

DRAMA AS CULTURAL ARCHIVE: PRESERVATION OF NIGERIAN CULTURE IN SELECT PLAYS

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Abstract

The pervasive influence of Western media, globalization, and cultural imperialism poses a significant threat to indigenous cultures in Nigeria, particularly within urban communities. This encroachment has led to the dilution of traditional practices and the emergence of cultural hybridization among diverse ethnic groups. In response, the imperative for cultural preservation and promotion has become increasingly urgent, transcending social and professional boundaries. This paper investigates the role of Nigerian dramatists in advancing cultural preservation by embedding indigenous elements within their plays. Drawing on Myron Lustig's Cultural Identity Theory, the study analyses selected works of Emeka Nwabueze, Ahmed Yerima, and Ola Rotimi, demonstrating that the incorporation of cultural motifs serves not merely as entertainment but as a deliberate strategy for safeguarding and promoting Nigeria's cultural heritage. The paper recommends that dramatists intensify the integration of cultural elements in their creative works and further proposes that the definition of African drama should explicitly recognize cultural authenticity as a core criterion.

Keywords: Archive, Preservation, Cultural Promotion, Culture, Drama.

Introduction

Culture encompasses the collective activities, practices, and values of a people, serving as the foundation of their identity. It includes social, physical, spiritual, and psychological elements that shape human behaviour within a given environment. Manifestations of culture are evident in language, cuisine, dress, marriage, music, dance, occupation, values, and religious practices, all of which contribute to a community's cultural identity. As Chen Vivian observes, culture is "the identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion" (1). Similarly, Nigeria's Cultural Policy defines culture as "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment" (Nigeria Cultural Policy 3). Ngugi wa Thiong'o offers a broader perspective, describing culture as "a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to come to terms with their total environment" (4).

Aghamelu views culture as “the integral pattern of behaviour that embodies the thought, speech, and actions of a person” (434), underscoring its role in shaping personality and self-definition. Okeke and Ume add that culture manifests in shared peculiarities that define the social structure of society (137). This structure, rooted in norms, values, and moral conduct, determines what is considered acceptable or unacceptable within a community. As Aghamelu notes, cultural orientation influences perception and decision-making, reinforcing the assertion that societal development is inseparable from cultural context (424). Iroh (41), agrees that “culture is all embracing, fully encompassing the people’s way of life”. Culture, therefore, stands as one of the principal pillars of development.

Preserving culture is essential for maintaining social stability and ensuring intergenerational continuity. Cultural preservation involves deliberate efforts to conserve, protect, and promote cultural practices for future generations. It fosters human uniqueness, strengthens identity, and sustains the historical heritage of communities. By safeguarding cultural traditions, societies enable younger generations to connect with their roots and appreciate the richness of their heritage. As Aghamelu affirms, “every society has its own culture and is responsible for the transmission of this cultural heritage to its members” (424).

Unlike biological inheritance, culture is learned and transmitted. In traditional African societies, norms and values were passed orally from elders to younger generations. However, globalization, Western media, urbanization, and cultural imperialism have disrupted this process. Technological advancements in communication have further weakened intergenerational ties, as younger people increasingly rely on diverse media sources rather than elders for knowledge. These developments have contributed to cultural hybridization across communities. Against this backdrop, this paper emphasizes the urgent need for cultural preservation and examines the role of dramatists in achieving this.

Theoretical Framework

Anchored on Myron Lustig’s Cultural Identity Theory, which views cultural identity as a dynamic and evolving component of self-concept shaped by individual and collective experiences, this study examines how Nigerian playwrights embed cultural elements into their dramatic works. Cultural identity, in this framework, is not static but constantly negotiated through interactions, traditions, and historical consciousness. Drama, therefore, becomes more than entertainment; it functions as a cultural archive that preserves, interrogates, and transmits identity across generations.

