

## Sustaining Puppet-Storytelling Tradition for Cultural Demonstration among Ethnic Nationalities in Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

*Puppet theatre is a rich cultural tradition among various ethnic groups in Nigeria. This tradition is gradually fading into oblivion amid the diverse challenges and realities of the 21st century. Extant literature has not paid close attention to the issue of its sustenance; thus, this chapter examined the preservation of puppet storytelling traditions in Nigeria as a practice that embodies and enshrines cultural values, ethics, mores, and belief systems essential for socio-cultural development. Culture Sustainability Theory (CST) was deployed, and findings revealed that sustaining puppet storytelling is not only about preserving culture but also about safeguarding values, morals, and creativity that cannot be allowed to go extinct. It was also found that puppet theatre is practised among different ethnic groups in Nigeria, mainly by the Tiv, Ibibio, Ogoni, Yoruba, and Kanuri. However, other ethnic groups practise masquerade traditions with figurines on the masks, but not in the real sense of puppeteering. Puppet theatre provides entertainment and education, raises awareness of critical social issues, and serves as a tool for conscientisation, attitudinal change, and the transmission of moral values from one generation to another. In addition, puppetry is an essential ingredient for socio-cultural and political development. However, it was observed that puppetry in Nigeria is marred by several challenges that threaten its existence, including a lack of patronage, competition from modern entertainment, limited development, and socio-religious changes. Furthermore, it was noted that the new media age presents several opportunities for puppetry in Nigeria to thrive, and that such opportunities can reposition the rich tradition for the better if judiciously used.*

**Keywords:** *Puppetry, Culture sustainability, Modernisation, Storytelling tradition, Edutainment*

### **Introduction**

It appears that puppet theatre is gradually losing relevance and the intensity of practice among several ethnic groups in Nigeria and across the African continent, rapidly becoming a historical reference point rather than a living tradition. The bulk of the present decline in puppet traditions is attributed to the shifting cultural realities brought about by the overbearing force of modernisation or globalisation. Despite increasing interest in cultural sustainability, there is a paucity of literary engagement with sustaining puppetry among various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. This situation is not, in any way, checkmating the excessive decline of the age-old tradition in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the decline in puppetry in Nigeria is gradually contributing to

the erosion of cultural mores and values and to identity crises, which is worrisome. It is against this backdrop that this chapter examines the preservation of puppet storytelling traditions in Nigeria as a practice that embodies and enshrines cultural values, ethics, mores, and belief systems essential to socio-cultural development. In light of this, this chapter re-evaluates the practice of puppet storytelling in various ethnic enclaves across Nigeria, examining its social and cultural significance in the contemporary context and the challenges and opportunities it faces.

The significance of this chapter is multifaceted. Aside from contributing to existing knowledge in the field of cultural sustainability, it will benefit various stakeholders, including researchers, Nigerian cultural agencies, policymakers in the Nigerian culture and tourism sector, and the industry itself. Cultural sustainability theory serves as the theoretical framework for this chapter. Both theories facilitate analysis of how stories are structured, the use of puppets as characters to enhance the narrative, and how audiences derive meaning from such performances through interpretation. Data generation will involve interviews and documentary observation.

### **Conceptualizing Puppetry**

It will not be out of place to state that puppetry is an age-old tradition that is gradually fading into oblivion. The argument is that puppetry has served various entertainment purposes in the past and has been overtaken by newer media such as animation (2D and 3D) and digital puppetry. Further, the argument is that the traditional puppet is not sophisticated and hence cannot compete with new media technology. Counterargument tends to assert that just because conventional puppetry cannot compete with the new technology, it does not mean that it should cease to exist. Doing that would mean it would cease to serve the local audience with the moral and cultural relevance it is known for. The idea is that globalisation should not lead to the death of cultures; instead, it should provide an opportunity for other cultures to thrive effectively. Otherwise, the importance is lost and becomes rather unfriendly. However, the concept of puppetry has been discussed, defined and contextualised in different climes.

A puppet is an object that humans manipulate. This definition is rather broad and may harbour confusion. To narrow it down to specifics, puppets can be toys (plastic, paper, etc.), dolls, or puffed objects (animal or human form, etc.). Regling (2015) opines that Puppetry is an ancient art form that has existed across different world cultures, used to hold audiences spellbound through its storytelling, performance, and craftsmanship (Bell, 2009). Furthermore, Krugger (2020) avers that Puppetry involves manipulating inanimate objects, typically puppets, to tell stories or perform

skits. There are different types of puppetry: Glove puppet, Rod puppet, Shadow puppet, Paper puppet, Water puppet, etc.

