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Building theatrical epistemic communities in the Global South:

Expert networks, philanthropy and theatre studies in Nigeria 1959–1969.

Abstract

In this paper I propose that the concept of an epistemic community can be adapted to describe how theatre artists, scholars, critics and pedagogues organized themselves as such a community and that several interrelated epistemic communities constituted themselves to promote a practice of theatre within the framework of decolonization. The paper shows how US philanthropic funding, here the Rockefeller foundation, invested heavily in assisting with the establishment of a theatre studies department at Nigeria's first and premier university at Ibadan. Employing network analysis the paper shows how Rockefeller, represented by its field officer Robert W. July, played a pivotal role in supporting young Nigerian theatre artists such as Wole Soyinka and Demas Nwoko as well as expatriate go-betweens (Ulli Beier, Martin Banham, Geoffrey Axworthy). Rockefeller was working parallel to the CIA-backed Council for Cultural Freedom, which was also funding the arts in Nigeria. The result was a highly innovative theatre department that by international standards was pioneering in its combination of theatre practice and academic research.

Keywords

Epistemic communities; Rockefeller Foundation; Robert W. July; Wole Soyinka; University of Ibadan.

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The term “epistemic community” sounds foreign to theatrical ears. While as theatre scholars and practitioners we like to extol the virtues of community, we are less familiar with the epithet “epistemic” in this connection. Indeed, to theatrical ears an epistemic community sounds almost oxymoronic: epistemic conjures up notions of hard science and knowledge systems, while community exudes associations of conviviality, even humanity. While communities tend towards warmth, epistemes are definitely located in the chillier precincts of human endeavour.

The term itself was coined far from rehearsal rooms, theatre workshops or black boxes, those privileged sites of theatrical labour and endeavour. It refers to networks of internationally organized technical experts who advise policy makers and governments. It is this international, or perhaps more precisely, transnational aspect of epistemic communities that is of interest and which is of relevance to the topic of performative interweaving. Indeed, this meeting is an example of the theatrical epistemic community in action.¹ We are not only part of it but represent its continuity and also mutability. My topic, however, is historical in focus: I want to look at a period, roughly two decades between 1950 and 1970, when the theatrical epistemic community formed, flourished, and declined – or rather disintegrated into smaller subcommunities.

My concern is with epistemic transformations: how knowledge flows are turned into bricks, mortar and concrete on the one hand and cultures of embodied performance practice on the other. I argue that in the wake of the Second World War, a multi-faceted internationalist movement arose, driven by a number of institutional actors, including the newly founded UNESCO and its theatre-focused spinoff, ITI, which saw in the arts, and theatre in particular, a means to ensure peace and build networks of professionals whose allegiances spanned both nation states and ideological divides.

The paper is divided into three parts: I shall begin with some necessary definitional labour as the term “epistemic community” was coined in a completely different disciplinary context and needs therefore some adaptation to relocate it in our own. I shall then briefly outline my methodological approach, namely historical network analysis as a means to map the intricate connections that constitute the theatrical epistemic community. The third and main part will discuss how the Rockefeller Foundation became heavily involved in promoting theatre studies in Nigeria in the 1960s. I will look at how this organisation launched the career not just of Wole Soyinka but many other Nigerian theatre makers and scholars as well. The focus will be on one part of the community, namely the university discipline of theatre studies, as it was conceived and instantiated in the newly decolonized nation of Nigeria.

Definitions

The term “epistemic communities” was coined by the political scientist Peter M. Haas, to describe networks of knowledge-based experts who advise policymakers and governments, usually on questions of scientific and technical complexity such as nuclear disarmament or climate change.² Their main characteristics are a high degree of transnational organization in the form of professional associations, conferences, expositions, and learned publications that seldom remain restricted to a single country. For this reason they have become a favoured object of transnational historiography of the post-1945 period.³ Although the concept was developed in the context of international relations and most research has focused on cases requiring a high degree of technical scientific expertise, there is no intrinsic reason why it cannot be extended to cultural, even artistic phenomena.⁴ I propose that the idea of an epistemic community can be adapted to describe how theatre artists, scholars, critics, and pedagogues organized themselves using the same elements of professionalization, organizational structures, and transnational connectivity that distinguish scientific and technical epistemic communities. I would like to argue that just such a community constituted itself to

promote a practice of theatre within the framework of decolonization that cut across Cold War rivalries.

The second reason for engaging with the term is that it emphasizes the knowledge-centric aspect of performance. While theatre scholars tend to theorize theatre and performance in terms of feedback loops of signs and affects in the here and now, both the production and reception of performance are equally dependent on *knowledge* acquired over much longer periods of time and space. This *longue durée* of performance knowledge is most evident in classical forms such as Japanese Nô or European ballet, both of which require knowledge-based practice to succeed: the corporeal knowledge of the performers and the spectatorial knowledge of the recipients who possess the code to make sense of the figurality of the *shite* or why young women in tutus dancing on their toes profess to be swans. My focus however is on a different epistemic domain, namely the institutional frameworks that are equally necessary for theatre to be instigated and accepted.

The origins of the post-war theatrical epistemic community lie in the international, multi-sited movement known as theatrical modernism, whose foundational belief was the idea that theatre can be an art form and hence of high cultural value and not just a commercial enterprise. It is the ideology in which all theatre scholars were educated, and to which we owe our institutional existence whether as artists or scholars or both. This set of beliefs and shared values provided the ideological basis of the community, albeit initially not in an organized form. Such an epistemic community was from the outset dispersed and international in composition. It also did not just appear without premeditation after 1945 but drew on more informal initiatives of the inter-war years.

Its “prehistory,” to give some examples, may be located in networks organized around internationally distributed theatrical periodicals such as the *Mask* edited by Edward Gordon Craig, the *Theatre Arts Monthly* in the USA, and, perhaps more significantly, in the series of international theatre expositions of the 1920s and 1930s that were held in Amsterdam, London, Vienna, Paris, New York, and Rome, where common artistic values were displayed and discussed.⁵ The correspondents and contributors to the *Mask* were extremely diverse and included leading figures from India, Japan, and China, as well as European countries. The community also constituted itself in new international organizations such as the Société Universelle du Théâtre, founded in 1926, or, in the amateur realm, La Comité International pour les Théâtres Populaires and the British Drama League, which by 1950 had branches in dozens of English-speaking countries.

