

The Role of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in the Preservation and Dissemination of Nigerian Theatrical Heritages.

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Abstract

Theatre has long served as a central medium of cultural expression and entertainment, with stage performances whether in drama or dance offering shared experiences to live audiences. In the pre-television era, such performances were rarely documented, relying largely on audience memory and oral retellings for preservation. The emergence of television broadcasting transformed this tradition by enabling stage performances to be recorded, archived, and transmitted to audiences beyond the physical theatre space. This study critically examines how the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Nigeria's foremost public broadcast station, covers stage performances and preserves them for future reference. The NTA was selected because of its historical mandate to promote Nigerian culture and its extensive archive of televised theatre productions. Using secondary data, the study reveals that while television coverage significantly broadens public exposure to theatre, it also plays a vital role in preserving performances as accessible cultural heritage. The findings suggest that strategic, inclusive, and culturally resonant television coverage can simultaneously safeguard theatrical heritage and stimulate interest in live theatre. The study therefore recommends closer collaboration between broadcasters and theatre practitioners to ensure that televised representations expand audience reach while maintaining the vitality of live theatre attendance. **Keywords:** Theatre, Television Coverage, Cultural Preservation, Nigerian Television Authority, Broadcast Theatre, Nigerian Culture

Introduction

The emergence of new media and the forces of globalization have significantly transformed theatre performance in Nigeria (Ibrahim, 2025). Traditional live theatre has declined as audiences increasingly consume theatrical productions through electronic media, including video cassettes, digital decoders, and compact discs. This shift has transformed theatre from a public arena of collective social interaction into a private form of personal entertainment. While digital technologies and new media platforms have expanded

accessibility, they also raise challenges, such as piracy, which threaten the sustainability of theatrical heritage.

In this context, television remains a critical medium for the preservation and dissemination of Nigerian theatre. Institutions such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) have archived and broadcast stage productions like *The New Masquerade between* (mid-1980s-Mid 1990s) and *Things Fall Apart* (1987), ensuring that these works continue to reach audiences across generations and contributing to the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

There is no doubt that Theater, is a vital cornerstone of human culture, has a rich and complex history that traces its roots to ancient rituals. While some scholars debate a direct link, the similarities are clear: both early theater and ritual utilized elements like costumes, masks, and skilled performers. However, a key distinction emerged, as noted by Aristotle, who defined theater as a medium that provided a unique form of healing and emotional purification for the audience, distinct from the ceremonial actions of a ritual. The earliest known example of this transition is the "passion plays" of Ancient Egypt, performed as far back as 2000 BC to honor the god Osiris. In ancient Egypt, for example, the so-called Abydos or Osirian "passion plays" enacted the death and resurrection of Osiris within annual temple rites, blending ritual obligation with narrative representation and role playing that many scholars now regard as proto theatrical performance Alan Sikes (2015)

This historical trajectory continued across different cultures, with theater evolving in distinct ways. In Nigeria, for instance, the art form is deeply rooted in the Egungun masquerade and the Alààrinjò traveling performance troupes. Many scholars credit Hubert Ogunde with pioneering modern Yoruba travelling theatre and shaping the earliest professional popular theatre movement in Nigeria, even though earlier forms, such as the Alààrinjò troupes, complicate claims that he was the first Nigerian professional dramatist. As Nigeria engages with globalization, ensuring the accessibility of Ogunde's performance texts through

translation and documentation is increasingly important for both critical study and the continuation of theatrical practice.

Television and broadcast media, such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), play a crucial role in preserving these works by archiving and disseminating theatrical performances, making them available to wider audiences and future generations (In Egypt, the modern theatrical movement emerged in the late 19th century, blending indigenous styles with European influences. This period saw the rise of iconic figures like Mounira El Mahdeya, who defied social norms to become a trailblazing actress and founder of her own theater group, paving the way for future generations of women in the arts for much of its history, the preservation of theatrical works was largely confined to written records, such as scripts and encyclopedias.

