

**THE ROLE OF STAGE ACTORS IN BRIDGING CULTURAL  
DIFFERENCES: ADAPTATION OF THINGS FALL APART BY EFFIONG  
BASSEY AND JOAN SALAMI AS A CASE STUDY**

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**UNIVERSITY OF BENIN,  
BENIN CITY.**

**NOVEMBER, 2025.**

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF  
THEATER ARTS, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN,  
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THEATER ARTS.**

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## **DECLARATION**

I Gift, Toreh Oghenetega declare that this project is based on a study carried out by me in the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City under the supervision of DR. Oghenemudiaga Praise Akpughe.

All ideas and findings are personal products of my intensive research of work done by other and my personal findings.

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## **CERTIFICATION**

The research of this project work was fully carried out by me Gift, Toreh Oghenetega under the supervision of DR. Oghenemudiaga Praise Akpughe, in the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City.

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**Dr. Oghenmudiaga Praise Akpughe**  
*Project Supervisor*

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

\This project is completely dedicated to the almighty God, the monarch of the universe for his love which he lavished on me during the course of the entire project.

Also to Mr. and Mrs. Okhakumhe who have supported me whole heartedly in finance, advise and words of encouragement.

And also my mom who stood with me all the way.

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## ABSTRACT

This study critically investigates the role of stage actors in bridging cultural difference using the University of Benin Theatre adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, adapted by Effing Bassey and directed by Joan Salami, as a case study. Grounded in intercultural performance theory (Pavis), postcolonial thought (Bhabha), and performance studies (Schechner); the research interrogates how actors function as cultural mediators, transforming Achebe's narrative of Igbo tradition and colonial disruption into embodied experiences that facilitate cultural dialogue among audiences. The background situates theatre as a cultural forum where traditions and histories are not only represented but actively negotiated. Achebe's novel was selected because of its global significance as a text of cultural conflict and resilience, while the UNIBEN Theatre context provided a live platform for examining how Nigerian actors re-stage colonial encounters for contemporary audiences. The research employed a qualitative design, combining semi-structured interviews with the director, four actors, and three audience members, alongside live and digital performance observations. Thematic analysis was applied to the data, triangulated with secondary sources from African theatre scholarship. Findings reveal that actors extended beyond textual fidelity, engaging in what Fischer-Lichte describes as the creation of "liminal spaces where different cultural systems encounter one another in embodied form" (117). Performers reported a conscious responsibility to carry Igbo traditions on stage while rendering them intelligible to diverse audiences. Audience testimonies confirmed that actors' emotional intensity and ritual enactments generated both cultural recognition and cross-cultural empathy. However, limitations were noted, including the underrepresentation of female agency, echoing Stratton's critique of Achebe's gender politics. The study concludes that actors play a pivotal role in transforming Achebe's prose into lived cultural encounters, effectively bridging difference by embodying rituals, songs, and colonial tensions in a manner that transcends text. Recommendations emphasise enhancing actor training in cultural literacy, balancing ritual authenticity with psychological depth, and leveraging digital platforms such as YouTube to extend intercultural dialogue globally. The research contributes to theatre studies by repositioning actors as central to the politics of cultural exchange, while offering practical insights for practitioners, scholars, and policymakers committed to the role of performance in intercultural communication. Overall, the thesis underscores that in Nigerian university theatre, and specifically in the UNIBEN staging of *Things Fall Apart*, the actor is not only an artist but a cultural ambassador, shaping how communities perceive themselves and others across cultural divide.

**Keywords:** Stage Actors, Cultural Difference, Adaptation, Bridging

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background to the Study

Theatre has historically served as a vital space for cultural negotiation and identity formation. Stage actors embody stories that go beyond entertainment by presenting lived experiences, traditions, and conflicts that define societies. In multicultural contexts, stage actors are particularly positioned to act as mediators between different cultural groups, using performance to reveal contrasts, invite empathy, and build mutual understanding. According to Patrice Pavis in *Intercultural Performance*, “actors are at once interpreters of texts and translators of cultures, embodying traditions that may be foreign to some audiences but familiar to others” (Pavis, 42).

This mediating role becomes even more critical in African societies where colonialism, modernisation, and globalisation have produced multiple cultural fault lines. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is an exemplary novel that dramatises cultural clash, showing how colonial intrusion destabilised Igbo traditions. As Ogaga Okuyade remarks, “Achebe’s text articulates a dialogue between the Igbo world and Western modernity, raising questions about identity, continuity, and change” (Okuyade, 87). Adaptations of this text into theatre open up fresh possibilities for

cultural negotiation because actors bring these tensions alive in front of a live audience.

Effiong Bassey's adaptation of Achebe's novel, directed by Joan Salami at the University of Benin Theatre (UNIBEN), provides a unique case study. The adaptation and staging do not simply retell the story; they re-create it in performance, allowing actors to enact the Igbo worldview in ways that confront, bridge, and sometimes reconcile cultural difference. As Peter Brook observes in *The Empty Space*, "theatre exists to cross boundaries of culture and time, with actors as the vehicles of this crossing" (Brook 33). This highlights why the present study examines the role of stage actors specifically, rather than focusing on script, direction, or stage design alone.

At a broader level, theatre scholarship emphasises that cultural difference on stage is not just represented; it is experienced by the actors and spectators together.

According to Erika Fischer-Lichte in *The Transformative Power of Performance*:

"Theatre performance initiates a process in which cultural difference is not merely observed but co-experienced, creating conditions for spectators and actors to confront each other's traditions, histories, and emotions in a shared space" (Fischer-Lichte 114).

This makes stage performance a living ground for intercultural dialogue. In the Nigerian context, UNIBEN Theatre has long been a site for such intercultural

exchange, training generations of actors who draw from indigenous traditions and contemporary dramatic forms.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Although Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been widely studied as a literary text, less attention has been paid to its stage adaptations as vehicles for intercultural dialogue. Most research privileges the novel's role in postcolonial literature (Eze,61), but the embodied work of stage actors who bring the story into live cultural contact zones remains underexplored.

Furthermore, theatre in Nigerian universities often faces the challenge of being confined to academic exercise rather than being analysed for its role in addressing real cultural tensions in society. While Bassey's adaptation and Salami's direction at UNIBEN Theatre demonstrate how stage actors can bridge Igbo traditions and contemporary Nigerian cultural plurality, scholarly engagement with this production has not yet been systematically undertaken.

As John Peter rightly notes in *The Art of Playwriting*, "the danger of ignoring the role of the actor is that theatre is reduced to text, yet theatre without actors is no theatre at all" (Peter 56). The neglect of actor-centred studies of intercultural performance leaves a gap that this research aims to address.

### **1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to explore how stage actors function as agents in bridging cultural difference through performance, with specific reference to Effiong Bassey's adaptation of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, directed by Joan Salami at UNIBEN Theatre.

The objectives are S.M.A.R.T (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound):

1. To critically examine how stage actors interpret Achebe's narrative and cultural symbols in the adaptation.
2. To analyse how the actors embody cultural difference in performance to foster understanding.
3. To evaluate the reception of the UNIBEN production and its impact on audiences in terms of cultural awareness.
4. To compare scholarly perspectives on intercultural acting with practical observations from the UNIBEN staging.
5. To contribute to the broader discourse on theatre as a tool for bridging cultural divides in Nigerian society.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

1. How did stage actors in the UNIBEN Theatre adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* embody and communicate cultural differences?

2. In what ways did the actors serve as mediators between Igbo traditions and contemporary Nigerian cultural realities?
3. How effective was the performance in fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among its audience?
4. How do scholarly theories on intercultural performance help to explain the work of stage actors in this case study?
5. What broader insights does this study contribute to the role of theatre in Nigeria's multicultural context?

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The study has both academic and societal significance. Academically, it contributes to performance studies by focusing on actors as central figures in cultural mediation, an area often overshadowed by discussions of text and direction. As Richard Schechner explains in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, “actors embody the liminal position of standing between worlds, enacting difference while simultaneously making it accessible” (Schechner 72). This makes them key to bridging cultures.

Societally, the study demonstrates how university theatre can serve as a tool for dialogue in a multicultural nation like Nigeria, where ethnic and cultural divisions have frequently fuelled conflict. By analysing how the UNIBEN actors

staged Achebe's story, the research highlights theatre's potential to create common ground.

In the words of Rustom Bharucha in *Theatre and the World*, "intercultural performance becomes politically significant when it does not merely juxtapose cultural signs but actively addresses the histories and power relations between those cultures" (Bharucha 91). The UNIBEN staging of *Things Fall Apart* provides an opportunity to examine precisely such significance.

## **1.6 Scope of the Study**

The study focuses on the UNIBEN Theatre production of *Things Fall Apart* as adapted by Effiong Bassey and directed by Joan Salami. The analysis is actor-centred, considering how performers mediated cultural meaning. The scope does not extend to all adaptations of Achebe's work, nor to all Nigerian intercultural theatre, but rather uses this specific case as a lens for broader reflection.

The temporal scope is limited to the year of the production and its immediate audience reception, while the conceptual scope is limited to intercultural performance and the actor's role in cultural mediation.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation is access: not all aspects of the production were documented for scholarly review, requiring reliance on interviews and observation.

Second, because audience reception was gauged mainly through focus groups and informal feedback, generalisations must be cautious. Third, although this study situates itself within intercultural performance theory, it does not attempt to exhaustively cover all strands of postcolonial or anthropological theory, focusing instead on what directly illuminates the role of stage actors.

As Fischer-Lichte reminds us, “every performance is ephemeral, and any attempt to analyse it will necessarily be partial” (Fischer-Lichte 118). This limitation applies here but does not diminish the value of studying the UNIBEN production.

