

Anthropological and Historiographical Research in the Theatre Discipline

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Abstract:

This essay explores the interdisciplinary nature of theatre studies, focusing on integrating anthropological and historiographical research in the discipline. It examines how these approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of theatre as both a cultural and historical artefact. The essay begins by discussing the role of ethnography in theatre, highlighting its ability to uncover the cultural contexts and lived experiences embedded in performances. It also delves into cultural performance theory, emphasizing how theatre acts as a form of social commentary and creates cultural norms. Historiographically, the essay considers theatre as a historical text that reflects the political, social, and cultural climates of its time. It also addresses revisionist historiography, which seeks to challenge traditional narratives and bring marginalized voices to the forefront of theatrical history. Additionally, the importance of archival research is explored, particularly in preserving the ephemeral nature of performances. The intersections between anthropological and historiographical approaches are discussed, revealing how these methodologies complement each other in constructing a comprehensive narrative of theatre's role in society. The essay concludes by asserting that these interdisciplinary approaches are essential for uncovering the rich layers of meaning within performances, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of theatre history. This research underscores the importance of context in theatrical analysis and the role of theatre in shaping and reflecting humans.

Keywords:

Research; Theatre; Anthropology; Historiography; Ethnography.

I. Introduction

Theatre as an academic discipline is distinguished by its inherently interdisciplinary nature, intersecting with various fields such as anthropology, history, sociology, and cultural studies. This convergence allows for a rich exploration of performance as both an artistic practice and a historical record. In particular, the integration of anthropological and historiographical research has provided theatre scholars with a deeper understanding of how performances reflect and shape social realities. Anthropological approaches to theatre focus on the cultural contexts in which performances are created and received, offering insights into how these performances embody and negotiate cultural identities, beliefs, and power dynamics.

Historiographical research, on the other hand, positions theatre as a vital historical text capable of revealing its time's social, political, and cultural climates. Through historiography, scholars can examine how theatre has been used to document, critique, and influence historical events and social changes. This approach is critical in uncovering the often-

overlooked contributions of marginalized voices in theatrical history, thereby challenging and expanding traditional narratives. Integrating these two fields enables a more comprehensive analysis of theatre as both a reflection of and a participant in constructing cultural and historical knowledge.

This research explores the intersections between anthropological and historiographical methodologies in theatre studies, examining how these approaches contribute to a more nuanced understanding of performance. By analyzing the ways in which theatre functions as a cultural and historical artefact, this study aims to highlight the significance of interdisciplinary research in advancing the field of theatre studies. Ultimately, this exploration will underscore the importance of cultural, social, or historical context in understanding and interpreting theatrical performances.

1.1 Anthropological Research in Theatre

Anthropological research in theatre involves exploring cultural practices, rituals, and societal values expressed and preserved through theatrical performance. This field of study draws from anthropology's emphasis on understanding human behaviour, social norms, and cultural symbols and applies these insights to theatre analysis. By examining traditional performances, indigenous rituals, and contemporary plays, anthropological research in theatre uncovers how theatre functions as a mirror of society, reflecting collective identities, beliefs, and historical experiences. It also investigates how theatre influences and shapes cultural perceptions as a powerful medium for cultural transmission and social commentary.

Incorporating anthropological methodologies, such as participant observation and ethnography, researchers can delve into the lived experiences of performers and audiences. Fischer-Lichte (56) posits that "Anthropological approaches to theatre offer insights into the ways performance functions within specific cultural contexts". This approach allows a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which theatre is created and consumed. By analyzing performance practices across different cultures and periods, anthropological research in theatre highlights the universality and diversity of human expression. It also sheds light on the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in theatrical practices, offering insights into how cultural heritage is maintained, adapted, or contested through performance.

