

Negotiating Applied Theatre and Community Memory: A Methodological Framework from Itchi–Agu, Enugu State Experience

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Abstract

This article proposes a methodological framework for community-based memory work through applied theatre, grounded in the Itchi–Agu experience in Enugu State, Nigeria. Rather than offering a generalizable model, the framework emerges from reflective engagement with a situated, practice-led intervention. The study examines how theatrical processes, particularly storytelling, improvisation, and site-specific performance, supported community members in engaging with shared histories in a rural context shaped by cultural disruption. Drawing on Cultural Memory Theory, Applied Theatre and Participatory Pedagogy, Performance Ethnography, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the article adopts a retrospective and interpretive methodological approach. Analysis of documented workshop processes and performances reveals how embodied action, symbolic gesture, and collaborative narration supported intergenerational dialogue. These practices brought marginalised memories of lineage, land, identity, and communal obligation into collective reflection. The findings suggest that applied theatre functions not only as a creative practice but also as a critical methodological tool for examining how memory is negotiated, reconfigured, and transmitted within specific cultural settings. The article further suggests the cautious application of this context-sensitive framework in communities where memory is closely tied to performance, ritual, and collective life.

Keywords: *Community Memory, Applied Theatre, Participatory Performance, Embodied Knowledge, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Intergenerational Dialogue.*

INTRODUCTION

While applied theatre is often celebrated for its participatory ethos, its methodological status within memory studies remains under-theorised, particularly in rural African contexts. In many African communities, these systems of memory have traditionally been oral and embodied. Rather than being written down, Karin Barber explained in her study of African oral traditions that "knowledge is passed on through performance, social interaction, and intergenerational exchange" (3–12).

However, these traditional channels of transmission are increasingly under pressure. Processes such as modernisation, migration, changing religious beliefs, and economic hardship have disrupted established forms of remembering. Paul Connerton's argument, while developed in largely Western contexts, is particularly resonant for communities such as Itchi–Agu "modern life encourages forgetting, especially in societies where history is preserved through ritual and performance rather than written texts" (30–37). This situation is evident in the Itchi–Agu community. Enugu, where long-standing narratives, genealogies, and ritual

knowledge are becoming endangered as younger generations move away from customary memory practices.

In Nigerian performance scholarship, applied theatre has most often appeared in studies of development communication and civic education rather than cultural memory. Within the traditions of Theatre for Development (TfD), performance has functioned not merely as a medium for information dissemination or behavioural advocacy, but as a dialogic process through which communities interrogate lived realities, negotiate social relationships, and articulate collective concerns. In many African contexts where oral traditions, ritual practices, and embodied expression remain central to cultural life, applied theatre has proven especially effective in mobilising local knowledge and encouraging participatory reflection.

The Itchi–Agu applied theatre project in Enugu State, documented in *Applied Theatre as an Interventionist Model for Theatre for Development Projects: the Itchi–Agu Experience* (Okeke and Ofoedu, 2022), provides an important foundation for addressing this gap. That study examined how participatory theatre practices, including improvisation, storytelling, and collective image-making, operated as interventionist tools for community engagement, dialogue, and social awareness. The project demonstrated that applied theatre could mediate tensions between neighbouring communities by creating inclusive performance spaces for expression, negotiation, and shared meaning-making. Building on this earlier work, the present study shifts analytical focus from intervention to methodology, re-examining the Itchi–Agu experience as a model for understanding how applied theatre can support community memory preservation and cultural continuity.

Drawing on our sustained engagement with the Itchi–Agu communities, this study reflects on the methodological implications of applied theatre practice beyond its immediate interventionist outcomes.

What remains less examined, however, is not whether applied theatre works, but how it can be organised methodologically for sustained memory work. Participants repeatedly drew on embodied gestures, symbolic actions, and oral narratives that reflected long-standing cultural knowledge and historical experience. Building on the empirical and practical insights of the 2022 study, the present article reframes the Itchi–Agu experience as a methodological case for understanding applied theatre as a structured approach to community memory work. Situated within cultural memory theory, performance ethnography, and participatory performance studies, this study foregrounds how embodied performance enables the negotiation of contested histories and the reconstruction of fragmented communal narratives. In doing so, it responds to broader scholarly calls for context-sensitive, ethically grounded methodologies that recognise local knowledge systems and collaborative authorship in research with communities.

