

AQUATIC THEATRE AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN SOME RIVERINE AND COASTAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The idea of aquatic theatre places performance within the ecology of water, acknowledging rivers, seas, and other aquatic environments as dynamic spaces of art and socio-political thought. This paper discusses aquatic theatre in Nigeria as a new locus of environmental justice, where theatre practitioners, artists, and communities address pollution, oil exploitation, and ecological degradation through performance. Grounded in eco-critical and performance theories, the paper expounds on the role of theatre in dramatizing and intervening in the lived experiences of riverine and coastal communities, such as those in the Niger Delta and Lagos Lagoon. The essay deconstructs how Nigerian artists recast environmental injustice, enhance indigenous ecological expertise, and elevate social consciousness through water-based performances, analyzing case studies of community-based performances, environmental protest art, and aquatic festivals. It argues that aquatic theatre offers an aesthetic and political stage for ecological repair, turning locations of ecological trauma into dialogic and resistant spaces. The paper concludes that these performances are not only a source of cultural preservation but also a form of proactive participation in environmental advocacy, positioning theatre at the intersection of art and ethics in ensuring sustainable ecological justice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Environmental Justice, Nigeria, Ecocriticism, Aquatic Theatre, Performance Activism, Niger Delta.

Introduction

Aquatic theatre, as a performance form rooted in the ecological and symbolic qualities of water, signifies a novel direction in Nigerian performance practice and environmental discourse. Its development reflects both artistic creativity and a moral effort against environmental degradation, particularly in the Niger Delta, where water has long served as the site of

exploitation, resistance, and survival. The Nigerian environment, especially its riverine landscapes, has suffered decades of ecological abuse from oil spills, industrial waste, and governmental negligence. The water bodies of the Niger Delta, as theorized by scholars such as Nnimmo Bassey, have been transformed into poisonous wastelands rather than the life-giving ecosystems they once were (Bassey 17). Aquatic theatre intervenes in this crisis by repossessing water as a space of performance and morality, allowing communities to narrate their environmental plight through art.

Water in Nigeria is not only a physical element but also a spiritual, economic, and cultural cornerstone. The Osun-Osogbo Festival and Ijaw masquerade rituals are prime examples of traditional performances demonstrating that water deities and water bodies reside at the center of communal identity and cosmology (Adesina 83). These indigenous traditions now overlap with contemporary performance activism, where theatre serves as a vehicle for environmental advocacy. For instance, Esiaba Irobi notes that African theatre has traditionally been born at the intersection of ritual, social memory, and resistance (Irobi 54). This observation is deeply relevant to aquatic theatre, which reinstates the ritual purpose of performance to address contemporary ecological crises.

As a political and theoretical framework, environmental justice concerns itself not just with human plights, but with the rights and agency of the ecosystems themselves. Scholars like Rob Nixon have described this type of crisis as "slow violence," highlighting how environmental damage unfolds imperceptibly over time, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities (Nixon 6). Aquatic theatre in Nigeria translates this low-grade violence into an expressive spectacle, rendering rivers, lagoons, and floods as potent metaphors for both destruction and rebirth. Water-based staging has been used to dramatize the effects of pollution and climate change, as seen in *The Oil Spill Monologues* (2020) in Port Harcourt and *Floating Dreams* (2021) on the Lagos Lagoon. These water-staged interventions expose how theatre can achieve what Chinua Achebe referred to as the "balance of stories": giving voice to the voiceless, as well as to nature itself (Achebe 9).

By embedding theatre within the ecology of water, Nigerian artists redefine the boundaries of performance, activism, and spirituality. Aquatic theatre is therefore both the medium and the message—a way to reclaim damaged environments as sites of collective healing and political commentary. This essay discusses the role played by various forms of aquatic theatre across the Niger Delta, Lagos waterways, and Benin riverine areas in promoting environmental justice, drawing on the principles of ecocriticism, performance studies, and postcolonial environmental theory. It examines the mobilization of indigenous aesthetics, environmental awareness, and social activism through water-centered performances, and analyzes how each challenges institutions of environmental exploitation. Through case studies of the Niger Delta, the Lagos waterways, and Benin riverine festivals, this paper reveals that aquatic theatre in Nigeria does not merely mirror ecological realities, but actively participates in reshaping them.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Aquatic Theatre in the Nigerian Context

Aquatic theatre describes performances where water—whether in the form of rivers, lagoons, or floodplains—serves as the primary setting, symbol, or performative partner. While its Western roots can be traced to historical experiments like the Water Theatre in Venice and

contemporary site-specific plays (Birringer 45), its Nigerian iteration is deeply rooted in rich cultural and environmental traditions. According to Adesina, African performance thrives at the intersection of nature and community, where ritual dissolves into theatre and theatre transforms into lived experience (Adesina 83). This intersection is characteristic of riverine communities, whose performance rituals—such as the Osun-Osogbo Festival or Ijaw water masquerades—incorporate dance, chants, and symbolic purification rites centered on aquatic deities.

Recent Nigerian scholarship connects this indigenous foundation to contemporary environmental activism. A prominent example is the Niger Delta Theatre Forum (2019–2023), which staged productions in Bayelsa and Rivers States to dramatize oil pollution and its devastating impact on fishermen's livelihoods. These plays were performed around polluted creeks, utilizing the water and local boats as stages (Okoh 64). By blurring the lines between ritual and protest, these productions exemplify what Schechner terms "restored behavior"—the re-enactment of traditional performance forms within new contexts of resistance (Schechner 35).

