POPULAR THEATRE IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

Popular theatre in North Central Nigeria comprises diverse community-based performance practices through which cultural knowledge, historical memory, social values and collective identities are communicated and sustained. However, scholarship has given uneven attention to these traditions, with limited integrated examination of their forms, aesthetic features and social functions across the region. This study examines selected documented popular theatre traditions in Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau States and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. It conceptualises popular theatre as publicly accessible, socially situated and participatory theatrical practice that communicates with identifiable communities through recognisable cultural and linguistic resources, while distinguishing it from the broader categories of indigenous and traditional theatre. Guided by Chinyowa's theory of African popular theatre aesthetics, the study adopts qualitative documentary research, drawing on published scholarship and verifiable documentary and audiovisual materials. The analysis identifies recurring aesthetic features including music, dance, masking, puppetry, storytelling, indigenous language, improvisation and audience participation, while demonstrating variations in their social, cultural, political, religious and educational functions. The study argues that popular theatre traditions in the region constitute significant forms of community-based cultural expression through which knowledge, memory and collective identities are sustained. Its contribution lies in bringing selected under-documented performance traditions into a regional analytical framework, while recognising that the availability and uneven distribution of documentary sources constrain the comprehensiveness of the study.

Keywords: *Popular theatre, North Central Nigeria, Indigenous theatre, Cultural heritage, participation.*

Introduction

Theatre in Africa is better understood as an extension and organisation of pre-existing systems of communal performance than as an institution introduced through the written play and the purpose-built theatre, that is, social practices that preceded the institutional theatre building and the circulation of written dramatic texts. Across African societies, singing, dancing, drumming, storytelling, masquerade, ritual enactment, praise poetry, procession and ceremonial display functioned as embodied modes of communication, collective memory and social participation long before colonial theatre structures emerged (Banham et al., 1994; Ogunbiyi, 1981; Soyinka, 1976). This position also resonates with Willmar Sauter's conception of the theatrical event, which shifts attention from the theatre building and dramatic text to the

communicative encounter among performers, spectators and the cultural circumstances of performance; his concept of "playing culture" consequently accommodates performance practices that occur beyond conventional theatrical spaces (Sauter, 2000). In Africa, therefore, theatre developed through social and cultural practices in which performance was integrated into religious observances, festivals, communal celebrations and everyday life, making the distinction between theatre, ritual and social activity less rigid than Western literary models often assume (Barber, 2000; Okagbue, 2013; Olaniyan, 2008). Banham (2004) therefore locates African theatre within longstanding systems of festival, ritual and popular entertainment rather than treating written drama as its point of origin. In Nigeria, this history includes Yoruba Alárìnjó, masquerade performance, festival drama and other indigenous forms in which performance served religious, social and political purposes (Adedeji, 1969; Ogunba & Irele, 1978). These traditions should not, however, be treated as synonymous with popular theatre. Indigenous or traditional performance refers to culturally established performance practices associated with particular communities and institutions, whereas popular theatre developed as a more identifiable theatrical practice through changing social, economic and political conditions.

Popular theatre in Africa is consequently better understood through its relationship with its publics than through the simple criterion of popularity. Barber, Collins, and Ricard (1997) demonstrate this through their study of Ghanaian and Togolese concert parties and Yoruba travelling theatre in Nigeria. Their work shows that popular theatre incorporates accessible languages, recognisable social experiences, music, comedy, dance and direct audience engagement while responding to changing conditions of colonial and postcolonial society. Barber (2000) further argues that African popular culture provides a means through which ordinary people represent and negotiate social experience. The category therefore concerns not merely performances watched by large audiences but theatrical practices whose production, circulation and reception are substantially connected to popular social life.

Obafemi (1983) associates popular theatre with political perspectives and social intervention, while Obafemi (2001) situates Nigerian theatre within a continuing relationship between cultural inheritance and social purpose. This position challenges a definition based principally on entertainment or accessibility. Popular theatre may employ indigenous artistic resources, but its defining feature in the present study is its capacity to communicate with identifiable publics about social experience through accessible theatrical forms. Such a definition also accommodates the Yoruba travelling theatre while allowing investigation of other Nigerian performance practices that address communities through locally intelligible forms. This distinction is important for examining popular theatre in North Central Nigeria. Existing studies of African and Nigerian popular theatre have given substantial attention to Yoruba travelling theatre, Ghanaian and Togolese concert parties, and selected forms of political and development-oriented theatre (Barber et al., 1997; Banham, 2004; Obafemi, 1983). Studies of Northern Nigerian performance have also examined street theatre and theatre for development, demonstrating that popular performance can operate outside conventional theatre institutions (Abah & Etherton, 1982). However, the place of popular theatre within North Central Nigeria requires further

interrogation in relation to the performance practices, languages, communities and social concerns that shape the region.