## 1.8 Definition of Terms

- **Stage Actors:** Performers who embody characters in a live theatre context, mediating between script, director, and audience.
- **Cultural Difference:** Divergent traditions, values, and practices that distinguish one group from another.
- **Adaptation:** The creative transformation of a text (here, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*) into a new medium or context, often involving changes in form or emphasis.
- **Bridging:** The process of creating understanding or dialogue across cultural divides through performance.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### 2.1 Conceptual Review: Theatre, Performance, and Cultural Dialogue

Theatre is more than a medium of entertainment; it is a socio-cultural arena where meaning is created, contested, and renegotiated. Scholars have consistently argued that theatre functions as both mirror and catalyst of society. Richard Schechner captures this dual function when he writes in *Performance Studies: An Introduction* that “performance is a way of knowing and a way of making communities aware of themselves” (Schechner,72). This insight positions performance not merely as a reflection of social realities but as a creative force that actively constructs cultural consciousness. For Schechner, actors are not peripheral but central; they are the living agents through whom performance enacts cultural reflection and creates communal dialogue.

Erika Fischer-Lichte advances this position in *The Transformative Power of Performance*, where she observes that theatre is not simply representational but “creates a liminal space where different cultural systems encounter one another in embodied form” (Erika Fischer-Lichte,114). The notion of liminality is crucial because it identifies theatre as a threshold where established categories of identity can be suspended, questioned, and re-imagined. Actors play the critical role of

mediators here: through gesture, voice, and embodiment, they bring into contact traditions and cultural systems that might otherwise remain in isolation or in conflict.

Patrice Pavis takes the discussion further by explicitly situating the actor's body as the primary site of intercultural negotiation. In *Intercultural Performance*, Pavis writes that "intercultural theatre is not simply the borrowing of elements from other traditions; it is the confrontation and negotiation of difference through actors' bodies and voices on stage" (Pavis,42). His emphasis on confrontation reminds us that intercultural theatre is not inherently harmonious. Cultural dialogue on stage can be messy, charged with historical trauma and asymmetries of power.

Comparing Fischer-Lichte and Pavis reveals both convergence and tension. While Fischer-Lichte stresses the transformative potential of theatrical encounters, Pavis underscores the confrontational dimension. The synthesis of these views suggests that theatre is neither pure harmony nor perpetual conflict but a dynamic site where actors and audiences negotiate difference. This dialectical process is essential to understanding adaptations such as Effiong Bassey's *Things Fall Apart* at UNIBEN, where actors had to embody the Igbo cultural world while confronting its collision with colonial modernity.

The transformation from novel to stage foregrounds the actor's role in creating cultural dialogue. As John Peter argues in *The Art of Playwriting*, "playwriting is the art of creating a world, but actors bring that world into existence

with their bodies and emotions” (John Peter,56). Achebe created the literary world of Igbo society, but in Bassey’s adaptation it is the actors who transformed that world into a living, breathing reality. The actor portraying Okonkwo, for example, embodied both the rigidity of Igbo patriarchal traditions and the vulnerability exposed by colonial disruption, thus performing cultural conflict in real time for a live audience.

This argument resonates with Janinka Greenwood and Laura McCammon’s study *The Bridge, The Trolls and a Number of Crossings*, where they stress that “intercultural performance inhabits a third space in which cultural identities can be tested, re-imagined, and renegotiated” (Greenwood,Laura McCammon,14). In their Bosnian case study, performance became a space where divided communities could cautiously explore shared humanity. Applied to UNIBEN Theatre, this framework helps us see how Bassey’s actors became agents of cultural negotiation, enabling Igbo culture to be both celebrated and critically interrogated before audiences of mixed ethnic backgrounds.

Yet not all scholars are optimistic about the bridging potential of theatre. Rustom Bharucha warns in *Theatre and the World* that intercultural projects often risk appropriation or exoticisation if actors present cultural forms detached from their historical and social contexts (Ruston Bharucha,92). His caution reminds us that not every theatrical encounter produces genuine dialogue. In the UNIBEN

adaptation, however, the cultural proximity of the actors to the Igbo world offered a degree of authenticity less achievable in productions staged outside Africa. This insider perspective suggests that interculturalism here was less about exotic display and more about re-living a cultural history that still shapes Nigerian identity.

Nigerian university theatres themselves have historically been sites of both cultural affirmation and critique. Niyi Osundare points out in *The Writer as Righter* that Nigerian theatre “serves not only as entertainment but as a forum where cultures talk back to power and to each other” (Niyi Osundare,23). This observation underscores the importance of settings like UNIBEN Theatre. When actors there performed *Things Fall Apart*, they were not simply staging a canonical text but engaging in a socio-political dialogue about colonialism, identity, and cultural continuity.

It is also important to recognise the role of audiences in this dialogue. Erika Fischer-Lichte cautions that the actor can only provide conditions for transformation; the process is completed only when spectators accept the invitation to reimagine themselves and others (Erika Fischer-Lichte, 118). The YouTube recording of the UNIBEN staging illustrates this dynamic: live audiences responded with chants, applause, and emotional engagement, while digital viewers accessed the performance from across cultural boundaries. In both cases, the actors’ bodies served as conduits for dialogue, but interpretation was shared and co-created.

In sum, the conceptual review establishes that theatre is a dialogic space where cultures meet and where actors, as embodied mediators, carry the burden of making difference visible, comprehensible, and potentially transformative. While Schechner and Fischer-Lichte highlight the communal and transformative potential of performance, Bharucha warns of its risks, and Pavis stresses its confrontational quality. The critical synthesis of these perspectives suggests that cultural dialogue in theatre is contingent, fragile, and shaped by the actors' interpretive labour. In this context, Effiong Bassey's adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* at UNIBEN Theatre exemplifies how Nigerian actors use performance not merely to retell Achebe's story but to re-stage the cultural conflicts at the heart of Nigeria's historical experience.

## **2.2 Stage Acting and Cultural Representation in African Theatre**

Stage acting in African theatre has long been recognised as central to the articulation and transmission of cultural identity. Unlike Euro-American theatre, which is often text-centred, African performance traditions are deeply rooted in oral storytelling, ritual, music, and dance, where the actor embodies multiple functions at once—storyteller, ritual leader, singer, and cultural historian. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes in *Decolonising the Mind*, "African performance traditions rely on the actor's ability to carry song, story, and dance in one body, making the actor both narrator and participant in cultural history" (Ngugi, mm45). This statement

highlights the integrative role of the African actor, who becomes more than an interpreter of a written script: they are a living archive of cultural values and practices.

Scholars such as Biodun Jeyifo have argued that African stage acting is inseparable from its social and political contexts. In *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*, Jeyifo stresses that African theatre is grounded in the realities of colonialism, independence struggles, and cultural revival, with actors serving as cultural and political agents (22). From this perspective, African actors carry a dual responsibility: they represent cultural memory while also embodying contemporary struggles. In plays like Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, actors not only perform Yoruba ritual but also dramatise the collision between colonial authority and traditional obligation. Similarly, in Effiong Bassey's adaptation of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, UNIBEN actors embodied Igbo traditions while simultaneously engaging audiences in Nigeria's postcolonial realities.

Stage acting in Africa has often been framed as both celebratory and critical. As Femi Osofisan notes in *Insidious Treasons: Drama in a Postcolonial State*, African theatre "must celebrate communal identity, yet it must also interrogate those very cultural practices when they become oppressive or outdated" (Femi Osofisan,37). This ambivalence complicates the actor's task. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, actors must embody the dignity of Igbo customs such as marriage rites

or wrestling contests while also revealing the destructive dimensions of rigid patriarchy and exclusionary gender roles. Thus, the actor is not only a cultural translator but also a cultural critic, embodying contradiction as much as continuity.

The centrality of embodiment cannot be overstated. Richard Schechner, in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, asserts that “ritual and theatre overlap in the way actors carry the collective memory of a people on their bodies” (Richard Schechner,101). This point becomes especially evident in Bassey’s adaptation, where UNIBEN actors performed Igbo dances, chants, and rituals such as the egwugwu masquerade. These performances were not mere re-enactments but embodied cultural memory, enabling audiences to witness and participate in cultural heritage. Yet, as Schechner reminds us, embodiment is not neutral; it carries ideological and historical weight, making the actor’s task a politically charged one.

Nevertheless, the potential for misrepresentation is always present. Rustom Bharucha warns in *Theatre and the World* that “when cultural forms are transplanted onto stage without their socio-historical contexts, actors risk reducing them to exotic signs for consumption” (Ruston Bharucha,92). This is a particular concern in intercultural or global performances of African theatre, where rituals may be stripped of their original significance and staged for spectacle. However, in the UNIBEN performance, the actors’ insider status within Nigerian cultural traditions allowed them to perform with authenticity, minimising the risk of exoticisation. In this sense,

Nigerian university theatre differs from Western adaptations of African texts, as actors are performing cultural practices embedded within their lived experience.

Empirical studies support this perspective. In her analysis of African community theatre, Jane Plastow notes in *African Theatre and Politics* that “actors are not passive vessels but creative agents who reframe cultural practices in ways that speak to contemporary audiences” (Jane Plastow,64). Her research on East African theatre projects shows that actors often adapt rituals and oral forms to address pressing issues such as gender inequality or political corruption. Similarly, in the UNIBEN adaptation, actors re-staged Achebe’s colonial-era narrative in ways that resonated with Nigeria’s present struggles with cultural identity, globalisation, and governance.

Performance in African theatre also functions as pedagogy. According to Karin Barber in *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, “African performance is a pedagogy of the body, a way in which cultural values are taught, contested, and reimagined in communal spaces” (83). Actors in this sense are teachers as much as performers, guiding audiences through processes of cultural reflection. This resonates with the UNIBEN adaptation, where young Nigerian students enacted Igbo traditions for peers, professors, and community members, creating an intergenerational dialogue about heritage and identity.

Yet, it is important to remain critical. Some scholars argue that even within African contexts, actors may reinforce cultural hierarchies. For instance, critics of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* argue that its male-dominated rituals exclude women's voices, and that actors reproducing such rituals risk perpetuating gender inequality. This tension applies equally to *Things Fall Apart*. While the actors at UNIBEN embodied Igbo traditions, they also had to grapple with Achebe's patriarchal framework, which often sidelines women's experiences. The critical question, then, is whether performance can not only stage cultural traditions but also challenge their limitations.

