

Article

Staging Sustainability: Ecoscenography, Technology, and Climate-Conscious Performance in Nigerian Theatre

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Abstract

This article examines the transformative intersection of technology, ecological design, and performance practices in Nigerian theatre. It argues that the integration of ecoscenographic principles – especially those spearheaded by Tanja Beer – offers revolutionary pathways for sustainable theatre production while addressing Nigeria's urgent environmental challenges. Through case studies of eco-theatre projects, digital innovations, and indigenous performance practices, we demonstrate how Nigerian artists are pioneering climate-conscious performance models. The research reveals that effective eco-design in Nigerian theatre hinges on three pillars: technological adaptation, cultural relevance, and community co-creation. Findings indicate that ecoscenography not only reduces the theatre's ecological footprint but also amplifies its capacity as a tool for environmental education and resilience-building in climate-vulnerable communities. The article concludes with a new framework for Nigerian theatre that combines Beer's theories with indigenous knowledge and suitable technologies.

Keywords: *Ecoscenography, Nigerian theatre, Sustainable design, Climate dramaturgy, Tanja Beer, Performance, Indigenous knowledge, Technology*

Introduction

In recent years, the performing arts in Nigeria have entered a period of profound re-evaluation, particularly regarding their environmental and technological futures. The fast growth of digital technologies, coupled with the growing urgency of climate issues, has compelled practitioners to reconsider how theatre is produced, conceived, and experienced. This rethinking aligns with global movements in ecoscenography, a concept pioneered by Tanja Beer, which emphasizes sustainable and community-centered design. Beer's pioneering work in ecoscenography provides a theoretical framework that extends beyond simple resource conservation to embrace what she terms "regenerative, place-based practices" that form "active partnerships with materials, communities and local ecologies" (Beer, "Regenerative Inspiration" 1).

The argument proceeds from three fundamental claims. Firstly, ecoscenography reframes scenographic practice so that materials, energy, labor, and place are read as ethical and creative resources rather than expendable inputs (Beer). Secondly, the material realities and social practices of Nigerian theatre, its community-rooted creation, indigenous ecologies, and emerging digital infrastructure offer fertile ground for a localized ecoscenography (Ododo). Thirdly, successful eco-design in Nigeria will depend on marrying technological adaptation with cultural relevance and community co-creation. When these pillars operate together, performances reduce footprint while amplifying civic learning and adaptive capacities (Emakunu and Amoma). Beer's approach reframes sustainability from an afterthought to a generative force that influences aesthetic choices and production processes. For Nigerian theatre, this framework offers particular relevance given the

country's rich indigenous performance traditions, which have historically maintained profound connections with natural environments and communal structures.

Furthermore, the integration of digital technologies into Nigerian performance practices induces both potential and challenges for sustainable theatre development. While digital tools can help reduce material consumption and increase audience reach, they also risk disconnecting performances from their communal, place-based roots. This article examines how the convergence of ecoscenography, appropriate digital technology, and Nigerian performance traditions can create a uniquely African model of sustainable performance that honors indigenous wisdom while addressing contemporary environmental crises.

As academic researchers and scenographers, the researchers' reflections are rooted in practical experiments within Nigerian theatre. Over the years, the researcher has explored how eco-design principles can intersect with indigenous aesthetics and local materials to create environmentally responsive and culturally relevant performances. These experiences, discussed later in this article, illustrate the possibilities of ecological creativity in Nigerian stagecraft.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining theoretical analysis, instance illustration, and synthesis of existing literature on ecoscenography, Nigerian theatre, and climate dramaturgy. The study draws upon Beer's practice as research methodology, which "engages stakeholders in iterative creation and reflection so learning and ownership emerge through making and performance" (Blissett 17).

Primary sources include Beer's theoretical writings and case studies, supplemented by recent scholarship on Nigerian theatre's digital transformation and climate-conscious performance practices. The analysis focuses on identifying convergences between Beer's ecoscenographic principles and existing Nigerian performance traditions, while examining how digital technologies can support rather than undermine sustainable practice.

