

**PERFORMING AFRICAN FUTURES: THEATRE, CULTURAL PEDAGOGY, AND
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN AFRICAN DIGITAL ANIMATION- A STUDY OF
IWÁJÚ AND *IYANU: CHILD OF WONDER***

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Abstract

*The emergence of African digital animation has expanded the boundaries of theatrical performance beyond conventional stages into mediated environments where culture, identity, and social realities are continually negotiated and reimagined. This study examines *Iwájú* (2024) and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* (2025) as case studies to investigate how contemporary African children's animation functions simultaneously as a form of digital performance, cultural pedagogy, and development communication. Guided by Performance Theory, Cultural Identity Theory, and Africanfuturism, with Afrofuturism serving as a comparative framework, the study adopts qualitative textual and performance analysis to examine how visual storytelling, characterization, indigenous symbols, mythology, language, and speculative world-building construct culturally affirming representations of African childhood and futurity. The analysis reveals that both productions transform storytelling, ritual enactment, music, gesture, costume, and symbolic action into forms of digital theatrical performance that preserve indigenous cultural memory and reimagine African futures through contemporary animation. The analysis further reveals that *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* challenge deficit-oriented representations of Africa by presenting technologically innovative, culturally confident, and ethically grounded societies in which indigenous knowledge and modernity coexist. Consequently, the study argues that African digital animation should be understood not only as children's entertainment but as a form of digital performance and development communication through which cultural knowledge, identity, ethical values, and visions of social transformation are communicated. By positioning animation within Theatre and Performance Studies, the study broadens contemporary understandings of performance while highlighting the growing significance of African digital storytelling in shaping global perceptions of the continent's multiple futures.*

Keywords: African digital animation, Performance Theory, Africanfuturism, Identity Construction, Development Communication.

Introduction

Digital animation has emerged as one of the most dynamic forms of contemporary storytelling, extending performance beyond conventional theatrical spaces into technologically mediated environments where culture, identity, and social values are enacted through visual narratives. Although long regarded primarily as children's entertainment, animation increasingly functions as a performative medium capable of preserving cultural memory, transmitting indigenous knowledge, facilitating cultural pedagogy, and shaping social imagination. Across Africa, the growth of digital creative industries has enabled new forms of storytelling through which creators negotiate cultural memory, indigenous knowledge, and alternative visions of African futures. Scholars of African

speculative imagination argue that such narratives challenge inherited representations of Africa by positioning African histories, philosophies, and technologies as sources of future-oriented creativity (Eshun 287–302; Okorafor). Recent African animated productions such as *Iwájú* (2024) and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* (2025) exemplify this transformation. Rather than portraying Africa as technologically dependent or culturally marginal, both productions place African children at the centre of narratives that integrate indigenous knowledge, ethical leadership, technological innovation, and speculative futures. While *Iwájú* imagines a futuristic Lagos where advanced technology coexists with Yoruba cultural identity, *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* reinterprets Yoruba mythology and spirituality as living foundations for contemporary storytelling. Together, these works challenge dominant representations of Africa by demonstrating that modernity and cultural heritage are complementary rather than opposing forces (Okorafor).

Despite growing scholarship on African animation, most studies have examined the field through the lenses of media studies, cultural representation, and the creative industries, with comparatively limited attention to its performative dimensions (Bendazzi; Furniss; Wells, *Understanding Animation*). Likewise, scholarship on Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism has focused primarily on literature, film, and visual art (Dery 179–222; Eshun 287–302; Womack 9–18), while Theatre and Performance Studies have traditionally focused more strongly on live bodily encounters, although recent scholarship has expanded the field toward mediated, digital, and technologically produced forms of performance (Schechner 28–36; Auslander 52–67; Fischer-Lichte 38–42). Within this expanding framework, animation provides an important but underexamined site for exploring embodiment, visual dramaturgy, spectatorship, and symbolic action. Furthermore, although children's animation is increasingly acknowledged as an important pedagogical medium, relatively little attention has been paid to how African digital animation simultaneously functions as theatre, cultural pedagogy, and a site of identity construction. This disciplinary separation has created a significant gap in understanding the performative and educational potential of African digital animation.

This study addresses that gap by examining *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* through the interdisciplinary lenses of Performance Theory, Africanfuturism, and Cultural Identity Theory. It argues that these productions are not merely animated entertainment but culturally grounded performative texts through which indigenous knowledge is revitalised, African identities are constructed, and alternative futures are imaginatively enacted. By positioning animation within Theatre and Performance Studies, the study broadens contemporary understandings of performance while highlighting the growing significance of African digital storytelling in shaping global perceptions of the continent's multiple futures.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative textual and performance analysis of *Iwájú* (2024) and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* (2025) as selected case studies. The analysis examines narrative structures, characterization, visual aesthetics, indigenous symbols, language, mythology, and the performative dimensions of animation, including voice, gesture, movement, music, costume, and symbolic action. Through close reading of the selected works, the study investigates how African digital animation operates as a form of digital theatre, cultural pedagogy, and a medium for constructing contemporary African identities and futures.

