

The Town Crier: A Solo Performer In African Theater And Drama

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20775946>

Abstract

This paper examines the Town Crier as a solo performer within the framework of African theatre and performance traditions, with particular reference to Amirikpa Oyigbenu's Town Hall Whispers. Although the Town Crier has traditionally been studied as an indigenous communication agent, limited scholarly attention has been given to his performative attributes as a theatrical figure. Using textual analysis and performance theory, this study explores the Town Crier's deployment of voice, gesture, movement, rhythm, costume, and symbolic props in the dissemination of communal information. Drawing on concepts of African oral performance and traditional theatre, the paper argues that the Town Crier functions as a dramatic monologist whose performance transcends mere communication and assumes theatrical significance. Findings reveal that the Town Crier's solo enactment, audience engagement, improvisational flexibility, and ritualized use of sound-making instruments position him as an important performer within indigenous African dramatic traditions. The study concludes that the Town Crier occupies a dual role as both cultural communicator and theatrical performer, thereby enriching scholarly understanding of African performance aesthetics and indigenous communication systems.

Keywords: Town Crier, Solo Performance, African Theatre, Oral Performance, Town Hall Whispers

Introduction

Communication and performance have remained inseparable elements of traditional African societies. Long before the advent of modern mass media, indigenous communities relied on established oral communication systems for the dissemination of information, social mobilization, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation. Among these systems, the institution of the Town Crier occupied a prominent position as the official messenger of the community.

Existing studies have largely examined the Town Crier as an agent of traditional communication. However, little attention has been paid to the performative dimensions of the role, particularly its similarities with solo theatrical performance. The Town Crier does not merely transmit information; he employs vocal modulation, bodily movement, rhythm, costume, gesture, and symbolic instruments such as the gong, bell, or drum to command attention and engage audiences. These characteristics align closely with the conventions of solo performance and dramatic monologue in theatre.

This paper therefore investigates the Town Crier as a solo performer in African theatre and drama, using Amirikpa Oyigbenu's *Town Hall Whispers* as a case study. The study argues that the Town Crier embodies key features of African performance traditions and functions as a theatrical figure whose role extends beyond information dissemination to include dramatic representation, audience engagement, and cultural mediation.

Literature Review

The Town Crier and Traditional Communication Systems

Before the emergence of modern communication technologies, African societies developed indigenous communication systems that facilitated the dissemination of information, social mobilization, and cultural continuity. Among these systems, the institution of the Town Crier occupied a central position as an official channel of communication between traditional rulers and community members. Scholars have consistently identified the Town Crier as one of the most effective means of communication in rural African communities due to his accessibility, credibility, and ability to communicate in indigenous languages (Etebu & Okokuro, 2015).

According to Etebu and Okokuro (2015), the Town Crier serves as a communication intermediary who transmits information from traditional rulers, clan heads, and community leaders to the populace. The use of locally understood symbols, sounds, and dialects enhances the effectiveness of the communication process. The Town Crier's activities often include announcing communal meetings, festivals, market regulations, public warnings, and emergency situations. Consequently, the institution functions not only as a communication network but also as a mechanism for maintaining social order and communal cohesion.

Similarly, Eze et al. (2021) observe that indigenous communication systems remain significant despite the advancement of modern media technologies. Their study argues that traditional communication agents such as the Town Crier continue to preserve cultural values and reinforce communal identity. This perspective highlights the enduring relevance of the Town Crier in African societies and underscores his importance as a cultural mediator.

African Oral Performance and Theatrical Traditions

The concept of performance occupies a central place in African cultural life. African performance traditions encompass storytelling, music, dance, ritual enactments, festivals, and oral poetry. Unlike Western theatre, which often depends on written scripts and formal stage settings, African performance is largely oral, participatory, and community-oriented (Doki, 2006).

