves both artistic and metaphysical purposes – it celebrates deities, honours ancestors, and reinforces social norms through collective participation. The symbiosis of religion and performance, therefore, becomes a vital aspect of Okun identity, situating theatre as a ritualized space of memory, moral instruction, and cultural affirmation.

Adedeji's (1989) and Ogundeji's (2005) typology of traditional performance provides a useful framework for classifying Okun theatre forms. This is reflected in the table below:

S/N	Adedeji (1989)	Ogundeji (2005)
1.	The Story Theatre	Sacred Ritual Drama
2.	The Festival Theatre	Festival Ritual Drama
3.	The Ritual theatre	Deritualising Drama
4	The Masque Theatre	Deritualised Drama

Table 1: Adedeji and Ogundeji's Typology of Traditional Performances (Adeoye, 15)

Within this model, Okun performances embody all four typologies, encompassing sacred ritual dramas like *Oro* and *Epa*, as well as festive and deritualised forms such as the *Agado Dance* and *Iregun chants*. Adeoye's psychosocial theatre further complements this classification by situating these forms within evolving socio-religious contexts (15). The fluidity between ritual and festival underscores the adaptive nature of Okun theatre, which, while grounded in precolonial spirituality, has continually responded to historical change. Kerr (1995) situates such performances within the broader "evolutionary perspective of African theatre," emphasizing how precolonial and syncretic traditions "progress logically into the more developed form of literary drama" (41). Consequently, the Okun theatrical heritage should not be viewed as static folklore but as a continuum linking oral ritual to modern performance aesthetics.

Still, some scholars have challenged the overemphasis on sacred elements in the interpretation of African theatre. Ogunba (1978) and Echeruo (2014) caution against romanticising ritual as the sole foundation of performance, insisting that festival theatre often carried secular, political, and educational functions. Applying this insight to Okunland reveals that while religious devotion permeates *Epa* and *Oro* performances, other genres such as *Iregun* chants or folk narratives were equally vehicles of satire, social critique, and communal amusement. These performative layers highlight Okun theatre's pluralism – a fusion of the sacred and the civic, the spiritual and the social. Adeoye's psychosocial reading reinforces this multiplicity by presenting the theatre as a "mirror of human experience" (24). In synthesizing these positions, the present study recognises Okunland's

theatrical culture as both a ritual archive and a dynamic public forum where art negotiates moral and historical discourse.

The Pre-colonial Period

Before the colonial era, the people of Okunland expressed their worldview through a wide range of theatrical practices deeply intertwined with religion, social order, and cosmology. These performances were not separate from life but constituted a form of communal philosophy enacted in ritual and celebration. The pre-colonial Okun theatre was grounded in indigenous spirituality moderated by *Ifa*, similar to other Yoruba settlements, and its performances – *Epa*, *Oro*, *Agado*, and *Iregun* – functioned as aesthetic expressions of faith and social continuity. Julius-Adeoye confirms that "indigenous Nigerian theatre developed from masquerade performances, as evidenced in African theatre history" (21). Ritual ceremonies thus served as the prototype of dramatic representation, providing the sacred matrix from which secular and didactic performances later emerged. These enactments not only entertained but also preserved ancestral memory, ensuring that moral wisdom and historical knowledge remained alive within the collective consciousness of the Okun people.

Ritual entertainment held and still holds pride of place within this cultural matrix, shaping both festival and masquerade traditions. Rotimi observes that certain "African ritual ceremonies reveal instances of 'imitation' either of an experience in life, or of the behaviour-patterns of some powers" (93), illustrating how the Okun theatre blurred boundaries between religion and representation. Yerima further insists that such rituals, born of serious drama, eventually "gave rise to the modern-day Nigerian tragedy" (26). In Okunland today, ritual dramatizations were and still are performed to honour *Olodumare* and the local *Eboras*, believed to protect the community from calamity and invasion. Interviews conducted with community elders such as Oloruntoba (2021) confirm that "the gods, and the *Eboras* of the land protected and saved us from being wiped out by the Nupe warriors." These performances, though sacred, also functioned as therapeutic spectacles – acts of communal healing that reaffirmed moral balance and ecological harmony.

Among the most remarkable of these ritual expressions is *Oro* theatre, a secretive and masculine performance associated with ancestral veneration and spiritual cleansing. In Kabba, *Oro* participants mask their faces to honour *Orisha*, the Yoruba deity of justice, whose presence is invoked to rid the land of evil. During *Oro* ceremonies, women and children remain indoors, reinforcing both the gendered and spiritual hierarchies of the society. The performance's combination of chanting, drumming, and nocturnal procession embodied what Adedeji (2014) calls "a synthesis of religion, poetry, and choreography that defines traditional Yoruba theatre" (273). Although feminist scholars such as Nwosu (2016) have critiqued the patriarchal exclusivity of *Oro* for marginalising women's voices, such readings also reveal the layered complexity of Okun ritual – its simultaneous capacity to preserve heritage and negotiate social boundaries. Through this duality, *Oro* remains both a sacred covenant with the ancestors and a commentary on social order within Okun cosmology.