This community leads to permanent international organizations after 1945: with the founding of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) in 1947, the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) in 1956, and the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) in 1957, all of which initially had close ties to one another through affiliation with UNESCO. An important feature of these organizations is that they emphatically sought to bridge the East-West divide. In this context American philanthropic foundations such as Rockefeller and Ford, played a key role.

Historical Network Analysis and Philanthropy

In his study, *Foundations of the American Century*, Inderjeet Parmar examines the activities of the major American philanthropic foundations – Rockefeller, Ford and Carnegie – in terms of “knowledge flows”, which he argues, were not just unequal but which also had a “denationalizing” impact on Third World scholars (Parmar 2012, p. 10). His concept of “knowledge flows” proceeds from a dynamic understanding of knowledge as mobile, negotiated, fluid, even tactical, and usually asymmetric. Most importantly it is transmissible. The transmission processes involve human actors, money, institutional and political power, which combine to legitimize particular forms of knowledge. Knowledge can be thus technological and scientific, but also aesthetic and even include theatre.

In order to analyse these knowledge flows via organizational networks and their relations to another and the emerging transnational theatrical communities, I shall employ a methodology known as historical network analysis. Sociologists such as Mark Granovetter have argued that networks can be divided into strong (homophilic) and weak (heterophilic) types. Strong networks such as families or clans evince a high degree of homophily, a tendency to gravitate to people similar to us. Granovetter's and many subsequent studies have, however, demonstrated that generally speaking heterophilic, or weak ties are often the more beneficial because a predominance of homophilic ties would lead to a highly fragmented world. In a society with relatively few weak ties, "new ideas will spread slowly, scientific endeavors will be handicapped, and subgroups separated by race, ethnicity, geography, or other characteristics will have difficulty reaching a *modus vivendi*" (Granovetter 1983, p. 202). In contrast, heterophilic networks, because of their reliance on weak ties, can much more easily form connections with other networks, a precondition for innovation and adaptation.

In his book *The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook* (2018), historian Niall Ferguson, gives historical network analysis a new urgency. He offers an incisive review of network theory both mathematical and sociological before arriving at a (as he admits) over-simplified distinction between hierarchies and networks (Ferguson 2018, p. xx). His argument is the following: Very broadly historians have been overly focused on hierarchical structures because they leave behind the kinds of archives that historians like to study whereas networks generally do not. Networks, on the other hand, tend to be more creative than hierarchies; we should expect a network-driven disruption of hierarchies that cannot reform themselves. Ferguson is of course aware that hierarchies are just a particular form of a network with the special feature that they form nodes and edges in vertical rather than horizontal structures. If we are looking for innovation, then we should be looking at the points of contact between diverse networks. His final and broad historical argument is that hierarchies are the dominant mode of governmentality between 1790 and 1970, the so-called corporate age. Recent times – since the 1970s – have seen, however, a reassertion of network structures, most notably in through the internet.

Foundations such as Rockefeller or Ford are hierarchical in terms of their internal organisation, but in their interaction with the outside world, especially internationally, they worked by forming many heterophilic networks and relatively loose ties to local individuals and institutions.⁶ Networks, especially heterophilic ones, form where hierarchies either do not exist, or are weakly developed. This was the case, I argue, when the theatrical epistemic community began forming in the late 1940s. It coincided with the decolonization movement and the formation of many new nation-states. Decolonization opened up spaces for new networks. Into these spaces vacated by colonial administrations entered, amongst other players, American philanthropic organizations. The players or nodes in these new networks followed roughly the same pattern and were constituted of the same elements: a strong institutional backer, sometimes a state authority, even colonial administration, more often a private foundation that identified countries and, secondly, individuals as worthy of support. International festivals also played a key role in the showcasing of the new theatrical initiatives, and international organisations such as ITI or IFTR often featured as brokers.

The School of Drama, Ibadan.

In 1962 the Rockefeller Foundation apportioned \$200,000 to establish a School of Drama at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. This was by far the largest single allocation to a beneficiary in the field of theatre outside the USA, which commanded the lion's share of theatre-related funding. This amount stands out even in a ten-year overview.

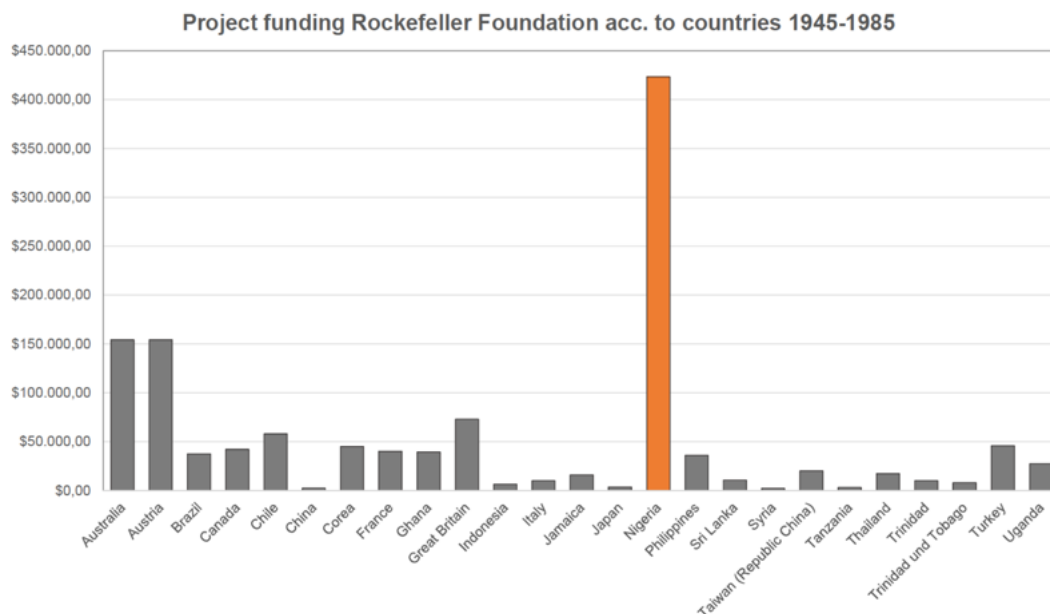


Fig. 1 Theatre-related project funding of the Rockefeller Foundation by country excluding the US 1945-1985. The figures are based on the amounts published in the annual reports.