Within this context, Applied Theatre offers a meaningful way to support community memory. Scholars describe applied theatre as a participatory and community-oriented practice that addresses social and cultural issues through creative engagement. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston notes that, it "emphasizes dialogue, collaboration, and lived experience" (9–11). This approach is especially relevant in African contexts, where theatre has long served as a living archive of shared values, myths, and histories. Andrew Ongom emphasizes that "performance in African societies often functions as a repository of collective memory (72). Adding to that, James Thompson explains that "methods such as story circles, devised theatre, and oral-history

performance allow communities to share experiences and construct narratives rooted in everyday life" (33–34).

Although Applied Theatre has been widely used in Nigeria for development communication, health campaigns, conflict resolution, and civic education, its potential as a structured method for cultural memory preservation has received limited scholarly attention. Christopher Odhiambo points out that, "existing studies rarely focus on how theatre can be systematically organised to support long-term memory work in communities" (146–148).

The applied theatre activities carried out in Itchi–Agu demonstrate this potential clearly. During earlier engagements, elders and young people collectively recalled forgotten histories, re-enacted cultural practices, and addressed intergenerational tensions through performance. These processes reflect Paulo Freire's argument that "participatory cultural action enables communities to reclaim agency and voice" (98–102). They also align with Augusto Boal's view of "theatre as a space where people can represent themselves and critically reflect on their lived realities" (19–21). Despite these positive outcomes, there is still no clearly defined methodological framework explaining how practices such as memory mapping, community dramaturgy, collaborative devising, embodied research, and performance documentation can be systematically organised for rural memory projects.

This lack of a structured framework forms the central problem addressed by this study. Conventional documentation methods, such as written archives, standard ethnography, or digital recording, often fail to capture the embodied, performative, and communal nature of cultural knowledge. Barber stresses that "African expressive cultures are dynamic and performance-based, and therefore require research approaches that respect their collective and participatory character" (17–19). Without methods suited to these realities, communities like Itchi–Agu risk losing memory practices that are deeply embedded in ritual, performance, and everyday social life.

This study emerges from the need to move beyond descriptive accounts of applied theatre practice toward a clearer methodological articulation of community memory work. It examines how theatre can support collective remembering, how participatory processes can be adapted to rural settings, and how performance can contribute to cultural renewal. The study brings together field-based observations and established theoretical perspectives to strengthen discussions on culturally responsive and community-led approaches to memory preservation.

The significance of the study lies in both its practical and scholarly contributions. For researchers, practitioners, cultural workers, and development facilitators, it provides a model for designing participatory memory initiatives that respect local knowledge systems. Rather than treating applied theatre as an auxiliary tool for development, this study positions it as a methodological practice capable of sustaining community memory in contexts where written archives remain inadequate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly work on applied theatre in Africa consistently emphasizes its value for rural communities whose histories are preserved mainly through oral and performative traditions, particularly in studies emerging from West and Southern African contexts.

Writing on community-based performance, Ebewo explains that applied theatre enables communities to "articulate their challenges using performance forms that are culturally grounded and community oriented" (77). This observation is particularly relevant to the Itchi–

Agu community, where collective memory is sustained through festivals, lineage histories, ritual enactments, and intergenerational storytelling. As social change, migration, and religious reform increasingly disrupt these indigenous memory systems, applied theatre becomes more than a creative practice; it functions as a cultural mechanism for recovering and revitalizing memories that might otherwise disappear.

The broader literature on Theatre for Development (TfD) helps explain why communities like Itchi–Agu experience disruptions in cultural memory. Hakib critiques mainstream TfD scholarship for "overlooking the cultural histories, social relationships, and indigenous power structures that shape African performance traditions" (582–83). This critique resonates strongly with the Itchi–Agu experience, where colonial land policies, missionary activity, and contemporary Pentecostal influences have reshaped traditional memory-bearing institutions. Rather than functioning as an abstract theoretical concern, these dynamics were directly observable in community narratives and performance processes.