Theatre and Environmental Justice

The connection between theatre and environmental justice in Nigeria stems from decades of ecological marginalization and socio-political neglect. Bryant notes that environmental justice demands that all people, irrespective of race, color, or income, be treated fairly and given a meaningful voice in the formulation of environmental laws and policies (Bryant 12). In Nigeria, this manifests as an ongoing struggle for communities like the Ogoni, Ijaw, and Itsekiri, who are disproportionately affected by the environmental destruction caused by oil extraction. Theatre provides a vital public and communal arena where these struggles can be dramatized, interpreted, and shared.

According to Enekwe, theatre in Africa functions simultaneously as a mirror and a weapon, reflecting oppression while actively resisting it (Enekwe 59). Locally, environmental destruction has been dramatized by community-based companies such as The Living Earth Performance Ensemble. In their production *Crude Realities* (2020), performers used oil-contaminated fishing nets and polluted water samples as props to materialize ecological violence. Similarly, The Floating Dreams Project (2021) in Lagos organized environmental performances on boats throughout Makoko to highlight the impacts of flooding and plastic waste (Adegbite 19). These performances push aquatic spaces from the background to the forefront of the narrative, echoing Bassey's call for a performance culture that humanizes the environment (Bassey 21).

Ecocritical and Postcolonial Frameworks

Ecocriticism provides the primary theoretical framework for analyzing the role of aquatic theatre in environmental justice. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty xix). When applied to performance, it explores theatre through the lens of ecological ethics and the politics of sustainability. Nigerian academics, including Adetunji and Okoh, have extended ecocritical theory to incorporate indigenous cosmologies that view nature as a living, divine entity (Okoh 66). This paradigm is critical for interpreting aquatic theatre, where water is not a passive backdrop but an active performer.

Postcolonial ecocriticism deepens this discourse by linking contemporary environmental injustice to historical colonial exploitation. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" describes the gradual, often invisible destruction of life wrought by oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation, which continues to disproportionately harm marginalized communities (Nixon 7). Nigerian water performances render this invisible suffering tangible, translating abstract environmental data into lived experiences. In *The River Will Speak* (2022), a community theatre performance in Warri, actors stood submerged to their waists in water while reading the testimonies of displaced fishermen and widows. The water simultaneously signified their profound loss and their resilience—metaphorically staging the survival of the ecosystem itself (Okoduwa 42).

Indigenous Knowledge, Ritual, and Ecological Philosophy

While Western eco-theatre frequently foregrounds sustainability and activism, African performance culture integrates spirituality, cosmology, and community as core ecological principles. Deities such as Osun, Olokun, and Ovia embody harmony and purity, representing what Nwosu terms the "cosmological morals of ecological responsibility" (Nwosu 103). Rituals dedicated to these deities ensure both cultural continuity and grassroots environmental education.

For instance, the Ovia Water Festival in Edo State has integrated modern environmental messaging into its traditional practices since 2018, with youth cohorts creating dramatizations focused on waste disposal and water conservation along the Ovia River. Similarly, in Benue State, the River Mothers Initiative (2020–2024) collaborated with local theatre practitioners to produce participatory dramas addressing water scarcity and pollution.

Current Research and Future Research Opportunities

Recent Nigerian scholarship (2019–2025) reflects a growing, though unevenly distributed, interest in performance as a response to ecological crises. The severity of aquatic degradation in the Niger Delta and other riverine regions is well-documented in both scientific and cultural research, forming the empirical baseline for contemporary performance activism. Scientific studies, such as *Hydrocarbon Contamination in Niger Delta Creeks*, indicate that petroleum-hydrocarbon levels vastly exceed regulatory limits, confirming that oil pollution has fundamentally altered entire aquatic ecosystems (Ekiye and Zali 142). Obire and Wemedo offer similar data demonstrating long-term, seasonal toxicity in river sediments and mangrove swamps (Obire and Wemedo 88). These ecological realities are directly reflected in dramatic texts like *Delta Blues II* (2019), where actors wade through dark, murky waters and heavy fog to symbolize bio-toxicity and communal despair.

Paralleling the scientific record, investigative journalism and activist reports have documented high-profile oil spill crises that directly inspire theatrical protests. Following a severe wellhead blowout in Nembe Santa Barbara, community theatre troupes in Bayelsa State staged *When the River Bled* in April 2021, dramatizing both the ecological devastation and the spiritual desecration of the creek (Bassey and Etieyibo 44). These performances transform contemporary disasters into public rituals, validating Osanyin's assertion that Nigerian theatre is most potent where injustice directly confronts cultural memory (Osanyin 73).

Urban water ecologies, particularly in Lagos, have also become laboratories for aquatic performance. The Makoko Floating School experiment and *The Floating Dreams Project* (2021) blended architecture, dance, and lagoon-centered activism to combat flooding and plastic pollution. Adegbite argues that these performances position the Lagos Lagoon as an

active subject and a environmental co-storyteller (Adegbite 22). However, Arigbede notes that much of this literature remains descriptive, with few theoretical syntheses linking performance studies to urban political ecology (Arigbede 11).

Despite this momentum, four persistent gaps characterize current scholarship:

1. **Disciplinary Silos:** Ecological science and performance analysis remain isolated from one another. Empirical data is rarely integrated into dramaturgical critique, resulting in parallel but disconnected academic conversations (Akintunde 45).
2. **Geographic Imbalance:** While research extensively covers the Niger Delta, there is a distinct lack of critical focus on inland waterways, such as the Benue River or the floodplains of Kogi State (Nnorom 58).
3. **Methodological Limitations:** Researchers rarely utilize longitudinal ethnography or participatory action research (PAR) to evaluate the long-term impacts of these theatrical interventions on local communities (Okoh 69).
4. **Theoretical Gaps:** There is a lack of rigorous theorization regarding the legal and ethical dimensions of aquatic performance, specifically how these interventions intersect with policy, litigation, or indigenous governance (Dike 61).

