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'Musueming' the Theatre for History and Heritage Preservation: Israel Wekpe's Production of Idia as Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

Besides edutaining its audience, the theatre is also an effective means for historical and heritage preservation. This, however, is partly dependent on the theatre director whose job involves manipulating the spatial medium and arts of the theatre to project a playwright's message. Although museums are primarily established to preserve cultural heritage and some part of history, they also entertain in their own unique way. Drawing on this, the museum and the theatre could serve similar functions in society, even though they seem to have been cast apart from each other to function independently. In a concrete way, therefore, both the museum and the theatre can achieve greater results if creatively merged to complement each other. It is within this context that this paper adopts the historical-analytic, participant observation and literary methods to investigate 'museuming' the theatre for historical and heritage preservation, using Israel Wekpe's theatrical production of Idia that was staged on 26th December,

2020, at the SIO Events Centre, Benin City, as paradigm. The article argues that the museum and the theatre have similar intents and should be made to complement each other whenever it is artistically possible; that one (the museum) can be used to promote the other (the theatre) and vice versa, if resourcefully manipulated for cultural communication. It concludes that the creative and artistic combination of both would not only make history and heritage preservation easy but also entertaining and interesting. It recommends that theatre directors should use realistic artefacts to establish their spatial setting whenever they encounter a historical play to direct, and not to hesitate to visit the museum as that can be a source of inspiration that could be resourcefully deployed.

KEYWORDS: : Theatre director, 'Museuming,' Idia, History and heritage preservation, Israel Wekpe, Cultural communication

AUTORE

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Introduction

Culture and history form a people's identity. But confronted often by recurring desirable and undesirable significant environmental changes, coupled with the dynamic nature of humans that enable them, not only to change and adapt to a new reality but also to grow and die, maintaining and sustaining culture and identity has, therefore, become a daunting challenge to any society. This is because culture is also dynamic like the people it represents. It can grow or go into extinction if deliberate actions are not taken to preserve it. Factors that negatively affect a people's culture are both external and internal and they include war, immigration, international commerce, social media, pandemic, migration, division and growing apathy towards one's culture or a gradual detachment from it. It appears that many Nigerians now perceive their cultural heritage as a sign of barbarism (Ode 81). In fact, the attitude of most Nigerians towards their cultural heritage endangers it. Most Nigerians have unwittingly abandoned their culture but unscrupulously copied and adopted Western culture, which they perceive as superior and more important (Ode 80; Omoera and Umunnah 111).

Although proactive actions were long taken to install preservation mechanisms to prevent such a painful loss from occurring, some of the mechanisms such as the family, community, school, and African traditional religion (ATR) appear to be failing in the responsibility they are charged with because of constant bombardment from Western culture or cultural values (Omoera 11). Our schools, for instance, are largely fashioned after western style, and parents hardly teach their children indigenous values or systems ethnic to their environments. In this study, we argue that two of the major preservation mechanisms; the museum and the theatre, which are relatively active in our sociocultural environment, can be further explored and deployed for history and heritage preservation of our sociocultural values and ethos. They (that is, the museum and the theatre) sometimes operate in a similar way in that they both entertain and educate while narrating history and preserving cultural heritage at the same time. Yet, they are separate institutions that would likely be more effective if creatively fused to complement each other in quest for cultural communication. Perhaps, the theatre is the most dynamic one between the two and in the hands of a skilful director the museum can be brought to the theatre to facilitate an entertaining way of history and heritage preservation. It is based on this notion that this article examines how the museum and the theatre can be creatively merged for history and heritage preservation, using Israel Wekpe's production of *Idia* performed on the 26th December 2020, at the SIO Event Centre, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, as model.

The Museum versus the Theatre and the Theatre Director

What is a museum? Although the museum is not a new area of research, the quest to arrive at a definition that can encompass its various role and nature of growth in our ever-changing world has surprisingly attracted different but related views from scholars. Basically, a museum is viewed as a building where artistic artefacts and scientific and natural objects are kept for viewers. Going beyond this surface meaning, museums are organizations with the mission of investigating the production of humanity across the ages from the viewpoint of science and art to enlighten them about the history in addition to being spaces that present and conserve the treasures of science and art and the under and above ground treasures (Gunay 1251). One of the significant values of museums as revealed in Gunay's definition is that, in addition to serving as spaces that house treasures, they enlighten us about our history through our valuable heritage. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) further conceptualizes a museum as a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (qtd .in Brown & Mairesse 2).