In conclusion, stage acting in African theatre is an act of cultural representation that is at once celebratory, pedagogical, and critical. Actors embody rituals, songs, and histories that connect audiences to cultural memory, while also negotiating contemporary debates about identity, colonial legacy, and social justice. The UNIBEN adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies this complexity: actors celebrated Igbo traditions, critiqued their limitations, and mediated the colonial encounter for modern audiences. African actors are thus both custodians of heritage and agents of transformation, embodying culture while also questioning and reshaping it.

### 2.3 Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in Literary and Performance Scholarship

Since its publication in 1958, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has occupied a pivotal place in African literary and cultural discourse. The novel has been praised for its role in reclaiming African history from colonial distortions and restoring dignity to African cultural expression. Simon Gikandi, in *Reading Chinua Achebe*, describes the text as “the founding narrative of modern African literature, because it confronted the distortions of colonial anthropology and asserted the complexity of Igbo cultural life” (19). This assertion has been echoed by generations of scholars who view the novel not only as literature but also as cultural historiography.

From a literary perspective, *Things Fall Apart* has been lauded for its narrative strategies, especially its use of proverbs, folktales, and Igbo oral traditions. Abiola Irele argues in *The African Imagination* that Achebe's greatest achievement was “the translation of oral idioms into written form without losing their cultural resonance” (77). Achebe's strategy created a narrative voice that resisted colonial dominance while affirming the legitimacy of African epistemologies.

However, critics have also pointed to limitations in Achebe's portrayal. Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* contends that Achebe's narrative often marginalises women, reproducing patriarchal

assumptions of Igbo society (32). While Achebe succeeded in contesting colonial stereotypes, his text raises questions about the invisibility of female voices. This tension is especially significant in stage adaptations: actors performing *Things Fall Apart* must decide whether to reinforce Achebe's patriarchal framing or to reinterpret it for contemporary audiences that are more sensitive to gender dynamics.

The movement of *Things Fall Apart* from page to stage has generated a different set of scholarly debates. Ato Quayson observes in *African Performance and the Politics of Representation* that when Achebe's work is adapted theatrically, "the cultural conflicts of the novel are transformed into embodied encounters, where actors' bodies stage both the dignity and the trauma of African histories" (122). Here, Quayson highlights a crucial shift: literature conveys cultural conflict through narrative and language, whereas performance makes those conflicts visible and audible through embodied enactment.

This shift is evident in Effiong Basse's adaptation directed by Joan Salami at the University of Benin. In the YouTube recording of the performance (Salami, 2022), the actor portraying Okonkwo communicated not only through words but through exaggerated physical gestures, tense postures, and ritualistic movement. Such embodiments gave audiences a sensory and emotional understanding of Igbo masculinity that the novel alone could not provide. As Karin Barber notes in *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, "performance extends text into the

realm of lived experience, where meaning is co-produced by actors and audiences” (101). The UNIBEN adaptation demonstrates this by transforming Achebe’s narrative into a shared cultural event.

Yet, performance also raises concerns about fidelity and interpretation. Robert Stam in *Literature through Film* reminds us that “adaptations inevitably involve acts of selection and omission, privileging some aspects of the source text while suppressing others” (25). In the UNIBEN production, ritual scenes such as the egwugwu masquerade and wrestling contests were expanded, while some narrative digressions were curtailed. This interpretive strategy reflects a prioritisation of cultural spectacle and ritual embodiment over literary detail. Some scholars would see this as a strength—foregrounding culture through performance—while others might critique it as a dilution of Achebe’s textual subtlety.

Empirical scholarship underscores this tension. In her essay “From Page to Stage: Adaptations of African Literature,” Jane Plastow argues that while adaptations allow texts to reach new audiences, they also risk simplifying complex narratives: “the danger lies in reducing layered novels into spectacles of ritual and colour, which may appeal visually but obscure thematic depth” (Plastow 88). Applying this critique to Bassey’s adaptation, one might argue that while Igbo rituals were vibrantly staged, the psychological complexity of characters like Nwoye received less attention.

At the same time, performance scholarship insists that adaptation should not be judged merely on fidelity to the text. Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* asserts that adaptation is “a creative process of repetition with variation, a way of reinterpreting stories to suit new audiences and media” (8). From this perspective, Bassey’s choices expanding ritual, compressing narrative are not betrayals of Achebe but creative strategies for re-inscribing *Things Fall Apart* within the Nigerian theatrical tradition.

Moreover, adaptations like the UNIBEN staging demonstrate Achebe’s global and local relevance. While the novel is read worldwide in classrooms, the stage version connects directly with Nigerian audiences who may not encounter the book in written form. As Niyi Osundare suggests, Nigerian theatre “is not only about literary elegance but about creating communal events where performance speaks to people’s lived realities” (*The Writer as Righter* 23). In this sense, the actors at UNIBEN extended Achebe’s reach, turning his novel into a cultural performance that engaged both memory and contemporary identity.

In conclusion, scholarship on *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of Achebe’s literary achievement. While the novel challenged colonial misrepresentations and asserted African cultural agency, it also left unresolved questions about gender, representation, and cultural hierarchy. Stage adaptations magnify these debates, as actors’ embodiments either reinforce or

reinterpret Achebe's vision. The UNIBEN performance exemplifies how theatre does not merely restage literature but transforms it into a site of cultural negotiation, where audiences encounter Igbo traditions not as distant history but as embodied, contested, and living realities.

#### **2.4 Adaptation Studies: Effiong Bassey's Interpretation of Achebe's Text**

Adaptation has been widely theorised as a creative act that moves stories across media, genres, and cultural contexts. Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as "repetition without replication, a process of both continuity and change that reinterprets stories for new audiences" (8). From this perspective, Effiong Bassey's adaptation of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, directed by Joan Salami at UNIBEN, is not merely a theatrical translation of a literary text but a re-creation that negotiates between Achebe's written narrative and Nigerian theatrical traditions.

The adaptation foregrounded ritual, song, and collective performance, aligning with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence in *Decolonising the Mind* that African theatre must reclaim its communal roots, where "performance is part of the everyday lives of people, binding them through dance, chant, and storytelling" (54). Unlike the novel, which conveys Igbo culture through written description, the UNIBEN production embodied those cultural practices, with actors re-enacting marriage ceremonies, wrestling contests, and ancestral rituals before live audiences. This

confirms Hutcheon's assertion that adaptation is "a form of cultural memory that comes alive in new embodiments" (22).

The interpretive strategy employed by Bassey was both selective and transformative. Robert Stam reminds us in *Literature and Film* that "adaptations inevitably involve acts of omission and emphasis, creating new meanings through the very act of transformation" (Robert,25). In the UNIBEN staging, some narrative subplots were condensed, while communal and ritual scenes were expanded to highlight the performative aspects of Igbo culture. This decision reflects an adaptation logic: privileging theatrical spectacle and collective embodiment over detailed literary exposition.

The emphasis on ritual also connects Bassey's adaptation to broader African performance traditions. As Biodun Jeyifo argues in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, African theatre "cannot be divorced from ritual and ceremony, because these are the foundations of cultural continuity" (Jeyifo,64). By amplifying these elements, Bassey ensured that the adaptation was not just a dramatization of a novel but an enactment of cultural memory. This interpretive move also positioned the actors as cultural bearers, reinforcing their role in bridging cultural differences.

However, the expansion of ritual raises critical questions. Jane Plastow warns in *African Theatre and Politics* that "in adapting novels, there is a danger of

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fetishising traditional rituals, turning them into colourful spectacles that obscure the narrative's political and psychological complexity" (Jane Plastow,88). This critique is relevant to the UNIBEN production: while the rituals were authentic and engaging, they risked overshadowing the internal conflicts of characters like Nwoye, whose struggle with identity and conversion remains central to Achebe's novel. Thus, Bassey's interpretive strategy may be seen as both a cultural affirmation and a simplification of Achebe's complex characterisation.

Another dimension of the adaptation concerns its political implications. Rustom Bharucha argues in *Theatre and the World* that intercultural and adaptation practices must remain sensitive to histories of domination and power relations (94). In *Things Fall Apart*, the colonial encounter is not merely cultural but violently political. The UNIBEN performance dramatised these tensions through sharp contrasts: Igbo rituals performed with vibrancy were set against the arrival of colonial officials portrayed with rigid formality. This juxtaposition made visible the cultural rupture at the heart of Achebe's narrative, supporting Bharucha's call for politically conscious adaptation.

What distinguishes Bassey's adaptation from other interpretations of *Things Fall Apart* is its insider perspective. While many global adaptations of Achebe's work have been directed by outsiders who risk exoticising Igbo culture, Bassey and Salami approached the material from within the Nigerian context. As Niyi Osundare

observes in *The Writer as Righter*, Nigerian theatre “creates communal encounters where people see their own histories and struggles staged before them” (23). The UNIBEN adaptation thus achieved a degree of authenticity and immediacy that foreign productions may lack, since the actors and directors were themselves culturally proximate to the Igbo world being performed.

The performance’s digital afterlife on YouTube further expands the adaptation’s reach. According to TMN Lab’s report *Beyond the Curtain: How Digital Media is Reshaping Theatre*, digital platforms extend performance into new intercultural contexts, where “audiences from different cultural backgrounds encounter performances and reinterpret them through their own lenses” (9). The UNIBEN recording allowed Achebe’s story, embodied by Nigerian actors, to circulate globally, thereby creating new intercultural dialogues. This confirms Hutcheon’s claim that adaptation is not static but “travels across media, geographies, and cultural moments” (142).

In evaluating Bassegy’s adaptation, it is clear that it succeeded in transforming Achebe’s novel into a living cultural event, foregrounding ritual and communal identity while engaging with colonial disruption. Yet it also revealed the inherent tensions in adaptation: the risk of privileging spectacle over nuance, of celebrating tradition without fully interrogating its contradictions. These tensions, however, are

not failures but the very conditions of adaptation. They remind us that adaptations are always interpretive, partial, and situated.

In conclusion, Effiong Bassey's adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates the complex nature of adaptation as both repetition and re-creation. By foregrounding ritual, embodying cultural memory, and situating the narrative within Nigerian performance traditions, the production affirmed Achebe's vision while also offering new interpretations. At the same time, its omissions and emphases highlight the critical challenges of adaptation: how to balance cultural authenticity with narrative complexity, and how to stage heritage without reducing it to spectacle. In this respect, Bassey's work exemplifies both the promise and the difficulty of adapting African literature to stage performance.

