



# The Impact of African Theatre on World Theatre Practice.

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## Abstract

*African theatre, with its rich and diverse past, has had a considerable impact on global theater practice. The cultural relevance of African theatre and its role in fostering social change are discussed in this article. We investigate how African theatre has influenced aesthetics, politics, and global theatre forms using the theoretical framework of Performance Studies. African theatre has challenged traditional Western norms and traditions by introducing new performing styles and storytelling strategies. We gain insight into the transformational impact of African theatre by exploring the intricate dynamics of the performer-audience connection within broader socio-cultural and political contexts. Its enduring impact continues to shape and enrich the worldwide theatrical environment, stimulating cross-cultural engagement and transcending artistic limits. African theatre is a testament to the power of performance as a catalyst for cultural discussion and social reform, from maintaining traditions and history to inspiring modern theatre practices.*

**Keywords:** *African theatre, Performance studies theory, World Theatre Practice, Western theatrical forms, Cultural significance,*

*Received 04 August, 2023; Revised 15 August, 2023; Accepted 17 August, 2023 © The author(s) 2023. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)*

## I. Introduction

African theatre is a rich and diverse art form that has been an integral part of African culture for centuries. It has served as a means of communication, education, and entertainment for communities across the continent, preserving history, customs, and traditions through storytelling, music, dance, and performance. Over the years, African theatre has also contributed significantly to world theatre practice, inspiring and influencing theatre artists and practitioners around the globe. In this article, we will examine the impact of African theatre on world theatre practice and explore the cultural significance of this art form, as well as its role in promoting social change. By delving into the evolution of African theatre, by investigating the distinctive aesthetic expressions, storytelling approaches, and performing styles that characterize African theater traditions, this paper will highlight the impact that African theatre has had on the broader landscape of world theatre practice.

## II. Evolution of African Theatre.

African theatre has a rich history, with roots that can be traced back to pre-colonial times. The continent's diverse cultures have given rise to a multitude of theatrical traditions, each with its unique styles, themes, and performance techniques. According to Okpewho (1993), the origins of African theatre can be traced back to the rituals and performances of African communities. These performances served as a way to celebrate important events, mark important milestones, and communicate important cultural values and beliefs. African theatre has its roots in ritual performances that were integral to traditional African societies. Thus, According to Akinwande (2010), many African societies had elaborated ritual practices that included dance, music, and theatre. These rituals were performed to appease the gods, mark important events, and bring the community together. Given the impetus by Akinwande (2010), Osofisan (2001) points out that, African societies have a

long history of performance, with dance, music, and theatre being integral to many cultural events. These performances were often accompanied by elaborate costumes, props, and instruments, and were a way of celebrating the community's rich cultural heritage. Over time, these performances evolved into more elaborate and structured theatrical forms, with the introduction of costumes, music, dance, and other elements of drama. Okome (2013), opines that European theatre forms such as opera, melodrama, and Shakespearean plays were introduced to Africa during the colonial period. Many African theatre practitioners, especially those who had been exposed to Western education, incorporated elements of Western theatre into their works. African theatre has been a fundamental part of African culture for many years and has contributed significantly to the preservation of African history, customs, and traditions. It has additionally served as a vital tool for social change as it frequently discusses current problems that the African continent is dealing with. According to Adegbite (2017), African theatre has been a means of communication for African communities for many years. The art form has been used to pass down traditional customs, beliefs, and values from one generation to another. African theatre has also helped to promote cultural unity by bringing communities together to share in the experience of storytelling and performance. In addition to its cultural significance, African theatre has been a catalyst for social change. Many African playwrights have used their work to address contemporary social issues, such as political corruption, gender inequality, and human rights abuses. For example, the Kenyan playwright Ngugi waThiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want* explores issues of land ownership and economic exploitation in Kenya (Gikandi, 2015). African theatre has played a significant role in preserving African history, customs, and traditions while also promoting social change. The art form has been used to pass down traditional customs, beliefs, and values from one generation to another and has served as a means of communication for African communities.

