

COMMUNITY THEATRE AND ECO-DEGRADING ENGINEERING RESPONSE IN NNA ENIN OF AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

Recent developments in mostly rural communities have indicated that unverified human actions can jeopardise the existence of lives in the ecosystem including man himself, indicating dearth of a dependable medium that stimulate the mood for speedy change in the society. Basing the theoretical framework on Ecocriticism, this paper uses qualitative research approach to discuss Community Theatre and Eco-Degrading Engineering Response in Nna Enin community of Akwa Ibom State. Findings show that Nna Enin is a community naturally endowed to support lives of all species, which the indigenes misuse and risk diseases outbreak, erosion and extermination of species of lives in the habitat. Findings further show that the quick response of the Nna Enin citizens to desist from the barbaric act of defecating into the stream they drink, setting fire to farmlands for games, excavating the soil for money and vacating domestic refuse from their community, show the tenability of the medium deployed to engage them. The paper concludes that when a medium is intimate, creative and persuasive in addressing human problems, it can also serve as a tenable tool of advocacy for the society.

Keywords: Community-theatre, Degradation, Ecology, Engineering, Response

Introduction

The spade of ecological degradation and the negative effects on people especially in Nigeria has drawn the concern of theatre to the centre stage. This abuse of ecosystem stems from the human's activities to grapple with the ups and downs of life for survival. Beyond mere survival, Mary Emah writes that humans specifically carry out some heinous act that they know would be detrimental to the wellbeing of the society, suggesting that the life in terms of struggle and survival stimulates conflict, displacement and, possibly, extermination (239). Then, there is need to address this malaise to curtail sudden extinction of some species in their natural habitat in the society.

Currently, the rate of unsavoury attitudes in personal hygiene extending to the safety of the society is alarming. Nature, on the other hand, becomes quite unpredictable. For instance, the constant flooding emanating from water and land disharmony has been causing deaths, property destruction and displacement in Nigeria. According to Azeezat Olaoluwa and Cecilia Macaulay, "floods are not uncommon during the Nigerian rainy season, which last from April until October. In 2024, Nigeria experienced flooding from heavy rain which caused deaths and drove people from their homes.... More than 600 people died and 1.3 million were displaced"

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/article>). Ecological destruction from nature is a factor to ponder on.

Human disaster is another terrible phenomenon. For example, the use of harmful chemicals for fishing tempers with the order of the marine life. As Segun Odunayo posits, “a study by Otitoju Beulah, has raised fresh concerns about the quality of drinking water available to Nigerian household.... the study, with samples taken from major and minor water-bodies in Osun, Oyo and Lagos indicated alarming high concentrations of industrial pollutant and pharmaceutical residue in both surface and groundwater sources, with levels spiking” (punchng.com/study-finds-toxic-in-packaged-water-in-lagos). Other lives find it difficult to survive in the ecosystem due to human activities. By this, living things on land, water and air are constantly endangered, indicating the need for good measures to be put in place to recoup and conserve these species. According to Stephen Umoh, “this can promote an economy that is driven by more practical ideas” (95).

Around many homes, there are no refuse-bins to dump the waste-products manufactured in the house. This in turn, inspires mounds of decayed shrubs and dung with species of disease carrying insect growing in them to be heaped at random. The most shocking is the defecation of excreta into the river that serves as the source of water for a community to bathe, wash and drink from. Such is the case of Nna Enin of Abak in Akwa Ibom State, and without the deployment of an intimate measure to interrogate these unsavoury attitudes it may result in disease breakout that may cause deaths to human beings and deadness to the ecology. Hence, there is need to evaluate the extent to which the people affected conceive of their predicament, using a medium that they become the tools to tell themselves the truth.

Nna Enin Community in Akwa Ibom State, has been shrouded with the miasma of their diet-waste, which they heap indiscriminately. They conscientiously empty these wastes product and raw-chemical substances into the only stream, serving as the only source of drink-water in the community. They freely defecate into the stream as a noble habit as well as negotiate with construction companies to excavate their land, and in many occasions these excavations becomes a hideout for criminals.

