



NIGER DELTA UNIVERSITY
WILBERFORCE ISLAND, BAYELSA STATE.

73rd Inaugural Lecture

The Framing and Praxis of Aquatic Theatre Forms and Traditions in the Delta

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NIGER DELTA UNIVERSITY

Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Motto

Creativity, Excellence, Service

Vision

To be a centre of excellence defined by well articulated programme that will produce creative and innovative minds

Mission

To strive to maintain an international reputation for high quality scholarship, research and academic excellence for the promotion of the socio-cultural and economic well-being of mankind

NIGER DELTA UNIVERSITY ANTHEM (THE BRIGHTEST STAR)

Like the brightest star we are, to lead the way
To good education that is all our due,
The dream of our fathers like the seed has grown;
Niger Delta University is here to stay.

In all that we do, let us bring to mind
Our duty as staff and students of N.D.U
Ev'rywhere to promote peace towards mankind.
Creativity, Excellence and Service

Let us build on this noble foundation
And with love, let our dedication increase,
To rise and uphold this noble vision
Ev'ry passing moment let our zeal never decrease.

CHORUS
Rejoice, great people old and new, rejoice
For the good fruit through us is shown;
Be glad in our worthy contribution
To the growth of humanity (x2)

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Dedication

This Lecture is dedicated to God Almighty for his grace, wisdom and life, my late father, Mr. Victor Boubeni Abraye, who did everything possible within the law to sponsor me through the university; my mother, Mrs. Agnes Ekpeteaperegha Abraye (née Ogidikpe), who broke her back fending to meet my needs in and out of school; my love and mother of my children, Ebibebo-ere Grace Abraye (née Ganagana), who came into my life and changed it for the better; and my children, Kuroakonghan Richard Abraye, Freeborn Ebimaye Abraye, Oyindoubra Precious Abraye, Victory Oyinkro Abraye, Promise Oyindebamo Sunday Abraye and Godsglory Tamarauebikonbowei Abraye; my friends; colleagues; and mentors.

PROTOCOL

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Royal Majesties, Highnesses, and other Traditional Rulers
here present
My Lords Spiritual and Temporal
Staff and Students of Niger Delta University
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, inaugural lectures are occasions when scholars recount what constitutes their scholarship. They are forums for pontificating about theories in a scholar's academic journey.

As a scholar in the discipline of Theatre Arts, creativity is my playground, and the concern of this inaugural lecture is performance and performance aesthetics—types, spaces and styles in Aquatic Theatre. I knew it was difficult to carve out a niche for oneself in academia, but when I joined scholarship 24 years ago, my dream was to create a new area of interest in Theatre Arts. Today, I wish to present to you my achievements in theatre research, creativity, and practice, particularly in Traditional African Drama and Theatre, where I earned my Chair, which has provided the platform for me to stand here and deliver this lecture on my research interest, “Aquatic Theatre”. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, somebody once described the Aquatic Theatre as 'drama on water', but I would rather describe it as Africa's unique performances on and around water. Through my years of scholarship, following the odd collocations and the polemics over defining aquatic theatre, I have, in several academic papers, attempted to help the world understand what aquatic theatre is in the African context. Abraye, in his book *Aquatic Theatre Traditions in the Niger Delta*, defines 'aquatic theatre' as any theatrical performance that takes place in, on and around water (iii). These type of performances abound in the Niger Delta. As revealed in theatrical practices, the environment one finds oneself influences one's performance tradition. The Niger Delta's geography has greatly influenced the performance of its inhabitants, with its rivers and creeks. The performance form is associated with riverine communities and, as such, has become a theatre of identity. This is my motivation because theatre scholarship in the region is often laced with foreign principles.

This lecture is important to me because I am the first of my 1997 bachelor's degree and 2011 PhD class at Delta State University to deliver an inaugural lecture. I am the fifth inaugural lecturer from the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University. I have carved out a niche in scholarship on traditional African drama, culminating in my appointment as Professor of African Drama and Theatre. I have brought to the fore performance dynamics that identify communal cultural expressions through theatre. I have also generated theories that are fast developing discussions in the theatre world. As a theatre scholar, I have contributed to scholarly literature with 3 published plays, a monograph on moonlight games in Ijaw Land, a textbook on aquatic theatre, and several articles and book chapters in national and international journals and books. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, my scholarship is geared toward discovering and exploring African performances that have to do with water, and until recently, only the Niger Delta University was teaching this course at the undergraduate level and had only added it to the postgraduate programme at the master's and doctoral levels. The course was classified as the Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University Flag course, by the National Universities Commission (NUC). With the CCMASS, the course is now taught at other universities in the South-South, such as Delta State University, Abraka; Hensard University, Toru-Orua; Dennis Osadebe University, Asaba; Felix and Cecelia Ibru University, Agbarho-Otor; and others. By divine orchestration and the longing for a new ground in theatre scholarship, I happened to be the first scholar to have done a PhD in Aquatic Theatre in Sub-Saharan Africa, to the best of my knowledge. Several others are trailing behind because I just birthed two disciples, one on technical aquatic theatre and the other on performance aesthetics in aquatic theatre in the Niger Delta.

The aim of the lecture is to reintroduce scholars to issues, concepts, and ideologies in the study of theatre arts, particularly those concerning the aquatic theatre tradition. My

area of scholarship examines the concepts of traditional African drama and their relation to performances that take place in, on, and around water. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, my scholarship is an effort to provide a clear view of theatrical forms in the Niger Delta region and to establish that the performances discussed fit into a new area of interest that warrants attention within the body of knowledge in theatre studies worldwide.

My Journey of Life

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, my interest in Literature and Drama was sparked when I was promoted to form 3 in Kpakiamma Secondary School. A young teacher had just been posted to the school to teach Literature. He was introduced to the students as Mr Oru-Ezonfa Cameroon from Aleibiri Community. A new teacher in the school was nothing special. This new teacher was assigned to teach Literature in my class, but when he sauntered into the class for the first time reciting the lines of W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming", used by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, he captured our collective interest.

Turning and Turning in the widening gyre
The Falcon cannot hear the Falconer.
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

That was a new dawn because my love for Economics, Commerce, Government, and Religious Studies shifted toward Literature. From that day, Mr. Vice-Chancellor Sir, there was no looking back. While still in secondary school, I started my acting career. I acted in plays such as *Isaac Boro*, written by Simon Ambakederemor; *Veronica My Daughter*, by Ogali A. Ogali; *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, by Ola Rotimi; and some others. As soon as I finished my secondary school education, I joined the Ijaw Pioneer Theatre Troupe in Bomadi, the area's

drama hub at the time. We had the likes of the late Goddy Igboavwota, Egbaseimokumor Sunday, Ijokor, Kingsley Atijero of blessed memory, Rapheal Obrike and a host of others.

