

## Community ARTs as a Tool for Development and Engagement in Oyo Town: A Study of Alarinjo Theatre Groups

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### ABSTRACT

This research explored the impact and effectiveness of community arts as a tool for development and community engagement. Community art has evolved into a powerful means of social change, civic participation, and creative expression. By involving the community in the artistic process, residents can contribute to and take ownership of the artwork, fostering collaboration and creating lasting social impacts. This study addressed the lack of articulated theories of change underlying community arts initiatives, which hinders their planning and evaluation. The study's objectives include assessing the cultural, educational, and recreational aspects of community art, measuring its effectiveness and impact, and understanding the various roles it plays in development and community engagement. The study relied on interviews with key community artists as well as observation and life histories of travel drama group leaders in Oyo theatric space. The research focuses on the Oyo community in Oyo State, Nigeria. Specifically it examines the influence of two Alarinjo Theatre groups, Tiwa lasa cultural group and Madosa Entertainment, on the community and its people. The study posits that community art is rooted in traditional practices and should be recognised as a development tool for community engagement and empowerment. The research findings contribute to the knowledge base of community arts, inform effective engagement strategies, and promote the betterment of society. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of participatory community art and its implications for social, economic, and cultural development

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend of community art projects being developed but many have failed to be truly community driven and inclusive. These efforts have failed to properly respect and support the voices of the local community, as well as failing to acknowledge and embrace the cultural diversity of all people involved. This glaring flaw in community art projects can be seen in many of the approaches taken to develop them. For example, often, designs and approaches are decided upon by art institutions, rather than through direct and meaningful consultation with the/ community itself. The lack of community buy-in and interest can lead to a disinterest and antipathy to the final product, even if it is well done. Community art is an important form of art that can build strong relationships and foster community spirit. By understanding the process and appreciating the collaborative nature of community art, artists can create meaningful pieces that promote dialogue and interaction between community members.

According to Grodach (2010), local arts centers, ones that involve small to mid-sized artists and foster collaboration with the community, can have a significant, positive impact on economic and community development. In reaction to the usually top-down approaches taken to community art, various measures have been put in place to remedy the situation. Another measure for improving community art projects is education. By educating community members about the beauty and value of art as a means of expression, as well as providing them with the necessary skills and training, art projects can become more meaningful and inclusive. These measures, however, must be coupled with a recognition of the humanity that each person brings to the project. Without an understanding and respect for the richness of cultures, art projects can be detrimental to the community, result in exclusion and be perceived as oppressive. In conclusion, successful community art projects must be seen as collaborative and participatory efforts, respectful of each individual's contribution and grounded in an appreciation of all of the cultures represented. These projects must acknowledge the humanity of everyone involved and create a space that is wholly inclusive and embracing of diversity. Only in such an environment, can the power and beauty of the arts be fully realized.

The basic research questions which will be used to guide the study is stated below in a veritable manner:

1. Do community arts have an impact on development and engagement of the community?
2. Does community art have any role to play in the intergenerational transfer of cultural and artistic knowledge and skills?
3. Should community art be inclusive and participatory?
4. Are community art based in only economically deprived area and does it give the local community an opportunity to express concerns and issues
5. To what extent does community participation or collaboration present itself in community art?

This research aims to provide an evidence base for further discussion about the effectiveness of community arts, and to assist in the development of

effective engagement strategies that enhance development and foster community cohesion.

To achieve this aim, the study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To ascertain the extent to which art can be a cultural, educational and recreational tool for the community.
- ii. To measure the magnitude of community art initiatives in terms of effectiveness and impact.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Community Art*

Community art, which is also referred to as social art, community-engaged art, community-based art, and occasionally dialogical art, involves the practice of art that originates from and is rooted in a community environment. It has a strong connection to social practice and the social turn. This type of work can utilize any media and is defined by engagement or conversation with the community. Professional artists can work together with communities that typically do not participate in artistic activities. As the practice expanded in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia during the late 1960s, the term was established. In Scandinavia, "community art" is more commonly associated with contemporary art projects.

Community art is a grassroots, community-focused approach that can be beneficial in economically disadvantaged areas. Professional artists or actors may participate when local community members unite to convey concerns or issues through this form of art. This creative practice can serve as a catalyst for events or changes within a community, and even on national or international scales. In countries where English is the primary language, community art is frequently regarded as the product of community arts centers, which typically involve visual arts (such as fine art, video, and new-media art), music, and theater. A lot of arts organizations in the UK engage in community-based work, usually focusing on fostering participation from non-professional individuals within local communities.