### **Puppetry among Ethnic Nationalities in Nigeria**

Nigeria is home to diverse puppet traditions, cutting across several ethnic groups, namely: Dogo-dogo (Kanuri), Kwagh-hir (Tiv), Gelede (Yoruba), Ekong (Ekon) (Ibibio), Ofiong (Efik), and Aninikpo (Ogoni) (Enem, 1981). These are the prominent traditions well known in Nigeria, but there may be others not as distinct as those mentioned above, which are subsumed in the masquerade traditions. It is noteworthy that masquerade performances in Nigeria often include puppetry, even though many may not perform it separately. This way, these may not be countered as a puppet tradition.

The ones mentioned above have a puppet performance separate from masquerades. The Kanuri people of Borno State are known for their Dogo-dogo puppetry, or Dabo-dabo, which involves using hand gloves to make expressions (Ellison, 1981). This is also known as a hand puppet or glove puppet. Idogho (2017) explains that Dabo-dabo are deployed to tell stories during major festivals and ceremonies. In practical terms, the *dabo-dabo*, also known as *dogo dogo* puppeteers, practice their art from village to village. Puppeteers could have as many assistants and drummers as possible, depending on the capacity of the crew. The work of the assistants and drummer is to assist the puppeteer with music and preparations for the act. Performances are usually thematised according to the mode of entertainment and the message to be conveyed.

*Kwagh-hir*: The Kwagh-hir, a popular theatre tradition of the Tiv people, involves puppet manipulation, masquerading, and other art forms such as dance and music, to tell moral stories and address social issues (Hagher, 1981). *Gelede*: The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria and the Benin people also utilise puppet theatre in their Gelede masquerade, a form of appeasing negative feelings associated with "mothers" (Lawal, 1996). *Ekong (Ekon) and Ofiong*: The Ibibio people have a puppet theatre tradition known as Ekong (Ekon) and Ofiong, often featuring Ekon society performances by men dedicated to ancestral spirits (Benson, 2020; Sampson, 2018).

*Aninikpo*: The Ogoni people are known for their Aninikpo puppet theatre, also used for storytelling and entertainment. In many cases, their performances are either at night or during the day and may include more than 10 puppets, each playing a different role, to tell a story simultaneously. Such performances are accompanied by dancing, music, singing, and wrestling, enhancing the

performance. Members of the audience can comfortably sit around, treating themselves to palm wine and cola nut while the performance is underway.

### **Puppetry Tradition: Significance**

It is important to note that, in addition to edutainment, puppetry is a fledgling art form and serves as a stage for social commentary (Mustapha, 2006). Puppeteers nose around for village gossip, happenings in virtually all aspects of society, and they use puppetry as a means of commenting on such events or happenings. Assert that one reason people gather to watch puppet performances is to get the gist of the latest trends in and around the community. Since it is difficult for people to go around and understand what is happening in society, they come to feast on news and such events from puppeteers who are good at gathering information and creatively delivering it to suit the interests of the audience they perform for. Storytelling adds to these performances. They share morals and delve into history about warriors, villains, myths, and fables. Through the rich storytelling traditions of puppet performance, several oral histories are passed down from generation to generation (Proschan, 1980). Such performances are thematically narrated to cover interesting areas, including political satire, where issues are brought to light for awareness and interrogation.

It is essential to sustain puppetry because, in the ethnic groups mentioned earlier, it is used to teach morals, virtues, and norms. In their performances, the rich cultural heritage of different ethnic groups is showcased. Some of the cultural heritage shown during the performance is only preserved by tradition. Thus, if such traditions are allowed to slip into oblivion, the preservatives are lost forever. Secondly, storytelling is carried out in different ways across various communities in Nigeria. The storytelling style of puppetry is dynamic and different from any other form. How the message is driven home can never be the same as other styles, like moonlight story traditions, etc. That is why we cannot allow puppetry to die away just like that. The level of creativity that a puppeteer must put into making an inanimate object take on actions, mannerisms, character and, sometimes, voice is unique and must be sustained.

*Entertainment:* Over the years, much has been achieved in puppetry. In the first instance, it has served as an entertainment medium. The puppet theatre of the Tiv people of Benue State attracts a large audience who come to enjoy the rich creative prowess of the puppeteer, just as we have musicians, dancers, comedians, acrobats, and songs. In most villages, puppet performers use the market, the village square and the king's courts to perform. Within the ambit of entertainment,

performance passes salient messages, informs people of events, both within and outside the village. This is often referred to as edutainment (the combination of education and entertainment in a performance). Rubin (1997) argues that puppetry among Nigerian ethnic groups primarily aims to entertain and educate, and often includes the use of masks, not just manipulated objects, as in the Western sense of puppetry.

