

SCENE DESIGN APPROACHES AND MATERIALS FOR AFRICAN CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN ANIETIE USEN'S *VILLAGE BOY*

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ABSTRACT

The critical thrust of this research focuses on the aspect of scene design materials and approaches in theatre and films production for the goal of propagating indigenous knowledge and African cultural reality. The study is based on the examples depicted in Anietie Usen's Village Boy which employs artistic ingenuity in the use of material designs and management of scene settings purposefully towards the preservation of African cultural heritage and material resources. The research is therefore purposefully intended to explicate the strategies of scene design and material utilization that students of theatre, scholars and practitioners in theatre and film design and technology would find useful. The study delves into how to procure the requisite materials and understand the approaches towards enhancing and informing on the ways and means of production in theatre, drawing on African traditional cultural material, worldview and ideals. The research recommends that scene designers in African drama, film and theatre practice should strive towards procuring the right material resources and adopt the right approaches in their theatrical or film career with the consciousness to teach, promote and propagate positive creative aspects of African cultural ethos, mores and traditions.

Keywords: scene design approaches, cultural material, cultural heritage, modern African drama.

Introduction

In theatre and film production and practices scene designers in most places normally see it an important requirement of duty and professionalism to depict the locale of the setting of the storyline imagined at any given moments. As cultural activity, theatre performances often rely on the coloration of the real or imagined environment in determining the texture, creative statement and social import of the artistry. The designing aspects in such activity therefore remain strongly significant for consideration in theatre business because such aspects add to inform, define the relevance of the performance, teach and illuminate the imagined audience on the realities of the world or society imagined in the play. Okon Udofot Jacob aptly states that "...in performing arts, the practitioners are interested in informing, educating, before entertaining the audience" (92). However, some designers, mostly within the academic environments and some private practitioners do by-pass the conventional approach to scene design to prioritize something much less important, perhaps for want of time, lack of awareness and non-availability of design expertise, professional advice or sheer absence of the right theatre materials.

This research therefore aims at re-iterating the conventional approaches to scene design and material acquisition in designing scene for African drama. The research is undertaken in the continuous quest for preserving the rich cultural heritage of African communities in spite of the influence of the Western culture on the indigenous way of life and worldview. It is in this perspective that Jacob further asserts that, "In theatre arts practice in particular and indeed performing arts in general, the concept of design is held as being very crucial to the profession..." (47). It is important to note that dramatic practices in African context serve as avenue for teaching traditional cultural morals, inculcating value system and traditional ethics, history, indigenous heritage and more, and not just for the entertainment reasons. Uwem Affiah, David Udoinwang and Offiong Amaku agree that these valuable objectives "have in no small measure enriched and reinforced the ideological contents" (48) of major performances in African theatrical and film experience.

Unarguably, dramatic works in Africa has always served as the bastion for the propagation of traditional culture of the people, despite the embedded political undertones. Most if not all of the foremost African playwrights or dramatists, including Wole Soyinka, J.P. Cark, Ola Rotimi Tess Onwueme, Femi Osofisan and a host of others all draw their theatre material from the traditional African oral cultural heritage. It is almost an imperative that African theatre practitioners draw on the rich heritage of the people in terms of the people's lifestyle, dressing culture, languages, the ambience of the local settings, songs, food, dressing and many others. This does not in any way suggest that the 'new' should be jettisoned while the 'old' ways are hook-line-and-sinker' as people put it. Anietie Udofia, Uwemedimo Atakpo and David Udoinwang point out that "One of the instruments for determining progress presently in the society is the creative practices that characterize a specific time and the innovativeness emanating from the system that makes it to function" (44). The emphasis in this work is to encourage writers and scholars to develop ideas that would propagate our traditional cultural identity and memories for posterity across generations. The considerations above underpin the critical interest in Anietie Usen's story *The Village Boy*, which re-creates a typical traditional African cultural environment and gives the story the coloration of indigenous traditional universe in its essential setting. The author in the storyline, dialogue and plot style projects the story of his fictionalized experience in a rural African community, and in the course of doing this, he creates dramatic situations that are tailored towards realizing the goals of propagating cultural heritage and values of a typical rural African community.

