

## **Towards A More Environmentally Friendly Nigeria: The Eco-Theatre for Children Initiative**

**Lilian Okoro**✉; Department of Theatre and Media Studies University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

**Juliana Sewuese Otonko**; Department of Theatre and Media Studies University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

**Abstract:** In Nigeria, despite numerous efforts to promote environmental safety, progress has been limited. Many young people, particularly children, need greater awareness of climate change's consequences, such as food scarcity. This paper examines the potential of eco-theatre as an effective tool for children's theatre to enhance environmental awareness among youth. By equipping children with knowledge about the importance of fostering a more eco-friendly Nigeria, children's theatre plays a crucial role. Utilizing participatory action research and drama, this study addresses harmful environmental practices such as bush burning, deforestation, and bush meat hunting by highlighting their negative impacts and empowering children to advocate for environmental preservation. The paper showcases a children's theatre production, "Bush Meat Makes You Bushy," developed from a three-day workshop, as a case study. The incorporation of the 'Catch them young' principle into eco-theatre aims to cultivate a generation of environmentally conscious children who can advocate for biodiversity conservation. Findings suggest that when children become environmental advocates, they can influence their parents and other adults. Given that children represent the future, they are ideal candidates for behavioral change initiatives. The paper concludes that eco-theatre for children can significantly aid in improving Nigeria's environmental condition, with eco-drama having the potential to enhance children's theatre experiences and boost their engagement with environmental issues.

**Keywords:** Environmental advocates; children's theatre; behaviour change; eco-theatre; climate change.

✉ [lilianokoro@unical.edu.ng](mailto:lilianokoro@unical.edu.ng)

**Citation:** Okoro, L, & Otonko, J. S. (2024). Towards A More Environmentally Friendly Nigeria: The Eco-Theatre for Children Initiative. *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 5(2), 238 – 245.



Copyright ©2020 Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)  
Published by Universitas PGRI Madiun. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, there have been numerous warnings about environmental degradation, with challenges spanning from the Global North to the Global South (Myers & Patz, 2009). The environmental crisis has become a central issue in world affairs, driven by an urgent need to address impending ecological disasters. Over the years, changes in climate conditions have intensified efforts to mitigate eco-degradation, with climate change largely attributed to human activities that deplete the ozone layer (Uzaji, 2023). Harmful human activities, such as pollution, unhealthy waste disposal, population pressure, ocean acidification, deforestation, and ozone layer depletion, contribute significantly to environmental challenges (Sadhu, et al., 2018).

In Nigeria, deforestation and poor waste disposal are among the major environmental issues. In both rural and urban communities, open defecation exacerbates the environmental degradation. Nwokoro Chris (2019) affirms that "open defecation is practiced everywhere in the country, no city or village in Nigeria is any exception" (internet). It is essential to address these challenges to mitigate their adverse effects on human lives. Despite efforts, the culture of tree planting and bans on deforestation and indiscriminate bush burning have not been effectively enforced. Thus, a concerted effort is required to provide solutions to these imminent threats to human life. The World Health Organization indicates that globally, 23% of deaths and 26% of deaths among children under five, amounting to 4 million children annually, are attributable to environmental factors (Perin, et al., 2022).

Environmental challenges affect everyone, necessitating collective action for solutions. The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, confirms that "environmental pollutants can cause health problems like

respiratory diseases, heart disease, and some types of cancer" (Xu, et al., 2022, p. 53). Therefore, it is imperative for all individuals, regardless of age, to advocate for environmental justice. In Nigeria today, numerous opportunities exist for environmental activism, with various media and communication platforms available. This paper focuses on children's theatre as a medium for enlightening children and young adults on the dangers of environmental degradation. Theatre has long been a tool for social correction, and its use in children's theatre will have multiple advantages: grooming children to become environmental activists and empowering them to speak out against harmful environmental practices.