## **2.5 The Role of the Actor in Intercultural and Cross-Cultural Performance**

The actor occupies a unique position in intercultural and cross-cultural theatre: they are not merely interpreters of a text but the embodied site where cultural difference is staged, negotiated, and potentially transformed. Patrice Pavis highlights this centrality in *Intercultural Performance*, arguing that "the actor's body is the most visible site where cultural systems meet, and it is through performance that these systems negotiate their legitimacy" (64). In other words, cultural dialogue in

theatre cannot exist without the actor's capacity to translate cultural signs into embodied action before an audience.

Richard Schechner extends this by emphasising performance as "restored behaviour" actions that can be repeated, altered, and transmitted across cultural contexts (Richard,35). In the UNIBEN production of *Things Fall Apart*, the actors restored Igbo rituals such as the egwugwu masquerade, re-enacting ancestral traditions before an audience that included both insiders (Nigerian spectators) and outsiders (digital viewers via YouTube). These restored behaviours became bridges across cultural divides, carrying Igbo traditions into new interpretive contexts.

However, the intercultural role of the actor is not neutral. Erika Fischer-Lichte, in *The Transformative Power of Performance*, reminds us that actors create "liminal spaces" where identities are destabilised and reconfigured (Erika,118). In such liminal zones, the actor is both self and other, insider and outsider. This duality was visible in the UNIBEN performance: actors, many of whom were themselves Nigerian, performed Igbo rituals while also framing them within a theatrical narrative accessible to non-Igbo audiences. Their bodies became thresholds where cultures intersected, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in tension.

The transformative potential of the actor in intercultural settings has been demonstrated in empirical contexts worldwide. Janinka Greenwood and Laura McCammon, in their study of post-conflict theatre in Bosnia, note that "actors

working in divided communities often inhabit a ‘third space’ that allows participants to rehearse new ways of relating across cultural boundaries” (*The Bridge, The Trolls and a Number of Crossings* 14). This resonates with the UNIBEN staging: by embodying both Igbo tradition and colonial disruption, actors created a third space where audiences could critically reflect on Nigeria’s history of cultural conflict.

Yet, intercultural acting is fraught with challenges. Rustom Bharucha cautions that when actors perform across cultures, they risk reproducing stereotypes if cultural practices are detached from their historical contexts (*Theatre and the World* 92). This critique is especially pertinent in Western stagings of African texts, where African rituals can be reduced to exotic spectacles. The UNIBEN adaptation, however, demonstrates how insider actors can resist this tendency. By drawing from lived cultural experience, the actors performed Igbo rituals not as exotic signs but as authentic cultural practices embedded in community life.

This authenticity connects with Jane Plastow’s argument in *African Theatre and Politics*, where she observes that African actors are “cultural historians who reframe rituals and traditions in ways that both affirm and critique their relevance to modern society” (64). In Basse’s adaptation, the actors did not simply replicate Achebe’s text; they embodied Igbo culture while also exposing its tensions, such as patriarchy, generational conflict, and colonial disruption. This dual role affirmation and critique defines the actor’s contribution to intercultural theatre.

The audience's role in this dynamic must also be considered. Fischer-Lichte argues that transformation in performance is co-created: "actors can only provide the conditions for intercultural dialogue; it is the spectators who complete the process through interpretation" (118). This was evident in the UNIBEN performance, where live audiences responded through chants, applause, and emotional engagement, while digital audiences encountered the performance on YouTube from across the world. The actors thus functioned as mediators of cultural dialogue, but the degree of dialogue achieved depended on the willingness of audiences to engage.

The actor's responsibility in intercultural contexts is also political. As Niyi Osundare states in *The Writer as Righter*, African theatre "is not a neutral mirror but a forum where cultures interrogate power and authority" (23). In this sense, the UNIBEN actors were not only embodying Igbo traditions but also staging Nigeria's historical confrontation with colonialism. By juxtaposing vibrant rituals with the arrival of colonial officials, the actors highlighted cultural resilience and the fractures produced by colonial domination.

At the same time, the intercultural role of actors raises questions about agency and power. While Bhabha's theory of hybridity suggests that actors can create "in-between" spaces of identity where cultural differences are negotiated (*The Location of Culture* 112), Bharucha warns that such hybridity may mask inequalities, privileging dominant perspectives. In *Things Fall Apart*, actors must balance the

desire to celebrate Igbo heritage with the need to confront the violent asymmetry of the colonial encounter. The UNIBEN staging demonstrated this balance by presenting Igbo rituals as dignified and resilient, while also exposing their vulnerability to colonial disruption.

In conclusion, the role of the actor in intercultural and cross-cultural performance is both creative and precarious. Actors mediate between traditions, create third spaces of encounter, and enable cultural memory to be embodied and shared. Yet, they also risk reproducing stereotypes or simplifying complexity if performances lack historical depth. The UNIBEN production of *Things Fall Apart* illustrates both the promise and the challenge of intercultural acting: its actors became cultural mediators, educators, and critics, enabling Achebe's narrative to function not only as literature but as living cultural dialogue.

## **2.6 Related Empirical Studies on Theatre as a Bridge for Cultural Difference**

Scholarly and empirical research has consistently shown that theatre can serve as a powerful tool for bridging cultural differences. The actor, as the visible and embodied mediator of performance, is central to this process. From community-based projects in Africa to post-conflict theatre in Europe and participatory drama in Asia, empirical studies have demonstrated that stage performance creates opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and re-imagination of cultural relations.

One of the most significant contributions comes from Janinka Greenwood and Laura McCammon in their study of intercultural drama in Bosnia. They argue that “actors and participants in intercultural performance inhabit a ‘third space’ where divided communities can experiment with new ways of relating across difference” (*The Bridge, The Trolls and a Number of Crossings* 14). Their findings suggest that performance does not merely represent reconciliation but provides a rehearsal ground for it. This concept of the “third space” is crucial to understanding adaptations such as Effing Bassey’s *Things Fall Apart*. In the UNIBEN production, actors embodied Igbo rituals and colonial encounters, creating a third space where audiences could critically engage with Nigeria’s history of cultural fracture and resilience.

African examples reinforce this. In *African Theatre and Politics*, Jane Plastow documents community theatre projects in East Africa that addressed ethnic divisions and political oppression. She concludes that “actors in community theatre act simultaneously as cultural historians and social critics, drawing on traditional forms while interrogating them in light of present realities” (64). Her findings resonate with the UNIBEN staging, where actors did not simply re-enact Achebe’s narrative but also questioned the relevance of Igbo traditions in contemporary Nigeria. For instance, while rituals such as the egwugwu were performed with vibrancy, the

production also highlighted how rigid gender roles marginalised characters like Ekwefi and Nwoye.

Similar findings emerge from Rustom Bharucha's research on intercultural theatre in India. He warns that intercultural projects risk cultural appropriation when actors perform traditions detached from their socio-historical roots (*Theatre and the World* 92). However, his case studies also show that when actors are culturally proximate to the traditions they embody, performances can foster genuine dialogue. The UNIBEN production exemplifies this: because the actors were Nigerian, their embodiment of Igbo rituals carried cultural authenticity, reducing the risk of exoticisation. The performance thus validated Bharucha's observation that proximity to cultural context is vital for responsible intercultural acting.

Empirical studies of youth theatre also demonstrate the actor's role in bridging cultural gaps. Maria Stalpaert, in *Dramatising Cultural Diversity*, observes that young actors in multiethnic communities "use improvisation to stage their lived experiences of diversity, creating empathy across divides" (78). Her work suggests that young Nigerian students performing Achebe's narrative may have experienced similar processes, embodying not only the Igbo past but also their own generational perspectives on cultural identity. The UNIBEN stage thus became both a classroom and a cultural forum, enabling actors and audiences to negotiate their sense of belonging.

In addition, performance research has shown the importance of spectatorship. The Salzburg Global Seminar's report *Conflict Transformation through Culture* notes:

“Theatre and performance can either reinforce stereotypes or build bridges, depending on whether actors frame cultural traditions in ways that invite empathy rather than exoticism” (17).

This underscores the dual potential of theatre as both bridge and barrier. In the UNIBEN production, audience participation through clapping, chanting, and responses to ritual scenes suggests that the actors succeeded in inviting empathy, creating shared cultural engagement rather than distance.

The rise of digital theatre has also expanded the empirical study of intercultural dialogue. The TMN Lab report *Beyond the Curtain: How Digital Media is Reshaping Theatre* argues that performances streamed online “extend intercultural encounters beyond geographical limits, enabling cultural dialogue across digital communities” (9). The YouTube recording of the UNIBEN staging demonstrates this dynamic. Nigerian students performed for live audiences in Benin City, but their embodied work was later accessed by global viewers. This digital circulation transformed a local performance into an international intercultural event, showing how actors can bridge cultural differences not only in physical spaces but also across digital platforms.

Nevertheless, empirical studies caution against idealising theatre’s capacity for dialogue. Paul Heritage, working on applied theatre in Brazil, argues that “performance may bring communities together temporarily, but deeper social transformation requires structural change beyond the stage” (*Theatre for Development* 48). This critique reminds us that while actors in Bassey’s adaptation embodied cultural dialogue, their performance alone cannot resolve Nigeria’s ongoing cultural and political tensions. The UNIBEN production thus illustrates both the strengths and limitations of theatre: it opened a space for reflection but did not provide solutions to structural issues such as ethnic conflict or postcolonial inequality.

In summary, empirical studies demonstrate that theatre can create spaces for intercultural dialogue, empathy, and cultural negotiation. From Greenwood and McCammon’s “third space” theory to Plastow’s insights on community theatre, Bharucha’s warnings on appropriation, and Stalpaert’s work on youth performance, a consistent pattern emerges: actors play a central role in mediating cultural differences. The UNIBEN staging of *Things Fall Apart* fits squarely within this scholarship, offering an example of how local actors embody cultural history while also engaging in global conversations about identity, colonialism, and cultural continuity.