My passion then was split between dance, drama and music. But as time passed, music faded, and I focused my efforts on dance and acting, which helped me overcome my stage fright. My employment as a messenger at the National Population Commission and, later, my promotion to Public Relations Officer, facilitated my progression toward becoming an actor. I moved to Bomadi town after my employment. I got accommodation in Bomadi, and attending rehearsals after working hours became my routine. We acted at Bare Nightclub and weekly turned out performances, sometimes comedies and, at other times, serious plays. Then Brodrick Esamabeke Opuofeni came with his Opulaws Theatre, and we shifted from onstage performances to recording on HVS tapes. The first work I did with him was his *Beni-ere*. Then we recorded the *Trials of the Sea Gods* before I was transferred to Burutu, the "Island of No Regrets".

In Burutu, I met Benedict Binebai, another drama enthusiast. I quickly connected with him, and the three of us, Broderick Esamabeke Opuofoni, Benedict Binebai and I, became close friends. I continued with my love for drama in Burutu. I started acting with Benedict Binebai, popularly known then as Atlantic JPP, as my drama leader, and we had quite a number of escapades. We ventured back into recording with HVS cameras. We actually started producing videocassettes before Nollywood. In 1991, the year I was transferred to Burutu, we recorded Benedict Binebai's *Drunkards' Expectations*, with me playing the major role, Temele, which later became the name by which many people living on the Island calls me till date. This was followed by *Devils of the Home* in the same year, 1991. Videocassettes were produced and sold, but the

patronage was low. We should actually take credit for producing videocassettes first in the Niger Delta, if not in the whole of Nigeria. But who will recognise our tiny efforts in rural Bomadi and Burutu?

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, all of these shaped my research mindset when I finally gained admission to Delta State University, Abraka, in 1992 to study Theatre Arts. The idea of studying Theatre Arts was something Binebai and I came up with while we were living in Burutu. We woke up one morning and asked ourselves what we wanted to study at the university, and realised that there was no other course for us except Theatre Arts, and that would be the light. Even if the sky falls, what light will shine? The light of the theatre. My research interest has been in African performances from the beginning, so when it was time to choose a topic for my first-degree research, I decided to look at the Owigiri dance of the Ijaw people. Again, my choice of the Owigiri dance was because I went to an Owigiri dance competition and lost to a man who had stamina and variety in dance steps and forms. I realised when I started studying Theatre Arts that being very good at one dance step does not give you the spread you need in performance to win a challenge, so my study focused on the different dance steps that make up my Ijaw people's favourite dance, the Owigiri dance.

From the first degree, I had already developed a bias toward studying the culture and traditions of my people. As we go along, you will discover the bias mentioned. In 2003, while in the Master's programme, the question of which area to focus my research arose again. I thought for a moment and told my Supervisor that I wanted to study the works of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, and he asked why. I blurted out, "Because he is my brother." Some of his supervisees were working on issues concerning the Yorubas, and here I am, from small Bayelsa State, wanting to work on my brother. With the

Master's programme over, I focused my research on issues that concern my people. My first paper was the "Amasinghan Oge of Aleibiri Town in Bayelsa State." This was followed by "Embele: the Concept and Perception of Sweetness in Izon Aesthetic Judgement". From the outset, my direction in scholarship has been to guide scholars to aspects of Ijaw culture and traditions that have positive impacts on humanity in general. My research scope examines performance styles and types in Ijaw land; our beliefs about communal coexistence, collective expression, marriage, and neighbourly love; our music, dance, spirituality, and entertainment; and culture generally. That is why my research takes on performances that matter to the Ijaw man.

The title of my lecture is *The Framing and Praxis of Aquatic Theatre Forms and Traditions in the Delta*. In this lecture, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, I invite you to journey with me into the tides, into the river surface, into the creek paths, into the imagination of the Ijaw people and other riverine cultures. For on these waters and creeks, theatre adjudged itself beyond the proscenium stage. Their search for a stage beyond the proscenium led them to push creative boundaries, seeking expression beyond the land. Aquatic theatre is the response of a people whose culture deferred geography.

Theoretical Framework

This inaugural lecture is anchored in Cultural Theory. Cultural theory comprises theories of culture – beliefs, values, customs, rituals, symbols, and social practices – that shape human expressions. It is about how culture works, what it means, how our understanding of it has changed over time, all the ways in which it has not changed, and how it relates to processes commonly thought to occur apart from culture. Cultural theory constitutes a step back from an immediate engagement with culture to a place of critical reflection where insights gained and lessons learned in the study of culture are consolidated into

general frameworks and organising principles for future analysis and investigation. It consists of the body of ideas and concepts which have helped, in the first instance, in the identification of appropriate objects of study: that is, with a sense of which sorts of activities and practices are properly understood to be culture and those which might not be.

Cultural theory provides us with tools for analysing these activities, practices, and artefacts for understanding the ways in which they are connected to the broader forces and developments which comprise human societies; and for providing an assessment of the contribution they make to the societies to which they belong, for example, why they exist and what purposes they serve within the overall framework of social life. For the most part, cultural theory is applied here to examine aquatic theatre practices, with the intent of showcasing the rich and complex tradition associated with the term. Cultural theory helps scholars to understand aquatic theatre as a product of its cultural and physical environment. Through cultural theory, performances staged on, in, and around water are understood as cultural texts that communicate social values, identity, aesthetics, and spiritual beliefs. The cultural theory allows scholars to interpret the symbolic elements, ritual manifestations and the latent artistic codes in aquatic theatre. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, cultural theory is not only an appropriate theoretical instrument for interpreting and understanding aquatic performances but also for defining terms, concepts, and theories within the field of aquatic theatre.

Historical Foundations of Aquatic Theatre: Water as the Cradle of Performance

Around the world, rivers, lakes, and oceans have served as venues for public dramatic presentations. K. M. Coleman traces the European origin of aquatic spectacles to around A.D. 80, as documented by Cassius Dio. According to Coleman, the earliest water stages were either purpose-built artificial lakes

or improvised venues, such as the adapted Flavian Amphitheatre and the constructed Stagnum Augusti. These settings were used to stage highly realistic naval battles that captivated Roman audiences. Historical records indicate that the acclaimed Roman poet Claudius reenacted a naval confrontation between the Sicilian and Rhodian forces, with the audience viewing the performance from the surrounding hillsides. As revealed by the Roman ruler Augustus Caesar, documented by Coleman, aquatic theatre performances were staged to commemorate military victories. These performances were historical reconstructions in which naval battles were reenacted to depict real wars. Through such displays, the Roman authorities sought to demonstrate to the public the courage and heroism of Roman soldiers, their commanders, and their rulers. The narrative aspects of these spectacles were also derived from the myths and legends of the Roman Empire (49–52).

