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From the Village Square to the Theatre Hall:
Reflecting on the Shifting Grounds of People Theatre in a Postcolonial Context

1. Indigenous Performance Space at the Threshold of Transition

Confronted with trends in African theatre genres, People Theatre spaces have become ideologically fixed, yet practically dynamic. The dynamism of such spaces responds to the ever-growing and complex realities of marginalised people from the Global South as they respond to new developments in their environment in order to counter complex interactions with systemic injustice. Re-appropriating non-conventional spaces, People Theatre offers the possibility to engage with multiple spaces, diverse people and local concerns. Also, as a site-specific art, People Theatre is enacted strategically on locations that are often frequented by locals like village squares, arenas, bars, open markets, open courtyards, restaurants, etc. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins's exploration of spatiality in imperial contexts reveals that contestations over the colonial construction of space "might be deconstructed and reorganised according to the imperatives of various colonised groups" (1996, 145). Today, Western metropolis theatre spaces are claimed and re-historicised to narrate the consequences of Western incursion in Africa. This strategy helps to create or claim "alternative spatiality" (Sibanda 2019, 1), whose encapsulation in a formal classical theatre hall might supposedly limit multiple possibilities of attendance. In a postcolonial context, "alternative spatiality" refers to spaces with interventionist agendas that aim at engaging with social reality. It is also assumed that such spaces are open-air and not located in concrete and confined frames, particularly if one emphasises that the former were integral elements of indigenous performances across Africa before colonisation. Yet, ambivalence emerges when the proscenium stage, often located in a building, eventually becomes a destination for People Theatre. This latter idea of a performance space invites one to explore a 'reversed resistant' or a writing back paradigm that not only decolonises concrete frames but also adheres to modes of syncretising specific

1 My profound gratitude is expressed to all the student participants of the workshops that I have discussed in this essay. Thank you for generating such engaging and intensive debates on the notion of experimenting with performance spaces in a bid to engage a wider audience in the topics that were raised in our public performances. I also thank Prof. Isidore Diala for his insightful comments on the initial draft of this essay.

2 Although the paper focuses on projects that are titled differently, they all fall within the category of applied or intervention theatre. Although I have used the term People Theatre to refer to a genre of applied theatre and a theatre engagement that expresses the experiences of ordinary and often marginalised people in society, it is used interchangeably with 'applied theatre' and 'intervention theatre' to refer to the participatory, empowering and conscientising potentials of the genre.
indigenous African theatre forms and European models. In this context, postcolonial anxieties associated with migration, race, class and gender are enacted.

2. Case Studies

My different temporal engagements with performance spaces are allied with a number of applied theatre workshops that I (co-)coordinated, namely Theatre and Environmental Education for Primary Schools, which took place from 7-13 July 2002 in the Nkambe Central Subdivision in the North West Province of Cameroon, and a Social Theatre on Culture and Sustainability workshop conducted from 24-29 September 2017 in Abuja, Nigeria. In the summer term of 2013, I organised an applied theatre workshop within an MA Projektmodul I often teach in the Department of African Studies at Humboldt University in Berlin that resulted in the creation of a play titled *Wait a Minute!* Other performances, equally resulting from intervention theatre seminars within the same module in the winter terms of 2016/17 and 2018/19, included Image Theatre and Grenzgänger*innen (a play), respectively. The first workshop was funded by The Swiss Association for International Cooperation (HELVETAS), as one of its programmes on development and sustainability sought to awaken the younger bracket of the population to the great need of protecting the environment through proper management of the soil/water/forest resources. Avoidance of bushfires and educating the adult population through theatre and practice on social issues.

The Nkambe workshop brought together pupils selected from schools in Binka, Binshua and Tabenken, all neighbouring villages located in Nkambe. This paper focuses on the Binshua Squares where the first performance of *Lucky Tree* was enacted. The Abuja workshop, which I directed, was conducted within a German Academic Exchange (DAAD) programme-sponsored Graduate School on Performing Sustainability: Cultures and Development in West Africa in a joint collaboration of the University of Hildesheim (Germany), the University of Maiduguri (Nigeria) and the University of Cape Coast (Ghana); masters and PhD students from Maiduguri and Cape Coast were and are enrolled in the programme, each pursuing research on the