Inderjeet Parmar notes that outside the US, the foundations were active in network building and in advancing an ideology of capitalist “modernization”:

Such networks were established in strategically important countries and regions – such as Indonesia, Chile, and Nigeria – specifically to ensure a regional and continental multiplier effect: cadres of academics imbued with knowledge and training aimed at orienting them toward a pro-American/Western approach to “modernization” and “development” as opposed to nationalist or pro-communist strategies (Parmar 2012, 7).

Although Parmar makes no mention of theatre or even the arts in his study, these areas were certainly within the purview of the Big Two (Ford and Rockefeller). He does study, however, intellectual and scholarly networks such as the African Studies network which was a Rockefeller-funded association of US academics working in the field across disciplines. He shows that American involvement in Nigeria increased in the late 1950s and early 1960s as the country moved towards independence. Although as a former colony of the British Empire, British connections were paramount, American foundations such as Rockefeller and Ford as well as Carnegie increased their involvement.

The key question here is why did Nigeria and more intriguingly, theatre studies, or “drama” as the discipline was then known, attract such interest and financial commitment? For US-American foreign policy the African continent was of strategic importance because it actively supported the decolonization process. The latter meant new spheres of influence for the US, which recognized that the new nations had a strained relationship with their former colonial masters, that considerable effort would be required to keep the new nations out of the Soviet sphere of influence, and that Nigeria, as the largest nation in West Africa, was of key political significance. Arnold Rivkin, who was director of the African Economic and Political Development project at the MIT-based Centre for International Studies (CENIS), formulated the importance of the country in a report of the Economic Mission to Nigeria in 1961: “Nigeria is a country in transition...in transition from tribalism to a Nigerian nationality, ...in transition from a state of primitive technology to the advanced jet-age technology of the 1960s.”⁷ But more significant was his recognition of the dangers posed by what he termed ‘African

socialism' which might significantly curtail the potential for foreign investment. Nigeria, however, was a leading example of a still open economy: "they accept the principle of private participation and decision-making and look upon their role as part participant, part promoter, and part residual. The Federal Republic of Nigeria is probably the leading example of this type of approach to the role of government in development" (Rivkin 1964, p. 7). This meant that Nigeria was still open for American business and investment and that it was going to be a test-case for the planning imperatives of the development ideology and its think tanks.

The late 1950s and early 1960s marked the heyday of the planning imperative. Five-year plans were not just a prerogative of socialist countries but occupied the State Department, US think tanks and charitable foundations, especially in relation to newly decolonized countries who were deemed needy of "development".⁸ In his influential book *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960) Walt Rostow, who later earned such epithets as the "American Rasputin" and the "architect of the Vietnam War", argued that all nations moved through five stages from "traditional societies" to "mass consumption." With the "right" technological and economic development this process could be accelerated. In a similar vein, his colleague Paul Rosenstein-Rodan (1957) had advocated in 1957 a "big push for development". Such ideas gained dominance through a unique combination of academic research, policy-generating think tanks such as the MIT-based CENIS and implementation on the ground through large foundations.

While the US foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller were by no means simple extensions of US state policy, their goals were often compatible, and in the cultural field, they even acted in close dialogue, as Frances Stonor Saunders has shown in her study of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. The foundations were often used to channel funds to recipients without alerting them to the actual origin. Their function was that of conduit rather than front, although the latter also existed, for example, in the form of the Fairfield Foundation that was set up for the sole purpose of channelling CIA money to beneficiaries. There also existed significant social networks linking the big foundations with the CCF and the CIA (Saunders 1999, pp. 135–36 and pp. 142–45). Research has shown that there was direct CCF involvement in Nigeria, in particular through support of journals such as *Transition* and *Black Orpheus* and the establishment and maintenance of the famous Mbari Artists and Writers Club at Ibadan.⁹

German historian Sönke Kunkel notes that in Nigeria planning had a tradition going back to the 1940s when Nigerian bureaucrats in collaboration with British colonial authorities had already formulated various development plans. In 1961 a five-year plan was set out, which was much more comprehensive than the forerunners. In particular it was more centralised and directed by technocrats without local knowledge (earlier plans had paid more heed to the suggestions of local chiefs). The new Economic Planning Unit consisted of three Americans provided courtesy of the Ford Foundation and three Nigerians. They were joined later by additional American "experts" including Rivkin (Kunkel 2009, p. 175).

That the University College Ibadan should be the object of philanthropic largesse was not surprising considering its position as Nigeria's premier, and until 1960, only university. Established in 1948 on the recommendation of the British government's Elliot Commission on Higher Education in West Africa as a University College, it was part of a network of new colonial universities in West and East Africa and the West Indies. They were staffed largely by British lecturers, awarded degrees through the University of London and were designed by British architects. They were a product of late colonial 'development' thinking with comprehensive planning initiatives and were part of a strategy to prepare colonies for self-government (Livsey 2017, p. 4). That meant that the students were expected to become central pillars, senior civil servants as well as technocrats, in the postcolonial state.

It is against the background of comprehensive planning, both British and American, that we need to see the Rockefeller engagement with theatre and theatre studies in Nigeria. In contrast however to the new five-year plan, the Rockefeller approach was characterized by close connection with local experts, at this time still often European university faculty, who provided advice on the ground. Although there has been some research done into Wole Soyinka's early and brief involvement with and support by the Rockefeller Foundation, the extent of the Foundation's involvement was much more extensive than funding one promising young dramatist, because it was framed within a larger strategy of fostering what later became known as syncretic theatre, the merging of indigenous and European theatre traditions (Balme 1999).