However, these acts do not appear in any way contagious or inimical since the stream absorbs these bacteria, churns them to debris and re-spew a silver surface they scoop to bathe, drink and cook with. Using such water for food is risky and may cause an outbreak if not properly addressed. There is serious need for the portrayal of these challenges at the Nna Enin Community to sensitize the citizens and persuade them to use themselves as instruments of advocacy against their actions and curb the menace.

Fortunately, community theatre is specifically orchestrated to tackle community/ecological issues and it is the indigenes that are used for the performance to intensify the intimacy, which in many occasions result in skills and creativity impartation. Its role, purpose and imprint to

the society are identified from its entertainment design, which is organized to attract, enlighten, conscientise, and educate people on a perceived threat, while unifying them for collective community's goal. This may stimulate "the desire to know why a certain idea is designed in a particular form" (Umoh 108) in the theatre. This paper discusses community theatre experience and responses on eco-degrading engineering at Nna Enin of Abak in Akwa Ibom State.

Theoretical Framework

The argument of this paper is premised on a literary theory called ecocriticism. The theory was propagated in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay titled, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment on Ecocriticism". It has become one of the trending speculations focusing on human attitude to his environment and the effects on organisms. The major points are nature conservation and lives preservation.

The word, ecocriticism, conveys two ideas. One is ecology which explains environmental/habitat and the lives existing in it. The other is criticism which is an appraisal of a course through a balanced view of circumstance. According to Mary Emah, "ecocriticism is one of the literary movements that actually bend the focus of a creative work to the ecological factors in the society... It periscopes those natural eruptions that may upset the cosmic balance, thereby causing unexplainable dissonance in the order of the society" (240-241). This suggests the interplays of literature and ecological problems. In this case, the reassessment of human-caused disaster and the possibility of resetting the balance through the instrument of the theatre.

It is otherwise referred to as "green approach", the theory is quite African in operation. According to William Slaymaker, ecocriticism is, without doubt:

African echo of global green approaches to literature...relates to ecology, environmental degradation and depreciation of land and animals..... (It is) a natural writing on natural land issues and landscape themes that are pertinent to traditional and local cultural claims that also functions as pastoral reminiscence or projection of a golden age when many of the environmental evils and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remedied (683).

The theory focuses on the deployment of literary tools to interrogate environmental issues in order to expunge the detrimental factors. To John Ranson, "it is a remarkable ability for thought feeling" (471).

Ecocriticism is a theory of conscientisation and "it stimulates environmental sensibility" (Emah 241), and as Byron Caminero-Santangelo puts, "the sensibility involves appreciating and being in tune with Africa's wild nature" (701). As Emah further puts, in "ecocriticism, human beings are focused as the architect of their pleasant or unpleasant outlook of their surroundings" (241). This means, engaging the media with environmental degradation "enables them to contribute to the developing discussion within ecocriticism and African

environmental history. Thus, ecocriticism frequently embraces the ethical position that human needs to do away with” (Caminero-Santangelo 699).

Relating this theory to the focus of this essay, the use of community theatre practice as a means to solicit for society’s response to their plight by exposing the human destructive activities on nature, habitat and life in the environment resulting from heinous human practices are perspectives of discussion in ecocriticism. Applying a theory that is concern with the protection and survival of lives in their natural environment is apt to the tone of the paper. Through the instrument of the theatre, various environmental hazards can be identified and dealt with in a fair, amicable and logical way.

Community Theatre

Community theatre as an idea expresses a brand of performance for a specific purpose. According to Ubong Nda, the two words, “Community” and “Theatre” suggest a single theatrical activity; focusing on a specific concern of a unit of the society (247), which denotes a theatrical programme towards unifying socially motivated community-based creativity. Specifically, “it is when the people themselves participate as actors in their own development...that people can readily derive strength for the process specifically from a re-examination and re-vitalisation of their cultural roots” (Calleja28). This idea has a more subjective insight that intersects the word community and another, theatre.

