

THE IMPACT OF THEATRE INITIATION ON THE PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF A PERFORMER: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Oluyinka Smart Babalola Ph.D

*Correspondence: Oluyinka Smart Babalola Ph.D

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan Nigeria.

Article History

Received: 23 July 2026 | Accepted: 27 July 2026 | Published: 03 Aug 2026

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.21769430](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21769430)

ABSTRACT

The subject of initiation of new entrants in theatre training has been widely debated. Different schools of thought hold distinct opinions on initiation practices, and this has been ongoing for quite some time without any definitive conclusion. While some question the necessity of initiation, others view it as a fundamental instrument of shaping a performer's training and ultimately, career. I find it important to contribute to this discourse because I underwent my own Association of Theatre Arts Students' (ATAS) initiation in 1986 at the University of Ibadan, and I have never regretted it. The experience provided me with a clear understanding of the profession I was entering, and prepared me for its demands and instilled in me the ethics, discipline, resilience, and endurance required to navigate the profession. It is noteworthy that at Ibadan, Initiation was and still is purely a student affair with very minimal contributions from the faculty. This paper focuses on the kind of impression that initiation and its rigorous training leave on students enrolling in theatre or performing arts. The experience is intense, and it leaves a lasting impact on a performer throughout their lives. For me, it serves as a constant reminder of my foundations when I hear "Choboi", meaning that the show must go on in spite of the inevitable pressure and challenges that come with the profession. While the term "initiation" may raise concerns, its essence and meaning varies from person to person, much like a tale that unfolds differently for different people. However, its significance in theatre training at the University, especially university of Ibadan cannot be over-emphasised. ATAS initiation has been preserved by students to ensure that new students not only undergo the process but also understand its purpose. For many, it is their first encounter with total theatre on a formal stage. From an historical/analytical perspective, and as a participant-observer, I reflect on how initiation shaped my creative and entrepreneurial growth at the University of Ibadan where I encountered artistic excellence and resilience through initiation. Even beyond my student years, the values instilled in me through initiation have continued to shape my professional life, reinforcing the principles that guide

me in my many specialist areas of the arts and business. This discussion, therefore, is not about religion, non-belief, gender, sexual orientation or personal identity, but about professionalism and the necessity of proper theatre training. I strongly suggest that initiation should not only be maintained by students who have done a great job of it, but also be given greater recognition, financial support and commercial value by the universities to enhance its role in preparing new performers for the realities of their chosen profession and proving the marketability of live theatre in our different domains.

Keywords: Theatre Initiation, Total theatre, Culture and performance, Cultural studies.

Introduction

The earliest memory of my contact with what I later understood to be festival theatre (Olaniyan, 2014; Okpadah, 2018) dates back to my early childhood in 1960s. Around the age of two, my family was hurriedly ferried out of my father's house in Ibadan amid the intense political climate leading up to the civil war. I first ended up at my grandmother's, and then I went to my great-uncle's house with my grandmother who went to her brother's house to care for her own mother. So, at around three, I ended up with my maternal great uncle. I started school at my uncle's when I turned five. Later, I moved to Akure to join my parents who had relocated there after the war, for greener pastures to complete my primary and secondary schooling.

My first contact with theatre came from experiences at my great-uncle's house. Chief Laditi was the Baale (Duke) of what we now call Monatan in Ibadan. This area extends from Iwo Road under bridge up to Iyana Church. In the 1960s, the area was made up of several villages that today boast of some of the best housing estates in that part of Ibadan city. Baba Laditi was a hunter, a chief hunter in fact, who led the hunter's group in that area. Every now and then, when hunters returned from an expedition with a good catch, they would come around, drink together, and perform together. And because he was a hunter, he was also an Ogun worshipper. This meant that at least once a year, the Ogun festival would take place in our compound. During the festival, my great uncle would kill dogs and perform other rituals in honour of Ogun, and there would be several kinds of dances and celebrations.

The Ogun festival attracted people from the city, and I would see many dances, ritual displays, and various performances such as Ijo Ode (hunters' dance), Ere ode (hunter's play), Ijala (hunters' chants), and other ritual displays. This was my first contact with what many scholars such as Ogunba and Irele, 1978, Ogunba, 1994 & 2000; Soyinka, 1976 and Diakhaté and Eyoh, 2017; and, Bakare, 2020 among others, have identified as African ritual theatre. It was not formal training, but it was a very

strong introduction to African performance for me. I learned to mimic the “Ijala” of the old hunters, their dances, and even practiced making simple bows and arrows. I never thought I was into theatrical entertainment for the sake of entertainment because to us the rituals were efficacious and were a form of religious worship but quite entertaining. Yet, these ritual experiences were my introduction to what I later discovered to be African festival/ritual theatre.