Through content analysis of selected plays by Emeka Nwabueze, Ahmed Yerima, and Ola Rotimi, the research demonstrates that dramatists act as custodians of cultural memory. Their works incorporate indigenous languages, folklore, rituals, proverbs, and historical narratives, thereby transforming the stage into a repository of collective identity. In this sense, drama reflects the lived realities of Nigerian communities, while simultaneously documenting cultural shifts and tensions brought about by colonialism, modernization, and globalization.

By situating Nigerian drama within Lustig's theory, the study underscores how playwrights use theatre to negotiate identity, affirm cultural heritage, and resist erasure. The plays serve as cultural texts that archive traditions, values, and historical struggles, ensuring that audiences engage not only with artistic expression but also with the cultural DNA of the society. Thus, drama becomes a living archive, preserving the past, interpreting the present, and projecting cultural identity into the future. This expansion makes clear that the framework is not just theoretical but directly tied to drama's role as a cultural archive.

The Dramatists and Cultural Preservation

African dramatists often draw inspiration from their immediate environment, which shapes both their creativity and artistic vision. The environment of the artist is inseparable from everyday life, and this connection informs the themes and narratives of African drama. Historically, African drama developed from religious rituals, dances, and songs—core elements of traditional African society. What distinguishes African drama from other dramatic traditions is its deep attachment to issues affecting the people and their environment. It is therefore culturally oriented, with culture playing a central role in its evolution. According to Taiwo, “every dramatic work is a representation of culture through the presentation of a geographical area that is revealed through the various elements of production and predicted on the official or indigenous language of the people” (1).

As Aghamelu notes, “plays are written as a reflection of the people's beliefs, cultural attitudes, experiences, and aspirations... it is a reflection of the dominant views and way of life of the people” (29). For African dramatists, culture serves as a vital source of inspiration. By incorporating traditional practices, rituals, and cultural elements into their narratives, dramatists document and preserve cultural heritage within drama texts. Oyin Ogumba categorizes West African drama as plays that adopt traditional African ideas and extend them beyond their original boundaries (23). In this way, African drama provides valuable insight into the religious philosophy and cultural wealth of the people.

Fenigan emphasizes that “in traditional African civilisation, communal performances represent collective memory and identity, enabling the transmission of cultural values across generations” (5). Similarly, Soyinka asserts that “theatre (drama) is a reflection of society and it should reflect the culture, tradition, and values of its people” (12). Contemporary African drama continues this legacy by maintaining cultural continuity and serving as a bridge between past and present. Falola affirms that “African drama ensures that the continent's rich cultural legacy continues to play a significant role in its social and artistic expressions by confronting contemporary concerns and encouraging a link to traditional ideals” (54).

African Drama as Cultural Archive in the Select Plays. **Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*.**

The play is a dramatic representation of one of the historic events within the Sokoto Caliphate. It is a depiction of the resistance of the colonial influence and dominance by the Islamic Sokoto Caliphate. Set in the period of colonial administration of Lord Frederick Lugard, the play tells the

story of Attahiru1, his ascension to the throne, exploits within and outside the Caliphate and his eventual death while fighting the colonial Army. Though he died on the battle field, the play eulogises his bravery, wisdom and courage in dealing with the colonial leaders. It also portrays the bravery the Northern Nigeria exhibited in their resistance of colonial leadership with its oppressive tendencies in Nigeria. Attahiru1 has to pay the supreme prize of sacrificing his life in the struggle to protect his people from colonial leadership.

Though a historical play, Yerima employed many cultural elements in the development of the story. One of such elements is the culture of patriarchal leadership selection. The play begins with preparation for the selection of the Caliph among the princes after the demise of their father. This process is a tradition within the Caliphate and everyone, including the blind is not left out. Leadership in traditional African society is a respected entity and has accepted methods or processes peculiar to a particular culture. As was the culture of the people, the selection is peacefully done between the two Princes following the traditional criteria recognised by the people. The acceptability of this selection method is captured in the conversation below:

- Ahmed:** The Princes we hear are contesting for the throne.
- Abbas:** Who are they?
- Ahmed:** Mohamed Atahiru Ahmadu and Mohamed al-Tahir Aliyu
- Yakubu:** Both men are good soldiers and leaders.