From the foregoing, it is clear that a museum is more than a mere building that collects and keeps objects for viewers. It is rather an establishment, publicly or privately owned, where valuable artistic artefacts such as paintings, sculptures, drawings and vases, and scientific, historical and natural objects are kept and preserved, for viewers who come to appreciate and enjoy their aesthetic value and/or their educative and historical implications. It is usually in service to its community in particular, and to the world in general. Its obligations include "nurturing, safeguarding and handling diligently over from one generation to another artefacts or stories in history, that is, the pride of the people in relation to their cultural heritage and way of life" (Oladumiye et al. 93). A critical look at the roles museum plays in ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage and national identity reveals that the "indispensability of museums cannot be overemphasized" (93).

Like a museum, the theatre is also a building. The building is, however not for the preservation of scientific and cultural objects or artefacts but designated for dramatic performances or presentations. Hence, *Merriam-Webster online Dictionary* defines it as "a building or area for dramatic performances (and/or) for showing motion pictures" (Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theater>), and Idogho explains that "the specific place of...performance is...named...theatre as derived from the ancient Greek theatron, "a place of viewing"" (232). But unlike the museum, the theatre is flexible because it does not have to be

a real building for a theatre to exist. It can happen on empty space as Peter Brook wrote in his book, *The Empty Space*, where he says, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (7) because the basic elements of the theatre are “what is performed, the performance and the audience” (Brockett and Ball 6).

Another flexible aspect of the term, theatre, is that it simultaneously refers to both the building where performances take place and the performances done in the building. Hence, theatre is sometimes used interchangeably with a building and an art form. Consequently, theatre is also seen as “a re-enactment of an event, which could either be real or imagined, and communicated to an audience through the medium in which the artist seeks to contact the audience” (Umenyilorah 34). And the *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds that it “a collaborative form of fine art that uses live performers to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place” (qtd. in Idogho 232). The performance could be musical, dance, mime, poetry or drama which involves the combination of speech, gestures, and movements and all the aforementioned performance forms and fine art to create a lifelike scenario to penetrate the audience emotion and sharpen their experience. It is imperative to note that the theatre is the melting point of all the arts because “the phrase, fine art, as used in the definition implies (sculptures), paintings and decorations...used to enhance the visual aesthetics of the performance” (Idogho 232). Other elements of design for visual effects are costumes, makeup, lighting and scenic background, and a non-visual aspect, sound, which help to make the performance a memorable experience for the audience (Wilson and Goldfarb 11).

This is where the theatre director comes in because it is his or her job to creatively bring all of this together in a meaningful manner for the audience's enjoyment. First, the “directorial art involves the ability to peruse a playwright's script (where there is one) thoroughly, discover the intended message for the audience and be able to communicate such a message to the actors and actresses who, ultimately, constitute the conduit between the text and the audience” (Emasealu 73). Second, the theatre, being a collaborative art, “directing, therefore, involves the harmonization of the work of all the designers such as the lighting personnel, the set designer and executants, the makeup person, and the costume and wardrobe workers, among others” (Emasealu 73) “to make certain that the event is performed appropriately, intelligently, and in an exciting manner” (Wilson 145). It is in the process of conversing and working with the designers that the director relates the specific demands of the play, such as “the shape of the set, the need for multiple levels, the placement of entrances, specific mood lighting, garments with specific features” (Brockett and Ball 329) that would project his/her production's vision. Hence, the director can extensively deploy other art forms in the theatre if it fits his or her production concept

and objective. It is in this connection that this article considers how the museum and the theatre can be merged for historical and heritage preservation, using Israel Wekpe's production of *Idia* held at the SIO Event Centre, Benin City, as paradigm.

The Idea of History and Heritage Preservation

In order to establish a suitable trajectory for this discourse, it is pertinent to define these concepts under consideration. The term, history is basically viewed as a record or a narrative description of past events. It is believed that "as a word, it entered the English language from the French formulation of *histoire*, the Latin notion of *historia*, and the Greek construction of *istoria*, each of which represented the basic sense of a knowledge of the past" (Yusuf and Goshit 2). And it has been argued that in its earliest English usage, history and story were synonymously used to refer to any account of the past, whether of imaginary events or of incidents that were held to be true and "such use of history for imagined or invented events is, of course, a practice which has persisted, at diminishing levels, up to the present. It continues to be embedded especially in imaginative literature, such as the novel" (Nasson par. 13). Arguably, however, "from roughly the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onwards, the meaning of history moved more emphatically towards an account of past real events, and the notion of story drifted towards a set of uses which included less documented accounts of past events, and accounts of purely imagined events of fantasy" (Nasson par. 13).