This article uses "popular theatre" to mean theatrical practices in North Central Nigeria that are publicly accessible, socially situated, participatory in form and directed towards communication with identifiable communities through recognisable cultural and linguistic resources. The study examines how such theatre operates, what social functions it performs, and the conditions affecting its continuity. It therefore shifts attention from defining popular theatre in general to examining its specific operation within North Central Nigerian societies.

Popular Theatre in Africa

Popular theatre in Africa refers to a wide field of theatrical and performance practices through which people entertain, communicate social ideas, transmit knowledge and represent their experiences. Kerr (1995) uses the term extensively, covering conventional drama, dance, mime, dramatised storytelling, masquerade, improvised vaudeville, travelling theatre and theatre associated with resistance and social action. Barber et al. (1997) identify Ghanaian and Togolese concert parties and Yoruba travelling theatre as important examples of established African popular theatre. These forms demonstrate that popular theatre is identified through its relationship with public audiences, accessible modes of communication, recognisable cultural materials and subjects drawn from social experience. The historical formation of African popular theatre is closely associated with indigenous performance practices, although the two categories should not be equated. Indigenous performance identifies practices that emerge from the cultural institutions and artistic traditions of particular communities. Popular theatre identifies the public use, circulation and reception of theatrical performance. A masquerade, festival enactment or ritual performance may be indigenous without constituting popular theatre in every instance. Conversely, a popular theatre production may use indigenous music, language, storytelling or costume without serving a ritual function. Kerr (1995) consequently includes several non-literary forms within African popular theatre, while Barber et al. (1997) demonstrate how specific popular theatre forms developed through changing social and economic conditions.

Colonialism contributed substantially to the transformation of these practices. Missionary education, Christianity, urbanisation, new forms of entertainment, literacy and colonial institutions introduced materials that African performers appropriated and modified. Ghanaian and Togolese concert parties and Yoruba travelling theatre demonstrate this process through the combination of local languages, music, humour, dance and storytelling with forms associated with modern stage entertainment (Barber et al., 1997). Nigerian travelling theatre also established an itinerant production system that brought performances directly to audiences in different locations. Adeoye (2023) confirms the continuing importance of itinerancy within Nigerian theatre practice, noting its capacity to take theatre closer to audiences while creating specific production requirements.

Audience accessibility is central to popular theatre. Performances commonly employ languages, songs, proverbs, humour, music, dance, costume and characters familiar to their

audiences. These elements facilitate communication and encourage audience response. Barber (2000) demonstrates this relationship through Yoruba popular performance, where theatrical meaning is produced through interaction among performers, audiences and everyday social experience. Participation can involve verbal responses, singing, dancing, laughter, commentary and other forms of audience intervention. Chinyowa (2007a) similarly argues that African popular theatre must be examined in relation to the people for whom it is created and the manner in which they participate in its production and reception.

Education constitutes another major function. African popular theatre has been used to communicate information about health, development, governance, social responsibility and community concerns. Mlama (1991) explains that popular theatre approaches in Africa use community participation as a means of facilitating communication and social learning. Theatre for Development extended this practice by involving communities in identifying issues, creating dramatic representations and discussing possible responses (Kerr, 1995; Mlama, 1991). Chinyowa (2015), however, cautions against assuming that participation automatically produces empowerment, since participatory theatre can reproduce unequal relationships between facilitators and communities. This qualification is important because popular theatre should be assessed by examining how participation is organised, who controls theatrical production and whose interests are represented.

Political commentary is also prominent. Obafemi (1982) identifies Nigerian popular theatre as a vehicle for addressing political authority and social conditions. Satire, comic characters, songs and dramatic representation can address corruption, leadership, inequality, morality and public responsibility. Similar functions appear in Southern African popular theatre, where community-based performance has been used to address social exclusion, public concerns and political questions (Chinyowa, 2007b). Popular theatre consequently operates as a form of public communication through which audiences encounter social questions in accessible theatrical forms.

Music, dance, puppetry, masquerade and storytelling further distinguish many African popular theatre practices from drama organised primarily around written dialogue. UNESCO (2019) provides a significant Nigerian example in Kwagh-Hir, which developed from Tiv storytelling and incorporates puppetry, masquerade, poetry, music, dance and dramatic action. Its transmission through apprenticeship demonstrates that theatrical knowledge can be preserved through practical training within community performance groups. Shija (2018) further explains the development of Kwagh-Hir from nativist performance towards stage popular theatre, showing its capacity to accommodate changing theatrical forms and social influences.