Ritual practices that once anchored communal identity have either been reinterpreted through Christian frameworks or pushed to the margins of social life. These changes have created ongoing tension between inherited cultural memory and modern pressures, making it increasingly difficult for younger generations to access the symbolic systems that once defined community identity.

Within performance studies, the concept of theatre as a site of memory has been developed across multiple cultural contexts. The concept of theatre as a "place of memory" further deepens this discussion. Scholars of cultural memory (Kapushevska-Drakulevska Lidija) argue that performance allows communities to engage the past through narrative, movement, gesture, symbolism, and ritual enactment (*Theatre as a Figure and a Place of Cultural Memory 1–2*). This idea closely aligns with the Itchi–Agu context, where memory is not written down but embodied in practices such as the new-yam festival, age-grade performances, genealogical storytelling, and rituals connected to land and kinship. Research beyond Africa also supports this view. In her study of cultural memory in Asia, Wang explained that theatre "re-animates buried narratives and empowers custodians of memory who no longer occupy central social status" (61–81). A similar pattern is evident in Itchi–Agu, where elders, once recognized as the primary keepers of communal history, have seen their authority weakened by youth migration, digital media, and changing religious commitments.

African scholarship on memory, trauma, and identity offers additional insight. Dennis Walder and Yvette Hutchison's *Performing Memory* project demonstrates how community performance combines archival knowledge with embodied remembrance, encouraging collective reflection.

In the introduction to *South African Performance and Archives of Memory*, Hutchison explicitly outlines the dynamic relationship between performance and memory. She argues that performance plays a central role in negotiating memory by foregrounding particular histories through public events, by enabling theatrical productions to support or challenge dominant memory narratives, and by offering a performative lens through which memory can be more finely interpreted (2).

Similarly, the book description of Walder's *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation and Memory* (2011) underscores his treatment of memory and representation as intrinsically social processes. Walder examines narratives "entangled in the aftermath of empire," tracing their underlying desires for shared identity and belonging, as well as their

struggles to reclaim suppressed histories. He further demonstrates how “admitting the past into the present through nostalgia enables... a deeper understanding of the networks of power” that shape postcolonial experience.

In this context, nostalgia is not framed as a private or individual emotion but as a collective act of re-membering mediated through representation. This conceptualisation aligns closely with community performance, which similarly operates as a representational practice through which shared memories are embodied, negotiated, and collectively reflected upon.

In a related but contextually distinct study, Xaba demonstrates that township plays actively mobilise collective memory by reworking historical events through contemporary performance practices, thereby showing how theatre both mirrors and shapes communal modes of remembering (PhD dissertation, University of South Africa, 45–60).

These studies illuminate the situation in Itchi–Agu, where memories of origins, spiritual practices, ancestral migration, boundary disputes, and kinship relations exist not as fixed historical facts but as living narratives that are continually reshaped during performance workshops and community dialogue. In this context, performing history becomes a key means of sustaining it.

Indigenous performance traditions in southeastern Nigeria provide a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding memory in Itchi–Agu. These traditions form part of the cultural repertoire encountered during applied theatre engagements in Itchi–Agu.

Although little scholarship focuses directly on the community, studies of Igbo performance show that masquerade traditions (mmanwu), folktales (akuko ifo), music and dance (egwu ndi Igbo), dirges, and age-grade enactments function as cultural archives that transmit values, moral codes, and historical knowledge across generations. These forms reinforce communal belonging and continuity.

A comparable example is the Tiv Kwagh-Hir theatre, which uses storytelling, spectacle, and puppetry to preserve communal memory. Supporting this perspective, Kofoworola Owokotomo argues that Theatre for Development is most effective when facilitators “listen, observe, and co-create meaning with locals rather than impose external interpretations” (Applied Theatre for Community Development in Nigeria 2021). This participatory ethic is essential in Itchi–Agu, where cultural legitimacy depends on respect for ritual boundaries, lineage authority, and community protocols.