Television and digital broadcasting have redefined theatre as ‘sans frontiers’, expanding its reach while creating a new, hybrid experience distinct from live performance” can be backed with (Mari, 2016) However, the advent of television revolutionized this process. Television theater transformed the stage from a physical location to a broadcast medium, making performances, dance, storytelling, poetry, and music accessible to a global audience, television has become a vital tool for promoting Nigerian culture (Mari, 2016), this expansion of reach is crucial for cultural preservation, as it ensures that traditional art forms are not forgotten but are instead seen, heard, and appreciated by diverse communities worldwide.

The potential of television has revived theatre by expanding its audience reach and enhancing cultural relevance, the medium can serve as a vital tool for restoring theatre’s significance in Nigeria (Ayakoroma, 2013). A compelling modern example of this is the case of Maryam Bukar Hassan, a Nigerian poet and spoken-word artist also known by the name "Alhanislam" who blends oral storytelling with modern media to reach global audiences.

Her deeply rooted tradition in oral performance was amplified through platforms such as TED Talks, UN SDG Awards, and collaborations with the United Nations, including the “Peace Begins With Me” poetry video and her spoken word performance at the Summit of the Future (United Nations, 2025), these televised, digital, and event-based recordings allowed her art to transcend local stages and resonate internationally, helping to preserve and magnify her messages of peace, as a result, in July 2025 she was appointed as the United Nations’ first Global Advocate for Peace effectively a peace ambassador role underscoring how television and media have enabled her to secure such a globally recognized platform. As much as theater performances are enjoyed by live spectators, its importance and impact on humanity and nature have made it paramount for its preservation for use in the future.

The success of broadcasting theatre through recorded or live screenings was not always assured. At first, many critics doubted whether the unique experience of live stage performance could truly be captured on screen, or whether it could hold up against the visual sophistication of Hollywood productions. However, experience has shown otherwise. As National Theatre’s head of marketing, Leo Jordan, explained, audiences who engage with recorded theatre often find it surprisingly effective, even if it cannot replace the physical presence of live theatre. Rather, it provides a powerful alternative for those unable to attend in person. Beyond cinemas, National Theatre Live extends access further by bringing performances to village halls, community centres, and even mobile screening units that tour remote regions like the Scottish Highlands (The Guardian, 2025).

The craft of recording plays for the screen lies in balancing theatrical authenticity with cinematic storytelling. Director Sam Yates, who adapted Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya into a one-man performance starring Andrew Scott for National Theatre Live, explains that the aim is to replicate the feeling of having the best seat in the theatre while still allowing the production to stand independently as a film (The Guardian, 2025). To achieve this, Yates emphasized the

strategic use of cameras employing mid-shots to follow the actor closely and extreme close-ups to create striking cinematic moments that transcend the static proscenium view (The Guardian, 2025). Similarly, Jess Richardson, head of production at National Theatre Live, highlights the collaborative process of aligning filming techniques with the stage director's vision, unlike in a live theatre setting where viewers are free to focus on different elements of the stage, captured theatre requires intentional framing. Through mid-shots and selective angles, the production team guides the audience's gaze, ensuring attention remains on the key actions and narrative beats intended by the director (The Guardian, 2025).

Literature Review

Digital Preservation and Cultural Access in Performing Arts

Digital media has significantly expanded access to the performing arts while preserving cultural heritage. Videorecording and broadcasting iconic performances, such as Baryshnikov's *Nutcracker* and Alvin Ailey's dance productions, allow audiences who cannot attend in person to experience high-quality performances, raising questions about aesthetic effects and continuity in performance history (Alui et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend, prompting theatre companies to broadcast performances online and develop strategies for sharing recorded media, giving rise to a distinct digitally mediated performance genre.

Broadcast organizations have adopted systematic digital preservation practices to safeguard audiovisual content. For example, Radio Television Malaysia maintains media archives as cultural repositories, though challenges remain in recognition and resource allocation (Alui et al., 2022). Similarly, Siyukhova (2024) highlights that electronic media preserve cultural codes and promote ethnocultural identity in multi-ethnic regions. Local programs, such as *Tembang Pantura* in Cirebon, Indonesia, integrate traditional cultural

elements with contemporary digital production techniques, engaging audiences while sustaining heritage (Cusniawati et al., 2024).