Children environmental activists have the potential to be game-changers in addressing environmental challenges. The interest and zeal of young people are often high in their endeavors. Greta Thunberg's example in 2018 inspired the world to tackle climate change with greater resolve. At age 16, Thunberg visited the Swedish Parliament with a sign reading "SCHOOL STRIKE FOR CLIMATE," sitting where she could be seen by the ruling class to motivate greater climate action. Her actions inspired the first Global Climate Strike in 2019. Since then, she has spoken to parliaments, groups, and individuals about climate justice (Nässén & Rambaree, 2021). Children's theatre is an avenue to raise more "Gretas" with the confidence and knowledge to discuss climate justice at home and in the larger society. Molder et al., (2022), in admiration of Greta's work and its impact, observes that

Greta speaks unapologetically and truthfully about the threat of climate change. Too many people moderate what they say, and Greta's ability to state the science and its implications without spin regardless of whether she's speaking to another 16-year-old or a world leader is exactly what we need (p. 64).

The choice of children's theatre is grounded in several compelling reasons. Firstly, it helps to revive and sustain interest in theatre among young audiences, fostering a lifelong appreciation for the arts. Secondly, it animates and motivates young people, instilling in them a love for theatre practice. Thirdly, children's theatre serves as a powerful tool for projecting ideal practices within society. By presenting environmental issues and solutions through an engaging and relatable medium, children's theatre reflects societal values and encourages positive change. Theatre, often described as a mirror of society, thus becomes an influential platform for educating and inspiring the younger generation about the importance of environmental stewardship.

### **CHILDREN THEATRE**

Children's theatre generally refers to theatre activities intended for and created by children and young people. This form of theatre includes children as actors and/or audience members, addressing issues that directly affect them. As Okoro (2022) states, children's theatre is ideally intended to be for and with children. The importance of children's theatre in building knowledge, confidence, skills, and interpersonal relationships among children cannot be overemphasized.

Theatre, as an art form, holds significant importance in society because it often reenacts real-life situations, reflecting societal values and issues (Okoro & Nwazue, 2022; Okoro, 2023). It explores the human condition through theatrical stage presentations and performances, making it an integral part of human history, especially in ancient and pre-industrial eras. Theatre is regarded as a complex art because it can portray the best and worst aspects of human nature, presenting them as either tragedy or comedy. People can easily connect with historical events depicted on stage and form emotional connections

to their roots or stay informed about current trends. According to the American Musical Theatre Academy, theatre serves several functions: self-discovery and expression, historical reflection, and education.

The numerous functions of theatre indicate its potential to contribute to environmental protection through various theatrical forms, including children's theatre. This paper focuses on the combination of eco-theatre and children's theatre, which has the potential to produce young environmental activists. These activists can champion the cause of promoting best human practices and eco-friendly activities, thus fostering a generation that is aware and proactive about environmental issues.

### **ECO-THEATRE**

Eco-theatre is a holistic approach to theatre-making that centers on climate and environmental justice in its content, process, and production (Taxopoulou, 2023). It refers to theatre performances focused on advocating for the environment, often using plays, spoken words, and musicals to educate audiences about environmental challenges. The entire process and product used in eco-theatre reflect the change it advocates for, with most eco-dramas utilizing recycled materials for costumes, props, and sets. Additionally, actors in eco-dramas often practice the environmental actions they promote on stage. Children's eco-theatre, therefore, projects lessons on environmental issues for both the young performers and their audiences (Woynarski, 2020).

Eco-theatre for children is usually presented in simplified forms, enabling them to understand complex environmental issues with ease. It teaches lessons about the effects of human activities on the environment, encouraging good choices, and increasing awareness about climate change and its impacts on people and the

environment. While climate change can be an overwhelming topic, eco-theatre makes it accessible for young actors and audiences, offering them simplified ways to learn and speak up about the environment. Theatre and the arts are powerful tools for addressing complex issues like climate change.

Eco-theatre provides a space for cultivating empathy and encouraging the audience to think critically and take positive actions to protect the environment. It can also make difficult issues, such as climate change, more digestible by breaking down the science for kids. According to Moms Clean Air Force, "Eco-theatre can be a space for cultivating empathy and provoking the audience to think and take positive actions that can salvage the environment. Theatre can also make difficult issues, like climate change, more palatable, as it can break down the science for kids" (Alexandrowicz, 2024, p 32).