Yerima's presentation of this patriarchal leadership selection process in the play helps in its documentation, thereby preserving this important cultural practice and its importance for generations unborn.

Also seen in the play is the culture of family inheritance. Abba's predicament is traced to his collection of his share of his late uncle's inheritance. He confirms this in the conversation with his friends as he narrates the genesis of his predicament with the thief:

- Abbas:** He knew I had money. I had collected my own share of my uncle's inheritance, the day before. I sold all the items I was given... (15).

This cultural practice of family members getting some portion of the properties of a diseased relative's wealth is a cultural practice among many African cultures and tribes. As Yerima hinted in the play, this practice dictates how property and wealth of a family member is distributed among the relatives after his or her death.

The play also portrays the dynamics of communal living and conflict resolution among the Hausas. Collective responsibility, where the welfare of one is a communal responsibility, is highlighted in the resolution of the conflict between the two settlers. The agreement to dig a well collectively for the group that has no water, is one Hausa culture that needs to be preserved. This culture advocates that survival, is dependent on the unity and cooperation of every member of the community.

Caliph: You have spoken well, I agree with the Waziri, you shall both organise your men and build a new well in the new market. This is our judgement (24).

The culture of inter communal marriage is also documented in the play as a functional tool for fostering communal bond and alliance between neighbouring communities. Intraditional Hausa community, marriage is not just a personal romantic institution; rather it is used to solidify political alliances between clans and families in order to maintain loyalty and unity. Inter communal marriage is presented in the play as an important culture that can be used as a pillar of peace in a conflict situation. SarikinFatake implores the Caliph to use his office to allow the young couple to marry despite the conflict existing between the two settlers

Sarikin Fatake: ...I beg the Caliph to implore my brother here, to leave our children out of this mater

The Waziri explains further:

Waziri: The marriage will restore the cordial relationship among you traders. Now that the land mater is settled, the children should be allowed to find happiness, your Highness (25).

The presence of cultural symbols like music and dance in the play is a deliberate act by Yerima to showcase and preserve this wonderful tradition among the Hausas. Through music and dance, Yerima reveres the cultural richness of the Sokoto Caliphate of the colonial era. The Goge is used in the play to create an authentic Hausa atmosphere, depicting both joy and or sorrow, thus reviving cultural memory.

The Incorporation of traditional Hausa proverbs in the play is another attempt by Yerima to ensure that these cultural symbols are documented and preserved for future reference. As is obtainable in most traditional African societies, proverbs are used in the play by elders to send across important messages as seen in the conversation below:

Madawaki: ...no mater how well one glorifies a donkey with beautiful apparel of a horse in Durbaar, a donkey is still a donkey and a horse still a horse...(28).

This proverb is used by Madawaki to inform the Caliph of the deception hidden behind the letter of friend ship sent by the white man. In another incident, the Caliph speaking on the delicate nature of friendship states thus:

Caliph: ... to have a friend , you must close one eye, but to keep the friendship going, takes a sacrifice so you close two eyes... (32).

These cultural elements employed by Yerima in the play are not mere aesthetics, they are used by the author to ensure the availability of these cultures to generations yet unborn and to promote the culture of the people that owns the story.

Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

Odewale, the powerful king of Kutuje, was informed by the diviner that the cause of the plague in the land is a result of the presence of the murderer of the late King Adetusa in their midst. In his quest to fish out the culprit, Odewale discovers that the stranger he killed in the past is his biological father, King Adetusa, and the couple he was running away from, after discovering the evil prophesy of killing his father and marrying his own mother, actually adopted him after picking him from the bush where he was abandoned by his biological parents, Queen Ojuola and King Adetusa in order to avert the evil prophesy. The reality of the situation made queen Ojuola to commit suicide. Odewale banishes himself from the land taking his children with him after gushing out his two eyes.