While in that village, I also came into contact with the Yoruba Alarinjo Theatre (Adedeji 1971), which is a more traditional form and different from the Yoruba Traveling Theatre (Barber 2000, Jeyifo 1984). These were the Etiyeriand Ayelabola groups – descendants of the entertaining masquerades (Eegun Alare) that travel around the villages performing magic, songs, dances, and drama to earn a living. They passed through our village most of the time, and, because my uncle was the Baale, they would stop at his house to perform, entertain, earn some money, and get food. So, as a 4 to 5-year-old boy, I saw many of these performances. The highlight of all these performances was when my great-great-grandmother eventually died (I believe she was about 126 years old) in 1973, and a royal burial was organized for her. During this burial, many performances took place over an eight-day period, and I absorbed every part of it. I never forgot what I witnessed as a young lad in that village, and these later played a significant role in my life. That is the unforgettable memory of my introduction to African ritual/festival theatre.

School Life and A Growing Passion for Theatre

Eventually, I ended up at Oyemekun Grammar School in Akure, where my parents had relocated after the civil war and my father’s short lived political adventure. My parents were there until Oyo State was created in 1976. But since I had gained admission into Oyemekun, I was left in Akure as a boarding student. Oyemekun Grammar School was very cultural; we had a strong literary and debating society, a vibrant cultural society, and excellent sports programs, among other things you would expect in a standard grammar school. Itinerant performers frequently visited the school. There was no way a Yoruba Traveling Theatre group would pass through Akure without stopping at schools like Oyemekun or perhaps Aquinas College and one or two other schools, as these were the catchment areas for the troupes. This travelling theatre phenomenon had become so popular in the western region from the early 1960s that several groups were in existence by the middle of 1970s. Adedeji (1971) and (1998); Jeyifo (1984); Barber (2018) and (2000); and many other scholars have recorded their exploits and popularity with the masses. They always performed in our large hall at Oyemekun, which they redecorate to suit their performances and we paid to watch the performances. I gained valuable experience from watching these enthralling shows.

Between 1976 and 1981 when I finished my school certificate and left the school, I witnessed at least six performances by the Yoruba Traveling Theatres. One performance that particularly stood out was

by the Ayox Arisekola Theatre Group that came to perform at our school around 1978. Their performance was a Yoruba folk opera, blended with Indian performance style. Although I cannot recall the title of the play or opera, I vividly remember the display, the musical rendition, the acting, and the dance and choreography, all coming together in an artistic wholeness. It was during this period that I first thought that to be an actor, one must be a good singer, a good dancer, and a good orator because all these skills worked together in these performances. I saw theatre in its glorious form in the 1970s and enjoyed every bit of it. However, I never thought about becoming a theatre artist because I had always wanted to be a pharmacist. Near my mother's business in Akure, there was a well-known pharmacy store run by a successful pharmacist, and I aspired to be like him. So I went on to study the sciences - physics, chemistry, biology, math – with the aim of a career in pharmacy. But I never ended up in Pharmacy.

When I completed my school certificate in 1981, I did not immediately continue into higher education. At that time, it was customary in my family to take a gap year or two to work before proceeding to higher studies. Additionally, 1981 was a notorious year of exam malpractice or leakage in West African Examination Council (WAEC) exams. Many results were cancelled and I was affected by this. I knew I would have to re-sit my school certificate exams. In the meantime, I decided to find work. By chance, my uncle who was a journalist and the editor of Sketch Newspapers in Ibadan at that time invited me to work in his office. I began working at Sketch as an office assistant in early 1982. This experience introduced me to another side of life: journalism and the fascination of the humanities. Although I loved literature in secondary school, I had not pursued it because I was a science student. When I started working at Sketch in 1982 in Ibadan, I had access to a huge library full of books and newspapers, and I began reading voraciously; even texts that were beyond my level of understanding, such as communist political treatises from Russia, China and North Korea. Writings on Maoism and various other “isms” were so fascinating to me. I also saw young reporters, cartoonists, editors and feature writers doing their jobs and creating headlines and meeting deadlines. This exposure made me to contemplate a new career as a writer, an author. I started reading great literary works by writers like Oscar Wilde, Shakespeare, Achebe, Soyinka etc. Consequently, I changed my mind about becoming a pharmacist. Instead, I then wanted to be an author. To do that, I needed to study English language and literature.

However, since I was working at a press, I also considered taking a diploma in journalism or an OND in mass communication and starting a journalism career. But one thing led to another. I left Sketch and was admitted into The Polytechnic, Ibadan. At the Polytechnic, I chose to enroll for Advanced Level (AL) at the school of basic studies. I would rather to take A-levels than study mass communication. When I retook my school certificate exams, I did not have enough art subjects I only

had English and literature in English as art subjects. I did not know that I needed three or four art subjects, I only added government and economics in an attempt to move away from the sciences. Eventually, I managed to combine literature with government and economics at the A-levels. I was not sure what I would do with that in university, but I finished and passed my A-levels and, fortunately, passed the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in the same year. I chose English because I wanted to pursue my passion for authorship.