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3 I co-facilitated the Nkambe workshop with the well-known Cameroonian playwright and critic Bole Butake (Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon) who was the main coordinator of the entire project.
4 This quotation is taken from the project proposal written by Bole Butake and submitted for funding to HELVETAS.
5 The Nkambe workshop was titled “Children's Theatre for Environmental Education for Primary Schools in Binka, Binshua and Tabenken.”
6 Dr. Nepomuk Riva is the German coordinator of the SDG Graduate School on Performing Sustainability based at the Center for World Music of the University of Hildesheim, Germany. He holds a PhD in musicology and works as an ethnomusicologist at the University for Music, Drama and Media in Hanover, Germany. I also wish to extend my profound gratitude to him and the entire Graduate School for engaging me in the programme. For more information on the project, see <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/sustainability> [accessed 17 October 2020].
subject of cultural sustainability from different academic disciplines. The play created in the workshop was performed in an open-air amphitheatre located in the centre of the Abuja Arts and Crafts Village. Its main foci were the causes of cultural unsustainability that, according to the student participants, are rooted in family conflicts and eventual disintegration. The goals of the Humboldt University theatre workshops were interlinked with the use of applied theatre as a medium to create public awareness about the intersectionality of race, gender, motherhood, sexuality and class. Given that there were two other performances of *Wait a Minute!*, I dwell solely on that performed on the premises of Mensa Nord (North Refectory) at Humboldt University in Berlin. Image Theatre and *Grenzgänger*innen were performed at Berlin Hauptbahnhof and in one of the theatre halls of the Jugendtheaterwerkstatt (JTW) in Spandau, Berlin, respectively. It is worth adding that the latter was enacted again in a seminar room of the Department of African Studies, HU Berlin, during the Lange Nacht der Wissenschaften on 15 June 2019.

3. Aim

In this paper, I reflect on the re-conceptualisation of performance spaces in terms of a Travelling People Theatre pattern that moves from a village square in Binshua, located in Nkambe Central Subdivision in the North West Province of Cameroon, to the Arts and Craft Village in Abuja, Nigeria to various spaces in Berlin, Germany.

This approach aims at interrogating the reasons why, in the Berlin context, I opted to move the performance space from the open-air to an enclosed concrete frame, contradicting the very relevance and efficacious intent of People Theatre practice. My intention in this essay is not to elaborate on the full content and methodological parameters of the People Theatre projects listed but rather to focus on the issue of performance space. The essay reflects critically on the use of specific indigenous African theatre elements to enact subaltern experience in such spaces. Performing People Theatre in open-air spaces is a decolonising strategy, a political act, challenging a formalistic, rigid and aesthetically complex proscenium stage that generally proliferated African performance practice in colonial and postcolonial times. In this way, Western theatre traditions effectively enabled the erasure of communal dialogue and socialisation; yet, in my case, the theatre hall is seemingly becoming the alternative destination for People Theatre, a phenomenon equally perceived in some ways as a decolonising act. As Isidore Diala notes with regard to the theatre of Esiaba Erobi, the combination of the “indigenous and international in their manifold and conflictual manifestations become[s] a metaphor for the competing epistemological codes that typify the postcolonial state” (2014, 27), and clearly the postcolonial experience. In pursuance of debates interlinked with theatre spaces, then, the following paragraphs

7 Before engaging with any of the public spaces in Berlin, we applied to the Ordnungsamt, requesting for permission. The Ordnungsamt in one instance did not respond to our request. They instead called the secretariat of the Department of African Studies asking what the performance was all about. After this incident, we never heard from them again, even after future applications were made. Our access to JTW was seamless as one of the theatre coordinators, Julia Schreiner, and her team were and are willing to collaborate with us. We were offered free access to the stage, together with other JTW facilities.
acquaint the reader with a brief understanding of People Theatre, explore theatre spaces in a colonial context and conclude with the basis for a shift in specific theatre spaces. Summarily, I map the impact of colonialism on African indigenous performance as a whole and, by implication, the performance space as I echo the concept of syncretism in my reflections, highlighting the demand to revert, ironically, to the proscenium stage located in a building as an alternative paradigm to decolonisation.

4. What is People Theatre?
As a sub-genre of applied theatre, People Theatre mobilises the community to generate counter-discourses often associated with stifling and futile political rhetoric. People Theatre draws on indigenous African theatre, which is a "communal-based oral genre whose context performance and meaning are distinct from the mostly individual-based and literary-bound modern western drama" (Chinyowa 2001, 4; see also Butake and Doho 1988), delineating open-air sites in the community as the spaces for such performances. Its use of a participatory theatre approach is designed to empower communities to initiate self-help programmes through awareness and conscientisation-oriented public performances. It is a purpose-oriented theatre that supersedes voyeurism (see Aba 2003). Equally, as Sibanda states, in the context of alternative theatre, it is a genre which "[demands] its own performance spaces that would allow and enable the use of indigenous idioms, performance styles, and techniques" (2019, 2). The performing spaces that become new destinations for such theatre praxis could be "appropriated and repurposed community halls, beer gardens, open spaces, and youth centres" (Sibanda 2019, 3). In the context of Cameroon, these include the market place, the village square, the village junction and the Fon’s (traditional ruler) palace. People Theatre converges community in performance to narrate its histories and intimate stories "through contextually relevant cultural performative frames that challenge domination and exclusion" (Sibanda 2019, 3; see also Kidd 1983; Kerr 1995; Landy and Montgomery 2012; Mda 1993; Odhiambo 2008). According to Oga S. Aba, People Theatre engages marginalised people in "discussing their problems and working out strategies of change through collective action, [as] they are engaging in a democratic exercise. It is also a theatre of struggle. It is a practice through which the people engage in the reclamation of their voice and culture" (2003, 83). Ultimately, it is a space where dissenting voices committed to demanding equality and justice for disenfranchised groups are heard in the language and idiomatic expressions that are familiar to the audience.