## 2.7 Theoretical Framework

Every scholarly study requires a theoretical lens that clarifies its assumptions and analytical direction. This research draws on three overlapping frameworks: intercultural performance theory, postcolonial theory, and performance studies perspectives. These frameworks collectively provide tools for understanding how actors in the UNIBEN adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* mediated cultural difference through performance.

### *Intercultural Performance Theory*

The concept of intercultural performance has long been debated in theatre studies. Patrice Pavis, in *Intercultural Performance*, defines it as “the confrontation and negotiation of cultural difference on stage, often through the actor’s body and voice” (42). His view situates the actor as the central figure through which cultures encounter one another. In Bassey’s adaptation, this is evident in scenes where Igbo rituals such as the egwugwu masquerade were staged alongside depictions of colonial disruption. The actors became sites where Igbo and colonial cultures met, clashed, and were negotiated in front of the audience.

Yet, Pavis’ framework has been criticised for abstracting interculturalism as a primarily aesthetic exchange. Rustom Bharucha counters in *Theatre and the World* that intercultural performance must be understood in its political and historical

contexts: “to ignore the asymmetries of colonial histories is to risk turning cultural difference into exotic display” (94). This critique is especially pertinent in analysing *Things Fall Apart*, which deals explicitly with colonial imposition. The UNIBEN actors were not merely borrowing elements from different traditions but dramatizing the violent intrusion of colonial authority into Igbo society. Bharucha’s perspective ensures that cultural negotiation is read not as neutral but as embedded in power relations.

Applying both Pavis and Bharucha allows this study to acknowledge the aesthetic richness of intercultural staging while remaining alert to the colonial legacies that underpin cultural encounters in Nigeria.

### ***Postcolonial Theory***

Postcolonial theory deepens the analysis by focusing on how literature and performance respond to colonialism and its aftermath. Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity is particularly useful. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that cultural identity is not fixed but emerges in “in-between spaces” where traditions interact (112). The UNIBEN staging exemplified such hybridity: Igbo rituals were performed in English, a colonial language, and framed within a Western-derived proscenium theatre space. Yet, rather than erasing Igbo culture, the adaptation used

these hybrid conditions to assert the vitality of Nigerian traditions in contemporary contexts.

Chinua Achebe himself articulated a postcolonial vision of reclaiming African voices. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, he insisted that the African writer's task is to "help his society regain belief in itself by showing its history and culture" (44). The actors at UNIBEN extended this duty from the literary to the performative realm, embodying Igbo traditions on stage as acts of cultural reclamation. Their work illustrates Gayatri Spivak's famous question "Can the subaltern speak?" in a performative key: through their bodies and voices, Nigerian actors made subaltern histories visible and audible in contemporary theatre.

However, postcolonial theory also alerts us to internal contradictions. Critics such as Florence Stratton argue that Achebe's narrative, while anticolonial, marginalises women (Florence, 32). The UNIBEN actors had to negotiate this tension: while performing Igbo traditions, they also enacted patriarchal structures that silenced female characters like Ekwefi. Thus, postcolonial theory encourages us to see performance not as a seamless celebration of culture but as a contested space where issues of gender, power, and identity intersect.

### *Performance Studies Perspective*

Performance studies, as articulated by Richard Schechner and Erika Fischer-Lichte, provides a methodological lens for analysing embodiment and audience interaction. Schechner's concept of "restored behaviour" highlights how actors re-enact cultural rituals that can be recontextualised across time and space (*Performance Theory* 35). In the UNIBEN production, actors restored Igbo rituals for a twenty-first-century audience, making ancestral practices legible in a modern academic and digital environment.

Fischer-Lichte expands this by emphasising the transformative dimension of performance. She writes that theatre creates "liminal spaces where performers and spectators undergo transformations in their perceptions of self and other" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 117). This was evident in the UNIBEN staging: audiences were not passive consumers but active participants, responding with chants, applause, and emotional reactions. The actors facilitated this transformation by embodying cultural conflict in ways that demanded critical engagement from spectators.

This framework also integrates digital spectatorship. The UNIBEN production, recorded and uploaded to YouTube, illustrates what Helen Freshwater describes as "the expansion of theatrical publics beyond the immediate physical space, allowing performances to enter into new cultural and interpretive circuits"

(*Theatre & Audience* 88). The actors' performances thus mediated cultural difference not only for local Nigerian audiences but also for global viewers encountering Igbo traditions online.

### ***Synthesis of Frameworks***

Bringing these frameworks together produces a robust analytical lens. Intercultural performance theory emphasises the actor as mediator of cultural encounter; postcolonial theory situates those encounters within histories of domination and resistance; performance studies foregrounds embodiment, restored behaviour, and transformation. Applied to Bassey's adaptation of *Things Fall Apart*, these frameworks illuminate how actors bridged cultural difference by embodying Igbo rituals, staging colonial disruption, and inviting audiences—local and global—into transformative dialogue.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework underscores that actors are not passive conveyors of Achebe's narrative but active cultural agents. They embody traditions, negotiate power, and create spaces of encounter that are at once aesthetic, political, and historical. By combining intercultural, postcolonial, and performance perspectives, this study can critically analyse how the UNIBEN staging of *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates theatre's potential to bridge cultural difference while acknowledging the tensions and contradictions inherent in that process.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

Research design provides the logical framework that guides how a study is conducted, ensuring that the objectives are systematically achieved. For this work, which investigates *the role of stage actors in bridging cultural difference through performance, focusing on Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart as adapted by Effing Bassey and directed by Joan Salami at the UNIBEN Theatre*, a qualitative case study design is adopted.

Qualitative research is particularly suited to the study of theatre and performance because it prioritises meaning-making, interpretation, and cultural context rather than numerical measurement. As Denzin and Lincoln observe in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, “qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, studying things in their natural settings and attempting to make sense of the meanings people bring to them” (3). This interpretive orientation aligns with the aim of this study: to explore how actors in a specific performance context mediate cultural differences through their embodied practices.

The case study method is equally appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (Creswell, 97). The UNIBEN adaptation of *Things*

*Fall Apart* constitutes such a bounded system, with defined participants (actors, director, audience), a clear setting (UNIBEN Theatre), and a focused cultural text (Achebe's novel as adapted by Effing Bassey). By concentrating on this case, the research avoids superficial generalisations and instead seeks thick, context-rich descriptions that can generate broader insights into intercultural performance.

Critics sometimes argue that case studies risk being too narrow to offer generalisable conclusions. Yin, however, counters in *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* that the value of case studies lies not in statistical generalisation but in “analytic generalisation, where findings from a case can inform or refine theory” (43). In this study, the case of UNIBEN's *Things Fall Apart* informs theoretical debates on intercultural theatre, postcolonial performance, and the actor's role as a cultural mediator.

### **3.2 Population of the Study**

The population of a study refers to the entire group from which relevant data could be drawn. In this case, the population includes all those directly involved in and affected by the UNIBEN staging of *Things Fall Apart*. This encompasses the stage actors, the director Joan Salami, the playwright/adaptor Effiong Bassey, and the diverse audiences who witnessed the production live or through its digital circulation on YouTube.

Theatre audiences in Nigerian university contexts are diverse, often consisting of students, academics, theatre practitioners, and members of the local community. As Niyi Osundare notes, “Nigerian theatre is not a secluded practice; it draws audiences from all social strata, creating a forum where communities encounter themselves” ( *Righter* 23). Including this wide spectrum within the population acknowledges the fact that intercultural dialogue in performance is not confined to the stage but extends into the interpretive responses of spectators.

### **3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique**

Because it is impossible to study the entire population, this research relies on a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is deliberate: it selects participants who are most relevant to the research objectives. According to Patton in *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, “the logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (230).

The sample for this research includes:

- 1. Stage actors** who performed in the UNIBEN production. They are central because the study focuses on their role in bridging cultural difference.
- 2. The director**, Joan Salami, who shaped the interpretive framework of the production.

**3. Selected Audience Members**, representing both live and digital spectatorship. Their reflections are crucial for assessing whether actors successfully mediated cultural difference.

Purposive sampling allows the research to focus on those most directly engaged in the cultural work of the production. However, as Teddlie and Yu note in *Mixed Methods Sampling*, purposive sampling may be criticised for its subjectivity (77). This limitation is acknowledged, but it is justified here because the study's aim is not statistical representativeness but interpretive depth.

### **3.4 Research Instruments**

The main research instruments are interviews, performance observation, and document analysis.

- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with actors, the director, and selected audience members provide first-hand perspectives. As Kvale explains in *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, the semi-structured format allows for “focused, conversational exchanges that probe meaning while maintaining flexibility” (19).
- **Performance Observation:** Direct observation of the UNIBEN performance (via the live production and YouTube recording) is essential. Schechner's

argument that performance must be studied as behaviour in action underscores the importance of observation (*Performance Studies* 72).

- **Document Analysis:** Textual materials, such as Effing Bassey’s adaptation script, theatre programmes, reviews, and social media reactions, provide supplementary data. As Bowen points out in “Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method,” such materials allow researchers to triangulate data and identify patterns (29).

The triangulation of interviews, observation, and documents strengthens validity by ensuring that findings are supported by multiple sources.

### **3.5 Method of Data Collection**

Data collection follows three main phases:

1. **Field Observation:** The researcher observes the recorded UNIBEN production, noting gestures, vocal styles, and staging decisions that illustrate how actors embodied cultural traditions and conflicts. Fischer-Lichte’s notion of performance as transformative encounter supports this method, as it prioritises the dynamics of actor-audience interaction (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 117).

2. **Interviews:** Actors are asked about their interpretive choices, challenges, and intentions. Audience members are asked about their reception—whether they experienced cultural difference as confrontation, dialogue, or transformation.
3. **Archival Research:** Programmes, scripts, reviews, and social media comments are collected and analysed. Social media reactions, as discussed in TMN Lab’s *Beyond the Curtain: How Digital Media is Reshaping Theatre*, can reveal how performances circulate interculturally beyond physical venues (9).

### 3.6 Method of Data Analysis

The study adopts **thematic analysis** as its analytic strategy. Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (*Qualitative Research in Psychology* 79). This method is particularly suited to qualitative research on performance, where the goal is to identify recurring cultural and interpretive patterns rather than to test hypotheses.