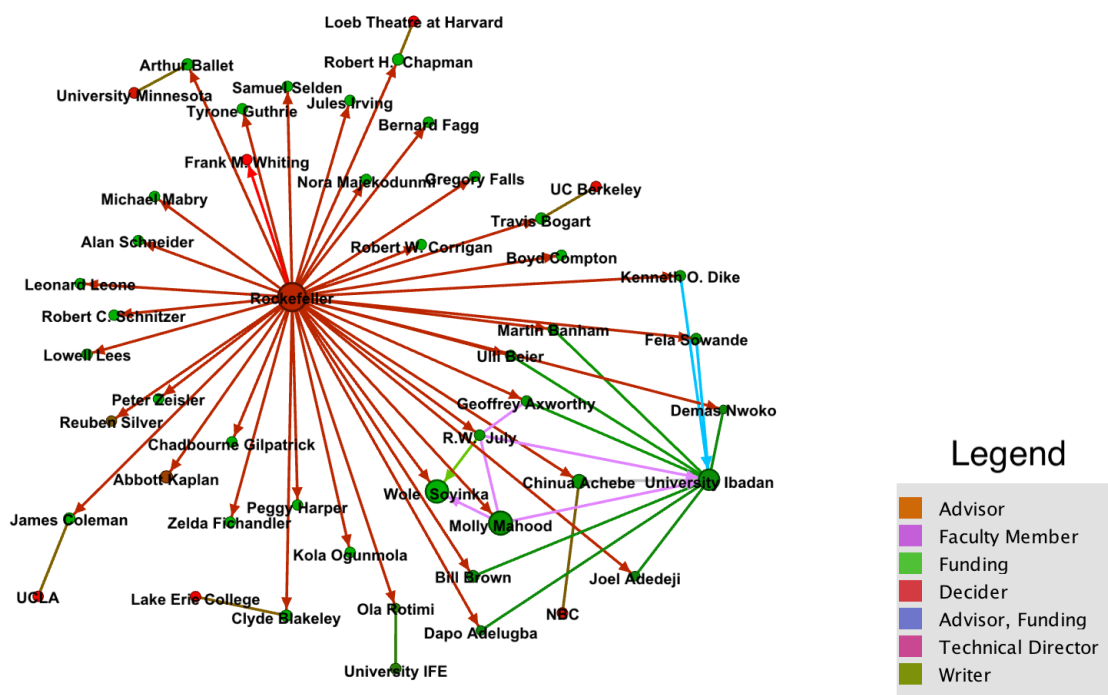


Fig. 2 The Rockefeller Funded Nigerian Theatre (Studies) Network

The network of people and organizations funded or consulted in connection with Nigerian theatre (studies) was large, considering that the discipline did not even exist before 1962 and was only a subject area within the English department.¹⁰ The first point to note is the number of US theatre directors and scholars within the orbit, names such as Jules Irving or Alan Schneider that one does not normally associate with Nigeria or Africa.¹¹ Most figure in an “advisory” capacity whereby the term could encompass a multiplicity of roles ranging from writing recommendations to hosting potential overseas artists and scholars. Also, there is a clear predominance of university-based experts compared to actual fulltime professional artists. The second point is that Rockefeller engagement was channelled primarily through educational institutions and infrastructure, not through direct grants to artists, although these were also given. The emphasis on education institutions was part of the ideology of development through knowledge transfer which saw in education and research more potential for long-term growth than in artistic activity.

Most of the US advisors were themselves recipients of Rockefeller or Ford funding in the US context and enjoyed a special status. Some such as Zella Fichandler and Jules Irving were active in US regional theatres, the structures of which were being built up at this time with significant Rockefeller funding and may have been regarded as a model for Nigeria. Support for regional theatres in the US was a major funding priority throughout

the 1960s. The 1969 annual report of the Rockefeller Foundation waxes lyrical in this regard and in its choice of metaphors applies the development paradigm to the US as well: “over the past decade theatre has sunk roots in cities where previously it was a transient apparition — Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Washington, D.C. Seattle, among others — responding to specific local needs and opportunities” (Rockefeller *Annual Report*, 1969, p. 37).

If we look at the nodes with high betweenness-centrality, i.e. the number of connections a specific node in a network enables, then we see not surprisingly that Robert W. July, Assistant Director of Humanities for the Rockefeller Foundation, is a pivotal figure. He was instrumental in negotiating the large grant for the drama department and is connected with most other individuals on the network. In order to illustrate the degree of agency he had in this network I want to focus on his role in facilitating an *ad personam* grant for Wole Soyinka in 1959 which preceded the larger institutional grant of 1962. We can see how this funding to an individual not only contributed to Soyinka's own career as a dramatist and advocate for a new form of African Theatre but may very well have provided crucial “proof of concept” for the later institutional grant.

Apart from July and Soyinka himself, the young chair of English at Ibadan, Molly Mahood, played a crucial role in brokering the personal grant to Soyinka. In 1959, the latter had left the University of Leeds and was a writer in residence at the Royal Court theatre in London. He had already written a number of plays, two of which had had performances in London. In his study, *Early Soyinka*, Bernth Lindfors has reconstructed the process whereby Soyinka was enticed back to Nigeria, in which Mahood played a crucial go-between role, mediating the final allocation of a two-year Rockefeller grant amounting to £2.782. It comprised the use of a Land Rover (with a petrol allowance), a tape recorder, a Bell and Howell 16mm camera with two lenses, an exposure meter, a tripod, and 6000 feet of film. Soyinka scholar, James Gibbs remarks:

He travelled tens of thousands of miles in the Land Rover at the foundation's expense and returned the vehicle at the end of his two-year “fellowship” with bald tires, a flat battery, and without a door. He did not write the expected book, and he did not return the tape recorder. [...] He took the Rockefeller Foundation, literally, for a ride (Gibbs 1997, p. 51).

Lindfors relativizes Gibbs's somewhat negative reading, claiming instead that the grant established Soyinka on his career.

He may have driven fast and a bit recklessly but he covered a lot of distance and despite numerous detours managed to get home – well and truly home – after all. Rockefeller only set the wheels in motion; Soyinka did all the navigating, following his own impulses and boldly steering a course to unbridled artistic freedom (Lindfors 2008, p. 112).