In modern times, interestingly, history is not seen as merely a written or a documented account of past events but products of the past that are not only active and influential in the present, but which will live on as imperatives, destined to shape the future in knowable or patterned ways. This means that history is directly connected to, and greatly influences, not only the present but also the future of a people. Nasson affirms that "today, it can be said that, in an almost universal sense, history has come to mean an organized knowledge and interpretation of the past...as a continuing sequence of productive human stages, a process with ineluctable implications for the future" (par. 13). History arguably has similar functions as an oral tradition, a method of history and heritage preservation that was mostly practised by Africans long before the coming of the advanced method of written documentation. Onyima explains that "oral tradition is the body of information concerning history, culture and environment of a people at any given time and space. It is also a set of verbally transmitted pieces of information about the experiences and worldviews of a people... preserved in the memories of the group of people and are transmitted

from one generation to another” (274). Thus, oral tradition can, therefore, be seen as the verbal form of history.

One significant thing about the knowledge of past events is that, whether documented in a written form like history or transmitted verbally like oral tradition, it teaches us about the significance of cause and effect, showing why and how people have come to a particular stage, and provides the analytical lens that can teach and show us kinds of knowledge of human past, and virtually every kind of imaginable, if not predictable, human future. An important point to note, then, is that “behind human ignorance of the present and uncertainty of the future, the historical forces that have shaped the world are continuing to operate” (Nasson par. 13).

Heritage, on the other hand, strongly pertains to inheritance; a valuable legacy that was bequeathed to us by our predecessors or a precious thing, idea or philosophy we gained, acquired or inherited from our ancestors/forefathers and/or our past that deserves our attention, and worthy of protection and preservation. According to Onyima, “heritages are cherished characteristic features of a society passed down from generation to generation through conscious preservation...(and) the riches of extinct and extant societies which are of historic, educational, recreational, and economic importance, preserved and handed over from one generation to another” (273). Heritage is mostly modified by the term, cultural, because they are inextricably linked and connected. However, heritages can also be significant endowments from nature. As a result, heritages could be categorized into ecological/natural and cultural heritages based on their sources. It is pertinent to note at this juncture that between these two categories, this paper focuses on cultural heritages, which may either be tangible or intangible.

Interestingly, every heritage is historically oriented because there are always account about how they came into existence and their relevance in the past. Expectedly, most tangible cultural heritages are preserved in the museum for the benefit of society. However, deciphering the values and significance of these heritages in the museum are often intellectually demanding and tasking to average members of the society. But when blended into a theatrical performance where the history of the tangible heritage, as well as other intangible ones connected to it, is re-enacted, the aesthetic value and significance of such are not only appreciated by the audience/society but are also enjoyed, cherished and greatly valued. In that sense, such heritages can be said to have been preserved in the memories of the people where they can be assessed more easily for their growth and as a means of identity. Hence, this paper investigates how the theatre and museum can be blended for history and heritage preservation, using Israel Wekpe’s production of *Idia* as a paradigm.

Idia

Written by Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki, *Idia: the Epic of an African Queen* captures the story of the bravery of the legendary queen-mother, Idia. She is the powerful and courageous woman behind Nigeria's most popular mask cast in ivory by the skilled brass smiths of the ancient Benin Empire about AD1550, which was looted with other treasures from the treasury of the ancient Benin Empire in 1897 by the soldiers of Her royal majesty, Queen Victoria, which now kept in the royal museum of Great Britain in London. Death fills the atmosphere as the play opens with Uke, the royal jester, who laments the death of Oba Ozolua, the King of Benin and husband of Queen Idia.