Theoretical Framework

Ecoscenography, as Beer defines it, "entails incorporating principles of ecology to create recyclable, biodegradable, restorative and regenerative performance spaces" (Beer, "What Is Ecoscenography?"). The framework is built on three foundational pillars: technological adaptation, cultural relevance, and community co-creation. Each of these pillars is vital but insufficient on its own; the strength of an ecoscenographic approach in Nigeria lies in its insistence on integrating all three.

1. Technological Adaptation

Beer's emphasis on "design for impermanence and lifecycle" provides a framework for evaluating technological choices based on their long-term sustainability rather than short-term convenience (Beer, "Ecoscenography Conversations" 1). Rather than universal adoption of Western digital technologies, the framework emphasizes technological choices contingent upon local needs, energy infrastructure, and cultural contexts. This involves prioritizing low-energy solutions, utilizing renewable energy sources, and ensuring that technology choices support rather than supplant local knowledge systems (Diri et al). The stage performance, *Uda Nkwa* (2024), shows "an example of immersive projection/lighting strategies that reduce heavy scenic builds" (Nwakunor) (see Fig. 3 and 4).

Considerably, digital technologies can support ecoscenographic practice in several ways. Social media platforms, for instance, enable community engagement and audience growth without the carbon footprint of traditional marketing materials. Digital design tools can facilitate the visualization and planning of material-efficient set designs, while 3D modeling can reduce the need for physical prototypes and miniature models. Inarguably, when properly conceived, projection can stand in for bulky scenic structures and enable rapid reconfiguration for touring performances. On the other hand, hybrid presentations, which combine tiny on-site builds with digital landscapes, reduce material waste while preserving a strong visual identity (Ododo). However, the most significant technological adaptation is what Midyanti and Sukmayadi call the “intersection of local wisdom and digital innovation” (20). This approach prioritizes technologies that amplify rather than replace existing cultural practices.

2. Cultural Relevance

Sustainability is not a foreign philosophy within the Nigerian context, as indigenous performance practices already embody environmental harmony and cultural symbolism. The example of the *Afia Olu* festival is instructive. In the festival held in Nnewi, masquerades (*mmanwu*), royal blessings, cultural dance, and dramatic enactments converge in the public square, making the festival itself a theatrical ecology of community, ritual, and performance (African Theatre Magazine). *King Orizu, Afia Olu Festival* and Traditional Igbo Community Theatre is described as “an unrivaled excellent piece of community theatre,” rooted not in imported spectacle but in communal ritual and identity (Anadi). Relatively, *Uda Nkwa* (discussed later) also demonstrates the integration of traditional instruments, props, and cultural authority into stage design (Udeze). Hence, this framework recognizes that sustainable theatre practices must be grounded in local cultural values and traditional ecological knowledge. This involves learning from indigenous performance traditions that have sustained communities for generations while adapting these practices for contemporary challenges (Ross and Beer).

3. Community Co-creation

Following Beer’s emphasis on place-making and community engagement, this principle prioritizes participatory design processes that build local capacity while creating performance works. Her concept of the “scenographer as placemaker” who facilitates “co-creating communities” provides a framework for understanding how theatre can serve broader social and environmental goals (Beer et al 2). Because performance in Nigerian theatre is collaborative, designers, performers, and audiences can all participate in shared creative activities. This participatory structure is completely aligned with ecoscenography’s emphasis on co-design and community engagement. As discussed in the illustrative examples later in this paper, such collaboration fosters environmental awareness while reinforcing cultural identity. Eco-design, in this sense, becomes a collective philosophy rather than a solitary artistic choice.

In addition, participatory approaches derived from Theatre for Development (TfD) can help communities co-create while addressing environmental issues (Komolafe and Apena 24). These approaches treat environmental issues not as abstract problems but as lived experiences that require community-generated solutions. They also ensure that sustainability initiatives serve community needs while fostering local ownership and long-term viability (Beer).

Literature Review and Discussion

Ecoscenography and Performance Ecology

Ecoscenography articulates an ecological ethic for scenography: it asks designers and makers to consider the life cycles of materials, the energy cost of technologies, and the wider social and more-than-human ecologies in which performances occur (Beer). Beer's praxis emphasizes a broader definition of "design"; one that incorporates reuse, repair, local sourcing, and collaborative authorship with people and surroundings. Rather than a limited set of green practices, ecoscenography represents a methodological reorientation: design as stewardship and design as pedagogy.

