

Applied Theatre and Decolonial Transformation: The Igbo Oloyin Community Project in Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract

Applied theatre in African communities is often framed as a tool for development, however less attention has been paid to how it can function as a decolonial practice that centres Indigenous knowledge systems over externally imposed solutions. This paper investigates how participatory, community-led theatre fosters social transformation when explicitly grounded in decolonial thinking. Using the Igbo Oloyin Community Project (Ibadan, Nigeria, 2020) as a qualitative case study, the research draws on critical discourse analysis and post-performance evaluation data. The project engaged residents in co-creating performances addressing substance abuse and promoting education, blending Yoruba oral traditions with contemporary theatrical techniques. The findings indicate that community-driven applied theatre can redistribute epistemic authority, enabling participants to become co-constructors of meaning rather than passive recipients. However, financial constraints, political resistance, and limited digital infrastructure persistently limit scalability. The paper concludes by proposing decolonial funding models, digital integration strategies, and South–South collaborations to strengthen the role of applied theatre in sustainable social transformation across Africa.

Keywords: Applied theatre, decolonial theory, Indigenous knowledge systems, social transformation, Nigeria, community engagement

Introduction

Applied theatre has gained international recognition as a participatory practice that addresses social issues through community engagement, education, and collective action (Prentki & Preston, 2009;

Prendergast & Saxton, 2009). Unlike conventional theatre which prioritises aesthetic spectacle, applied theatre emphasises social impact, positioning participants as co-creators of performance and meaning. In African contexts, where communities face intersecting challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, inequality, and cultural erosion, applied theatre offers a pathway to empowerment that resonates with pre-colonial oral traditions of storytelling, ritual, and communal problem-solving (Mda, 1993; Dugga, 2024).

While much of the existing scholarship examines applied theatre as a development intervention — a tool delivered by external experts to achieve predefined outcomes — this paper adopts a different stance. Drawing on decolonial theory (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu, 2019; Quijano, 2000), we argue that applied theatre can function as an epistemic intervention: a practice that challenges colonial legacies in development by centring Indigenous knowledge systems, redistributing creative and decision-making power, and refuting the assumption that expertise resides only in the Global North.

To explore this proposition, we examine the Igbo Oloyin Community Project (2020), an applied theatre initiative led by practitioner Kofoworola Owokotomo in Ibadan, Nigeria. The project used participatory theatre to address drug abuse and low educational engagement among youth. We ask the following questions:

- (1) How does the project's participatory methodology enact or fail to enact decolonial principles?
- (2) What evidence of social transformation emerges from post-performance evaluations?
- (3) What structural challenges constrain the scalability of such initiatives?

This study contributes to a growing body of decolonial applied theatre scholarship by moving beyond case study description to explicit theoretical framing, and offering actionable recommendations for policy, funding, and digital infrastructure.

Applied Theatre, Decoloniality, and African Epistemologies

Applied theatre in Africa is deeply rooted in traditional performance arts, which have historically served as vehicles for knowledge transmission, conflict resolution, and communal healing. Ajai-Lycett

et al. (2025) examine the Alárinjò tradition—a pre-colonial Yoruba travelling theatre form—highlighting concepts of invisibility, disguise, and spirituality that continue to influence contemporary practice. Similarly, Animbon (2024) demonstrates how therapeutic theatre interventions in Cameroon draw on Indigenous healing practices alongside Western models, arguing that “the boundary separating these genres is narrow compared to their similarities” (p. 45).

One well-documented initiative is DramAidE (Drama in AIDS Education) in South Africa, which employed community-based performance to destigmatise HIV/AIDS at the height of the epidemic (Durden & Tomaselli, 2012). Crucially, performances were created and performed by affected community members, making the work highly participatory and locally relevant. More recently, Adeyemi (2025) shows how “follow-up” in Theatre for Development (TfD) can sustain peace in communities experiencing intra-ethnic conflict in Ogun State, Nigeria.