Literature Review

The increasing visibility of African animation has generated growing scholarly interest in the intersections of digital storytelling, technological innovation, cultural representation, identity formation, and cultural pedagogy. Once regarded primarily as children's entertainment, animation is

now widely recognised as a significant cultural form capable of communicating historical, political, philosophical, and educational values through visual performance (Bendazzi; Furniss; Wells, *Animation*). Beyond entertainment, children's animation increasingly functions as a pedagogical medium through which ethical values, indigenous knowledge, language, environmental awareness, and cultural identity are transmitted to younger generations. Within Africa, scholars argue that the expansion of locally produced animation reflects broader transformations in the continent's creative industries, enabling African storytellers not only to reclaim narrative authority but also to transmit cultural knowledge through narratives grounded in African cultures that challenge longstanding Western stereotypes.

According to Okorafor, African futurism situates African stories within African histories, cultures, and worldviews rather than Western paradigms (Okorafor). Closely related to this development is the expanding scholarship on Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. Mark Dery first coined the term "Afrofuturism" to describe speculative cultural productions that engage questions of race, technology, and the future (179–222). Building on this foundation, Eshun and Womack argue that speculative narratives contest colonial histories by positioning Black identities within technologically advanced and socially transformative futures (Eshun 287–302; Womack 9–18). Okorafor's conceptualisation of Africanfuturism provides a useful framework for examining speculative narratives that emerge from African geographical, cultural, and historical realities rather than primarily from diasporic experiences. This distinction provides an important framework for analysing contemporary African animation, where technological innovation frequently coexists with indigenous cultural traditions (Okorafor).

Theatre and Performance Studies likewise offer valuable perspectives for understanding animation beyond its status as a visual medium. Schechner's conception of performance as restored behaviour and Turner's theory of liminality extend performance beyond conventional theatre to include ritual, media, and symbolic action (Schechner 28–36; Turner 94–102). More recent scholars argue that digital technologies have transformed theatrical practice by creating mediated forms of embodiment in which voice, movement, visual design, and spectatorship continue to generate performative meaning (Auslander 52–67; Dixon 561–70; Fischer-Lichte 38–42). Despite these developments, animation remains relatively underexplored within Theatre and Performance Studies, particularly in relation to African cultural production. Scholarship on cultural identity further reinforces the significance of children's media. Hall argues that identity is continually constructed through representation rather than inherited as a fixed cultural essence (222–37). Media therefore plays a central role in shaping how individuals understand themselves and their communities because identities are continually constructed through systems of representation rather than inherited as fixed cultural essences (Hall 222–25).

African animated productions that foreground indigenous languages, folklore, mythology, ethical values, and contemporary realities offer culturally affirming representations that contribute to identity formation while encouraging historical awareness and social imagination. Although animation has increasingly attracted scholarly attention across film, media, and communication studies, much of the existing literature continues to examine it primarily as an audiovisual medium rather than as a form of theatrical performance (Bendazzi; Furniss; Wells, *Understanding Animation*). While these approaches have generated valuable insights into representation, aesthetics, and media production, they pay comparatively less attention to animation's performative dimensions, including embodiment, spectatorship, ritualised action, and the broader processes through which performance is produced and experienced. It is within this scholarly context that the

present study argues that Performance Theory offers a complementary analytical framework for understanding African digital animation as a form of African digital theatre.

Despite the significant contributions of these bodies of scholarship, they have rarely been integrated in the study of African children's animation. Existing research on African animation has focused largely on representation and industry development, while performance scholarship has seldom considered digital animation as theatrical performance, and Africanfuturist studies have given limited attention to children's animation as a pedagogical medium. This study addresses this gap by integrating Performance Theory, Africanfuturism, and Cultural Identity Theory to examine *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* as forms of African digital theatre through which indigenous knowledge, ethical values, cultural identity, and speculative futures are simultaneously performed, transmitted, and reimagined. From the perspective of Development Communication, culturally rooted animation represents a form of symbolic communication through which societies transmit values, knowledge systems, and social aspirations. Unlike conventional development messages that often operate through direct instruction, African digital animation communicates through narrative identification, emotional engagement, and imaginative participation. This makes animation particularly significant for children's learning, cultural confidence, and social awareness.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Performance Theory, African futurism, and Cultural Identity Theory to examine how *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* function as forms of African digital theatre. These complementary perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding African digital animation not merely as children's entertainment but as a performative cultural practice through which indigenous knowledge, cultural identities, and visions of African futures are constructed, communicated, and reimagined. Rather than approaching animation solely as a visual or technological medium, the study situates it within Theatre and Performance Studies, where storytelling, embodiment, symbolism, and spectatorship converge to produce performative meaning. At the same time, Africanfuturism provides a culturally grounded framework for interpreting speculative African futures, while Cultural Identity Theory explains how such representations participate in the construction of culturally grounded identities. Together, these theories demonstrate how African digital animation operates simultaneously as performance, speculative storytelling, and cultural pedagogy.

Performance Theory

Performance Theory provides the primary analytical framework for this study because it extends the concept of performance beyond conventional theatre to encompass ritual, everyday life, media, and symbolic action. Contemporary performance scholarship recognises that performance is not confined to actors performing before a live audience but includes culturally meaningful actions through which societies communicate values, identities, memories, and collective experiences. This expanded understanding makes Performance Theory particularly relevant for analysing digital animation, where voice, gesture, movement, music, costume, visual aesthetics, and audience engagement combine to create performative experiences within mediated performance environments. Schechner's conception of performance as "restored behaviour" provides the foundation for this study. He argues that restored behaviour consists of actions that are learned, rehearsed, repeated, and re-enacted rather than performed for the first time, allowing cultural practices to be continually reconstructed and transmitted across different historical and social contexts (Schechner 34-35).