### **III. Literature Review**

African theatre has had a profound impact on world theatre practice, influencing and inspiring theatre artists and practitioners across the globe. Banham (1999) argues that the globalization of African theatre has facilitated the exchange of ideas and cultural practices, leading to the development of intercultural theatre. He further alludes that African theatre's focus on communalism, spirituality, and storytelling has contributed to the emergence of alternative theatre forms, such as physical theatre, street theatre, and theatre for development. Viewing through the lens of Banham, (1999), one can infer that, different cultures are now able to share and exchange their ideas, which has resulted in the creation of new theatre forms. One of the illustrations of the globalization of African theatre is Street theatre. Street theatre is a genre of performance that frequently tackles social and political themes. The emphasis on storytelling in African theatre has had a big impact on street theatre, as many street performers employ storytelling to get their point over to the audience. Storytelling is a fundamental element in African theatre, as it provides a way to connect with the audience emotionally and intellectually. African theatre also emphasizes the use of music, dance, and physical movement to enhance the storytelling experience (Nwachukwu Agbada, 2019). According to Touloumakos (2016), storytelling is a common technique used in street theatre, as it allows performers to connect with the audience on a personal level. Street performers often use storytelling to convey messages about social injustice, poverty, and other issues that affect their communities. Ojo (2018) argues that the use of storytelling in street theatre is a way to create a connection between the performer and the audience, allowing the audience to understand the message in a more personal way. African theatre's emphasis on storytelling has had a significant influence on street theatre, as many street performers use storytelling as a way to connect with their audience and convey important messages. The use of storytelling in street theatre allows performers to create a personal connection with their audience, allowing them to understand the message in a more meaningful way. The influence of African theatre on street theatre highlights the importance of storytelling in theatre and its ability to connect performers and audiences on a personal level. Aside from the aforementioned theatre subgenres that have developed as a result of the globalization of African theatre, there is one more subgenre worth mentioning: theatre for development, which is a genre of theatre that aims to address social and political issues by involving the community in the creative process. African theatre's focus on communalism and community has been instrumental in the development of theatre for development. By involving the community in the creative process, theatre for development can address the issues that affect them directly, and the result is often a powerful and transformative experience for both the performers and the audience. According to Banham (2004), African theatre is rooted in the traditional forms of storytelling, dance, and ritual that have been used for centuries to pass on cultural traditions and knowledge. These forms of theatre have always been community-based, with performers and audiences coming together to share in the experience. The influence of African theatre on the development of TFD cannot be overstated. According to Kairu (2014), TFD draws heavily on the principles of African theatres, such as community involvement, collective creativity, and the use of storytelling to address social issues. TFD also reflects the communal ethos of African theatre, which emphasizes the importance of working together to achieve common goals. Abimbola (2014) argues that African traditional theatre has had a

significant influence on global theatricality by providing a source of inspiration for contemporary theatrical productions. In the argument of Ambimbola (2014), African traditional forms of theatre such as storytelling, music, mask, and dancing to mention a few have inspired contemporary playwrights, directors, and actors to incorporate African aesthetics, themes, and performance styles into their work. For instance, storytelling is a vital element in August Wilson's plays, and he uses it in several ways to engage his audience, convey his themes, and develop his characters. In August Wilson's *Fences* is a powerful example of how he incorporates African storytelling techniques into his plays. The play tells the story of Troy Maxson, a former baseball player who struggles to provide for his family and comes to grips with his failures and disappointments. In the play, there is the usage of the Call and Response technique. In African storytelling, call, and response is a technique where a storyteller engages the audience by asking questions or making statements, and the audience responds with a chorus or repeated phrase. Wilson uses this technique in "Fences" through the character of Gabriel, Troy's brother, who is a mentally disabled war veteran. Gabriel has a recurring line throughout the play, "I got the power of the angel, I got the power of God," which he repeats as a call, and the other characters respond in chorus, "I got the power of God." Despite the many contributions of African theatre to global theatricality, African theatre, and its practitioners still struggle to gain recognition and respect in the global theatre community (Yankah, 2004). African theatre has faced several challenges that have hindered its representation and visibility in world theatre. These challenges include limited funding, colonialism, language barriers, and inadequate infrastructure. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that African theatre continues to influence world theatre practice. Aside from the above challenge that militates against, the impact of African theatre in World theatre practice, exist other challenges such as the Lack of funding and limited access to training and resources. Thus, Many African theatre companies struggle to secure funding for their productions, leading to limited resources and reduced opportunities for training and development. According to Nwafor, (Nwafor, 2015) African theatre faces significant financial constraints that limit its capacity to produce quality productions. Most African countries have limited resources, and theatre is not a priority in national budgets. The lack of funding affects the quality of productions and hinders the growth of African theatre. Due to the lack of funding, many African theatre practitioners have limited access to training and resources, making it difficult to develop their skills and create high-quality productions. Akporobaro (2013) states that inadequate infrastructure is a significant challenge facing African theatre. The lack of rehearsal spaces, performance halls, and other facilities hinders the growth of theatre in Africa. According to Osadebe (2017), Language barriers have hindered the growth of African theatre, making it difficult for theatre practitioners to create productions that appeal to everyone. Another challenge faced by African theatre is language barriers. Africa is a linguistically diverse continent, and language barriers have hindered the growth of theatre. Most African countries have more than one official language, which makes it challenging to create productions that appeal to everyone. The language barrier also limits the audience reach of African theatre. Addressing the challenges faced by African theatre is essential to ensure that it continues to influence world theatre practice. African theatre is rich in culture and diversity, and its influence on world theatre practice cannot be underestimated. Due to the challenges that have befuddled African theatre, Nwafor (2015) states that Addressing the challenges faced by African theatre is critical to ensure that African theatre continues to influence world theatre practice. It will provide opportunities for theatre practitioners to showcase their works on the global stage. Thus, addressing the challenges faced by African theatre will provide opportunities for theatre practitioners to showcase their works on the global stage. It will also enhance cultural exchange and promote diversity in theatre.