These examples illustrate the principles of Cultural Preservation Theory, which emphasizes how societies safeguard and transmit cultural expressions across generations (Scholars' interpretation). In the Nigerian context, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) recorded and broadcast plays like *The Village Headmaster* and *Tales by Moonlight*, ensuring that stories reflecting indigenous values remain accessible decades after their original staging (NICO, 2013). This demonstrates the role of media in preserving cultural memory and reinforcing identity within a rapidly changing society.

Theatre was historically confined to physical venues, limiting audience access. Television, film, and digital platforms have transformed this landscape, extending theatre's reach globally. In Nigeria, Western Nigeria Television (WNTV), established in 1959, laid the foundation for national broadcasting, later succeeded by NTA, which promoted culture and unified audiences through televised drama productions (Onwumere, 1983; Nnadiukwu & Anih, 2020). Iconic programs such as *The Village Headmaster* and *Cock Crow at Dawn* turned theatre into a shared national experience (NICO, 2013).

Globally, archival initiatives like the Theatre on Film and Tape (TOFT) in New York (Dorney, 2021) and the UK's National Theatre Live (since 2009) demonstrate similar trends. TOFT systematically recorded live performances for research and pedagogy, while National Theatre Live broadcasts productions to cinemas and alternative venues using filmic techniques (mid-shots, close-ups) to replicate the "best seat in the house" (The Guardian, 2025a; 2025b).

These developments align with Media Convergence Theory (Jenkins, 2006), which posits that traditional media and digital platforms merge to create new forms of content distribution, audience interaction, and participatory engagement. NTA's transition from live broadcasts to digitization mirrors global convergence practices, allowing theatre to reach wider

audiences while adapting to technological change. Collective Memory Theory (Halbwachs, 1925/1992) argues that memory is socially constructed and maintained by communities.

Media institutions play a central role in shaping these shared memories. Through preserved recordings, NTA has become a cultural archive, enabling Nigerians to collectively recall historical and artistic milestones. These broadcasts reinforce shared narratives and contribute to national identity (Communiqué, 2025; Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025). Similarly, global initiatives like TOFT and National Theatre Live ensure that theatrical performances contribute to collective memory, allowing future generations to engage with ephemeral works that would otherwise be lost.

Across these examples from Nigerian television Authority to National Theatre Live and archival projects mass media and digital technologies extend theatre accessibility beyond physical venues, preserve ephemeral performances for research, pedagogy, and cultural memory, innovate audience engagement through cinematic and digital techniques, and reinforce collective memory and cultural identity. Despite extensive research on digital media, theatre, and audience engagement, limited attention has been paid to the specific role of television in preserving theatrical heritage through systematic archiving and broadcast dissemination. Existing studies have largely focused on digital streaming platforms, online performances, and audience reception, leaving a gap in understanding how traditional broadcast media sustain cultural memory and theatrical practices over time.

This gap highlights the need to investigate how television contributes to the preservation and transmission of theatrical heritage in Nigeria through its archival and broadcast practices. Examining this question will clarify the relevance of television as a cultural preservation tool and its role in maintaining national and local theatrical identity.

Benefits of NTA's Preservation of Theater

Cultural Continuity and Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer:

When the NTA records and airs stage plays or culturally rooted drama productions, it contributes to the preservation and transmission of Nigerian cultural values. Through televised theatre and related programming, children who have never attended live village theatre can still access stories like *The Village Headmaster* and learn about earlier social customs, norms, and ways of life. In this way, traditions are sustained beyond the physical stage and continue to inform cultural identity across generations (Nnadiukwu & Anih, 2020)

Education and Research Resource for Theatre Scholars:

For students and researchers, NTA's recordings act as a living archive. Instead of only reading about classic Nigerian plays, scholars can actually watch how they were performed. This provides insight into acting styles, stagecraft, costumes, and storytelling methods, making NTA's archives a valuable educational resource for both learning and teaching (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025; Communiqué, 2025).