Beer's methodology extends beyond eco-efficiency to what she calls "material partnership," where designers develop relationships with reclaimed materials, allowing these materials to inform aesthetic choices rather than simply serving predetermined concepts (Beer, "The Aesthetics of Impermanence" 59). The Living Stage project, Beer's signature case study, demonstrates how ecoscenographic principles can create "recyclable, biodegradable, edible, and biodiverse performance spaces" that serve beyond theatrical presentation (Beer, "The Living Stage" 2). In Nigeria, such approaches could be based on traditional practices such as temporary shrine construction, market installations, and festival preparations, all of which have long incorporated sustainable design principles.

Notably, for theatre scholars and practitioners, this has theoretical implications beyond sustainability. Ecoscenography aligns with recent work in ecodramaturgies and climate dramaturgy, which reimagines the performance event as both cultural intervention and material practice (Amaefula). It also provides a useful vocabulary for connecting scenographic choices (wood or synthetic materials, temporary or permanent construction, single-use or reconfigurable pieces) to ethical commitments and pedagogical outcomes. Beer argues that materials and place must act as co-creators in the scenic ecology (Beer 45). In the context of Nigerian theatre, local festivals like *Afià Olu* already enact material and spatial co-creation through community-driven performance, ritual, and scenic gesture. As the African Theatre Magazine article observes, the festival theatre is deeply interwoven with Igbo cosmology and identity rather than standing apart as an "artistic event" (Anadi). This suggests that a Nigerian ecoscenography should not merely insert eco-materials into performance but emerge from the relational textures of community, ritual, and place.

Nigerian Theatre in a Digital and Ecological Moment

Two converging trends make the present moment decisive for eco-design in Nigeria. One is technological: Nigerian theatre has increasingly engaged with digital practices: projection, LED lighting, video capture, and social-media distribution, accelerated by conferences and discussions on a 'digital era' for Nigerian theatre (Ododo). The second is ecological: theatre-for-development initiatives, community-based eco-theatre projects, and touring climate-arts interventions in vulnerable areas demonstrate the public's need for localized climate narratives (Emakunu and Amoma; AP News coverage of The Herds).

Before the new millennium, theatre scenography in Nigeria relied largely on manual technology and improvisation for set, lighting, and sound. This practice is now being superseded by digital technology, which has "overshadowed the older and more tasking ways of designing and setting up theatrical shows" (Umezina & Orji 49). Contemporary

Nigerian theatre is experiencing what Ododo describes as a “digital era” characterized by the integration of social media, livestreaming, and digital design tools into traditional performance practices (Ododo 1). Several Nigerian artists and institutions are experimenting with sustainable and digital theatre models. University theatres, arts festivals, and independent collectives are increasingly staging productions using upcycled set designs, biodegradable costumes, and immersive digital settings. For example, internet performance festivals during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how theatre could thrive in the absence of traditional physical infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic led to innovations such as drive-in performances and hybrid digital-live formats that maintain communal aspects while expanding accessibility (Morgan 4).

These changes create an opportunity for hybrid approaches that leverage digital technology to reduce resource intensity while using performance’s capacity to convene, educate, and organize people. Notably, the Internet of Things (IoT) applications in theatre, including smart lighting systems and environmental sensors, can optimize energy usage while creating responsive performance environments (Boh and Adoka).

Climate Dramaturgy and Community Engagement

The emerging field of climate dramaturgy provides methodological frameworks for using theatre as a tool for environmental education and community resilience building. Theresa May defines ecodramaturgy as a dramaturgical approach that “foregrounds ecological values in plays and productions and connects them to place, justice, and multispecies relations” (3). This approach treats “natural environments as active participants” and integrates “ecological reciprocity into site, form, and performance processes” (Heddon and Mackey 41).

Illustrative Instances

In every production, design is an experiment in material ecology. The preference for organic and biodegradable components: raffia, clay, bamboo, and jute – reflects a philosophy of respect for the environment. For this reason, the researcher’s professional practice has consistently served as a testing ground for ecoscenographic concepts. Each production potentially offers a platform for merging technology, ecology, and culture within the Nigerian context.