The author employs many theatrical strategies towards illuminating the cultural settings and vividly arouses the audience's attention to the situation of the performance with suspense and flashbacks to enrich the storyline. This culminates to the novel being an award winning piece of art work for generations seeking information and knowledge regarding a typical African society and lifestyles. This novel was adapted from prose genre to drama and was presented before the audience during its launching and public presentation, and this is where the quantum of the data for this research was drawn.

In this paper therefore, the following salient areas are carefully examined in for the purpose of highlighting the means by which contemporary how well articulated design approach could serve as buffer of creativity and artistic integrity of the artistic sector. In this regards, let it be stated here that our areas of concern should point informing upcoming practitioners mostly that designers are expected to have firm grasp of the formalistic approach and the

wherewithal of requisite material so as to enhance design tasks and utilized purposively towards the preservation of African cultural landmarks and infrastructure.

The study thus beams searchlight on the equipment that were utilized in the performance setting of the adapted play drawn from Anietie Usen's *Village Boy*. Specific attention was done through highlights of the concept of scene design approaches, the skills of a scene designer, and scene design materials that were found relevant to showcase a typical setting that closely replicate African cultural environment. Attention of this study is also directed at examining adaptation strategies that made the performance widely applauded by the cross section of artistic community. More so, specific attention was equally directed at identifying carefully identified and selected scene design materials that served as strategic utility for the performance in the bid to underscore the approaches by which drama could be acted to demonstrate cultural awareness and consciousness among the people, against the background of eroding modernity.

The Concept of Scene Design

Every theatrical performance takes place within a given space otherwise, known as the acting area. Therefore, scene design is the hub around which all other aspects of theatrical productions revolve. Scene design in this context therefore has to do with the conscious assembling of the props and meticulous planning and arrangement of theatrical design items or elements such as sceneries and props within the performance space. This serves to depict the locale of the play towards enhancing audience's understanding and enjoyment of the play. Michael Gillette avers that, "Scenic designs can provide reinforcement of the mood and spirit of the play (114). Gillette further asserts that:

The design should be expressive of the mood and spirit of the play. Within this context, mood usually refers, to the dominant emotional quality of the production. Spirit is generally interpreted to refer to the production concept - the way in which the production design team (producer, director, and scene, costume, lighting, and sound designers) decide that the play is going to be presented (114).

In their contribution with regard to the concept of scene design and the theatre space, Oren Parker, Craig Wolf and Dick Block explain the idea further in the extract below:

Many things influence the form of a final design for the theatre. The text itself (the raw material) and the conceptual work done by the artistic team (the interpretation of the text), are equally necessary and form the basis for the design. As part of the overall dramatic form of theatre, however, design does not stand alone. It is part of an event only if it includes and involves the audience as well. A scene designer may draw sketches or make models, but designs do not reach a full state of expression until they are on stage and inhabited by actors in front of an audience. As a result, the scene designer is concerned with not only the manner in which the design is presented to the artistic team, but also how it will be used in production and the physical space in which it will be presented (7).

The detailed explanation above should serve as tutorial that should be considered critical. In Oscar Brockett and Robert Ball it is further expatiated that, "The scene designer is concerned

with the organization and appearance of the performance space. The designer defines and characterizes the space, arranges it to facilitate the movement of the actors, and uses it to reinforce the production” (301). From the above discussion, it is deduced that scene designers serve many functions in theatrical productions. Some of the functions amongst others include proper definition of the performance space by establishing distinction between onstage and offstage; creation of a floor plan that provides opportunities for movement, composition, character intersection, and stage business; visually characterizes the acting space and creates mood and atmosphere (Brockett and Ball, 361-362).

From the foregone, it is worthwhile to reiterate the fact that although scene design is the hub around which all other activities in the theatre revolve, it can never be complete on its own as it is only one part of the total design, therefore it should operate in consultation and collaboration with other personnel of the theatre that are responsible for the other parts to make the whole.