Restored behaviour enables communities to preserve rituals, traditions, ethical values, and social practices by repeatedly performing culturally learned behaviours across generations. Within

animated narratives, this concept explains how recurring gestures, speech patterns, costumes, rituals, moral choices, and symbolic actions become performative expressions of culture. From this perspective, *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* function as performances because their characters repeatedly enact social values, ethical responsibilities, indigenous traditions, and communal identities before audiences through digitally mediated storytelling. Turner's concept of liminality further enriches this analysis by explaining how performance creates transitional spaces in which existing social realities may be questioned and alternative possibilities imagined (Turner 94–102). Liminal spaces temporarily suspend ordinary structures, allowing audiences to engage with new ways of understanding identity, power, morality, and community. Both *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* construct such liminal environments by placing African children within speculative worlds where technological innovation coexists with Yoruba mythology, spirituality, and indigenous knowledge systems. These imaginative worlds invite audiences to reflect upon questions of identity, justice, leadership, cultural continuity, and the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Contemporary performance scholars extend these ideas into digital and mediated environments. Auslander argues that performance continues to generate theatrical meaning even when mediated through digital technologies because the relationship between performers, media technologies, and audiences remains fundamentally performative (Auslander 52–67). Similarly, Dixon argues that digital technologies have transformed rather than diminished theatrical performance by creating new forms of embodiment, interaction, and spectatorship within virtual and mediated environments (Dixon 561–70). Fischer-Lichte likewise argues that performance is a transformative event generated through the dynamic relationship between embodiment, representation, and audience interpretation (Fischer-Lichte 38–42). Collectively, these perspectives support the argument that digitally animated narratives should not be regarded merely as audiovisual texts but as legitimate forms of theatrical performance. However, this understanding of animation as theatre requires engagement with perspectives that traditionally define theatre through the physical co-presence of performers and spectators. Traditional theatre scholarship has often maintained that live bodily co-presence remains the defining characteristic of theatrical performance. Scholars influenced by phenomenological approaches to theatre, particularly those who emphasise the shared physical presence between performer and spectator, may therefore question whether digitally animated works should be classified as theatre. From this perspective, animation lacks the immediate encounter and embodied presence associated with live performance. However, this study aligns with expanded performance theories that recognise mediation, technology, and digital environments as contemporary extensions of performative practice. Rather than dismissing the distinction between live theatre and digital animation, the study argues for understanding animation as an expanded form of digital performance that shares important theatrical qualities while operating through different modes of embodiment and spectatorship.

Some scholars continue to distinguish theatre from mediated forms by emphasising the live encounter, bodily presence, and immediacy that characterise theatrical performance. From this perspective, animation may be classified primarily as a cinematic or audiovisual medium rather than theatre. Nevertheless, contemporary performance scholarship has increasingly expanded the boundaries of performance to include digital, mediated, and technologically produced experiences. This study therefore does not argue that animation replaces conventional theatre; rather, it proposes "digital theatre" as an expanded category of performance in which theatrical principles of embodiment, dramatic action, visual composition, and spectatorship are reorganised through technological mediation. Viewed through this theoretical lens, *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* extend African theatrical traditions into digital environments. Their performances unfold through

character embodiment, vocal performance, music, costume, movement, visual symbolism, spatial design, and ritual enactment, demonstrating that contemporary African performance increasingly operates beyond physical stages. Consequently, this study argues that both productions should be understood as forms of African digital theatre, where indigenous storytelling traditions are preserved and reinterpreted through contemporary animation while engaging audiences in culturally meaningful performances.

African Futurism

African futurism provides the conceptual lens for interpreting the speculative futures imagined in *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder*. While Dery's concept of Afrofuturism foregrounds Black experiences through speculative engagements with history, race, technology, and liberation (179–222), Okorafor distinguishes Africanfuturism by locating Africa itself at the centre of speculative imagination (Okorafor). Rather than privileging diasporic experiences, Africanfuturism is rooted in indigenous epistemologies, African philosophies, cultural traditions, and local histories as the foundations for imagining African futures. While Africanfuturism emerges from the broader intellectual tradition of Afrofuturism, the two concepts are not entirely synonymous. Afrofuturism, as articulated by Mark Dery, primarily addresses the experiences of Black diasporic communities by exploring the relationship between race, technology, alienation, and speculative futures. Africanfuturism, however, shifts the analytical focus toward Africa itself, emphasising indigenous histories, local cosmologies, geographical specificity, and African knowledge systems as foundations for imagining the future. Therefore, this study employs Africanfuturism rather than Afrofuturism as the primary framework because *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* are centred on African cultural realities, particularly Yoruba histories, philosophies, and symbolic systems. Nevertheless, Afrofuturism remains useful as a comparative framework because both approaches challenge dominant narratives of technological exclusion and enable marginalised communities to imagine alternative futures.