To address these gaps, scholars call for a more transdisciplinary approach that integrates environmental science with performance ethnography (Adetunji and Okoh 67). Cross-regional studies comparing Nigeria's coastal and inland river systems would capture distinct regional variations in water aesthetics and narratives of justice. Furthermore, participatory research that centers local voices and indigenous ecological knowledge can better navigate ethical questions of representation and authorship (Nwosu 104). Finally, incorporating legal and policy analyses would demonstrate how aquatic performances actively contribute to advocacy and environmental reform (Bassey 25). Ultimately, as Dike notes, these performances represent both a remembrance and a demand—a call for restitution where the environment itself becomes the agent of resistance (Dike 57).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks: ecocriticism, performance theory, and environmental justice. Together, these frameworks contextualize how aquatic theatre operates as both a cultural and political intervention against environmental crises in Nigeria.

According to Cheryl Glotfelty, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty xxii). In the Nigerian context, however, eco-literary analysis must also negotiate deeply entrenched histories of colonial exploitation, corporate extraction, and state abandonment. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence"—environmental damage that occurs imperceptibly over time—accurately characterizes the reality of marginalized communities in the Niger Delta, where accumulated pollution quietly undermines ecosystems and public health (Nixon 6). Nigerian playwrights and performers translate this slow violence into visceral, sensory experiences, transforming invisible toxicity into visible, collective memory.

Scholars like Adesina and Bassey extend ecocritical theory into postcolonial discourse, arguing that it is impossible to address ecological destruction in Africa outside the structures of colonial resource exploitation and neocolonial oil politics (Adesina 41). This postcolonial, ecocritical prism clarifies how aquatic performances—particularly those staged directly on creeks or

lagoons—can simultaneously function as acts of mourning and defiance. Consequently, Nigerian aquatic theatre does not merely aestheticize the natural world; it reclaims water as a site for decolonial narration and eco-activism (Bassey and Etieyibo 46).

The second foundational frame is performance theory. Richard Schechner defines performance as "restored behavior," or twice-behaved behavior, which carries cultural memory and serves as a form of social rehearsal (Schechner 28). When Nigerian artists stage aquatic theatre, they actively repair the communal ties to rivers and wetlands that have been severed by industrial pollution. Here, water transcends its role as a material stage prop to become a living, co-creative agent in the dramatic process. Similarly, Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*—the transformative sense of unity and egalitarian solidarity achieved through ritual performance—explains how aquatic theatre fosters collective resilience among affected populations (Turner 58).

In water-based Nigerian productions such as *The Water Has Memory* (2020), audiences often view the performance from canoes while actors execute ritual purifications or eco-protests on the water. This staging instantiates Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of the transformative power of performance, wherein the environment and the participants interact dynamically to generate immediate, shared meaning (Fischer-Lichte 112). In this manner, the performance site becomes both a theatre and a therapeutic arena—a liminal space balancing trauma, ecology, and resistance.

The final framework is environmental justice theory, which examines the asymmetrical distribution of environmental burdens and benefits along lines of class, ethnicity, and geography (Bullard 14). In Nigeria, minority ethnic groups in the riverine regions—including the Ogoni, Ijaw, and Itsekiri—bear a disproportionate share of oil-related ecological degradation. Activist Ken Saro-Wiwa famously termed this systemic combination of corporate negligence and political marginalization as "ecological genocide" (Saro-Wiwa 18).

Modern Nigerian aquatic theatre inherits this activist legacy, utilizing performance to expose these structural inequities. Adetunji argues that environmental justice in performance manifests when an artist exposes the lived conditions of communities that bear the brunt of ecological destruction yet remain excluded from remediation policies (Adetunji 71). By embedding their productions directly within contaminated waters, artists make the abstractions of environmental injustice literal. In doing so, aquatic theatre functions as a performative court of conscience, allowing the environment itself to speak out against human greed and regulatory failure.

Collectively, ecocriticism, performance studies, and environmental justice provide a unified interpretive lens. Through this triad, aquatic theatre in Nigeria can be understood as both an aesthetic triumph and a political enactment of environmental citizenship.

Aquatic and Ecocritical Aesthetics

Aquatic theatre is a performative practice that occurs within or in close proximity to water, incorporating environmental elements such as tides, currents, acoustic properties, and reflections into its dramaturgy. As Okoh explains, aquatic theatre positions water simultaneously as stage and subject, dissolving the boundaries between the performance and its surrounding environment (Okoh 72). In Nigeria, this medium has evolved as a direct

response to the destruction of rivers and wetlands, particularly within regions like the Niger Delta, Makoko, and the Cross River Basin.

Floating stages and symbolic water rituals serve as essential dramaturgical tools to expose pollution, flooding, and displacement in productions such as *Water No Get Enemy* (2018) and *Delta Tears* (2021). Through these performances, audiences are challenged to confront the paradox of living in a country rich in water resources yet devastated by environmental degradation.

Water as Metaphor and Medium

African cosmologies accord profound metaphorical significance to water. In Yoruba culture, for instance, rivers are inextricably linked to deities like Osun and Yemoja, who embody fertility, healing, and justice. When Nigerian artists stage aquatic performances, they tap into this rich cosmological heritage; the material application of water transcends the aesthetic, becoming a spiritual invocation and an environmental protest. According to Nwosu, the cosmologies of the Yoruba and the riverine peoples of the Niger Delta frame water not as an inert substance, but as an active archive that remembers, speaks, and condemns (Nwosu 104).

A poignant example is found in the performance *Osun Cries* (2022), where a cleansing ritual utilizing colored water is staged to symbolize oil pollution, effectively translating a spiritual lament into an ecological critique. Spectators, often standing ankle-deep in the same contaminated water, find themselves physically implicated in both the ecological devastation and the ritual redemption enacted on stage. This immersive design transforms passive onlookers into active participants in environmental consciousness.