These characteristics become particularly significant in North Central Nigeria because the region represents one of the most culturally diverse areas of the country. Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau States, together with the Federal Capital Territory, are home to numerous ethnic nationalities, including the Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Igala, Ebira, Nupe, Gbagyi, Berom, Eggon, Alago, Tarok, Mwaghavul, Goemai, Afizere, Anaguta, Bassa, Gwandara, Mada, Afo and many others. Every community possesses distinctive forms of dramatic expression that

communicate historical memory, indigenous knowledge and communal values through festivals, masquerades, storytelling, puppet theatre, dance drama, music and ceremonial performances. This remarkable concentration of theatrical traditions makes North Central Nigeria one of the country's most important centres of indigenous performance. Kwagh-Hir provides one documented example of this regional theatrical heritage, but it should not stand for the entire region. UNESCO's inscription confirms its cultural significance and records its combination of storytelling, puppetry, masquerade, music, dance and social commentary. Other communities possess performance practices requiring comparable documentation and interpretation. Popular theatre in North Central Nigeria can consequently be examined through the forms by which performances reach publics, the theatrical resources they employ, the subjects they address, the functions they serve and the systems through which knowledge is transmitted.

For this study, popular theatre is operationalised as publicly accessible theatrical performance that uses recognisable cultural or linguistic resources, engages identifiable audiences and communicates social, educational, political or cultural concerns. This definition accommodates indigenous materials without making indigeneity the sole condition for classification. It also permits attention to travelling theatre, community theatre, festival performance, puppetry, dramatised storytelling and other forms that operate beyond conventional theatre buildings. Such an approach provides a precise basis for examining the range of popular theatrical practices in North Central Nigeria and their contribution to Nigerian theatre heritage.

North Central Nigeria: Historical and Cultural Profile

North Central Nigeria occupies a distinctive position in the historical, geographical and cultural development of the Nigerian federation. Officially recognised as one of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, the region comprises Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau States, together with the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The region extends across the central axis of the country, forming a geographical link between the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. Although the designation "North Central" became widely adopted following the creation of the six geopolitical zones in the 1990s, the region has long been identified as the Middle Belt because of its location and exceptional concentration of indigenous ethnic nationalities. The designation "Middle Belt" acquired historical significance during the colonial and post-colonial periods as a geographical and cultural description for the diverse peoples occupying central Nigeria, many of whom possessed distinct languages, political systems and cultural traditions that differed from the dominant emirate structures of northern Nigeria (Ballard, 1971; Falola & Heaton, 2022).

The historical development of North Central Nigeria predates the formation of the Nigerian state in 1914. Archaeological discoveries, oral traditions and historical records indicate that the region has been occupied for several centuries by numerous indigenous communities that established organised political institutions, economic systems and artistic traditions (Falola & Heaton, 2022). Ballard (1971) explains that the linguistic distribution of the Middle Belt provides important historical evidence of prolonged human settlement, migration and interaction among different ethnic groups. The concentration of diverse language groups across the region

demonstrates that North Central Nigeria served as an important meeting point where communities maintained their identities while engaging in trade, diplomacy, intermarriage and cultural exchange. Unlike regions dominated by a single language or ethnic group, North Central Nigeria developed as a mosaic of independent societies whose histories contributed to the cultural diversity that continues to distinguish the region today.

The physical environment contributed significantly to the historical development of the region. North Central Nigeria is characterised by extensive savannah vegetation, fertile agricultural plains, river valleys, rocky hills and the elevated Jos Plateau. The River Niger and River Benue, two of Nigeria's major waterways, meet at Lokoja in present-day Kogi State, creating an important geographical and historical point of interaction. The Niger-Benue valley supported movement, settlement and commercial interaction among communities, while the Jos Plateau's distinctive terrain shaped settlement patterns and relations among its numerous communities (Ballard, 1971; Tambo, 1978). These geographical conditions facilitated interaction among communities and contributed to the circulation of agricultural products, craft products, performers, musicians and merchants across different settlements. The geographical location of the region consequently encouraged cultural interaction and promoted the circulation of artistic practices, including music, dance, masquerade performances, storytelling traditions and ceremonial festivals.

Agriculture has remained the principal occupation across much of North Central Nigeria and has exerted considerable influence on its cultural expressions. The fertile soils support the cultivation of yam, cassava, maize, millet, sorghum, rice, soybeans and various vegetables, while fishing, hunting and livestock production complement farming activities in many communities. These economic activities have produced numerous agricultural festivals, harvest celebrations, hunting ceremonies and communal performances that express gratitude for successful harvests, celebrate communal cooperation and reinforce social solidarity. Banham (2004) observes that African performance traditions frequently emerge from the economic and social activities of communities, making agricultural life an important source of dramatic expression. Consequently, many performance traditions across North Central Nigeria remain closely associated with seasonal farming cycles, communal labour and indigenous systems of production.