It advances forms of speculative storytelling that draw upon mythology, spirituality, folklore, language, and ancestral memory to envision futures shaped from within African realities rather than through Western developmental paradigms. This emphasis on indigenous futurity, as articulated by Okorafor, makes Africanfuturism particularly relevant to the selected case studies. *Iwájú* imagines a technologically advanced Lagos where innovation coexists with Yoruba cultural identity, while *Iyanu* reinterprets Yoruba mythology and spirituality as living resources for envisioning ethical, culturally grounded futures. Together, both productions demonstrate that African modernity can emerge through the creative interaction of technological advancement and indigenous knowledge systems rather than through imitation of Western models.

Cultural Identity Theory

To examine how these narratives shape children's understanding of themselves and their societies, the study draws upon Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory. Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed or inherited essence, but a dynamic process continually produced and reconstructed through systems of representation (222–37). For Hall, media does not merely reflect reality; it actively constructs cultural meanings by shaping how individuals perceive themselves, their histories, and their place within society. Representation therefore becomes a powerful site through which identities are negotiated, affirmed, and transformed. This process of cultural construction is particularly significant in children's media, where visual narratives contribute to the formation of historical consciousness, belonging, and social imagination. Both *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* contribute to this process by foregrounding African languages, folklore, mythology, ethical values, and technological innovation. Their protagonists are represented as innovators, leaders, and custodians of cultural

heritage rather than passive recipients of external intervention. Through these culturally affirming representations, the productions encourage young audiences to view African identity as a source of confidence, creativity, agency, and social responsibility.

Theoretical Synthesis

These theoretical perspectives are complementary. Performance Theory explains how animation functions as performance; African futurism explains what kinds of futures these performances imagine; and Cultural Identity Theory explains how such representations participate in the construction of cultural identity. Their integration enables the study to interpret *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* not simply as animated entertainment but as performative cultural texts through which African identities are enacted, indigenous knowledge is revitalised, and alternative futures are collectively imagined.

Contextual Overview of the Case Studies

The selection of *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* is informed by their significance within the emerging landscape of African digital animation and their shared commitment to reimagining African identities through culturally grounded speculative storytelling. Although differing in narrative style and aesthetic orientation, both productions place African histories, philosophies, languages, and cultural values at the centre of technologically sophisticated animated narratives. Their international visibility further positions them as influential cultural texts through which global audiences encounter alternative representations of Africa beyond long-standing stereotypes. Unlike earlier animated productions in which African cultures often appeared as peripheral settings or exotic backdrops, *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* foreground African experiences as the primary narrative perspective. Both portray African children as protagonists whose journeys are shaped by indigenous knowledge, communal values, ethical responsibility, and innovation. Consequently, they provide valuable case studies for examining how contemporary African animation functions simultaneously as performance, pedagogy, and cultural representation.

Iwájú

Produced through a collaboration between Kugali Media and Walt Disney Animation Studios, *Iwájú* (2024), the series represents one of the most significant collaborations between African animation creators and a major global animation studio, positioning Lagos not as a background setting but as the imaginative centre of a futuristic African narrative. It is set in a futuristic Lagos where advanced technology coexists with Yoruba cultural identity. The story follows Tola Martins, a privileged young girl from Lagos Island, whose friendship with Kole, an inventive boy from the Mainland, exposes the social inequalities that shape the city. Through themes of friendship, innovation, empathy, and social responsibility, the series imagines a future in which technological advancement is closely connected to indigenous culture rather than separated from it. By presenting Lagos as a centre of innovation, *Iwájú* challenges deficit-oriented representations of Africa while offering young audiences culturally affirming visions of African modernity.

Iyanu: Child of Wonder

Adapted from Roye Okupe's graphic novel, *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* (2025) presents a complementary vision of African futurity rooted in Yoruba mythology and cosmology. The narrative follows Iyanu, a young girl who discovers extraordinary spiritual abilities while protecting her community from forces that threaten its harmony. Through its integration of folklore, ritual, oral tradition, music, and indigenous philosophy, the series reimagines Yoruba cultural heritage as a living source of ethical leadership, resilience, and communal responsibility. By placing a young

African girl at the centre of this narrative, *Iyanu* challenges conventional representations of African childhood while affirming indigenous knowledge as a foundation for imagining the future.

Rationale for the Selection of the Case Studies

Although *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* differ in their narrative settings and aesthetic approaches, they share three characteristics that justify their selection. First, both centre African children, making them appropriate for examining animation as a medium of identity construction and cultural education. Second, each integrates indigenous traditions with contemporary digital storytelling, demonstrating that technological innovation can coexist with local knowledge systems. Third, both have achieved international recognition while remaining firmly grounded in African creative perspectives, providing valuable opportunities to examine how contemporary animation contributes to global conversations on representation, performance, and African futures. Together, the productions offer complementary visions of African futurity—one shaped primarily by technological innovation and the other by mythology and indigenous spirituality—making them particularly suitable for this comparative study.

Analysis and Discussion

Performing African Futures through World-Building

One of the defining achievements of *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* lies in the creation of richly imagined worlds that challenge inherited representations of Africa as technologically dependent, culturally static, or historically marginal. Although the two productions differ considerably in aesthetic style and narrative orientation, each constructs an environment in which African societies occupy the centre of imaginative possibility rather than its periphery. Their fictional worlds become performative spaces where competing ideas about progress, tradition, identity, and social responsibility are enacted before audiences. As Pavis argues, theatrical space is never merely a physical location but a semiotic environment through which performance generates cultural meaning (Pavis 395–97). Similarly, the animated worlds of *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* function as performative environments in which African futures are imagined, rehearsed, and symbolically enacted. In *Iwájú*, the city of Lagos is reimagined as a technologically advanced metropolis where artificial intelligence, robotics, autonomous transportation, biometric security systems, and sophisticated digital infrastructure coexist with recognisably Nigerian cultural practices (Iwájú).