The play is an adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex in Yoruba cultural setting. While highlighting the universal themes of fate, accountability and identity, Rotimi utilises cultural elements to underscore the tension between freewill and divine will in the life of Odewale. The play deliberately promotes and preserves Yoruba culture by embedding diverse cultural elements throughout the play. Music and dance, central to Yoruba life, feature prominently as expressive tools for joy, sorrow, and communal solidarity. The opening scene, for instance, is heralded with music and dance:

[Merry singing and dancing. Enter Queen Ojuola, bearing a baby swaddled in a white linen. She is accompanied by elderly women on a dance procession] (Rotimi 1).

Similarly, when Baba Fakunle announces the child's ill fate, "the townspeople sing a dirge softly" (Rotimi 3). Rotimi underscores music's centrality in Yoruba culture by documenting songs in both Yoruba and English, ensuring their preservation:

Oya	come round everybody
Ejek'alo	let us go into the bush
Em'adalo'owoe gbe	get your cutlass
Koko	get cooking pots
Igboya Igboya	get ready for work (Rotimi 17).

Praise singing and chants, another vital Yoruba tradition, are also preserved. Chants eulogize kings and distinguished individuals, reinforcing communal values. Rotimi documents this practice through the Royal Bard's words:

Royal Bard:	There are kings and there are kings; King is greater than king. It is not changing into the lion that is hard, it is getting the tail of a lion. Odewale, King, son of Ogundele, you will last long to rule us (7).
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Proverbs, integral to Yoruba speech and wisdom, are judiciously employed throughout the play. Elders often communicate through proverbs, and Rotimi preserves this oral art by weaving them into dialogue. For example:

Odewale: “He who pelts another with pebbles asks for rocks in return” (7).

Aderopo: “It is said that the secrets of a house should be known first to the head of the home” (19).

Odewale: “When the frog in the front falls into a pit, others take caution” (23).

Odewale: “By trying often, the monkey learns to jump from tree to tree without falling” (14).

These proverbs admonish, encourage, and comfort, while also condemning undesirable behaviors, thereby preserving Yoruba rhetorical traditions.

Rotimi further promotes Yoruba language in the play by employing it extensively in chants, songs, and proverbs, while providing English translations to ensure accessibility. His bilingual documentation preserves both originality and universality. This is exemplified in the call for the villagers to gather and move to the bush in search of herbs and the villagers’ response below:

T’eba ngho gbe- gbe- gbe	When you hear our voices
T’eba ngho gbe-gbe-gbe	Brother you better respond
B’osi gbe	To call of duty
Ehukule-re	Or you have yourself
L’aogbesi	To blame... (Rotimi,17).

Folk storytelling, another cultural hallmark, is also dramatized. Ojuola engages the royal children in a family pastime, singing after a folk tale:

Ojuola: The song goes like this
Onikuluku Njeje Ewure 3X
Onikuluku Njeje Agutan 3X
Olorombi Jeje Omoro Omoro
Olurombi o ojoin join iroko join join (Rotimi, 36).

By recording such stories and songs, Rotimi ensures their transmission to future generations. Traditional medicine is likewise documented. Yoruba reliance on herbs is dramatized when Odewale instructs a woman on proper preparation:

Odewale: No, no, you must boil it longer, woman, longer so that the medicine in the herbs can come out in full spirit to fight the sickness. Boil it longer (13–14).

This scene preserves indigenous medical knowledge within dramatic literature.

Finally, rituals, divination, and communalism are central cultural elements Rotimi highlights. Odewale's life is guided by oracles and priests, reflecting Yoruba religious adherence. Communal solidarity is also emphasized: the people rejoice at births, mourn during tragedy, and unite against plague. Rotimi's documentation of these practices underscores drama's role as a cultural archive, ensuring that Yoruba traditions remain accessible to future generations.