Promotion of National Identity Through Media

By broadcasting Nigerian stories to millions of viewers nationwide, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) contributes to the promotion of national identity and cultural values. Television drama and programming can showcase indigenous languages, traditions, and social practices, helping to strengthen social cohesion and a shared sense of Nigerian identity among diverse ethnic groups (Nnadiukwu & Anih, 2020; Emetumah & Emetumah, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Media Convergence Theory: Propounded by, Henry Jenkins (2006) and rooted in earlier concepts of technological convergence from Ithiel de Sola Pool and Nicolas Negroponte. Media Convergence Theory posits that in a digital era the boundaries between traditional media (e.g., television, film, print) and new media (e.g., online platforms, streaming

services) blur, resulting in a cultural convergence where audiences interact with content across multiple platforms rather than within a single medium. Convergence also encompasses collective intelligence audiences collaboratively contribute meaning and context to media products and participatory culture, where users are both consumers and co-creators of media content.

Convergence has been applied in studies of digital culture, transmedia storytelling, and audience engagement to explain how cultural products travel across platforms and reach fragmented, global audiences. Jenkins's work, for example, has been used to analyze fan cultures and mainstream media intersections in digital contexts.

In examining theatre beyond the live stage, Media Convergence Theory helps explain how performances originally produced for live audiences are transformed and disseminated across broadcast and digital platforms. The NTA's shift from live radio/television broadcasts to digitized archives reflects this convergence: theatre becomes accessible via multiple media formats, enabling broader reach while adapting to technological evolution similar to global practices like National Theatre Live in the UK. This framework justifies analyzing how convergence enhances the visibility, distribution, and longevity of theatre as cultural expression.

Collective Memory Theory: Propounded by Maurice Halbwachs (originally 1925; widely disseminated in English in *On Collective Memory*, 1992). Collective Memory Theory argues that memory is not purely individual but socially constructed within group contexts. According to Halbwachs, groups shape and interpret memories according to shared experiences, norms, and frameworks, meaning what is remembered and how it is remembered reflect collective identity rather than isolated cognition.

Collective memory thus functions as a mechanism for social cohesion and cultural continuity. This theory has been employed in sociological research, history, cultural studies,

and media studies to examine how societies remember historical events, cultural practices, and shared identities through rituals, monuments, archives, and media. In mediated cultures, digital archives and broadcast media increasingly act as vehicles for sustaining collective memory across generations.

Applying Collective Memory Theory to the NTA's archival recordings highlights how preserved theatre productions serve not merely as entertainment but as mnemonic resources that reinforce shared cultural experiences and national identity. These broadcasts and digital archives contribute to a collective repertoire of cultural references enabling communities to recall, reinterpret, and engage with theatre as part of Nigeria's cultural heritage. This aligns the present study's focus on how media institutions help shape societal memory and collective identity

Methodology

This study is based on secondary data, drawing from archived materials and scholarly sources related to the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and its role in preserving and promoting Nigerian theatrical heritage. The research employed a qualitative documentary analysis approach, utilizing academic journals, books, articles on Nigerian theatre and media studies, official NTA reports and publications, as well as relevant online repositories and databases documenting Nigerian theatrical heritage. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, which involved careful reading and examination of all collected materials to identify recurring themes, patterns, and narratives. These themes were then categorized and interpreted in relation to the study objectives and existing literature on media and cultural preservation, with a focus on evaluating NTA's role in disseminating and sustaining knowledge of Nigerian theatrical heritage across different audiences. To ensure analytical rigor, source triangulation was applied by cross-checking findings from multiple scholarly, archival, and

institutional sources, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the NTA's contributions to the preservation and dissemination of Nigerian theatrical heritage.

Discussions of findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that mass media has significantly extended the reach of theatre in Nigeria, transforming it from a primarily live, localized experience into a medium that can reach audiences across diverse geographic and socioeconomic contexts. The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) has played a pivotal role in this transformation by systematically archiving and broadcasting theatrical productions. Through programs such as *The Village Headmaster* and *Cockcrow at Dawn*, NTA has ensured that these performances are not only accessible to contemporary audiences but also preserved for future generations, contributing to cultural continuity and the reinforcement of national identity.

NTA's archival efforts exemplify the intersection of media and cultural preservation. By capturing and transmitting theatre via television, NTA allows audiences who may never have the opportunity to attend live performances to experience the aesthetic, narrative, and cultural dimensions of Nigerian theatre. This aligns with broader global practices, where institutions such as the UK's National Theatre Live and the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive in the United States have successfully adapted live theatre to screen-based formats, extending access while simultaneously safeguarding performances for research, pedagogy, and public engagement.