From the opening episode, viewers encounter a city divided between the affluent Island and the densely populated Mainland. This geographical separation is communicated not simply through dialogue but through architecture, transportation networks, lighting, costume, and environmental design. Expansive smart homes, elevated transit systems, and sleek technological interfaces distinguish the Island, while the Mainland is portrayed as vibrant but economically constrained, characterised by improvised innovation, crowded neighbourhoods, and informal technological adaptation. These visual contrasts establish class inequality as a central dramatic tension long before it is explicitly articulated by the characters. The relationship between Tola Martins and Kole illustrates how the series transforms spatial division into theatrical conflict. Tola's movement from the protected environment of the Island into Kole's community on the Mainland becomes more than a physical journey; it functions as a performative crossing of social boundaries. In Turner's conception of liminality, such transitional spaces temporarily suspend established social structures, allowing participants to question existing hierarchies and imagine alternative forms of social organisation (Turner 94–102). The friendship that develops between Tola and Kole therefore operates not merely as narrative development but as a dramatic negotiation of empathy, citizenship, and shared humanity. Their movement across social boundaries transforms space itself into an instrument of performance through which audiences rehearse possibilities for social inclusion.

Technology itself functions as an important performative agent within the series. Rather than existing as neutral background machinery, robots, surveillance systems, digital companions, and intelligent devices actively shape the actions, relationships, and moral choices of the characters. The robotic companion Otin, for example, is more than a technological invention; it becomes an emotional catalyst that reveals Tola's curiosity, compassion, and willingness to challenge social expectations. Dixon argues that digital technologies increasingly function as active agents within performance, transforming both the aesthetics and dramaturgy of contemporary theatre rather than serving merely as technical support (Dixon 561–70). Viewed from this perspective, technology in *Iwájú* becomes a performative participant whose presence shapes dramatic action and audience interpretation.

Unlike many Western science-fiction narratives that position technological development in opposition to cultural tradition, *Iwájú* presents innovation as inseparable from local identity. Yoruba names, indigenous architecture, family structures, multilingual dialogue, and recognisable cultural practices remain visible throughout the futuristic cityscape. This integration reflects Okorafor's definition of Africanfuturism as a mode of speculative imagination rooted in African histories, philosophies, and lived realities rather than external developmental models (Okorafor). It also resonates with Barber's observation that contemporary African cultural production frequently adapts indigenous traditions rather than abandoning them in response to modernity (Barber). The future imagined by *Iwájú* therefore emerges not through the rejection of culture but through its continual renewal. While *Iwájú* projects Africa into a technologically advanced urban future, *Iyanu* constructs its speculative world through mythology, spirituality, and indigenous cosmology. Set within the kingdom of Yorubaland, the series draws extensively upon Yoruba oral traditions, sacred landscapes, ritual practices, and ancestral wisdom to imagine a society in which supernatural power and communal responsibility are closely intertwined. The forests, shrines, sacred objects, and mythical creatures that populate the narrative are not decorative fantasy elements; they function as performative symbols through which cultural memory is continually activated. Finnegan observes that oral traditions remain dynamic systems of cultural knowledge continually renewed through performance rather than static records of the past (Finnegan 25–37). *Iyanu* extends this performative tradition into digital animation by transforming mythology into an active dramatic language for contemporary audiences.

The opening episodes immediately establish this relationship between mythology and identity. *Iyanu*'s unexplained spiritual abilities initially position her as an outsider, yet her gradual acceptance of these powers reflects a broader process of cultural self-discovery. Rather than depicting indigenous spirituality as incompatible with modern storytelling, the series presents it as a living system of knowledge capable of guiding ethical leadership and communal renewal. Every encounter with ancestral forces becomes both dramatic action and cultural performance, reinforcing the continuing relevance of Yoruba cosmology within contemporary African imagination. Equally significant is the way space itself becomes theatrical. Sacred groves, ancient temples, royal compounds, and ceremonial gatherings are carefully choreographed to evoke the rhythms of traditional performance. Costume, music, dance, ritual gesture, and oral narration interact to produce environments that resemble theatrical stages upon which questions of power, responsibility, sacrifice, and justice are continually negotiated. Fischer-Lichte argues that performance generates meaning through the dynamic interaction between performers, spectators, and performative environments (Fischer-Lichte 38–42). Likewise, Jeyifo notes that African performance traditions derive much of their expressive force from the interaction of ritual, communal space, symbolism, and audience participation (Jeyifo). *Iyanu* exemplifies these

principles by transforming its physical settings into active participants in the dramatic experience rather than passive narrative backgrounds.