The term "aquatic theatre" has a short history in Niger Delta literature, but not the performances ascribed to it. As implied earlier, the term was coined by K. M. Coleman; however, it gained popularity when scholars adopted it, and it became an area of academic interest in the Niger Delta. The term was introduced in the Niger Delta by Henry Bell-Gam (2005 and 2006) and popularised and grounded by Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye (2012). Coleman's aquatic theatre describes reenacted naval battles, the equivalent of the Niger Delta war boat. In the Niger Delta, aquatic theatre explains a different scenario. This is so because, in the words of Fred Brisibe, "Niger Delta aquatic theatre represents a wide spectrum of performances associated with water. Some are performed on water, some in water, and some around water, while others are water-related performances staged on land" (33). Before the term came into public and academic recognition, different forms of aquatic performances were recognised as distinct spectacles and used according to the occasions to which they were respectively

related in pre-colonial times. It would be misleading to give the Niger Delta aquatic theatre a specific date of origin, as it embodies distinct forms of performance. Each of the different forms is generic and of a peculiar origin. This would be better understood as we paddle downstream with one of the forms, ‘regatta’.

THE FRAMING OF AQUATIC THEATRE FORMS AND TRADITIONS

Boat Regattas in Ijaw Land – Origin

It is indisputable that the natural affinity shared with the riverine environment and the preferences lent to riverine habitation have wielded a tremendous influence on the people of the Ijaw nation and their way of life. The living arts, literature, science, technology, philosophy, music, religion, and, in fact, cosmological views and ideologies are directed by this congenial aqua influence. This conclusion grows increasingly incontrovertible, especially when the subject of aquatic theatre tradition is examined. However, this lecture, for the most part, covers boat regattas and presents different types of boat regattas and their theatricalities. It is significant to note from the outset that the cynosure of aquatic theatre is the boat regatta performance. Apart from its cultural relevance as a cultural event, the boat regatta performance also holds potentials for tourism because of the cultural values it embodies and its functions, which range from economic, political, religious, and social to artistic. It is, in no doubt, a definitive example of theatre practised and enjoyed by the folks who are settled along the coastline of the Niger Delta.

The boat regatta of the Ijaws has one of its origins in the religious practices of old, perhaps stemming from their daily encounters with the environment as occupational fishermen. Details of specific points of connection regarding these claims remain incomprehensible and scanty. Besides pointing to the undying religious features, the oral tradition is consistent to the extent that the boat regattas were fashioned for the pleasure of

the Ijaw man in unique forms and spectacles. As a communal event, packaged mainly as a form of theatre, the boat regatta has been a delightful choice of performance on occasions of the coronation of priests or kings, during cultural festivals, and at times on the anniversary of popular heroic feats of the past. Boat regatta festivals offer people the opportunity to reconnect with their past and renegotiate a communal identity.

Boat regatta, as a form of aquatic theatre, is an ancient artistic practice among the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta. This theatre genre is used to honour state visits by top national leaders and other heroic figures. It is on record that when the northern and southern protectorates of Nigeria were amalgamated in 1914, Sir Frederick Lord Lugard, who became the pioneer governor-general of the colony of Nigeria, visited the ancient city of Warri. In the Warri district, where the tribes occupying the riverine part of the district—the Ijaws and Itsekiris—welcomed him with aquatic theatre displays of high artistic value. This was when Chief Bekederemo of Kiagbodo, Dore Numa of Itsekiri, Egbe (an Itsekiri married to Bekederemo's sister) and other notable personalities were projected as ethnic voices in the Warri district. This is attested to in John Pepper Clark's play, *All for Oil*.

Henry Bell-Gam traces the origin of boat regattas in Nigeria to the arrival of the first European traders in the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century. He explains that kings and chiefs of the Niger Delta travelled by boat either to visit fellow rulers in neighbouring city-states or to transport their trade goods from one market to another (21). These boats, laden with valuable commodities, were paddled by men drawn from the households of the kings or chiefs. Known as treasure boats (*Alali-Aru*), they were protected by an accompanying security vessel manned by warriors, called the war boat (*Omu-Aru*). Following the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, a new era of legitimate commerce in palm oil and other

palm products emerged, with Niger Deltans becoming the principal traders. Markets for this trade were located in the hinterlands, and chiefs who retained their slaves travelled to the markets to sell palm kernels and oil. The trade was highly competitive, demanding strong and well-nourished men who could paddle swiftly to ensure early arrival at the markets. The physically fit men in the households of chiefs or kings rehearsed their paddling techniques, coordinating their movements with traditional drumming, songs, and dances performed in the various war canoes. Bell-Gam maintains that these artistic and rhythmic practices gradually evolved into elaborately designed ceremonial occasions that now serve as platforms for displaying the people's sporting skills, entertainment, and cultural heritage.

Types of Boat Regattas in Ijaw Land

There are different types of boats in a regatta. These boats have their own styles of performance, occasions of performance and evolution. On rare occasions, especially when assembled for the funeral of a notable community leader, more than half of the number of boats are floated. The following types are popular and generic.

- | | | |
|--------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| (i) | <u>Su-ar<u>u</u></u> | - War Boat |
| (ii) | <u>Anda-ar<u>u</u></u> | - Wrestling Boat |
| (iii) | <u>Owu-ar<u>u</u></u> | - Masquerade Boat |
| (iv) | <u>Due-ar<u>u</u></u> | - Funeral Boat |
| (v) | <u>Ogetei-ar<u>u</u></u> | - Festival Boat |
| (vi) | <u>Se-ar<u>u</u></u>
Boat | - Cultural Love |
| (vii) | <u>Orukari-ar<u>u</u></u> | - Ritual Boat |
| (viii) | <u>Tei-ar<u>u</u></u> | - Love Boat |

To avoid cluttering the discourse, 'su-aru' (war boat) and Love Boat are used here to represent the other types, as they are more often celebrated. The literary meaning of the two words,

'su' and 'aru', is 'war boat'. 'Su' simply means 'war', while 'aru' is the Izon word for 'boat' or 'canoe'. Before their exposure to modern engine-powered boats, the war boats were carved from wood. In constructing the boat, attention was given to details such as size, space for sitting or dancing, compartments for storing arms, weight, and so on, with consideration for the boat's intended uses. Some boats contain specific spaces for warriors, the orchestra, watermen and the priest. While some boats were large enough to carry over 30 people, others were built to accommodate a small crew of no more than 21. A community could have as many war boats as allowed by its economic strength. The size of a boat often depended on the population of the individual community.