Despite these successes, most studies focus on outcomes, such as awareness and behavioural change, without interrogating the epistemological conditions that enable or constrain transformation. Exceptions include Barnes and Coetzee (2014), who examine participatory theatre for post-conflict reconciliation, and Durden (2018), who analyses how South African applied theatre creates safe spaces for processing collective trauma. However, a systematic decolonial framing remains absent from much of the literature.

Decolonial Theory and the Critique of Development

Decolonial theory, emerging from Latin American and African scholarship (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu, 2019), challenges the “coloniality of power”—the persistence of colonial hierarchies in knowledge, gender, and economy long after political independence. Applied to development practice, decolonial thinking critiques the assumption that expertise flows from the Global North to the Global South, and that “development” is defined by externally imposed metrics (Kothari, 2001).

From this vantage point, applied theatre is not merely a culturally sensitive way to deliver health or education messages. It is a site where epistemic violence—the systematic devaluation of non-Western ways of knowing—can be resisted. When a community uses Yoruba storytelling forms to address drug abuse, they are not simply translating Western public health messaging into a local idiom. They are asserting that Indigenous forms constitute legitimate knowledge production in their own right.

This study adopts this decolonial lens, examining whether and how the Igbo Oloyin project redistributes epistemic authority, centres community-generated narratives, and challenges the extractive logic of many development interventions.

Symbolic Interactionism as Complementary Framework

To analyse the micro-processes of meaning-making within the project, we draw on symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1986). This framework holds that the self develops through social interaction, that meanings arise from shared definitions of situations, and that role-taking (imagining oneself in another's position) is central to moral and social development.

Applied theatre, particularly exercises adapted from Boal's (2002) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, explicitly trains participants in role-taking. A community member playing a drug dealer, a teacher, or a recovering addict must interpret that character's motivations—a process that transforms abstract social issues into embodied, empathetic understanding. Furthermore, when a group arrives at a shared definition of a problem (e.g., "drug abuse is a health issue, not merely a moral failing"), coordinated collective action becomes possible.

Symbolic interactionism thus provides the theoretical vocabulary to explain how performance translates into social transformation at the level of face-to-face interaction—a mechanism often asserted but rarely theorised in applied theatre research.

This study employs a qualitative, single-case-study design (Yin, 2018) situated within a decolonial and postcolonial theoretical paradigm. The research is not designed to produce generalisable findings but to provide thick description (Geertz, 1973) of how decolonial principles operate (or fail to operate) in a community-led applied theatre project.

Case Selection: The Igbo Oloyin Community Project

The Igbo Oloyin project was selected because it explicitly engaged Indigenous performance traditions (storytelling, song, proverbs, and ritual forms) alongside contemporary methodologies, and because it addressed pressing social issues (substance abuse and educational disengagement) through participatory, community-centred processes. The project was led by Kofoworola Owokotomo, a Nigerian theatre practitioner and researcher, and implemented in collaboration with students from the University of Ibadan.

The project followed a modified seven-stage Theatre for Development (TfD) process adapted from Ross Kidd's popular theatre tradition: (1) relationship building, (2) situational study, (3) learning Indigenous cultural forms, (4) dramatic exploration, (5) performance organisation, (6) performance delivery, and (7) evaluation.

Facilitator Positionality and the Labour of Building Trust

A decolonial methodology requires candid reflection on the researcher's positionality, particularly when entering a community as an outsider. The project facilitator, Owokotomo, was a 19-year-old university student at the time, entering Igbo Oloyin as a stranger who required an interpreter to communicate in Yoruba. As she later reflected, trust was not established through a single breakthrough moment but through a gradual, relational process:

I honestly would not say that trust was fully built, because that might be an overstretch. However, I would say that over time, the community members gradually let their guards down as I began to familiarise myself with them beyond the role of a researcher. This happened through simple everyday interactions like having casual conversations about life, playing with the children in the community, and spending time talking and gisting with the women. I also made a conscious effort to clearly introduce myself, explain my intentions, and communicate the goals of the project in an open and transparent way. It was important for me to emphasise that I was not affiliated with any governmental organisation, but rather that I was there as a student researcher from the University of Ibadan who hoped to work collaboratively with the community through an applied theatre process. [Interview data, 2026]