## **NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES: THE NIGERIAN CASE STUDY**

Nigeria, with a population exceeding 200 million, faces significant environmental challenges due to the interactions between its inhabitants and the environment. These interactions have led to various health issues and environmental degradation (Raimi, et al., 2019). Despite efforts by the government and various environmental agencies, policies and regulations on environmental issues in Nigeria have not been adequately articulated or implemented. This paper highlights several negative environmental practices prevalent in Nigeria, including animal cruelty, deforestation, pollution, and poor waste management.

### **Animal Cruelty**

In Nigeria, there is a widespread practice of killing animals indiscriminately, which adversely affects the ecosystem. The consumption of bush meat is culturally ingrained in many

communities, leading to the depletion of wildlife. Additionally, harmful fishing practices, such as the use of chemicals like gamma lin-20, continue despite their detrimental effects on waterways and human health (Machovina, et al., 2015).

### **Oil Spillage**

Oil spillage is a frequent and severe environmental hazard in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region. The area's oil production infrastructure often leads to spills that contaminate drinking water, damage soil, and harm local ecosystems (Ukhurebor, et al., 2021). Nigeria is notorious for oil spills, which have devastating effects on key natural areas, including fishing grounds, mangrove swamps, and tropical rainforests. These spills contribute to health problems, economic losses for farmers, and significant environmental degradation (Onyena & Sam, 2020).

### **Deforestation**

Deforestation is a critical issue in Nigeria, driven by the demand for timber and agricultural land due to the rapidly growing population. Firewood fetching and usage remain common practices, contributing to deforestation. According to the United Nations, Nigeria has one of the highest rates of deforestation globally, with an estimated 3.7% of its forest cover lost annually. This deforestation disrupts ecosystems, causes soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and local climate changes, and increases the risk of flooding and landslides (Ahmed & Aliyu, 2019).

### **Desertification**

Desertification, exacerbated by deforestation and drought, is turning fertile land into desert across Nigeria (Azare, et al., 2020). This leads to the degradation of land and loss of flora and fauna, resulting in inadequate water supply, windy disasters, and high food costs. There is an urgent need for proper soil management, increased tree planting, and other environmentally

friendly practices to combat desertification.

### **Poor Waste Management**

Indiscriminate waste disposal is rampant in Nigerian urban areas, with solid waste often ending up in drainages and street corners. The government and relevant agencies struggle to manage waste effectively. Waste management encompasses the collection, transportation, treatment, and disposal of various types of waste, including solid, liquid, and gaseous forms. Improper waste management poses significant health risks to humans and contributes to environmental pollution (Rajaram, et al., 2016).

### **Bush Burning**

Bush burning is a common practice among Nigerian farmers, who burn their fields to prepare for the next planting season or during dry seasons for hunting purposes. Accidental fires are also common during dry periods when shrubs and woodlands are highly flammable. These fires can quickly spread and cause extensive environmental damage (Musa, et al., 2023).

The list of negative human activities impacting the environment in Nigeria is extensive, and so are their adverse effects on human health and ecosystems. Key issues include oil spillage, carbon emissions, deforestation, desertification, poor waste management, bush burning, air pollution, water pollution, and open defecation. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive environmental policies, public awareness, and sustainable practices to mitigate the ongoing environmental degradation in Nigeria.

### **CHILDREN AS ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATES**

Globally, there has been a record of children who speak up against negative practices on the environment, and they are known as children's activists. This paper advocates for more children's

involvement in identifying issues that threaten the Nigerian environment at different levels. Such child activists can emerge when they are exposed to theatrical activities in the eco-theatre. Eco-theatre has the capacity to educate, engage, and involve young people as advocates for a more environmentally friendly Nigeria. When children are adequately equipped with information, it may become easier to put pressure on other children, adults and even government. A good case study is a children's theatre production targeted at enlightening the Calabar audience about bush meat consumption. The title and theme of the theatre production "Bush meat Makes You Bushy". The children's theatre workshop strategically engaged in condemning the activities of hunters who consistently kill animals for human consumption. The workshop was a three day engagement with children of about ages 6 and 7 in a primary 3 class in *Calabar Scholastic Leadership Academy Calabar*. During the workshop children took turns to role-play, discuss and play exciting games that wove in climate justice as major issues. The class concluded with a resultant storyline, which was acted by the children with support from their class teacher, took a role as a teacher to help educate the children. In the narrative, the consumers of such animals were portrayed in such a way that discourages the audiences from consuming bush meat.