However, the study also identifies significant challenges that constrain the long-term impact of NTA's work. Inadequate preservation technology, insufficient digitization infrastructure, and substandard storage systems limit the durability and accessibility of archived theatrical materials. These constraints not only threaten the sustainability of Nigeria's theatrical heritage but also reduce the potential for leveraging television as a long-term tool for

cultural education and identity formation. Addressing these technological and infrastructural gaps is therefore critical to enhancing the efficacy of media-based theatre preservation and ensuring that future generations can continue to engage with Nigeria's rich theatrical traditions.

In summary, the study highlights the dual role of television in contemporary Nigerian theatre: it functions both as a medium for audience expansion and as a mechanism for cultural preservation. While international models provide lessons on best practices, sustainable preservation in Nigeria will require coordinated investment in technology, professional capacity building, and policies that prioritize long-term archiving and dissemination of theatrical works.

Conclusion

The role of mass media in extending the accessibility of theatre cannot be overstated. Theatre, once limited to live audiences in physical venues, has been transformed into a widely accessible cultural experience through the intervention of television, film, and digital technologies. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) pioneered this transformation by recording and broadcasting local plays, ensuring that cultural expressions once confined to specific communities were brought into homes nationwide. This practice not only widened access but also positioned theatre and televised drama as a unifying cultural force in Nigeria. Television serves as a medium through which cultural values and traditions are shared, sustained, and transmitted across generations, reinforcing cultural continuity and intergenerational knowledge transfer through programming that reflects indigenous norms and practices (Nnadiukwu & Anih, 2020)

From a theoretical perspective, Cultural Preservation Theory explains how such media practices safeguard traditions for future generations, while Media Convergence Theory demonstrates how theatre adapts to new technological formats to remain relevant. Collective Memory Theory further highlights how preserved performances contribute to shared cultural

identities, strengthening a nation's sense of belonging. These frameworks underscore the enduring value of media as both a preserver and transmitter of culture across time.

Global parallels also reinforce this conclusion. In the UK, National Theatre Live has shown how recorded theatre can reach global audiences by using filmic techniques to replicate the intimacy of live performance while providing cinematic experiences (The Guardian, 2025, 2025b). Similarly, the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive (TOFT) at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts demonstrates how archiving live theatre performances has long term academic and educational value, providing an indispensable resource for scholars, students, and theatre practitioners who study past productions and draw inspiration for new work (The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 2025). Together, these examples show that theatre's survival and relevance in modern society increasingly depend on its ability to be adapted and preserved through media. However, the Nigerian context also reveals pressing challenges. Poor archival storage, deterioration of older footage, and limited digitization threaten the long-term survival of many culturally significant productions. Without strategic investment in preservation technology, digitization, and partnerships with global cultural institutions, large portions of Nigeria's theatre heritage may be permanently lost.

However, the preservation of theatre through mass media is not merely a matter of archiving performances; it is an investment in cultural identity, education, and collective memory. For Nigeria, sustaining and upgrading NTA's preservation capacity is vital for safeguarding its diverse cultural heritage in the face of technological change and global cultural competition. At the same time, lessons from international practices like National Theatre Live and TOFT show that with adequate investment, innovation, and collaboration, theatre can transcend geographical and temporal limits.

The challenge for Nigeria and indeed for societies worldwide is to ensure that the stories told today are not forgotten tomorrow, but remain accessible, meaningful, and relevant for generations to come.

Recommendations

Digitization of Archives: Prioritize the digitization of NTA's existing recordings to ensure accessibility for modern audiences and to protect against physical deterioration.

Government and Private Investment: Increase funding for preservation technologies, including partnerships with private media organizations and cultural institutions.

Training and Capacity Building: Provide specialized training for NTA staff on digital archiving, restoration, and metadata cataloguing to enhance long-term preservation.

Public Access Platforms: Develop user-friendly online platforms where Nigerians, scholars, and the diaspora can freely access digitized theatre archives.

Collaborative Projects: Foster partnerships with international bodies such as UNESCO, British Film Institute, and National Theatre Live to share expertise and strengthen Nigeria's preservation capacity.

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