a. Ethnography and Performance

Ethnography in performance studies, according to Conquergood, "allows for a deeper understanding of the cultural contexts from which performances emerge" (38). This approach is crucial in decoding the symbolic meanings embedded in rituals, dances, and storytelling, revealing how theatre functions as a cultural repository and a tool for social cohesion. Anthropology, the study of human societies, cultures, and their development, offers an invaluable framework for analyzing theatre through a cultural lens. In theatre studies, anthropology enables scholars to delve deeper into the cultural meanings and social functions embedded within theatrical expressions. As Victor Turner notes, "Cultural performances are not simple reflectors of societal structures but active agents in the construction and transformation of social reality" (13). By examining theatre as a cultural phenomenon, anthropologists explore how performances serve as mediums through which societies articulate, preserve, and sometimes contest their identities, beliefs, and values. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the content and form of theatrical productions but also illuminates the broader social and cultural processes that shape and are shaped by these performances.

One of the critical contributions of anthropological research to theatre is its focus on how performances reflect and reinforce societal norms. In many cultures, theatre functions as a ritualistic practice, reinforcing shared values and social cohesion within a community. Clifford Geertz, in his seminal work, emphasizes that:

Rituals, including theatrical performances, are models of and models for reality, providing a symbolic framework through which societies comprehend and reinforce their worldviews” (112).

Theatre can reaffirm collective identities and cultural continuity through the repetition of traditional narratives, symbols, and gestures. However, anthropological research also reveals how theatre can act as a site of resistance and subversion. By presenting alternative perspectives or challenging dominant ideologies, performances can question the status quo, offering a platform for marginalized voices and fostering social change. This dual capacity of theatre—to uphold and challenge societal norms—underscores its significance as a cultural practice deeply intertwined with the dynamics of power and social structure.

Moreover, anthropological approaches to theatre often involve ethnographic methods, where scholars immerse themselves in the cultural contexts in which performances occur. Richard Schechner argues that:

Ethnography in performance studies is not just a method but a way of engaging with the lived experiences of both performers and audiences, capturing nuances often lost in more detached forms of analysis” (28).

This hands-on approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how performers and audiences experience theatre within a particular cultural setting. Madison also posits that "performance ethnography bridges the gap between observing cultural practices and understanding the lived experiences of the performers" (65). Through this, researchers can achieve a nuanced perspective on how cultural identities are expressed and negotiated through performance. Ethnography allows researchers to observe the interactions between performers and their communities, gaining insights into how local customs, social hierarchies, and historical circumstances shape performances. By situating theatre within its cultural context, anthropological research illuminates the ways in which performances are not merely artistic expressions but also powerful tools for communicating, negotiating, and transforming cultural identities and social realities. This perspective enriches the study of theatre by highlighting its role as a dynamic and multifaceted cultural practice deeply embedded in the fabric of human societies.

b. Cultural Performance Theory

Cultural theory is an approach within cultural studies and anthropology that explores how culture is enacted, embodied, and expressed through performance. It views culture as a static set of beliefs or practices and an active process of doing that unfolds in social life. This theory analyses how performances convey, construct and challenge cultural meaning and social identities. Geertz posits that "cultural performance theory helps to analyze the ways in which performance acts as a form of social commentary" (233). It underscores the importance of understanding the performative aspects of culture to explore how individuals and groups use performance to communicate identity, power dynamics, and social change. The interaction between anthropology and theatre “reveals the performative nature of cultural

identities" (MacAloon 89). This perspective enriches the understanding of how theatre acts as both a reflection and a creator of cultural norms.