Our survey after the production shows that most children became more conscious of the implication of indiscriminate consumption of the bush meat. In children theatre, strategic portrayals and acting are part of the tools that are used to reinforce behaviour change. This paper therefore, believes that, when children theatre productions on eco-theatre are strategically scripted, and acted, enlightenment about the environment will increase and children will emerge as environmental activists in Nigeria.

### **Synopsis of "Bush Meat Makes You Bushy"**

In a typical classroom setting, Miss Joy confronts Binang, who has returned his book without completing his homework. Binang explains that his parents were unavailable to help him because his father had gone hunting while his mother was busy selling bush meat from a previous hunt. Miss Joy expresses concern over Binang's parents' lack of attention to their son's education. She emphasizes that reliance on bush meat, whether for food or other reasons, is detrimental to Binang's academic performance, likening it to making one "bushy."

Miss Joy finds further reasons to discourage bush meat consumption when Binang recounts a story. He once ventured into the bush to see an antelope, having learned that 'A' was for antelope. As a hunter's son, he wished to share stories about antelopes, but his quest was futile because previous hunting activities, including his father's, had decimated the antelope population.

Miss Joy makes the class repeat the word "EXTINCTION," explaining that continuous hunting would lead to the disappearance of these beautiful animals. She asks Binang to share more about his experiences. Innocently, Binang recalls a day when a portion of the forest was burned down to help hunters catch more animals, though the effort yielded little. Miss Joy introduces the word "DEFORESTATION," discussing related issues such as global warming and ozone layer depletion. Binang struggles to pronounce these terms, reinforcing his belief that bush meat makes one "bushy."

Resolving to always complete his homework, Binang also plans to speak to his parents and others about stopping the killing and consumption of bush meat. The workshop concludes successfully, with children gaining knowledge on climate justice and the courage to join the fight. United in their resolve, the children agree to speak out against environmental injustices,

including animal cruelty, deforestation, desertification, and poor waste management. None of the children want to be "bushy," and they commit to advocating for a healthier environment.

### **CONCLUSION**

Engaging children in the fight to rescue the environment represents a commendable initiative that broadens the scope of environmental activism (Smith & Pangsapa, 2008). The state of the environment is critical to human existence and well-being, making it imperative for collective efforts to address the deteriorating conditions in Nigeria. Among various platforms for environmental advocacy, children's theatre stands out for its multidimensional benefits, engaging both children and adults, thus amplifying the impact and ease of mobilization. Environmental activism, as a humanitarian effort, is vital for human survival and longevity.

Consequently, exploring the potential of integrating children and eco-theatre is particularly pertinent in contemporary Nigeria. Numerous communities face severe challenges such as flooding, escalating air pollution, rapid soil degradation leading to food scarcity, and deforestation driven by overpopulation, which strains available land resources.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper recommends the maximal utilization of children's theatre as a pedagogical tool in environmentally friendly initiatives. Producers of eco-drama have access to various forms of children's theatre, including storytelling, poetry/spoken word, musicals, mimes, and other creative performances. Incorporating diverse elements in children's theatre is highly recommended to sustain interest.

The creation of eco-dramas in children's theatre should incorporate sustainable practices, such as using recycled materials for costumes and

props and discouraging the use of non-degradable materials (De Waal, 2021). Where applicable, natural materials like leaves and other plant parts can replace conventional costumes. Additionally, stage properties should reflect environmental consciousness.