Community theatre equally refers to a non-professional, amateur theatre production that is typically performed and produced by members of a local community. Such productions can take place in a wide range of venues, from school auditoriums/grounds, community centres to outdoor spaces and community arenas. Community Theatre provides a platform for people of all ages and backgrounds to express themselves creatively and to engage with their local communities. “This aims to create meaning through the interaction of signs in its operation rather than history”(Stephen Umoh 271). It can serve as a way for people to connect with each other, build new relationships, and develop skills in acting, directing, and other aspects of theatre production. The concept of found space allows production to be mounted in an unconventional area. For drive-in theatres, audience members positioned themselves at whatever point of comfort to watch the performers. This is also applicable to community theatre experience where the audience areas are not conventionally demarcated.

Community theatre mirrors the immediate and obvious communal circumstance to induce conscience. From history, various kinds of community festivals, ceremonies, rituals and also storytelling, performed for the entire community, had been considered to have some sort of theatrical elements like performance space, performers, costumes, masks and make-up, music and dance. According to Anietie Udofia and Aniekan Akpan, “there seems to be more need for in-depth analysis of life through the sign system used in encoding life in a production” (101). This is noted from when people first gathered to listen to someone else tell a story mostly in the evenings, sometimes called in the African context “Tales by Moonlight”. This consisted of friends and family who shared the responsibilities of director, actor manager, audience and performers, trading roles back and forth as long as someone had a story to share. To this effect,

research by African scholars have pointed to the continuity, vitality and relevance of the genuinely communal theatre as manifested in festivals, ritual and masquerade performances with sophisticated use of dance, mime, costuming and music, and the integral relationship between performers and observers as equal participants. It is an intimate tool for communal dialogue, and as Nnanake Ekeke and Dora Ekeke situate, “it could be used to conscientise people on why they must do something for their community” (135).

In community theatre practice, a major factor is to raise a workable theme based on the condition of the community, using the arts of the theatre to expatiate for prompt response. Such themes must encompass noticeable misconducts on the use of the natural terrain, ecological degradation, social vices and or questionable mindsets. According to Austin Lordlax, such artworks, “no matter what medium... must (have) an overriding theme upon which it is created. This may stem from social ills, individual weakness, economic, cultural, health or political issues (424)”. In the same vein, Chilioke Iyama and Denis Obire opine that community theatre is oftentimes a brain child of some concerned citizens, which:

through their creative ingenuity, they are able to assemble materials from nation’s historical past and present which highlight issues that border on social development and well-being of the people which include; corruption, political, exploitation, economic backwardness, social dislocation and leadership questions which remained a burning issue in the front line of Nigerian politics (87).

This suggests that a performance to a community to make the citizens participate should be impressive and enticing through reasoning and creativity.

Community theatre is a deployment all components of drama such as plot, character, dialogue, theme, setting, song and spectacle. “The aim of which is to ginger development” (Nda 249). The community may draw more fact from the ingenuity, making it more of an experimental process meant to evoke consciousness, change and unification through dialogue crafted to the level of the community. With this in action, “the theatre becomes a communal project and a celebration,... a form of expression that will become more and more of a necessity as society becomes increasingly mechanical and organised” (Roose-Evans 85). To this effect, Idachaba posits that theatre “has been proved to influence the behavioural and thinking of the audience across the world” (95). Thus, ecological sentiment, concern for humanity and the feasible attitude to recoup the glory of mankind is easily blended in a community theatre project’s dramaturgy.

Another view of community theatre is its capacity to unite a community for a specific factor for development. According to Ross Kid, “it uses a community forum to get the whole community discussing what they want to do as a community.... (Thus) community members analyze the problem and decide together.... and gets the whole community to make change, rather than focusing on individual behaviour change” (197). This may be the reason Duruaku defines community theatre as:

A theatre practiced in the rural communities mainly for the purpose of enlightenment. It also becomes a means of projecting the plight of rural population, and making them aware of their potentialities so that they may better their lives. Thus, it is seen as 'popular' and people oriented. But popular does not necessarily refer to oppressed masses of peasants, but include all those that are involved in the process of development and are in fact prepared to take destiny in their hands to improve their lives (18-19).