*Fostering unity:* In many Nigerian communities, puppet theatre is like football. During a puppet performance, people from different climes come to watch under the same conditions. At that point, what matters to everyone is the entertainment. Thus, an event like this should be given the pride of place in the annals of creative endeavours. It is also important to note that during puppet performances in Tiv communities, people from different clans come together, which helps concretise relations and unity among villages and people.

*Creating Awareness:* Because of the appeal of puppet theatre, it has become a tool for awareness-raising, especially in rural areas, on issues such as agriculture, politics, relationships, child abuse, family crises, and marital challenges. In some climes, puppetry is deployed as a political instrument, often in the form of political satire, where government policies and activities are critiqued in a comic manner or with subtle denigration, without much fear of intimidation, especially when leaders are anti-people or anti-development. Thus, puppet theatre is applied to foster conscientisation, awareness, awakening and attitudinal change, which are essential for sustainable development.

### **Culture Sustainability as a Theoretical Framework**

In the present dispensation, certain aspects of global society must be preserved. These include: economy, policies, and cultures. An attempt to allow for an erosion of these aspects can lead to a socio-cultural crisis of identity and stability. In other words, changing the culture and identity of a people is tantamount to underdevelopment from all angles. These scenarios perhaps heralded the need for sustainable development across fields such as the environment, the economy, agriculture, and culture.

Cultural sustainability is, however, crucial to this chapter, especially Cultural Sustainability Theory (CST). According to Hawkes (2001), devising a cultural framework is expedient for the protection of cultural resources and rights. UNESCO acknowledges culture as a fourth dimension of sustainable development, together with economy, environment and society. This acknowledgement emphasises the need to sustain cultural resources to achieve sustainable

development. It is important to note that numerous individuals, groups, and organisations have contributed to our understanding of the critical role culture plays in achieving sustainable development, promoting cultural preservation, and fostering sustainable practices across various aspects of society.

Cultural sustainability refers to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and practices, ensuring their continued vitality amid societal changes and external pressures. It is about safeguarding intangible assets, such as traditions, beliefs, and knowledge, as well as tangible assets, such as historic sites and artistic expressions. This involves actively engaging communities, valuing diverse cultural expressions, and ensuring that cultural practices are passed down to future generations. Cultural sustainability encompasses key aspects such as heritage preservation, cultural validity, community engagement, economic viability, and cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is crucial to the chapter's argument: that modernisation should pave the way for the recognition of diverse cultures, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, and allow such cultures to thrive rather than overriding them, because it offers a more engaging and media-friendly alternative. The relevance of a cultural practice is not in its tendency to hybridise, but in its originality throughout generations. This applies to puppet traditions in various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Puppetry is one of such practices that must be preserved in Nigeria. Suppose masquerade traditions in various parts of Nigeria have survived modernisation without demanding change in practice. In that case, puppetry should be able to survive without going into oblivion as it is currently. Masquerade traditions abound among various ethnic groups in Nigeria, and a couple of masquerades incorporate puppets without puppeteers. Although the objects are figurines made of wood, clothing, plastic, and paper, they create the imagery of dolls or toys in different forms. However, without creative manipulation to create movement or animation, one cannot call them a puppet. As far as puppetry is concerned, there must be movement or animation.

### **Challenges Facing the Puppet Tradition in Nigeria**

Scholars have argued that globalisation has contributed significantly to the erosion of values and to the decline of some African cultures and traditions. The argument revolves around the dominance of Eurocentric or globally acceptable cultures that threaten extant culture (Bell, 2009). This situation plays out in the Nigerian cultural space with very deafening calls for attention and, perhaps, action before certain forms disappear into oblivion (Ellison, 1981). It is pertinent to note

that when traditional cultures go into extinction, values, norms, mores, and ethics erode, affecting society on a larger scale.

Puppet players are older men who have not been able to pass down the knowledge to the new generation. The point here is that puppet practitioners are closely related to herbalists and charmers. Often, puppet show practitioners show up in special costumes, drawing some weird looks. These look to create fear in the younger generation, who see the practice as a fetish. Just like other fetish cultural practices,

*Lack of Patronage and Support:* Many traditional puppet shows in Nigeria travel from one place to another in search of an audience, especially a paying one, and to stage a performance and get a few bugs fixed. With economic hardship biting harder, traditional puppeteers move about for greener pastures without much success. This does not mean that all puppeteers are doing well; the number is relatively small. These practitioners do not get funding from the government or other institutions.