One of the defining characteristics of North Central Nigeria is its remarkable ethnic diversity. The region accommodates numerous indigenous communities representing several language groups and cultural traditions. Major ethnic groups include the Tiv, Idoma and Igede of Benue State; the Igala, Ebira, Okun Yoruba, Bassa and Nupe of Kogi State; the Yoruba, Nupe, Baruba and Bokobaru of Kwara State; the Nupe, Gbagyi, Kamuku, Kambari and Koro of Niger State; the Eggon, Alago, Mada, Gwandara, Afo and Migili of Nasarawa State; the Berom, Afizere, Anaguta, Tarok, Ngas, Mwaghavul, Goemai, Ron and Pyem of Plateau State; together with the Gbagyi, Gade, Bassa and Koro peoples of the Federal Capital Territory. Each of these communities possesses distinctive artistic traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, oral literature, festivals and theatrical expressions that contribute to the cultural identity of the region (Ballard, 1971; Mepaiyeda, 2012).

The exceptional linguistic diversity of North Central Nigeria further distinguishes the region from many other parts of the country. The region contains numerous languages belonging predominantly to the Niger-Congo family, alongside languages whose historical relationships demonstrate extensive population movement and interaction. Ballard (1971) argues that language distribution provides valuable evidence for reconstructing historical relationships among communities because linguistic patterns preserve traces of earlier population movements and cultural interaction. Indigenous languages therefore perform functions extending beyond communication. They preserve oral history, traditional knowledge, songs, praise poetry, proverbs, folktales and dramatic performances that define the identity of each community. This linguistic diversity has consequently produced an equally significant diversity of theatrical forms, each employing language as a vehicle for artistic expression and cultural continuity.

Religion constitutes another important element in understanding the historical and cultural profile of North Central Nigeria. Christianity, Islam and African Indigenous Religion are practised throughout the region, with many communities maintaining indigenous beliefs alongside the major world religions. Religious festivals, ancestral commemorations, initiation ceremonies, masquerade performances and royal celebrations continue to influence artistic production despite religious transformation during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Adedeji (1969) explains that some indigenous performances originated from religious observances before acquiring educational, recreational and social functions. Consequently, several performance traditions in North Central Nigeria retain symbolic elements that reflect earlier systems of belief while functioning today as cultural performances and public celebrations.

The political history of North Central Nigeria also contributed significantly to the development of its cultural traditions. Before British colonial administration, the region accommodated different forms of political organisation, including centralised kingdoms, chiefdoms, clan systems and republican communities. The Igala Kingdom and Nupe Kingdom, together with several indigenous chiefdoms and political communities, developed administrative structures supported by court ceremonies, praise performances, royal musicians and ceremonial dances. These institutions encouraged the development of specialised performers whose responsibilities included preserving dynastic history, entertaining royal courts and communicating political authority through artistic performance. Banham (2004) notes that royal institutions across Africa frequently served as centres for artistic production because rulers patronised musicians, dancers, storytellers and other performers whose activities reinforced political authority and cultural continuity.

Colonial administration introduced profound changes to the region through indirect rule, missionary education, Christianity, infrastructure development and commercial expansion. Although these developments transformed political administration and educational systems, indigenous artistic traditions continued to adapt. Rather than disappearing, many performances incorporated contemporary themes, new musical instruments, modern costumes and changing audience expectations. Barber (2000) explains that African popular theatre responds to changing social conditions through the reinterpretation of inherited performance practices. This process is

evident across North Central Nigeria, where masquerade festivals, puppet theatre, storytelling traditions, ceremonial dances and musical performances continue to transmit indigenous knowledge while responding to contemporary society. North Central Nigeria occupies an important position in Nigerian theatre because its cultural diversity has produced a substantial concentration of indigenous performance traditions. Many communities possess distinctive forms of popular and indigenous performance that communicate history, educate society, celebrate communal identity and transmit indigenous knowledge through artistic expression. Understanding the historical and cultural profile of the region is therefore indispensable for an evaluation of its popular theatre traditions, since performance derives its meaning, structure and purpose from the historical experiences, cultural values and social institutions that produced it.

State-by-State Analysis

Benue State presents one of the most documented performance landscapes in North Central Nigeria. Tiv performance culture is central, particularly *Kwagh-hir*, a puppet and masquerade theatre tradition that integrates carving, narration, music, dance and social commentary. Mbatyav (2012) explains that *Kwagh-hir* functions as a visual storytelling system through which Tiv society reflects moral values, historical memory and social criticism. Swange dance theatre also operates as a popular expressive form combining satire, music and dance in urban and rural settings. Idoma performance traditions include *Alekwu* masquerade theatre, which mediates between ancestral authority and living society through ritual performance and symbolic movement. Igede and Etulo communities maintain storytelling performances and ceremonial dances linked to harvest and communal celebrations.