Approaches to Scene Design

Scene design approach in this context refers to the step by step methodology of dealing with scene design aspects of performance from the pre-production stage to the post production stage. This is the design approach in which all theatrical designers must adhere to. In this perspective, Okon Jacob posits that, “in theatre practice, the different aspects of the theatrical design are regarded as process. It is regarded as process because there are series of step by steps that designers must follow in pursuing the goal of creating what should be adjudged a valuable work of art.” (47). Scene design approach therefore has its starting point at the point of a scene designer accepting to work with the production team and spans through series of steps. Brockett and Ball (above) opine that, “there is no standard way of moving through the design process. After having studied the play and studied the production concept with the director and other designers, most designers, make many tentative, preliminary sketches as a means of thinking through possibilities.” (365). In a nutshell, scene design approach takes the form of acceptance and commitment which includes visit to the performance venue, script analysis and interpretation; questioning and researches, incubation, discussion and selection. Next step is the implementation stage where all the drawings and sketches are included, alongside with strategies of production, assessment and evaluation stages. On scene design approach, Robert D. Taylor and Robert D. Strickland expatiate:

Read the script as soon as possible. Discuss it with the director and other members of the design team. Work from the production concept if one has been defined by the team; otherwise, find out on your own all that you can about the time, place and style of the play. Think about its meaning and the overall mood. You might want to make some sketches or collect pictures representing the time, place, climate, mood and type of people the play will present. You will certainly want to explore the technical demands of the play in light of the space in which the play will be performed. If you are unfamiliar with the space, take time to evaluate the possibilities and problems it presents (206).

Parker, Wolf and Block sum it all by saying that “a design approach is the idea, or the visual theme of the design. It is the product of creative thinking, visual imagination and collaboration with the director” (49).

The Skills of Scene Designer

Scene designers' skills are supposed to be treated as multi-faceted. This is so because a scene designer is expected to carry out a good number of professional activities such as measurement, drawing, construction and fabrication, decoration, painting and many others. Based on the above postulation, a scene designer is expected to possess the skills of different professionals to a certain extent, although may not be as comprehensive as those personnel in their different professions. Since it is expected that a scene designer should perform variety of tasks in order to make available a conducive performance space for the actor, a scene designer is seen as a prophet/seer; a theorist/critic; an architect; a civil engineer, a mechanical engineer, an electrical/electronic engineer, a painter, interior and exterior decorator, and actor as well as being computer literate. It is in the light of this that Okon Udofot Jacob avers that "Technical Theatre has come to be reckoned as the essential bedrock in the development of Theatre Arts profession" (33). Corroborating the above, Brockett and Ball comprehensively explain that:

Scene designers need a variety of skills, many of them pertinent to other arts, especially architecture, painting, interior design, and acting. Like architects, scene designers conceive and build structures for human beings to use. Although scene designers do not design entire buildings as architects do, they sculpt space and, like architects, must be concerned with its function, size, organization, construction, and visual appearance. Also, like architects, they must be able to communicate their ideas to others through sketches, scale models and construction drawings that indicate how each element is build and how it will look when completed...scene designers need to be grounded in art history (including architecture, crafts and decorative arts),... However, though computer-assisted design and architectural programmes are useful tools for designers, such programmes have their limitations and cannot replace the designer's artistic skills and judgments.(363-365)

From Brockett and Ball, it is deduced that the skills of scene designers are multi-faceted and may be summarized that scene designers must be intelligent, creative, industrious, flexible, visionary, accommodating, ability to interpret scripts / ideas and plan. Above all, a scene designer must be a team worker. Assuming that the background above is imagined from western cultural setting or otherwise, it is mandated on the African dramatist to bring the traditional cultural imaginaries to bear on the technology of drama production, based on the basic architectural descriptions enunciated above. It is about localizing or indigenizing certain the established ideals.

Scene Design Materials for African Drama

Scene design is an interesting aspect of theatre design and technology and requires the utilization of certain materials according to the chosen style, availability of the materials and funds logistics. Gillette clearly states that:

Almost any material can be used to make scenery. Wood, fabric, metal, and plastics are commonly used but almost anything else can be, or has been used in scenic construction. The majority of the non-traditional

construction materials are generally applied to a basic scenic form as decoration. Most basic scenery is made by constructing supporting form from wood or metals and covering that structure with wood, fabric or both (133).