One feature that sets war boats apart from other regatta boats is the *atu*, a miniature calabash. It is tied to the tip of a cloth, which dangles from a pole pitched toward the boat at the rear end. The duty of the watchmen, two of them on the rear seat, is to supervise the *atu* as it swings with the wind on the water. The *atu* is the enemy's target. It is believed to carry the fate of all the warriors on board. The enemy can defeat them only if they can cut or destroy the *atu*. The *atu* also signifies a war pass; hence, it is folded up when the boat approaches a community. This is to avoid an attack.



Plate 1: warriors guarding the *atu* in the water

An *atu* on water is a call on a community to a fight. Another feature that distinguishes the war boat from others is its weird appearance due to the use of *emunumunu*, young yellow palm leaves.



Plate 2: A war boat designed with *emunumunu*

The ‘emunumunu’ are pruned and bunched together and tied around the boat to create effects of honour and weirdness. This creates a strange, supernatural appearance in the boat and gives it the impression of a mobile shrine. In the course of research, I have observed that the war boat functions differently on different occasions. Some of these functions are as follows:

- **Ritualistic:** Masquerade festival displays, sacrificial boat parades, libation ceremonies on water, and so on. Like other African societies, those in the Niger Delta celebrate various festivals at different times of the year. The area is predominantly riverine; the festivals celebrated reflect the region's occupational interests. Fishing festivals are the most common. Examples

include the ‘Seigbein Fishing Festival’ of the Amassoma people of the Ogboin Clan, the ‘Opudounou Fishing Festival’ of the Aleibiri community in the Ekeremor Local Government Area, and others. A good number of the aquatic activities are shrouded in religious beliefs, such as the annual sacrificial boat (*ekinyan aru*), organised by communities in the Niger Delta to carry the old year’s iniquities to the town's boundary, where the symbolic sacrificial items are disposed of.



Plate 3: disposal of ritual items during Amaseimukumor aquatic ritual performance.

- **Narrative:** Reenactments of myths and stories to appease the water goddess or heroic voyages across creeks.

Aesthetics: The use of colourfully decorated and designed floating stages, costumes and floats that mimic aquatic creatures, and soundscapes drawn from water images.



Plate 4: a war boat design to look like an aquatic creature (fish)



Plate 5: Amasinghan Love Boat of Aleibiri Aesthetically Designed for Entertainment



Plate 6: Amasinghan Love Boat Performers Enjoying themselves

In search of a Stage Beyond Land

Theatre, as classically defined, is tied to architecture – proscenium stages, booths, and amphitheatres. Yet the very essence of theatre performance is not limited by walls. Human creativity has always sought expressions that break boundaries. In the riverine communities of the Niger Delta, performance is not confined to land. The aquatic theatre tradition of the Niger Delta people emerged in response to the region's geography. Performances that utilise rivers, boats, and the fluid nature of water are integral to the storytelling and ritual traditions of the people. Unlike landlocked theatrical performances, aquatic theatre is performed on the tides, shaped by the tides, weather, water levels, climate change, and the river's ever-shifting flow. Aquatic theatre straddles disciplines—anthropology, performance studies, environmental aesthetics, and cultural theory. It is rooted in the lived experiences of communities, whose identities are deeply tied to water. Through my research and observations in riverine communities, especially in Aleibiri, Amassoma, Tungbo, Kaiama, Trofani, Adagbabiri and Tombia in Bayelsa State;

Kpakiamma, Patani, Ogodobiri, and Ogbe-Ijoh in Delta State; and Okrika in Rivers State, I have discovered that aquatic theatre operates in three spaces, including 'water space', 'canoe space', and 'land space'. Each of these spaces has its function and significance. You will soon know their similarities, connections, disparities and functions in aquatic performances.

The water space includes the creeks, rivers, streams, rivulets, seas, lakes, lagoons and pools in the Niger Delta, without which there is no aquatic theatre. They provide the performance space on which canoes and other watercraft serve as mobile stages. These waterways also provide a performance space for dancers on the rivers and creeks as their boats travel to and from marriages and funerals. The sight of a big outboard engine boat with music blaring from loudspeakers and people dancing on it, tearing through the middle of the river in the afternoon or late hours of the day, is a common thing in Ijaw land. It announces the conveyance of people to a marriage or the carrying of the remains of a loved one from one community to another. This is because the only channels connecting most communities in Ijaw land until recently were waterways. Also significant about the water space is that it functions as a stage. The types of stages drawn from the water body are the fluid stage and the shoreline stage. The shoreline stage is where performers and audience interact, the space between the waterline and the land. A performance is said to have occurred on the fluid stage when a performer's body is immersed in the water from the ankle.

The canoe space is also very significant because most aquatic performances are performed in canoes. 'Canoe', in this context, refers to all forms of watercraft used for performance. Canoes sometimes provide convenient places to watch masquerade dances. For instance, masquerade performances like the Osuopele of the Ojobo people can only be enjoyed by the

elderly, women and visitors when view from canoes and other watercraft on the river. Canoes serve as mobile theatrical stages, and cultural theory interprets this as a reflection of river-based livelihoods, the mobility of riverine communities, and the integration of daily life with performance. There are theatre scholars who argue that the canoe is not a stage, but I would want to draw their attention to the dynamic nature of knowledge about theatre, where stage types are not static. What makes a stage in Europe is not what makes a stage in Africa. I will advise that such scholars open their minds to innovations taking place in theatre studies. The concept of the canoe as a stage challenges Eurocentric definitions of theatre architecture by demonstrating that African performance traditions utilise indigenous environments as theatrical spaces. It expands theatre studies by recognising fluid, mobile, and environmentally integrated stages. I strongly argue that the canoe is a mobile stage in aquatic performances, as recognised in the Niger Delta, where performers dance and sing on board and dramatic reenactments of historical events are performed for the audiences to watch from the waterfront. Ossie Enekwe's opinion about a performance space, especially in an African context, is germane and supports my pontifications:

It does not matter if there is no formal designated playing space, for the only thing really necessary to an actor when putting on a play are the audience and a space to act in. Even though the latter may be only a patch of grass. But when there is no formal method of designated space, the actors and the audience acknowledge a playing space as separate from the viewing space, whether or not that space is rigidly defined or has flexible boundaries. (35)

The canoe is a floating stage, continually reshaped by environmental forces. Henry Bell-Gam in his work "Boat

Regatta Programme of the Annual Festival of Opobo Kingdom" (2006). States that:

It is strongly noted that the stage, by definition, is the part of the theatre where performances take place. It is the environment used by the artistic director to showcase the realities of life in a theatrical form (16-18).