Both readings cast the artist as hero in this narrative, which Soyinka certainly went on to become, especially after his internment under martial law during the Nigerian civil war, and as a spokesperson for political freedom, African literature and the arts.

The Rockefeller archives tell a somewhat different story, or at least, if we read the documents contained there, we see a conscious strategy on the part of the Foundation, represented by Robert July, to promulgate a particular version of the theatrical epistemic community, he or Rockefeller considered best suited for Africa.

July had visited Nigeria in early 1959 where he had met Mahood and Geoffrey Axworthy at Ibadan. Still a University College, Ibadan was already ear-marked to become not just a leading university in Nigeria but throughout the African continent and Rockefeller made significant financial contributions. July's diary, held at the archives,

records conversations with both in which plans for “a survey of drama in Nigeria” were noted with Soyinka as the preferred author. The term “drama” was understood in the broadest possible sense of encompassing the full gamut of African performance forms. This understanding was outlined in more detail in a proposal submitted by Mahood to Rockefeller entitled “Proposal for an Investigation into the Indigenous Drama of Nigeria” in which she elaborated a typology consisting of three forms:

- 1) European plays which are dull and stilted and which audiences find boring;
- 2) “dance-drama,” a category encompassing masquerades, burial rites, commemorative rituals, folk opera, religious plays, and musical comedies, all of which are quite popular in the language communities in which they are performed;
- 3) drama making use of “indigenous dramatic tradition by incorporating it in plays written in theatrically effective standard English.”¹²

She notes that the only dramatist who has attempted the third category is Soyinka himself.

Correspondence between Mahood and July indicates that the planning paradigm was in full swing. She opined that Soyinka might want to set up a repertory company and perhaps lay the foundation for a national theatre in Lagos, the latter being also part of the colonial planning heritage (with ideas going back to the 1950s.) In Uganda, for example, colonial officials had already begun planning a national theatre in the early 1950s, and the building was opened in 1959. Its erection prompted an oft-cited remark by Soyinka who visited it just after its opening: “there was no theatre, there was nothing beyond a precious, attractive building in the town centre [...] it was disconcerting to find a miniature replica of a British provincial theatre.” (Soyinka 1963, p. 21).

At this stage at least Rockefeller was not planning or investing in buildings but rather in people and educational / research institutions. Mahood herself was not in favour of a drama department, arguing that practical training was best acquired in a professional theatre. In the letter to July she also expressed reservations about the necessity for a School of Drama “when there are so many urgent needs to be met in such fields as medicine and agriculture.”¹³ She argued instead for the integration of history and theory courses plus English phonetics within the existing English department (the phonetics lecturer was a young German-Jewish refugee named Ulli Beier who would go on to have a significant impact on Nigerian, especially Yoruba, theatre, literature and the arts).¹⁴ Although she had reservations about the necessity for a full blown School of Drama she energetically supported a grant to Soyinka for him to write the aforementioned “survey of the dance drama (and possibly other forms of entertainment) in Yoruba country.”¹⁵

In his correspondence with Soyinka July formulated in clear terms his own and by extension the interest of the Rockefeller foundation in investing in such a survey: “I am interested to find the gradual emergence of new art forms combining both the traditional African elements and the acquired European types.” He added that it should not be an anthropological or sociological study but rather an analysis of the “artistic and aesthetic impulses in Nigerian drama which would be useful to the playwright, producer, the director, and the acting company in direct and specific fashion.”¹⁶

As we know, this vision of a fusion of African and European forms coincided with Soyinka’s approach, which he outlined in considerable detail in a long letter to July. Here Soyinka discusses in depth the question of so-called “traditional art from the village dweller” which, he argues, continues to be passed down in a creative atmosphere. The problem to be addressed is how “modern would-be dramatists” can harness these traditions, as the output is chiefly European in content and imitative in conception: “What is needed [...] is a fusion of the two enthusiasms.” He excoriates the European tendency to “freeze” African culture in a discourse of authenticity and finds that anthropological studies even encourage “this process of refrigeration.”

Despite or perhaps because of his highly differentiated response which weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of the fusion approach to Nigerian “drama”, the grant for the full amount requested was allocated and Soyinka returned to Nigeria in 1960. Although Rockefeller was happy to fund Nigerian and other scholar-practitioners as university faculty, Robert July was not happy with Soyinka taking time off his research to work on practical theatre projects. The latter outlined his plans “to form a semi-professional company...(as a) base for a National Theatre” in the context of “Independence hysteria” (Soyinka) and inquired whether Rockefeller would be prepared to fund such an undertaking.¹⁷ July was not amused and insisted that Soyinka concentrate on the research project for which he had received funding. In the end, however, he granted Soyinka unpaid leave from the project to follow his playwrighting projects. The result was *A Dance of the Forests*, first performed during the Independence celebrations in October 1960 by the 1960 Masks, the semi-professional company he formed. Since Soyinka had already sent July a preliminary report on his research in two versions, it was clear that he was doing both: research and writing plays and, as the content of *A Dance of the Forests* attests, the two activities were in close symbiosis.¹⁸

Two years later Rockefeller earmarked \$200,000 to establish a School of Drama at Ibadan. Final planning had been laid in March 1961 when July visited Ibadan again in the course of a three-month field trip to Africa. Here he met with Soyinka, Ulli Beier and the lecturers from the English Department such as Geoffrey Axworthy and Martin Banham who would go on to be the key staff. The trip included an outing to Oshogbo via Ife with Beier and Soyinka where they watched a touring student production of a Molière play written partly in pidgin English directed by Axworthy. They also inspected the Mbari Club, founded by Beier and Soyinka, and still under construction. July noted prophetically in his diary: “it could develop into an important literary centre for it will be well directed and is in the middle of the biggest African city in the whole continent” (July 1961, p. 86). July also witnessed and was impressed by a performance by the Yoruba travelling theatre troupe of Kola Ogunmola whom Beier regarded as a “first-class theatre man who could make a successful full-time business of his troupe were he to get a six-month stake” (July 1961, p. 87).