Doki (2006) argues that traditional African theatre is a "total theatre" because it integrates various artistic elements such as music, dance, costume, mime, and symbolic actions into a unified performance experience. The emphasis on participation and communal engagement creates a dynamic interaction between performers and audiences. This characteristic is particularly relevant to the activities of the Town Crier, whose performances involve direct interaction with community members and often require audience response and participation. The oral nature of African performance has also been examined by Eze et al. (2021), who emphasize the concept of "composition-in-performance." According to these scholars, oral performances are flexible and adaptable, allowing performers to modify content according to context and audience needs. This flexibility enables performers to remain relevant within changing social environments. The Town Crier embodies this

characteristic through his ability to adapt messages to different audiences, occasions, and communal circumstances.

Performance Theory and Solo Performance

Performance theorists have long argued that performance extends beyond conventional theatre and includes everyday social actions that involve presentation, communication, and audience engagement. From this perspective, performance is understood as a culturally situated activity through which meanings are created and transmitted. The Town Crier's public announcements can therefore be viewed as performative acts because they involve vocal delivery, bodily movement, symbolic gestures, and audience interaction.

Worthen (2004) notes that performance does not depend solely on elaborate stage settings but can be created through the effective use of language, props, costumes, and actor-audience relationships. This observation is particularly applicable to the Town Crier, whose performance space is the community itself. The village square, market, streets, and palace courtyards become theatrical spaces where information is transformed into performance.

The notion of solo performance further illuminates the role of the Town Crier. Solo performance is a theatrical form in which a single performer assumes responsibility for sustaining audience attention and communicating meaning without the support of other actors. Such performances rely heavily on vocal dexterity, physical expression, improvisation, and audience engagement. These characteristics closely resemble the techniques employed by Town Criers in traditional African communities. Through vocal projection, rhythmic delivery, and strategic movement across communal spaces, the Town Crier performs in a manner comparable to a dramatic monologist.

The Town Crier as a Performer

Although most studies have examined the Town Crier primarily as a communication agent, few scholars have considered his role from a theatrical perspective. Existing literature focuses predominantly on his contribution to information dissemination and rural development (Etebu &

Okokuro, 2015). Consequently, the performative dimensions of the institution remain underexplored. The Town Crier's activities exhibit several characteristics associated with theatrical performance. First, the use of symbolic props such as the gong, bell, drum, or horn functions similarly to theatrical properties that help establish mood and attract audience attention. Second, the Town Crier's vocal style often involves rhythmic patterns, repetition, chants, and dramatic pauses that enhance audience engagement. Third, his movement from one location to another transforms the community into a performance arena, thereby creating a mobile theatrical space.

Brown (2022) notes that Town Criers historically used rhyme, rhythm, and vocal projection to ensure effective communication and audience attention. These techniques demonstrate that Town Crying involves more than the simple transmission of information; it also entails performance strategies designed to captivate listeners. Thus, the Town Crier may be viewed as a performer whose actions combine communication, spectacle, and dramatic representation.

Gap in the Literature

Existing studies have extensively discussed the Town Crier as an indigenous communication agent and cultural intermediary. Likewise, scholars have examined the significance of oral performance traditions within African societies. However, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the Town Crier as a solo performer within the framework of African theatre and drama. Most available studies focus on communication functions rather than performative qualities such as vocal performance, gesture, movement, audience interaction, and the use of theatrical props.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the Town Crier as a solo performer through a textual analysis of Amirikpa Oyigbenu's *Town Hall Whispers*. By foregrounding the theatrical dimensions of Town Crying, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on African performance aesthetics and indigenous theatrical traditions.

Theoretical Framework

Performance Theory

This study is anchored on Performance Theory, particularly the perspectives advanced by Richard Schechner and other performance scholars who argue that performance extends beyond the

conventional theatre stage to encompass social, cultural, ritual, and communicative activities. Performance Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how human actions become meaningful through enactment, presentation, and audience engagement. The theory challenges the narrow conception of performance as an activity confined to formal theatre and instead views performance as a broad spectrum of expressive behaviours through which individuals and communities communicate meanings, values, and identities.