5. Colonial Discourse and the African Performance Space
Postcolonialism continues to challenge critics' engagement with cultural production and practices that are rooted in countries which have experienced European expansionism. Entrenched in revisionism, colonial structures enacted a process of deletion which did not only strip the colonies of their material resources but also brutally reversed the colonised African to either think European or perform the former's supposed naïvety. As David Kerr observes, the initial contact of Europe with African performance by travellers such as Vasco da Gama in 1497 was "vitiates by condescension and ignorance; less noticeable in the use of African dance as a
mechanism of psychic release and vicarious euphoria" (1995, 16). The colonial process, together with missionaries' exploits, denigrated the artistic wealth of indigenous Africans, undermining their aesthetic, cultural and philosophical value, while Western forms were fervently encouraged. Propagating such artistic forms was not intended to promote African performance in a mutual artistic engagement, but rather as a strategy of subjugating the people and objectifying the potentials of their cultural productions. This form of erasure was accompanied by "the use of military force and physical coercion, but it could not function without the existence of a set of beliefs that are held to justify the (dis)possession and continuing occupation of other people's lands" (McLeod 2010, 44). Kerr further attests that, with the transatlantic slave trade and formal colonisation, Western imperialists and missionaries justified their economic expansion and Christian mission by advocating principles that proliferated "the myth of African cultural inferiority as a spurious moral justification for slavery and unequal exchange of commodities" (1995, 18). Correspondingly, Diana Looser's exploration of precolonial performances in the Pacific islands in the 18th and 19th centuries unravels European judgement of Mā'ohi drama as "a primitive version of eighteenth-century English popular performance genres" (2011, 527). In spite of the fact that early ethnographers and explorers' writings on African performances attested to their theatrical qualities, these writings, as with the case of the Pacific islands, were mainly conducted from Eurocentric perspectives. The mythical prognoses of the Europeans were that African performances were primitive, suspicious, underdeveloped and, from the missionaries' perspective, pagan and heinous to the soul. Indigenous African performances were either completely banned or restructured to convey Western notions of civilisation vis-à-vis the 'native' and Christian dogma. It is significant to note how such a strategy inadvertently redefined the form and content of African performances and engendered critical concepts that have preoccupied colonial discourse analysis and postcolonialism in the last decades (see Diala 2014).

The restriction of African performance presupposed effacing its performance space, which was constantly under surveillance during colonial times. The African performance, to quote Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "could take place anywhere – wherever there was an 'empty space'" (1994, 37). Yet during colonial times, "any gathering of the natives needed a licence: colonialism feared its own biblical saying that, where two or three gathered, God would hear their cry" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1994, 37). Therefore, between 1952 and 1962 the 'empty space' was confined behind barbed wire in prisons and detention camps where political detainees and prisoners were encouraged to produce slavishly pro-colonial and anti-Mau Mau propaganda plays. The social halls encouraged concert, a kind of playlet, with simple plots often depicting the naive peasant who comes to the big town and is completely perplexed by the complexities of modern life [...] The school and church hall produced religious theatre with the story of the prodigal son and the nativity being among the most popular themes [...]. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1994, 38; see also Gikandi 2000)

From a decolonising perspective, theatre had to be taken away "from the confines of closed walls" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1994, 41) to a "location in a village [...]. Theatre is
not a building. People make theatre [...] Their life is the very stuff of drama" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1994, 42; see also Diakhaté and Eyo 2017), which is conveyed in an African language that speaks to the social reality of the people. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is clear about this decolonial stance particularly when he insists that African theatre should be performed in open spaces and conveyed in African languages.

But before colonial contact, the mysteries of life and death were performed through rituals, festivals and ceremonies, and the challenges that humans encountered in their interaction with nature formed part of such ceremonies precisely performed in those 'empty spaces.' The highlights of these celebrations were oral performances that included myths, legends, epics, proverbs, folktales, "song, dance and occasional mime!" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1994, 37). This space, which also included the courtyard, around a hearth in a hut (Sìrayî 2001, 17), was in fact central to communal contact and mutual celebration that underlined the people's religion, ontology, philosophy, art, tradition and worldview. Through colonial theatre, this 'empty space' was literally and systematically emptied of its people, together with its accolade of performances, ritual and history, through violence. Frantz Fanon, a leading figure in postcolonial theory, together with the Negritude philosophers advocated the revival of an African cultural past, national culture in his case, as a strategy of invoking a national consciousness directed towards anti-colonial movement. Such a movement staged the "desire to articulate the people's hopes, activities and experiences on their terms" (McLeod 2010, 113; original emphasis). In the context of African performance, reclaiming the value of African culture during anti-colonial and decolonisation processes also meant reclaiming those 'empty spaces' that were almost denigrated during colonisation and repurposing European-imposed buildings, not only on the African continent but also in the Western metropolis. This strategic form of decolonisation resists imperialism and correspondingly contributes to the emergence of a new kind of performance that continuously redefines post-independent contemporary theatre space.