This account foregrounds several decolonial principles in practice: the rejection of institutional authority (distancing herself from government), the prioritisation of informal, non-extractive forms of engagement (playing with children and conversing with women), and the recognition that trust is a process, not a credential one arrives with. The language barrier and outsider status were not obstacles to be overcome quickly, but conditions that necessitated a slower, more ethically attentive mode of engagement. This methodological patience—three weeks of relationship-building before any formal data collection—would rarely be feasible within conventional research timelines, yet it proved foundational to the project’s legitimacy within the community.

The Limitation of the “Outside-In” Approach

A further methodological consideration concerns the mobility or “outside-in” structure of the project. Because Owokotomo did not reside in the community, participation was constrained by time and logistics. Reflecting on this, she observed:

Looking back, I think one of the major limitations of the outside-in or mobility approach was that it restricted the level of deeper participation and ownership the community members could have within the creative process itself. Due to time and logistical constraints, we primarily collected their stories and experiences and then transformed those narratives into a community performance. However, the community members themselves were not fully integrated as performers or co-creators on stage. (Interview data, 2026).

She further noted that “because I did not live within the community, there were layers of everyday social dynamics, relationships, and unspoken tensions that I may not have fully accessed or understood.” This limitation is both logistical and epistemological. The stories collected were authentic, their translation into performance remained partially in the hands of the external facilitator and student volunteers. In an ideal restructuring of the first phase, Owokotomo recommended “a longer community immersion process before performance-making begins” and the incorporation of “participatory devising methods where community members could contribute not only stories, but also performance ideas, movement, music, language, and staging choices” (Interview data, 2026). This reflexivity is integrated into the study’s limitations and informs the recommendations for future practice.

Data Collection

Data sources included:

1. Post-performance evaluation transcripts: semi-structured group discussions with 15 community members (students, parents, teachers, and practitioners) immediately following the performance.

2. Performance texts and documentation: scripts of Ijanba Oogun Olooro (Dangers of Drug Abuse) and video recordings of the performance.
3. Facilitator reflections: Written notes from Owokotomo and student participants, supplemented in 2026 by a reflexive, semi-structured interview with the lead facilitator (Owokotomo, 2026) conducted by the first author. This interview, approved under the original project's ethical clearance for ongoing reflective documentation, provides the retrospective practitioner perspective that grounds the methodological and structural analysis in this article.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided by decolonial concepts (epistemic authority, centring of Indigenous knowledge, and the rejection of extractive models) and symbolic interactionist concepts (shared definitions of the situation, role-taking, collective meaning-making). The analysis was conducted collaboratively between both authors, with disagreements resolved through discussion.

Findings

Overview of the Seven-Stage Process

Ross Kidd identified a distinct historical evolution of Theatre for Development (TfD) in Africa, with each decade characterized by different methodological approaches. In the 1950s, TfD functioned primarily as a propaganda tool for colonial government development policies. During this period, development workers created theatre to disseminate messages about immunisation, sanitation, and cash crop production—essentially using performance as a one-way communication channel for colonial agendas. The 1960s saw a shift toward travelling theatre groups. University student troupes took performances to rural villages and urban squatter areas as part of a "cultural democratization"

movement, making theatre accessible to the masses. However, these were still largely ready-made performances brought to communities rather than created with them. The most significant transformation occurred in the 1970s, when TfD adopted a more participatory model. Rather than touring pre-scripted performances, development workers and theatre practitioners first researched villagers' issues and concerns before creating dramas, and organized post-performance discussions to facilitate community reflection and mobilization (Kidd, 1984).