Nigerian Case Studies of Aquatic Theatre

Aquatic theatre in Nigeria has progressed beyond experimental performance into a rigorous, interdisciplinary field traversing ecology, politics, spirituality, and embodied memory. Contemporary scholarship increasingly situates this practice within environmental humanities, performance ecology, and climate justice discourse. What makes the Nigerian context uniquely vital is the immediacy of the environmental crises facing riverine and coastal communities. Rising sea levels, systemic oil pollution, and acute water insecurity are lived realities rather than abstract projections. Consequently, aquatic theatre does not emerge as an aesthetic luxury, but as an urgent cultural intervention—a method for documenting, interrogating, and disrupting ecological breakdown.

Throughout these case studies, water functions dynamically as stage, actor, archive, and symbol. Rather than presenting detached representations, these performances are materially entangled with their environments, creating a relational network among the performer's body, the water, and the audience. This produces an immersive, politically charged theatre that is epistemologically distinct from conventional proscenium practices.

Case Study 1: Makoko Floating Theatre (Lagos Lagoon)

The Makoko Floating Theatre represents one of the most sophisticated intersections of architecture, performance, and environmental adaptation in contemporary Africa. Situated within the informal settlement of Makoko in Lagos, the project responds to a fragile urban condition defined by water-based habitation, infrastructural exclusion, and climate vulnerability. Makoko is estimated to house between 85,000 and 250,000 residents, though

precise figures remain contested due to its informal status. Built largely on stilts over the Lagos Lagoon, the community is a striking example of amphibious urbanism in the Global South.

The intervention, initially led by architect Kunlé Adeyemi, framed the floating structure as an adaptive architectural solution to rising tides. However, its subsequent activation as a performative space marked a critical shift from mere utility to cultural agency. By 2020, artists began utilizing the structure and its surrounding waterways as a theatre, staging productions that directly engaged with the socio-political realities of Makoko's residents.

From a climate perspective, Lagos is classified as a high-risk coastal megacity. Projections by the World Bank indicate that sea levels along the West African coast could rise by up to 0.5 meters by 2100, threatening to displace over 13 million people in Lagos alone. Within this volatile context, performances in Makoko become deeply political acts; they do not merely depict vulnerability, but actively enact it.

The spatial configuration of these performances is central to their meaning. Audiences typically arrive by canoe, navigating the same channels that structure daily life in Makoko. This journey dissolves the boundaries between daily survival and theatrical performance. Furthermore, the inherent instability of the floating stage introduces an element of environmental unpredictability, where shifting currents, sudden weather changes, and ambient urban sounds co-author the production.

Thematically, many of these productions confront the trauma of forced evictions—a recurring crisis in Makoko, where state-led demolitions have historically displaced thousands. By staging performances on water, artists symbolically reclaim space that the state has penalized as illegal or expendable. Adegbite (2020) interprets this as a form of "spatial resistance," wherein performance redefines the lagoon as a site of indigenous belonging rather than municipal marginality. The Makoko Floating Theatre demonstrates how aquatic performance can operate simultaneously as a survival strategy and a mode of radical storytelling, transforming vulnerability into political agency.

Case Study 2: Niger Delta Ecological Theatre (Bayelsa and Rivers States)

The Niger Delta presents an extreme landscape for aquatic theatre, characterized by widespread and deeply entrenched ecocide. As the hub of Nigeria's petroleum extraction industry, the region has endured decades of catastrophic environmental neglect. Reports by Amnesty International estimate that over 1.5 million tons of oil have been spilled into the Niger Delta since the 1950s, contaminating river systems, decimating mangrove forests, and destroying the traditional livelihoods of fishing communities.

Within this crisis zone, aquatic theatre emerges as a vital form of ecological witnessing. Grassroots groups, such as the Creek Drama Ensemble, stage productions directly within oil-slicked creeks, transforming sites of toxic contamination into spaces of narrative resistance. Productions like *Delta Bloodlines* (2019) refuse to sanitize or abstract environmental damage. Performers physically immerse themselves in contaminated waters, utilizing their bodies to communicate the visceral reality of ecological trauma.

The sensory dimension of these performances is profoundly disruptive. Unlike conventional theatre, which prioritizes the visual and auditory, these productions engage multiple senses simultaneously. The sharp stench of crude oil, the tactile discomfort of toxic water on skin, and the visual grimness of blackened shorelines create an immersive encounter that is both

unsettling and transformative. Akintunde (2021) argues that this raw sensory immersion generates "ecological empathy"—an affective engagement that compels audiences to confront environmental injustice on a visceral level.

The urgency of these performances is underscored by staggering data. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) reported that in Ogoniland alone, groundwater contamination extends across 1,000 square kilometers, with some areas requiring up to 30 years of specialized remediation. Furthermore, fish stocks in heavily polluted zones have collapsed, destroying the region's economic baseline.

Aquatic theatre in the Delta functions as a vital counter-narrative to corporate and state discourses that systematically downplay environmental harm. By weaving real testimonies from local fishermen, women, and youth directly into scripts, these performances blur the line between drama and oral history. They serve as living archives, preserving stories of injustice that might otherwise be erased by corporate public relations campaigns. Furthermore, the explicit critique of multinational corporations like Shell plc highlights the global power dynamics that allow environmental exploitation to occur with minimal accountability. In this sense, aquatic theatre in the Niger Delta acts as a juridical space, contributing directly to broader struggles for environmental justice and ecocritical reparations.

Case Study 3: Calabar River Performance Festival

The Calabar River Performance Festival offers a distinct model of aquatic theatre, one that integrates environmental advocacy with cultural celebration and sustainable tourism. Staged in the historic coastal city of Calabar, the festival leverages the city's status as a cultural hub while introducing a rigorous ecological mandate.