Echoes of Madness

The play centers on the communal responsibility of choosing a replacement for a dead chief priest of Avuuja. The village diviner has named Obiora as the replacement but his long sojourn in foreign land makes unacceptable by the people. However, his sudden arrival at the shrine with his wife, makes the people to think otherwise, believing that the gods must have brought him to serve them. Obiora's rejection of the nomination paves the way for his uncle, Akamonye to employ every desperate measure within his power to covert the position. This desperation results in the emotional and psychological destruction of Obiora and his dreams of improving the lives of the people.

Echoes of Madness dramatizes communal life in a fictional Igbo community. The play stages a central conflict between binding oracular pronouncements and individual desires, exposing how ritual authority shapes personal fate and social order. Through proverbs, songs, and ritual scenes, Nwabueze records communal values and the mechanisms by which tradition enforces responsibility and loyalty. Ultimately, the drama interrogates the tension between collective obligation and personal agency, showing how cultural norms, both sustain and constrain human lives.

Emeka Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness* functions as a cultural dictionary, documenting numerous traditions of the Igbo people of Nigeria. One such practice is marriage by proxy, a custom applied when an adult male of marriageable age, particularly an only son living outside the community, shows no intention of returning home to marry. Akamonye reminds Obiora that his refusal to accept Nkechi Adibe as his legitimate wife does not absolve him of responsibility:

Akamonye: And as long as Nkechi Adibe remains unmarried, you are responsible for whatever happens to her (20).

By dramatizing this practice, Nwabueze preserves its cultural significance within Igbo society.

Religion also plays a vital role in the daily life of the Igbo. Belief in the supernatural, the cyclical relationship between the living and the dead, and reverence for ancestral authority are central to Igbo culture. The chief priest's words are binding on all members of the community, regardless of age or status. Nzeduba affirms:

Nzeduba: One does not doubt the potency of an oracle invoked by the acolyte of the ancestors (5).

Osuofia attests further in the following words:

Osuofia: I'm the diviner of Avuuja. My art has never failed me in time of need...(7).

Such documentation perpetuates knowledge of the chief priest's authority and the efficacy of oracular pronouncements. The ritual of oath-taking, another cultural and religious practice, is also highlighted. Among the Igbo, oaths instill loyalty and sustain statutory obligations, even though their outcomes depend on the sincerity of the individuals involved.

A close reading of *Echoes of Madness* reveals Nwabueze's extensive use of proverbs, a hallmark of Igbo oral tradition. Proverbs serve as powerful communicative tools, offering philosophical depth and rhetorical strength. As Aghamelu observes, "good orators express their ideas more concisely using proverbs, thus making such speech more natural and effective" (90). Examples from the play include:

- "When the penis stands up, it behaves as if it will penetrate a wall" (8).
- "It is with sense that a man kills a fly perching on his scrotal sack" (6).
- "It is the lawsuit of a fool that keeps the court sitting all day" (7).

These proverbs, philosophical and often abstract, provide speakers with rhetorical authority and cultural security. Okoye and Kingsly affirm that "proverbs function as socio-cultural agents by which elements of culture are continually preserved and transferred from one person to another and from one generation to another" (21). Iroh further asserts that "Proverbs are very important in traditional education...is part of Africa's oral culture" (89). By embedding proverbs in nearly every conversation, Nwabueze transforms the play into a compendium of Igbo wisdom.

Songs, music, and dance also permeate the play, not merely for aesthetic effect but to emphasize their central role in Igbo communal life. The play opens with a funeral song heralding the arrival of the casket bearing the dead chief priest. "The singers enter stage left. They are village youths singing the traditional funeral tune, the song is solemn, melodious, exuberant, and sounds half joyous, half melancholy. Dimgba, the village youth leader moves upstage center and does the traditional ida iya dance, amidst the approbation of his companions" (Nwabueze, 1).