Despite their contrasting aesthetic strategies, *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* converge in their rejection of deficit-oriented representations of Africa. One imagines the future through technological innovation, while the other draws upon mythology and indigenous spirituality. Yet both insist that African futures must be understood on their own cultural terms. Their speculative worlds challenge assumptions that progress necessarily requires cultural assimilation or the abandonment of indigenous knowledge. Instead, they demonstrate that technological advancement and cultural continuity are not opposing forces but complementary dimensions of African modernity, consistent with Eshun's argument that speculative narratives enable historically marginalised societies to reclaim agency by imagining themselves within alternative futures (Eshun 293–300). From the perspective of Theatre and Performance Studies, these imagined worlds function as more than fictional settings; they constitute performative environments in which audiences rehearse alternative ways of understanding Africa's past, present, and future. World-building becomes an act of cultural performance, inviting viewers not simply to observe speculative societies but to participate imaginatively in their values, conflicts, and aspirations. Through these theatrical environments, *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* reposition Africa from the margins of speculative fiction to its creative centre, offering visions of the future grounded in innovation, historical memory, and cultural confidence.

Performing Cultural Identity through Characterization

The imaginative worlds of *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* acquire their full significance through the characters who inhabit them. While the visual landscapes establish the cultural and ideological contexts of each narrative, it is through characterization that these contexts are embodied, contested, and transformed. The principal characters do not merely advance the plot; they function as performative embodiments of competing ideas about identity, leadership, community, technology, and cultural continuity. Their actions, relationships, and moral choices constitute theatrical enactments through which audiences encounter alternative ways of imagining African futures. As Carlson argues, theatrical characters should be understood not simply as fictional personalities but as symbolic performers who embody broader social and cultural meanings (Carlson 41–48). Viewed in this way, the characters in *Iwájú* and *Iyanu* perform identities that invite audiences to reflect upon the evolving relationship between African tradition, modernity, and social transformation.

In *Iwájú*, the relationship between Tola Martins and Kole serves as the emotional and ideological centre of the narrative. Their friendship bridges the stark socioeconomic divide between Lagos Island and the Mainland, transforming what initially appears to be a geographical distinction into a broader commentary on inequality, privilege, and social responsibility. Tola is introduced as the daughter of a wealthy technology entrepreneur whose daily life is shaped by comfort, advanced digital systems, and constant protection. Her world is carefully regulated by surveillance technologies and parental authority, reflecting both the opportunities and the constraints associated with privilege. Kole, by contrast, navigates the resourcefulness of the Mainland, where creativity and resilience often compensate for limited access to technological resources. His experiences foreground a different form of intelligence; one rooted in adaptability, communal relationships, and practical innovation.

Their first encounters are characterised by hesitation and mutual curiosity, but as the narrative progresses, these differences become the basis for empathy rather than division. The series deliberately avoids reducing either character to a social stereotype. Instead, their evolving friendship demonstrates that meaningful social transformation begins when individuals move

beyond inherited assumptions about class and belonging. Schechner's concept of restored behaviour is particularly useful here, as both characters gradually adopt new patterns of interaction that challenge the behavioural expectations imposed by their respective social environments (Schechner 35–36). Through repeated acts of trust, cooperation, and mutual sacrifice, Tola and Kole perform alternative models of citizenship founded upon solidarity rather than social separation. In Boal's terms, performance becomes a rehearsal for social transformation by allowing audiences to imagine more equitable human relationships through dramatic action (Boal 141–43).

The development of Tola's character is especially significant because it illustrates a gradual shift from passive dependence to ethical agency. Initially insulated from the realities of the Mainland, she becomes increasingly willing to question the structures of privilege that shape her existence. Her decisions are not driven by personal ambition but by a growing recognition of social responsibility. This transformation reflects Hall's argument that identity is continuously produced through lived experience and representation rather than inherited as a fixed cultural essence (Hall 222–37). Tola's evolving worldview demonstrates that identity remains fluid, emerging through encounters with different communities, values, and experiences. Her character therefore illustrates Hall's broader proposition that identity is always a process of becoming rather than simply a state of being (Hall 225–30).

Kole's character offers a complementary perspective. Although materially disadvantaged, he is never portrayed as helpless or dependent. Instead, the series presents him as intellectually capable, inventive, and morally grounded. His familiarity with local technologies, neighbourhood networks, and everyday survival reflects an alternative form of knowledge that challenges conventional assumptions about expertise and innovation. By positioning Kole as both collaborator and problem-solver rather than as an object of sympathy, *Iwájú* resists narratives that associate African urban poverty solely with deprivation. Instead, it emphasises resilience, creativity, and communal resourcefulness as defining characteristics of contemporary African urban life. African cultural narratives frequently negotiate modernity through adaptation rather than complete rejection of indigenous traditions. Another important dimension of characterization is the role of Otin, the robotic companion whose presence extends beyond technological novelty. Otin functions as a dramatic mediator, facilitating relationships between characters while simultaneously raising questions concerning emotional attachment, artificial intelligence, and ethical responsibility. Rather than existing merely as an advanced machine, Otin becomes a symbolic participant in the narrative, demonstrating that technology itself acquires meaning through human relationships. Dixon observes that digital technologies increasingly assume performative functions within contemporary performance by participating directly in dramatic interaction rather than merely supporting it (Dixon 561–70). Otin therefore performs alongside the human characters, shaping narrative development, audience empathy, and ethical reflection.