6. The Shifting Space of African Theatre: Resistance and Syncretism

Marked by anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments, the transition to independence was often characterised by wars, together with what Bill Ashcroft et al. perceive as "resistance literature" (2013, 229). While resistance theatre was not solely a literary response to colonial culture in the Western sense, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1994) and Kerr (1995) clarify that it was alive in indigenous performances that resisted colonialism, like the songs of the Mau Mau fighters, and lampooned Western life (see Erobi 2006). Inevitably, these resistant patterns enabled a "Euro-African mixed parenthood" (Kerr 1995, 82) that resulted in varied forms of syncretic theatre, present in popular theatre movements which one can trace back to theatre traditions such as the Ghanaian Concert Party, the Yoruba Opera, the Travelling Theatre movement and Theatre for Development.

Local languages are central to People Theatre performances because they embody communities' experiences and way of life. The performance in the Nkambe workshop was enacted in Limbum and Pidgin English. While the students in the Abuja workshop employed Hausa, Pidgin and English to convey their messages to the audiences, those in Berlin performed in German, English, Arabic, and Kiswahili.
Ebun Clark, in her detailed study of Hubert Ogunde's theatre, remarks that five years before Nigeria's independence, his theatre "was the only one that consciously aimed at preserving the cultural identity of the nation […] [it] was always at the centre of controversy because of his constant attack on the colonial rule which often led him into head-on collision with the law" (1979, 83). Syncretic both in form and content, Ogunde's theatre made use of 'empty spaces' and repurposed infrastructures as performance sites. The process of resistance developed a counter-discourse which not only challenged colonial rule, suggestive of reactionary uprising, but also occasioned emergent transformation that accompanied such a process (see Shahjahan 2011). Rooted in cultural resistance, transformation in the theatre offers several possibilities through which postcolonial theatre practitioners have the option to adapt, to adopt and also to relinquish European forms, based on how each theatre practitioner and critic experiences imperialism and its consequences.

Embracing this ideology and praxis beyond national borders conveys new developments in theatre, together with indigenous identity to such spaces. But what transpires at such encounters? With regard to theatre spaces, exposing the binarity that animated colonial structures is not only insufficient but also simplistic. Further, repurposing, by performing African-related topics in those spaces, serves as a springboard to claiming these spaces through the staging of interventionist and African-related performance genres that contest (neo)colonial sentiments and challenge the politics of the postcolony. Arguably, the process of resistant decolonisation is not only functional for the previously claimed spaces and for the 'empty space' but rewriting those spaces ideologically, in the Western metropolis, indeed offers alternative understandings and creates an alternative centre. Such a movement distinctly engages a decolonising project that aligns with Bart Moore-Gilbert et al.'s proposition that "decolonization is a slow and uneven process" and "could be engaged from multidimensional and non-temporal angles" (1997, 2). As said, I refer in this article to a few open-air performances through which we10 intervened with People Theatre at the Mensa Nord (North Refectory) at Humboldt University in Berlin, Berlin Hauptbahnhof (Berlin main train station) and the Jugendtheaterwerkstatt (JTW) in Spandau, Berlin. Experiencing such transnational spatial movement, from Nkambe and Abuja to Berlin, People Theatre is neither indigenously African nor Western but emerges as a multicultural form of expression.

7. What Occurs at these Theatrical Encounters?

The transfer of a People Theatre tradition to the Berlin space echoes Ashcroft et al.'s idea of "the positive and energetic aspects of the process of transculturation and the equal but different elements that the various historical periods and forces have contributed in forming the modern postcolonial condition" (2013, 256; original emphasis). But what accounts for this energetic process in the context of my People Theatre work as a lecturer and practitioner of theatre in Berlin? A negotiation process is a prerequisite to this theatrical encounter within German theatre spaces that are

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10 These performances were organised in the context of applied theatre courses that were taught by the researcher in the Department of African Literatures and Cultures at Humboldt University in Berlin. The performers, also students of her courses, emanated from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Arabic, German, and African ethnicities.
potentially realised in open-air spaces and theatre buildings. Engaging in negotiating transcultural theatre spaces allows me to pursue diverse artistic expressions and ways of engagement that are not strictly attached to my indigenous Cameroonian roots. Once enabled by the conversion of indigenous forms through the process of corporeal and intellectual flexibility, the negotiation of location and performance contexts subjects the performers' bodies to the unremitting repercussions of the colonial encounter in the diaspora as narratives of migration, race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. are engaged. In this circumstance, one inevitably becomes what Awam Amkpa describes as "culturally 'inauthentic'" which emerges from "overlapping modernities" (2004, 1). Notwithstanding, the intention of pursuing People Theatre in the Western metropolis is not the desire to finalise the mission of liminality. In my context, I lived in my quest for a performance space that not only enables People Theatre to express the challenges of race, migration, class and gender concerns in the diaspora but one that would also invite participation and intervention from the audience. My reflections about a theatre encounter that enables continuous engagement means that I travelled from Binshua Squares in Nkambe where I left behind a participatory and intervention-oriented audience, to the Abuja Arts and Crafts Village in Nigeria where, in spite of the dwindling number of spectators, their responses paralleled those of the participants on the Binshua Squares. But my People Theatre project in the 'empty spaces' of Berlin was performed in front of an audience which was 'present but not quite.' Assuming that the specific life concerns of marginalised people are symbolic of the creation and usage of these theatre spaces, open ones for that matter, empowers spaces that are either located in the village square or the urban centre. This highlights how the relationship to such spaces evokes experimentation that summons a shift when one journeys across theatre spaces.