Recent applied theatre scholarship also foregrounds decolonial approaches to memory work. The collection *Innovative Methods for Applied Drama and Theatre Practice in African Contexts* (2018), by Barnes Hazel, Carol Beck Carter, and Warren Nebe, stresses that theatre-based memory projects must challenge colonial distortions that have erased or marginalized indigenous histories. This concern is especially relevant in Itchi–Agu, where oral traditions have been weakened not only by urbanization and global media but also by missionary narratives that label certain indigenous practices as “pagan” or incompatible with Christian belief. In practice, negotiating these tensions requires methodological sensitivity rather than ideological rigidity.

Any approach to memory reclamation in the community must therefore address religious sensitivities, intergenerational tensions, and the need to recover cultural knowledge without romanticizing the past.

Nigerian scholars such as Alero Uwawa Agbonkonkon-Ogbeide et al argue that "Theatre for Development interventions are meaningful only when communities themselves define the goals, processes, and outcomes of the work" (20). This insight is particularly important for Itchi–Agu, where the success of a memory project depends on the approval of elders and age grades, the active involvement of young people who may lack access to ancestral knowledge, and careful negotiation with Christian groups whose beliefs may shape their participation. Applied theatre's inclusive and dialogic methods therefore offer a practical framework for bridging the generational and ideological divides that complicate memory work in the community.

Across these bodies of scholarship, several shared themes clarify the Itchi–Agu experience. Drawing on sustained engagement with the Itchi–Agu community and existing applied theatre practice in the area, this study identifies four key patterns that inform its methodological orientation.

First, performance emerges as a living, embodied archive well suited to communities whose histories rely on oral and ritual continuity rather than written records. Second, memory is shown to be fluid and contested, continually reshaped by power relations, religious influence, and social change, conditions that closely reflect the Itchi–Agu context. Third, scholars consistently call for culturally grounded, participatory, and community-led methodologies in memory reclamation. More critically, despite the richness of research on African theatre and memory, few studies offer structured methodological frameworks specifically designed for rural memory projects in southeastern Nigeria. This study responds directly to that gap by proposing an applied theatre-based methodological framework rooted in the cultural, historical, and social realities of the Itchi–Agu community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study draws on four closely connected areas of scholarship that explain how communities remember, how performance carries knowledge, and how participatory theatre supports collective engagement. These perspectives were selected not only for their theoretical relevance but also because they emerged repeatedly as interpretive anchors during the Itchi–Agu applied theatre process.

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Applied Theatre and Participatory Pedagogy, Performance Ethnography, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). They collectively provide a coherent foundation for designing community-based theatre projects that support cultural memory in ways that reflect the lived realities of the Itchi–Agu community.

The first framework, Cultural Memory Theory, explains how societies preserve and transmit knowledge over time. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory, which consists of "every day and short-term recollections shared informally, and cultural memory, which is sustained through rituals, festivals, stories, and symbolic performances that endure across generations" (37–40). Maurice Halbwachs further explains that "memory is shaped by social groups, meaning that people remember within shared community structures rather than as isolated individuals" (43–52). In the context of Itchi–Agu, these collective

memory structures are sustained less through formal institutions and more through ritual repetition and performative social life.

In communities such as Itchi–Agu, where oral storytelling, ritual practice, and symbolic enactment remain central, memory is not primarily stored in written records but embedded in repeated communal performances. Paul Connerton reinforces this view by arguing that "societies remember through "performative acts" such as ceremonies and embodied traditions passed down over time" (4–5). Applied Theatre aligns closely with these ideas because it relies on storytelling, bodily expression, and collective participation to revive memories that may be at risk of being lost.

The second framework draws from Applied Theatre and Participatory Pedagogy, particularly the work of Freire and Boal. Freire emphasizes "dialogue, critical reflection, and shared knowledge-making as essential processes through which people come to understand and transform their social realities" (72–79). When applied to memory work, this approach encourages participants to share experiences, reflect together, and collectively interpret their past. In practice, however, such dialogic processes require careful facilitation to navigate generational authority, religious difference, and unequal access to cultural knowledge.

In the Itchi–Agu workshops, practices such as story circles and oral-history sessions reflected Freire's principles by creating inclusive spaces where elders and young people could exchange memories and reconstruct community narratives. Boal's participatory theatre techniques, including image theatre, forum theatre, and devised performance, "offer practical ways of translating memory into visual, physical, and symbolic forms" (19–21). His concept of the "spect-actor," in which community members move from passive observation to active participation, was especially relevant, as participants in Itchi–Agu were both performers and custodians of their own history.