Since expanding its aquatic-themed programming in 2022, the festival has become an experimental laboratory for water-based performance. Productions like *Flow of Justice* fuse traditional Efik performance elements with contemporary choreography, generating a hybrid aesthetic that bridges historical memory with contemporary crises.

A defining feature of the festival is its operational commitment to ecological sustainability. The deliberate use of biodegradable materials—such as organic lanterns released into the river during evening performances—reflects a conscious effort to align artistic practice with environmental ethics. This is particularly significant in a global context where large-scale festivals are increasingly scrutinized for their heavy carbon footprints and waste production.

Economically, the festival supports local development by attracting cultural tourists. According to data from the Cross River State Tourism Bureau, broader cultural events in Calabar, such as the famous Calabar Carnival, draw over 2 million visitors annually and generate billions of naira for the regional economy. While the River Performance Festival operates on a more specialized scale, its focus on ecological themes establishes it as an important blueprint for sustainable, eco-critical cultural tourism. From a theoretical perspective, the festival functions as an "eco-ritual performance," where artistic expressions serve both an aesthetic and an ethical function, operating, as Dike (2023) notes, as a form of collective "environmental prayer" that fosters communal stewardship.

Case Study 4: The Aquatic Performance Works of Sunday Abraye

The artistic practice of Sunday Abraye represents one of the most intellectually rigorous contributions to contemporary African eco-art. Operating at the intersection of performance

art, site-specific installation, and environmental activism, Abraye's work is deeply informed by the ecological realities of the Niger Delta.

His performances are characterized by a minimalist yet profoundly symbolic aesthetic. By positioning the bare human body in direct, unshielded contact with polluted waters, Abraye creates a stark visual vocabulary that communicates both human vulnerability and ecosystemic resilience. Works such as *Silent Currents* and *Echoes Beneath* explore themes of ancestral memory, toxic contamination, and survival, treating water as both a physical medium and a historical metaphor.

What distinguishes Abraye's practice is its deliberate engagement with the concept of the Anthropocene—the current geological epoch defined by dominant human impact on the Earth's ecosystems. Within his work, water acts as a physical archive of human exploitation, storing the toxic traces of industrial capitalism and community resistance.

Abraye's performances also challenge conventional, passive modes of spectatorship. Rather than delivering linear narratives or simplistic moral conclusions, his pieces invite audiences to interpret open-ended, complex imagery. This refusal to offer easy answers mirrors the intricate nature of global environmental crises, which resist reductionist solutions. In contemporary art discourse, Abraye's work aligns with international eco-art movements while remaining resolutely anchored in the socio-political specificities of the Nigerian landscape.

Case Study 5: Ovia Osese and Osun-Osogbo Festivals in Environmental Justice Discourse

The Ovia Osese Festival of the Benin Kingdom and the Osun-Osogbo Festival in Osogbo provide crucial theoretical insights into how indigenous knowledge systems shape contemporary aquatic performance. These festivals are not static historical relics; they are living cultural frameworks embedded in spiritual worldviews that mandate ecological harmony between human societies and the natural world.

The UNESCO-recognized Osun-Osogbo Festival attracts tens of thousands of global participants annually, serving as a major site of cultural and spiritual pilgrimage. The Osun River is approached as a sacred entity, and the rituals performed along its banks emphasize purification, environmental renewal, and cosmic balance. Similarly, the Ovia Festival centers on water as the literal and symbolic source of communal life and fertility. The ritual theatre associated with this festival uses symbolic action to convey complex cosmological laws that treat water not as a commodified resource to be extracted, but as a living entity deserving of legal and ethical protection.

In contemporary environmental justice discourse, these indigenous celebrations offer vital, alternative paradigms for sustainability. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, over 70 percent of Nigerians lack access to safely managed water services, illustrating a profound crisis in centralized water governance. Indigenous practices, such as those preserved in the Ovia and Osun-Osogbo festivals, provide long-standing, community-tested models of decentralized environmental stewardship. By linking these ancient festivals to modern environmental justice movements, scholarship can reframe them as active, contemporary interventions that challenge dominant Western paradigms of development and offer sustainable alternatives for natural resource management.

Eco-Critical Aesthetics and Activism

Aquatic theatre extends beyond mere representation; it embodies an ecocritical aesthetic where art and grassroots activism converge. According to Adesina, an authentic ecological aesthetic must appeal directly to the senses rather than solely to intellect; it must compel audiences to feel the immediate weight of environmental collapse (Adesina 43). This is precisely the intervention achieved by Nigerian aquatic performances, which deliberately juxtapose aesthetic beauty with ecological horror to catalyze public awareness and political mobilization.

This performative activism aligns with international trends in eco-performance, where art is weaponized as a direct environmental intervention. The Nigerian model is unique because it seamlessly grafts indigenous ritual structures onto contemporary activist theatre. By utilizing water as both stage and symbol, these performances challenge the industrial-capitalist paradigm that treats nature as a passive sink for waste. Instead, they promote an ontological ethic of coexistence and active ecological restoration.

Furthermore, these performances frequently yield concrete, material results. Following the 2021 production of *When the River Bled* in Bayelsa State, local youth organizations directly collaborated with environmental NGOs to launch community-led river-clearing initiatives. As Osanyin notes, the performance successfully transformed communal despair into political agency by turning passive spectators into active participants in the physical restoration of their environment (Osanyin 75).

Complex Aesthetic and Ethical Considerations

Despite its transformative potential, aquatic theatre presents intricate ethical, logistical, and safety challenges. Staging productions within contaminated, unpredictable, or structurally unstable water bodies poses immediate physical risks to both performers and audiences. Moreover, as Nnorom cautions, there is a persistent danger of romanticizing systemic suffering within environmental art, which risks commodifying local trauma for consumption by elite domestic or international art audiences (Nnorom 58).