8. "My Experience, My Reality:" Binshua Squares, the Indigenous Space

Although discernibly empty, open-air theatre spaces are associated with symbolic meanings. Image 1 portrays participants of the Binka, Binshua and Tabenken workshop at theatre games. Taking place on Binshua Squares, the games served a dual purpose: first, as warm-up exercises that prepared the bodies of the performers and built their self-confidence before the performance and, secondly, as a strategy to not only entertain themselves and the public but also to pull/invite the latter to the performance space.

![Image 1: Theatre games on the Binshua Squares. ©Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong](image1.jpg)
Characteristic of indigenous African performances, the audience that finally converged on the Squares was not only entertained but also lived the impact of People Theatre. The story of Lucky Tree, the play that was performed and which I have discussed elsewhere (see Chiangong 2008), counters the inhabitants’ indiscreet exploitation of the forest located on the community's water table in the Mbikop forest. A local businessman, Pah Tantoh, sells out pieces of land on this location to local farmers for interesting kinds of remuneration. The latter, in turn, solicit the services of an Engine Saw Man who clears the allocated forest portions of its trees, equally for payments. Besides felling the trees and thus affecting water levels in the community, other farmers also engage in slash and burn activities with a similar intention of clearing the land for farming. However, a lone yet mythical tree that survives this environmental carnage becomes a trope for the survival of the community and the ecosystem. The performance unfolds in such a way that, although interaction with the audience, especially at the post-performance discussions, is not regulated, the performance context enables a freedom of interaction framed by the ‘empty space.’ The concept of performance space here relates to Christopher Balme’s interpretation that frames it “primarily as an interactive relationship between spectators, stage and the […] spatial environment encompassing both” (2008, 47). This notion is central to the understanding of the artistic motivation that propels the children and theatre facilitators’ occupation of the Squares. Their presentational acts aesthetically transform a once empty space into a symbolic site that responds to the need of intervention in environmental protection. After the performance, enriched through edutainment (education and entertainment), the audience vacates the space. Ousmane Diakhaté and Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh, resonating with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, iterate that,

‘Long before cultural contact with Europe, Black Africa had its very own personal forms of dramatic expression. But in order to understand them, one must banish all notions of theatre as it is thought of in the Euro-American context – something dependent on text, on halls, on technology and on box-office returns. (2017)"

The Binshua Squares is one such ‘empty space’ in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as well as Diakhaté and Eyoh’s conceptualisation of the term. Reclaimed from colonial ideology and its practices of surveillance, the space once again unites the community to not only celebrate their cultural forms but also to critique postcolonial challenges engulfing the village, for instance, environmental degradation. Although Binshua Squares plays a socio-economic and cultural role, surrounded by one or two provision stores and a beer parlour where, at that time, basic necessities were purchased and where people met for leisure activities, respectively, it equally played host to specific forms of cultural activities like dance, mimes, masquerade displays, etc. There are no injunctions as local inhabitants for various secular and sacred activities can transform and occupy these spaces, sometimes spontaneously.11

11 It is important to clarify that open-air spaces in many African communities are transformed into performance arenas for the enactment of religious and cultural events at specific times of the year. Therefore, the community is aware of upcoming events and participates in them. Most popular-oriented performances also follow a similar dynamic. However, the communal, participatory, interventionist and spontaneous character of African performances has inspired
Ultimately, Binshua Squares, similar to Binka Market where two other performances were enacted, served as a fitting venue to reach a wide and diverse audience with a message on environmental conservation. The theatre games attracted about 400 spectators who watched *Lucky Tree*. A lively post-performance discussion followed the performance during which the spectators admitted of being entertained. They also expressed deep concerns about the growing rate of planting eucalyptus trees in farming and water catchment areas, a practice that was also responsible for the depletion of water supply in the village at the time.

9. Abuja Arts and Crafts Village: The Urban Space

I argue that, when open-air theatre spaces that are rooted in indigenous culture are conveyed to urban spaces, the response is different, based on where they are located. Balme argues that "[t]he history of spatio-cultural interaction between spectators and spaces would be a history of how theatrical spaces change under different cultural conditions, owing to factors such as location, size and shape of the theatre space" (2008, 58). With that in mind, the Arts and Crafts Village in Abuja, which is run by the National Council for Arts and Craft, is constructed in the form of an African village. The thatched huts on the site are reminiscent of architectural forms found in rural African villages that are gradually being replaced by European architecture. These huts (see image 2) are shops in which arts and crafts objects are displayed for purchase by merchants for ordinary Nigerians, foreign nationals and, most of all, tourists.