Schechner (2013) conceptualizes performance as “restored behaviour,” that is, actions that are repeated, rehearsed, and culturally patterned. According to him, performances are not spontaneous occurrences but socially recognized activities that derive meaning from their repetition within particular cultural contexts. Such performances may be theatrical, ritualistic, ceremonial, political, or communicative. This understanding is particularly relevant to the institution of the Town Crier in traditional African societies, where the act of disseminating information follows established conventions involving vocal delivery, symbolic instruments, movement, and audience interaction.

Performance Theory further emphasizes the relationship between performer and audience. Schechner maintains that performance is incomplete without an audience, whether physically present or symbolically implied. The audience serves as an active participant in the construction of meaning. This perspective is significant in understanding the activities of the Town Crier whose announcements are designed not merely to inform but also to attract attention, provoke response, and stimulate communal participation. The sounding of the gong, bell, or drum functions as an invitation to performance, creating a temporary performance space within the community and transforming listeners into an audience.

The theory also recognizes the importance of space in performance. Unlike conventional Western theatre, which is often restricted to purpose-built stages, Performance Theory acknowledges that performance can occur in any environment where expressive actions are enacted before an audience. Schechner (2013) argues that streets, marketplaces, village squares, and communal gathering spaces can function as performance arenas. This notion aligns with the activities of the Town Crier, whose performance space is not a formal theatre but the entire community. Through movement from one

location to another, the Town Crier converts ordinary communal spaces into sites of performance and communication.

Another important aspect of Performance Theory is its emphasis on embodiment. Performance scholars argue that communication is achieved not only through spoken language but also through gestures, posture, movement, costume, facial expression, and the manipulation of objects. In traditional African societies, communication frequently combines verbal and non-verbal elements to achieve maximum effectiveness. The Town Crier exemplifies this performative embodiment through his use of vocal projection, rhythmic speech, symbolic gestures, movement across space, and the handling of communicative instruments such as the gong or bell. These elements collectively contribute to the theatrical quality of his role. The theory also accommodates the concept of improvisation and flexibility, which are fundamental characteristics of African oral performance traditions. Oral performances are often composed and modified during presentation to suit audience expectations and contextual realities. As noted by Eze et al. (2021), oral artists frequently engage in “composition-in-performance,” adapting content according to circumstances while maintaining the essential message. The Town Crier similarly demonstrates this flexibility by adjusting his style of delivery, tone, language, and emphasis depending on the nature of the message and the audience being addressed.

From the perspective of Performance Theory, the Town Crier may therefore be understood as a performer whose communicative activities transcend the mere transmission of information. His role involves deliberate acts of presentation, audience engagement, symbolic representation, and cultural enactment. The sounding of the gong, the dramatic proclamation of messages, the strategic use of pauses, repetition, rhythm, and movement all contribute to the creation of a performance event. In this regard, the Town Crier performs functions comparable to those of a solo actor or dramatic monologist who relies on personal skill and audience interaction to sustain attention and convey meaning. The relevance of Performance Theory to this study lies in its capacity to illuminate the theatrical dimensions of Town Crying. While previous studies have largely examined the Town Crier as an indigenous communication agent, this theory enables a deeper exploration of the performative elements embedded within the institution. Through the lens of Performance Theory, the Town Crier

emerges not merely as a messenger but as a solo performer whose actions reflect the aesthetics of African theatre, oral performance, and communal communication.

Consequently, this framework provides the analytical basis for examining the representation of the Town Crier in Amirikpa Oyigbenu's *Town Hall Whispers*. It facilitates an understanding of how the Town Crier's voice, movement, gesture, costume, props, and interaction with community members function as theatrical devices that transform information dissemination into a performative act. By applying Performance Theory, this study demonstrates that the Town Crier occupies a significant position within the broader landscape of African theatre and performance traditions.

Analysis of Town Hall Whispers

The Town Crier as a Dramatic Monologist

One of the most remarkable features of the Town Crier in Amirikpa Oyigbenu's *Town Hall Whispers* is his role as a dramatic monologist. A dramatic monologue is a dramatic form in which a single speaker addresses an audience while revealing information, emotions, or circumstances through speech. Throughout the play, the Town Crier appears alone at significant moments and assumes sole responsibility for communicating crucial information to the community.