The third framework, performance ethnography, provides a methodological foundation by treating performance as a way of generating and interpreting knowledge. Dwight Conquergood argues that "performance allows researchers to access embodied, sensory, and experiential forms of knowing that cannot be fully captured through written texts alone" (146–150). In the Itchi–Agu context, memory is communicated not only through spoken narratives but also through gesture, song, proverb, ritual movement, and collective enactment, making performance-based methods particularly appropriate. Victor Turner's concepts of 'liminality and *communitas*' help explain how collective theatre-making can create temporary spaces where social hierarchies are suspended and participants engage as equals (44–52). As Turner explains, "in the liminal phase of ritual, participants are released from the structures that ordinarily define social positions, entering a realm of *communitas* in which new relationships, meanings, and understandings can emerge" (44). In the Itchi–Agu applied theatre workshops, this liminal space enabled elders, youths, and other community members to temporarily set aside everyday hierarchies and engage collaboratively in remembering, interpreting, and re-imagining shared histories. Such moments of *communitas* were not permanent, but they were significant in opening temporary spaces for shared reflection and mutual recognition.

Soyini Madison further emphasizes the ethical dimensions of performance ethnography, stressing that "cultural authority and interpretive power must remain with the community itself" (7–9). These ideas support the study's use of participatory performance as a shared process of research, reflection, and representation.

The fourth framework, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), grounds the study in African epistemologies and cultural practices. Hoppers Odora, explains that "African knowledge systems are holistic, communal, and largely transmitted through orality, ritual, and symbolic practice rather than written documentation" (3–7). In communities like Itchi–Agu, knowledge is collectively owned and passed down through established cultural roles involving elders, ritual specialists, and community custodians. During applied theatre engagements in Itchi–Agu, this collective ownership shaped who could speak, who could perform certain narratives, and how memory was publicly represented.

As Jabulani Sithole notes, "memory in such contexts is inseparable from embodiment, spirituality, and communal life" (25–29). Drawing on IKS ensures that the study does not impose external or inappropriate research models but instead respects local worldviews, cultural logics, and memory practices.

Drawing on sustained engagement with the Itchi–Agu applied theatre process, these four theoretical perspectives form an integrated and complementary framework for the study. Cultural Memory Theory explains why memory matters and how it is preserved through symbolic and embodied practices. Applied Theatre and Participatory Pedagogy operate as dialogic and participatory tools for engaging communities in remembering and re-enacting their histories. Performance Ethnography clarifies how performance itself functions as a research method and a mode of knowledge production. Indigenous Knowledge Systems anchor the entire process in local epistemologies, ensuring cultural relevance and methodological integrity. Together, these frameworks support a holistic approach to understanding how community memory can be collaboratively revived, strengthened, and sustained through Applied Theatre in Itchi–Agu and in other communities facing similar challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and retrospective methodological approach relevant to applied theatre research and cultural memory studies. *The methodological choices outlined here are shaped by my sustained involvement in the original Itchi–Agu applied theatre process and subsequent reflection on its research implications. This approach reflects the study's emphasis on reflection, re-interpretation, and methodological learning drawn from an already completed applied theatre process.* Rather than undertaking new field-based intervention, the article re-examines an existing practice-led project, "Applied Theatre as an Interventionist Model for Theatre for Development Projects: the Itchi–Agu Experience", which emerged from sustained participatory theatre work conducted in the Itchi and Agu communities of Enugu State. That earlier project involved immersive Theatre for Development (TfD) workshops designed to address communal concerns through collective performance-making, and it provides the empirical foundation for the present analysis. *The time that has elapsed since the original project allows for critical distance and methodological reassessment rather than immediate evaluation of outcomes.*

The original project employed applied theatre techniques such as storytelling, improvisation, image theatre, forum theatre, and site-specific performance to generate shared narratives around history, land, identity, and communal relations. *These techniques were selected for their capacity to externalise memory through embodied action and collective narration rather than through didactic instruction.*

