

Exploring the Role of Theatrical Texts in Evangelism: A Comparative Study of *Everyman* and *Eniyan*

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Abstract

Stories have been presented on the stage, bringing together important truths and people's lives. Within Christian moralistic and Yoruba cultural traditions, these plays strongly show how theatre can convey religious messages, values and instructions. It looks at the way Everyman and Eniyan dramas are used to teach lessons through comparative analysis. Although written long apart and in many cultures, these works all try to show spiritual truths and inspire audiences to think about right and wrong. The characters in the medieval Christian play Everyman are allegories and the story follows the journey of the soul towards salvation. Eniyan follows the same story as Wole Soyinka's but tells it using an African religious view and blending universal religious ideas with Yoruba customs. A study of dramaturgy, themes and reactions from audiences have helped this work demonstrate that theatre crosses cultural lines to spread religious ideas. It demonstrates that plays can still create personal changes and link faith with art. By observing the structure and what happens on stage, the research highlights the ability of theatrical texts to spread faith, reach a range of audiences and help people reflect and transform spiritually. It also contributes to discussions about the relationship between religion, culture and arts through performance.

Keywords: Christianity, Culture, Evangelism, Medieval, Theatrical Text.

Introduction

Cultures all over the world and in history have documented the use of plays for evangelism. Scholars have discovered that in medieval Christianity, drama, especially morality plays, were important for teaching religion to groups who could not read. Hardison (2008) says, in her study of medieval theatre, that plays like *Everyman* were designed to help audiences become virtuous by giving useful moral guidance. In a similar way, Somerset (2018) stresses that medieval morality plays were carried out publicly, so that the community could unite for religious guidance. In a different vein, many African theatre studies like those by Femi Osofisan and Akinwande Oluwole examine how local performance styles have been used to

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spread the gospel in the postcolonial period. Ogunyemi (1999) discusses how African playwrights have used traditional African performance methods and merged them with Christian themes to tell religious stories in new ways. Ogunyemi blends Yoruba religious ideas with Christian moral guidance in the novel *Eniyan*. According to Omole (2019), African evangelical theatre helps people grow spiritually and at the same time brings attention to societal problems such as corruption, injustice and human weakness from a religious standpoint. This is in agreement with Ekpe and Wekpe (2023), who state that literature can inspire analysis of human concerns, just as Ekeke (2025), Jacob (2024) and Iyorza and Iseyen (2022) also believe. The link between theatre and religion is reflected in a long history, as artworks in play can inspire deep spiritual and ethical learning. Scripts for theater have been written in many cultures and ages to show religious ideas, provide guidance for good living and push audiences to think spiritually. This practice of theater for preaching goes back to the medieval period, seen in plays like *Everyman* and is also found today in adaptations like *Eniyan*.

Everyman, written in the 15th century, is regarded as a key example of using plays to teach about religion. The plot which includes both allegory and personification, dramatizes the religious pilgrimage that people experience on their path to salvation (Murray, 1999). The use of drama makes it possible to encourage morality and share Christian thoughts on a common and symbolic way to tell about universal human concerns. Meanwhile, *Eniyan* shows how storytellers can update the basic ideas using today's language and setting. The play demonstrates how religious and moral thinking changes to address problems in society today. *Eniyan* relates traditional religious ideas in a way that is meaningful to modern audiences, showing that evangelism can be applied creatively no matter the changing cultural situation. It seems similar to what Ekpe and Okoronkwo (2024) found, suggesting that contemporary transformations work together with, not against, old traditions. Bassey (2025) points out that theatre arts have progressed, just like other areas, yet this does not dismiss former practices. Studying both plays together sheds light on how religions have been shown on stage over different periods and cultures. It points out how theatre can be used to spread the Word, always considering and representing the values and issues present in the age in which it was produced. With this background, the ways theatrical evangelism worked and grew can be considered, preparing us to look closely at what *Everyman* and *Eniyan* did.

Even though some theatrical texts are used in evangelism, not many comparative studies have looked at the two traditions. People agree that *Everyman* is a well-known morality play, but not everyone thinks it is meaningful for audiences now. Similar to Entertainment, *Eniyan*

tackles present-day topics, but the role of traditional Christian evangelism has not been fully explained. It looks at how, despite being different, these two plays share evangelical messages and can bring about spiritual and moral renewal.