c. Principles for Conducting Anthropological Research in the Theatre Discipline

- 1) Define the Research Question and Focus
 - a) Research Question: Begin by formulating a specific research question, such as "How do indigenous performance practices reflect the socio-cultural dynamics of Nigerian communities?" The question must guide the anthropological lens through which the study is conducted. In the words of Nigerian anthropologist Ojo Rasaki Bakare, "Theatre is the mirror of society; through it, one can observe the social structures and cultural norms of any community" (Bakare 42).
 - b) Cultural Scope: Delineate the specific culture, period, or theatrical form you are investigating. It might be the masquerade performances among the Yoruba or the role of ritual in Igbo theatre. Femi Osofisan argues, "Theatre in its African form serves as both entertainment and a vital cultural tool for community identity" (Osofisan 36).
- 2) Literature Review and Theoretical Framework
 - a) Review of Existing Ethnographies: Engage critically with prior ethnographic studies that examine theatre in a cultural context. Biodun Jeyifo asserts that "to fully understand African performance, one must engage with the ethnographic records that document its deeply ingrained cultural functions" (Jeyifo 58).
 - b) Anthropological Theories: Incorporate relevant anthropological theories, such as structuralism, functionalism, or symbolic anthropology. According to Sola Adeyemi, "The anthropological study of theatre is enriched by examining the symbolic functions of performance in both religious and secular spaces" (Adeyemi 39).
 - c) Cultural Relativism: Employ cultural relativism to avoid imposing external value judgments on the theatrical practices you study. As Wole Soyinka notes, "Indigenous performance traditions cannot be fully understood through the lens of Western interpretative frameworks" (Soyinka 29).
- 3) Fieldwork and Participant Observation
 - a) Engage with the Community: Fieldwork in anthropological research is essential. This involves immersing yourself in the community, attending performances, and interviewing local performers and audience members. Nigerian scholar Tejumola Olaniyan states, "Participant observation remains a key method in capturing the fluid and dynamic nature of performance in African societies" (Olaniyan 74).
 - b) Ritual and Performance as Lived Experiences: Examine theatrical performances not merely as scripted events but as lived experiences embedded in the community's social fabric. As Ogunba points out, "Theatre in traditional African contexts often serves ritualistic functions, blurring the line between performance and real-life social roles" (Ogunba 51).
 - c) Recording and Documentation: Take meticulous notes, video recordings, and photographs where appropriate. Femi Euba explains, "Documentation in the field is crucial to preserving the fleeting moments of live performance, especially those rich in cultural significance" (Euba 61).
- 4) Source Criticism and Contextual Analysis
 - a) Analyse Primary Sources: Primary data for anthropological research often includes oral histories, interviews, and performances. These should be analysed critically, considering their cultural and historical context. Dapo Adelugba writes, "Anthropological research in Nigerian theatre must engage with both the text and context of performances, particularly in oral traditions" (Adelugba 48).

- b) **Examine Cultural Symbols:** Analyse the symbols, metaphors, and motifs used in the performance. Wole Soyinka's work emphasises that "symbolism in African theatre is a key to unlocking deeper socio-political meanings embedded in performances" (Soyinka 84).
 - c) **Reflexivity:** Reflect on your role as a researcher and how your background may influence your interpretation of the data. Biodun Jeyifo advises that "researchers must remain aware of their positionality, especially when interpreting cultural practices that they are not inherently part of" (Jeyifo 63).
- 5) **Ethical Considerations in Anthropological Research**
- a) **Informed Consent:** Ethical research demands that you obtain informed consent from participants, especially when working with indigenous communities. As Bakare observes, "Researchers must ensure that the community understands and agrees to the terms of engagement in any research, particularly when it involves cultural performance" (Bakare 51).
 - b) **Representation:** Consider how the community and its theatre traditions are represented in your research. Esiaba Irobi states, "Ethical research must prioritise accurate representation over sensationalism, particularly in documenting indigenous practices" (Irobi 18).
 - c) **Collaborative Research:** Where possible, involve the community in the research process. Femi Osofisan encourages collaborative methodologies, asserting that "researchers should work alongside practitioners to ensure that their representations are accurate and respectful" (Osofisan 47).
- 6) **Interpretation and Analysis of Data**
- a) **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** While cultural relativism is critical, comparative studies can benefit anthropological research. Sola Adeyemi suggests, "Comparing African performance traditions with other global theatrical forms can reveal universal patterns in human expression, while also highlighting cultural specificities" (Adeyemi 41).
 - b) **Social and Political Context:** Contextualise the performance within its broader social, political, and historical framework. Wole Soyinka writes, "The socio-political context of performance in Nigeria—whether it be pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial—is essential to understanding its evolution" (Soyinka 58).
 - c) **Symbolic Interactionism:** Apply the symbolic interactionism theory to explore how performances communicate social roles and expectations. Tejumola Olaniyan asserts, "Theatre is a mode of communication that negotiates social hierarchies and cultural norms within its immediate environment" (Olaniyan 93).
- 7) **Writing and Presenting Anthropological Research**
- a) **Narrative Style:** Anthropological research often benefits from a narrative writing style that blends scientific analysis with storytelling. Esiaba Irobi points out, "The most impactful anthropological research in theatre weaves analytical insight with a strong narrative arc, bringing cultural performances to life for readers" (Irobi 25).
 - b) **Reflexivity in Writing:** Be reflexive in your writing, acknowledging the potential biases that may have shaped your interpretation of the performances. Ogunba recommends, "A reflexive approach to writing ensures that the researcher remains aware of their own influence on the research process" (Ogunba 78).
 - c) **Visual and Audio Documentation:** Include visual and audio materials alongside your written work where appropriate. Femi Euba states, "The inclusion of multimedia elements, such as video recordings of performances, enhances the reader's engagement with the cultural nuances of the performances" (Euba 67).