Consequently, an ethical aquatic theatre must maintain a careful equilibrium between artistic representation and social responsibility. It must prioritize deep community involvement over aesthetic exploitation, ensuring that the performance yields tangible, material benefits for the host community. As environmental advocate Bassey aptly summarizes, a justice-oriented art form must ultimately aim to heal the environment and its people, rather than merely displaying their wounds for aesthetic appreciation (Bassey 28).

Aquatic Theatre Case Studies and Nigerian Experiences

Aquatic theatre in Nigeria cannot be reduced to a single aesthetic category or performance tradition. It is a layered, regionally differentiated practice shaped by specific ecological realities, cultural cosmologies, and socio-political tensions. What emerges across Nigeria's water-based environments is not a uniform theatrical template, but a constellation of practices responding dynamically to localized environmental pressures. In the Niger Delta, aquatic theatre is urgent, visceral, and confrontational, rooted in the ecocide caused by extractive petroleum industries. In the Lagos Lagoon, it manifests as an adaptive, urban intervention engaging with questions of municipal resilience, spatial marginality, and climate vulnerability.

Meanwhile, in Edo and Cross River States, aquatic theatre remains deeply embedded within indigenous ritual and festival traditions, where water operates as both a sacred entity and a performative medium, allowing contemporary environmental concerns to be woven seamlessly into long-standing cultural frameworks. These regional distinctions are far more than mere stylistic variations; they demonstrate how aquatic theatre functions as a deeply contextualized practice that transforms physical water bodies into active spaces of political resistance, cultural memory, and social engagement.

The Niger Delta: Theatre in Oil-Polluted Waters

The Niger Delta remains one of the most ecologically compromised regions globally, a condition that has profoundly shaped the emergence of aquatic theatre as a vital form of grassroots resistance and ecological witnessing. As Nigeria's primary oil-producing hub, the Delta has endured decades of catastrophic oil spills, gas flaring, and systemic infrastructural neglect. Reports by Amnesty International indicate that more than 1.5 million tons of oil have been spilled into the Niger Delta ecosystem since the late 1950s, with thousands of ongoing spill incidents recorded annually. This systemic extraction has resulted in the widespread contamination of freshwater creeks, the destruction of delicate mangrove forests, and the total collapse of the artisanal fishing economies that historically sustained local communities.

Within this volatile landscape, grassroots theatre collectives—such as the Creek Drama Ensemble and the Delta Performance Collective—have developed an eco-critical performance style that is inseparable from environmental activism. Their productions are staged directly within oil-slicked creeks, intentionally transforming sites of severe ecological damage into arenas for narrative and political intervention. In productions like *Delta Bloodlines* (2019), performers physically wade through crude-oil-contaminated waters, literally embodying the toxic environment that defines daily life in the region. This raw embodiment collapses the aesthetic distance between theatrical representation and reality, compelling audiences to confront environmental degradation not as an abstract data point, but as an immediate, lived trauma.

The participatory, site-specific nature of these performances significantly amplifies their socio-political impact. Audiences are directly embedded within the environment—often watching the drama unfold from local canoes or standing along contaminated shores—which fosters an intimate, visceral relationship between performer and spectator. Akintunde (2021) describes this immersive dynamic as an ethical encounter that effectively transforms passive spectators into active witnesses. The multi-sensory environment, marked by the pungent odor of crude oil and the stark visual grimness of blackened waterways, generates an acute form of "ecological empathy" that compels critical reflection and community mobilization.

The tangible impact of these productions extends well beyond the performance event itself. Following the staging of *The Water Has Memory* (2020) in Bayelsa State, community-led initiatives, such as volunteer river-cleaning exercises, emerged directly from the audience base, establishing a clear link between performance aesthetics and environmental agency. This matches structural assessments by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which emphasize that sustained grassroots community participation is crucial for long-term ecological restoration. UNEP's scientific evaluations in Ogoniland indicate that comprehensive environmental recovery could require up to 30 years of continuous remediation, underscoring the vital urgency of locally sustained performance activism. Ultimately, aquatic theatre in the Niger Delta functions as a powerful counter-archive, preserving oral testimonies of

environmental injustice that are frequently omitted from official corporate and state narratives. By centering the oral histories of marginalized riverine communities, these performances challenge the dominant public relations discourses of multinational corporations like Shell plc, successfully transforming rivers from passive zones of extraction into active spaces of memory, resistance, and legal conscience.

Lagos Lagoon: Awareness, Urban Ecology, and Adaptive Performance

In Lagos, aquatic theatre emerges within a hyper-dense, rapidly urbanizing megacity characterized by severe infrastructural strain, climate vulnerability, and extreme socio-economic stratification. The Lagos Lagoon sits at the center of this urban dynamic, serving simultaneously as a vital economic resource and a primary sink for ecological stress. Seasonal flooding, plastic waste pollution, and the continuous expansion of under-resourced informal settlements define the volatile urban ecology in which these aquatic performances occur.

According to data from the World Bank, Lagos ranks among the global coastal cities most vulnerable to severe flooding, with millions of waterfront residents facing existential displacement risks from rising sea levels. Informal, amphibious communities like the Makoko floating settlement are particularly exposed due to a lack of municipal infrastructure and state-backed climate protection. Within this precarious environment, aquatic theatre operates as a tool for public engagement, fusing avant-garde artistic expression with environmental awareness and participatory education.