This aligns with the arguments of scholars like Peter Brooks, who stresses that every empty space, be it a canoe, a barge, or the waterfront, is a stage. The canoe space, with all the artistic paraphernalia, serves as the standard stage for the performance. As argued earlier, the canoe is a stage type in all senses of the word in the aquatic theatre. As in a conventional theatre, where the audience focuses on the actions within the set, the audience's interest is in what occurs on the boat rather than elsewhere on the water. In aquatic parlance, the boat and all watercraft it represents are floating stages.

The land space comprises the area of play leading to the shoreline, the shore, beaches, and any solid grounds that aquatic performers use to enact their roles. The land space is also where the audience watches an aquatic performance. In other words, the land space is both an acting space and a viewing space. More detailed attention is given to this under the description of the arena and shoreline stages. Two types of stages are used within the landscape: the arena and the avenue. The arena stage is the open square where performers perform their fortification dance and other rites before dancing to the waterfront. The avenue, on the other hand, is the passage, between the land (arena, stage) and the shoreline. This stage comes alive when the warriors proceed from the the arena stage to the shoreline stage before embarking on the boat.

Audience Experience: Tides of Engagement

The audience is a very important aspect of the theatre business, and as such, it is widely agreed that there is no theatre without an audience. The audience for aquatic theatre constitutes a distinct category of spectators whose responses are shaped by their cultural backgrounds and environmental locations, setting them apart from audiences in conventional theatrical situations. Audience behaviour in aquatic theatre is culturally conditioned. Although audience reactions are often assumed to be immediate and spontaneous, they are largely shaped by cultural norms and expectations. Audience behaviour is influenced by the nature of the event and the conventions of the group for whom the performance is intended, making it, to a significant extent, a product of cultural conditioning. In contemporary performance contexts, audiences from different cultures express approval in distinct ways. In the United States, it is common for audiences to applaud when a well-known or popular actor makes a first entrance. In contrast, such applause in London is generally discouraged, as it is considered disruptive to the continuity of the performance. At Kabuki performances in Japan, audiences engage in *kakego*, a practice that involves calling out words of encouragement to the actors not only at their first appearance but throughout the performance. Since Kabuki theatre does not include curtain calls, audience appreciation is expressed during the performance itself.

The audience for aquatic theatre is similar to that of Kabuki theatre in that they actively participate in the performance. From the waterfronts of their indigenous communities, spectators express appreciation through coordinated dancing and singing that occur alongside the actions on the floats. This form of participation is particularly associated with women, who readily show solidarity with their relatives and community members. As a result, float performances take on a strong communal character, giving each one a distinctive

identity that reflects the specific traditions of the hosting community. For instance, the wrestling boat of the Kpakiamia people of Bomadi Local Government Area in Delta State is unique mainly because of the distinctive nature of their drum signals and rhythmic patterns. The uniqueness of the Kpakiamia wrestling boat results from the use of a complete set of wrestling drums, and they are twelve in number. A Kpakiamia woman marrying anyone from any part of the Niger Delta recognises her community's float without seeing it and would immediately step out to dance to welcome her people. Similarly, an Aleibiri woman from Ekeremor Local Government Area of Bayelsa State needs no prompting once she hears the drum rhythms and songs of the 'Amasinghan Love Boat' performance; she will quickly make her way to the waterfront to greet her kinsfolk.

There is a unique audience-performer relationship in aquatic theatre. I agree that "There is something almost 'primal' about the relationship between a theatre audience and the actors because of their physical proximity and the power the audience has to affect the actors' performance" (Down et al. 26). The audience of aquatic theatre performances does not conform to the conventional notion of a stationary audience, just as the performances themselves are not confined to a single location. Instead, the performance moves from place to place, much like the mediaeval 'Pageant Waggon' productions. The relationship between performers and audience in aquatic theatre is therefore highly distinctive. In recognition of this uniqueness, I describe the audience as a "hyphenated audience" (112). In this performance tradition, performers travel through creeks and rivers on floating stages, presenting their arts to communities situated along the route of the float. The residents of these villages who gather at the waterfront to watch constitute the audience for each segment of the performance. This audience—predominantly made up of women in each community—can only observe the

performance for the duration of the float's passage through their locality. Because the villages are separated by dense rainforests, spectators from one community cannot follow the float to the next.

Consequently, each village provides a distinct audience, made up solely of its own indigenes. The audience is therefore termed "hyphenated": it is linked only by the moving performance, forming a chain of separate audiences connected solely by the shared experience of the passing float of the performers. A thin audience linking the various communities is formed by people who are fishing or these farming along the river that the float passes through. The following postulation would be helpful:

The audience changes as the boat moves on.

The Ndoro audience is made up of Ndoro people, but when the boat moves to Ojobo, the next community on the route of the boat, the audience changes to indigenes of Ojobo at their waterfront.

Only a small number of fishermen, traders, and palm collectors serve as a connecting audience between the two communities that are separated by rainforests (Abaye 98).

It is this structure of the audience, as seen in the war boat 'Amasinghan Love Boat' and other aquatic performances, that informed the nomenclature—'Hyphenated Audience'.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, it should be re-emphasised at this point that the aquatic theatre audience is mostly women and

children, with only a few men. This is because the Ijaw man believes that only lazy men loiter around the village and have time for such float performances. Most men ask only which community the float originated from when the women return from the waterfront after entertaining the performers on the float. But men who have a strong sense of socio-cultural affiliations with surrounding communities often dismiss the earlier notion and go out to entertain the floats to maintain already existing relationships. Aquatic performances that see men with enthusiastic audiences are often the staged regattas.

Creative Arts of War Boat

The creative arts deployed in boat regattas, apart from space and floats, are costumes, makeup, properties and artistic feats. The artistic feats comprise acrobatics, dance, mime, magic, music, rituals, chants, and incantations. The war boats also incorporate smoking pots of charms to ward off enemies' bullets. Another artistic design is the screening of the boat's fore and sides with raffia fronds to serve as a traditional shield against bullets. The warriors' costumes are unique. They are dressed in blue, black or red costumes. Some of these costumes are to create a sense of invisibility, and others a sense of danger. Warriors wear make-up to disguise their faces. Make-ups are sometimes loud. In some cases, warriors' faces are either coloured white, black or blue to create a scary appearance. The main properties are assorted weapons and paddles. Paddles are the main propellers and are also used during engagement with the enemy. War songs accompany war-boat processions, which are crewed by warriors wielding weapons and chanting martial songs. The boat often travels along the waterfronts of communities with the warriors singing boisterous war songs like the following:

Woso woso mo, woso woso mo;
Opuoru, wosowoso mo, (2)
A wotìbì sein, a wotìbì seinghan ba
Me gbai ba siegha.