Community art is grounded in a shared sense of place or tradition. Artists who operate from a shared identity rooted in tradition – such as ethnicity, ideology, or class – seemingly already have some knowledge of collective work. As a result, they also have an advantage over artists who are accustomed to an individualistic stance when it comes to supporting or contesting an issue. Community art differs from what is known as political art, which generally pertains to an aesthetic object whose content either directly addresses a contentious public action or aims to confront public perception regarding the current state of affairs. Community-based art, by contrast, emphasizes the process of engaging individuals in the creation of the work as much as it does the final product. Context plays a crucial role as well; this type of art is located in more public, accessible, and resonant spaces, aimed at a particular audience and moment. The international community art represents a constellation of inclusive and participatory arts practices, alongside a global movement of socially engaged

artists, organizations, communities, and thinkers dedicated to bridging the distances between people, places, and perspectives in their daily work.

Moreover, community art emerges from thoughtful and mutual processes involving professional artists collaborating with a wide range of often marginalized communities. Without question, this is the most inclusive, diverse, and participatory art practice available. Seen from this perspective, the developing connection between 'artists' and 'participants' in this creative endeavor is frequently regarded as crucial to this work. The art produced from these relationships is intimately connected to the lives, contexts, experiences, and worlds of those involved. Community arts processes and outcomes often result in life-altering experiences for all participants, along with remarkable aesthetically designed expressions. The artists who choose to do this work are often knee-deep in the proverbial mud and endeavour to bring imagination and connection to places where precisely this is very scarce and much needed.

UNESCO in 2018 launched the Community Arts Development Programme which is:

- i. To expose local communities to the performing arts and to move the persons trained into academic programmes at the secondary and tertiary levels;
- ii. To stimulate and promote excellence in all areas of the performing arts;
- iii. To improve the quality of performing arts in the community;
- iv. To foster and promote a strong sense of national identity through the use of the arts;
- v. To deliver broad-based access to children in Barbados in all areas of the performing arts, regardless of levels of income, education, ethnicity, race, age, gender, whether as participants and or as audiences.

### ***Community Engagement***

Community engagement is broadly understood as a purposeful, collaborative process of working with groups of people connected by geography, shared interests, or common circumstances to address issues affecting their collective well-being. Although definitions vary, it goes beyond one-off interactions and emphasizes sustained partnerships that mobilize resources, influence systems, and promote social and behavioral change (Fawcett et al., 1995). Unlike individual participation, community engagement centers on groups and their shared identity, fostering relationship-building through learning, dialogue, and collective action while respecting cultural knowledge and practices. It strengthens planning and decision-making by increasing public commitment and incorporating diverse perspectives through both traditional methods, such as town halls, surveys, and public hearings, and creative tools like storytelling, visual arts, festivals, music, and digital platforms. Effective arts-based community engagement is characterized by reciprocity, inclusive participation, social dialogue, meaningful cultural expression, and outcomes that build long-term community capacity, making it a vital catalyst for community planning, civic engagement, and sustainable development.

### *Alarinjo Theatre in the Yoruba Community*

The Yoruba Alarinjo theatre is one of the earliest and most influential indigenous performance traditions in Nigeria, originating from ritual festivals, rites of passage, and the Egungun masquerade tradition, and evolving into a mobile, masked theatre that blended satire, music, dance, mime, and audience participation. Performed by itinerant troupes, it functioned as both entertainment and a medium for social, moral, and historical commentary, relying on improvisation, stock characters, and topical themes that reflected Yoruba worldviews (Adedeji, 1969). Alarinjo laid the foundation for the Yoruba travelling theatre movement of the mid-to-late twentieth century, shaping pioneers such as Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, and Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala), who professionalized and modernized indigenous performance through folk opera, historical drama, and cultural symbolism. Its influence persists in contemporary Nigerian theatre, film, and comedy, informing the works of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Tunde Kelani, and Kunle Afolayan, while the transition of travelling theatre to television after the establishment of WNTV in 1959 expanded its cultural reach, solidifying Alarinjo's enduring legacy in shaping Nigerian performance traditions across generations.