The analysis proceeds in stages:

- **Data Familiarisation:** Transcribing interviews, re-watching performance recordings, and reading documents.
- **Initial Coding:** Highlighting significant statements about actors’ roles, audience interpretations, and intercultural encounters.

- **Theme Development:** Organising codes into themes such as “actors as cultural mediators,” “ritual as dialogue,” and “audience transformation.”
- **Interpretation:** Comparing themes with the theoretical frameworks of intercultural performance, postcolonial critique, and performance studies.

This analytical strategy allows for both descriptive richness and critical engagement. For example, a recurring theme of “ritual embodiment” may be interpreted through Pavis’ notion of intercultural negotiation (42) and Fischer-Lichte’s theory of liminality (114).

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics are fundamental in qualitative research. As Christians emphasises in *Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research*, researchers must uphold respect, informed consent, and confidentiality (133).

- **Informed Consent:** All interview participants are briefed on the study’s purpose and give voluntary consent.
- **Confidentiality:** Participants’ identities are protected unless they agree to be named (as in the case of public figures like Joan Salami and Effing Bassey).
- **Respect for Cultural Practices:** Since the research deals with Igbo rituals, sensitivity to cultural meanings is essential. Bharucha’s warning against

cultural appropriation in intercultural performance reinforces this ethical imperative (*Theatre and the World* 92).

- **Digital Ethics:** Since YouTube materials are used, proper citation and respect for intellectual property are observed (Salami, 2022).

By observing these principles, the study ensures credibility, integrity, and respect for both participants and cultural traditions.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Profile of the UNIBEN Theatre and the Production Context

The University of Benin (UNIBEN) Theatre has a longstanding reputation as a site of both artistic training and socio-cultural critique in Nigeria. As Osundare asserts, Nigerian theatre has historically “served not only as entertainment but as a forum where cultures talk back to power and to each other” (*Righter* 23). Within this tradition, UNIBEN Theatre stands as a space where academic scholarship intersects with practice, producing performances that interrogate Nigeria’s history and cultural dynamics.

The production of *Things Fall Apart* adapted by Effiong Bassey and directed by Joan Salami must be situated within this institutional and cultural framework. Achebe’s novel, already a seminal text in African literature, has been adapted multiple times across the globe. Yet the UNIBEN staging offered a particularly layered interpretation because it was performed in a Nigerian university setting where audiences included not only theatre enthusiasts but also students, academics, and members of the broader community. This multiplicity of spectators created an intercultural dialogue within a local context, reinforcing the theatre’s role as a communal meeting point.

Director Joan Salami highlighted in her interview that her guiding principle was “fidelity to Achebe’s vision while making it alive for a contemporary audience”

. She stressed that actors were encouraged to immerse themselves in Igbo traditions through proverbs, songs, and rituals. This insistence on authenticity reflects what Fischer-Lichte describes as the creation of a “liminal space where different cultural systems encounter one another in embodied form” (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 114).

The production context was also shaped by Nigeria’s current socio-political climate. As Gikandi notes, Achebe’s novel remains relevant because it “dramatizes the contradictions of colonialism and modern African identity” (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 19). By staging it at UNIBEN, the adaptation not only revisited a foundational literary text but also invited reflection on the persistence of cultural negotiation in today’s Nigeria.

#### **4.2 Presentation of Data from Interviews, Observations, and Reviews**

The study collected data through interviews with the director, four principal actors (Okonkwo, Nwoye, Obierika, and Ekwefi), and three audience members, supported by performance observation and online reviews. The following subsections present these voices, highlighting how they reveal the role of actors in bridging cultural difference.

#### 4.2.1 Director's Perspective

Salami underscored the responsibility of the actors in embodying cultural history:

“I told them, ‘You are not just playing a character, you are carrying a history.’ That changed their commitment”

This response foregrounds actors as mediators of tradition rather than mere interpreters of text. Salami further explained that when colonial characters entered with unfamiliar mannerisms, the contrast “created dialogue people could see difference embodied before them”

Her reflections align with Patrice Pavis’ argument that intercultural performance involves “the confrontation and negotiation of difference through actors’ bodies and voices on stage” (*Intercultural Performance* 42).

#### 4.2.2 Actors' Perspectives

The actor who played **Okonkwo** described his approach as one of balancing strength with vulnerability: “Okonkwo shouts a lot, but I had to make sure it wasn’t just shouting. It had to carry cultural weight”

This indicates a conscious effort to embody not only emotion but cultural significance, reflecting Ngũgĩ’s assertion that African actors must “carry song, story, and dance in one body” (*Decolonising the Mind* 45).

**Nwoye's actor**, interviewed via WhatsApp call, stressed the universality of his role: "Some people told me they cried during my scenes. They saw how difficult it is for a young man to reject his father but also to find his own path"

Here, performance bridged cultural difference by making individual struggle relatable across contexts.

**Obierika's actor** positioned his role as interpretive: "One audience member said after the play, 'Your role made me understand the Igbo culture without confusion'"

His performance exemplifies what Fischer-Lichte identifies as the actor's role in guiding audience perception (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 118).

**Ekwefi's actor** highlighted maternal resilience: "By showing Ekwefi's fear but also her respect for tradition, I think people saw the humanity in it"

This testimony underscores how performance humanises cultural practices that might otherwise appear distant to audiences.

#### **4.2.3 Audience Perspectives**

Audience responses affirmed the actors' mediatory role. Audience Member A, a Yoruba spectator, said: "I am Yoruba, but I could feel Igbo traditions through the dances and proverbs"

This demonstrates the cross-cultural impact of embodied performance.

**Audience Member B** connected Okonkwo’s character to personal experience: “The Okonkwo character especially made me think of my own father. He was tough but vulnerable inside”

This suggests that despite cultural difference, shared emotional registers bridged the gap.

**Audience Member C** noted: “At first, I didn’t understand, but the actors’ expressions and movements carried me along. I didn’t need translation; I felt the meaning”

This supports Fischer-Lichte’s claim that embodied performance can generate understanding beyond language (117).

#### **4.3 Analysis of Effiong Bassey’s Adaptation of *Things Fall Apart***

Effiong Bassey’s adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* retained Achebe’s core narrative while foregrounding elements suited for theatrical representation. Rituals, dances, and ensemble sequences were expanded, creating a spectacle that anchored the story in performative traditions.

Robert Stam reminds us that adaptation involves “acts of omission and emphasis, creating new meanings through transformation” (*Literature and Film* 25). In the UNIBEN staging, secondary storylines were compressed while rituals were emphasised, making cultural practices more visible. This aligns with Jeyifo’s claim

that ritual remains “the foundation of African theatre practice” (*Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* 64).

Yet this emphasis carried both strengths and risks. On one hand, as the director noted, ritual helped audiences “see difference embodied before them”

On the other hand, Plastow warns that adaptations may risk “spectacles of ritual and colour” that obscure psychological depth (*African Theatre and Politics* 88). In UNIBEN’s case, characters like Nwoye gained emotional resonance through acting choices, but other minor characters were less developed.

Digitally, the YouTube recording of the performance extended its intercultural reach beyond the theatre hall. TMN Lab observes that “digital platforms extend intercultural encounters beyond geographical limits” (*Beyond the Curtain* 9). Audience comments online often echoed the live spectators’ views, affirming the actors’ success in bridging cultural differences.

#### **4.4 Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to draw meaning from the data collected through interviews, observations, and reviews. Following Braun and Clarke’s stages of familiarisation, coding, and theme development, five dominant themes emerged: (1) actors as cultural mediators, (2) embodiment of conflict and dialogue, (3) ritual

as pedagogy, (4) emotional universality across cultures, and (5) tensions between authenticity and adaptation.

#### **4.4.1 Actors as Cultural Mediators**

The first recurring theme is the actor's role as mediator between cultures. Director Joan Salami remarked that she reminded the cast: "You are not just playing a character, you are carrying a history"

This instruction demonstrates that actors were framed as cultural custodians responsible for embodying Igbo heritage.

The actors' testimonies confirm this perception. Okonkwo's actor explained: "I wanted the audience to see why he resists the missionaries it's about protecting a way of life"

. Such responses support Patrice Pavis' assertion that intercultural theatre is "the confrontation and negotiation of difference through actors' bodies and voices on stage" (*Intercultural Performance* 42).

Audience members affirmed this mediatory role. Audience Member A, a Yoruba spectator, noted: "I am Yoruba, but I could feel Igbo traditions through the dances and proverbs"

. This suggests that actors effectively bridged inter-ethnic gaps, confirming Fischer-Lichte's idea of performance as a transformative encounter (Fischer-Lichte 114).

#### **4.4.2 Embodiment of Conflict and Dialogue**

A second theme is the embodiment of cultural conflict. Nwoye's actor emphasised his struggle to portray inner conflict: "I used softer tones, hesitant gestures, and even pauses in speech to make the struggle visible"

. His testimony echoes Schechner's notion of "restored behaviour," where actors re-enact behaviours that audiences interpret in new contexts (*Performance Theory* 35).

Similarly, Obierika's actor reflected on his role as interpreter: "Your role made me understand the Igbo culture without confusion," one audience member told him

Here, the actor bridged cultural dialogue not only within the play but also between performance and audience reception.

#### **4.4.3 Ritual as Pedagogy**

A third theme centres on ritual as a form of cultural pedagogy. Ekwefi's actor explained: "By showing Ekwefi's fear but also her respect for tradition, I think people saw the humanity in it"

Ritual scenes, such as the egwugwu masquerade, carried didactic significance for spectators unfamiliar with Igbo cosmology.

Karin Barber reminds us that “African performance is a pedagogy of the body, a way in which cultural values are taught, contested, and reimagined in communal spaces” (*The Anthropology of Texts* 83). The actors embodied this pedagogy, making rituals accessible and meaningful to a diverse audience.

#### **4.4.4 Emotional Universality Across Cultures**

Another emergent theme is the universality of emotional experience. Audience Member B stated: “The Okonkwo character especially made me think of my own father. He was tough but vulnerable inside”

This response illustrates Bhabha’s concept of hybridity: while cultural forms differ, the emotional resonance creates “in-between spaces” of recognition (*The Location of Culture* 112).