Where *Iwájú* explores identity through social diversity and technological modernity, *Iyanu* locates identity within mythology, ancestry, and spiritual responsibility. As the central protagonist, Iyanu's journey reflects the classic structure of the heroic quest, yet the narrative deliberately reshapes this tradition through an African philosophical framework. Her extraordinary abilities are not presented simply as individual gifts but as sacred responsibilities entrusted to her for the benefit of the wider community. Leadership, therefore, is defined less by personal achievement than by service, accountability, and collective well-being. Throughout the series, Iyanu repeatedly confronts situations in which compassion, wisdom, and restraint prove more valuable than physical strength alone. Her encounters with spiritual forces, elders, and members of her community reinforce the idea that authority must remain accountable to ethical principles. This portrayal differs significantly

from many contemporary superhero narratives that celebrate individual exceptionalism. Instead, the series foregrounds a relational understanding of leadership that resonates with African communal philosophies and indigenous systems of governance. Turner observes that ritual performance frequently reaffirms collective values while guiding participants through periods of transformation (Turner 44–52). Likewise, Obafemi argues that African performance traditions consistently construct heroism through communal obligation rather than individual dominance (Obafemi). Iyanu's spiritual journey therefore functions as a performative process through which both the protagonist and the audience negotiate questions of identity, responsibility, and communal renewal.

The supporting characters further enrich this process. Biyi and Teye contribute perspectives that balance courage with humour, scepticism with loyalty, and youthful enthusiasm with moral reflection. Their interactions with Iyanu prevent the narrative from reducing heroism to individual accomplishment. Instead, success consistently emerges through cooperation, dialogue, and shared responsibility. This ensemble dynamic reflects Mbiti's well-known observation that African philosophical traditions emphasise personhood as fundamentally relational, where the individual exists through the community rather than apart from it (Mbiti 106–08). The collective nature of heroism in *Iyanu* therefore reinforces indigenous understandings of leadership grounded in mutual responsibility. Characterization in both productions also challenges long-standing representational patterns in global children's media.

African children are not portrayed as passive recipients of external assistance or as peripheral observers of technological change. They occupy the centre of the narrative as innovators, decision-makers, protectors, and custodians of cultural knowledge. Their agency is expressed through curiosity, critical thinking, resilience, and ethical judgement rather than through stereotypes of victimhood or dependency. Such representations contribute to what Hall describes as the continuous reconstruction of cultural identity through representation, enabling young audiences to encounter images that affirm rather than diminish their sense of self (Hall 222–37). From the perspective of Theatre and Performance Studies, these characters should be understood not merely as fictional individuals but as theatrical embodiments of broader cultural ideas. Their voices, gestures, emotional conflicts, relationships, and symbolic actions generate dramatic meaning in much the same way as performers within live theatre. Although their bodies are digitally animated, they continue to function as expressive agents whose performances invite audiences to reflect upon justice, belonging, innovation, leadership, and cultural continuity. As Fischer-Lichte argues, embodiment remains central to performance because meaning emerges through expressive action rather than physical co-presence alone (Fischer-Lichte 80–87). In both *Iwájú* and *Iyanu*, characterization becomes a site where African identities are not simply represented but actively enacted, negotiated, and reimagined for contemporary audiences.

African Animation as Digital Theatre

The preceding analysis demonstrates that *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* are more than animated television series; they represent significant developments in the evolution of African theatrical expression. While produced within digital environments, both works employ the fundamental elements of theatre—dramatic conflict, characterization, embodiment, spectacle, music, costume, movement, symbolism, and audience engagement—to create immersive performative experiences (Schechner 28–30; Carlson 15–18). Their significance, therefore, lies not only in their technological sophistication but also in their ability to extend African performance traditions into contemporary digital spaces. Viewed from this perspective, animation becomes a legitimate site of theatrical practice rather than a medium that exists outside the scope of Theatre and Performance Studies (Dixon 1–12).

Indeed, theatre has long been understood as a collaborative art form in which meaning emerges through the interaction of performers, space, narrative, visual design, sound, and audience interpretation (Carlson 3–18). Although digital animation does not involve actors performing before a physically present audience, it nevertheless retains these fundamental characteristics through mediated forms of embodiment. Voice actors, animators, composers, designers, and directors collectively create dramatic performances that invite emotional participation and critical reflection. As Auslander argues, mediation does not negate theatrical experience but transforms the conditions under which it is produced and received (Auslander 52–67). The absence of a conventional stage, therefore, does not diminish the theatrical qualities of *Iwájú* or *Iyanu*; rather, it demonstrates how performance continues to evolve alongside technological innovation.

This evolution is particularly evident in the construction of animated bodies. Characters such as Tola, Kole, Iyanu, Biyi, and Toye communicate through carefully choreographed movement, expressive facial animation, vocal performance, and symbolic gesture. Their identities are realised through rhythm, posture, silence, physical interaction, and emotional expression in ways that closely resemble the work of live performers. Rather than merely illustrating dialogue, these embodied performances generate dramatic meaning by revealing internal conflict, interpersonal relationships, and moral transformation. Fischer-Lichte observes that theatrical meaning emerges through the dynamic interaction between embodiment and spectatorship, even when performance takes forms that depart from conventional stage practice (Fischer-Lichte 38–42). Digital animation exemplifies this principle by demonstrating that expressive embodiment can be achieved through technologically mediated performance without sacrificing emotional authenticity.