Egbesu fun pele bo eteri yo,
Muni muni, fun pele bo eteri. (2)

Translation

Bushy Bushy, the big deity with the bushy
hair (2) Let us shave his hair; if not, nobody
will go to the bush (2)
Egbesu pluck leaves
To cover me completely (2) (84)

This song calls on the Ijaw people's war god to come to their aid in times of war. The warriors ask Egbesu to make them invisible when they put a leaf in their mouths. Music keeps the warriors in an active, joyful alertness and awakens them to a constant awareness of the expedition's purpose. Music helps invoke the power of the god of war, giving them help when they are locked in battle with their enemies. It strengthens the bond with the supernatural by psychologically transporting them to the realm of the gods. When they fall into a trance as a result of the music, the warriors' confidence in the efficacy of the charms and arms with which they are fortified increases.

Challenges and Currents: Navigating the Limits

Yet, like the tide, aquatic theatre presents challenges:

- Environmental Hazards: Climate change, rising tides, rain, and unstable platforms pose risks to performers and audiences alike.
- Logistic limitations: Transportation, sound amplification, and stage design require careful adaptation.
- Institutional Neglect: Aquatic theatre remains under-researched and underfunded in academia and policy.
- Cultural Misinterpretation: There is a danger in treating common sacred rituals as such when they are performed outside their cultural contexts.

In spite of these, the resilience of riverine communities continues to inspire and inform societies of their oral traditions, visual symbolism, and fluid philosophies, making aquatic theatre an authentic expression of indigenous performance epistemologies.

The Way Forward: Anchoring Theatre in Scholarship and Practice

To ensure that aquatic theatre is not washed away by neglect, we must ride the waves purposefully. I propose the following:

1. Curriculum Integration: Aquatic theatre should be formally introduced into the curricula of Theatre Arts departments at higher institutions, integrating theory, practice, and fieldwork.
2. Floating Theatre Projects: Universities and cultural institutions should invest in experimental floating theatres for research and performance.
3. Archiving Oral Traditions: Documentation of riverine performance traditions, using video, photography, and written accounts.
4. Community Collaboration: Partnering with local performers and elders as co-creators, not just subjects of study.
5. Environmental advocacy: Using aquatic theatre as a platform for ecological education and activism, arts that speak for the river.

Contributions of Aquatic Theatre to the study of African Drama and Theatre

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, for over twenty-four (24) years, I have channelled my scholarship toward finding a path that is originally African with a particular interest in my people, the Ijaws. Despite the various scholarly disciplines, I chose Theatre Arts and have expanded the scope of theatre

scholarship in Africa to include aquatic theatre as a form of theatre practice. I have written a sourcebook and several articles on various issues related to this unique performance type to support this claim. In my *Aquatic Theatre Traditions in the Niger Delta*, several issues, concepts, ideologies, and theories in the study of theatre arts influenced by the riverine environment are addressed. The text examines and connects traditional African festival drama and performances that take place in, on and around water. It is an effort to provide a good view of theatrical forms in the Niger Delta. While searching for a sample to demonstrate this performance form, I researched "The Amasinghan Oge of Aleibiri Town in Bayelsa State". I explored the festival traditions of the Aleibiri community and brought the festival's essence and relevance to scholarship. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, this appears to be the foundation upon which my quest for advancing theatre scholarship began. The article highlights the dance traditions of the people and equally interrogates the paddling and other performance ethics in the festival, which gave me a glimpse of the need to pursue the study of performance forms on water in the Niger Delta.

Since Theatre Arts foundation is performance, the study of aquatic theatre can only be effective through performance. This compels my article on "Dynamics of Performances on the Aquatic Stage". An attempt is made to explore the origins of boat regattas in the Niger Delta and how these performance types metamorphosed into what is now considered and studied as aquatic theatre in Nigeria. The most conspicuous kind of regatta amongst riverine people in the world is the war boat. The theatrical performances of the people of the Niger Delta that are overtly considered aquatic theatre performances obviously include the war boats. My article, "Suu-arau (war boat) of the Izon People and Counter Terrorism in the Niger Delta", evaluates the role of the su-aru (war boat) and counter-terrorism in the Niger Delta and establishes the fact that the su-aru (war boat) was necessary to curb the terrorist activities of

the sea pirates amongst the Niger Delta People. The importance of this article is the utilitarian value of theatre arts to society, in this case, the Niger Delta society.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor. Sir, theatrical performances are not gender-specific because roles are assigned to performers of different sexes, and the place of women in aquatic theatrical performance caught my interest in writing the article “Aquatic Theatre: Women As Performing Audience”. The role of women in the aquatic theatre performance and how the audience factor is key to the aquatic performance informed my article, “Music and the Aquatic Theatre Tradition in Izon Land”, because, though men sing in their aquatic performances, the women are often known and associated with music. The Ijaw people’s love for music is measured here by its application on different occasions.

Directing is an important aspect of theatrical performance, and the aquatic theatre tradition cannot do away with it. Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, the form of performance that we are talking about, which is domiciled in the Niger Delta due to its environmental conditions, is not a theatre that is lacking in any area. It is more or less like the total theatre discourse that dominated African theatre scholarship in the 1990s, exemplified by the works of Ola Rotimi and other playwrights. I wrote “Directing in the Aquatic Theatre” to address the need and importance of directing in aquatic performance. Unlike the conventional director who craves the stage picture, the aquatic director’s first concern is the balance of his craft, which is his performing stage. This is important to the aquatic director because all the effort put into a performance may go in vain due to a single mistake by a performer who takes steps, a wrong step and upsets the boat. To connect the dots and establish the “total theatre” experience of aquatic theatre, I wrote “Debate on The Authenticity of African Drama: The Total Theatre Paradigm in The Niger Delta”.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, though I have researched other areas in Theatre Arts scholarship, I am more interested in traditional African theatre and drama, with particularity on the theatrical forms in the Niger Delta; that is why a larger chunk of my research is on the Niger Delta. My article “Drama and Cultural Exposition among the Izon People of the Niger Delta” looks at how culture, the totality of the way of life of a people, is projected using drama. It interrogates the interrelationship between culture and drama in Ijaw land. Works of art in Ijaw land reflect the collective aspirations of the people, as the paper explicitly portrays. “Dramatic and Spiritual Discourse of Aleibiri Festival Masquerade Dance of the Bayelsa People” evaluates the degree of artistic impersonation in the masked actors’ re-enactment of the society’s aspirations, beliefs, and anxieties as they recreate the community’s lifestyle. “Integrating the Dynamics of Owigiri Dance among the Izon: A Descriptive Note”, “Imbele: The Concept and Perception of Sweetness in Izon Aesthetic Judgement”, “Dance as a Means of Communication: The Owigiri Dance Experience”, “Storytelling and Moonlight Games: A Source of Cultural Exposition in Izon Oral Literature”, and “Symbolism in the Language of J.P. Clark’s Plays: A Study of The Three Plays and Ozidi” are a few examples.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, apart from critical works, I have contributed to scholarship through creativity, as evidenced by a few published plays. *The Deed*, *The Paddler* and *Hurdles*. I also co-authored a monograph titled *Kpingolololo Mo Ba Zine Oloama Mo*. A collection of moonlight games we used to play in the moonlight while growing up in the village. I have also written a text book that serves as a source book for students and scholars of Aquatic theatre *Aquatic Theatre Traditions in the Niger Delta*. Following my critical and creative scholarship, especially as it pertains to aquatic theatre, my oeuvre of

research has contributed the following to scholarship:

The eclectic staging experience of the Aquatic Theatre performance, with its interrelated or interlaced stage types from the arena stage to the avenue stage to the shoreline stage and the floating stage, makes its performance special and unique.