Figure 1. Igala masquerades performance
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Igala_masquerade_festival_01.jpg

Kogi State demonstrates a convergence of cultural traditions from Igala, Ebira, Okun Yoruba, Nupe and Bassa groups. Igala masquerade performances, royal theatre, particularly performances connected to the Attah's court ceremonies, integrates praise poetry, drumming and dance (see Figure 1). Ebira performance traditions include *Ekuechi* masquerade theatre, a night performance cycle involving masked figures, chants and drumming that symbolically communicates ancestral presence. Okun Yoruba communities maintain oral performance traditions linked to festivals and lineage celebrations. Nupe communities present court-centred performances combining drumming, dance and praise singing linked to emirate institutions. Kwara State performance traditions are shaped by Yoruba, Nupe and Baruba cultural systems. Yoruba popular theatre forms include travelling performance traditions influenced by Yoruba folk opera. Nupe performances in the state include court entertainment, drumming ensembles and ceremonial dances linked to emirate festivals (see Figure 2). Baruba performance traditions incorporate masked dances and agricultural celebrations that reinforce communal solidarity.



Figure 2. Nupe drumming ensembles and ceremonial performance
Source: https://www.facebook.com/100075683178247/posts/the-masked-nupe-drummers-bida-niger-state-nigeria2022-the-masked-nupe-drummers-a/867764089089689/

Nasarawa State exhibits diverse performance traditions among Eggon, Mada, Alago, Afo, Gwandara and related groups. Eggon masquerade performances remain prominent, combining ritual symbolism with public entertainment (see Figure 3). Mada and Alago communities maintain harvest festivals involving dance theatre, musical storytelling and communal participation. These performances often function as social regulation systems, reinforcing moral instruction through performance. Niger State presents Nupe, Gbagyi, Kamuku, Kambari and Koro performance traditions. Nupe *Etsu* court performances integrate music, dance and praise recitations within royal institutions. Gbagyi storytelling theatre includes oral performance, dance and ritual enactments linked to agricultural cycles. Kamuku and Kambari performances are closely tied to initiation rites, hunting traditions and seasonal festivals.



Figure 3. Eggon Masquerade (Ashim), Eggon Dancers (Anzalu)
Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ7YPz6sgwD/

Plateau State contains one of the most diverse performance environments in Nigeria, with Berom, Afizere, Anaguta, Tarok, Ngas, Mwaghavul, Goemai and related groups (see Figure 4). Berom festivals include dance drama and masquerade performances linked to agricultural cycles. Tarok performances include ritual dances and communal theatre during festivals. Mwaghavul and Ngas communities maintain storytelling performances and masked dances that communicate ancestral heritage and agricultural thanksgiving. These traditions often combine music, movement and symbolic costume. The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) reflects Gbagyi, Bassa, Koro and Gade performance traditions. Gbagyi performances include storytelling theatre, agricultural dances and ritual masquerades. Bassa and Koro communities maintain festival performances involving drumming, masking and communal participation. Despite urban transformation, many of these performance forms persist in rural settlements surrounding Abuja.



Figure 4. Nahwai's performance of the Ron Butura people in Plateau State.
Source: https://www.facebook.com/groups/387166634721219/posts/8816565168447948/

Tabular Analysis of Popular Theatre in North Central Nigeria

Table 1: State-by-State Popular Theatre Mapping in North Central Nigeria

State	Major ethnic groups and communities	Selected performance, festival and popular theatre forms	Key performance features	Social, cultural and communicative functions
Benue	Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Etulo, Jukun, Akweya, Nyifon, Abakwa and Ufia	Kwagh-hir; Swange dance; Ingyough; Ange; Anchanakupa; Ogirinya; Idoma Alekwu ancestral performances; Igede Agba and New Yam festival performances; Tiv Kyegh Sha Shwa cultural festival	Puppetry, masquerade, storytelling, satire, music, drumming, dance, costume, song, dramatic representation and communal participation	Moral instruction, social commentary, ancestral remembrance, cultural transmission, communal identity, historical memory and entertainment. Kwagh-hir combines puppetry, masquerading, poetry, music, dance

				and animated storytelling and is transmitted through apprenticeship.
Kogi	Igala, Ebira, Okun Yoruba, Bassa, Nupe, Kakanda, Kupa, Ogori and Magongo	Igala Ocho, Italo, Egwu and Ogaganyi festival performances; Igala royal court theatre and masquerade traditions; Ebira Echane/Eche-Ane; Ebira Ekuechi; Ogori Ovia-Osese; Okun Egungun performances; New Yam and community cultural festivals	Sacred masquerade, ancestral representation, royal performance, drums, praise poetry, dance, songs, costumes, processions and festival display	Ancestral communication, religious observance, political and royal representation, initiation, moral regulation, cultural education and community identity. Miachi (2012) identifies incarnate beings as sacred ancestral entities rather than simply masked performers in Igala tradition. Kogi's official cultural documentation lists Ekuechi, Echeane, Echori, Ovia Osese, Ocho, Italo, Egwu, Ogaganyi and Egungun among its recognised festivals.
Kwara	Yoruba, Nupe, Bariba/Batonu, Bokobaru and Fulani communities	Yoruba Egungun and festival performances; Nupe royal and festival performances; Bariba/Batonu cultural festivals; Bokobaru cultural performances; Durbar-related performance traditions in Ilorin and surrounding communities	Masquerade, drumming, dance, praise singing, royal processions, costume, oral narration and communal celebration	Historical transmission, royal representation, communal identity, moral education, entertainment and cultural continuity. The principal indigenous groups identified for Kwara include Yoruba, Nupe, Bariba and