Idia and her slave girl, Izevbokun, appear as tension rises. She plans with Izevbokun on how to install her son, Osawe, as the next Oba of Benin because she is being vehemently opposed by the kingmakers, royal spokesman and prime minister. According to tradition, the firstborn son inherits the throne. Aruaran was born first in the morning but did not cry immediately hence he was not carried to the king for his blessings as the heir to the throne. Osawe, on the other hand, was born in the evening. Yet he cried before Aruaran and was immediately carried to Oba Ozolua for his blessings as the next king in line after him. Queen Idia tenaciously holds on to this delicate element of the tradition and after helping her son, Osawe, surmount all the tests through spiritual fortifications, is installed as Oba Esigie, the new king to rule the Benin Kingdom.

Installed as the Oba of Benin, Osawe, now Oba Esigie attends to pressing matters affecting the kingdom. One of which is to punish the villains of Uzea with the death penalty because it is discovered that they poisoned the former king, Oba Ozolua. Next, he attends to the matter concerning the Portuguese from Portugal. He consults with Ohen Osa (Native Priest) to learn what the gods say about the visit of the white men whether he should welcome them or not. Ohen Osa replies that the gods are silent. Chief Oliha confronts the priest that silent gods bear no ill, and suggests to the Oba that he should receive them because the women flock to them and they, in turn, shower them with gifts. Chief Oloton confirms that the white men give women gifts such as mirrors, saying that his wives told him they gave plenty to Imaguero. The spirited talk about Imaguero prompts the king to inquire about her identity and he is told that she is one of the wives of Oliha whom he brags about as the most beautiful in all the land. Hearing about this the first time, Idia asks Oliha about Imaguero's fidelity and he replies that Imaguero's fidelity is a lesson even for the gods. The white men are allowed to see the king and they present the gifts they brought from Portugal.

After some time, Oba Esigie is bored and is unmoved by all the activities suggested by Uke. The queen mother enters unheralded and tells the king that the quest for the impossible kills all boredom; that he should capture a stubborn town and make the king his slave or take a beautiful woman who rests already as another man's wife. She convinces him to do the latter and with the help of Uke, Idia starts strategizing how to get Imaguero for Oba Esigie by sending royal gifts to her through him. Meanwhile, the Atah, ruler of one of the colonies of Benin called Ida, rebels against Oba Esigie by unlawfully carrying the *ada* and *eben* (emblem of authority and ceremonial sword) and using them without the authorization of the Oba. Then Oba asks Chief Oliha to go warn the Atah of Ida that Oba Esigie demands that he (the Atah) should send fifty slaves to Benin and return the *ada* and *eben* he carried for himself else, he won't spare his life, that of the family's and the life of his people. As Oliha tries to calm Oba Esigie, Chief Oloton accuses him of complacency, saying Oliha would rather stay at home with his ebony-skilled wanton woman (Imaguero) than obey the Oba in respect to the Atah's rebellious act. Oliha is infuriated that Oloton called his wife a whore and Oloton defended himself by saying they should ask Uke to confirm. Oliha chooses to ask Uke by himself if he committed adultery with Imaguero but Uke evaded the question. Oliha asks again but this time, it is if Uke gave coral beads to Imaguero and Uke answers saying, "You said so, my lord." Oliha misunderstands Uke because of anger and moves to strike him but the other chiefs hold him back. Then he storms out of the palace.

When Oliha gets home he questions Imaguero but he refuses to accept her denial. He rather lays his sword and a poisoned calabash down to choose her honourable way to die since his love for her makes it difficult for him to spill her blood. She drinks the poison and Oliha is even more heartbroken and his anger becomes uncontrollable. As a result, he sends a messenger to the Atah of Ida to inform him that he (Oliha) will bring his army to form alliance with him against Oba Esigie to capture him and his kingdom. Bad news filters into the Oba palace afterwards that the Ida warriors were unleashing terror on Benin warriors. Meanwhile, Oba Esigie has not known by this time that Oliha has formed alliance with the Atah. He asks about Oliha's position and Oloton announces that he smells treachery. Oba Esigie prepares to go to war himself as things are getting out of hand. The Queen Mother, Idia, storms in at this time, dressed for war. Everyone, including Oba Esigie, is shocked to see her because no woman has ever gone to war in Benin kingdom before. Oba Esigie persuades his mother to go back home but she remains adamant about her decision to go to war.