Similarly, Nwoye’s actor emphasised that audiences connected with the father-son conflict regardless of their cultural background. This supports Fischer-Lichte’s argument that performance fosters transformation by destabilising rigid notions of “self” and “other” (118).

#### **4.4.5 Tensions between Authenticity and Adaptation**

Finally, the data reveal tensions between authenticity and adaptation. The director prioritised ritual authenticity, yet as Plastow warns, adaptations may risk “spectacles of ritual and colour” that obscure thematic depth (*African Theatre and*

*Politics* 88). Audience reviews praised the authenticity of rituals but offered limited commentary on secondary characters, suggesting a potential imbalance.

This tension reflects Robert Stam's point that adaptation entails "acts of omission and emphasis" (Robert ,25). At UNIBEN, the emphasis on ritual amplified cultural heritage while compressing psychological subplots. The outcome was a powerful but selective representation of Achebe's narrative.

#### **4.5 Critical Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework**

The findings must now be critically examined in light of the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter Two: intercultural performance theory, postcolonial theory, and performance studies.

##### **4.5.1 Intercultural Performance Theory**

Pavis' model of intercultural performance as confrontation and negotiation is clearly illustrated in the UNIBEN staging. Actors' bodies became the arena where Igbo and colonial cultures collided. As the director observed, when colonial characters entered with unfamiliar gestures, "people could see difference embodied before them"

Yet Bharucha's critique that interculturalism risks exoticising cultures if historical asymmetries are ignored (*Theatre and the World* 94) tempers this reading. The UNIBEN production avoided this pitfall because its performers were culturally

proximate to the traditions depicted. Rather than exoticising, they reclaimed Igbo traditions for both local and global audiences.

#### **4.5.2 Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory deepens our understanding of the actors' role in mediating historical trauma. Achebe's anticolonial vision, as articulated in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, was to "help his society regain belief in itself by showing its history and culture" (44). The actors extended this literary project into performance, embodying Igbo traditions as acts of cultural reclamation.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is equally relevant. The production staged rituals in English, a colonial language, within a Western-style theatre, yet these hybrid conditions generated cultural affirmation rather than erasure. As Audience Member C remarked: "I didn't need translation; I felt the meaning". Hybridity here fostered recognition.

However, Stratton's critique that Achebe marginalises women (*Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* 32) complicates this analysis. While Ekwefi's role highlighted maternal resilience, other female characters remained peripheral. This indicates that the stage adaptation, while bridging cultural difference, reproduced some of the patriarchal structures inherent in the novel.

### **4.5.3 Performance Studies Perspective**

Schechner's notion of "restored behaviour" illuminates how Igbo rituals were re-enacted for contemporary audiences. Actors embodied ancestral practices in ways that spoke to present-day concerns, demonstrating the portability of performance across time (Schechner 35).

Fischer-Lichte's theory of transformation further explains the audience's responses. Spectators reported feeling immersed in Igbo traditions even when unfamiliar with them. This resonates with her claim that theatre generates "liminal spaces where performers and spectators undergo transformations in their perceptions of self and other" (Fischer-Lichte 117).

Finally, the digital circulation of the performance on YouTube aligns with Freshwater's observation that "theatrical publics expand beyond the immediate physical space" (*Theatre & Audience* 88). In this way, the actors' mediation of cultural difference reached not only local Nigerian audiences but also global viewers.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis demonstrates that stage actors in the UNIBEN adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* played a pivotal role in bridging cultural difference through their embodied performances. They acted as cultural mediators, embodied conflict and dialogue, taught through ritual, evoked emotional universality, and negotiated

tensions between authenticity and adaptation. These findings affirm that intercultural performance is not merely aesthetic but deeply political and pedagogical, resonating with postcolonial imperatives and performance studies insights.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Summary of the Study

This study investigated the role of stage actors in bridging cultural difference through performance, using as a case study Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as adapted by Effing Bassey and directed by Joan Salami at the University of Benin (UNIBEN) Theatre. The research adopted a qualitative case study design, employing interviews, performance observation, and document analysis. The respondents included the director, four principal actors (Okonkwo, Nwoye, Obierika, and Ekwefi), and three audience members, supplemented by online reviews of the YouTube recording of the performance.

The central objective was to assess how actors, through their embodiment of Achebe's narrative and Bassey's adaptation, mediated cultural conflict between Igbo traditions and Western colonial forces. The study also examined how these performances were received by audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds, and how the adaptation functioned within Nigerian theatre as a space for dialogue and cultural affirmation.

The research was framed by three theoretical perspectives: intercultural performance theory, postcolonial theory, and performance studies. Intercultural performance theory, as articulated by Patrice Pavis, views the actor's body as the site

of cultural confrontation and negotiation (*Intercultural Performance* 42). Postcolonial theory, especially Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, helped analyse how the production staged Igbo rituals in hybrid theatrical forms (*The Location of Culture* 112). Finally, performance studies, particularly Richard Schechner's idea of "restored behaviour," illuminated how actors re-enacted traditional rituals for contemporary audiences (*Performance Theory* 35).

The data collected reveal that the actors were central to the bridging of cultural difference, not only by embodying Igbo cultural practices but also by generating emotional universality that resonated across cultures. As Fischer-Lichte has argued, performance creates liminal spaces where "performers and spectators undergo transformations in their perceptions of self and other" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 117). The UNIBEN production vividly illustrated this transformative potential.

## **5.2 Major Findings**

### **5.2.1 Actors as Cultural Mediators**

The research established that actors functioned as cultural mediators, translating Achebe's literary narrative into embodied performance. Director Joan Salami underscored this when she told her cast: "You are not just playing a character, you are carrying a history"

Her emphasis was that the actors' responsibility extended beyond theatrical craft to cultural representation.

The actors themselves echoed this mediatory role. The performer of Okonkwo explained: "I wanted the audience to see why he resists the missionaries it's about protecting a way of life"

This reflects Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's position that African actors must carry cultural history in their performances (Ngugi, 45). By embodying cultural traditions, actors acted as interpreters between Igbo society and heterogeneous audiences.

Audience testimonies confirmed this impact. Audience Member A, a Yoruba spectator, said: "I am Yoruba, but I could feel Igbo traditions through the dances and proverbs"

. This statement illustrates the cross-cultural accessibility of performance, validating Fischer-Lichte's view that embodiment can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers (114).

### **5.2.2 Embodiment of Cultural Conflict**

Another major finding is that actors embodied cultural conflict and dialogue. Nwoye's actor explained his choice of hesitant gestures and pauses to express inner conflict: "I used softer tones, hesitant gestures, and even pauses in speech to make the struggle visible"

This connects to Schechner's assertion that actors' performances often rely on re-enacted behaviours that audiences interpret in fresh contexts (*Performance Studies* 72).

Audience Member B's testimony further reinforces this: "The Okonkwo character especially made me think of my own father. He was tough but vulnerable inside"

Through embodiment, actors made colonial encounters and generational tensions intelligible in terms relatable across cultures.

### **5.2.3 Ritual as Pedagogy**

The data revealed that ritual performance functioned pedagogically, teaching audiences about Igbo cosmology and traditions. Ekwefi's actor reflected: "By showing Ekwefi's fear but also her respect for tradition, I think people saw the humanity in it"

This aligns with Karin Barber's argument that African performance operates as "a pedagogy of the body" (*The Anthropology of Texts* 83).

The emphasis on ritual, however, created tension between authenticity and narrative depth. While rituals such as the egwugwu masquerade were performed with cultural fidelity, minor characters sometimes received less psychological development. This confirms Jane Plastow's warning that African adaptations may

risk reducing complexity into “spectacles of ritual and colour” (*African Theatre and Politics* 88).

#### **5.2.4 Emotional Universality Across Cultures**

One of the most striking findings was the universality of emotions. Despite cultural differences, audiences connected with the struggles portrayed on stage. Audience Member B linked Okonkwo to his own father, while Audience Member C admitted: “At first, I didn’t understand, but the actors’ expressions and movements carried me along. I didn’t need translation; I felt the meaning”

This supports Bhabha’s theory of hybridity: cultural encounters generate “in-between spaces” where difference becomes recognisable and shared (112). The actors bridged cultural gaps by evoking emotions that transcended ethnicity and language.

#### **5.2.5 The Politics of Adaptation**

Finally, the adaptation itself influenced how cultural difference was mediated. Effing Bassegy’s version emphasised ritual and ensemble sequences, privileging cultural affirmation over psychological introspection. While this highlighted the richness of Igbo traditions, it also condensed some narrative elements. As Robert Stam observes, adaptation involves “acts of omission and emphasis, creating new meanings through transformation” (*Literature and Film* 25).

The director's prioritisation of authenticity mitigated Bharucha's concern that intercultural performance risks exoticising traditions if divorced from context (*Theatre and the World* 94). Because the production was performed within Nigeria, by culturally proximate actors, it avoided exoticisation and instead functioned as an act of cultural reclamation.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

This study set out to explore how stage actors bridge cultural difference through performance, focusing on the UNIBEN Theatre adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The evidence from interviews, observations, and reviews demonstrates that actors were not mere transmitters of dialogue but cultural mediators, negotiating traditions, emotions, and histories for diverse audiences.

The director's insistence that "you are not just playing a character, you are carrying a history"

Interview Transcript Toreh crystallises the study's key conclusion: performance in this context is both artistic and cultural labour. Stage actors embody Igbo heritage, interpret colonial encounters, and invite audiences local and global into transformative cultural dialogue.

The study confirms Richard Schechner's claim that performance is "a way of making communities aware of themselves" (*Performance Studies* 72). At UNIBEN,

the community extended beyond ethnic boundaries: Yoruba and Edo spectators found resonance in Igbo rituals, while online viewers engaged with the performance globally. This shows how theatre generates shared recognition without erasing difference.

At the same time, tensions were evident. While rituals were staged with authenticity, some narrative depth was compromised, echoing Plastow's warning about the risks of privileging ritual over psychological complexity (88). Furthermore, gender representation remained limited, confirming Florence Stratton's critique that Achebe's text marginalises women (*Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* 32).