Owokotomo's approach underscores the potential of applied theatre as a transformative tool for community development, particularly in addressing issues of gender and social equity. This reflective case study details the application of theatre for development (TfD) as a participatory intervention in two Nigerian communities—Igbo Oloyin and Abadina. Unlike conventional theatre oriented toward entertainment, TfD seeks to mobilise community members to critically engage with and act upon locally identified issues. The author, a theatre director and researcher, collaborated with students from the University of Ibadan to implement a modified seven-stage TfD process, with each stage involving distinct activities and challenges.

The seven-step process represents a practical field adaptation of the popular theatre tradition that Ross Kidd helped pioneer and document in Botswana (Kidd & Byram, 1979). While Kidd's approach emphasized popular theatre as a research methodology rooted in Freirean conscientisation, the seven-step process frames applied theatre as a community development intervention with a structured sequence. Both approaches share core values: participation, collective expression, use of indigenous forms, and post-performance dialogue as a site of learning and action. The Igbo Oloyin project demonstrates these principles in practice through relationship building, participatory problem identification, culturally-grounded performance creation (including the plays *Ijanba Oogun Olooro* [Dangers of Drug Abuse] and *Unity in Diversity*), and interactive evaluation following each performance.

The Igbo Oloyin project unfolded over ten weeks and involved seven stages:

- Stage 1 (relationship building) involved a formal courtesy visit to the Baale (chief) and three weeks of informal visits, sharing meals, and listening to community concerns.
- Stage 2 (situational study) identified two priority issues: drug abuse among young boys and low primary school attendance.
- Stage 3 documented local Yoruba songs, proverbs, and drum patterns.
- Stage 4 involved improvisation workshops with community members, resulting in the play *Ijanba Oogun Olooro*.
- Stage 5 (performance organization) scheduled the performance during school lunchtime to maximise child attendance.
- Stage 6 (delivery) incorporated a freeze-frame technique where a nurse character paused the action to discuss drug dangers directly with the audience.
- Stage 7 (evaluation) is analysed below.

Post-Performance Evaluation: Evidence of Decolonial Practice

The evaluation session invited audience members to share what they had learned. Several themes emerged that align with decolonial principles.

Theme 1: Centring community voice as epistemic authority. The researcher did not frame herself as the expert responsible for interpreting community responses. Instead, the headmistress (Mrs. Ajayi), a trader (Mrs. Adebo), a teacher (Mr. Adigun), and five students were positioned as legitimate interpreters of the performance's value. Mrs. Ajayi stated: "This play has taught our students to avoid drugs and face their studies. We are grateful." A student added: "I learned that bad friends can destroy your future." These are not supplementary data to be validated by the researcher but constitute the primary findings.

Theme 2: Indigenous knowledge as pedagogical resource. The lessons articulated by students—prioritising studies, avoiding peer pressure, maintaining concentration—emerged from the

performance's use of Yoruba folk songs and proverbs, rather than externally imposed curricula. One cast member taught a song encouraging children to resist peer pressure, which was subsequently sung by audience members. This exemplifies knowledge co-creation rather than top-down transmission.

Theme 3: Rejecting extractive research models. Community members did not simply receive messages; they contributed their own expertise. Mrs. Adebo advised parents to “constantly monitor their children against illicit behaviours.” Mrs. Soetan added that “parents must model good behaviour, as children imitate parental conduct.” The evaluation session functioned as a reciprocal exchange, not an extractive interview.

Theme 4: Challenging development hierarchies. Mr. Adigun, a local teacher, observed that “education has really been helpful in combating this issue” of global drug misuse. A local teacher—not an external development expert—was positioned as a knowledgeable commentator. This subtle inversion challenges the colonial assumption that expertise flows from the Global North to the Global South.