The School of Drama was established in the 1962/63 session, opening with its first intake of 30 students in 1963. In the same year Kola Ogunmola was granted a six-month attachment, which culminated in the famous production of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in April, 1963. The founding director was Geoffrey Axworthy. Other founding members of the school included Egun Odutola (later Professor [Mrs] Egun Clark), a graduate of Rose Bruford School of Drama, Bill Brown (a Harvard-trained technical director), Demas Nwoko (the theatre designer, artist and architect who had trained in Paris), the dance scholar and choreographer Peggy Harper, Martin Banham, Joel Adedeji (who had also trained at Rose Bruford) and in 1967 they were joined by Dapo Adelugba, who had studied at UCLA.¹⁹

The School of Drama continued to receive annual direct grants, while additional grants were given to individual faculty members until 1969. In 1962 Geoffrey Axworthy received a travel stipend to consult with theatre specialists and visit drama centres, mainly in the United States in connection with the development of the university’s program in drama. Rockefeller’s support for Axworthy illustrates how the network functioned. Because of its extremely high betweenness-centrality, the Foundation functioned as a conduit for contacts between a lecturer in English in a newly independent African nation to prestigious US universities. In a letter of 19 March 1963, Chadbourne Gilpatric, Deputy Director of the Rockefeller Foundation, wrote to Abbott Kaplan, Director, University Extensions Southern Area, UCLA, introducing Axworthy who was searching for new faculty: “This is to introduce in advance Mr. Geoffrey Axworthy, who is in charge of the drama program at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, for which this foundation has provided substantial support for its development over the next few years [sic] [...]. Thus, the purpose of this present visit for one month in the United States is to

make contact with a few centres like U.C.L.A. and individuals who might help him in recruiting the kind of “experts” he could bring to Ibadan.²⁰ One such “expert” was a young Nigerian, Dapo Adelugba, a graduate of Ibadan, who was enrolled at UCLA and would go on to become a central figure at the School of Drama in various functions.

In the same year, Martin Banham, a lecturer in English, also received a travel grant to visit centres of theatrical activity in the United States in connection with the university’s proposed School of Drama. Also, in 1962 the University of Ibadan was given \$ 5.900 for the development of an itinerant theatre, under the direction of Kola Ogunmola. Other recipients included Ulli Beier, Peggy Harper, Dapo Adelugba (Nigeria) and Ola Rotimi (Nigeria). Travel grants were allocated to the stage designer Demas Nwoko, to visit drama centres in Asia and North America and to Joel Adedeji to visit theatre centres in the United States. Between 1959 and 1969 grants to the University of Ibadan School of Drama and its faculty totalled \$423.202. As mentioned, this was the largest amount given to any one institution outside the US in the field of theatre.

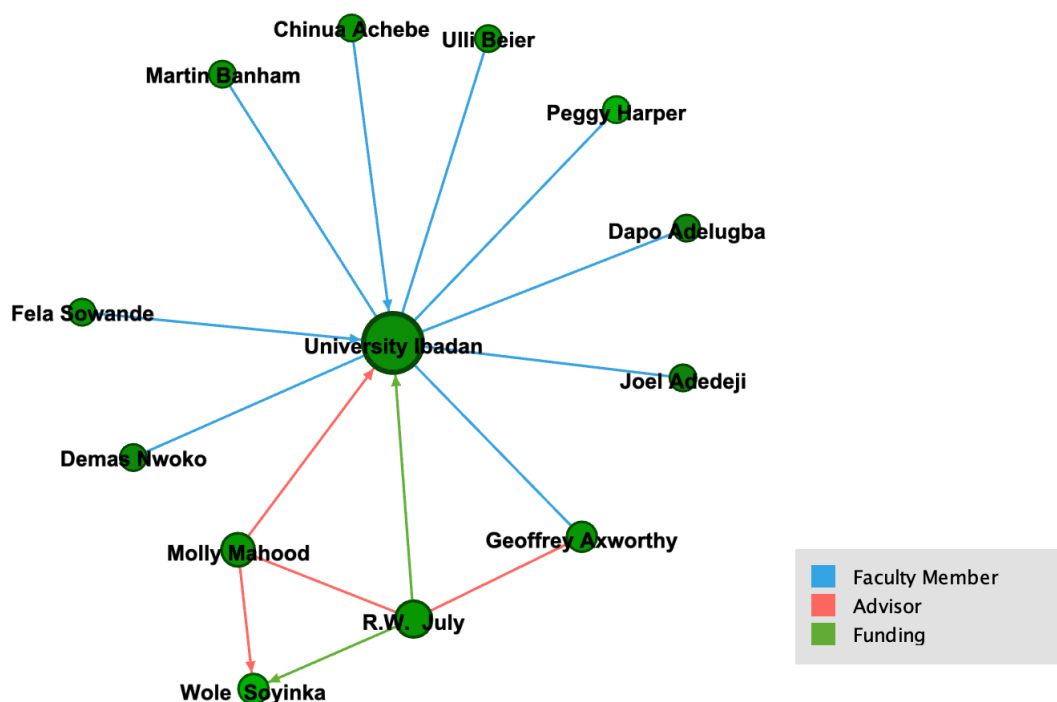


Fig. 3 Network of Rockefeller funding of Nigerian artists and scholars in the field of theatre 1960-67.

If we look more closely at the people on the diagram (Fig. 3) we can see that overwhelmingly scholar-practitioners were employed at the department and subsequently supported by Rockefeller. Although Mahood, as we have seen, questioned the usefulness of practical training at a university, the traditional division between conservatory-based training and research-oriented university education was not one that made sense in the Nigerian context at the time (or indeed anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa). If there was going to be professional arts-based theatre in Nigeria of the kind being espoused in the theatrical epistemic community of the global North, then it would have to happen at universities. A number of the new staff had in fact received conservatory training in the UK or US: Joel Adedeji and Egun Clark at Rose Bruford College, while scene designer and artist Demas Nwoko had a period of training in scenic design in Paris at the Centre Français du Théâtre, run by the French branch of ITI. This sojourn was financed by the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom.