(1) The hyphenated audience: An audience type that spans from one village (audience) to another. In this case, a single performance witnesses different audience types in the performance. The Love Boat performance of the Aleibiri people is a typical example, as the boat departs from the Ndoro community and travels through Ojobo, Torugbene, Ekeremor, Tamigbe, Tegegbe, Ogbobagbene and Isampou etc to Aleibiri, the performance's terminal point. There are about fifteen different communities situated along the length of the performance stage, which spans about 26.3 nautical miles of river. The hyphenated audience is a new nomenclature in the practice and theory of theatre studies. It is a theatrical vocabulary emanating from the scholarship of this inaugural lecturer. A 'hyphenated audience' is therefore original to the study of African Drama and Theatre.

(2) The Amasinghan love boat performance area or stage: The Amasinghan love boat performance has the longest and largest performance stage in the history of theatre in Africa and possibly the world, a unique attribute. This assertion is made as a result of the fact that the Amasinghan love boat stage spans from Toru-Ndoro to Aleibiri. The performance area is about 26.3 nautical miles long and is considered one of the longest performance arenas on record.

(3) Aquanomics: Theory of Risk Management in Aquatic Theatre.

The theory of Aquanomics posits that the more conversant a performer is with water, the better the performance index of that individual in the parlance of the aquatic theatre. This assertion is based on the fact that the risk factors increase with the strength of the water flow in an aquatic stage, so as the risk of being swept away multiplies in the event of a performer falling into the water body (river or lake), the more care and caution the performer exhibits, thereby limiting the performance potentials of the artist. The development of this theory, though in its foundation stage, is important for the aquatic theatre practices because the mastery of the tides is the hallmark of the determinants of the level of performance expected from a performer in this theatre.

Aquatic Theatre: A Niger Delta Cultural Legacy

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, it is with great ease that I submit that aquatic theatre constitutes a vibrant and most distinct theatre form, profoundly entrenched within the Niger Delta's cultural space, its traditions and history intimately woven into the very drapery of its being. This fascinating form of artistic and cultural expression, grounded in performances on water, has long served as an unlimited medium for storytelling, community engagement, and the expression of cultural identity.

From the awe-inspiring masquerade performances enacted upon the waters of the Ijaw creeks to the ritualistic dances upon columns within the freshwater and mangrove swamps, the Niger Delta aquatic theatre, particularly Ijaw traditions, stands as a demonstration of the amazing inventiveness of its people. I profess that the Ijaw, Itsekiri, and other ethnic groups of the Niger Delta possess a most impressive history of aquatic performances, which proudly celebrate their myths, legends,

and cultural values. These performances, traditionally staged upon boats, platforms, or artificial islands, collaborate to shadow the margins between land and water, thus creating a truly fascinating theatrical experience.

Aquatic Theatre, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, offers not simply communal entertainment but also serves as a powerful channel of social commentary while concurrently enabling a relationship with the divine. I hold, without equivocation, that aquatic theatre constitutes an indigenous and original form of theatre, uniquely moulded by the environment, culture, and history of its people, which has, in turn, contributed most significantly to global theatre scholarship and landscape.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this lecture, as we are gathered today on Wilberforce Island, surrounded by waters that have shaped Ijaw civilisation for centuries, I will say that we have been "Riding the Waves of Creativity". We are reminded that creativity, like water, flows like a tide, sometimes calm, sometimes turbulent, but always moving. It cannot be contained; it flows, meanders, breaks barriers and reshapes the land. Aquatic theatre challenges us to reimagine the possibilities of performance not as fixed but as fluid, not limited but limitless. It is a theatre that celebrates a people of the tides, a people whose artistry rises and falls with the waves; a people whose stories cannot be separated from the waters that cradle their lives. From the rippling creeks of the Niger Delta to the tides of global avant-garde theatre, we are reminded that the theatre of the future is not in the proscenium stage or the elevated platforms with a cyclorama. It also belongs to a floating, shimmering, and surging tide that rides the rhythm of open rivers and mangrove-lined creeks in the living cultural spaces of the Niger Delta. I invite you all, scholars, artists, and students, to join me in riding this wave. Together, we shall sail new waters, anchor fresh traditions, and tell timeless stories on

the tide.

The lecture thus recommends the following to standardise the performance style to meet international patronage.

- For effective packaging and presentation of this performance, and to meet international standards, the organisers of aquatic performances should enhance the aesthetic value of the dances. Costuming of the performances should be made more innovative and effective
- Artistic innovation should be introduced to overhaul the age-old festival performance, enabling it to meet present-day artistic appetites and attract international tourism. To achieve this, the lecturer recommends that whenever the performance is to be packaged, a practising, artistically endowed theatre artist be involved in the packaging. This will give the performance the aesthetic prosperity required to keep it in both the national and international realms.

I strongly recommend that more attention be paid to aquatic theatre festivals in the Niger Delta region. Theatre scholars in tertiary institutions, especially in the Niger Delta, should introduce the course 'Aquatic Theatre' across institutions at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as this will help project the cultural identity of the Niger Delta region. It is also recommended that the course be examined using both practical and theoretical yardsticks. The performances should also be packaged for the National Theatre Arts Festivals. The purpose of these recommendations is to keep the aquatic theatre tradition alive and to showcase it to the rest of the world, as we have the Kabuki Theatre and other theatre forms. The study of aquatic theatre will present the Niger Delta region with its own theatrical form, as it is a theatre of identity for the Niger Delta and for Africa.

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I will not forget to acknowledge my spiritual family, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, RCCG, Bayelsa Region 27. The pastor in charge of the region and his assistant, I appreciate the work God is using you to do in the lives of Bayelsans. Pastor in Charge of RCCG Bayelsa Province 5, my spiritual father and friend, Professor (Pastor) Tonye Ogiriki; the two APICPs, Pastor Odesola Idowu and Pastor Tonye Apiri, PhD; and the CGO, Pastor (Dr) Ebikefe Omu, all Senior Pastors and Pastors in Bayelsa Province 5, I appreciate you. I am equally grateful to all pastors in RCCG Region 27 for their love and prayers, especially the “Wonderful Pastors”.