However, JAMB, in its wisdom, decided that I could not be placed in English Department due to my lack of three art subjects, so they placed me in Theatre Arts. I scored 273, which was quite high in those days, and Theatre Arts at that time accepted entry with three subjects from science or social science. That was how I ended up in the theatre. I was angry because I had also passed my A-levels and wanted to upgrade; after all, you can upgrade when you pass both JAMB and A-levels. When I told the then Head of Department, Professor Adelugba about wanting an upgrade to 200 level with my A-Level result, he sent me with a note to the Linguistics Department because there was no more space in theatre arts. I was happily on my way when an uncle of mine who studied theatre arts met me and I was happy to show him Adelugba's note to Linguistics. It was God's intervention. He pointed out that one of the few professional courses in the arts was theatre arts and that I must enroll for the prelim. He then took me back to Professor Adelugba. It turned out that my name had been cancelled on the list and was already substituted with someone else's. My uncle had to beg seriously to have it changed back. That was how I got enrolled in theatre. It wasn't planned, it wasn't my choice, it was God's will. I could never have planned to end up in theatre, but that was how it happened.

When I entered the University of Ibadan (UI) and began the registration process, I already had it in my head that I was going to cruise through the four years and have fun, thinking it would be a walk in the park since theatre artists were known to 'only sing and dance'. Then, the Association of Theatre Arts Students' (ATAS) Initiation rehearsals started. Having spent five years on the streets after finishing secondary school, some of my classmates and I thought we were not children and that we could handle some rigorous exercises. We assumed it was something we could play with. However, our seniors were not easy on anyone. We faced a very rigorous month of rehearsals, starting very early in the morning and ending very late at night. We did two rehearsals a day, plus additional sessions. Our seniors were very enthusiastic, many were already professionals and we were also joined by new diploma students who were real professional adults, not like the children we see in schools today. We were a mix of old and young people and some of us could neither dance nor sing at all, yet we had to learn the choreography, new dance steps, new songs and even poetry. The two most important skills that we learned were discipline and teamwork. Without discipline, we could not have managed to put together the initiation performance within one month of rehearsals. We had to come at specific times,

and the whole process taught us the importance of timekeeping, focus, and time management. We learned a lot of management skills without anyone explicitly teaching us, and most importantly, we learned to depend on our team. Our team was enthusiastic and determined to make things happen, they drilled into us the spirit of “CHOBOI”, meaning the show must go on at all cost.

We learned how the various arts of the theatre come together to form a whole through our rehearsals and performances. We experienced African Total Theatre through the ATAS Initiation, a performance that integrated music, songs, dance, spoken words, and acting. Okague(2012:11) captures this aptly; “It is about spectacle, a feast for the eyes. It can sometimes be an auditory feast for the ears...” More importantly, it combined the visual elements such as lighting, sets, and costumes, which were of very high importance in our student days. ATAS initiation was something I did not bargain for and never thought about when I first came to UI because I had never been to a theatre arts department and did not even plan to study theatre. However, being introduced to this style of performance and seeing how seriously people took it was novel to me. It reminded me of when I used to perform for elders in the village at around five years old, trying to re-enact the Etiyeri or Alarinjo theatre performances. The initiation ceremony felt like a welcome into a closed but distinct family, a specially selected group of individuals. I felt as though I was one of the few chosen ones. Although some might interpret the performance from an African religious perspective, there was nothing religious or cultic about it. All the props and elements used during the initiation were either made by students or sourced from professional props makers, and in some cases, the initiates brought items ourselves (such as chalk and honey). These elements were simply a simulation of traditional symbolism to inaugurate us into the profession. I was elated. Although I joined the initiation grudgingly at first, I was very happy to be a part of it. The key skills that I learned during the first month at UI including; focus, discipline, teamwork, timekeeping, time management, and even personal hygiene have remained with me. I have never regretted being part of the initiation, and I have always advocated for its continuation.

Controversies, Challenges and Lasting Impact

In 1980s and 1990s Nigeria and even into the new millennium, many people did not seem bothered or worried about the word “initiation.” I cannot even remember anyone having an issue with the term until I returned to the University of Ibadan as an Arts Fellow in 2011. Then I discovered that some people, including lecturers, felt that “initiation” was a bad, cultic word that should be changed or the whole process canceled because it appeared to be a disguise for recruiting students into cults. I am talking about the University of Ibadan where the whole thing began in the early 1970s. I was a part and parcel of the initiation ceremony both as a new student and as a senior. I also contributed to the growth NUTAF (Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Festival) and NUTASA (Nigerian Universities Theatre Arts Students’ Association), all of which were run by students. But when I returned as a tutor,

I noticed some lecturers were already trying to resuscitate and run NUTASA and NUTAF or similar activities. The question is, what are we turning our students into? If we want them to be politically exposed and be responsible as students in order to replicate same as graduates, we should not spoon-feed them and vegetate them politically and intellectually.