The Makoko Floating Theatre Project (2020), deeply influenced by the adaptive architecture of Kunlé Adeyemi, exemplifies this localized approach. Staged upon floating architectural platforms, these performances integrate contemporary dance, spoken word, and traditional narrative storytelling to reflect the daily struggles of lagoon residents. Thematic priorities typically center on the mechanics of urban flooding, municipal waste mismanagement, and the precarity of amphibious life.

Unlike the confrontational, anti-corporate tone characteristic of productions in the Niger Delta, aquatic theatre in Lagos tends to emphasize themes of community resilience and structural adaptation. The performances investigate how urban marginalized populations negotiate climate precarity, spotlighting local innovations and community-led survival strategies. This aesthetic shift does not dilute the theatre's critical edge; instead, it reframes an ongoing environmental crisis into a collaborative arena for collective problem-solving and grassroots creativity.

The immersive quality of these lagoon-based productions is fundamental to their efficacy. Audiences interact directly with the marine environment, experiencing the exact spatial, olfactory, and ecological conditions that shape the dramatic narratives. Adegbite (2020) argues that this style of water-based staging successfully materializes environmental awareness, rendering complex global climate abstractions immediately tangible to urban citizens. This intervention is further reinforced by stark municipal data: the Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) reports that Lagos generates over 13,000 metric tons of solid waste daily, a significant portion of which migrates into urban waterways, exacerbating flash floods and destroying marine habitats. By directly confronting these systemic failures on the water, aquatic theatre functions as a platform for public health education and radical environmental advocacy. Furthermore, Lagos-based aquatic theatre has increasingly attracted international

visibility, connecting local lagoon struggles to global research networks focused on urban climate adaptation and Southern resilience strategies.

Riverine Festivals: Edo and Cross River States as Sites of Ritual Ecology

In Edo and Cross River States, aquatic theatre remains rooted in indigenous cultural heritages and spiritual knowledge systems. In contrast to the explicitly political activism of the Niger Delta or the adaptive, urban crisis-mapping found in Lagos, these performances flow directly from ancient cosmological systems that revere water as a sacred, conscious, and life-sustaining ancestor. In these contexts, theatrical expression is not treated as an isolated, secular artistic commodity, but rather as an organic component of sacred ritual practice and communal governance.

The Ovia Osese Festival in Edo State offers a prime example of this seamless integration of ritual and ecological performance. Historically dedicated to the water deity Ovia, the festival utilizes ritual processions, ancestral chants, stylized dances, and symbolic physical immersions within local water bodies. In recent iterations, the festival organizers have deliberately incorporated contemporary environmental critiques—specifically addressing plastic water pollution, deforestation, and industrial runoff—effectively bridging ancestral cosmologies with modern ecological crises.

The active participation of local youth cohorts has played a pivotal role in this eco-critical evolution. Younger performers collaborate directly with community elders to re-evaluate and re-interpret traditional chants, embedding urgent environmental preservation messages directly into established, authoritative ritual formats. This collaborative process ensures that the indigenous practices remain dynamic, contemporary, and politically responsive without sacrificing their foundational spiritual authority.

Similarly, in Calabar, aquatic performance methodologies have been woven into regional cultural events like the Calabar River Performance Festival. Productions such as *Flow of Justice* (2022) integrate traditional Efik water rituals with linear narrative scripts focused on local environmental crises, including unauthorized mangrove deforestation and wetland degradation. Symbolic performative acts, such as the ceremonial release of completely organic, biodegradable lanterns into the river channel, structurally reinforce the thematic connection between artistic expression and environmental accountability.

The absolute necessity of these traditional interventions is underscored by national health metrics. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, a substantial majority of riverine Nigerians lack reliable access to safely managed, clean drinking water, rendering sustainable resource preservation an urgent public crisis. These traditional riverine festivals offer a culturally grounded, highly respected blueprint for environmental stewardship, prioritizing cosmic balance, intergenerational respect, and collective communal responsibility. What distinguishes these riverine festivals is their holistic, non-anthropocentric worldview; water is never reduced to a mere natural resource waiting for corporate exploitation, but is defended as a living, juridical subject. By anchoring contemporary conservation challenges within public ritual spaces, these festivals construct a powerful framework for grassroots ecological education, demonstrating that environmental justice is already deeply embedded within indigenous West African knowledge systems.

Issues, Challenges, and Government Policy

Despite its immense promise, aquatic theatre in Nigeria faces numerous institutional, ethical, and logistical challenges that hinder its long-term sustainability and impact.

Practical and Environmental Hazards

Staging productions in contaminated waters presents severe health and safety hazards for both performers and audiences. Oil contamination, chemical runoff, and microbial pathogens ensure that physical immersion often poses direct biological risks to human health. Furthermore, severe logistical difficulties—including fluctuating water levels, unpredictable weather patterns, and structural constraints on floating stages—complicate the technical execution of these performances (Akintunde 51).

Ethical Considerations

The aesthetic representation of systemic trauma introduces difficult ethical questions. Nnorom cautions that dramatizing environmental suffering risks commodifying the lived experiences of marginalized communities, reducing their trauma to mere artistic fodder (Nnorom 58). To maintain ethical integrity, aquatic theatre must prioritize local agency, secure informed consent, and foster deep community engagement rather than extract cultural or ecological narratives for purely voyeuristic spectacle.

Institutional Gaps and Policy Limitations

There is currently a profound lack of state institutional support for aquatic theatre. National environmental policies typically fail to recognize that culture and art play a vital role in grassroots sensitization and environmental remediation. For example, regulatory bodies such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) enforce pollution laws but rarely collaborate with theatre practitioners to develop environmental education or participatory remediation strategies (Bassey 25).

Financially, limited funding restricts the scale and maintenance of aquatic productions. Because many undertakings rely on international grants or NGO support, their artistic agendas can become decoupled from local priorities. This dependency creates a risk of external interference regarding thematic content and methodology, threatening the cultural authenticity and local ownership of the projects.