To succeed in the campaign for a better human society through the arts of the stage, there is need to stimulate a massive response of the community through a specific technique of audience engineering.

Nna Enin Community Theatre:

Nna Enin is one of the villages in Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. It adjoins Ukanafun Local Government. The community has an estimated population of about two thousand seven hundred people (2,700). However, the only stream lying across the village, which conveys the ambience of a natural site for tourism is at the brink of disappearing, and the citizens themselves are the agents to this destruction.

In Nna Enin, part of the community is used as a waste valley for dung to be dumped and a reservoir for excavation of clay soil, sold to develop other communities. There are no accessible and motorable roads in the village. The most depressing is that the only stream in the village, which serves as a pool for bathing and drinking is also the community's latrine. Being that the stream is not stagnant, there is a chance of a plague or a deadly sickness to develop from this act within Nna Enin or the neighbouring communities who also share the stream. This calls for a more intimate tool of advocacy, enlightenment and development, which the citizens of Nna Enin themselves can participate as the instruments of communication while assessing their conducts to the ecosystem, hence the use of community theatre.

Engineering Strategies for Nna Enin Community Theatre

In order to attract audience for the production, there were many actions and activities carried out by the researcher to motivate them. Both analogue and digital outlets were deployed as presented below:

Indigenous Communication Approach:

The Director and his production crew, made some door-to-door visitations to the village head, chiefs and other inhabitants of Nna Enin. They were able to present the intent of community theatre as an advocacy tool and agent of development, to the admiration of the people. This was done in agreement with Duruaku's view that "there is a way a community theatre facilitator presents himself/herself, the case to focus inspire people to oblige; and there is a way the target could be presented, it repels the community. It should be presented as an aspect of enlightenment instead of blames" (20-21), and that "the interest of the decoder not the encoder should be emphasized" (Hanwa 48).

Thus, after consulting with the Village Head and his chiefs, ingredients for the script were outlined and mechanized for production. Following this agreement between the village representatives and the production crew, the Village Head sent for the town crier and instructed him to disseminate the information accordingly. With the use of the traditional mouthpiece of the community to disseminate the information, there was an effective audience participation in process.

One-on-one Negotiation:



Plate 1: Researcher solicits for audience through the Village Head of Nna Enin (Umanah, 2025).

To fully execute the Nna Enin community theatre project, there were pockets of interrogations and negotiations between the theatre crew and the community. This negotiation aided in creating a more amicable rapport between the community and the performing crew.

Street Show:



Plate 2: A Street Show in Nna Enin Village (Umanah 2025).

A street show was organized to draw the attention of people and attract them to the venue of the productions. The show included dances, instrumentations and songs familiar to the indigenes of Nna Enin. This act aroused the interest of those passing by who in turn aided to spread the information about the production to others. The costumes used by the dancers also drew the attention of the prospective audience. The villagers who arrived the venue early joined in the dance performance and displayed their talents.

Print Media Strategy:

Poster/Flex



Plate 3: Poster/Flex of Nna Enin Community Theatre (Umanah 2025).

The production team designed and printed posters, fliers and banners for the production. Some volunteers in the village and members of the production crew moved around the Nna Enin Community to distribute the fliers and had the posters pasted in some strategic positions in the village. The banners were placed at the road leading to the village from the main road, while others were placed at the production venue. These engagements created awareness about the production and also prompted improved audience participation.

(i) Banner



Plate 4: Banner at the entrance of the Nna Enin village (Umanah 2025).

Banners were placed at strategic positions to create awareness, indicate the date, time and place of performance. This allowed the citizens to prepare and participate in the community theatre project.

Social Media Approach

Similarly, the cast and crew members of the production engaged some audience via the social media to create awareness about the production. The designed fliers were posted on WhatsApp and Facebook platforms. Interestingly, most people who engaged the post were indigenes of Abak Local Government Area, where we have Nna Enin Village. Those who were not far away, turned up to witness the performance, while others sent in their goodwill messages.