By 2012, many religious meanings were read into the word “initiation” at UI, and some even had issues with certain practices. However, initiation was purely a theatrical process and there was nothing religious or cultic about it. Anyone can choose to interpret the word negatively, but in reality, being welcomed into a select group is what initiation means. Unless you want to call it ‘entre’ or ‘induction’ for wants of a more liberal sounding word. At UI, ATAS retained the word “initiation” and the teachers saw no harm in it. Even when there was an investigation between 2012 and 2014 when the then Head of Department petitioned the authorities that we were cultists using the veil of initiation ceremony to recruit students. The current Vice Chancellor who is also a Pastor and a churchman headed the investigation and found the complaints to be all bubbles with no substance.

There was a tradition in UI. Before the initiation performance, none of us - diploma students and undergraduates (called Jambites) - was allowed to desecrate the Arts Theatre stage by stepping on it because we were not yet initiated. We could not be part of any play or performance, and we were not allowed on stage until after the initiation. This was a strict rule at Ibadan; you were not permitted to participate in any production that would allow you to step onto the ‘shrine’ of theatre artists, The Wole Soyinka Theatre stage. Even if there were performances that we wanted to join perhaps as acolytes or in just ‘wakapass’ roles, we were not allowed until after the initiation performance. They used to say, “Our tails have not been cut,” meaning that until your tail is cut, you are still like a monkey and cannot climb the theatre stage. Therefore we looked eagerly forward to that initiation moment, and after the initiation, we were gladly admitted into rehearsals and performances.

The discipline and the skills that I learned as a young lad encountering theatre in its glorious form at UI have stayed with me in my career as a stage and screen performer, filmmaker, teacher, and scholar. In theatre, when a deadline is given, we understand that the show must go on. Even if you cannot put up a poster on time and are tempted to cancel, you don’t! You simply proceed. Many of these lessons have remained with me. I have done many things deemed impossible solely because of my training in theatre. One clear fact is that when we entered the theatre, we were essentially in the hands of our seniors. The lecturers stepped back and allowed the older students or senior colleagues to guide us through the process so that by the time we started lectures and rehearsals with the lecturers, we already knew how to behave and comport ourselves because of the experiences we had with our seniors. It was a very good exposure and a warm welcome

For me, this is why I raise a serious question of why should lecturers show more interest than the students in the initiation of ‘Jambites’? In other words, why should teachers want to direct, name, or control the welcoming of new students? It seems to reflect the mindset that young people in Nigeria cannot do things by themselves. Even if the students’ body says, “We are done with the word ‘initiation’ we want it to be called induction or something else,” it is their call. We cannot simply stop their process. I have discovered that it is usually the parents and the teachers that take front rows in the questionable agitation over the word initiation and the iconic cultural symbols that punctuate the visual and aural feast served by the students yearly. Within a month of initiation, a new student is prepared for the rigours of the industry and the pressures of the profession. We are theatre artists, and we still produce first-class students every year. How do these students manage to achieve first-class results after enduring the pressure of our department? They still have to attend classes in the Faculty of Arts, in other departments such as English, Communication Arts, Religious Studies, and Classics, to demonstrate their brilliance. They are working toward a Bachelor of Arts, not just a Bachelor of Theatre Arts. While they study in these other departments, they also come to the theatre to dance, perform, and take exams in addition to rehearsals and performances. We are talking about a department full of pressure. In fact, many schools combine theatre, film studies, performing arts, film and media arts, and similar subjects into one department. Yet we trust that those who come through the initiation process and have faced the pressure of the initiation process will survive and excel.

I do not understand why some parents and lecturers say that the initiation rehearsals are “too much” or that the seniors are “overbearing” in their behavior when, in truth, we went through this rigorous process and survived. How would we have made such impact in our lives if it were not for the rigorous training we underwent? Why seek to remove the rigour from the training of the young ones? Nowadays, new theatre arts departments are being established, and some select students from English or Linguistics are joining theatre arts. However, they cannot fully understand the rules of theatre unless they truly study it, and then they might complain that the performances are too long or the rehearsals too demanding. Those who study theatre understand that this rigorous training is preparation for what is to come. I thank God that I experienced initiation. It was a major preparation for me because I came in with the notion that I had at A-levels where you simply read and write exams. I had no idea that theatre required daily commitment starting at 7 a.m., practicing consistently without which I would never have been able to cope if I were simply thrown into the department. I am grateful to my seniors who stood up for us during the initiation. As I write this, I see familiar faces of enthusiastic seniors who used to come to rehearsals even before us. It was not easy, but we went through it and excelled.