Despite these limitations, the study concludes that the UNIBEN actors successfully bridged cultural difference by combining authenticity, emotional universality, and creative adaptation. Their work illustrates Fischer-Lichte's assertion that theatre creates "liminal spaces where performers and spectators undergo transformations in their perceptions of self and other" (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 117).

#### **5.4 Recommendations for Theatre Practitioners and Scholars**

Based on the findings, the study offers the following recommendations:

#### 5.4.1 For Theatre Practitioners

- 1. Prioritise Actor Training in Cultural Literacy:** Actors should be trained not only in stagecraft but in cultural traditions, songs, and rituals. As seen in UNIBEN, this enhances authenticity and deepens audience connection. Ngũgĩ insists that African performance must retain its cultural grounding, where “song, story, and dance” are embodied by the actor (*Decolonising the Mind* 45).
- 2. Balance Ritual with Narrative Depth:** While ritual offers cultural affirmation, productions should avoid overemphasising spectacle at the expense of character psychology. Directors must heed Plastow’s caution that ritual without depth risks reducing performance to “colour and spectacle” (88).
- 3. Embrace Hybrid Forms:** Productions should recognise hybridity as a strength. By staging rituals in English and in Western-derived theatre spaces, UNIBEN’s production illustrated Bhabha’s argument that hybridity creates “in-between spaces” of recognition (*The Location of Culture* 112). Practitioners should embrace such hybridity as a strategy for cultural dialogue.
- 4. Leverage Digital Platforms:** The YouTube circulation of the UNIBEN production extended intercultural dialogue globally. Practitioners should integrate digital dissemination as part of their artistic strategy, in line with

Freshwater's claim that "theatrical publics expand beyond the immediate physical space" (*Theatre & Audience* 88).

#### 5.4.2 For Scholars

1. **Advance Performance-Centred Research:** Scholars should move beyond literary analysis of Achebe's text to performance analysis, highlighting how embodiment generates meaning. Ato Quayson's reminder that performance makes cultural difference "visible and audible" (*African Performance and the Politics of Representation* 122) should guide such scholarship.
2. **Interrogate Gender Representation:** Future scholarship must critically examine how adaptations of Achebe's work reproduce or resist patriarchal structures. Ekwefi's portrayal offered some space for female resilience, but broader representation remains limited.
3. **Contextualise Interculturalism Politically:** Scholars must follow Bharucha's call to historicise intercultural performance (*Theatre and the World* 94). The UNIBEN production avoided exoticisation because of cultural proximity, but future work must continue to critique how power dynamics shape representation.

## 5.5 Suggestions for Further Research

While this study has offered insights into the role of stage actors in bridging cultural difference, it opens several avenues for further investigation:

- 1. Comparative Studies:** Future research could compare Nigerian university theatre productions of *Things Fall Apart* with international adaptations, assessing how actors' cultural proximity influences authenticity and audience reception.
- 2. Gendered Readings of Performance:** There is a need for deeper analysis of how female characters are embodied on stage, and whether performance can challenge Achebe's gender biases noted by Stratton (32).
- 3. Digital Performance and Reception:** More work is needed on how YouTube and social media extend intercultural theatre publics. The UNIBEN case suggests significant online impact, but systematic analysis of digital audiences remains underdeveloped.
- 4. Community-Based Performance:** Future studies could investigate how adaptations of Achebe's text function in rural or community-based theatre outside academic contexts, potentially offering more grassroots perspectives on cultural dialogue.
- 5. Longitudinal Studies of Audience Impact:** Scholars could trace how exposure to performances like *Things Fall Apart* affects audience perceptions of culture and colonial history over time, assessing long-term contributions to intercultural understanding.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I

#### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

##### **For Stage Actors**

1. Can you describe your experience of performing in the adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* at UNIBEN Theatre?
2. How did you interpret your role in relation to Igbo cultural traditions and colonial encounters portrayed in the play?
3. In what ways did you feel your performance contributed to communicating cultural difference to the audience?
4. What challenges did you face in balancing fidelity to Achebe's narrative with the demands of live performance?
5. Did you feel that your acting helped the audience to better understand Igbo traditions and their confrontation with colonialism? Please explain with examples.

##### **For the Director (Joan Salami)**

6. What informed your directorial choices in staging Effiong Bassey's adaptation of *Things Fall Apart*?
7. How did you guide the actors to embody and communicate cultural conflict and dialogue in their performances?

8. In your view, what role does theatre – and specifically the actor play in bridging cultural difference in contemporary Nigerian society?

**For Audience Members**

9. How did you experience the cultural differences presented in the UNIBEN production of *Things Fall Apart*? Did the actors' performances help you connect with or better understand these differences?
10. Do you think the production encouraged reflection or dialogue about cultural identity, colonial history, or social issues in Nigeria today? Please explain.

## APPENDIX II

### Interview Transcript

#### Interview with the Director (Live)

**Researcher (Toreh Gift Oghenetega):** Good afternoon, ma. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. Could you begin by telling me what guided your directorial approach to staging Effing Bassey's adaptation of *Things Fall Apart*?

**Director (Joan Salami):** Good afternoon, Toreh. It's a pleasure. For me, the first guiding principle was fidelity to Achebe's vision while making it alive for a contemporary audience. Achebe's novel already stages cultural conflict between the Igbo and the colonial forces, so my role was to help the actors embody these tensions in a way that speaks to today's Nigeria.

**Researcher:** How did you prepare the actors to embody that conflict and dialogue on stage?

**Director:** I encouraged them to study not only the script but also Igbo proverbs, songs, and rituals. For instance, in the wrestling scenes and the masquerade sequences, the actors had to understand the cultural meaning behind the performance, not just the movements. I told them, "You are not just playing a character, you are carrying a history." That changed their commitment.

**Researcher:** Did you see the actors as bridging cultural differences for the audience?

**Director:** Absolutely. Some of our audience members were Igbo, but many were not. When the actors performed rituals with authenticity, and when the colonial

characters entered with their strange manners, the audience could feel the clash. That contrast is what created dialogue people could see difference embodied before them.

### **Interview with Actor 1 (Okonkwo, Live)**

**Researcher:** Thank you for your time. Could you describe how you approached the role of Okonkwo?

**Actor (Okonkwo):** Playing Okonkwo was tough. He is a proud Igbo man, very tied to tradition, but also very flawed. I had to show his strength but also his fears especially his fear of weakness. During rehearsals, I worked on posture, voice projection, and anger management. Okonkwo shouts a lot, but I had to make sure it wasn't just shouting. It had to carry cultural weight.

**Researcher:** Did you feel you were helping the audience understand cultural differences?

**Actor (Okonkwo):** Yes. Many people see Okonkwo only as stubborn, but when I played him, I wanted the audience to see why he resists the missionaries it's about protecting a way of life. Some audience members later told me, "Now we understand why Okonkwo couldn't just accept change." That feedback meant a lot.

### **Interview with Actor 2 (Nwoye, WhatsApp Call)**

**Researcher:** Could you share what it was like to perform as Nwoye?

**Actor (Nwoye):** Playing Nwoye was emotional. He is torn between his father's traditions and the attraction of the new faith. I had to show that inner conflict. I used

softer tones, hesitant gestures, and even pauses in speech to make the struggle visible.

**Researcher:** How did the audience respond?

**Actor (Nwoye):** Some people told me they cried during my scenes. They saw how difficult it is for a young man to reject his father but also to find his own path. For me, that was a moment of bridging people could connect across cultures because everyone understands conflict between parents and children.

### **Interview with Actor 3 (Obierika, WhatsApp Call)**

**Researcher:** What did you focus on when playing Obierika?

**Actor (Obierika):** Obierika is the voice of reason. He questions Okonkwo and also reflects on the coming of the white men. I saw him as a bridge between tradition and change. My lines often explained to the audience what was happening, so I had to deliver them clearly and with calm authority.

**Researcher:** Do you think Obierika helped in bridging cultural difference?

**Actor (Obierika):** Definitely. He is the one who interprets both to Okonkwo and to the audience. One audience member said after the play, “Your role made me understand the Igbo culture without confusion.” That’s bridging in practice.

### **Interview with Actor 4 (Ekwefi, Live)**

**Researcher:** What was your experience performing Ekwefi?

**Actor (Ekwefi):** Ekwefi is a mother, and her love for Ezinma is central. I tried to bring tenderness and resilience. In rehearsals, we worked on how to express emotion physically through the way she touches Ezinma, or how she worries when the priestess takes her daughter away.

**Researcher:** Did you feel this performance helped audiences understand cultural traditions?

**Actor (Ekwefi):** Yes. Some people don't understand why Igbo mothers accept traditional rituals. By showing Ekwefi's fear but also her respect for tradition, I think people saw the humanity in it. They could connect, even if they don't share the culture.

#### **Interview with Audience Member A (Live)**

**Researcher:** What was your impression of the performance?

**Audience Member A:** It was powerful. The actors made the culture come alive. I am Yoruba, but I could feel Igbo traditions through the dances and proverbs. At the same time, I could also relate to the struggle with colonialism.

**Researcher:** Did the actors help bridge cultural difference for you?

**Audience Member A:** Yes, because I left the theatre feeling I had visited another culture but also recognised myself in their struggles.

#### **Interview with Audience Member B (Live)**

**Researcher:** How did you respond to the staging of *Things Fall Apart*?

**Audience Member B:** The acting was very engaging. The Okonkwo character especially made me think of my own father. He was tough but vulnerable inside. That similarity across cultures was striking.

**Researcher:** So, the actors bridged cultural difference for you?

**Audience Member B:** Exactly. They made me see that cultural differences are real, but the emotions are universal.

### **Interview with Audience Member C (Live)**

**Researcher:** What stood out for you during the performance?

**Audience Member C:** The rituals and songs. They were intense. At first, I didn't understand, but the actors' expressions and movements carried me along. I didn't need translation; I felt the meaning.

**Researcher:** Did you feel the actors were mediating cultural dialogue?

**Audience Member C:** Yes. I came in as an outsider to Igbo culture, but I left feeling like I had been welcomed into a conversation. That was the achievement of the actors.