Consequently, Ohen Osa is asked to consult with the gods and it is revealed that since the war was caused because of a woman it will also be fought and won by a woman. Oba Esigie allows his mother to go to war based on this revelation and she is victorious. Oliha dies in battle while the Atah is captured alive as a slave. At the

Oba Palace. Oba enters with his retinue, does a brief dance and sits on his throne. Oliha's body is brought and laid at his feet, followed by the bowed figure of Atah who kneels and pays homage to him. Idia, the queen-mother, enters, dressed with the headgear which is popularly acknowledged today. As she sits, a brass smith sits before her to sculpt her face for eternity.

Israel Wekpe and the 'Museumed' Idia Theatre Production

The terms, 'museuming' and 'museumed' are not English words. However, the researchers coined them from the museum which is an English noun. The terms are used as gerund and adjective in this paper to mean the process of making something look like a museum or making a museum out of something by endowing the thing with features and characteristics of a museum. Based on this, therefore, a "museumed theatre," according to this paper, is that performance whereby the director heavily deploys features of a museum to create a captivating mental picture in the audience to engineer the preservation of their historical and cultural heritage in their memory. No one disputes the fact that a museum is an effective means of historical and heritage preservation. The theatre also does this through re-enactment. But bringing both together to complement each other on a common objective will achieve greater results than letting them function separately. Hence, our intellectual probing and presentation of how Israel Wekpe 'museumed' *Idia* performance and made the preservation of history and heritage entertaining.

Theme Exhibition at the Entrance and Exit of the Theatre Hall: Theatre is a reflection of life. Consequently, a performance that captures an artist's life in his studio should exhibit objects and works of art representing his creative works. This helps to properly situate the action in an appropriate background. But the exhibition, however, would be on the stage where the action will take place and not at the entrance of the theatre hall. *Idia*, as directed by Israel Wekpe, and as performed at the SIO Event Centre on the 26th December, 2020, was not about the life of any artist but Queen Idia and her acts of bravery. Yet, there were beautiful exhibitions at the entrance and exit of the hall where the performance was held.



PLATE 1 & 2: PLATE 1 (LEFT) IS THE EXHIBITION OF IDIA MASK AT THE ENTRANCE AND EXIT OF THE SIO EVENT CENTRE WHERE THE PERFORMANCE TOOK PLACE. PLATE 2 (RIGHT) SHOWS A FEMALE AUDIENCE IDENTIFYING WITH IDIA'S BY SNAPPING WITH THE MASK. SOURCE: PICTURES TAKEN BY MERIT, AN AUDIENCE MEMBER.

It is instructive to note that the exhibition was deliberate and purposeful. The theatre was a re-enactment of how the famous Idia mask came about. The director thoughtfully collaborated with Frontini Studio to have a large replica of that mask and some paintings depicting the rich culture of Edo people exhibited at the entrance and exit of the hall. As a result, the audiences are immediately brought in contact with the central character and her culture at the entrance of the hall even before the performance. Consequently, some audience were quickly enthralled by the mask at the entrance and were prompted to ask questions about the person behind the mask as they patiently waited to enter the hall. Interestingly, it was some of the older audience that availed themselves to explain to their children, other younger audience and non-native audience because the exhibition created an avenue for them to exercise their historical and cultural prowess and knowledge. And almost all the female audience wanted to snap with the exhibited Idia mask when coming out of the hall after the performance because they were captivated by the electrifying re-enactment of her courage as a woman and they wanted to be identified with her bravery. The audience was also reminded through the exhibition and the announcement made by the director that the national museum, Edo State, houses this same mask and other cultural artefacts that can teach them a lot about their history and cultural heritage. Thus, the theme exhibition at the entrance and exit of the theatre hall added to the effective realization of the director's vision of historical remembrance and showcase of cultural heritage, and the audiences' enjoyment of the memorable experience of the performance.

Exhibition on Stage: In the theatre, “designers create settings that are appropriate to the play but also provide spectacle through the settings' visual variety and appeal” (Brockett and Ball 379). The standard practice is that “even after the sets are assembled onstage, they are incomplete without set decoration and properties”

(Brockett and Ball 380). Set decoration and properties include such items as coats-of-arms, windows draperies, furniture, pictures, banners, book and anything to complete the setting. But transforming the stage into a semi-gallery is an indication that the decoration has the additional objective that transcends the creation of visual appeal. Israel Wekpe adopted this style of stage-to-semi-gallery-transformation during the performance of *Idia* to aid his directorial vision and concept.