At the start of our program at the University of Ibadan (UI), the rigorous initiation helped us to discover latent talents. I quickly realized my passion for acting and enjoyed portraying different characters. This led me to take theatre more seriously. Within a short period, I became a favourite of directors and frequently participated in productions. By the end of my first year, I had gained significant recognition, partly because, at that time, during the 1980s at the University of Ibadan, the theatre served as the primary source of entertainment. There was less competition as there was no DSTV, no European football, and even cinemas were non-existent. We had just those television stations that nobody wanted to really watch. Once in a while, Halls of residence would show videos and all, but the theatre remained the central focus for entertainment within the university community. Within a year, I had established myself as a significant actor and was invited to join Laffomania Organization. Laffomania, a phenomenon that dominated campus theatres in the 1980s and early 1990s, had started a year before I came into UI. In my second year (200 level), I was invited to become a member, which I gladly accepted. This new membership of elite comedians also unveiled my talent in comedy. With Laffomania's popularity and the roles I played on stage, I gained confidence in pursuing theatre as a career after graduation. I had no reservations about my career path. While my Laffomania cohorts were serving in the East, I was serving in Ogun State. Therefore, I chose to establish Laffomania as a professional organization in the late 1990s before they returned from service. I registered the company and secured a four-bedroom flat for us known as Laffomania Villa in Orogun, Ibadan, ensuring that we all had a place to return to in order to go pro. Additionally, I obtained a post office box, ensuring we transitioned properly into professional theatre business. Alongside my colleagues, we performed numerous shows. Eventually, after about four years together, we pursued our individual paths, but I remained dedicated to the theatre.

The creative freedom that theatre offered was invaluable, and with the support of God and family, I continued to pursue my artistic dreams. I collaborated with Hafiz Oyetoro (an Obafemi Awolowo University graduate) to establish another production company, focusing on play production and we found the Ibadan Festival of Theatre (IBAFEST). We received support and patronage from friends in various professions who recognized our talent and invested in it, including some prominent figures in Ibadan. Through these efforts, we elevated theatre to a level where it became our sole means of livelihood. We were thoroughbred professionals.

In the mid-1990s, I left Nigeria due to the political climate, including the challenges under Abacha's regime. Seeking new opportunities, I relocated to England, anticipating an easier integration into the theatre scene. However, I discovered that breaking into the industry in the United Kingdom was very challenging. To adapt, I enrolled in a film school, leveraging my background as a media producer in Nigeria, where I had produced drama for OGTV and NTA Abeokuta. My goal was to be employed by

the likes of BBC. After completing film school and facing employment challenges, I drew upon the confidence instilled during my time at UI. I established my own audio-visual studio, which became one of the first successful studios catering to Africans in England. A few months into its operation, I aspired to produce Nigerian films. Collaborating with my friend, Femi Ogunjobi, who had also relocated to England, we produced "The 11th Commandment" in 1997. Femi wrote and directed the film script starring Sola Fosudo, who was visiting England at the time. I shot, edited and produced the film. This was around the time Richard Mofe-Damijo (RMD) released the film 'Out of Bounds' in London. Both films created waves in the Nigerian community. I organized its Premiere in London and it was very successful.

However, I couldn't secure a distributor in Nigeria despite my best efforts. RMD introduced me to some distributors, but I realized that Nigerian video distribution system was so polarized and segmented along ethnic lines. Igbo distributors focused on English language films while Yoruba ones distribute Yoruba language films only. Consequently, a filmmaker like me, a Yoruba man, producing an English language movie, was left without support. Even with personal connections and introductions, distributors were reluctant, often influenced by others questioning why they should allocate resources to someone outside their usual network. Despite investing heavily in the film, I couldn't find a distributor in Nigeria. I initially sought a distributor in the UK, specifically, African Video Centre, to handle the film's distribution. However, when I approached him and he suggested starting with 500 copies. I was taken aback, thinking, '500? What are you talking about? I've invested so much money into this film. I took on the distribution myself, producing 5,000 copies and selling them directly to African shops in the UK. This hands-on approach transformed me into a distributor. That was the spirit of the training I received at Ibadan. Impossibility is not in my dictionary.