The Children's Responses: Depth Beyond Expectation

What stayed with the facilitator most profoundly was the response from the pupils at Saint John Anglican School during the post-performance discussion. The interactive devices—the freeze-frame and the omnipresent narrator—proved remarkably effective in eliciting not passive reception but active, critical engagement. Owokotomo recalled:

After the short drama skit, the children came forward with such enthusiasm that it was difficult to limit participation due to time constraints, and five students were eventually selected to share their reflections. Taiwo Oyeyemi, a Primary Four student, explained that he learned the importance of focusing on his studies at all times. Adesola Kamaru from Primary Five added that the performance made him understand the dangers of drug abuse and reinforced the need for students to prioritize their education. Ajayi Mary, also in Primary Four, shared that she learned to avoid bad friends and negative

influences. Similarly, Amosun Peter and Stephen Damilola both emphasized that the skit taught them the importance of concentration in class, regular reading, and striving toward becoming successful individuals in the future. What stayed with me was not only the content of their responses, but the consistency and intensity with which they echoed similar themes: education, discipline, peer influence, and future aspiration—suggesting how deeply the performance resonated within their everyday realities.

(Interview data, 2026)

This moment is significant from both a decolonial and a symbolic interactionist perspective. The children were not passively receiving a moral message delivered by adults; they were actively interpreting the performance through the lens of their own lived experience and articulating those interpretations publicly. The sheer enthusiasm to speak—to the point where participation had to be limited—indicates that the theatrical frame had temporarily suspended the age-based hierarchies that normally position children as silent recipients of adult knowledge. The consistency of their responses (education, discipline, peer influence and aspiration) further suggests the emergence of a shared definition of the situation: these young participants were co-constructing a collective understanding of the issues at stake, not merely reciting what they believed adults wanted to hear.

Symbolic Interactionist Analysis

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the evaluation session itself functioned as a site of collective meaning-making. When the headmistress publicly encouraged students to “face their studies,” she was not merely expressing an opinion but reinforcing a norm that the group could now reference and internalise. The convergence of responses across students, parents, teachers, and practitioners indicates the emergence of a shared definition of the situation: drug abuse was collectively framed as a danger, education as a solution, parental responsibility as essential, and theatre

as a legitimate tool for change. This consensus was co-constructed through the interactive processes of performance and post-performance dialogue.

Moreover, the practitioners' reflections—expressing “joy in adding value” and gratitude for “knowledge that will remain with me forever”—illustrate that *the reflexive self* is central to symbolic interactionism. Their identities as theatre practitioners were transformed through interaction with community members. They no longer saw themselves solely as entertainers but as agents of community development.

This transformation was not, however, sustained for all participants. The economic realities of the Nigerian theatre sector meant that the project's impact on the student volunteers' professional trajectories was constrained by structural forces beyond the project itself:

Sadly, the economic realities of theatre practice in Nigeria have made it difficult for many of the student volunteers to remain fully within the field, regardless of their passion or initial involvement. The theatre economy is quite unstable, and like many young artists, they have had to prioritize survival and more financially sustainable career paths. From what I know, Ogundipe Priscilla has moved into the field of communication... As for Taiwo Adepeju, I am not certain what direction her career has taken since the project. However, I know some of the volunteers... are still theatre artists and filmmakers, although they are struggling to make ends meet and are only doing it for the passion. [Interview data, 2026]

This postscript complicates any triumphalist narrative of transformation. While the experience was deeply meaningful, the structural conditions of the Nigerian arts economy—unstable, unsupported, financially precarious—meant that the project could not, on its own, create sustainable career pathways

for the practitioners it had trained. This reflects, as the facilitator noted, “one of the limitations of applied theatre work in contexts where structural economic support for the arts is weak” [Interview data, 2026].

Persistent Structural and Personal Challenges

Despite these successes, several structural constraints limit the project’s scalability:

- 1. Financial precarity and institutional absence.** The project costs were entirely funded by the facilitator’s family with no external funding secured. Reflecting on the emotional and professional weight of this arrangement, Owokotomo stated, ‘At that moment, the experience was honestly very difficult both emotionally and financially. I was only 19 years old and still a university student, relying largely on stipends and support from my parents. Trying to facilitate a community-based applied theatre project with significant social goals while also navigating the realities of limited funding was extremely draining. There were moments of exhaustion, uncertainty, and pressure because the responsibility of sustaining the project often felt like it rested entirely on me.’ (Interview data, 2026).