A demonstration of this practice in Nigerian theatre is found in the researcher’s work as scenic designer for *The King Orizu Afia Olu Festival* (2024). This annual cultural celebration provided an ideal setting for exploring the intersection of ecological consciousness, indigenous performance, and technological adaptation. Serving as both designer and educator, the researcher approached the festival as a living laboratory for sustainable scenography; one that merged environmental ethics with cultural performance aesthetics.

In conceptualizing the scenic environment, the researcher adopted materials that were biodegradable, locally sourced, and community-crafted. The primary structures were built from bamboo, palm fronds, raffia, clay, and repurposed wood, which not only mirrored the ecological realities of the host community (Nnewi) but also represented the festival’s celebration of harvest and renewal (see Figs. 1 and 2). Beyond materials, the production integrated technological and ecological aesthetics in subtle yet effective ways using low-energy LED lighting. This fusion of eco-technology and traditional performance reflected the very principles that Tanja Beer champions: ecological design as both artistic expression

and environmental activism. Relatively, local artisans, students, and cultural custodians co-created scenic elements for this production. This approach aligned with the “community co-creation” pillar identified earlier in the paper, thus turning theatre-making into an act of environmental stewardship.



Plate 1. The stage and performers at the Afia Olu festival performance (2024).



Plate 2. The stage and performers at the Afia Olu festival performance (2024).

Similarly, *Uda Nkwa: Echoes from the Drums* (Dec. 2024), staged at Arochukwu, exemplifies another practical exploration of ecoscenography. The production, written and directed by Dr. Ikechukwu Erojikwe, revisits the legacy of Eze Kalu Oji of Arochukwu through a rich fusion of music, dance, masquerade, and narrative. Serving as the scenic designer, the researcher developed an environment that extended the dramaturgy of rhythm and memory through locally sourced bamboo, raffia, and fabric textures.

In designing *Uda Nkwa*, the researcher implemented key ecoscenographic strategies. Firstly, as The Guardian News reviewed, seamless scenographic transitions (where set, costume, and movement interpenetrate) were achieved with lightweight, locally sourced materials and careful rehearsal of choreography, thus reducing the need for heavy, single-use set builds (Nwakunor). Secondly, the sound ecology of the performance drew from percussive acoustic layering rather than full amplification, thereby reducing power consumption while enhancing audience immersion. Thirdly, *Uda Nkwa's* close collaboration with cultural custodians and use of traditional artefacts reinforced the necessity of community co-creation in ecoscenographic work: design choices must be negotiated with local bearers of

knowledge so that materials and staging are culturally appropriate and environmentally respectful (Udeze).



Plate 3. The eco-friendly stage and performers of Uda Nkwa production



Plate 4. The researcher constructing & painting the stage of Uda Nkwa production

In the same vein, the *Things Fall Apart Festival* held in the Centre for Memories, Enugu, 2025, exemplified how Nigerian memory can be interpreted through sustainable and community-driven performance design. Through reimagination of Achebe's *Umuofia* using biodegradable materials, handcrafted props, and open-air performance spaces, the festival merged ecological sensitivity with cultural heritage (Centre for Memories). With the participation of scholars, artisans, and professional performers, including a keynote by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, it became a living site for “Town and Gown” exchange, where academic insight met grassroots creativity (Chijioke & Egbejule). Its scenographic approach, rooted in local aesthetics yet responsive to environmental ethics, aligns closely with ecoscenographic principles and reinforces the researcher’s framework for integrating cultural heritage, sustainability, and Climate dramaturgy in Nigerian theatre.



Plate 5. The researcher constructing an open-air performance space for Things Fall



Plate 6. The researcher constructing an eco-friendly scenic unit for Things Fall Apart

Visual Documentation of Eco-Design Practice

To complement the discussion of ecoscenographic experimentation, selected images from the researcher's design portfolio are included below. These images capture various stages of conceptualization, material testing, and set construction. Though not tied to a single production, they collectively reflect the researcher's evolving commitment to sustainable design principles, which include biodegradable materials, spatial adaptability, and the fusion of indigenous and digital aesthetics.



Plate 7. Eco-scenic hut constructed from raffia, bamboo & clay. Photograph by researcher.



Plate 8. Modular seating prototypes made from repurposed fabric, foam and tyres. Photograph by researcher.