These activities facilitated intergenerational dialogue and enabled community members to articulate memories embedded in oral traditions, ritual practices, and embodied action. Documentation from the project, including workshop reports, performance descriptions, reflective notes, and published analysis, constitutes the primary data set for this study. *These materials are treated not as objective records but as situated traces of collaborative performance processes shaped by context, participation, and facilitation.*

Methodologically, the current article undertakes a close re-reading of these materials through textual and interpretive analysis, guided by cultural memory theory, performance ethnography, and participatory performance scholarship. As Braun and Clarke explain, “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data,” allowing the researcher to organise and describe a data set in rich detail while remaining theoretically flexible (79). *In this study, thematic analysis is used as a flexible interpretive tool rather than as a rigid coding procedure, allowing performance practices and embodied meanings to guide analytical focus.* Particular analytical attention is given to embodied practices, symbolic gestures, spatial arrangements, narrative patterns, and collaborative authorship as mechanisms through which memory is produced, negotiated, and transmitted within community performance contexts. *Among these, embodied action and spatial arrangement emerged as especially significant for understanding how memory was negotiated during performance.*

For clarity and transparency, digital writing tools, including artificial intelligence-assisted applications, were used exclusively for non-interpretive tasks such as language refinement, rephrasing for clarity, and organisational coherence of the manuscript. These tools did not generate analytical content, theoretical claims, or interpretive conclusions. Interpretive decisions were informed by disciplinary training and sustained engagement with applied theatre practice rather than automated suggestion. All conceptual framing, critical analysis, and scholarly judgments presented in this article remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study follows established ethical guidelines commonly applied in applied theatre, participatory research, and cultural memory studies. *These guidelines were informed by applied theatre’s emphasis on relational accountability and long-term engagement with communities.*

The original Theatre for Development project in the Itchi–Agu communities was conducted with the informed consent of participants, who were engaged as collaborators rather than subjects. Participation in workshops and performances was voluntary, and community members retained agency over the narratives, symbols, and representations that emerged through the process.

In re-examining the project retrospectively, this article relies solely on previously documented materials for which ethical clearance and community approval had already been secured. No new data were generated, and no additional interventions were undertaken. *Nonetheless, retrospective analysis required careful consideration of how previously documented materials are re-contextualised for scholarly interpretation.*

Care has been taken to represent communal experiences respectfully, avoiding misappropriation, distortion, or the disclosure of sensitive cultural knowledge. Where

communal memory intersects with identity, land, or historical conflict, interpretive caution is exercised to foreground collective meaning rather than individual attribution.

Consistent with applied theatre ethics, the analysis acknowledges the co-authored nature of the performance processes and resists claims of sole intellectual ownership over community-generated knowledge. *While academic authorship necessarily rests with the researcher, interpretive authority is approached as shared and dialogic.*

Finally, transparency is maintained regarding the use of digital writing tools, which were employed only for editorial support and did not compromise authorial responsibility, analytical integrity, or ethical accountability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the Itchi–Agu applied theatre workshops demonstrate that community memory, embodied expression, and collective reflection were central to how participants engaged with both their shared past and their present social realities. *These observations are grounded in my sustained engagement with the workshops and post-performance discussions, where meaning often emerged unevenly and through moments of hesitation as much as through collective affirmation.*

One of the most significant observations was the way theatrical improvisation surfaced long-standing cultural memories related to land, ancestry, historical conflict, and attempts at reconciliation. These memories did not emerge as detached narratives but were enacted through physical action, affective gesture, and spatial composition within the performance space. This agrees with Diana Taylor's argument that "communities transmit memory not solely through archival texts but through embodied "repertoires" of performance that sustain cultural knowledge across generations" (16–19).

Across the workshops, participants repeatedly employed symbolic gestures, such as lifting soil, touching the chest, or extending the hands, that were immediately legible to others as references to ancestral inheritance, protection, and communal obligation. Paul Connerton's concept of "social memory as embedded in bodily practices provides a useful lens for understanding the resonance of these gestures" (38–44). Their recurrence across age groups indicates that memory within the Itchi–Agu context functions as a shared cultural inheritance rather than an individualized possession. This dynamic can be read alongside Assmann's assertion that "cultural memory is sustained through repetitive, collectively enacted practices that reinforce social identity and continuity" (18–21).