Underscoring the communal nature of performance Festivals, ceremonies, and rituals are likewise documented, as represented in the passage rites of the Chief Priest of Avuuja. Excerpts:

Dimgba: Hi... hi...hi...Eze

All: Eze-Avuja!

Dimgba: Eze... Eze...

All: Eze-Avuja!!

Nzeduba: Thank you my son (faces the audience). Eze-Avuja, you have been drenched by the rain, you've been scorched by the sun. now it's the time for you to take the appropriate position among your ancestors. As our people say, if a masquerade overstays in the arena, the uninitiated will throw sand at it (2).

Obiora's welcome, and the ritual for the selection of the new Eze -Avuja are other examples in the play that document the culture of the people. These elements highlight the importance of ritual in sustaining cultural continuity:

Osuofia: (As if waking up from a trance). He is in the shrine of Avuja. Behold the chief priest of our deity! (9)

Nwabueze explains the scene thus: "the youths sing and dance round Obinna and Brenda. They are excited. Osuofia stands up, walks to Obiora and hangs a long red cloth on his neck. The drums beat. The songs rise in tempo. They dance and begin to leave..."(9).

Through *Echoes of Madness*, Nwabueze preserves and promotes Igbo traditions, ensuring their transmission to future generations

The deliberate and unique use of cultural elements by African playwrights in the three plays under study—Yerima's *Attahiru*, Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, and Nwabueze's *Echoes of Madness*—can be interpreted as a conscious strategy to safeguard and transmit the heritage of their respective communities. These dramatists do not merely entertain; they act as cultural archivists, weaving traditions, rituals, proverbs, songs, dances, and communal practices into dramatic narratives that ensure their survival. As Ajayi rightly observes, "the creative artist moulds cultural elements to enhance and embellish their work. In this instance, culture becomes an enhancer that establishes a dramatic experience within a geo-cultural society" (387). In this way, drama becomes more than art—it becomes a repository of collective memory and identity.

Even in instances where the playwrights' primary intention may not have been cultural preservation, the plays nonetheless serve this purpose. By embedding cultural practices into their texts, they inadvertently create reference materials that future generations and researchers can consult. This dual function—entertainment and documentation—positions African drama as a vital tool in combating the historical problem of poor documentation that has plagued African historiography. It is often lamented that "the problem with African history is lack of

documentation,” yet plays infused with cultural content directly challenge this narrative by offering written records of traditions that might otherwise fade into obscurity.

Furthermore, these plays highlight the dynamic relationship between art and society. Drama, in its African context, is not detached from communal life but deeply rooted in it. The dramatists under study demonstrate that cultural elements—whether in the form of proverbs, chants, rituals, or communal practices—are not static relics but living traditions that continue to shape identity and values. By dramatizing them, playwrights ensure that these practices remain relevant, accessible, and adaptable to contemporary realities. This underscores the role of drama as both a mirror of society and a bridge between past and present.

The implications of this study extend beyond literary analysis. Recognizing that cultural elements as defining feature of African drama provides a framework for evaluating and authenticating African theatrical works. It also offers a corrective to Eurocentric definitions of drama that often overlook the cultural specificity of African theatre. By insisting on the inclusion of cultural elements as a criterion for African drama, scholars and practitioners affirm the uniqueness of African theatre traditions and resist homogenization under Western models.

This paper therefore recommends that cultural elements and materials be formally acknowledged as integral to the definition of African drama. Such recognition will encourage playwrights to continue embedding cultural practices in their works, thereby ensuring their documentation and preservation for generations to come. More importantly, it will establish African drama as a legitimate cultural archive, one that not only entertains but also educates, preserves, and transmits the values, beliefs, and practices of African societies. In doing so, African drama fulfills its dual mandate: to delight audiences while safeguarding the cultural heritage of the continent.

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