Closely related to *Oro* is the *Epa* masquerade theatre, which embodies the most elaborate manifestation of Okun ritual art. The narrative of Elela, regarded as the progenitor of *Epa* worship, links the performance to divine inspiration and historical migration. As Ayinmode recounts, Elela "climbed up to the top of the hill that separated Agbura and Iyah Old Site and sang *Oro* tunes… He then moved down to that side of the hill to settle at Ekuku… where he established *Oro Imole* religion and *Epa* as its annual festival" (88). The *Epa* masquerade represents fertility, renewal, and ancestral protection, and its iconography integrates sculpture, dance, and invocation. Awolalu explains that "the *Egúngún* is an embodiment of the spirit of a deceased person who is believed to have returned from *orun* (the spirit-world) to visit his children" (65). Through such performances, Okun actors dramatise the continuum between life and afterlife, transforming ritual possession into theatrical spectacle. Adelugba (2014) describes this transformation vividly: "with the inspiration of the possessed, the worshippers who are versed in knowledge and are on constant vigil assemble and sing the praise-songs and chants of the gods, while the possession deepens gradually in ecstasy" (259).

The *Agado* dance theatre of Takete-Ide exemplifies another dimension of Okun creativity, merging prophecy, satire, and communal dance into a rhythmic celebration of resilience. Oral accounts from Orogbemi (2023) recall that "a rainbow appeared in the skies only for it to fall into the room Agado was kept," symbolising divine endorsement of the dance. Ododo observes that performers in such festivals "often seek spiritual aid to fortify themselves against spiritual attacks" (143), highlighting the protective and regenerative purpose of performance. Over time, *Agado* evolved into a dynamic art form blending mime, acrobatics, and music, embodying what Adeoye (2021) terms the "psychosocial theatre" – a performative mode that unites artistic catharsis with communal well-being (24). The vibrancy of *Agado* underscores Okunland's enduring ability to translate spirituality into movement, transforming divine communion into embodied choreography.

Equally significant are the *Iregun* chants and songs of the Yagba people, which transform poetic expression into performative history. Titus (2015) notes that during performance, "some *Iregun* performers explain that in the process of singing when they are moved, they are able to tap into a vast repertory of song lines which is not always accessible to them outside the context of performance" (15). This trance-like improvisation situates *Iregun* within what Finnegan (1970) calls the "living art of oral literature," where performer and audience collaborate in the recreation of collective experience. The lyrical verses – such as *momo pansaga se teletele latijo* ("I like chasing women in my early life") – merge humour with moral reflection, reinforcing social discipline through satire. As Ola-Busari (2015) explains, such narratives form part of "communal socialisation that takes place under the moonlight" (119). The *Iregun* chants, like other pre-colonial Okun performances, thus serve as mnemonic rituals that integrate entertainment with ethical instruction, ensuring that culture remains both lived and learned.

The Colonial Period

The colonial encounter profoundly altered Okunland's theatrical landscape, introducing new cultural tensions while stimulating adaptive creativity. Missionary incursions and Western education redefined performance spaces, as indigenous rituals came under scrutiny from Christian and colonial authorities. Amankulor (2014) observed that "these cultural activities contain the germ of rich poetry and prose, excellent music and lively drama which have not been raised far above the traditional level" (138). Yet, colonialism simultaneously eroded traditional patronage systems and inspired new artistic hybrids. In Okunland, troupes that once performed exclusively for deities or festivals began to adopt narrative techniques influenced by Western drama. The Alarinjo travelling theatre, which Adedeji (2014) identifies as a precursor to modern Nigerian theatre, gained renewed prominence as performers blended indigenous forms with Christian moral themes to navigate censorship.

The encounter between Christianity and traditional theatre produced complex negotiations of faith and identity. As Sciortino, a colonial officer cited in Oshewolo (2018), reported, "in the Kabba division, Christianity is spreading so fast that it is beginning to come into conflict with fetishism" (14). Many Okun converts reinterpreted ritual songs and masquerade chants into Christian hymns, an example of what Ogunbiyi (2014) describes as the "reworking of traditional masquerade songs into church music" (22). While this adaptation promoted religious syncretism, it also diluted some ritual significances of the performances. Nzekwu (2014) laments that even the *Epa* masquerade "is dwindling in importance as the people become more and more used to Western ideas" (158). However, postcolonial critics such as Clark (2014) argue that this transformation should not be read purely as decline but as evolution – the rise of a "modern professional theatre" that retools indigenous expression for new social realities (375).

