

# National Theatre Institutions and the De-Neocolonisation and Re-acculturation Agenda

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## Abstract

The institutionalisation of the national theatre concept in the cultural reengineering of African nations' post-independence was a welcome development. The national theatre institution was intended to be a midwife, compass, and custodian of the host nation's beliefs, customs and ways of life. Therefore, it was expected to play a crucial role in its post-independence acculturation. The extent to which the national theatre institution has met its expectations leaves much to be desired. Using the National Theatres of Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria as case studies to represent key post-independence founded African national theatre establishments. This paper examines the impact of the national theatre institution toward the "de-neocolonisation" and re-acculturation of its people since independence, and makes recommendations towards the achievement of the founding national objectives. The research relied on in-depth personal interviews, syndicate discussions, library and web sources for authorities, analysis and conclusion. The study recommends a conscious revisiting of the founding principles behind the birthing of the National Theatre institution in Africa, in line with the culture, customs and beliefs of its peoples.

**Keywords:** National Theatre, Colonialisation, Neo-colonialisation, Culture, African Nations.

## Introduction

Africa has come a long way in contending with numerous issues aimed at completely freeing itself from the whims and caprices of colonialism, and re-acculturate its own people from the stigma and holds of imperialism long after 'supposedly' gaining independence. Ironically, most African nations, even with the claims to so called post-colonial independence, are still replete with post-colonial cultural anomalies such as the arrant display of pseudo-political immaturity by African political leaders and intelligentsia; sit-tightism of African political

leaders in power; capitalistic and avaricious egotism of the upper/middle class businessmen and political jobbers; and a general regime of unchecked recklessness with public funds again, first by the political class and then across the public and private sectors of the African economy. Also, of yet more concern to this research, is the serious consequence of the confusion of cultures between what is truly African indigenous culture and the inherited (or imported, as it were) general post-colonial western ways of life, and the near obliteration of what could be said to be original African culture.

Osofisan (199), very aptly described this post-independence situation, as “an elitist concept of the state, which in theory, preaches a populist orientation, but which in practice is just the opposite that ultimately translates to a very visible contempt for the ordinary people. He maintains, “there always is a tendency which gradually becomes obvious as the regime grows older in office, towards a neo-colonial complex. They grow a kleptomaniac attitude to public office in which they see a position in government as an open warrant to loot the public purse and then persecute those who dare to protest against it” (Osofisan 199-200). Ironically, this general neo-colonial culture displayed outlandishly by the ruling class, becomes a norm to be seen as a sort of national culture that cascades down the classes.

The expected radical efforts of certain segments of the societies such as the civil societies, human right movements, the academia, and various labour movements, in contending with these oppressive and exploitative neo-colonial tendencies, are quite enormous. How can the total expectations of the arts, particularly the national theatre institutions be realised and sustained for the successful de-neocolonisation and re-acculturation of the African people? This is the concern of this paper. There is need to ascertain whether the national theatre institutions in Africa have played their expected roles sufficiently, in initiating a noticeable change considering their founding objectives.

What was the original mission and institutional objective of the national theatre institutions in the socio-cultural conscientisation of post-independent Africa, and how well have the institutions fared in this mandate? On the other hand, in what ways have the management and administration of these institutions been a challenge in the fulfillment of their corporate mandate? The need for a generally effective and deeply rooted cultural de-neocolonisation and re-

acculturation of the masses of the African people cannot be overemphasized. The National Theatre of Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria are used as case studies.

### **The Socio-Economic Significance of the Arts in Nation Re-Building**

The socio-economic benefits of the arts on the individual, community and national development of any society or nation cannot be overemphasized. The low priority accorded the issue of impact measurement within the political and policy agendas of the time, coupled with the lack of a systematic evidence-based metrics have always been a down side for the arts in terms of its socio-economic rating amongst policymakers. This means that the case for the arts was seen as having a wider societal impact was not sufficient to convince policymakers to admit adequate provision for the arts in national budgets. However, from the early 1980s onwards, arts and cultural activity became an increasing feature of urban regeneration programmes. This was evident in Britain when cities began to seek solutions to economic restructuring, turned to the cultural industry owing to the decline of traditional manufacturing industry (Reeves 2). The arts sector is a significant, growing and value-added sector in its own right, with a turnover of £10 billion and employing some 500,000 people (Reeves 2).