The opening scene introduces the Town Crier as the first active voice in the drama. His announcement of the king's invitation to a community meeting immediately establishes the dramatic action and provides the audience with essential information regarding the events that will unfold. In this respect, the Town Crier functions as a narrator and mediator between the authority of the king and the community. His solitary presence mirrors the structure of solo performance in which one performer sustains audience attention through speech and physical presence. The Town Crier's appearances at the beginning, middle, and end of the play further reinforce his role as a dramatic monologist. At the climax of the conflict, he is again entrusted with summoning the people to an emergency meeting. Similarly, at the resolution of the drama, he reappears to restore order and direct communal attention. These strategic appearances demonstrate that the Town Crier is not merely a

messenger but a dramatic device that advances the plot and guides audience understanding of the unfolding events.

Through his solo performances, the Town Crier embodies characteristics commonly associated with monodrama and solo theatre, where a single performer becomes the focal point of communication and representation. His role confirms that indigenous African communication practices possess theatrical qualities comparable to recognized dramatic forms.

Voice and Vocal Performance

Voice constitutes one of the Town Crier's most important performative tools. Since the effectiveness of his role depends largely on oral communication, the Town Crier relies on vocal projection, articulation, rhythm, and modulation to communicate messages clearly and effectively. In traditional African communities where communication is predominantly oral, a strong and commanding voice is essential for reaching a dispersed audience.

In *Town Hall Whispers*, the Town Crier's proclamations demonstrate a deliberate use of vocal authority. His announcements are delivered in a manner that commands attention and conveys urgency. The language employed in his speeches is formal and authoritative because he speaks on behalf of the king and the traditional institution. Consequently, his voice carries symbolic authority beyond his individual identity. The performative quality of the Town Crier's voice can also be understood through rhythm and repetition. Traditional announcers often repeat key phrases to ensure that messages are clearly understood by listeners. Such repetition creates a rhythmic pattern that enhances audience engagement and retention. The Town Crier's vocal delivery therefore transcends ordinary speech and enters the realm of performance.

Furthermore, vocal projection enables the Town Crier to transform public announcements into dramatic events. Through variations in tone, volume, and pace, he creates suspense, urgency, and anticipation. These vocal techniques align closely with the practices of solo performers who rely exclusively on their voices to sustain audience interest and communicate meaning.

Gesture and Movement

Performance is not limited to speech alone. Physical actions, gestures, and movement contribute significantly to the communication process. In *Town Hall Whispers*, the Town Crier's role involves continuous movement throughout the community as he travels from one location to another disseminating information. This movement transforms ordinary communal spaces into performance arenas.

The Town Crier's gestures complement his verbal communication. His bodily expressions reinforce the importance of the messages he delivers and assist in capturing audience attention. Through hand movements, body posture, facial expressions, and physical positioning, he emphasizes particular points and enhances audience understanding.

From a theatrical perspective, movement serves both practical and symbolic functions. Practically, the Town Crier must physically reach different parts of the community to ensure widespread dissemination of information. Symbolically, his movement represents the circulation of authority, knowledge, and communal values throughout society. Every stop he makes becomes a temporary stage upon which performance occurs.

Performance Theory emphasizes that meaning is generated through embodied action. The Town Crier exemplifies this principle by combining movement and gesture with speech to create a complete performance event. His body functions as a communicative instrument through which messages are dramatized and made memorable for the audience.

The Gong as a Theatrical Prop

Props occupy an important place in theatrical performance because they assist performers in creating meaning and attracting audience attention. In *Town Hall Whispers*, the gong functions as the Town Crier's primary theatrical prop and serves both practical and symbolic purposes.

The play opens with the stage direction indicating that the Town Crier "beats the familiar gong to draw attention." This action immediately establishes the gong as a significant performance

instrument. Before any verbal communication occurs, the sound of the gong creates anticipation and signals the beginning of a public performance. It serves as a theatrical cue that prepares the audience for the message that follows. Beyond its communicative function, the gong symbolizes authority and legitimacy. Its sound represents the presence of traditional leadership and communal power. When listeners hear the gong, they recognize that an important announcement is about to be made. The instrument therefore functions as a symbolic extension of the king's authority.