#### **IV. Theoretical Framework.**

The theoretical framework that underpins this topic is Performance studies. Performance studies is an interdisciplinary field that explores the social, cultural, and political implications of performance (Denzin, 2003). In the context of African Theatre, performance studies provide a useful framework for analyzing the impact of African Theatre on World Theatre practice. According to Carlson (2003), performance studies are concerned with how performance intersects with broader social, cultural, and political contexts, and how it is used to negotiate power relations and create meaning. Okagbue (2014) argues that performance studies offer a way to understand the complex dynamics of cultural exchange and influence in African Theatre. Okagbue notes that African Theatre has influenced contemporary theatre forms such as physical theatre, devised theatre, and performance art, and that performance studies provide a lens for analyzing how these forms have been shaped by African Theatre. Similarly, in his study of African Theatre and its impact on global theatre, Mqgwashu (2017) uses performance studies to examine the role of performance in challenging dominant Western narratives and representations. Mqgwashu argues that African Theatre has created alternative modes of performance that reflect African cultures and histories and that performance studies provide a way to analyze the social, cultural, and political implications of these modes of performance. In a study of the performer-audience relationship in African Theatre, Mervin (2018) uses performance studies to explore how the roles of performer and audience have evolved. Mervin argues that performance studies provide a useful framework for analyzing the ways in

which the performer-audience relationship is shaped by broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Overall, the theoretical framework of performance studies has a significant bearing on this paper since the theory offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to understanding the complex dynamics of cultural exchange and influence in African Theatre and beyond. It provides a way to analyze the impact of African Theatre on contemporary theatre forms and the role of performance in challenging dominant Western narratives and representations. It also offers a lens for examining the performer-audience relationship and the ways in which it is shaped by broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

## **V. Statement of the problem**

Despite African theatre's considerable impact on global theatre practice, there is a need for a thorough understanding of the specific ways in which African theatre has influenced aesthetics, politics, and the broader landscape of theatre forms. While the transformational impact of African theatre is generally recognized, there is a knowledge vacuum addressing the cultural and social significance of African theatre in questioning and reinventing Western theatrical standards and traditions. Furthermore, the dynamics of the performer-audience connection in African theatre, as well as how these dynamics are impacted by broader socio-cultural and political settings, need to be investigated further. Understanding these features is critical for appreciating African theatre's continuing significance and its potential as a catalyst for cultural discussion and social transformation. This study intends to fill these gaps and contribute to a better understanding of the effect and cultural significance of African theatre in the global theatrical domain.

## **VI. Methodology**

This qualitative study investigates the impact of African theatre on worldwide theater practice using interviews, observations, and content analysis. Interviews with practitioners, performance observations, and textual material analysis provide in-depth insights on the impact of African theatre on aesthetics, performance styles, and storytelling approaches in a global setting.