				Fulani. NICO's language inventory also records Batonu, Bagobiri and Bokobaru among languages associated with the state.
Nasarawa	Gwandara, Alago, Eggon, Gbagyi, Egbira, Migili, Kantana, Mada, Afo/Eloyi, Agatu, Gade, Koro, Kofyar, Buh, Ninzo, Nungu, Goemai, Jukun, Tiv, Bassa, Kulere, Arum and other communities	Nzeh Mada; Gwandara Cultural Carnival; Eggon agricultural and festival performances; Alago cultural performances; Agatu and Afo/Eloyi festival performances; community dance, wrestling, masquerade and storytelling traditions	Dance, drumming, costume, oral narration, agricultural symbolism, wrestling, festival procession, music and communal display	Cultural education, agricultural celebration, identity formation, historical transmission, social interaction and community mobilisation. NICO identifies Agatu, Aho, Alago, Chesu, Eggon, Gbagyi, Gwandara, Kantana, Rindre, Mada and Migili among the state's indigenous communities, while contemporary administrative sources identify an even wider range of groups. The Nzeh Mada festival explicitly presents Mada cultural practices through communal celebration and performance. The Gwandara Cultural Carnival also incorporates dance, music, dress and performances

				relating community history and values.
Niger	Nupe, Gbagyi, Hausa, Kadara, Koro, Bariba, Kakanda, Ganagana, Dibo, Kambari, Kamuku, Pangu, Dukkawa, Gwada, Ingwai, Gungawa, Dendi, Busa, Bassa, Gurmana, Hun-Saare and other communities	Nupe royal and festival performances; Gbagyi cultural festivals and masquerade; Gurara Cultural Festival; Kambari, Kamuku, Koro and other community cultural dances and festivals; traditional wrestling, music and masquerade displays	Drumming, dance, masquerade, cultural procession, oral narration, traditional wrestling, music, agricultural display, costume and festival participation	Cultural transmission, communal identity, historical memory, agricultural celebration, social interaction and public cultural education. The Niger State Government lists a substantial range of ethnic communities beyond the five originally included in the table. The Gurara Cultural Festival has included cultural procession, masquerade, traditional music and dance, craft exhibition, food and farm-produce displays, wrestling and contemporary performance.
Plateau	Berom, Afizere/Izere, Anaguta, Tarok, Mwaghavul, Ngas/Angas, Goemai, Ron/Kulere, Mushere, Bogghom, Pyem, Mupun, Miship,	Nzem Berom; Pusdung; Pus Kai'at; Bit Goemai; Taroh Cultural Day; Ron/Kulere Festival; Bogghom Cultural Festival; Thaar Cultural Community Festival; Zarachi Festival; Pu'us Kang/Mushere cultural festival; Pandam	Communal dance, percussion, songs, masquerade, ceremonial costume, agricultural symbolism, fishing displays, processions,	Agricultural thanksgiving, historical transmission, cultural education, communal identity, social cohesion, ancestral remembrance and celebration. Plateau contains far more ethnic groups than the original five-

	Montol, Rukuba, Irigwe, Challa, Jukun, Chwe, Miango, Amo, Tal, Fier, Buji, Kofyar, Panawa, Kwang, Piapung, Bassa and many other communities	Fishing Festival; initiation, harvest, masquerade, dance and community festival performances	ritual enactment and oral performance	group entry suggested. The Plateau State Government's cultural documentation records Taroh Cultural Day, Pusdung, Ron/Kulere, Bogghom, Thaar, Zarachi, Nzem Berom and other festivals. A demographic and cultural assessment also records more than forty ethno-linguistic groups and identifies festivals such as Pusdung, Pus Kai'at, Bit Goemai and Pandam.
Federal Capital Territory	Gbagyi/Gbari, Gade, Bassa, Koro, Gwandara, Ebira, Bwari-area communities, and other indigenous communities	Gbagyi cultural dances and masquerade; Gade cultural performances; Bassa and Koro community festivals; Gwandara cultural performances; agricultural and marriage-related performances; storytelling and traditional dance	Drumming, dance, masquerade, oral narration, costume, procession, music and communal participation	Cultural transmission, community identity, social education, historical memory and preservation of indigenous practices