In addition, researchers have looked closely at the part theatre plays in communicating religious ideas, especially connected to virtue and morality. In titles such as *Everyman* and *Eniyan*, dramatic works, mainly used in performances, tackle topics such as life, death, sin and salvation to support evangelism. Although both plays try to teach Christian principles, their settings and culture vary, so it matters to see how their evangelistic messages are effective and making a difference in various places. Going by Ekpe and Thompson (2020), it is the influences of society, politics and the economy that help shape and drive arts.

Considering the long history of theatre in passing on religious knowledge, there are not many studies to show how the setting and culture affect the way audiences receive pro-conversion messages in plays. Specifically, there is limited scholarly attention on how traditional European Christian teachings, as reflected in *Everyman*, compare with the Christian values presented in modern African theatre, as seen in *Eniyan*. Moreover, as societies evolve, the methods used for religious instruction must adapt to remain effective. While *Everyman* reflects the religious and social concerns of medieval Europe, *Eniyan* addresses contemporary moral and social challenges within an African Christian context. Understanding how these plays address their audiences and fulfil their evangelistic purposes within their respective cultures is crucial for recognizing the evolving nature of religious communication through theatre. And interestingly too *Eniyan*, in African context serve as avenue for teaching traditional cultural morals, inculcating value system, and traditional ethics (Jacob 2023).

Therefore, the problem this study seeks to address is the gap in knowledge regarding the comparative role of *Everyman* and *Eniyan* in promoting evangelism, particularly how their distinct cultural and historical contexts influence their evangelistic strategies and effectiveness. By analysing the thematic, literary, and cultural dimensions of these two plays, the paper aims to provide insights into how theatrical texts can serve as tools for evangelism across different periods and cultures, and how the methods employed in religious theatre evolve to meet the spiritual needs of their audiences.

Theatrical Texts and Evangelism

Because theatre can communicate serious religious and ethical messages in an interesting way, it has long been seen as a valuable instrument for evangelism. Thanks to spoken lines, performances and allegory, the audience can feel and understand the abstract concepts in

religion. Evangelism with theatrical texts takes religious lessons and advice and changes them into plays intended to educate, entertain and motivate change in those who see them. Such texts mix art with Christian teachings, not only for people's joy but also to lead them spiritually and help them stay morally upright. Morality plays of the 15th century, including *Everyman* and modern Nigerian dramas, for example *Eniyan* by Wale Ogunyemi, both show how theatre plays a role in evangelism.

Medieval Europe

Medieval theatre was closely attached to the church and was mostly used to teach about religion. Morality plays such as *Everyman*, were the main form of religious theater in the Late Middle Ages. *Everyman* was used by Christians to explain what happens after death, God's judgment and the path to salvation using a format the illiterate people could understand. The play compares the soul's travel to death to facing judgment, as it emphasizes the Christian teaching that acts of kindness are what decide whether someone gets admitted to heaven. It convinces people to think and act more like Christians by urging them to live a morally upright life. *Everyman* deals with abstract themes like Death, Doing Good Works, Knowledge and Fellowship by giving them human characteristics.

Because the drama was staged in places open to all such as marketplaces and guildhalls, every person could understand the lessons shared by *Everyman*. Apart from entertaining, drama was a way to help people spiritually and support the church's goal of helping people find salvation.

Postcolonial Period

In contrast to the medieval European context, Wale Ogunyemi's *Eniyan* represents how theatrical texts are used for evangelism in a postcolonial, African context. *Eniyan* draws on both Christian teachings and traditional Yoruba spirituality to explore themes of morality, responsibility, and human weakness. Nigeria, with its complex mix of indigenous traditions and Western influences (including Christianity), provides a fertile ground for the syncretism of religious messages in theatre.