When I came to Nigeria to find a distributor for my film, I also embarked on producing a second film. Initially written in English, but I realized the language choice might not get me a distributor. I then made it in Yoruba, believing this would facilitate easier distribution. By 1998, I had completed the film. I returned to England and released them using the same distribution network I had created. However, upon returning to Nigeria, I faced challenges securing a distributor once again. The Yoruba distributors were hesitant to accept my film because I wasn't a member of the Association of Nigerian Theatre Practitioners (ANTP) and wasn't recognized within the established filmmaking circles and caucuses. Consequently, I left Nigeria again empty handed.

By the time I was working on` my third film, 'London Lawa,' I had built rapport with several distributors and have established my own retail outlets in London. I shot the film in England and released it through my distribution network there, achieving significant success. Subsequently, I sold the film outright to a Nigerian distributor, marking my first film released in Nigeria as 'London Lawa.'

This venture garnered recognition from Nigerians and Yoruba distributors, leading me to focus on producing Yoruba films thereafter. I collaborated with ToyinAdegbola on a successful project, 'Mayowa,' which performed well both in England and Nigeria, attracting sponsorships. By then, I had become integrated into the filmmaking community. Naturally, I gravitated towards Corporate Pictures for my next project, "Akobi Gomina." I wrote and produced the film, shooting in both England and Nigeria. To ensure acceptance, I collaborated with a director preferred by the distributors, adapting to the existing system.

The film was released in two parts and achieved significant success. This journey reflects the can-do spirit instilled in me by the University of Ibadan. It's not just me; it's all of us. Many who enter the University of Ibadan theatre arts and first encounter an initiation ceremony, an experience unlike any they've had before. This baptism serves to build our confidence in the profession. I could easily transition from stage to screen, from film to TV, and from TV to radio. I was adaptable because I was well-trained and had mentors, seniors and colleagues whom I admired and who were also thriving. We all underwent the same rigorous training and initiation, which instilled in us resilience and courage. Whenever I faced challenges or doubts, I reflect on past productions, recalling how we overcame difficulties, reinforcing my belief that we can surmount any obstacle. This resilient spirit is a testament to the enduring influence of ATAS initiation.

We went through a baptism of fire, as it were, to be welcomed into the industry. All manner of fear and doubt were eliminated in us within the first month of entering university. When we started Laffomania organization as a professional theatre troupe, we had virtually nothing. We only had our BA (Hons) certificates, which could not even be used to secure a small bank loan for productions. Some kind family members offered us employment opportunities elsewhere, even bringing police recruitment forms to us to join the police force. In 1990 or 1991, we could have joined as an Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP). Imagine the career trajectory that could have offered. However, like theater, the police force had its risks. We deliberately chose the path of creativity and performance. I might have stumbled my way into the theatre, transitioning from sciences onto the arts without a clear direction, but I believe in divine guidance. Theatre became a place of peace for me, a realm where I could freely express myself and create as the spirit led. Had I not had that primary initiation experience, I might not have developed such confidence in my creative abilities. Perhaps I would have ventured into journalism, a field I was familiar with from a young age. But becoming an actor, director, producer, writer and distributor stemmed from the resilience and artistic baptism of the ATAS initiation of 1986.

I cannot forget the senior colleagues that guided us through the rigorous training. These were committed theatre artists who were passionate about their craft. We absorbed their passion, witnessed

their unwavering dedication, and we naturally adopted the same spirit which we also passed onto those who followed. It's unsurprising that the Association of Theatre Arts Students (ATAS) continues to uphold the tradition of initiation, even years after we left, years after the nation has become so religious and proselytizing medieval-Europe-type of retrograde sentiments. It's a symbolic passing of the baton. Although times may have changed and the theatre may now be merely a place for leisure, our work, which is called 'play,' an enjoyment for our audiences is still serious work for us and serious business for the investors. When our audiences are on holiday or needed leisure, they come to the theatre where we 'play' (work) to their pleasure. This inversion (work for us is play to the audience or the uninitiated) holds true across generations. We find theatre to be very tough and demanding. Without the best training and introduction through initiation, theatre would have been tougher. If you encounter an indolent artist or a star lacking ethics and discipline in the industry, it is likely they never received proper initiation into the profession or they never came through the theatre at all. The profession is challenging and pressure-prone. The best introduction is at that high level of challenge and pressure, making it clear that indolence has no place in theatre. This is the crux of the training we received.