The performance process also opened space for memories that had remained unspoken due to long-standing tensions between the Itchi and Agu communities. Participants reenacted episodes of conflict but frequently reworked these scenes into narratives of negotiation, cooperation, and collective labour. *This transformation suggests, though not without tension, a communal inclination toward healing and reconciliation.*

Helen Nicholson's claim that "applied theatre enables participants to rehearse alternative social futures was clearly evident, as performance became a means of imagining relationships not constrained by inherited narratives of division" (52–56). Notably, younger participants devised scenes focused on shared access to farmland and water resources—issues that elders later identified as historical sources of conflict. This intergenerational convergence illustrates what Thompson describes as "the capacity of applied theatre to create emotionally supportive spaces in which difficult memories can be revisited and reworked productively" (32–35).

Storytelling emerged as another key finding, particularly in the post-performance dialogues where meanings generated through performance were further negotiated and refined. Barber's analysis of oral traditions as "dynamic exchanges between past and present offers a valuable framework here" (1–9). In the Itchi–Agu discussions, stories were not used simply to recall historical events but to interpret them in relation to contemporary political, social, and economic realities. Elders often framed past conflicts as moral or ethical lessons, while younger participants analyzed them through the lenses of governance, leadership, and resource management. This divergence supports Edward S Casey's view that "memory is continually reshaped by present concerns and positionalities rather than preserved as a fixed record of the past" (183–187).

A particularly significant finding concerns the role of applied theatre in reconciling fragmented or competing memories. Through image theatre and improvisation, participants integrated diverse personal recollections into shared symbolic forms, allowing multiple perspectives to coexist without erasure or antagonism. Robin Nelson's argument that "practice-as-research enables lived experience to be transformed into reflective and communal knowledge was evident in this process" (72–73). The collective images produced during the workshops functioned as platforms for dialogue about practical strategies for improving inter-community relations, emphasizing mutual responsibility, care, and the possibility of future collaboration. In this way, performance operated not merely as artistic expression but as a catalyst for social reflection and ethical deliberation.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the Itchi–Agu applied theatre process created a safe and inclusive environment in which difficult memories could be examined, community identity could be renegotiated, and alternative social futures could be imagined. Through embodied expression, storytelling, and dialogue, the theatre space became a site of cultural remembrance, emotional repair, and socially meaningful insight, demonstrating the potential of applied theatre as a tool for memory work and community reconciliation in similar contexts.

CONCLUSION

The Itchi–Agu applied theatre project, shows that community memory is not only kept alive through spoken stories but is continually revived, questioned, and reshaped through embodied performance. The workshops demonstrated that theatre creates a distinct space where communities can face difficult histories, express shared hopes, and work through long-standing tensions in ways that are both emotional and reflective. As Boal observes, "theatre allows participants to enter and reinterpret their personal and collective narratives, enabling them to rehearse not just what has happened but what could happen in the future" (139–141). This was evident in how participants from both communities moved from reenacting painful memories of conflict to creating scenes that emphasised cooperation, suggesting that the process itself encouraged new ways of thinking and feeling about their shared history.

By highlighting embodied knowledge, the project supports Conquergood's argument that "performance is a valid and insightful mode of inquiry into people's lived realities and cultural reasoning" (149–152). The gestures, positions, rhythms, and improvised scenes that emerged were far more than creative displays; they were active forms of remembering that allowed participants to reconnect with inherited meanings, reinterpret old stories, and construct new understandings grounded in their cultural traditions. These insights affirm the value of applied theatre not only as a method for research but also as a practical tool for community

development—one that can bridge generational divides, promote dialogue, and create shared symbolic spaces where multiple perspectives can be held together.

Overall, the study concludes that applied theatre offers a powerful framework for strengthening communal ties in contexts shaped by historical tension. Through participatory performance, communities can critically engage with the past while working together to imagine more hopeful and collaborative futures. The Itchi–Agu experience therefore stands as a clear example of how applied theatre can animate cultural memory, deepen empathy, and support ongoing processes of reconciliation and collective healing, *even as such processes remain ongoing and contingent rather than complete*.

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