*Competition from Modern Entertainment:* The rise of cinema, television, and the internet has provided alternative forms of entertainment, diverting attention away from traditional performances. Youths who are supposed to continue the tradition are seeking white-collar jobs in big cities and would not want to pursue puppeteering, which is often considered a local tradition. Again, being that puppeteering is an intricate and creative skill, it requires apprenticeship and a reasonable time frame for apprentices to understand. Since it is not taught in school and other regular institutions, sending young people to learn the trade has become problematic. Apart from this, the puppet business is not seen as a modern creative venture like the rest, and it seems not to attract young people. Therefore, as the old puppeteers grow old in the trade and die, the skills and efficiency go with them, leaving no successors. This is a significant challenge that requires innovation and development.

*Lack of Development:* A significant challenge facing puppetry is a lack of development. Although it is an ancient art, it requires some development, especially in the present age, when other media compete for relevance. Thus, for practitioners to continue in the old tradition is not an issue; the new audience, familiar with new media, may have difficulty appreciating the old style of traditional puppetry. In this regard, many have argued that the lack of development limits the relevance of puppet art. It is expected that puppeteering will evolve alongside the new scripting trend, and

storytelling will reflect the contemporary world. Failure to adapt favourably may have been the reason for the dwindling appeal in recent times.

*Religious and Societal Changes:* It is pertinent to observe that, with adherence to religious creeds and the proliferation of religious institutions across Nigeria, certain cultural practices have been affected, oftentimes negatively. For instance, Islam decries the use of objects in human form. In the same vein, Christianity does not support figurines, as it connotes graven images (idol worship). This outlook, perhaps, contributes to the declining interest of many in the puppet traditions in rural areas of Nigeria. Again, puppetry is considered rooted in traditional beliefs or rituals. Therefore, it is kicked against by the aforementioned religious institutions. It is noteworthy that most traditional practices have given way due to the increasing activities of religious bodies in Nigeria and beyond. Thus, it threatens the core of cultural existence, especially in Africa. With this situation, it is expected that shortly, some of the traditional and cultural practices, which have defined various ethnic groups in Nigeria, will go into oblivion. The effect of this on the sustenance of the ethnic groups' language and identity would have been significantly altered, even in light of the insistence on culture as the fourth pillar of development.

### **Puppetry in the Contemporary Domain: Opportunities**

The contemporary era is laced with opportunities for the art of puppetry to continue to develop. The new media have offered more opportunities for creative arts than ever before in the history of scientific development. Unfortunately, a large population of puppeteers in Nigeria are either illiterate or semi-illiterate and may not have the expertise or be ICT compliant. This situation limits the opportunities available through the new media. For instance, the world can now enjoy the rich cultural heritage of traditional puppetry on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. If young, creative skit makers and content creators have utilised social media to make great wealth (Obot, 2025), what stops puppeteers from creating amazing content for millions of teeming enthusiasts who daily crave unique content?

Recent complaints about the gradual decline of the puppet theatre are that young people are not showing interest in the practice because it is archaic and old-fashioned. With the emergence of the new media, the interest can be rekindled and nurtured to fruition. It requires close collaboration between creative agencies, saddled with the responsibilities of sustaining cultures. A national puppetry competition can be organised and sustained to boost widespread interest. New social media platforms can be created to showcase puppet theatres from diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria.

These, and many new ideas, can be floated by individuals, the government and culture-conscious agencies to preserve the dying puppet traditions in Nigeria.

## **Conclusion**

Sustaining puppet storytelling tradition is not only for the preservation of culture but also for the values, morals, and level of creativity that cannot be allowed to go extinct. Puppet theatre is practised among different ethnic groups in Nigeria, but mainly by the Tiv, Ibibio, Ogoni, Yoruba, and Kanuri. However, other ethnic groups practice masquerade traditions with figurines on the masks, but not in the real sense of puppeteering. Puppet theatre provides entertainment, education, and raises awareness of important social issues, while serving as a tool for conscientisation, attitudinal change, and the transmission of moral values from one generation to another. Invariably, puppetry is an essential ingredient for socio-cultural and political development. Nevertheless, this rich tradition faces several challenges to its existence, including a lack of patronage, competition from modern entertainment, and socio-religious changes. The new media period presents several opportunities for puppetry in Nigeria to thrive, and such opportunities can reposition the rich tradition for the better if judiciously used.

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