Fig 1. Picture of the Egungun Cult  
Source: Tuck Magazine

### *Performance Theory*

Performance theory, as applied in this study, understands artistic works as situated performances shaped by narrators who actively construct meaning within specific social events (Dundes, 2004). Emerging in the 1970s from interdisciplinary scholarship in anthropology, folklore, and sociolinguistics, and formally articulated by Richard Schechner in 1977, the theory defines performance as “twice-behaved” or restored behaviour, actions rehearsed,

transmitted, and re-presented over time. Thus, an artwork comprises articulated content, its medium of expression, and shared cultural frameworks that guide interpretation, reflecting historical processes of learning and communal participation. Tracing theatre to early ceremonial centers where ritual, storytelling, geography, and social interaction converged, Schechner identifies three forms—eruptive, procession, and traditional performance—ranging from structured spontaneous reenactments to ritualized journeys and communal open-air events embedded in daily life, such as Indian traditions (Awasthi, 1974), thereby emphasizing the continuity between ritual, theatre, and social existence.

**Performance Theory and Contemporary Theatre Practitioners**

Richard Schechner’s performance theory has profoundly shaped contemporary theatre by expanding performance beyond the stage into everyday life and across cultures, advocating that it be “intercultural, inter-generic and inter-disciplinary” (Schechner, 1995). Through concepts such as “restored behaviour,” “presentation of self,” and “expressive culture,” he presents performance as rehearsed and re-enacted action, drawing on J.L. Austin’s idea that “to say something is to do something” (Austin, 1962) and situating performance within postmodern thought where art and life intersect. Rejecting the notion that art merely imitates life, Schechner argues for a continuum between ritual, theatre, and daily activity (Schechner, 2002), a view that has legitimized experimental, multimedia, site-specific, and environmental theatre practices. Influenced by avant-garde movements and Allan Kaprow’s “Happenings” (Kaprow, 1966), he proposes the idea of “found space,” where theatrical events occur in transformed environments rather than fixed stages (Schechner, 1977), blurring performer–audience boundaries and reinforcing performance as a fundamental mode of human and social existence (Schechner, 2002).

**Cleveland Model of Community Arts**

Cleveland (2002) argues that community arts perform four main functions:

1. Educate and inform us about ourselves and the world
2. Inspire and mobilise individuals and groups
3. Nurture and heal individuals, groups and/or communities
4. Build and improve community capacity and/or infrastructure



Fig 2.

Cleveland Model of Community Arts in Community Arts as an Instrument for Community Development. (Love M. Chile, 2007)

### ***Relevance of Community Arts***

The creative arts are acknowledged for unlocking the creative potentials of individuals deemed non-achievers in society. Indeed, individuals vary in their learning potential, abilities, and approaches. Some individuals lean towards visual and creative styles instead of the traditional auditory-memory-verbal method commonly used in classrooms.

The incorporation of the arts into educational settings has revealed the talents of many individuals who might have been labeled as non-achievers. According to Moterrasso (1999), community creative arts programs have been implemented in schools and educational environments to enhance the educational outcomes of both children and adults by promoting their individual personal development and aiding in the cultivation of self-confidence, skills, and motivation. Community arts offers the chance for individuals to collaborate, discuss their own work, and hear other artists elucidate their creations, concepts, and backgrounds. The individual's self-awareness, self-perception, and self-esteem are enhanced by creative self-expression.

In simple words, community arts do the following:

#### ***Community Arts Inspires and Mobilises***

Community arts involve public initiatives aimed at strengthening the ties among community members. The combination of professional artists and non-artists at the local community level undertakes them. Community arts are inherently experiential, creative, and inclusive. They offer community members the chance to unite, engage socially, enjoy themselves, exchange knowledge about one another, their thoughts, and their artistic abilities.

As Greene suggests, community arts projects are:

A way of speaking of an expanded community-[that]-takes shape when diverse people, speaking as who and not what they are, come together in both speech and action [and their creative works] to constitute something that is common among themselves (Greene 1995, p155).

#### ***Community Arts Nurtures and Heals***

Community arts are being utilized more and more for healing purposes, not only in medical health contexts but also in community healing and relationship restoration. The creative therapies are becoming increasingly significant in the fields of medical, mental, and spiritual health. Creative therapies provide clients with opportunities to delve into their imagination and hone their critical thinking abilities via creative arts and activities that alleviate anxiety and emotional conflicts that may be repressed or entrenched. This allows clients to cultivate self-expression, awareness, and esteem in a secure and supportive setting as a way of achieving healing and personal change.