Plate 9. The researcher constructing Akwa from reclaimed bamboo. Photograph by researcher.



Plate 10. The researcher recycling coconut shell. Photograph by researcher.



Plate 11. The researcher constructing mobile scenic unit from reclaimed tyres & bamboo. Photograph by researcher.



Plate 12. Eco-designed bag made from coconut shell. Photograph by researcher.



Plate 13. The researcher constructing eco-friendly stage furniture with plastic bottles Photograph by researcher.

Practical Recommendations and Future Framework

The future of Nigerian theatre lies in balancing innovation with accountability. As digital tools become more accessible and environmental challenges intensify, there is an opportunity to establish Nigeria as a leader in sustainable performance design. Based on the analysis of existing literature and emerging practices, this article proposes a framework for Nigerian ecoscenography that integrates Beer's theoretical contributions with indigenous knowledge systems and appropriate technologies. Tanja Beer's ecoscenography offers a rigorous ethic and vocabulary – materials as partners, design as care, and creation as political action, which is easily adapted to the Nigerian setting (Beer). However, in order to adapt, ecoscenographic practice must be decolonized from any single geographic toolbox. A Nigerian ecoscenography should:

1. Treat indigenous materials and crafts as site-specific technologies. What in Beer's account is called "material agency" can be mapped onto Nigerian craft ecologies, where carving, weaving, and found-object assembly serve as material languages for sustainable scenography.
2. Prioritise low-tech/high-impact interventions where appropriate. A solar-powered sound system paired with reconfigured narration and song can be more transformative in a riverside community than an expensive projection rig that requires constant grid power.

Technology integration should prioritize tools and approaches that amplify existing cultural practices while minimizing environmental impact. This includes digital documentation systems that preserve and disseminate indigenous knowledge, communication technologies that facilitate community engagement, and design tools that promote material efficiency. It is also necessary to consider energy usage, electronic waste, and digital divisions, which may prevent communities from participating. Technology choices should be evaluated based on their long-term sustainability and ability to promote community self-determination.

3. Institutionalize repair and materials-lending libraries. Design for longevity requires institutional coordination: theatre companies, universities, and municipal cultural offices can maintain inventories of reused flats, modular frames, and lighting rigs.
4. Invest in skills transfer. Technical upgrades are only useful if technicians and makers are trained. Workshops and curricular adjustments (SONTA-led conversations and university modules on ecoscenography) are relevant (Ododo, Akpienbi, and Tugbokorwei).

Essentially, further research should focus on developing more sophisticated assessment techniques capable of capturing the environmental and cultural implications of sustainable theatre practices. There is also a need for longitudinal studies that track the long-term effectiveness of various sustainability approaches in varied Nigerian contexts.

Conclusions

The future of sustainable theatre in Nigeria, and potentially beyond, lies in creating synergistic approaches that embrace the perspectives of the past while addressing present-day challenges. Through careful attention to technological adaptation, cultural relevance, and community co-creation, Nigerian theatre practitioners are already pioneering models that could transform how the global theatre community approaches sustainability. Ultimately, Nigerian theatre, with its deep cultural roots and adaptive creativity, is poised to become a leading voice in sustainable performance design; a theatre that does not just entertain, but educates, heals, and sustains. As Beer's work demonstrates, ecoscenography is not merely a set of techniques but a way of reimagining the relationship between art, community, and environment. For Nigerian theatre, this reframing offers the possibility of performance practices that serve not only artistic expression but also cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and community resilience.

Building on this vision, the researcher proposes the **Town and Gown** framework as a necessary bridge between academia and the professional theatre community. This initiative seeks to stimulate dialogue and collaboration between scholars, students, and theatre practitioners, ensuring that sustainable performance principles are both theoretically informed and practically applied. The Town and Gown approach, through the encouragement of mutual learning between the university and the industry, strengthens the implementation of ecoscenographic principles in real-world productions, ensuring that sustainability is both conceptually grounded and practically achievable.

This work represents just the beginning of what promises to be a rich field of research and practice. By encouraging this exchange, Nigerian theatre can strengthen its capacity for innovation, cultural preservation, and ecological resilience, ultimately offering models that may shape the global understanding of sustainable performance and climate dramaturgy in the years ahead.

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