The climb from a graduate assistant to becoming a professor is tedious, studious, and full of obstacles, both material and spiritual, but God, in His infinite mercy, used people to see me through these rough paths. I want to appreciate all my teachers from primary school through my university days for the good job they did in my life, which is evident today. I may not be able to mention all their names here, but know that I appreciate you all. Mr Samsom Bakpo taught me at Akedienowei Primary School in Toru Angiama and instilled in me the fear of failure. Messrs Obakana Oruodubo, Arthur Egbure, Action A. Oruyei, James Torukro and a host of others taught at the

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Erezone of History, Stanley Udisi of Philosophy, Independence Gabriel of Religious Studies, Azibalou of Philosophy, Lazarus Saale of Religious Studies and every other person in the faculty. To my academic sons and daughters, my appreciation is no less. Dr Jonathan Kiapene, I appreciate you. Tarela Afore, Ebiere Gbe, Tolumo Ebiarede Akia, Augustina Pagaye, Joel Nwachukwu and all the others, I say, God bless you. All the PG Supervisees that pass through me, I want to say thanks.

It is time I appreciate my family. I will start with my beloved wife, the GOC of the Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye dynasty. A/P (Mrs) Biboere Sunday Abraye (nee Ganagana), who stood against the tide physically, financially and spiritually to bring me to where I am today, my wife, God will continue to bless you. I want to appreciate my children who had to endure stomach and structural adjustments to accommodate my ambition to climb the academic ladder to the top. First, Richard Kuroakonghan Sunday Abraye, my replacement when I retire; Freeborn Ebimaye Sunday Abraye, CEO, Coastal Times Online Newspaper; Precious Oyindoubra Sunday Abraye, my banker; Victory Oyinkro Sunday Abraye, my microbiologist; Promise Oyindubamo Sunday Abraye, the man in charge of my agro farm; and the youngest, Godsglory Tamarauebikonbowei Sunday Abraye, my computer scientist in the making. I love you all.

I will move to my foundation. I want to extend my sincere appreciation to my late father, the man who set me on a course of academics but did not live to see this day, the late Mr Victor Boubeni Abraye. My mother, the woman who worked her back bent to keep me in school, Mrs Agnes Ekpedeapregba Victor Abraye. I want to thank my siblings. John Ebimo Sarota, G.O. of Truth and Life Ministry Inc., Mr Iddo Sarota, Mr Woli Sarota, Mrs Ebikonbode Abraye Bioko, Mr Gabriel Wenebi Victor Abraye and Inspector Embeleakpo Victor

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NDU 73RD INAUGURAL LECTURER



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ABOUT THE INAUGURAL LECTURER

Professor Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye is a scholar of extraordinary distinction, a tireless intellectual and an accomplished researcher, a cultural advocate, and a teacher of uncommon dedication. Professor Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye's academic journey exemplifies perseverance, intellectual excellence and commitment to the preservation and advancement of African cultural heritage.

Born and formed in the rich cultural heartland of the Niger Delta to late Mr. Victor Boubeni Abraye of Aleibiri Federated Community in Ekeremor local Government Area of Bayelsa State and Mrs. Agness Ekpeteiapreggha Abraye (Nee Ogidikpe) of Koroama Community in Yenagoa Local Government Area also in Bayelsa State.

Professor Abraye's scholarly trajectory began with the attainment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Theatre Arts from the Delta State University, Abraka in 1997. Driven by an enduring passion for scholarship in the performing arts, he proceeded to the University of Ibadan in Oyo State where he earned a Master's Degree in Theatre Arts in 2004. He further consolidated his academic standing with a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Theatre Arts from the Delta State University, Abraka in 2011.

As a scholar of remarkable depth and originality, Professor Abraye has distinguished himself in the field of African Traditional Theatre and Drama, Aquatic Theatre, Cultural Studies and Behavioural Patterns. His pioneering investigation into the Aquatic theatre traditions have opened new frontiers on African performance studies. Professor Abraye's scholarly contributions have broken new grounds in which few have dared to attempt. His research into African Theatre and Drama represent decades of fieldwork, critical inquiries and

intellectual courage. His works have constantly challenged Eurocentric paradigms of performance studies and asserted the complexities, sophistication, and philosophical depth of African theatre forms. His publications in this area have enriched the academic literature and provided framework for scholars, students, and practitioners across the continent and beyond. However, his pioneering scholarship on Aquatic Theatre has made his most singular and irreplaceable contribution to human knowledge. Professor Abraye is the first to earn a PhD in Aquatic Theatre in sub-Saharan Africa. He has conceptualized and advanced Aquatic Theatre as a distinct and legitimate category of African performance. He has illuminated a dimension of Niger Delta cultural life that had long remained on the margin of formal academic attention. His work recognizes the rivers, the creeks and the water ways, not merely as geographical issues but as sacred performance spaces. A theatre without walls, staged-shaped by the tides and traditions where communities have for generations enacted the cosmologies, celebrated their identities, and communed with the divine through meticulous scholarships, Prof. Abraye has given the living traditions a theoretical language, an academic home, and a global audience.

His research has not only expanded the frontiers of theatre and performance studies, it has confirmed Niger Delta University's place as a centre of original and consequential works rooted in the realities.

Beyond his contributions to research, Prof. Abraye has devoted himself to teaching, mentoring and community service. He has inspired generations of students through rigorous scholarship, intellectual guidance and exemplary leadership. His commitment to nurturing young scholars and practitioners has significantly strengthened the discipline of Theatre Arts and contributed to the development of creative and cultural industries in Nigeria.

Prof. Abraye has held several sensitive offices within and outside the academic community.

- Examination officer for the Department of Theatre Arts, 2011-2015;
- Coordinator Izon language Programme, Institute for Niger Delta Studies 2011-2017;
- Ag. Director, Institute for Niger Delta Studies, 2017-2018;
- Ag. Head, Department of Theatre Arts, 2021-2023;
- Auditor, ASUU, NDU, 2015-20217;
- Vice Chairman ASUU, NDU 2019-2023;
- Acting Chairman, ASUU, March - July 2023;
- Auditor, Ijaw National Congress, Central Zone, 2015-2017; and
- Member and chairman of many internal and external committees.

Prof. Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye is an active member of several professional bodies, including the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA), the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP), Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), the African Theatre Association (AFTA), and many others. Through these platforms, he has continued to advance scholarly discourse and professional engagement within the humanities.

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