## **VII. Research Questions**

1. How has African theatre influenced global theatre practice in terms of aesthetics, performance styles, and storytelling techniques? This question seeks to comprehend the precise ways in which African theater has influenced worldwide theater practice. We can investigate how African theatre traditions have introduced new artistic forms, extended the breadth of theatrical expression, and influenced the creative choices of theatre artists worldwide by studying aesthetics, performance styles, and storytelling strategies. This subject elucidates African theatre's real and visible contributions to the larger theatrical environment.
2. What are the cultural and social implications of African theatre in questioning and redefining Western theatrical standards and conventions? The purpose of this topic is to delve into the broader cultural and social ramifications of African theatre's influence on Western theatrical norms and practices. African theater frequently questions and redefines mainstream Western norms, providing alternate viewpoints, narratives, and performing styles. We can better comprehend how African theatre has contributed to cultural discussion, diversity, and representation in the global theatre scene by considering the cultural and socioeconomic repercussions.
3. How does the performer-audience relationship in African theatre differ from that in Western theatre, and how do broader socio-cultural and political settings impact this interaction? This inquiry explores the intricate workings of the performer-audience interaction in African theatre, as well as how it differs from Western theater techniques. Understanding the unique characteristics of this interaction allows us to investigate the participation nature, communal aspects, and interactive elements that may differ from the more formal and passive audience roles of Western theatre. Furthermore, investigating the impact of broader socio-cultural and political contexts sheds light on how African theatre shapes and is affected by its cultural context, altering the performer-audience dynamic.

## **VIII. Discussion**

African theatre has had an immense impact on worldwide theatre practice, influencing aesthetics, performance styles, and storytelling methods. This effect extends not only artistically, but also culturally and socially, as African theater challenges and redefines Western theatrical standards and practices. Understanding the performer-audience interaction in African theatre, as well as its broader socio-cultural and political contexts, sheds light on African theatre's tremendous impact on global theatre practice. African theatre is noted for its bright and diverse aesthetics, which originate from Africa's rich tapestry of cultures and customs. By bringing new visual, aural, and sensory aspects, it has had a tremendous impact on global theatre practice. African theatre incorporates a wide range of performance techniques, including ritualistic performances, physical theater, and dance-drama, which contributes to the global growth of the theatrical repertoire. Many theatre practitioners around the world have been inspired to experiment with novel artistic expressions by the use of masks,



costumes, body paint, and symbolic objects in African theatre. Furthermore, communal storytelling techniques are frequently used in African theatre, where performances are profoundly anchored in collective experiences, oral traditions, and community engagement. This technique has encouraged a shift in narrative viewpoint in worldwide theatre, pushing playwrights to explore new directions. The performer-audience interaction in African theatre differs greatly from that in Western theatre. African performances frequently blur the distinction between performers and viewers, encouraging active audience participation, collective responses, and direct engagement. The audience becomes an integral part of the performance, affecting the development of the tale and boosting the entire experience. The participatory aspect of African theatre is heavily impacted by the socio-cultural and political contexts in which these performances take place. In many African communities, art, ritual, and daily life are inextricably linked, and theatrical performances are profoundly woven in communal rites and ceremonies. This fosters a sense of communal ownership and responsibility for artistic expression, so increasing community relationships and social cohesiveness. Western theatre, on the other hand, has traditionally emphasized a clear separation between the performer and the audience, generally adopting a more passive position for the audience. The influence of African theatre, on the other hand, has led Western practitioners to experiment with interactive performance formats and immersive experiences, bridging the gap between performer and audience and exploring new ways of engaging spectators. Finally, African theater has called into question the dominant Western theatrical standards and traditions. By establishing its cultural uniqueness and distinct means of expression, it confronts the Eurocentric perspective that dominates worldwide theatre. African theater emphasizes the importance of cultural representation, authenticity, and inclusivity, addressing the historical misrepresentation of African cultures in Western theatrical works. African theater promotes international discussion and understanding by displaying African narratives, traditions, and societal challenges on stage, breaking down preconceptions and preconceived notions. This technique helps to create a more diverse and inclusive global theatrical landscape, enhancing the richness and complexity of performances around the world.

## IX. Conclusion

The impact of African theatre on world theatre practice has been profound, with significant contributions to the aesthetics, politics, and cultural significance of theatre on a global scale. African theatre has challenged and redefined conventional Western theatrical forms, drawing on diverse performance traditions and cultural perspectives to create a unique and immersive theatrical experience. It has also challenged dominant narratives and representations, expanding the possibilities for representation and diversity on the global stage, and promoting a sense of cultural pride and belonging. As a result, African theatre has inspired artists worldwide to experiment with new forms and techniques, engage with social and political issues, and appreciate diverse cultural expressions. The legacy of African theatre continues to shape and enrich world theatre practice, highlighting the importance of cultural exchange and the value of diverse perspectives in the arts.

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