#### ***Community Arts Builds and Improves***

Community arts play a vital role in community building and enhancement by utilizing an asset-based approach to development, as demonstrated in the Cleveland framework and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD prioritizes the identification and mobilization of existing strengths, talents, networks, and institutions within a community, rather than concentrating on deficits. It seeks to combine these assets with partnerships

across government, business, and philanthropic sectors to promote collective well-being. This approach, akin to Appreciative Inquiry, emphasizes positive experiences and achievements to motivate social change, acknowledging that communities frequently adopt negative identities when characterized by their issues. Community arts play a transformative role by reframing local creativity and cultural expression as valuable assets that drive economic, social, cultural, and political development. This shift helps to change perceptions, empower residents, and promote coordinated partnerships that enhance community infrastructure and sustainable growth.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research design was adopted for this study. Within this frame work, this research uses the interview method for data gathering. The research is designed to critically analyse how Community Art is a tool for development and engagement in Oyo Town in Oyo State. The study populations are privately owned cultural troupes in Oyo town in Oyo West local government area of Oyo State. The Study focused only on a subset of the total population because of the constraint of time, finance and the desire to get relevant information from a relatively manageable sample. In this study, the researcher used structured and unstructured interviews to gather the data. The researcher implemented interview as the instruments in order to support the document analysis to collect the data to investigate how Alarinjo theatre as a community art is a tool for development and engagement.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The Significance of Community Arts in Oyo Town***

Community arts in Oyo Town play a significant role as an effective medium for communicating sensitive social and developmental issues without provoking the hostility often associated with direct confrontation. Cultural troupes use theatre to critique local practices that conflict with development and conservation goals, yet audiences respond positively, actively participating in post-performance discussions rather than resisting the message. Beyond communication, community theatre fosters deep emotional engagement by creating empathy between performers and spectators, enabling audiences to intellectually, aesthetically, and emotionally connect with unfolding situations, sometimes to the extent of visibly passionate reactions during performances by groups such as Tiwa L'asa Cultural Ambassador and Madosa Entertainment. Moreover, community arts stimulate collective action by mobilizing residents toward positive conservation and social change, while simultaneously serving as a platform for marginalized voices. Through performance, individuals articulate concerns and experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken, making theatre a vital tool for community empowerment, expression, and sustainable development in Oyo Town.

### ***Inclusiveness and Participation of Community Art in Oyo***

Community arts in Oyo are highly inclusive and participatory, involving diverse members of the community across age, culture, and life experience, and

reaching wider audiences than most other performing arts. As a folk art rooted in shared language, concepts, and cultural understanding, community theatre originates within the people and is most effective when created and performed by those who reflect the community's lived realities. It functions not merely as entertainment but as a social activity intertwined with the fabric of society, encouraging collective reflection and action toward desired social change. For community theatre to remain authentic and transformative, it must move beyond dependence on professional artists who may impose externally shaped ideologies or elite perspectives. As noted by groups such as Madosa Entertainment and Tiwa L'asa, artistic expression can sometimes reflect the interests of dominant social or economic sectors, echoing Karl Marx's view that knowledge is often transmitted from the standpoint of those who control power. Genuine community arts in Oyo therefore emphasize grassroots participation, shared ownership, and creative processes that empower the people rather than reinforce existing hierarchies.

#### ***Script-based Performances***

Script-based performances within the travelling theatre tradition emphasize that genuine community theatre must emerge from active community involvement in both development and production. While performances based solely on externally written scripts may risk being perceived as foreign, plays such as *The Daughters of Elenpe* by Ayodeji Ajadi, performed by Madosa, demonstrate that scripted works can still qualify as community theatre when they are rooted in collaboratively generated local materials and reflect shared cultural realities. Determining whether a play is truly community-based requires examining not only how the script was developed but also whether it captures the community's fears, aspirations, lived experiences, and capacity to stimulate dialogue and action. In the Alarinjo tradition, performance aims to entertain, raise awareness, and influence attitudes by realistically portraying prevailing socio-cultural and economic conditions through a dynamic, dialectical relationship between performers and community members. Drawing from school engagements, focus groups, community meetings, and informal discussions, practitioners such as Ajuwon of Tiwa L'asa affirm that even when the scriptwriting process appears solitary, community feedback, identification, and emotional involvement remain central to refining performances and ensuring their relevance, impact, and potential for broader dissemination.