PLATE 3&4. PLATE 3 (LEFT): STAGE EXHIBITION OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ARTEFACTS SUCH AS THE BUSTS OF PAST OBA, LEOPARD AND THE THRONE HAVING "ADA" AND "EBEN" CREATIVELY ATTACHED TO IT. PLATE 4 (RIGHT): THE INSIDE VIEW OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM, BENIN CITY, DISPLAYING THE BUST OF OBA EWUARE AND OTHER HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ARTEFACTS. SOURCES: PLATE 3 WAS TAKEN BY MERIT, AN AUDIENCE MEMBER AT THE PERFORMANCE. PLATE 4 WAS PHOTOGRAPHED BY T. I. UMAGBAI, THE DEPUTY CURATOR, NATIONAL MUSEUM, BENIN CITY.

As shown in the picture (left) above, notable artefacts exhibited on stage during the performance of *Idia* were busts, leopard and *ada* and *eben* (emblem of authority and ceremonial dance sword) creatively carved as part of the throne. Beyond forming part of the performance's scenic aesthetic, these artefacts were skillfully and deliberately deployed for their strong historical and heritage implications. The exhibited busts for instance, although neither the exact total number nor their replicas, represented the busts of the past Obas that ruled the kingdom before the Oba Esigie mounted the throne. They were strategically arranged to impress their significance on the audience and/or to capture their attention and nurture their curiosity to prompt them to ask questions about the implication of the busts on stage. Interestingly, a good number of members of the audience got the message while others asked questions that led to a robust discussion about past Obas after the performance. As was to be expected, they were told about the carved busts of past Obas that are well preserved in the national museum, Benin City, Edo State, as the bust of Oba Ewuare shown in the picture (the first object, left) above. This added to the audience experience.

Other set properties that transcended the shore of scenic aesthetic but deployed with strong heritage implication are the leopards. This is because “animals considered sacred, in various parts of Africa, embody spiritual powers or extraordinary capabilities. Thus, they are highly valued and revered in their place in nature” (Nwafor 118). Edo people are not different in this regard and the leopard is one of the animals with symbolic significance in their culture. As the British Museum came to realize, “the leopard is king of the forest, just as the Oba of Benin is king of the city and villages where his people live. The king used to keep leopards, which were paraded on important occasions like mascots” (The British Museum 6). The significance of this is that since the king can tame and keep leopards, “the king is also master of the tropical forest which covered most of Benin until recent times” (The British Museum 6). Some members of the audience did not know about this before the performance opened their eyes to the invaluable cultural heritage.

Another significant role the exhibited artefacts played in the performance of *Idia* was to remind the audience, who were mostly Edo people, of their artistic ingenuity and the creation of craft guilds system by Ogoiso Ere where “various professionals and craftsman were encouraged to form associations with monopoly rights to produce and market their products” (Osagie and Ikponmwosa 3). Seeing artworks displayed on the set that captured a story that happened about AD1550 gave the audience pride knowing that crafts such as ironsmith, carpentry and carving existed in Benin long before the coming of the Whiteman. Again, it was also to reawaken their interest in their heritage because the performance made them realize that their craft contributed to their growth and greatness in the past.

Appropriate Use and Display of *Ada* and *Eben* as Hand Props: Hand props are used by the actors in stage business, and “directors frequently make specific requests regarding hand props because of their intimate connection with the acting” (Brockett and Ball 380). Thus, there are wrong and right ways to handle specific hand props. *Ada* and *eben* are not just any hand props in Benin culture because of their strong spiritual implications. Many people wrongly refer to them as swords and weapons of war which they are not. *Ada* is an emblem or sword of authority, proclamation and honour while the *eben* is a ceremonial sword for dancing. As practised in Benin tradition, “the *ada* is the superior emblem, and it takes precedence, wherever it appears, over the *Eben*. While both Oba and the chiefs dance with *eben*, *ada* is only carried by the *Emada* (pages) during public appearances of the Oba. The Oba can never appear in any gathering without the *ada* nor move about even in his palace without it” (edoaffairs.com/ada-eben-scepter). Thus, it is only the Oba that wields the *ada* although a few chiefs are conferred with the right to possess the *ada* and use it within their domain and not in the public.