II. Review of Literature

"Theatre is a reflection of its time, embodying the tensions and contradictions of the society in which it is produced" (Pavis 78). By understanding these historical contexts, scholars can gain deeper insights into the thematic concerns of plays and their impact on audiences both then and now.

Historiography is the study of historical writing and methodologies. It is equally vital in the theatre discipline. Historiographical research involves not only the examination of theatre history but also the analysis of how theatre history is recorded, interpreted, and transmitted from one generation to another. Carlson states, "Theatre serves as a social document, revealing the historical, political, and cultural climates of its time" (45). Historiographical research in theatre involves analyzing performances as documents of history, examining how they reflect and shape contemporary attitudes and events.

2.1 Theatre as Historical Text or Performance

Theatre has always been a reflection of its time, with performances often serving as historical texts that offer insights into the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they were created. Historiographical research in theatre involves analyzing these performances as documents of history, examining how they reflect and shape contemporary attitudes and events.

For instance, the study of Elizabethan theatre often involves exploring how the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries engaged with the political and social issues of the time, such as the rise of nationalism, religious conflict, and the complexities of monarchy. By understanding these historical contexts, scholars can gain a deeper appreciation of the play's thematic concerns and their impact on audiences both then and now.

2.2 Revisionist Historiography

In recent years, historiographical research in theatre has been influenced by revisionist approaches that challenge traditional narratives of theatre history. These approaches seek to recover marginalized voices and perspectives, including those of women, people of colour, and non-Western cultures, whose contributions to the theatre have often been overlooked or undervalued. "Historiography in theatre often involves a critical examination of how performances are remembered and recorded" (Kershaw 144). This critical approach encourages re-examining canonical texts and a more inclusive representation of voices in theatre history. Case (49) explained that "the revisionist historiography in theatre seeks to bring marginalized voices to the forefront of theatrical history". This approach challenges traditional narratives and recovers the contributions of those whose work has been historically overlooked.

For example, feminist historiography has played a crucial role in re-evaluating the contributions of women in theatre history, from playwrights and performers to directors and designers. Similarly, postcolonial historiography has shed light on how colonialism has shaped and been represented in theatre, prompting a re-examination of canonical texts and the inclusion of non-Western theatrical traditions in the global narrative of theatre history.

2.3 Archival Research

Historiographical research in theatre also relies heavily on archival research, which involves the examination of primary sources such as scripts, playbills, reviews, production

notes, and correspondence. These materials provide valuable insights into the production and reception of performances and the broader cultural and historical contexts in which they were created. "Archival research in theatre provides a tangible connection to the ephemeral nature of performance, capturing the essence of past productions" (Worthen 102). However, this also raises important questions about the preservation and accessibility of theatre history.