By using the form of the morality play, Ogunyemi highlights the problem of corruption in Nigeria by blending Christianity and Yoruba religion. Even though *Eniyan* reflects Christian beliefs in things such as good and evil, sin and salvation, it also shows the importance of communal duty and harmony with the spirit world to Yoruba people. Ogunyemi brings these different influences together to ensure that the play relates to Nigerians who live alongside different religious traditions. Spreading the Christian faith is part of evangelism in *Eniyan*, but

the main goal is to encourage ethical behaviour and social responsibility among people dealing with modern issues. The story highlights problems in a person's and society's ethics and encourages them to be more morally wholesome. By using familiar religious and cultural references Ogunyemi makes the play accessible and impactful, making the moral messages resonate deeply with the audience.

Cultural Relevance and Contextualization

Everyman was written in late 15th-century Europe during a time when the Catholic Church dominated the cultural and religious landscape. Its primary audience were Christian, and the play reflects medieval European concerns about salvation, sin, and the afterlife. The play teaches Christian doctrine about judgment, repentance, and the necessity of good deeds for salvation, reflecting the moral and religious values of the time.

Eniyan, written by Wale Ogunyemi, is set in a postcolonial Nigerian context, where Christianity and indigenous Yoruba religious beliefs coexist. The play addresses moral decay and corruption in modern society, blending Christian ethics with Yoruba spiritual traditions. Ogunyemi's play reflects the challenges of postcolonial identity, where Western and African values merge and conflict. It critiques social and political issues while exploring morality from both Christian and Yoruba perspectives.

Communal Engagement and Participation

Theatre, particularly in cultures like the Yoruba tradition, is a communal activity that brings people together to reflect on shared values and beliefs. In the context of evangelism, theatrical performances become not only a means of individual reflection but also a way to engage the entire community in discussions about morality, ethics, and faith. Performances like *Everyman* in medieval Europe or *Eniyan* in modern Nigeria are more than mere entertainment; they serve as catalysts for communal introspection and societal change. And as noted in Bassey's (2025) study: literature has . . . both historically and currently, help to both inspire and shape change. Jacob (2024) adds that literature from inception has remained a predominant means of eliciting exhilarations and the sublime appreciation of man's inner sensation towards nature and the world around him, just as it has been a means of expression of inner thoughts and feelings.

The communal aspect of performances in Yoruba theatre is consistent with the notion of shared moral and spiritual accountability. *Eniyan* involves audiences as active participants in a common moral journey rather than merely passive observers. Similar to this, morality plays like *Everyman*'s public nature in medieval Europe served to further the notion that moral

behaviour and redemption were issues that affected the entire society rather than simply the individual. However, theatrical texts in evangelism serve as dynamic tools for moral instruction, spiritual reflection, and community engagement. Plays like *Everyman* and *Eniyan* exemplify how theatre can blend entertainment with religious teaching, using allegory, performance, and communal participation to communicate powerful messages about faith and morality. While the cultural and historical contexts of these plays differ, their use of theatre to promote ethical behaviour and spiritual reflection highlights the enduring power of theatrical texts in evangelism across different societies.

Cultural and Religious Syncretism in *Everyman* and *Eniyan*

Everyman is based on Christian teachings, mainly from Catholicism and forms the basis of medieval morality plays. The dominant religious ideas of medieval Europe are shown here, pointing out that repentance, the sacraments and divine judgment are needed. Whilst many see it mainly as a Christian religion, it still shows signs of older philosophical and cultural influences. It has been suggested that Christian belief uses allegory the same way pre-Christian traditions described good and bad traits as personified characters. Also, the play presents death as a moment for moral judgement in a way that is much like pre-Christian European beliefs about fate and the afterlife. So, *Everyman* is not just a Christian work; it merges Christian beliefs with what people were already familiar with which made it beneficial for showing the gospel to its audience.

Moreover, *Eniyan* stands out as a syncretic example because it is centered within Yoruba culture. European missionaries introduced Christianity to the Yoruba people, but the way it became part of Yoruba society was very familiar. Because traditional Yoruba spirituality covered issues including morals, ethics and the future (destiny), Christianity was already in line with some of its beliefs. Messages in *Eniyan* are often delivered using the techniques of Yoruba stories, songs and local drama. Unlike *Everyman*, which strictly follows a medieval European structure, *Eniyan* may incorporate elements of oral tradition, making the play feel more authentic and relatable to a Yoruba audience.