Role-play/Acting:



Plate 5: Acting/Role-play in Nna Enin Community Theatre (Umanah 2025).

By the presentation of the imaginary personas who may have made the Nna Enin community what it actually looks like, the message was tactfully verbalised, and being that the indigenes equally play the roles, it was very easy to attack the subject matter and induce collective empathy to the degenerating condition of the Nna Enin ecosystem.

Music/Songs:



Plate 6: Theme enunciation and mood stimulation in the production (Umanah 2025)

The tunes used as abridgement for the various scenes were made to create a foreboding mood over the dramatised theme. This helped to stir the feeling of nausea, which intensified dispositions of disgust for perspective of degradation and impel the desire to revamp the aliveness of the ecosystem by the citizens.

Eco-Degradation in Nna Enin

Eco-degradation is formed from ecology and degradation. Ecology is “a scientific study of how living organisms interact with each other and their physical surroundings, exploring relationship from individual organism to entire ecosystem” (Tansley 433). Abdul Ahad and Anas Ferdous states that “ecology is derived from a Greek word *oikos*, meaning ‘house’ or ‘place to live’. Literary, ecology is the study of organisms ‘at home,’... defined as the study of the relationship of organisms and their environment”([8]. To Shankhwar Anil, “ecology is the study of interrelationship between living entity and to its environment” (169). These ideas suggest ecology to be the reassessment of the condition of living among different organisms existing in a particular ecosystem. This include man and his interaction with the environment such as, mosquitoes, rodents, monkeys, fish, snake, rocks, trees and rivers in which he takes from to survive or to give to survive.

Degradation, on the other hand, is a deteriorating condition of a thing. It also suggests the decay or decomposition of a being. Therefore, eco-degradation is “the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources,... or disturbance to environment perceived to be deleterious or undesirable” (archive.unescwa.org). The same view is expressed in Wikipedia that eco-degradation “entails the destruction of ecosystem (from) any change or disturbance to the environment” (en.wikipedia.org).

The Nna Enin community is blessed with a serene landscape and a multipurpose stream. The stream is a natural habitat for edible plants and organisms like frogs, Egyptian-giant frogs, species of fish, crabs, and crayfish. Around the stream and the forest is a habitat for animals such as antelopes, iguanas, grass-cutters, hyenas and numerous species of rodents. More so, it is asserted that the community, Nna (the lair of) Enin (Elephant) is so named because a herd of elephants used to dwell in the land. Besides the animal, birds and insects that support life in the community, there are various economic trees such as palm-trees, mangoes, star-fruit, plantains, bananas, wall-nuts, oil-bean trees, pears, and many others. The soil is very fertile that potatoes, yams, cocoa yam and cassava yield in impressive chunks. However, the way the citizens waste these lives has made the once cherished citadel of life to surface among many neighbouring village as a wilderness of dirt and decay as realised in the discussion with Nna Enin people during interaction.

Inordinate Destruction of Economic Trees:



Plate 7: Trees cut down without aim (Umanah 2025)

One of the discoveries during the community theatre project was the authorised falling of trees by the citizens. Most of these trees could be used for building of houses, construction of boats or for other industrial purposes; but the citizen sometimes cut them down and hew them in piecemeal as firewood; yet they never plant another to keep the habitat alive.

Defecation into the Communal Stream:



Plate 8: Defecation in Nna Enin Stream (Umanah 2025)

The villagers derive pleasure in perching on trees and the stream banks to defecate into the stream. The same stream is their source of drink-water, a pool to bathe in, and also the one used in washing and cooking at home. Most times, the numerous decay products such as dead dogs, decomposed snakes, dead goats, domestic wastes and unwanted chemicals products are disposed into the stream without considering the danger to man using it and the lives in the stream.