According to Osofisan, the wounds of the mind that were caused by a form of indoctrination can only be cured by another form of indoctrination. This is where, according to him, the artist and particularly the theatre artist is most relevant, describing the artist “as a great surgeon of the mind” (Osofisan 201). In other words, the arts and indeed the performing arts, has the capacity to effectively conscientise the masses and contribute immensely to the de-neocolonisation and re-acculturation of the minds of the African masses. More strategically however, is that the national theatre is adequately positioned institution to host the entire process. But how well this institution has lived up to its founding objectives leaves much to be debated.

If any National Theatre is to live up to its name especially in Africa, its performance and objectives should be seen from these parameters proposed by Barbara Ann Teer for the National Black Theatre in her 1968 New York established. Accordingly, a national theatre should:

- raise the level of consciousness through liberating the spirits and strengthening the minds of its people;
- be political, i.e., must deal in a positive manner with the existing conditions of oppression;
- educate to bring out that which is already within, giving knowledge and truth;
- clarify issues, by enlightening participants as to why so many negative conditions and images exist in their community in order to eliminate the negative condition and strengthen the positive condition; and
- entertain. (cited in Osofisan 204).

Germane to the founding mandates of any National Theatre anywhere in the world, as in Africa, is the propagation and entrenchment of the indigenous culture of its host community. The National Theatre of Great Britain for example is reported to be “dedicated to the constant revitalisation of the great traditions of the British stage and to expanding the horizons of audiences and artists alike”, and that it “strives to be a national centre of theatrical arts, central to the creative life of the country and unmatched in the world for scale, range of repertoire and audience reach” (web, *mtishows.com*).

The National Theatre of America in Washington DC has “existed for over 200 years and is reported to be the historic cultural centre for the performing arts in the nation’s capital and the oldest enterprise on Pennsylvania Avenue continuously operating in its original designated capacity”. Till date, the American national theatre remains the residual base and reference point of America’s cultural and social life even so much so that certain remarkable national events are deliberately associated with the building. The theatre has played a significant role in national events, boosting public moral in times of conflict and serving as a focal point in the struggle for civil rights in the 20th century (Hytner 2). In terms of their founding objectives or expected inputs in the continent’s socio-cultural and political life, the national theatres of African countries are no exceptions.

Ironically, it is evident that the expectations from Africa's national theatre institutions with regards to statutory inputs, through management and repertory of performances, towards the de-neocolonisation and re-acculturation of the African minds, are quite high. However, various African nations' national theatres seem to have been bedeviled by myriads of administrative, operational and state challenges. This ranges from the political, social, economic and professional being strategically (or otherwise) distracted from their founding objectives while the all-important socio-cultural, political roles suffers. This is inimical to their mainstay as the host country's cultural institution.

These challenges ranged from government abandonment in terms of funding and cultural policy formulation and non-implementation; marginalisation in national budget planning, extreme bureaucratisation of the day-to-day running of their affairs; lack of due attention to highly needed maintenance culture; abuse, dis-use or under-utilisation of the theatres facility space; the lack of well-articulated and purpose-driven annual repertory of performances and of course, a lack of the application of contemporary management principles and practices. These facts are evident in the case-by-case study of the National Theatre of Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria that follows in this research.

### **The National Theatre of Ghana**

Theatre, culture and the nation are inextricably linked in Ghana. Since the establishment of independence, the country's political and cultural leaders have engaged themselves with the fundamental question of national identity post-colonization (web). It is this search for identity that gave voice and focus to the founding of the National Theatre Company, which was to be in the front burner of this national identity quest post-independence. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first President was consciously redefining the identity of the new nation of Ghana at independence in 1957. Nkrumah recognised the importance of culture as a voice in helping to define and promote his new ideas of nationhood. So, by that same year of independence, the foremost practitioners of theatre in Ghana, inspired by a new wave of energy and freedom, came together to form the National Theatre Movement to 'help forge the new nation's cultural identity'. Through this avenue, a theatrical form of 'truly Ghanaian flavour, which drew immensely on oral traditions of performance' was created. This was what ultimately gave birth to the 'Abibigromma' Concept - a form of total theatre, a

multidisciplinary form with a uniquely Ghanaian flavor. The total theatre of Abibigromma was to be 'a blend of music, dance, mime, movement and dialogue with a strong social, spiritual and folkloric base' ([ghanaculture.gov.gh](http://ghanaculture.gov.gh)).