This comparison highlights how religious messages do not exist in isolation. Instead, they interact with the existing cultural and artistic traditions of a society. Christianity, as an evangelizing force, does not remain unchanged when it enters a new culture; it blends with and is shaped by local traditions. This process of adaptation is a form of cultural and religious syncretism. This presents an interesting read to the study by Ekpe (2016) and Bassey (2025), arguing that identity fits individuals into the society in which they live and where there is no

synergy, there is bound to be conflicts in the course of historic and cultural development especially, in a class society.

In both plays, we see a merging of religious evangelism and cultural expression, demonstrating that faith is often communicated in ways that align with the traditions of a people. While *Everyman* reflects the medieval European understanding of Christian morality, *Eniyan* showcases how the same Christian themes can be woven into an African cultural context. This syncretism ensures that religious messages remain effective and relevant across different societies, reinforcing the idea that religion is not static but continually shaped by culture and history. And as observed by Bassey (2025), plays that tackle socio-political themes have a long history.

Theoretical Framework

The paper leans on interrelated concepts from literary theory, performance studies, and theology; specifically, it hinges on Performance Theory as well as Religious Communication and Evangelism Theory. These perspectives provide a foundation for analysing how theatrical texts function as mediums of religious communication and moral instruction.

•Performance Theory

The main focus in this study is theatre as something that is performed. Performance theorists Richard Schechner and Victor Turner look at the relationship between traditional and religious rituals and performances. Writers like Schechner (2003) and Turner (1982) argue that theatre is more about shared participation in cultural and spiritual activities than about just performing. Because *Everyman* and *Eniyan* are written to be enacted, they fulfill more roles than storytelling and actively involve audiences to consider moral and spiritual themes. The plays give their audiences the opportunity to think about their ethics, their mortality and their relationship with the powers above.

In analysing *Eniyan*, the role of performance as ritual is very significant, as the play references themes from both Yoruba and Christian traditions. Because Yoruba performances are tied to religious and social events, Ogunyemi's use of them in *Eniyan* is an extension of this way of storytelling. Medieval dramas such as *Everyman* were used as public events to give guidance on how to achieve salvation with a mix of acting and religion.

Religious Communication and Evangelism Theory

Clifford Geertz and Emile Durkheim among others, help us to understand that religious

communication plays a major part in how theatrical texts reach out with a message. Geertz (1973) underlines that religious practices convey not only religious beliefs but also the emotions and values connected to faith. In this way, *Everyman* and *Eniyan* display religious content by adding drama structures and experiences to their teachings and messages.

In religious studies, evangelism means trying to share religious beliefs with others and working to bring them into a chosen religion. In this case, *Everyman* and *Eniyan* are written to encourage their audiences to adopt certain religious beliefs. *Everyman* makes use of Christian metaphors to underline the truth of death and the call for repentance; while *Eniyan* brings together Yoruba religious elements and Christian beliefs to shed light on various moral issues. They depend on dramatic stories to make religious ideas easy to understand and touch their audiences emotionally.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research approach, focusing on textual analysis of the selected text, as the study seeks to explore the ways in which theatrical texts have been used as instruments of evangelism. By conducting a comparative study of *Everyman* and *Eniyan*, the research aims to examine the religious, moral, and spiritual messages embedded in these works and their effectiveness in communicating Christian doctrine. The rationale for this design is to allow for an in-depth exploration of how these two distinct yet parallel texts convey theological messages and their respective impacts on their audiences.

The Case Studies: *Everyman* and *Eniyan*

Everyman is an allegorical morality play, originating in the late 15th century, that dramatizes the central Christian message of salvation and the human soul's journey towards judgment. *Everyman*, the protagonist, is a representation of humanity, and his journey towards death serves as a metaphor for Christian teachings on repentance, redemption, and divine judgment. This play is significant for its use in European Christian evangelism during the medieval period. *Eniyan* (meaning 'man' in Yoruba language) is a 20th-century Nigerian play by Wale Ogunyemi that adapts similar moral and religious themes but within the context of Yoruba traditions and Christian evangelism in Africa. *Eniyan* merges Yoruba oral traditions with Christian eschatology to present a localized version of the universal human struggle between good and evil, sin and redemption. The play uses indigenous symbols and cultural references to make Christian teachings more accessible to its African audience.