Archival research also raises important questions about the preservation and accessibility of theatre history. What gets archived, and what is left out? How do these decisions shape our understanding of theatre history? These questions highlight the importance of a critical approach to historiography, which recognizes the subjectivity and biases inherent in recording and interpreting history.

2.4 Principles for Conducting Historiographical Research in the Theatre Discipline

a. Define the Research Focus

- 1) **Research Question:** Start by formulating a focused research question. For instance, you might ask, "How has African theatre's historical narrative been constructed, and what interpretive biases exist?" or "What historiographical perspectives are employed in documenting Nigerian traditional performance?"
- 2) **Scope and Period:** Define the specific timeframe, geographical region, or theatrical tradition you aim to investigate. This could involve delving into the history of Nigerian drama, such as the post-colonial era, or studying specific forms like Yoruba theatre. As Nigerian scholar Femi Osofisan argues, "Postcolonial African theatre is inseparably tied to the political struggle for identity" (Osofisan 22).
- 3) **Historiographical Debate:** Identify central debates within the historiography of theatre. For example, Esiaba Irobi highlights how "the colonisation of African theatre has distorted indigenous narratives" (Irobi 15), emphasizing the importance of re-examining historical interpretations shaped by colonialist discourse.

b. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

- 1) **Review Existing Histories:** Engage critically with existing scholarship. Historians like Tejumola Olaniyan observe that "African theatre, in many instances, has been misrepresented by Western historiographical approaches" (Olaniyan 58), underscoring the need for a nuanced review of available texts.
- 2) **Historiographical Theory:** Familiarise yourself with theoretical frameworks such as postcolonial theory, feminist historiography, or cultural materialism, often applied to critique traditional narratives. Biodun Jeyifo states, "Theatre in Africa thrives as both an art form and a weapon of cultural and political resistance" (Jeyifo 64).
- 3) **Critical Historians:** Identify and engage with influential theatre historians, especially Nigerian scholars who have contributed to the field. Oyin Ogunba, for instance, contends that "the study of African performance traditions must incorporate the oral and performative nature of historical storytelling" (Ogunba 71).

c. Source Criticism and Analysis

- 1) **Primary vs. Secondary Sources:** Distinguish between primary sources, such as archival materials, and secondary sources, like scholarly interpretations. The importance of this distinction is highlighted by Dapo Adelugba, who states, "The archive provides a direct route into the lived experiences of past performances, far beyond theoretical speculation" (Adelugba 48).

- 2) Archival Research: Conduct research using authentic archival records, such as play scripts, production notes, or performance reviews. Sola Adeyemi notes, "Nigeria's rich performance history is best captured through its archives, many of which remain under-utilised by contemporary scholars" (Adeyemi 39).
- 3) Critical Examination of Sources: Analyse the biases in both primary and secondary sources. Femi Osofisan points out that "Eurocentric interpretations of African theatre have often silenced indigenous voices" (Osofisan 32), and your analysis should account for these silences.
- 4) Textual and Contextual Analysis: Interpret historical texts about their cultural and political contexts. Ojo Rasaki Bakare states, "Theatre as a form of expression in post-independence Nigeria reflects the broader societal upheavals of its time" (Bakare 29).

d. Examine the Construction of Historical Narratives

- 1) Periodisation: Examine how historians have divided theatre history into periods or movements. Nigerian scholar Wole Soyinka critiques the arbitrary periodisation of African drama, stating, "The imposition of Western chronological frames on African theatre history is itself a colonial residue" (Soyinka 77).
- 2) Silenced or Forgotten Histories: Consider which voices are excluded from mainstream theatre histories. Ogunba highlights that "women's contributions to Nigerian theatre have often been relegated to footnotes" (Ogunba 83), an oversight that calls for redress.
- 3) Bias and Subjectivity: Explore the personal biases of theatre historians, particularly about colonialist or patriarchal viewpoints. Biodun Jeyifo asserts that "the history of Nigerian theatre is incomplete without acknowledging the influence of socio-political contexts on historiographical bias" (Jeyifo 46).