On returning to academia, I was disheartened to encounter allegations against staff members accused of using initiation ceremonies to recruit students into cults. This accusation was particularly shocking, considering it came from the chief priest of the initiation of the previous year and the acting head of the department. Such incidents suggest that objections to initiation ceremonies often stem from underlying issues, frequently of a religious nature. Many individuals, deeply rooted in their faiths, prefer that initiation songs should align with Christian or Islamic traditions and cultures, mirroring the trend of incorporating religious songs into traditional weddings and other cultural events. This shift raises the question: why hold a traditional wedding if it is to be accompanied by non-traditional music and songs? Similarly, during legal marriages conducted in courts, the inclusion of religious songs reflects a form of religious chauvinism. It is imperative to transcend narrow religious dogmas and appreciate that our culture is showcased in these initiation ceremonies. At the University of Ibadan, the songs, costume, and visual elements used in initiations are deeply cultural. However, there is a tendency to replace our cultural expressions with Western or Eastern religious practices, which is not appropriate. In fact, initiation ceremonies represent one of the few remaining rites of passage within the academic setting that are still deeply rooted in our culture. Many other inductions adhere to Western or Eastern religious or cultural ideals. The discomfort some individuals feel towards initiation often stems from associating the term with Africa's past religious and cultic practices.

Yet, it is essential to recognize that theatre itself has its origin in ritual and religious worship for we must have all studied theatre history at least by Brockett and Hildy (2003). The theatre we study and

practice today in universities largely derives from the Greek tradition, particularly the Athenian theatre, where performances were intertwined with religious ceremonies and in honour of Dionysus. Even during the City Dionysia, when theatre became secular, the altar of Dionysus (Tymele) was conspicuously placed at the centre of the playing arena and many of the plays produced at the City Dionysia had significant input of the gods in resolving issues (Brockett and Hildy, 2003). Why then do we have problem with our own rituals and religious ceremonies in Africa since “rituals reflect the society’s understanding of its relationship to the powers that govern its well-being and its own interrelationship” (Brockett and Hildy, 2014:4). Therefore, attempting to separate our culture from the initiation overlooks the foundational role of cultural performances in theatre. For many students, initiation ceremonies provide their first genuine encounter with cultural songs and dances, such as the bata dance, presented in an organized and synchronized manner.

If the term 'initiation' is contentious, alternatives like 'induction' may be considered. However, the essence must remain a proper welcoming of new intakes into the profession of theatre – with its ethics, challenges and pressure. Whether the ceremony is secular, cultural or religious, it is crucial to convey the realities of theatrearts with its challenges, its pressures, and the importance of discipline and teamwork to new intakes. While practices may vary from place to place, the core purpose of these ceremonies should be consistent. At the University of Ibadan, there have been instances where lecturers criticized the rigorous training associated with initiation, claiming it adversely affects academic performance. However, this perspective is flawed. Despite the demanding nature of ATAS initiation, we continue to have students with first-class CGPA in their first year. Academic failure cannot be attributed to initiation; it is an excuse used by some to exert control over student bodies responsible for these performances. Such control is unnecessary and detracts from the holistic development that initiation fosters. The role of the ATAS Liaison Officer, the lecturer overseeing student activities, is to act as a bridge between the students’ body and the department. If issues arise that cannot be resolved on his table, they are escalated to the departmental board. However, some individuals exhibit a need to control every aspect of student activities, often under the guise of protecting certain students from rigorous work, thereby hindering their future growth.

Many professionals today would attribute their success to the comprehensive training they received, including participation in ATAS activities. Shielding students from such experiences deprive them of opportunities to face challenges, develop teamwork skills, and achieve a sense of accomplishment. Some objections to initiation may also stem from personal grievances experienced by faculty members against their colleagues, and they would then project these issues through disagreement with initiation ceremonies and other students’ productions. It is important to acknowledge that today's students are resourceful and knowledgeable, often surpassing previous generations in their access to

information and marketable skills. At the University of Ibadan, we have students who are already making significant strides in the industry in music, acting, set construction and more, balancing their studies with professional commitments. Despite this, there is a strong desire among some tutors to control these students, especially if they do not conform to certain expectations. Criticisms of initiation often serve as a facade for other underlying issues. The actual issues are usually related to personal conflicts and ego, not the initiation itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, initiation ceremonies play a vital role in preparing students for the realities of the theatre profession. They provide invaluable experiences that contribute to personal and professional growth. Attempts to undermine or abolish these ceremonies often stem from personal biases or misunderstandings and religious sentiments/intolerance. It is essential to preserve African culture through the performances, and allowing students to develop theatre ethics, discipline, resilience, teamwork, and a deep appreciation of their cultural heritage.

I believe that the term used, be it "initiation," "induction," or another, is less significant than the core lessons and benefits derived from the event. The experience itself holds greater value than its label. Personally, transitioning from a polytechnic background without prior initiation experiences, this ceremony served as my significant introduction to the theatre profession, a decision I will forever treasure. The lessons imparted from that moment have remained with me, enabling me to stand confidently in the industry. Through such events, students learn collaboration, self-expression, perseverance, and management skills applicable to both personal and professional growths. They also gain cultural insights, often lacking from their upbringing, such as traditional arts, attire, and languages. Many students, unfamiliar with their native languages or cultural practices, find value in learning songs in various dialects, traditional makeup techniques, and other art forms during initiation. Emphasizing these cultural aspects and core lessons is more beneficial than a morbid fixation on the event's title.