In designing scene for African traditional drama therefore, certain things must be taken into strict consideration. These include the topography of the community in which the playwright portrays in the script, the period, the culture of the people and the styles of the production as agreed by the director and the design team. This is the scenarios and consciousness that loudly evolve in the plays of J.P. Clark. Pointedly, David Udoinwang and Monca Udoette in their study aver that “The two drama texts, J.P. Clark’s *The Masquerade* and Uwemedimo Atakpo’s *Isadok*, draw their creative energy on the mainstream inter-cultural dialogue while foregrounding their artistic vision on the ethno-cultural pre-texts and the tension of resilient traditional cultural heritage existing side by side with postmodern world order” (217).

In most cases, scene design for African drama may be very difficult because, in this modern era, some of the materials needed for the true nature of the play to be realized may be very scarce or completely unavailable because some of these traditional and cultural materials have gone into extinction due to modernity and civilization. Cultural drama like the one at hand should be found relevant as pedagogical tool to remind and to inculcate values and heritage knowledge in the present and next generation, and this is what the examples noticed in Sam Ukala’s and Femi Osofisan’s dramaturgies consistently explicate over the years (Uwem Affiah, and Offiong Amaku, David Udoinwang, 2022). This is exactly what the scene design team for Usen’s *Village Boy* experience tries to buttress.

Village Boy is no doubt a thrilling piece, incisive and irresistible work. This attribute is made, and as well-earned, because of what went into its production. The production team was made up of seasoned, creative and feature writers. And it is the purposiveness of it that made the production worth the effort. The story was adapted for stage by Okon Udofot Jacob. According to the author of the adapted book:

Village Boy is not just a real life saga of the poverty-stricken boy who overcame incredible obstacles and prevailed against all odds. It is the inimitable and absorbing adventure into village life in Southern Nigeria, especially Akwa Cross States. For adults, it is a nostalgic relish. For the younger generation, this is not just a breezy window to the 60s and 70s, but the veritable binoculars to trace the footsteps of their parents and grandparents, the proverbial good old days. And for teachers and students in secondary and tertiary institutions, this is a study in creative writing. (The Blurb)

There are other inspiring comments about *Village Boy* by both national and international scholars as illustrated by Joseph A. Ushie (Professor of General Stylistics & Literary Criticism, University of Uyo, Nigeria) among many others. In his critical purview of the play witnessed by Ushie, the following remarks should be instructive:

If *Audacious Journalism* by Anietie Usen was a must-read for journalists, writers and academics, one outstanding quality of *VILLAGE BOY* is that it is

a sweet book for all generations, for all climes and for all seekers of information and knowledge about typical African societies and lifestyles.... This is a book of record, which brings back in a rather humorous and refreshing way, the fading memories of my generation. It is bound to amaze the younger generation, now in schools and various spheres of life. This book brings to bear the very best of the literary devices of suspense, imagery, hyperbole, a sudden twist in the tale. The author's inimitable descriptive skills, and above all, his nerve-wracking humor makes the reader laugh out loud, even when he is alone....(viii-x)

Scene Design Approaches for Teaching African Cultural Ideals in Usen's *Village Boy*

As earlier discussed, scene design is an inevitable component of theatre practice and has a specific approach to be followed. In the same vein, materials needed for scene design differ from one production to the other based on the cultural and technical requirements. In *Village Boy* by Anietie Usen and adapted for stage by Okon Udofot Jacob, Joseph A. Ushie explains that:

The portrayal of rural life in a typical African setting as depicted here in this book deserves a deeper study from many perspectives, as the veritable path and part of the African Renaissance. It would serve both in recovering the typical African mode of survival as well as an agent of unification among the people of the continent in view of the cultural communalities it will help to discover. (xx)

Therefore, going by the foregone critical interventions, in discussing scene design materials and approach for the teaching or instructions on African cultural presentation and ideals, it becomes both challenging and quite interesting. The task is challenging in the sense that, apart from mentioning the materials and approach, the possible means of procuring the materials must be meticulously ironed out. Quite interesting because it draws attention of both the researcher and the readers or audience to the fact that as a result of the domination of African culture by the Western culture, much of African cultural memories had been eroded by the waves of postmodernity with its induced fears, (dys)functionality, social hysterias and panicky circumstances (David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan 2022).