The story of the Ghana National Theatre, which was finally established and signed into law in 1992 by Ghana's third, elected President J. J. Rawlings, after ten years of military rule evolved from the national identity agenda of Kwame Nkrumah in 1957. Ghana's National Theatre Company was established 1983 but was not signed into law until 1992 as 'a model repertory troupe to facilitate teaching, research and experimentation.' Its mission was to 'evolve the concept of an authentic African theatre which draws from both traditional and contemporary legacies,' encapsulated in the "Abibigromma" concept. ([nationaltheatreghana.com](http://nationaltheatreghana.com)).

The National Theatre building designed to resemble sails being caught by the wind and propelling the affluence of Ghanaian theatre out into the wider world was actually sponsored in lent-cash and building construction personnel by the Republic of China. China eventually wrote off the debt. In the last few years China repeated the gesture by funding the refurbishment of the building, and then again wrote off the debt. Of late however, the fortunes of the National Theatre have begun to dwindle remarkably both in terms of sustaining its huge expense of maintenance and its array of repertory to the point that there have been suggestions to recourse to China to come again to the rescue. But the attitude and body language of the Theatre's Director General strongly suggests an endeavour toward a local solution rather than relying on China. How well they are able to hold out leaves much to be anticipated. ([ghanaculture.gov.gh/](http://ghanaculture.gov.gh/))

### **Kenya National Theatre (KNT)**

The Kenya National Theatre (KNT) was built in 1952 and is the first national theatre in the Commonwealth. The Kenya National Theatre is part of the Kenya Cultural Centre (KCC). The Kenya Cultural Centre in turn, is the national centre for cultural engagement, discourse, performance and research. Incorporating dynamic and aesthetic public spaces for harmonious connections, the Kenya National Theatre is an institution, which embraces and encourages diversity and pluralist perspectives. Located in Nairobi City on Harry Thuku Road... Between the University of Nairobi main campus and the Kenya Broadcasting

Corporation (KBC) headquarters and directly opposite The Fairmont Norfolk Hotel, the KNT as it is fondly called, has a 370 Seating Capacity auditorium & Dance Studio. (Web).

The Kenya National Theatre is, however, a semi-autonomous government agency under the Ministry of State for National Heritage and Culture in Kenya. It is mandated to offer space for the rehearsal and staging of productions to both local and international repertoire. The history of the building has viewed its location as a hurdle for an earnest identification with the local artistic performances. The cost of maintenance has meant higher booking fees for fledgling repertoires, which therefore eventually constrains the theatre to reserving itself for only corporate clientele who could afford it. The Kenya National Theatre has also been a subject of scholarly debate, becoming a basis for formulating a national cultural policy. In 2004, Kenya Cultural Centre Ltd contracted Millicon's Ltd to undertake a three phase renovation of the facility. In October 2007, Kenya National Theatre was handed over and renamed "National Theatre" with a notable interior design of the first floor's "Wasanii Restaurant" by Terry Tabor. The most notable performance is Conrad Makeni's production of *I Will Marry When I Want* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, play with a cast of about 50 which eventually landed Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in trouble with authorities in the 1980s. (*britannica.com*).

The Kenya National Theatre like most of its African counterparts soon after founding was in a terribly dismal and recklessly abandoned state to the point that only the earlier reported Wasanii Restaurant on the first floor happened to be the only active concern in the entire building. It however was revamped, renovated and relaunched by September 2015. The relaunch was a remarkable landmark in the landscape of the cultural development of Kenya, and in the development of the African National Theatre history in general. The Kenya National Theatre relaunch event hosted the President of the Republic of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta who did the re-opening, and other notable personalities and dignitaries that included the renowned playwrights and activists, Ngugi Wa Thiong 'O and Micere Mugo. It is only hoped that the new face of the Kenya National Theatre after the landmark relaunch will help to galvanise a new zeal in the management of the facility so that it can begin to live up to its founding objectives as the country's culture midwife. (Mkokoteni, 25).

**National Arts Theatre of Nigeria**

Constructed in 1976, the National Arts Theatre, which hosted the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977, is a multi-purpose national monument intended for the preservation, presentation and promotion of Nigerian arts and culture. Located in Iganmu on the mainland area of Lagos, the theatre was built during the military regime of Olusegun Obasanjo, and used to be the primary centre for the performing arts in Nigeria. Its exterior is shaped like a military hat making it stand out as a landmark edifice within the city. The building is termed “the culture house” which represents one of the most identifiable national symbols about Nigeria’s arts and culture at home and abroad. The theatre has an auditorium that has the capacity to seat around 3,000 persons, and a conference hall that can accommodate around 800 people. The hall is equipped with facilities for simultaneous translation of 8 languages. (Malomo 14).