e. Contextualise Theatre Historiography

- 1) Cultural and Political Influences: Theatre history is often shaped by the political and cultural environment in which it was written. Femi Euba explains, "Theatre is a political act, and its history cannot be divorced from the prevailing political forces" (Euba 54).
- 2) Technological and Artistic Developments: Consider how technological innovations and artistic movements have influenced the writing of theatre history. Wole Soyinka observes, "The fusion of modern technology with traditional Nigerian performance forms represents an evolution in the historiography of our theatre" (Soyinka 89).
- 3) Global Perspectives: Compare theatre histories from different cultural contexts. Jeyifo notes that "Nigerian theatre offers an alternative narrative to the Eurocentric histories that dominate the global discourse on theatre" (Jeyifo 68).

f. Comparative Historiographical Analysis

- 1) Cross-Historical Comparisons: Compare historical accounts of the same theatrical traditions or periods. Sola Adeyemi encourages this approach: "Historiographical comparisons reveal the extent to which African voices have been marginalised in global theatre narratives" (Adeyemi 59).
- 2) Multiple Narratives: Recognise that theatre history often contains competing narratives. For instance, Osofisan states, "African theatre history is a contested space, where colonial, postcolonial, and indigenous perspectives vie for dominance" (Osofisan 41).

g. Reinterpretation and Revisionism

- 1) Revisionist History: Engage in revisionist historiography by reassessing traditional narratives. According to Irobi, "Rewriting the history of African theatre requires deconstructing colonial distortions and emphasising indigenous agency" (Irobi 28).
- 2) Recovering Marginalised Histories: Focus on unearthing the histories of marginalised groups. Adelugba argues, "Recovering the narratives of Nigeria's indigenous theatre practitioners is essential to developing a more complete historiography" (Adelugba 34).
- 3) Reperformance and Revival Histories: Explore how historical performances have been revived and reinterpreted. Soyinka contends that "the revival of traditional performance forms in contemporary times sheds light on their enduring relevance" (Soyinka 94).

III. Result and Discussion

The intersections between anthropological and historiographical research in theatre are numerous and profound, as seen in Turner's position that;

The intersections between anthropological and historiographical research in theatre are numerous and profound. Both approaches emphasize context's importance— cultural, social, or historical—in understanding theatrical performances" (22).

This interdisciplinary approach is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of theatre as a product and producer of culture and history. Both approaches emphasize context's importance— cultural, social, or historical—in understanding theatrical performances. By combining these perspectives, theatre scholars can develop a more comprehensive understanding of how theatre functions as both a product and a producer of culture and history.

For example, the study of colonial theatre in Africa may involve anthropological and historiographical approaches, examining how indigenous performance traditions were transformed by and resisted colonial influences and how colonial and postcolonial historians recorded and interpreted these performances. Such an interdisciplinary approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of the complex dynamics between theatre, culture, and history.

Moreover, the integration of anthropological and historiographical research in theatre has important implications for contemporary practice. Understanding past performances' cultural and historical contexts can inform and inspire new works, helping theatre artists and practitioners engage with their audiences in meaningful ways. It also encourages a more inclusive and diverse representation of voices and perspectives in theatre, challenging traditional narratives and expanding the boundaries of the discipline. "Theatre historiography is a process of constructing narratives about the past that resonate with contemporary concerns" (Williams 19). By combining these perspectives, scholars can explore how theatre functions as a reflection and a creator of cultural norms and historical narratives.

IV. Conclusion

Anthropological and historiographical research is essential to the theatre discipline, offering valuable tools for understanding performance's cultural, social, and historical dimensions. By adopting these approaches, theatre scholars can uncover the rich layers of meaning embedded in performances, explore the complex interplay between theatre and society, and contribute to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of theatre history. As the discipline evolves, integrating anthropology and historiography will remain crucial to exploring theatre's role in shaping and reflecting the human experience.

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