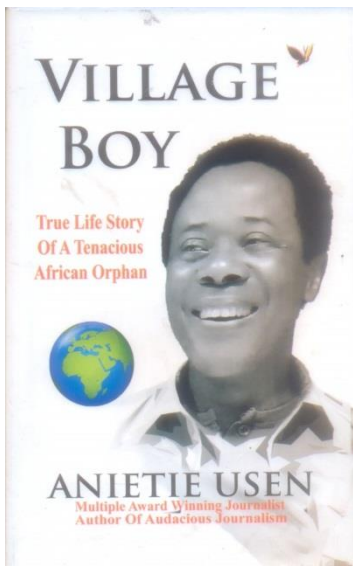
As African Modern Drama with African traditional and cultural contents, the scene designer of the production under study adapted the conventional or the formalistic approach to scene design for Anietie Usen's *Village Boy* which was presented at Sheer grace Arena, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. As discussed, the scene design process began with the invitation of this researcher by the author and producer (the organiser) of the event to design the scene for the production. This offer was accepted and commitment ensued. The creative work was handed over in prose form and was adapted from prose to drama genre by this researcher. The process of adaptation actually gave this researcher (the scene designer) ample opportunity to read and re-read the novel before adapting it to drama. This also gave this researcher an opportunity to analyze the adapted version of *Village Boy* based on the technical requirements for the production. During this process of analyses, questions were asked before various forms of researches were carried out.

The period of questioning and researches revealed a lot of ideas and facts to the researcher/designer and this enhanced proper incubation and implementation in which series of sketches and other relevant paper works were produced. With the aid of the sketches which included the Scene-by-Scene Division, the Ground Plan, different forms of Elevation and the Model, the scene designer had series of discussions with the author, which in this case, was the producer, the artistic director and other members of the production team. At this stage, selection of ideas and facts took place and agreement reached. This contributed immensely guiding the scene designer in the process of procurement of materials which constituted the major challenges encountered during the design process. When the day for the production came, being the implementation stage, with the contributive efforts of all the members of the production team, the production turned out to be a huge success and added to the adapted book's winning the Commonwealth International Award.

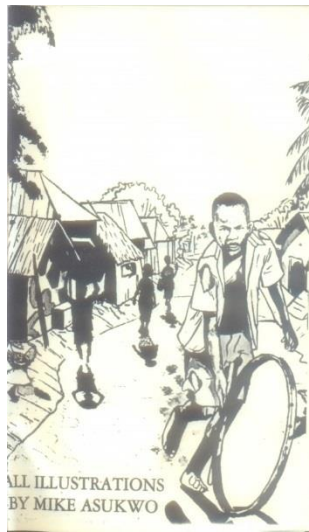
Scene Design Materials for African Cultural Preservation in Anietie Usen's *Village Boy*

The most challenging stage of scene design approach in the experience *Village Boy* production was the stage of procuring the requisite scene design materials to actually realize the production objective as the author insisted that he needed a typical African rural setting of the past in the clearest picture of it. Some of the scene design materials procured and utilized as listed below represented a typical rural African community where cultural heritage and traditional mien loomed large in the production:

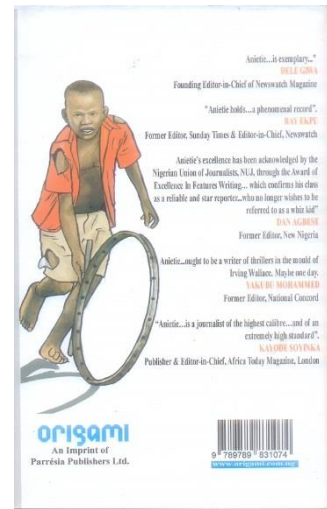
The Sceneries/Props include: Local bamboo sticks, local mats, raffia, local stick for the mud walls, the mud itself, locally made basket, native clay pots, photographic camera and tripod used in the 1950s/1960s, old bicycle and bicycle wheel, female handbag of the 60s, local grater and sieve, locally made catapult, box iron, kite, local frying pot for garri, etc. After a thorough script analysis and interpretation and the necessary researches, it was quite glaring that scene design for *Village Boy* was expectedly challenging especially with regard to scene design materials procurement. The researcher took the scene designer to interior villages in search of these materials for sceneries and props. These moves yielded significant fruits after weeks of special booking and ordering of these materials and several follow-ups. At the end of all the approaches and long period of tedious search for these materials, they were finally procured, set/scene constructed and the performance of the adapted version of *Village Boy* staged to the admiration and appreciation of the huge number of people that constituted the audience members. This analysis is detailed out here to prepare the mind of other researchers in related field and to ginger them to go in for such task, especially for the sake of the promotion of the theatre profession and for the cultural posterity of African experience. Below are some of the pictures of the set under construction and the finished set together with some other pictures during the performance.



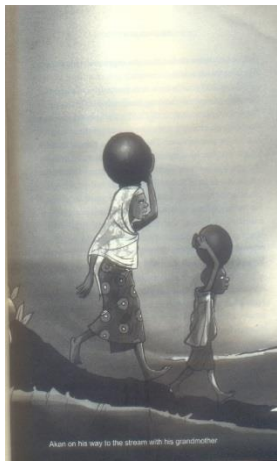
Cover page of *Village Boy*



Akan riding his wheel



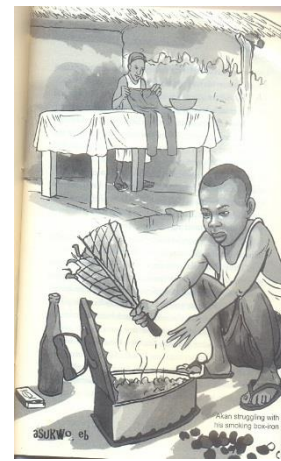
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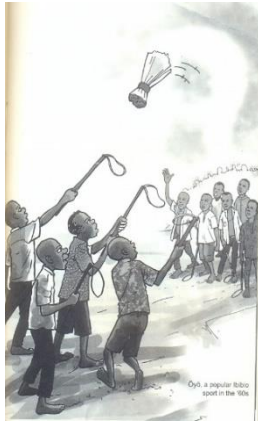
Akan and Mama going to stream