Contribution, Limitations, and Future Research

Contribution of the Study

This study makes four significant contributions to scholarship. First, it extends Performance Theory by demonstrating that African digital animation constitutes a legitimate form of theatrical performance, thereby broadening contemporary understandings of theatre beyond conventional stage-centred practices toward digitally mediated performance (Schechner 28–30; Auslander 52–67; Dixon 9–18).

Second, it contributes to African Theatre and Performance Studies by establishing digital animation as an emerging space where indigenous performance traditions are preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted through contemporary technologies, thereby expanding existing discussions of African performance beyond live theatrical practice (Jeyifo 21–39; Obafemi 41–58).

Third, the study advances scholarship on Africanfuturism and cultural representation by demonstrating that *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* construct distinct yet complementary visions of African futures in which technological innovation and indigenous knowledge coexist rather than compete. In doing so, it builds upon the works of Okorafor, Eshun, and Womack by showing how African children's animation provides a previously underexplored site for the performance of speculative African identities (Okorafor; Eshun 287–302; Womack 9–18). Finally, the study contributes to Development Communication by demonstrating that culturally grounded animated narratives promote ethical reflection, identity construction, and civic imagination through dramatic storytelling rather than direct persuasion alone. This expands prevailing understandings of development communication by highlighting digital performance and animation as important cultural resources for social learning, cultural preservation, and participatory development (Melkote and Steeves 215–33; Servaes 17–31).

Collectively, these contributions provide a multidisciplinary framework for understanding African digital animation as a cultural practice situated at the intersection of theatre, performance, media, education, development communication, and cultural identity.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study demonstrates the significance of African digital animation as a form of theatrical performance, cultural pedagogy, and identity construction, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on only two selected productions, *Iwájú* (2024) and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* (2025). While these case studies provide valuable insights into contemporary African animation, they do not represent the full diversity of African animated practices across different regions and cultural contexts. Second, the study is limited to qualitative textual and performance analysis of the selected works. It does not examine audience reception, production processes, or the experiences of animators, creators, and young viewers who engage with these narratives. Consequently, the findings primarily address how meaning is constructed within the animated texts rather than how audiences interpret or respond to them. Additionally, because the study examines the textual and performative qualities of the selected animations, it does not measure the actual educational impact of these productions on children's cultural identity formation, values, or understanding of African history. While the analysis demonstrates the pedagogical potential of *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder*, further empirical research involving young audiences, educators, parents, and content creators would be necessary to evaluate their practical influence within different social and cultural contexts.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may extend this study through audience-based investigations, interviews with animation practitioners, comparative studies of additional African animated productions, and research into the educational application of African digital animation within different cultural environments.

Conclusion

The emergence of African digital animation represents a significant development in contemporary Theatre and Performance Studies, demonstrating that performance has expanded beyond conventional theatrical spaces into technologically mediated environments where culture, identity, and social imagination are continually negotiated (Schechner 28–30; Dixon 9–18). By examining *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder*, this study argues that African animation functions not only as children's entertainment but also as a performative medium through which indigenous knowledge, cultural values, historical memory, and speculative futures are enacted for both local and global audiences. Guided primarily by Performance Theory, Africanfuturism, and Cultural Identity Theory, with Afrofuturism serving as a comparative framework, the study demonstrates that both productions employ world-building, characterization, visual aesthetics, oral traditions, mythology, and symbolic performance to construct culturally grounded visions of African futures. While *Iwájú* imagines technologically advanced urban societies shaped by innovation, inclusion, and social responsibility, *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* reclaims mythology and indigenous spirituality as significant foundations for imagining future African communities.

Together, these productions affirm Okorafor's definition of Africanfuturism, which argues that African futures emerge from indigenous histories, philosophies, and cultural experiences rather than through the imitation of external developmental models (Okorafor). The study further establishes that animation constitutes an important extension of African performance traditions.

Although created within digital environments, *Iwájú* and *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* retain essential performative qualities through voice acting, movement, music, costume, symbolism, narrative conflict, and audience engagement. In doing so, they adapt storytelling, ritual, oral performance, and communal ethics into contemporary digital media while preserving their educational and cultural significance. This finding broadens the scope of Theatre and Performance Studies by demonstrating that African digital animation deserves scholarly recognition as an evolving form of theatrical practice (Auslander 52–67; Fischer-Lichte 38–42).

Beyond their artistic value, both animations function as important pedagogical resources. By presenting African children as innovators, leaders, problem-solvers, and custodians of cultural heritage, they encourage ethical reflection, creativity, and social responsibility. Their narratives challenge deficit-oriented representations of Africa and instead present culturally affirming futures in which African societies occupy central positions within global technological and intellectual landscapes. In this respect, the study reinforces Hall's argument that cultural identity is continually produced through representation and that media plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals and communities imagine themselves (Hall 222–37). The significance of this study therefore extends beyond the analysis of two animated productions. It contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations on digital performance, African cultural production, children's media, Africanfuturism, and Development Communication by demonstrating how culturally grounded animation contributes to broader discussions on performance, representation, identity formation, and African futurity. By positioning African animation within Theatre and Performance Studies, the study invites scholars to reconsider the boundaries of performance and recognise digital storytelling as an important site through which African identities and futures are continuously performed, negotiated, and reconstructed.

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