In 1962 theatre or drama studies was still a fledgling discipline. The first degree-granting drama department was founded in England at the university of Bristol in 1947, a second followed in Manchester in 1961. In the USA theatre studies had been established much earlier, albeit in quite different permutations: in 1912 at Harvard as playwriting, in 1914 at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, followed by the first professional graduate programme at Yale in 1926 (Shepherd and Wallis 2004, p. 8). Most such establishments were accompanied by debates over the tension between a broadly research-focused humanistic discipline and professional, vocational training better suited to a conservatory or academy. The School of Drama at Ibadan was a fusion of both camps and countries. Staffed initially by British-trained lecturers but funded and assisted by US philanthropy and experts, including young Nigerians who had studied there, the Nigerian experiment resulted in a highly innovative model for a university-based discipline. Already at its inception the University of Ibadan had been provided with a fully functional Arts Theatre designed by the ‘tropical’ architects Maxwell and Jane Drew in the mid-1950s. In 1973 Dapo Adelugba described it as the “the most adequately equipped theatre building in the country” (Adelugba 1975, p. 65) where it formed the focal point of a broad range of theatrical activity including a travelling theatre troupe. The hosting of Kola Ogunmola as an artist-in-residence, the practice of student theatre providing itinerant theatre and the cross-fertilization between academic research into African performance culture and artistic production all point to the emergence of a unique form of practice-based theatre studies at a time when it was only just beginning to establish itself in Britain and the US.

Beyond Nigeria: Rockefeller and Theatre in the Global South

Although the amounts donated by Rockefeller to the School of Drama at Ibadan are exceptional, it follows a pattern in other countries of the developing world. Whether in Ghana, Tanzania, Jamaica, Trinidad or the Philippines, in these countries and more we find a concerted strategy to fund arts-based theatre. Funds were allocated in support of the Ghana Drama Studio directed by Efua Sutherland, to the Trinidad Theatre Workshop founded by Derek Walcott, to the University of Bahia to support a theatre school, to the Catholic University of Chile to fund a transportable tent theatre; to the Indonesian National Theatre Academy; to the Philippines Normal College in Manila to support a drama programme (see here the contribution of Nic Leonhardt), teaching materials to the National Conservatory of Ankara in Turkey for use in the drama department, to the Uganda National Cultural Centre trust for an experimental training programme at the National Theatre. The list can be continued. Across the world we see that Rockefeller (and in other countries the Ford foundation) was funding theatre activities that were not just artistically focused but sometimes positively experimental. Apart from personal stipends, which were mainly used to assist faculty and artists to visit the United States and other countries, support for infrastructure occupies most of the funding. Some money went to sending experts abroad to these countries, but most was invested in the people on the ground.

Expertise could be imported by bringing in people with special training but it could also be actively fostered by enabling “key individuals” to form networks with other high potentials and thus contribute to the development process.²¹ This was the age when it was believed that expertise was the key to development and this held true not just for the construction of hydroelectric dams but also for theatrical infrastructure, which required investment in skills and knowledge.

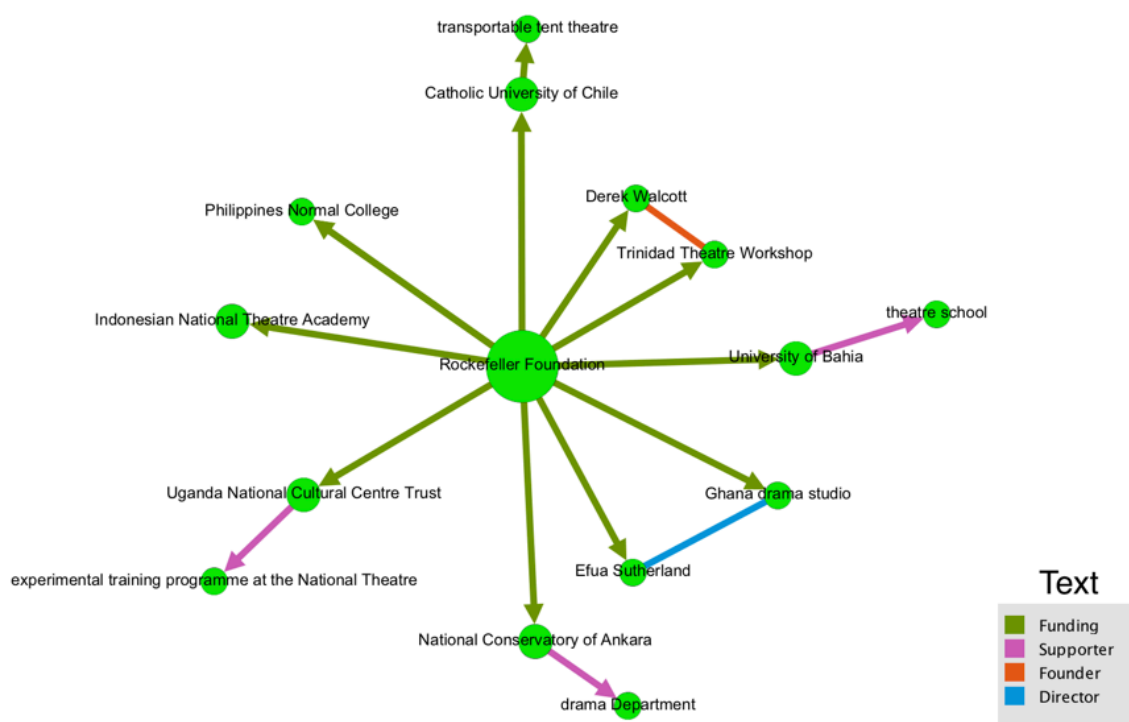


Fig. 4 Rockefeller theatre-related funding in the developing world 1959-1969.

Conclusion

If we ask what factors were conducive to fostering theatre studies as an academic discipline in Nigeria (and it is only one example), then we have to take into account the networks established and funded by the Rockefeller foundation and other charitable, transnational organisations. Although internally highly hierarchical, in the dealings with partners around the world such organisations employed heterophilic networks to establish robust relationships. These consisted largely of individuals, mainly university faculty, who in turn made use of local networks to implement policy. I have focused just on one example, Wole Soyinka, to illustrate how such networking functioned. One could of course take another node on the network such as Ulli Beier and his work at the Mbari Club in Ibadan. He and the club were supported by Rockefeller, although the bulk of the funding came from CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom. At the Mbari Club the CCF and the Rockefeller networks intersected. Of interest is the epistemic dimension of such support. What was in it for Rockefeller? Rockefeller saw itself not only as a source of finance but also as a go-between, mediating and enabling knowledge flows within the larger project of 'development'. Rockefeller's database of grantees in the US was tapped to provide contact points for visiting artists and academics from developing countries.