As a dedicated professional, I attribute my confidence and accomplishments to the foundational training received during initiation. For instance, during my time at a film school in England, I seamlessly integrated despite being the sole black student on the course. My theatre training enabled me to communicate with clear diction. And my performance skills allowed me to connect effectively. This background ensures that wherever our well-trained students go, they excel, largely due to the comprehensive introduction to the profession through initiation. At the University of Ibadan, our students thrive and value their initiation into the theatre, a testament to the program's efficacy, and we consistently have confidence in their potentials for success, owing to the solid foundation they receive. While I cannot speak for other institutions, I can assert with conviction that our students excel

and deeply value their initiation into the theatre even though it can be rough and tough at the beginning, they always smile at the end.

Finally, I strongly believe that initiation ceremonies across the schools and colleges should be maintained by students who have done a great job of it. Students should be encouraged to be more creative and learn more about the cultures they wish to project or promote in their initiation ceremonies. It is important for them to know that Nollywood has done a lot of damage to our culture and should not be the benchmark for the portrayal of Nigerian culture. Therefore, they should be encouraged to do more research for their initiation. Also, initiation ceremonies across our campuses should be well marketed to stakeholders and sponsors for greater recognition and financial support. The commercial value of these ceremonies to the universities should be of concern to us the tutors rather than the puerile attempts at rationalizing names and titles of the event due to religious sentiments and ego tripping. We must support initiation in order to enhance its role in preparing new performers for the realities of their chosen or divinely found profession and proving the marketability of live theatre in our different domains.

Article Publication Details

This article is published in the [International Journal of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities Studies](#), ISSN XXXX-XXXX (Online). In Volume 1 Issue 1 (July – Aug) 2026

The journal is published and managed by [IRPG](#).

Copyright © 2026, Authors retain copyright. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> (CC BY 4.0 deed)

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Funding

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The author(s) declare that it is not applicable.

Consent for publication

The author(s) declare that this is not applicable.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

References

1. Adedeji, J. A. 1971. .A profile of Nigerian theatre 1960-1970. Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. https://www.si.edu/object/siris_sil_598531 Accessed 24 November 2021.
2. Adedeji, J. A. 1998. The Theatre in Yorùbá. *Nigerian Theatre: Dynamics of a Movement*. Adedeji A. & Ekwuazi H. Eds. Ibadan: Caltop Publications.
3. Bakare, B. A. 2020. The Yorùbá Theatre from Religious and Ritualistic Perspectives. *Ibadan Journal of Theatre Arts (IJOTA)* Nos. 13&14:121-133
4. Barber, K. 2018. *A history of African Popular Culture* Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
5. Barber, K 2000. *The generation of plays: Yorùbá popular life in theater*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press
6. Brockett, O. G. and Hildy, F. J. 2003. *History of the theatre*. New York: Allyn and Bacon.
7. Brockett, O. G. and Hildy, F. J. 2014. *History of the theatre*. (10th Ed.) Harlow: Pearson Education Limited
8. Diakhaté, O. and Eyoh, H. M. 2017. The Roots of African Theatre Ritual and Orality in the Pre-Colonial Period. Critical Stages/Scènes critiques. *The IATC journal/Revue de l'AICT* – June/Juin 2017: Issue No 1. <https://www.critical-stages.org/>
9. Jeyifo, B. 1984. *The Yorùbá Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine Publications.
10. Ogunba, O. 2000. Stage and Staging in Yoruba Ritual Drama. In Layiwola D. (Ed.), *African Theatre in Performance*. p53-66. Amsterdam: Harwood academic publishers.
11. Ogunba, O. 1994). Introduction. In Ogunba, O. (Ed.) *Soyinka: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ibadan: Syndicated Communications Ltd.
12. Ogunba, O. & Irele A. 1978. Introduction. In Ogunba, O. & Irele A. (Eds.) *Theatre in Africa*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
13. Okagbue, O. 2012. *African Theatres and Performances*. New York: Routledge
14. Okpadah, S. O. 2018. A Study of Festival Theatre to Flekstival Theatre: EmuodjeFlekstival of Ekaakpamre in Southern Nigeria as a Paradigm. *Pan-African journal* 12(1):42-56
15. Olaniyan, M. E. 2014. An appraisal of OsunOsogbo as a festival theatre. *European Scientific Journal* April 2014 edition vol.10, No.11 ISSN: 1857 – 7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857- 7431
16. Soyinka, W. 1976. *Myth, literature and the African world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Publisher's Note:

IRPG remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations. The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of IRPG and/or the editor(s). IRPG disclaims responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.