This testimony foregrounds an ethical issue rarely addressed in applied theatre scholarship: the cost to the facilitator. The labour of community-engaged practice is not only creative and logistical but deeply emotional. When that labour is borne by a young practitioner without institutional support, the risk of burnout and exploitation is high. After studying applied theatre and drama therapy in the United States, Owokotomo reflected critically on this experience, ‘I realized that many of the responsibilities I carried alone as a young student should not have rested solely on one person. Community-based theatre projects require emotional labor, logistical planning, transportation, material resources, relationship-building, facilitation skills, and long-term engagement. Looking back, I now understand

that the department and institution should have provided stronger structural and financial support because community-engaged work is a significant commitment, not just academically, but ethically and emotionally as well.’ (Interview data, 2026).

- 2. Political and policy vacuum.** No government policy framework currently supports applied theatre as legitimate development practice. Owokotomo articulated a vision for what a genuinely decolonised, non-performative form of government support could look like:

The most critical first step would be for the government and cultural institutions to begin recognizing theatre not merely as entertainment, but as legitimate tools for community engagement, education, mental health advocacy, conflict resolution, and social development. For me, a genuinely decolonised form of support would mean moving away from top-down systems where communities are treated simply as recipients of interventions. Instead, support structures should center collaboration, local knowledge, storytelling traditions, and the actual needs identified by communities themselves. (Interview data, 2026).

This call—for sustainable residencies, university-community partnerships, proper compensation, and structures that listen to communities rather than impose upon them—offers a concrete policy agenda grounded in frontline experience.

- 3. Digital and institutional gaps.** Limited internet access and digital literacy prevent outreach beyond the immediate community, and no university or ministry partnership exists to sustain the work beyond individual projects. From a decolonial perspective, these are not merely logistical failures but symptoms of deeper epistemic injustice: indigenous performance practices remain devalued within postcolonial education and cultural policy frameworks. The absence of funding is not neutral; it is an expression of what a society values and what it considers disposable.

Discussion

The Igbo Oloyin project demonstrates that applied theatre can function as a decolonial practice—but only under certain conditions. First, prolonged relationship-building (three weeks of informal visits, the facilitator’s conscious distancing from governmental authority, and the everyday process of gradually becoming a familiar presence) was essential for building trust. As the facilitator described it, trust was not a credential she arrived with, but something that “gradually” emerged through “informal interaction and transparency.” (Interview data, 2026). This finding challenges project-based development models that compress relationship-building into brief, instrumental “entry” phases.

Second, the use of Yoruba folk songs, proverbs, and drum patterns positioned Indigenous knowledge as central, not ornamental. Third, the post-performance evaluation was structured as a public dialogue, not an extractive survey, enabling community members—including children—to become co-constructors of meaning. The children’s enthusiastic and thematically consistent responses demonstrated that when the theatrical frame temporarily suspends age-based and institutional hierarchies, young people can articulate sophisticated analyses of their own social realities.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates the complementary value of decolonial theory and symbolic interactionism. Decolonial theory explains why centring Indigenous knowledge matters; it challenges the coloniality of knowledge. Symbolic interactionism explains how transformation happens at the micro-level; through shared definitions of the situation, role-taking, and public reinforcement of norms. The facilitator’s observation—that the project showed “the average Nigerian can be a change maker if given the opportunity to express themselves”—sits precisely at the tension between potential and access that both theories illuminate. As she elaborated:

The biggest barrier is not lack of voice but it is the combination of hierarchical authority structures and limited spaces for expression, especially for children and community members who are rarely positioned as legitimate knowers. Structurally, expression is

often filtered through institutions where knowledge is top-down... Applied theatre disrupts that hierarchy. It creates a structured but open space where interpretation is allowed. That is why moments like the students at St John Anglican School speaking so freely feel significant: the theatre frame legitimises voices that are otherwise socially constrained. (Interview data, 2026).