PLATES 5 & 6. PLATE 5 (LEFT) SHOWS THE CHIEFS DANCING WITH THE EBEN, A CEREMONIAL DANCE SWORD, DURING THE CORONATION OF OBA ESIGIE. PLATE 6 (RIGHT) SHOWS THE OMADA (SINGULAR) PAGE CARRYING THE ADA, EMBLEM OR SWORD OF AUTHORITY AS OBA ESIGIE WAS COMING FROM WHERE THE CORONATION WAS HELD.

In Old Benin, an *Enogie* could not order the execution of any of his subjects unless the right to possess the *ada* had been conferred on him by the Oba (edoaffairs.com/ada-eben-scepter). It is instructive to note that the *ada* must always be on the right side of the Oba or any chief that has ancestral connections to the throne of Benin. Carried in the Oba's presence, *ada* is a reminder of his right to pronounce death. The *eben* is strictly for ceremonial dance. However, it is forbidden for it to fall while dancing with it because it could mean death to the person except he makes some sacrifices and also pays a heavy fine in addition. The significance of *ada* and *eben* is not just the symbolism of Benin kingdom insignia but also portrays the historical tenacity and traditional uniqueness and heritage of the Benin people. It is believed that they were invented during the Ogo dynasty by Ogo Ere 16 CE – 66CE (Edoaffairs.com par 2).

Sadly, these emblems have either been grossly misused or disparagingly and inadequately used in some performances that captured stories that involved the Oba in his palace and/or on the public. Some directors have wrongly used them as swords while others have done worse by wrongly placing the *ada* on the left side of the Oba in their performances. Still others, maybe as a result of economic constraints and low budget, do not give *eben* to the chiefs at all irrespective of the action and occasion. One *eben* is used throughout the performance and is carried by the *Emada* like the *ada*. These are, of course, misleading and they happen when a director fails to do proper historical and cultural research of the play he wants to produce. In the performance of *Idia* on the 26th December, 2021 at the SIO event centre, as directed by Israel Wekpe, these cultural emblems and hand props, were not only properly used but also adequately displayed as culturally stipulated. As shown in the picture above (left), we see all the chiefs dancing with their *eben* during the coronation of Oba Esigie. The picture on the left above shows the Oba walking to the throne after

his coronation and the *Omada* is in his front with the *ada* as the tradition demands that the Oba cannot appear in the public without his *ada*.

Use of Appropriate Costumes: Another way Israel Wekpe used his production of *Idia* as a “museumed theatre” for historical and heritage preservation was through the use of appropriate costumes. For instance, scrutiny of the skirt of the Oba in the picture of plate 3 revealed that adequate research was done before the selection of the material because it has the picture of the leopard on it. The costumes of the chiefs during the coronation where they had to dance with the *eben* (plate 5) is greatly different from when they were deliberating on an issue in the palace (plate 3). This appropriate use of costume exhibited during the performance of *Idia* helped the audience appreciate their culture and the aesthetic value of their dress heritage.

One other aspect where costumes were creatively and appropriately used as a means of historical reawakening was that worn by the Portuguese, Afonso D’Aveiro and his men. All aspects of their costume were properly captured as shown in their pictures preserved in the National Museum, Benin City. The roles were played by fair-complexioned Nigerians. However, they were greatly transformed on stage with the help of their costumes and the audience members were ‘transported’ to the period when the white man first came as friends into the kingdom before they eventually invaded in 1897. All of these are preserved in the national museum and the audience members were moved by every aspect of the performance to visit the museum to see artefacts and history preserved there.

Conclusion

A people’s history and cultural heritage are inseparable because they come together to form their identity that makes them distinct from the rest of the world. Hence, it is extremely important to preserve them not only on paper and show glasses in a room but also in the memories of the people that have the history and heritage. To preserve is to protect something from being destroyed or to keep something safe. It is a known fact that the museums were built for the preservation of significant objects for future use and references. The theatre also has the responsibility of preserving a people’s history and culture through re-enactments and performances. Since the theatre and museum have similar objectives, they should always be made to complement each other whenever it is creatively possible. As a result, history and heritage preservation would not only be made easy but also entertaining and interesting. And in the process, the active art, the theatre, would be used to promote the museum productively. And whenever a performance is meant to capture the history and project the heritage of a people, this paper recommends that

theatre directors should always use realistic artefacts to establish their spatial setting as that would help the audience to quickly grasp the message without misleading them with undecipherable symbols. And where they may need explanations about some artefacts/heritages and their uses, visiting the museum might just be a good source of clarification and inspiration.

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