#### ***Constraints of Community Art in Oyo Town***

The issue of difficulty in securing funding is a major challenge. There is no activity that does not require funds and community theatre cannot be an exception. A substantial amount of funding is required not only to set up a community theatre but also to monitor and evaluate it. Unfortunately, there is often great difficulty in securing funding to support community theatre activities. There is also the absence of a common frame of reference. Starting a community theatre programme can be quite a daunting experience, especially in regard to the orientation of the community members vis-à-vis that of the initiator.

Again, the lack of political support contributes to the challenges of the community art. Since theatre, by its very nature, also x-rays the society, this can

be a source of threat to some people, especially corrupt or oppressive leaders. This situation can make it extremely difficult to initiate or promote a community theatre programme, especially as authorisation is often required from an authority in the area for any such activity to be implemented.

#### ***Forging a Culture-Sensitive Community Theatre***

For community theatre to gain acceptance, it must remain sensitive to both traditional and political cultures by showing respect for existing institutions and avoiding direct confrontation, while subtly addressing negative elements that require change. Programmes should begin with widely accepted community concerns before progressing to more sensitive issues, as this strategic approach builds trust and reduces resistance. Given theatre's historical role in mobilizing social reform, traditional and political leaders may be sceptical of its intentions; therefore, community theatre initiatives must clearly demonstrate their commitment to addressing pressing societal challenges in constructive and socially beneficial ways.

#### ***Building the Capacity of the Community***

Improving performance can be achieved directly and effectively through capacity building. Its emphasis should be placed on acquiring suitable knowledge, fostering constructive attitudes and developing appropriate skills for action. Workshop environments can facilitate this, with the first segment focusing on establishing the aims, philosophy, and goals of the community theatre programme with sufficient clarity. After these have been set up, the workshops can advance to training in particular skills – such as voice, movement, and group dynamics – as well as the specifics of employing chosen theatrical conventions and assessing the effects of the theatrical endeavor.

#### ***Promoting the Activity***

How can we promote community theatre activities? In other words, how can we ensure that after the training of members and setting up of the community theatre groups the activities will continue without further external drive or support? The answer rests in interest and motivation. Community theatre activities can be sustained by fostering strong interest and motivation within the groups, particularly through healthy competition such as organizing performance festivals or awarding prizes to outstanding groups, especially during the early monitoring stages. However, given the limited and often inadequate funding available for theatre, especially when it is not directly tied to broader community development objectives, it is more sustainable to establish independent theatre groups within each target community, enabling them to function as self-reliant cultural bodies and ensuring the long-term continuity of the programme without constant external support.

#### ***Monitoring and Evaluating the Activity***

Monitoring and evaluation is an important, albeit often downplayed, aspect of many field activities. Theatre is an activity that has hardly received any attention when it comes to this phase, and in such a situation its impact cannot be properly assessed. Perhaps, this is where the difficulty with securing funding for theatre activities lies- there must be sufficient proof that the activity is succeeding or is likely to succeed. This can be shown only in a well designed and

well implemented programme of monitoring and evaluation which must clearly define what is to be monitored.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Community arts possess immense potential as flexible and transformative tools for social change, empowerment, and community development. While their improvisational and participatory nature can pose challenges, particularly regarding coordination and sustainability, they provide vital platforms for expression, inclusion, and collective action. When thoughtfully planned, adequately funded, and systematically monitored, community arts initiatives can strengthen cohesion, stimulate dialogue, preserve culture, and foster sustainable development. Ultimately, by prioritizing participation, inclusivity, partnerships, and supportive policies, community arts can serve as powerful catalysts for building vibrant, resilient, and self-reliant communities.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

Based on the research conducted on community arts and their impact on development and community engagement in Oyo town, it is recommended that community art initiatives prioritize active participation, collaboration, and inclusivity by meaningfully involving local residents in planning, design, and implementation to foster ownership and reflect community values and diversity. Art education and skills training should be promoted to strengthen local capacity and improve project quality, while institutions clearly articulate their theories of change and establish effective monitoring and evaluation systems to assess both short- and long-term impacts. Additionally, strong partnerships among artists, community members, organizations, and local authorities should be fostered, alongside supportive government policies and funding frameworks that integrate community arts into broader development strategies, thereby enhancing cultural preservation, empowerment, and sustainable social transformation.

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