This insight sharpens our understanding of applied theatre's mechanism: it does not "give voice" to the voiceless (a patronising colonial trope) but temporarily dismantles the structures that prevent existing voices from being heard. The limitation, however, is that a single project cannot permanently dismantle those structures. The real transformation is incremental: "once a community has experienced itself speaking and being heard in that way, it becomes harder to fully return to silence." (Interview data, 2026).

Our findings align with Adeyemi (2025) on the importance of follow-up, and with Durden (2018) on the importance of creating safe spaces for collective trauma processing. However, we extend this work by explicitly identifying the epistemic dimensions: applied theatre is not merely a tool for delivering messages but a site for reclaiming the right to define both problems and solutions. We also extend the literature by foregrounding the emotional and financial cost to the facilitator, an issue that remains undertheorized in applied theatre scholarship. The fact that a 19-year-old student had to rely on family stipends to sustain a community-engaged project with significant social goals is not a romantic story of passion overcoming obstacles; it is evidence of institutional failure. As Owokotomo articulated upon later reflection, "passion alone cannot sustain socially engaged work indefinitely. Practitioners also need support systems, mentorship, funding, and institutional recognition in order to do community work responsibly and sustainably." (Interview data, 2026).

The challenges identified—funding, policy, and digital infrastructure—are not unique to Nigeria. Mukundane (2020) reports similar barriers across East Africa, and Mokoena & Janse van Vuuren (2023) highlight digital access issues in South African online applied theatre education. This suggests the need for South–South collaboration to share funding models, digital resources, and policy advocacy strategies.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, as a single-case study, findings are not statistically generalisable. Second, we did not conduct longitudinal follow-up to assess whether changes persisted beyond the immediate post-performance period. This absence is not merely a methodological gap but a symptom of the structural conditions the paper critiques. The facilitator herself articulated this as a lasting regret:

Sadly, I have not been able to return to the Igbo Oloyin community since the projects were completed. That same year, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everything; the lockdown forced me to leave Ibadan and relocate to Akure. After the pandemic, I eventually moved to the United States to continue my studies. One regret that has stayed with me is that I was never able to return to the community to follow up on the work or to see how, or if, the conversations from the performances continued in their everyday lives (Interview data, 2026).

This discontinuity is not a personal failure but a structural one: it reflects a context where community-engaged art is systematically unsupported, where a global pandemic can sever fledgling relationships without institutional scaffolding to maintain them, and where the mobility of the practitioner (pursuing education abroad) mirrors broader patterns of knowledge extraction. Documenting this honestly is a vital part of the project's account, resisting the temptation to narrate a neat, closed story of success. Third, the researcher's presence during the project may have influenced community responses,

despite efforts to minimise coercion. Fourth, we lack comparative data from a project that did not centre Indigenous knowledge, limiting our ability to attribute outcomes specifically to the decolonial approach.

Future research should address these limitations through multi-site comparative designs, longitudinal tracking, and participatory action research where community members are co-researchers, not merely participants. It should also investigate models for maintaining community continuity when practitioners must relocate, and for embedding applied theatre within local institutions (schools, community centres) so that the departure of an individual facilitator does not mean the end of the work.

Recommendations

For policymakers and funding bodies:

Establish dedicated institutional support structures for applied theatre within ministries of education, health, and youth development. Move beyond short-term project cycles to multi-year, flexible funding that prioritises community-defined outcomes over Western-centric metrics. A decolonised approach to support, as articulated by the practitioner, must “center collaboration, local knowledge, storytelling traditions, and the actual needs identified by communities themselves,” while also “properly compensating facilitators, community artists, and participants for their labor and expertise” (Interview data, 2026). This includes creating community arts residencies, partnerships between universities and local communities, and accessible funding structures that do not demand that young practitioners personally underwrite the costs of social transformation.