Table 2: Ethnic Groups and Their Popular Theatre Systems

Ethnic Group	Theatre Form	Performance Mode	Aesthetic Features	Cultural Function
Tiv	Kwagh-hir	Puppet & masquerade theatre	Sculpted puppets, satire, music, dance integration	Social commentary, moral instruction
Idoma	Alekwu theatre	Masquerade performance	Ancestral masking, ritual chants, symbolic movement	Spiritual mediation, moral enforcement
Igala	Royal court theatre	Ceremonial performance	Praise poetry, drumming, court choreography	Political authority reinforcement
Ebira	Ekuechi theatre	Night masquerade cycle	Mask emergence, chants, percussion-driven movement	Ancestral representation, social order
Nupe	Emirate theatre	Court performance	Drumming ensembles, horse displays, praise recitation	Political legitimacy, cultural identity
Gbagyi	Storytelling theatre	Oral-performance theatre	Narrative delivery, dance integration, ritual symbolism	Historical preservation, education
Berom	Festival theatre	Agricultural dance drama	Group choreography, seasonal symbolism	Harvest thanksgiving, unity
Eggon	Masquerade theatre	Ritual performance	Masking, dance, symbolic enactment	Social regulation, ancestral respect
Tarok	Ritual theatre	Community festival performance	Dance cycles, oral narration	Cultural identity reinforcement
Mwaghavul	Festival theatre	Agricultural performance	Drumming, masked movement	Communal cohesion
Kamuku	Initiation theatre	Rite-based performance	Ritual movement, chanting	Identity formation
Koro	Festival theatre	Seasonal performance	Drumming, storytelling	Cultural continuity

Table 3: Comparative Performance Aesthetics of Popular Theatre

Aesthetic Element	Description Across Region	Function in Performance
Music	Drumming, flute, vocal chants, rattles	Rhythm control, emotional expression, narrative support
Dance	Structured and symbolic movement systems	Communication of meaning, embodiment of social values
Masking	Use of carved and symbolic masks	Representation of spirits, ancestors, moral forces
Puppetry	Especially strong in Tiv Kwagh-hir	Visual storytelling, satire, education
Language	Indigenous languages dominate performance	Cultural identity preservation, accessibility
Improvisation	Performer-audience interaction shapes delivery	Adaptation to social reality and audience response
Audience participation	Singing, responding, dancing, verbal interaction	Collective ownership of performance
Costume design	Symbolic clothing and body decoration	Identity marking, status representation

Table 4: Functional Classification of Popular Theatre in North Central Nigeria

Function Type	Description	Examples
Educational	Transmission of moral and cultural knowledge	Kwagh-hir, storytelling theatre
Political	Expression of authority and governance	Igala court theatre, Nupe emirate theatre
Religious	Communication with ancestral/spiritual forces	Alekwu, Ekuechi
Agricultural	Celebration of farming cycles	Berom, Mwaghavul festivals
Social regulation	Reinforcement of communal ethics	Eggon masquerade theatre
Entertainment	Recreation and public enjoyment	Swange dance, festival performances

The tabular analysis demonstrates that popular theatre in North Central Nigeria comprises a range of indigenous and community-based performance traditions shaped by social organisation, ritual practice, historical memory, political institutions and communal participation. The traditions differ in their purposes, structures, performance conventions and relationships with particular communities. Music, masking, storytelling, dance, puppetry, praise poetry and audience participation occur across several communities, but their meanings and functions are not uniform.

The table consequently presents selected performance traditions associated with major ethnic communities in each state rather than identifying a single dominant theatrical form for an entire state or ethnic group.

Performance Aesthetics

The performance aesthetics of popular theatre in North Central Nigeria are grounded in indigenous systems of expression that integrate movement, sound, symbolism and communal participation. Performance is not structured around textual permanence but around live interaction, improvisation and sensory engagement. Music constitutes a central aesthetic principle, with drumming, vocal chants, flutes, rattles and horns functioning not as background accompaniment but as active narrative forces that shape rhythm, meaning and emotional intensity. Barber (2000) observes that African performance traditions often collapse the boundary between speech and song, allowing musical expression to carry dramatic significance.

Dance operates as both physical expression and symbolic communication. Movements are carefully structured to reflect social roles, spiritual beliefs and historical memory. In Tiv *Kwagh-hir*, for example, puppet movement and masquerade choreography combine to represent moral ideas and social commentary. In Ebira *Ekuechi*, masquerade movement is carefully coded to reflect ancestral authority and spiritual presence. In Berom and Tarok performances, dance sequences mirror agricultural cycles, linking human activity to seasonal rhythms. Costume and masking form another essential aesthetic dimension. Masks are not merely decorative but symbolic representations of ancestral beings, moral forces or social archetypes. Colours, materials and designs communicate meaning that is immediately recognisable to the audience. Adedeji (1969) explains that in Yoruba and related performance traditions, masking and costume function as visual language systems that express identity, authority and cosmology.