**Management of Nigeria’s National Arts Theatre**

The National Arts Theatre of Nigeria is one National Theatre institution in Africa that can be clearly said to have evidently failed in delivering its mandate as a true National Theatre. The establishment has not enjoyed an effective and efficient management practice. This is perhaps due to the civil service bureaucratic strait-jacket under which it has always been expected to function. Apart from hosting the 1977 FESTAC event, the National Arts Theatre is, according to Jide Malomo’s study, “*The Theatre Audience in Nigeria*”, lacks a clear “guideline or blue print for its managers” (14). For example, after the FESTAC in 1977, the then Federal Military Government (under General Olusegun Obasanjo), perhaps, not realizing the great social and political significance of the national arts institution and its need for professional management, was quoted as having directed the bureaucrats of the Federal Department of Culture in the Ministry of Information “to do what they wished” with the building. That marked the beginning of the future decay of the National edifice (Malomo 14). To that extent, the Ministry of Information has managed the National Theatre through Department of Culture in accordance with Civil Service rules.

Unlike other National Theatres in Europe and America, Nigeria’s National Arts Theatre does not boast of a consistent policy document of repertory of productions whereby carefully selected works of a season are staged on a regular basis. According to Muiyiwa



Awodiya, the National Arts Theatre has become a stereotype by institutionalized ineffective management, poor service quality and audience scarcity. He added, the management cannot be innovative as long as it is tied to the apron strings of the civil service bureaucracy (153). Ahmed Yerima, former Director General of the National Arts Theatre, Lagos, Nigeria (2007) lamented, "the National Theatre was almost comatose when I took over administratively, in terms of the staff attitude, dynamism of management and focus, and programmes. In fact, there had not been power (electricity) here for about two years. The place was nearly completely dilapidated." (Ohenhen 66).

In recent years, the National Arts Theatre has been positioned for privatisation or concessioning by the Federal Government against the wish and outcry of performing arts scholars, practitioners and other concerned stakeholders in the Nation's cultural sector. So far, Government does not seem to be listening, as signals of government's intentions to sell the National pride remains high.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Below are some recommendations that may help to revamp and strengthen the institutions and enable them to begin to make the required impact in the de-neocolonization and reacculturation of the African people.

- 1. The National Theatre is a Public Institution:** The National Theatre anywhere in the world, especially in Europe and America is owned, funded, maintained and run by Government. These are places where the real value of the National Theatre is appreciated and therefore well treasured by the State. Governments all over Africa must own up to the fact that the National Theatre is a National Heritage and a public institution and therefore must be run, funded and propelled by government in order to dispense its socio-cultural responsibilities based on its founding policy objectives.
- 2. Professionalizing the Management of the National Theatre Administration:** The Board of Governors, or whichever authority is responsible for the hiring of the chief executive of the National Theatre should make deliberate efforts at professionalising the management of the institution by hiring the right people for the job. For example, the man at the helm of affairs should understand the arts and arts administration together with the passion for it. The

Rockefeller Panel report of 1965 describes the qualification of such a manager as:

knowledgeable in the art... an impresario, labour negotiator, diplomat, educator, publicity and public relations experts, a politician, skilled businessman, a social sophisticate, a servant of the community, a tireless leader, becoming humble before authority, a teacher, a tyrant and a continuing student of the art with which he has to do (Langley 23).

This Rockefeller Panel Report's definition should become a parameter for hiring, training and developing managers for the performing arts institutions, and particularly, the National Theatre. It effectively covers the basic requirements in the aspects of knowledge, skills and attitude for the job. Compromise of any sort must not be exercised in ensuring that the right persons are hired to run the organisations. Putting round pegs in square holes has certainly been the bane of some of the African National Theatres.

**3. De-bureaucratisation of Authority**

No doubt, bureaucracy usually characterises any public service establishment. However, excessive bureaucracy, especially in a creative arts institution in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century, would certainly slow down decision-making, problem solving, slow down productivity, and entrepreneurial spirit. For the new African National Theatre to be effective to its mandate, its management must have freedom to dispense professional initiatives in repertory planning and programme execution. In turn, a more dynamic, innovative and effective National Theatre will evolve.