Without contesting the exoticism that this site, located in the core of a city like Abuja, generates, I concentrate on the architectural framework of the market and the open-air amphitheatre located in its centre (see image 3). These are informed by rural (if not

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ancient Greek theatre) environments that seek communality and freedom, prototypical to indigenous life in an African village. Of course, this notion is clearly a paradox as the conceptualisation of the market allows it to be practically transformed into a revenue-generating space actualised by the selling and buying of arts and crafts objects. Further, the site, in my view, does not serve as a liminal space that might constantly provide indigenous performances to Nigerians who have migrated from the rural areas to settle in Abuja or to those who transit to different places. Probably the politics of operating the market, the commercial intent, together with restricted access, as discussed below, hamper this state of liminality. However, our arrival at the performance space in the village was accompanied by singing and drumming, evocative of the theatre games in Binshua and employed as a strategy to attract people to the performance area. We equally invited people, orally, as we walked through the market.

The number of people who finally watched the play was considerably lower than those at the Binka, Binshua and Tabenken workshop where particularly at the Binka open market about 1500 people watched the play (see Chiangong 2008). The reality in Abuja might be accredited to the fast pace of life that is distinctive of postcolonial African urban centres where people are absorbed in money-making activities that enable them to accommodate the interests of a capitalist economy. Further, security reasons\(^\text{12}\), equally a postcolonial concern, might have contributed to the lesser number of spectators in the space. Due to safety concerns, access into the market is placed under stringent security checks. Although the market looks like a village in an African understanding of the concept, it is nevertheless gated and guarded. Despite the security concerns in northern Nigeria where Abuja is located, the amphitheatre nevertheless offered an alternative performance site when compared with any other 'empty space' that might have been located outside the crafts village. Nonetheless, the spectators who were drawn to the performance were still fully engaged in the post-performance discussions during which they confirmed the play's relevance to the concerns expressed, admitting that negative ethnicity, corruption and land dispute were indeed dividing the people in Nigeria; the spectators insisted that all Nigerians were one people.

\(^{12}\) Abuja is located in the northern part of Nigeria and has, in the past, experienced deadly attacks from Boko Haram insurgents.
10. Mensa Nord

As the practitioners of People Theatre cross transnational borders, the concept and meaning of the 'empty space' not only shifts but also becomes more fluid resulting in adaptability and resistance. A combination of these almost paradoxical notions is embodied in a postcolonial understanding of theatre which is conceivable in a project that seeks to dismantle the patronising nature of classical European theatre. This approach probably problematises postcoloniality but equally serves as an approach that potentially complicates the postcolonial subject's engagement with Western metropolitan theatre spaces. In the Berlin context, therefore, most of the intervention performance spaces that I experimented with engaged the 'empty space.' The first performance of *Wait a Minute!* took place in the summer season, a period marked by exciting outdoor activities that often include forms of ephemeral public artistic displays like musical performances and public painting. These shows, enacted in the open air, often attract people passing by. Therefore, the sunny weather often interests not only the general public but also, in this context, students and potential guests to Mensa Nord who relish their lunches and coffee breaks outside the refectory. We exploited this seasonal bliss with the hope of reaching out to as many people as possible. In the performance, students enacted the ambiguity, if not double standards, that often mark seeking accommodation in Berlin. As the play illustrated, class, ethnicity and sexuality determine one's chances of getting an apartment. The performance showed that people of African ancestry who happened to be involved in a same-sex relationship are underprivileged in such circumstances. Equally, unemployed individuals who depend on government support encounter similar challenges. *Wait a Minute!* also tackled sexual harassment interrogating why the public would watch and might not engage in strategic action against perpetrators of such acts. My engagement with Mensa Nord was rooted in my conceptualisation of the village square as communal, free, interaction-oriented, ritualistic and interventional. After the performance, a few audience members, after being prompted, commented on the play; one spectator highlighted the relevance of such an initiative in creating awareness about the concerns raised on how seeking accommodation evokes racism, classism and gender discrimination based on sexual orientation. A second spectator concurred with the first but recommended the use of microphones and added that posters and flyers should have been distributed (which we did) in order to advertise the performance. Nonetheless, many people were either completely disinterested or watched the play as a fleeting distraction from their meals and the nice weather. While "[t]he choice of the venue can and does have a decisive influence on the theatrical experience, both positively and negatively" (Balme 2008, 60), we nevertheless pondered whether this recognisable indifference shown towards the performance was based on the theme conveyed through our spontaneous 'invasion' of what I envisage as a leisurely space; or, were people simply not interested in the topics engaged in the performance? Based on cultural differences, how would an African audience in Berlin have reacted to our performance? Besides, how symbolic was the motif of reluctance that marked the audience's engagement with the performance and the post-performance discussions to an awareness-oriented performance that requested intervention? Robert Leach's invocation of audience-performance relations in European medieval theatre elaborates on performers enacting...
their art on "trestle stages in town squares or market places, in pubs and on village
greens and [...] [...] in many of these cases, actors and spectators were hardly separated,
and there was an informality about even the most impressive performances which
typified the time" (2013, 162). What, therefore, got lost in the development of European
theatre from the medieval period until the 21st century? I had previously imagined that
specific performance genres were central to intervention on open spaces in rural
African, urban African and Western environments. Now confronted with such a
challenge, my indigenous understanding of the open space was probably being tasked.