Improvisation remains a defining feature of performance aesthetics across the region. Performers adapt dialogue, songs and movement in response to audience reactions, social events or environmental conditions. Collins (1996) explains that improvisation sustains vitality in African popular performance by ensuring that each presentation remains responsive to its immediate social environment. Audience participation further strengthens aesthetic experience, as spectators contribute verbally, physically and emotionally to the unfolding performance.

Contemporary Developments

Popular theatre in North Central Nigeria continues to evolve in response to changing social, economic and technological conditions. Urbanisation has significantly altered performance spaces, shifting many traditions from village squares and communal grounds into urban centres, schools, cultural institutions and media platforms. Despite this shift, indigenous performance forms remain active, although often reconfigured to suit new environments. Barber (2000) notes that African performance traditions demonstrate adaptability by incorporating contemporary themes while retaining indigenous artistic foundations. The influence of formal education and modern theatre training has also contributed to the transformation of indigenous performance

practices. Many performers now operate within hybrid systems that combine traditional performance techniques with elements of Western theatrical staging, lighting and dramaturgy. This development has enabled indigenous theatre forms to enter formal stage productions, academic presentations and cultural festivals, expanding their visibility beyond local communities. Media technology has further transformed popular theatre. Recorded performances, digital documentation, social media circulation and televised cultural programmes have expanded the audience base of indigenous performance traditions. While this development increases visibility, it also introduces questions regarding authenticity, preservation and adaptation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasises that cultural expression must retain its linguistic and artistic integrity to preserve its meaning and social function, particularly in environments influenced by global media systems.

Religious transformation has also influenced contemporary performance practices. The spread of Christianity and Islam has modified certain ritual performances, leading to reinterpretations of masquerade traditions and festival practices. In many communities, performances once strictly associated with indigenous religion are now presented as cultural heritage events rather than ritual obligations, allowing them to survive in changing religious environments. Despite these transformations, popular theatre remains an important medium for social commentary. Contemporary performances frequently address issues such as governance, youth unemployment, corruption, gender relations, education and communal responsibility. This continuity confirms that popular theatre retains its function as a reflective social institution that engages with both tradition and modernity. Banham (2004) observes that African performance traditions persist because they continually respond to changing historical conditions while preserving essential cultural values. In North Central Nigeria, these developments demonstrate that popular theatre is not a static heritage form but an adaptive cultural system. Its continued survival depends on its ability to integrate indigenous aesthetics with contemporary realities while maintaining its role as a medium of communal expression, education and identity formation.

Challenges and Prospects

Popular theatre in North Central Nigeria continues to face structural, cultural and institutional challenges that affect its transmission and sustainability. One major challenge is the gradual decline in intergenerational transmission, as younger populations increasingly engage with global digital entertainment systems that reduce sustained participation in indigenous performance traditions. Urbanisation also contributes to spatial disruption, as many traditional performance spaces such as village squares, shrines, courtyards and festival grounds are replaced by urban infrastructure that does not always accommodate communal performance practices. Economic limitations further constrain performance continuity, since many indigenous theatre forms depend on communal funding, voluntary participation and seasonal festivals rather than stable institutional or governmental support.

Religious transformation presents another challenge. The expansion of Christianity and Islam in several communities has led to the reinterpretation or reduction of certain masquerade

and ritual-based performances, particularly where such practices are perceived as incompatible with contemporary religious beliefs. In addition, limited documentation and archival preservation have resulted in the loss of performance knowledge, scripts, songs and choreography in some ethnic communities, especially those with smaller populations or reduced institutional support for cultural preservation.

Despite these challenges, the prospects for popular theatre in the region remain significant. Increasing academic interest in indigenous performance traditions has led to greater documentation, research and cultural visibility. Universities, cultural institutions and theatre practitioners are progressively integrating indigenous performance forms into academic curricula, stage productions and research projects. Digital media also presents new opportunities for preservation and dissemination, allowing performances to reach wider audiences beyond their immediate communities.

Tourism development offers additional potential for revitalisation, particularly through cultural festivals such as Kwagh-hir performances in Benue State, Ekuechi festivals in Kogi State and agricultural festivals across Plateau and Niger States. These events attract national and international attention, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and economic development. Furthermore, Theatre for Development initiatives continue to utilise indigenous performance techniques for education, health communication and social awareness, reinforcing the relevance of popular theatre in contemporary society. If effectively supported through cultural policy, documentation initiatives and community engagement, popular theatre in North Central Nigeria can continue to function as a living system of cultural expression, education and identity formation while adapting to contemporary realities.

Conclusion

Popular theatre in North Central Nigeria represents a sustained cultural system through which communities preserve memory, communicate values, educate society and express identity through performance. Its continued existence across diverse ethnic groups demonstrates its resilience and adaptability in the face of social, religious and technological change. Despite challenges relating to documentation, urbanisation and shifting cultural practices, popular theatre remains central to communal life and cultural expression. Its persistence affirms its importance not only as an artistic tradition but also as a medium of social communication and cultural continuity across the region.

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