Scriptwriters for children's theatre are encouraged to integrate positive environmental practices into their narratives. Beyond the storyline, stage directions and actions documented in the plays can strategically promote environmental awareness. Dominant themes in play texts should reflect and advocate for positive environmental practices. Furthermore, there is a need for more scripts and storylines focused on the Nigerian environment to emerge from authors and scriptwriters.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Y. A., & Aliyu, I. (2019). Climate Change Induced challenges on deforestation: the needs to educate mitigation measures in Nigeria. *Analele Universității din Oradea, Seria Geografie*, 29(2), 64-76.
- Alexandrowicz, C. (2024). *Performing the Nonhuman: Towards a Theatre of Transformation*. Taylor & Francis.
- Azare, I. M., Abdullahi, M. S., Adebayo, A. A., Dantata, I. J., & Duala, T. (2020). Deforestation, desert encroachment, climate change and agricultural production in the Sudano-Sahelian Region of Nigeria. *Journal of Applied Sciences and Environmental Management*, 24(1), 127-132.
- De Waal, A. (2021). More future? Straight ecologies in British climate-change theatre. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 9(1), 43-59.
- Machovina, B., Feeley, K. J., & Ripple, W. J. (2015). Biodiversity conservation: The key is reducing meat consumption. *Science of the Total Environment*, 536, 419-431.
- Musa, M. F., Bah, A. S., Mbayoh, T. D., George, D. R., Tandason, A. F., & Sumana, S. L. (2023). The Effects of Bushfires on Farming Industry Among Small-Scale Farmers in Kori Chiefdom, Moyamba District, Sierra Leone. *International Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 12(3), 279-293.
- Myers, S. S., & Patz, J. A. (2009). Emerging threats to human health from global environmental change. *Annual review of environment and resources*, 34(1), 223-252.
- Nässén, N., & Rambaree, K. (2021). Greta Thunberg and the generation of moral authority: A systematic literature review on the characteristics of Thunberg's leadership. *Sustainability*, 13(20), 11326.
- Okoro, L. (2022). Children Theatre and Inclusivity in Nigeria: A case of Shadow Theatre. *PINISI: Journal of Art, Humanity and Social Studies*, 2(4), 127-134.
- Okoro, L. (2022). Understanding Laughter and the Role of Nigerian Laughterpreneurs in a Failing Economy. *Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity and Social Studies*, 2(1), 75-82.
- Okoro, L. (2023). Promoting Goodwill and Universal Humanism through Storytelling; the Ibuanyidanda Philosophical Initiative. *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis*, 6(1), 227-235.
- Okoro, L., & Nwazue, U. C. (2022). Showcasing African Story Through Multimedia Performance: A Review of Rejected Blessing. *ELT Worldwide*, 9(1), 198-208.
- Onyena, A. P., & Sam, K. (2020). A review of the threat of oil exploitation to mangrove ecosystem: Insights from Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Global*

- ecology and conservation*, 22, e00961.
- Perin, J., Mulick, A., Yeung, D., Villavicencio, F., Lopez, G., Strong, K. L., ... & Liu, L. (2022). Global, regional, and national causes of under-5 mortality in 2000–19: an updated systematic analysis with implications for the Sustainable Development Goals. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 6(2), 106-115.
- Raimi, M. O., Bilewu, O. O., Adio, Z., & Halimat, A. (2019). Women contributions to sustainable environments in Nigeria. *Raimi Morufu Olalekan, Bilewu Olaolu Oyinlola, Adio Zulkarnaini Olalekan, Abdulrahman Halimat (2019) Women Contributions to Sustainable Environments in Nigeria. Journal of Scientific Research in Allied Sciences*, 5(4), 35-51.
- Rajaram, V., Siddiqui, F. Z., Agrawal, S., & Khan, M. E. (2016). *Solid and liquid waste management waste to wealth: Solid and liquid waste management waste to wealth*. PHI Learning Pvt. Ltd.
- Sadhu, S. D., Garg, M., & Kumar, A. (2018). Major environmental issues and new materials. In *New polymer nanocomposites for environmental remediation* (pp. 77-97). Elsevier.
- Smith, M. J., & Pangsapa, D. P. (2008). *Environment and citizenship: Integrating justice, responsibility and civic engagement*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Taxopoulou, I. (2023). *Sustainable Theatre: Theory, Context, Practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Ukhurebor, K. E., Athar, H., Adetunji, C. O., Aigbe, U. O., Onyancha, R. B., & Abifarin, O. (2021). Environmental implications of petroleum spillages in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: a review. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 293, 112872.
- Woynarski, L. (2020). *Ecodramaturgies: theatre, performance and climate change*. Springer Nature.
- Xu, H., Jia, Y., Sun, Z., Su, J., Liu, Q. S., Zhou, Q., & Jiang, G. (2022). Environmental pollution, a hidden culprit for health issues. *Eco-Environment & Health*, 1(1), 31-45.