Was I to return to theatre halls and other enclosed structures associated with an invisible
fourth wall that demarcates the stage from the audience and which had previously been
subverted in the context of decoloniality? I decided to encounter such a structure with
a subversive intent, beginning with Berlin Hauptbahnhof.

Image 4: Image Theatre at Berlin Hauptbahnhof. ©Peptual Mforbe Chiangong

11. Berlin Hauptbahnhof

At Berlin Hauptbahnhof, the main performance format was expressing forms of
oppression through 'Image Theatre.' Of interest to this study, one particular
performance depicted the travails of motherhood in a diasporic space (see image 4). Invited to intervene, this image was transformed by an elderly woman who, contrary to
my expectation, transformed a seemingly recalcitrant child to an obedient one whom
she advised should listen to the mother. Her process of transformation was
accompanied by soft words that encouraged the child to be obedient. The approach of
the elderly audience participant, I assume, is generation-oriented and equally associated
with Africa's philosophy of teaching children to respect older individuals, especially
parents. Such circumstances usually do not accommodate either questioning elders or
enacting rebellious behaviour, which is often blamed on modernity. That said, the

13 In the winter term of 2013/14, I coordinated a similar intervention theatre workshop with
students from an MA Projektmodul. It is worthy to mention that one of the performances of
our play on Alexanderplatz in Berlin recorded the same experience as that at Mensa Nord.
14 For more information on Image Theatre, see Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (2000).
mother, like most diaspora mothers who must grapple with the challenges of raising children away from family support and socio-communal environment and also handle the demands of Western society, feels helpless. She nevertheless desires alternative measures to deal with the situation through an interventionist process which she receives from the elderly audience member but clearly not from the character in the image who is, seemingly, discontent with the unfolding situation in the family. We enacted a second performance of the entire play, together with the created image, on another platform of the Hauptbahnhof to a group of students on a school excursion. They were not only engaged in watching the performance but also participated in the transformation of the images by converting the bodies of the performers from oppressive and frustrating situations to that of optimism and conviviality.

The Hauptbahnhof as a performance space is both liminal and ambiguous as opposed to Mensa Nord, the crafts market and Binshua Squares. Therefore, both liminality and ambiguity are associated with the space's busy nature. A conglomeration of identities occupies, temporarily, the space as they transit to other locations. As we hoped to convey our narrative to many people, we were equally aware that they would be itinerant and could spontaneously leave the performance space to continue their travel. This rather ambivalent outcome allowed us to play with targets. These targets embodied performing in front of people seated on a bench and to those standing in a group. We hoped that enacting our play to such individuals would invite bystanders and passers-by to the performance. Therefore, the spontaneous intervention of the audience at the Hauptbahnhof, the elderly woman, the students on excursion, and a mother of a family of four, recalled the challenges of involving the audience in the ‘empty space.’ It enabled a reflection on the potential efficacy of buildings as possible environments for People Theatre in Berlin. Experiencing efficacy at the Hauptbahnhof invigorated the notion that other enclosed sites, the proscenium stage in this case, could be a resource for experimentation. The thought of engaging the Jugendtheaterwerkstatt (JTW) in Spandau emerged.

12. Jugendtheaterwerkstatt (JTW) Spandau

Enacting Africa-associated intervention theatre projects in classical theatre spaces seems to be a major practice in Berlin. The 'empty space' in the sense discussed earlier appears to be disavowed. This assumption does not refute the fact that specific genres are enacted in site-specific environments. The performance of a German/Tanzanian theatre project on mental health, Notaufnahme/Hospitali, at the Vierte Welt in Berlin on 24 September 2018 and a Togolese-German-Swiss performance of Traces Vol. II on 13 July 2019 at Theatre Strahl Probebühne\textsuperscript{15} are just a few examples. But the fascinating component of the theatre space in which we performed at the JTW and that differentiates it from the performances just cited was its living room design. If the living room is the quintessential space of Western realist drama" (Balme 2008, 57), one

\textsuperscript{15} When the audience was invited by the performers to intervene during the performance of Notaufnahme/Hospitali, no one opted to comment on the scene which was being enacted. At the end of Traces Vol. II, the audience was invited to comment on the play outside the performance space, denotative of a one-on-one discussion.
wonders how the semantics of this space are relevant to the genre of People Theatre with a decolonising goal. There was a slightly raised platform, a proscenium stage, where the performance took place. The walls of the stage had framed paintings and pictures on them while rugs were placed on the entire floor of the room (see image 5).