Why an organisation such as Rockefeller should invest considerable sums in people and institutions to foster theatre and performance can only be explained by situating these endeavours within a wider epistemic shift which had seen theatre move from being an area of purely commercial activity to a sphere on a par with classical music and the fine arts. This process, which sociologist Paul DiMaggio terms 'sacralization', took place in the US roughly between 1900 and 1940 (1992). The extension of the "high culture model" to the theatre was established by the 1950s and 1960s and could therefore be integrated into funding initiatives. Despite Molly Mahood's misgivings, theatre at this time was on a par with tropical medicine and agriculture – at least until the end of the 1960s.

Rockefeller discontinued their support of the theatre department in Ibadan after 1970, in fact for theatre in most places outside the US. The reasons for this are not entirely

clear, but are no doubt linked to broader funding agendas on the one hand, and possible disenchantment with the specific political situation in Nigeria on the other, which had descended into civil war in 1967. Optimism about the influence “key individuals” in the area of arts and culture could have on the development of postcolonial nations had well and truly waned. The expectation that postcolonial states would step in to enable long-term institutional funding of cultural infrastructure was largely disappointed.²² By the end of the 1970s much of this optimism and efflorescence in the Global South had passed: attempts to create permanent ensembles had failed; the theatre buildings hosted mainly folkloric performances, many leading artists had emigrated, and international funding was being channelled into Theatre for Development projects with highly instrumental ends. How this came to be is another story to be continued at a later date.

Endnotes

- ¹ This article is a substantially revised version of a paper given at the conference “Dynamics of Interweaving Performance Cultures,” (21-24 June 2018) at the Academy of Arts Berlin. It was given again at the conference “Philanthropy, Development and the Arts: Histories and Theories,” (23-25 July, 2018) at the Carl Friedrich von Siemens-Stiftung, Munich organized by the ERC Project “Developing Theatre: Building Expert Networks for Theatre in Emerging Countries after 1945,” funding ID 694559. I have retained some of the idioms of a paper presentation.
- ² Haas, Peter M. “Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination,” *International Organization* 46.1 (Haas 1992, pp. 1–35).
- ³ See, for example, Clavin (2005) and Rosenberg (2012), Rosenberg writes: “The new professionals, who energetically worked to build transnational epistemic communities, generally embraced the idea that global revolutionary progress could be guided by the authority of their expertise” (Rosenberg 2012, p. 919).
- ⁴ See for example Davis Cross, 2013.
- ⁵ It is perhaps significant that in his lecture on the opening of the London International Theatre Exhibition, Craig redefined international in terms of the “national,” in the sense of a call for a national theatre in England (Craig 1922, p. 11).
- ⁶ The tension between hierarchical structures where field officers on the ground were beholden to decision-making processes in New York often hindered the efficacy of their work. See for example Sackley who notes for the Ford Foundation: “The construction of an international network of field offices, built in part on the New Delhi model, required an exponentially larger New York bureaucracy that tended to centralise and systematise Foundation policy at the centre” (Sackley 2012, p. 236).
- ⁷ Cited in Kunkel 2009, p. 174.
- ⁸ See here Tony Judt, who terms planning “the political religion of post-war Europe” and traces its beginnings to the inter-war years and the wartime economy, which demonstrated proof of its efficacy (Judt 2006, p. 67).
- ⁹ The connections between early African writers and the CCF have been the subject of research since the 1980s; see Benson (1986) for an early study. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the topic; see Kalliney (2015), and the exhibition, “Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War,” curated by Anselm Franke, Nida Ghouse, Paz Guevara and Antonia Majaca. 3.11.2017- 8.1.2018 at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt. https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/parapolitics/parapolitics_start.php.
- ¹⁰ This data is based on research conducted by Nic Leonhardt at the Rockefeller Archives. The diagram was created by Aydin Alinejadsomeeh using Gephi. My thanks to both for their help in preparing this paper.
- ¹¹ Jules Irving (1925-1979) was a co-founder with Herbert Blau of the San Francisco Actor’s Workshop and long-time director of the Lincoln Center. Alan Schneider (1917-1984) was an American theatre director associated with Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee.
- ¹² M. Mahood, “Proposal for an Investigation into the Indigenous Drama of Nigeria,” cited in Lindfors 2008, pp. 99–100.
- ¹³ Letter to July, June 19, 1959, cited in Lindfors 2008, p. 102.
- ¹⁴ For an account of Ulli Beier’s importance as a cultural go-between in Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s, see Benson (1986), especially Chapter I.
- ¹⁵ Lindfors 2008, p. 102.

¹⁶ July to Soyinka, September 2, 1959, *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Lindfors 2008, pp. 114–15).

¹⁸ *A Dance of the Forests* won a drama competition sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the literary magazine *Encounter* (which it also funded). It was judged by Chinua Achebe, Ulli Beier, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Stephen Spender. The prize included a public performance during Nigeria's independence celebrations. See Kalliney 2015, pp. 359–360.

¹⁹ For this information, see <https://www.ui.edu.ng/content/1st-geoffrey-axworthy-lecture>. In 1962. In 1969, the School of Drama was upgraded to a Department, with Wole Soyinka as the first African head.

²⁰ Rockefeller Archives, Box No 17 Folders Nos. 187–199, RG 1.2, 497, R Nigeria, Folder 1.2 497 17 194.

²¹ For the term “key individuals” in connection with Rockefeller funding, see Benson 1986, p. 34). Benson uses the phrase to explain why Ulli Beier received a Rockefeller travel grant.

²² There is a parallel here to Derek Walcott's unsuccessful efforts to obtain state support for the Trinidad Theatre Company; see Balme (2014).

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