For practitioners:

Adopt a framework that centres prolonged relationship-building, Indigenous knowledge systems as epistemological resources, and interactive performance devices (e.g., freeze-frame techniques and

narrator interventions) that transform spectators into active discussants. Recognise that the most significant insights often emerge not in formal interviews but in informal conversations, repeated visits, and moments of apparent inactivity. Practitioners should also consider continuity from the outset by identifying individuals within the community who can carry the work forward, even in small ways, once the external facilitator departs. As Owokotomo reflected, “I would tell her to slow down and listen more than she feels she needs to perform or prove anything... The most important work actually happens before any of that—during the quiet moments of building relationships, sitting with uncertainty, and allowing people to tell you what matters to them in their own way” (Interview data, 2026).

For academic institutions:

Recognise that community-engaged work is a significant commitment, “not just academically, but ethically and emotionally” (Interview data, 2026). Departments that support applied theatre projects must provide structural support through mentorship, ethical oversight that includes care for the practitioner, and—crucially—funding. The model of a 19-year-old student self-funding a community project through family stipends is not a model to celebrate but a failure of institutional responsibility that must be addressed.

For researchers:

Conduct comparative, policy-focused research examining the political economy of funding, digital integration strategies that avoid replicating colonial knowledge hierarchies, and institutional mechanisms that sustain applied theatre across multiple African contexts. Ensure that findings are disseminated in accessible forms to participating communities, embodying the decolonial principle of reciprocity. Future research should also attend to the experiences of facilitators themselves, whose emotional and financial labour is too often invisible in published accounts of community-based work.

For international partners:

Invest in South–South collaboration networks that enable peer learning among African applied theatre practitioners, rather than perpetuating North–South funding dependencies that reproduce colonial hierarchies.

Conclusion

This study has investigated how applied theatre, when explicitly framed through decolonial thinking and the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, can foster social transformation in African communities. Using the Igbo Oloyin Community Project as a case study, we have demonstrated that participatory, community-centred methodologies can effectively challenge colonial legacies in development practice by prioritising local epistemologies over externally imposed solutions.

The Igbo Oloyin project shows that decolonisation does not require a romanticised return to a pre-colonial past. Rather, it requires a sovereign capacity to select, adapt, and synthesise cultural tools on one's own terms—Yoruba folk songs addressing drug abuse, freeze-frame techniques from Boal, and public dialogue grounded in Indigenous oral traditions.

Yet the project also reveals the persistent gap between the transformative potential of applied theatre and the structural conditions required to sustain it. The absence of institutional funding, the lack of policy frameworks, the economic precarity that disperses trained practitioners into other fields, and the severed connections caused by global mobility and pandemic disruption are not peripheral difficulties. They are central to understanding why decolonising applied theatre requires not only methodological innovation but structural transformation—in how projects are funded, how practitioners are supported, and how knowledge is valued.

In a final moment of reflexivity, the facilitator offered the advice she would give to her younger self, a statement that serves equally as a methodological principle for the field:

I would tell her to slow down and listen more than she feels she needs to perform or prove anything... I would also tell her not to be discouraged by limitations—whether it is funding, time, or not being able to return immediately. Those gaps will exist, but they do not cancel the value of what was created... And finally, I would tell her to accept that this work will stay with her longer than she expects. Some things will feel incomplete, some endings will feel unresolved, and some questions will remain open. But that is not failure, it is part of what makes community-based theatre alive and real.

(Interview data, 2026)

This acceptance of incompleteness is not a concession to failure but a recognition of what decolonial practice demands: an ongoing, unfinished, relational commitment that cannot be reduced to a project cycle or a publication. By bridging traditional performance forms with contemporary methodologies, and by advocating for institutional recognition and funding that respects community-defined outcomes, applied theatre can be effectively positioned as a catalyst for sustainable, decolonised social transformation across the African continent. However, this will require institutions, funders, and practitioners to commit not only to the beauty of the work but to the unglamorous, long-term, structurally supported labour that makes such work possible.

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