Image 5: Performance at the JTW Spandau. ©Patryk Witt

Vintage furniture with non-classical theatre seats was placed in front of the stage for the audience. Other antique furniture was positioned on the stage and in the auditorium. Although there was foot lighting possibility from down stage, the stage and room were equally lit by floor lamps, sited at the upper stage left and right, thereby generating a living room warmth throughout the entire space. A bar was located at the back of the room from where the audience could be served subsidised drinks and food. Was People Theatre at home at JTW? Disassociating our performance from the conventions of colonial theatre, we made our entrances and exits from the audience who sat in front of the stage. This strategy that is allied with African communal performances dismantled the fourth wall, rendering it invisible. Gilbert and Tompkins avow that "[t]his kind of intervention in the conventions which govern performance space usage is crucial because, until adapted to the expressive and semantic intentions of colonised peoples, such spaces exist primarily in the dominant society's history" (1996, 158). Although bourgeois in outlook, I argue that the realist character of the performance space created an intimate connection between the stage and the audience to which we claimed to communicate personal and often traumatic narratives of migration, accompanied by storytelling, music, drumming and dance. This strategic reclamation eschewed the invisible wall that disrupts performer-audience intimacy in classical, imperialist-oriented dramaturgy. Perhaps the participatory model of African theatre was being modernised in the process, but the audience's immersion in the mood and tensions generated by these narratives, the theatre space and the corporeality of the performers enabled audience reaction at the end of the play. Although this reaction cannot be paralleled to Nkambe, Abuja and the Lange Nacht der Wissenschaften, it was far more engaging than that at Mensa Nord. Participation in the theatre game coordinated by one of the performers to introduce the performance also served as a sort of warm-up for their subsequent intervention. Most importantly, the audience's willingness to
participate in the singing that concluded the play allowed for a reconsideration of the energy that the use of a specific performance space can generate when it comes to applied theatre. The audience that watched Grenzgänger*innen at JTW and eventually those at the Lange Nacht der Wissenschaften in many respects met the expectations in terms of discussions and intervention of theatre enacted in an open-air space. These expectations do not marginalise the precolonial understanding of the 'empty space' but rather present my engagement with the classical stage in Berlin as my centre (Okagbue 2016).

13. Merging the Postcolonial Debate to Performance Spaces

In a colonial context, given the strategy with which it was introduced in the colonies as discussed above, Western theatre is indeed a colonial symbol. Yet, enacting People Theatre on the stage confirms the syncretic outcome of a process which Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o relates to the discourse of colonisation. He states,

> the imperial lord and the colonial bondsman leave marks on each other, but with the difference that the bondsman can appropriate the best of the imperial input and combine with the best of his own into a new synthesis that assumes the 'globe' for a theatre. (2012, 51)

Whereas Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o legitimately concurs that putting African literature, theatre in this case, on the world stage "has been viewed with such one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness" (2012, 48), Khalid Amine admits to the challenges that critics continue to encounter in their search for African theatre in the annals of world theatre. He states that "[o]ur task as subaltern scholars is further complicated while revisiting the existing body of world-theatre histories; we are hardly visible, and if mentioned at all, then often on the borderlines between absence and presence" (2014, 25; see also Fischer-Lichte 2014). One nevertheless engages in a negotiation process mediated through the process of travel – intellectual, material and corporeal – and through the performers/students/participants who serve as a window into fully understanding the theatricality of spaces. Further, one distinguishes the energy that such spaces generate and, most of all, one defies adoption. The bringing together of these elements by engaging critically different ideological trajectories and understandings accentuates a postcolonial process. Through this process, the metropolis in which these plays are enacted, including the proscenium stage, is claimed and transformed into our own centres stimulating a platform on which marginalisation and agency are voiced. Moreover, postcolonialism "is inherently outward-looking, inherently international in its very constitution of themes, language, and the intellectual formation of the writers" because "it will be quite productive to look at world literature, though not exclusively, through postcoloniality" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2012, 49). Therefore, the syncretic outcome of the Travelling People Theatre project is conceived on a European theatre stage and delivered through a deconstructive model that challenges and repurposes that space. While People Theatre often insists on intervention, this approach equally highlights the recognition of a few audience members' unfamiliarity with interventional theatre approaches in the Berlin context. This admittance recalls Augusto Boal's declaration that people could adapt to artistic
forms that pertain to other cultures to enable them to articulate their current situations (see Schechner et al. 1998, 87-88).

14. Conclusion

The village square is a metaphor for a space that enables community participation and is certainly not limited to its materiality; it is deeply entangled in the people's association with it. The space, as it is transposed, becomes an embodiment of diverse aspects of cultural knowledge and production associated with the dynamism of society. It affects the outcome of the entire theatre process and experience. That notwithstanding, audience participation not only furnishes such a project with the potentiality of engaging broader political, social and economic discourses but also experiments with its very own aesthetic forms. Combining multicultural artistic expressions with indigenous African culture as their root is identified here as the foundational vehicle of syncretism; syncretism in this context incorporates two or more cultural elements into a single production enabling a construction of multiple theatre identities and performance cultures. This foundation, also true of other cultures of the world, enables participation, intervention and perhaps spontaneity that are empowering factors for sensitisation and awareness. Negotiating theatre spaces projects the postcolonial experience as a bridge to encountering cultural communities. This strategy must not be mistaken for a naïve attempt at eschewing persisting colonial acts, but as a strategy to delineate and enliven the ambiguities of cross-cultural interactions, which can potentially serve as a blueprint to development and peaceful co-existence among peoples. While nevertheless still insisting on the invasion of the 'empty space' in the Western metropolis with intervention-orientated applied theatre forms, I equally pursue a project of engaging Western and People Theatre spaces in a practical and ideological conversation directed towards a seemingly interminable decolonising scheme.

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