These two plays, though from different cultural and historical contexts, both serve the same

function: to communicate Christian doctrine and encourage moral behaviour through dramatization. Their use of allegory, personification, and moral messaging makes them powerful tools for evangelism.

***Everyman* and Evangelism:**

- (i) The allegorical structure: Each character in *Everyman* (e.g., Good Deeds, Knowledge, Fellowship) represents abstract ideas related to the Christian faith. Moral lessons are efficiently communicated by this framework, which also invites audience members to consider their own spiritual life.
- (ii) Themes of death and salvation: The play's primary focus is the inevitability of death and the importance of leading a virtuous life to attain salvation. This theme is directly aligned with the core principles of Christian evangelism, which emphasize repentance and redemption.
- (iii) Direct appeal to the audience: The play ends with a direct appeal to the audience, urging them to reflect on their own lives. This closing message functions as a call to action, a common feature in evangelical texts.

***Eniyan* and Evangelism:**

- (i) Cultural context and evangelism: *Eniyan* draws heavily on Yoruba cultural practices, incorporating proverbs, songs, and local customs. These cultural elements make the message of the play more relatable to Nigerian audiences, effectively bridging the gap between traditional beliefs and Christian teachings.
- (ii) Symbolic characters: Similar to *Everyman*, the characters in *Eniyan* symbolize various moral qualities, such as wisdom, foolishness, and repentance. Through dialogue and interaction, the play communicates moral lessons that align with Christian doctrines.
- (iii) Christian doctrines in an African context: The play weaves Christian doctrines into an African context, emphasizing themes such as humility, forgiveness, and the importance of faith in God. This contextualization enhances its effectiveness as an evangelical tool.

Comparative Analysis:

Eniyan and *Everyman* use stories and characters to examine moral issues, even though they both come from different cultures and ages. *Everyman* reveals the interests of religion and society that mattered in medieval Europe, but *Eniyan* is set in modern Nigeria, when Christianity and Yoruba tradition are both present. By using personification and allegory, the playwrights are able to present more complex moral and spiritual messages clearly, providing

theatre for enjoyment as well as for teaching.

Although *Everyman* and *Eniyan* originate from different cultures and times, they are alike in using theatre to teach about morality and religion. In both cases, the plays fit the definition of a morality play which uses allegories to set guidelines for human conduct, spirituality and ethics. Still, these novels differ greatly in their cultural settings, what their authors believe and their main themes. Both plays try to spread the message, but they use different techniques to appeal to their audiences. The play, *Everyman*, uses a general Christian message to point out that we all must die and seek personal salvation. Because Christianity was at the core of medieval European life, the text is straightforward in its approach. Unlike some, *Eniyan* styles its teaching to reach a particular audience in Africa, combining Christian beliefs with Yoruba customs. This way of staging encourages the audience to relate to the play and proves that Christian teachings can adapt in a multicultural society. Talking in the audience's language, using their proverbs and including songs make the play more effective for evangelism, both spiritually and culturally.

Conclusion

Theatrical texts like *Everyman* and *Eniyan* remain powerful tools in evangelism. Both plays embody the notion that theatre, with its capacity for visual and emotional engagement, serves as an effective medium for communicating complex theological ideas. By personifying virtues and vices, these plays simplify spiritual teachings, making them accessible to a broad audience. *Everyman* reflects the universality of Christian doctrine, presenting salvation as a journey every individual must undertake. Its use of allegory to dramatize abstract concepts like Death, Good Deeds, and Knowledge makes its message both memorable and impactful. *Eniyan*, on the other hand, demonstrates the adaptability of Christian themes to diverse cultural settings. By drawing on Yoruba customs and linguistic nuances, it shows how evangelical messages can be made relatable and compelling for African audiences, blending traditional beliefs with Christian ideology. In both cases, the use of theatrical performance enhances the spiritual and emotional engagement of audiences, reaffirming the idea that the arts, particularly drama can be a bridge between doctrine and the lived experiences of people. The findings also underscore that evangelical strategies can benefit greatly from incorporating elements of drama, especially when addressing diverse cultural contexts.

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