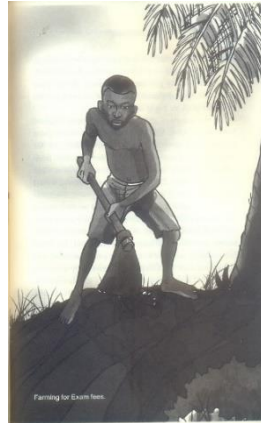
Photographer of the 60s



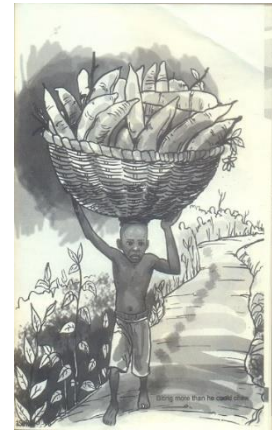
Akan fanning box iron



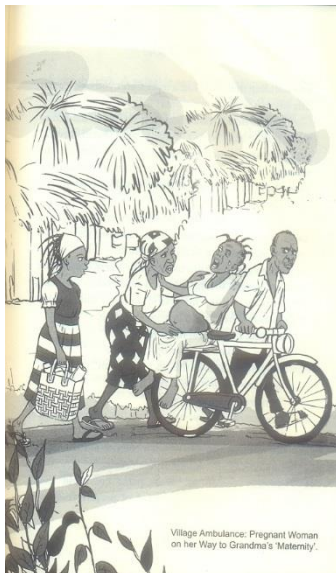
Akan and friends hunting birds



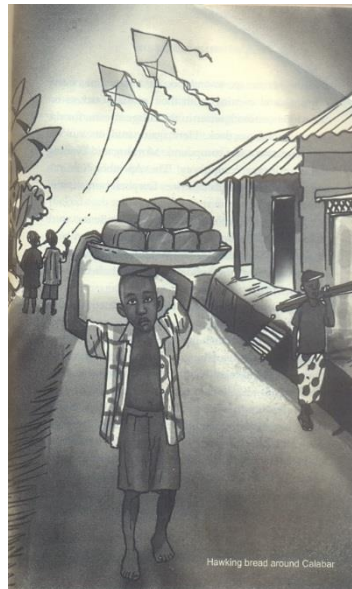
Akan working on farm



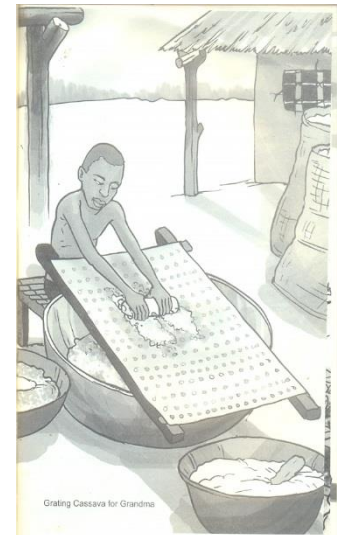
Akan carrying load



Village Ambulance (Bicycle) needed during emergencies



Children flying kites



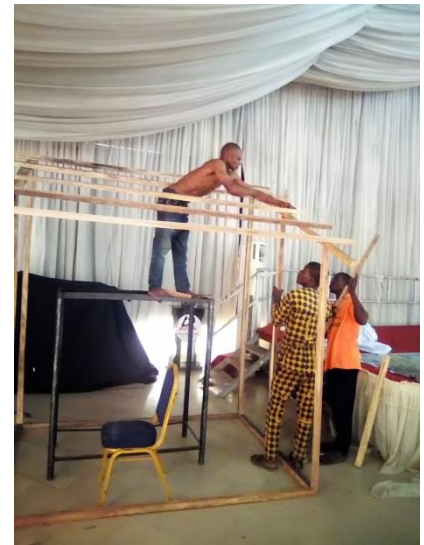
Akan grating cassava



Front elevation of the set



Set construction in progress



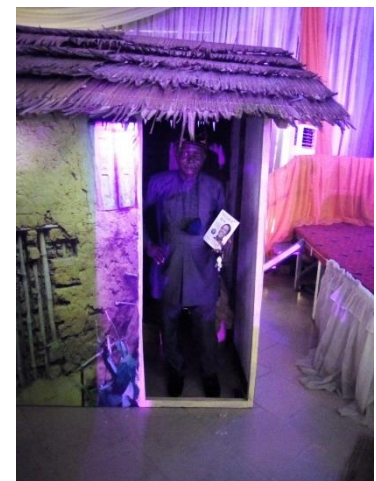
Construction in progress



Village Hut



Village hut on set



Researcher in the hut

Conclusion

African traditional culture is so precious to be allowed to the whims and caprices of modernity. Students of theatre and film must be encouraged to invest their talents and ingenuity in this line of artistry and research. It is understood that there are some negative traditions that are brutal, non-progressive and unnecessary and should be discarded. There are also a lot that requires modifications, adjustments or total abandonment as it were. But it is the height of insensitivity for any society or people to blank out their cultural traditions and identity. Great African dramatists, poets, novelists and traditional tale griots or singers of tales have done much in the past to re-tell African stories for the benefit of heritage and posterity, and for the preservation of the cultural memories of the people. But the modernity and digitalization keep encroaching and corroding the traditional cultural institutions, authorities, norms and values and even indigenous languages of the folk world. There is need to check such situation. This is the onus that is most critical to this research. It is hoped that the

academia in the performing arts discipline and in other humanities sphere would direct attention of the younger generation to develop passion to knowledge in cultural heritage and the glowing legacies of Africa's ancestry.

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