**4. Research-Based Marketing Strategies**

For utmost success of the National Theatre institutions, their marketing efforts must become strictly based on research findings, far more than sheer guesswork. The institutions that must market right, selling the right product, to the right audience, at the right time, for the right pricing, at the right location, must not by any means be research-shy. Through research, a volume of vital information will be thrown open to enhance the organisation's

marketing communications efforts, influencing the choice of productions for the right audiences, making them more result-oriented. Any institution that must effectively reach its right audience, be it public or privately run, must invest in a research-based marketing.

**5. Strategic Planning/Management**

The National Theatre Management should engage in more strategic planning efforts by tasking its Management and Staff to revisit its founding vision and mission statements, with a view to providing a more contemporary, relevant and competitive corporate blueprint. Whereas, a well-crafted, broad-based corporate mission statement according to Webb, should be able to “motivate people inside the organisation, inspire and invite support (from outside), must be understood to provide a lot of flexibility to the organisation as it considers how to accomplish its goals. (Webb 128)

**6. Periodic Management & Staff Training**

In view of the growing competitiveness of the labour terrain, one known way of keeping the management and staff of organisations updated, innovative, top performing and loyal to the organisation is through training and constant re-training and development. In the art world, the emphasis is usually on the direct technical skills and competencies that have to do with acting, directing, and designs. Whereas certain aptitudes in such areas like leadership, entrepreneurship, management, marketing, emotional intelligence etc. are rarely deemphasized but yet quintessential to effective running of great organisations in the global market. The National Theatre Institutions should develop a training curriculum for its cross-section of employees, touching various aspects of the facilities behind the stage, or front-of-the-house operations.

**6. Aggressive Fund-Raising Drive**

The institutions should stop resting on their oars and putting all their expectations on Government fundings that are never enough. They should begin to engage in aggressive fund-raising drive to enable them generate funds from other sources to run their affairs and their plethora of production repertory. Even the National Theatre of Great Britain that makes huge box office collections and gets heavy subsidy from Government, still engage in fund drives from many other sources.

**7. Commitment to Planning and Plan Implementation**

The Board and Management of the National Theatre must begin to pay attention to planning: budget planning, programme planning and events planning – and each plan must always be in synergy with the corporate objective of the institution. Planning and execution must go together otherwise planning will be of no use.

**8. A Consistent Facility Maintenance Culture**

Many a private and public sector establishment have faded into oblivion or suffered arrested development due to public apathy as well as negative attitude toward public facility maintenance. Accordingly:

Facility management culture is yet to be cultivated in Nigeria as public facilities are not well maintained. When public facilities are not properly maintained, they will normally break down and there will be under scheduled shut-down and production flow will be hindered (Awodiya 209).

This has been the bane of most establishments in Nigeria and indeed other African countries, cutting across the power and energy sector, national and public edifices and resort centres, oil and gas pipes and refineries, schools and colleges, public offices and facilities, roads, public vehicles and other equipment. There must be a consistent facility maintenance culture put in place in every African National Theatre establishment to ensure that the institutions remain attractive, serviceable and productive for all times.

**Conclusion**

The national theatre concept was, and still is a welcome development in the deconstruction of the neocolonial hegemony and cultural reawakening, reacculturation and re-engineering process of the Africa's post-independence. This development is due to its strategic positioning as the residual culture midwife of the host nations. The National Theatre possesses the capacities and potentialities embedded in its programming, management, repertoire, and culture policy formulation and implementation influences, to conscientise the nation and stir a revolution in whichever direction it so decides to commit. Ironically, it seems especially as this research has shown, that the

National Theatres in most African countries have been either incapacitated, frustrated or distracted by diverse internal structural or external socio-political and economic challenges.

The de-neocolonisation and re-acculturation of the African people, which are critical to the development of Africa, cannot be overemphasized. The role of Africa's National Theatre Institutions in that process is equally a sine qua non. It is evident, as have been clearly shown in this paper, that the National Theatre Institutions in African Countries post-independence, have however, fallen short of their critical roles and mandate as the culture midwives of their host countries. These institutions need general management re-engineering; renewed government commitment and interests in their survival and operations. There must be general sensitization of public awareness, interest and participation in ensuring that the institutions do not only survive but begin to live up to the ethos of their founding objectives.

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