Despite missionary opposition, many Okun communities maintained elements of their ritual aesthetics under the guise of entertainment. The early twentieth century saw the incorporation of drumming, chanting, and symbolic dance into church festivals, where the line between sacred and secular became increasingly blurred. Echeruo (2014) notes that these "Choral and Dramatic Societies" often conflicted with colonial notions of civility because they celebrated indigenous idioms of expression (446). Yet, their persistence affirmed the resilience of local identity against cultural homogenisation. Even within Christian worship, as Ododo (2014) observes, the use of indigenous music "has done significant experiments in worship" (142). The result was a hybrid theatre – part liturgical, part traditional – that retained Okunland's performative vitality while accommodating Western influence.

Moreover, Okun performances during this era evolved into vehicles of subtle resistance, embedding critiques of colonial authority within symbolic narratives. Dasylva (2006) reminds us that culture's adaptive capacity "engenders flexibility and societal cohesion" (326), a principle vividly exemplified in Okunland's colonial theatre. While missionaries sought to erase indigenous spirituality, performances like *Epa* and *Iregun* encoded historical memory and communal pride beneath the veneer of entertainment. Through dance, satire, and masquerade, Okun artists articulated counter-discourses of dignity, turning the stage into a site of cultural negotiation. By mid-century, these performative strategies laid the groundwork for a post-colonial theatrical consciousness later seen in the works of Yoruba dramatists such as Ogunde and Ladipo. Okunland's theatre thus bridged eras – preserving ancestral idioms while nurturing a new civic artistry that anticipated Nigeria's broader theatrical renaissance.

Conclusion

The evolution of folklore, performance spaces, improvisation, and audience-interaction significantly shaped traditional theatre forms in Okunland between 1900 and 1950, and demonstrates the depth of the people's creative resilience and the fluidity of indigenous performance traditions. Across pre-colonial and colonial eras, Okun theatre functioned as both ritual and resistance – bridging myth and history, spirituality and social change. The intricate

interplay of folklore, ritual drama, masquerade performance, and communal storytelling reflects a society that uses art to interpret its world. Within this continuum, the performances of *Epa*, *Oro*, *Agado*, and *Iregun* not only preserved ancestral memory but also served as repositories of ethical instruction and cultural renewal. By integrating historical documentation with lived experience, Okunland's theatre traditions reveal that performance is not a static cultural artefact but a living organism – constantly evolving in dialogue with the forces of time, power, and belief.

The application of *New Historicism* as the study's theoretical lens has illuminated how Okun theatre functions as a cultural text shaped by material and ideological conditions. In alignment with Greenblatt's principle that expressive acts are "embedded in a network of material practices" (Veeser 1077), Okun performances embody the complex relations between religion, politics, and identity. Yet, as African theorists such as Soyinka and Ogunba remind us, the metaphysical dimensions of ritual must also be acknowledged, since theatre in Africa extends beyond textual interpretation into the realm of spiritual communion. The fusion of these perspectives enriches the study's argument, demonstrating that Okun performance practices cannot be understood solely as historical phenomena but as enduring metaphors of existence. They dramatize not only the past but also the moral and cosmological negotiations that continue to define African modernity.

Moreover, the transition from indigenous ritual to hybrid colonial performance underscores the adaptive genius of Okun artists. The transformation of masquerade chants into church hymns and of festival spectacles into civic celebrations signifies neither loss nor assimilation, but creative survival. Through such transformations, Okun performers retained the aesthetics of their ancestors while engaging with the modern world. This negotiation between continuity and change confirms Ododo's assertion that African performance is "bent, not broken" (1). The colonial experience, far from erasing indigenous theatre, reconfigured it into new forms of artistic and cultural dialogue. In this sense, Okun theatre remains both archive and prophecy – a living script of resilience and reinvention.

The study thus contributes to scholarship in Nigerian and African theatre by revealing the underexplored historical depth of Okun performance culture. It highlights how regional traditions enrich the broader narrative of Yoruba and Nigerian theatre development, offering alternative frameworks for understanding creativity, spirituality, and cultural identity. The emphasis on ethical research practice and documentation further aligns with current academic imperatives for decolonising knowledge production. By documenting Okun theatre as a distinct but interconnected tradition, the study affirms that every performance is an act of cultural remembrance – one that challenges the silences imposed by history and celebrates the imaginative agency of the people.

Future research should extend this inquiry to the post-independence and contemporary phases of Okun theatre, exploring how digital technology, tourism, and diasporic exchange are reshaping its performative landscape. Investigating these emerging dynamics will help sustain the dialogue between tradition and innovation, ensuring that Okun performance continues to thrive as both heritage and contemporary art. Ultimately, as this study has shown, the theatre of Okunland embodies a living testament to the creative spirit of a people who transform adversity into art, memory into movement, and history into song.

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