Unauthorised Earth Excavation:

The youths of Nna Enin are reported to be conniving on many occasions with construction contractors to turn any site of their choice to a “boro-pit” (excavation site) without the knowledge of the chief and elders of the community. Worse, they charge lower sum and squander the money while the topography is damaged. This leads to numerous kinds of erosions in the community. To this effect, those deep excavations have gradually become hideout for criminal minded young men to carry out activities such as selling and smoking of contraband drugs; it has gradually become a hiding place for wanted criminals and a safe abode to initiate other nefarious activities like kidnapping and robbery.

Hunting by Bush Burning:



Plate 9: Games hunting by Bush Burning (Umanah 2025)

The vegetation of Nna Enin is a natural habitat for both large and small animals and it is usually populated with frogs of different species, snakes, tortoise, grass-cutters, partridge and rodents. Hunting these delicacies in the traditional style allows the animals to regenerate naturally but Nna Enin people often set fire to the field, which burns both the edible and inedible animals. After few days, the environment begins to stink from the remains of destroyed but unspotted burnt animals in their act. Both lives and the habitat are destroyed alike, threatening the extinct of these species.

Heaping and Dumping of Refuses in the Stream:



Plate 10: Refuses and Chemicals dumped in Nna Enin Stream (Umanah 2025)

Nna Enin indigenes have penchant for heaping their domestic refuses by the wayside, forming pyramids of rancid dung they later haul into the stream. This does not only evoke a strong miasma but stir a gamut of flies which spread and perch randomly on fruit, smoked fish and raw meat disposed for sale within the community.

Eco-Degrading Engineering Response in Nna Enin

Based on the interlocution between a select set of personalities, all the cruel acts listed above were incorporated as dialogue in the community theatre practice. After the production, the following responses were documented as feedback of the performance towards ecological revitalisation of Nna Enin community.

Communal Reorientation:

Following the apt mirroring of the Nna Enin outlook by the performers, the audience (Nna Enin indigenes) saw themselves as the direct agent of their ecological destruction. This made them cluster to chat their way forward in a collective remorse.

Inauguration of Volunteers:

Many youths volunteered to keep watch on the surrounding in order to dissuade those who may still refuse to make a personal latrine in the determination, aiming to continue defecating into the communal stream and those who may not desist from the barbaric method of unguided bush burning for games.

Declaration of Communal Periodic Sanitation:

Following the recommendations of the community theatre production, a general sanitation was imposed on Nna Enin and was agreed to be made a compulsory monthly exercise. This is meant to evacuate the here-and-there heaps of domestic refuses and to inculcate a collective cleaning consciousness among the citizens.

Collective Management of Natural Resources:

The wanton allotment of the Nna Enin “red-soil”, which is commonly sought for by construction companies, was addressed. Land excavation for “boro-pit” was agreed to be made

a communal project instead of individual; and it was further speculated to be used as interlink to draw the government attention to the presence of such rare site. As Stephen Umoh and Sandra Ekpo posit: collective management of natural resources “will result in the innovativeness that leaves a remarkable imprint which transcends generations surface” (13)

Application for Government Intervention:

Through the guidance of the project initiator (researcher), the elders of Nna Enin unanimously agreed to draw the government’s attention to the plight of the community, soliciting for the construction of a road and provision of pipe-borne water for them.

Conclusion

The discovery of human congenial activities for pleasure and survival in the society and their possibility of endangering the lives in the ecosystem is an indication that a tenable communication instrument is necessary. Considering the media trends and the thrusts of operations of the radio, TV, phones and films in the society, it would be misleading to adduce the scarcity of personal hygienic information or that of the effect of environmental pollution to both individuals and the society. In the case of Nna Enin people, despite their possessions of these media, the message they generate by themselves over their predicament has a self-satisfying powers compared to others.

The use of community theatre was strong enough to mirror the debased, articulate the bestial and garner momentum to enforce the advocacy for the regeneration and conservation of species almost endangered by human activities for decades. This is an indication that a specific model of communication fits into a specific class and level of people. Community theatre for development enacted in the rural area to address rural problems may generate a faster response than other media since it is practically a theatre of the people by the people and for the people.

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