From a theatrical standpoint, the gong operates similarly to props used in conventional theatre productions. It helps define character identity, establish atmosphere, and direct audience attention. The repeated use of the gong throughout the play reinforces its significance as an essential component of the Town Crier's performance. Without it, the dramatic impact of his announcements would be considerably diminished. The gong also contributes to the auditory aesthetics of the performance. Its rhythmic sounds create an acoustic environment that distinguishes ordinary communication from ceremonial proclamation. Consequently, the instrument enhances the theatricality of the Town Crier's role and strengthens his identity as a performer.

Audience Interaction and Participation

Audience participation is one of the defining features of African performance traditions. Unlike conventional Western theatre, where audiences often remain passive observers, African performances encourage interaction and communal involvement. The Town Crier's activities in *Town Hall Whispers* exemplify this participatory tradition. The Town Crier's announcements are directed toward a collective audience consisting of community members. His performance depends on their attention, response, and cooperation. The sounding of the gong serves as an invitation for people to gather and participate in the communication process. In this sense, audience members become active participants rather than passive recipients.

The relationship between the Town Crier and his audience reflects the principles of Performance Theory, which emphasize the co-creation of meaning between performer and spectators. The effectiveness of the Town Crier's message depends on audience engagement and comprehension.

Community members respond to his announcements by attending meetings, obeying directives, and participating in communal activities.

In *Town Hall Whispers*, audience interaction also contributes to dramatic progression. The Town Crier's announcements trigger actions that influence the development of the plot. His summons to meetings brings characters together, facilitates conflict resolution, and advances communal decision-making. Thus, the audience within the play functions as both recipient and participant in the dramatic process. The participatory nature of the Town Crier's performance demonstrates the communal essence of African theatre. Rather than existing as an isolated performer, he engages in a dynamic relationship with the people he addresses. This interaction transforms communication into performance and reinforces his position as a solo performer operating within a collective cultural framework.

Conclusion

This study examined the Town Crier as a solo performer in African theatre and drama, with particular reference to Amirikpa Oyigbenu's *Town Hall Whispers*. While previous studies have largely focused on the Town Crier as an indigenous communication agent, this paper has demonstrated that the role extends beyond information dissemination to encompass significant theatrical and performative dimensions. Through the lens of Performance Theory, the study has shown that the Town Crier functions as a performer whose activities embody essential characteristics of African oral performance and traditional theatre.

The analysis reveals that the Town Crier operates as a dramatic monologist whose solo appearances at crucial moments in the play contribute significantly to plot development and audience understanding. His use of voice, vocal projection, rhythm, and verbal artistry transforms ordinary announcements into compelling performance acts. Similarly, his gestures, bodily movements, and mobility across communal spaces convert the village environment into a dynamic performance arena. These performative elements underscore the theatrical nature of Town Crying and highlight its relevance within African dramatic traditions.

The study further establishes the importance of the gong as a theatrical prop that serves both communicative and symbolic functions. Beyond attracting attention, the gong signifies authority, legitimacy, and communal identity, thereby enhancing the dramatic impact of the Town Crier's performance. Equally important is the participatory relationship between the Town Crier and his audience. The interactive nature of his performances reflects the communal aesthetics of African theatre, where meaning is created through the active engagement of performers and spectators.

Through its examination of *Town Hall Whispers*, this study argues that the Town Crier should be recognized not only as a traditional communicator but also as a significant performer within the broader framework of African theatre and performance studies. His ability to combine speech, gesture, movement, symbolism, and audience interaction demonstrates the convergence of communication and theatrical expression in traditional African societies.

The paper therefore contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding the performative dimensions of the Town Crier and by expanding discussions on indigenous African theatrical practices. It concludes that the Town Crier occupies a unique position as both a custodian of communal communication and a solo performer whose activities exemplify the aesthetics, creativity, and vitality of African performance traditions. Future studies may further explore the representation of Town Criers in other African dramatic texts, oral traditions, and contemporary performance practices to deepen scholarly understanding of this important cultural institution.

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