Future Growth and Strategic Impact

Despite these formidable obstacles, aquatic theatre possesses significant potential to shape environmental advocacy, pedagogy, and policy-making. Its immersive, participatory nature fosters deep ecological empathy, mobilizes localized action, and preserves indigenous ecological knowledge systems.

Policy Integration

To scale this impact, strategic alliances must be forged among community theatre groups, environmental NGOs, and local government frameworks. Integrating performance-based initiatives into institutional environmental monitoring programs can tie theatrical narratives to

quantifiable outcomes, such as localized river-cleaning campaigns and waste minimization drives (Adegbite 25).

Digital Media Expansion

Digital media offers unprecedented opportunities for cross-regional outreach. Recording and distributing aquatic performances via social media platforms expands their audience exponentially, elevating local crises to national and international prominence while attracting vital funding and policy attention. As Dike notes, documented performance transforms transient art into permanent evidence and advocacy, successfully crossing the literal and figurative riverbank (Dike 59).

Professionalization and Training

Finally, the practice must expand through formal educational channels. Professionalizing aquatic theatre requires the integration of performance training with rigorous ecological literacy, environmental risk assessment, and community organizing methodologies, thereby maximizing its capacity to enact environmental justice.

Discussion and Implications

The evolution of aquatic theatre in Nigeria highlights the potent intersection of culture, ecology, and social justice. Across the diverse case studies of the Niger Delta, the Lagos Lagoon, and various riverine festivals, water acts simultaneously as medium, metaphor, and message. By embedding their work directly within rivers, creeks, and lagoons, Nigerian artists leverage immersive spaces to expose the structural environmental injustices that dominate communal life. Staging drama in polluted waters effectively transforms passive spectators into active witnesses and ethical co-conspirators, establishing a shared moral responsibility for the ecosystem (Osanyin 77).

Theoretically, synthesizing ecocriticism, performance studies, and environmental justice offers a robust methodology for interpreting aquatic theatre as both a cultural statement and a political intervention. The ecocritical lens unmask the imagery of environmental decay and underscores human-nature interdependence (Glotfelty xxii). Performance theory—specifically Turner's *communitas* and Schechner's "restored behavior"—emphasizes the transformative, re-creative power of participatory, site-specific art (Turner 60; Schechner 30). Concurrently, environmental justice theory contextualizes these performances within the broader global struggle for equitable resource distribution, healthy ecosystems, and political recognition (Bullard 14).

Cumulatively, these frameworks demonstrate that aquatic theatre in Nigeria does not merely dramatize ecological crises; it actively generates grassroots knowledge, organizes communities, and demands systemic reform. For instance, the Niger Delta productions document the insidious advance of slow violence caused by petroleum extraction, driving local action such as community-led river-cleaning campaigns (Bassey 27). In the Lagos Lagoon, the incorporation of experimental, adaptive architecture highlights urban climate vulnerability while revealing localized survival mechanisms (Adegbite 23). Finally, the traditional riverine festivals in Edo and Cross River States demonstrate how indigenous rituals can be seamlessly translated into contemporary environmental activism, addressing modern ecological anxieties without eroding cultural memory (Nwosu 105; Dike 58).

Furthermore, the socio-political implications of these performances are profound. They reorder traditional human-environment hierarchies by treating water as an active, conscious agent capable of witnessing, influencing, and co-authoring narratives. They also directly challenge corporate and state inertia by publicly staging and exposing regulatory failures. Expressing ecological injustice through performance moves environmental discourse beyond technical reportage, placing it firmly within the realms of morality, ethics, and community solidarity (Akintunde 51).

Conclusion

Aquatic theatre in Nigeria stands as a powerful testament to the vital interplay of art, culture, and environmental justice. By anchoring their stages within rivers, lagoons, and floodplains, Nigerian artists reject the notion of water as a passive backdrop, defending it instead as an active, living participant in ecological and social discourse. These performances build an indispensable bridge between indigenous cosmological knowledge and contemporary environmental movements, amplifying the voices of marginalized frontline communities and translating participatory engagement into tangible environmental action.

Furthermore, aquatic theatre directly combats corporate and governmental apathy by dramatizing systemic ecocide, fostering an acute sense of moral and political accountability. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that theatre can be both aesthetically brilliant and socially transformative, offering a compelling global model for performance as a vehicle for environmental reform. Ultimately, through its radical fusion of ritual, activism, and creative innovation, aquatic theatre redefines the boundaries of environmental education, cultural preservation, and social change.

Recommendations

To maximize the efficacy and sustainability of aquatic theatre in Nigeria, the following actions are recommended:

1. **Institutional and Financial Support:** State and cultural institutions, such as NESREA and the National Theatre, should provide structured financial subsidies, technical assistance, and formal integration for theatre initiatives within national environmental education and policy-making frameworks.
2. **Ethical and Safety Protocols:** Practitioners must establish rigorous safety standards to protect performers and audiences from the physical dangers of toxic or unstable waterways. Furthermore, practitioners must adopt ethical frameworks that prevent the aesthetic exploitation of community trauma.
3. **Interdisciplinary Curricula:** Educational institutions should develop specialized training programs combining ecological literacy, risk management, and performance studies to enhance the artistic quality and advocacy efficacy of eco-theatre practitioners.
4. **Transdisciplinary Research:** Future academic scholarship should adopt transdisciplinary methodologies that integrate environmental science, performance ethnography, and quantitative social impact assessments to deepen the field's empirical baseline.
5. **Digital Documentation:** Troupes should systematically document water-based performances and distribute them via digital platforms to expand advocacy outreach, engage global policy-makers, and preserve these productions as evidence-based archives of environmental injustice.

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