

An evaluation of the dramatic aesthetics of Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals of Ossissa people of Delta State

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the dramatic aesthetics of the Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals of Ossissa people of Ndokwa-East Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The study, which is a survey of the performance tradition, critically analyses the controversy surrounding the views of African dramatic scholars (the evolutionists and the relativists) on the question of what constitutes drama in the context of Nigerian traditional performances. This controversy arose as a result of Aristotle's concept of drama with its emphasis on imitation, plot, dialogue, conflict, etc. Based on this concept, Ruth Finnegan describes the indigenous festival traditions in Africa as "quasi-dramatic phenomena" that lack the Western dramatic structures. While the evolutionist school of thought argues that the traditional festivals are not drama but rituals, the relativist school claims that the traditional festivals in Africa can be considered as dramatic performances since most of the features of drama such as music and dance, audience participation, costumes, stage, etc., are present in the festival traditions. The study employs a field work-oriented methodology, involving participatory observation of the festivals, interviews, documentary analysis, audio records, and photographs of scenes and events. The findings of the study confirm that traditional African festivals are indeed dramatic performances. The study concludes that the African traditional performance mode is indigenous to African people and must not necessarily mirror the Western model. The paper, therefore, submits that the Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals of Ossissa can be seen as complete drama just like any other Western dramatic forms.

Keywords: African festivals, dramatic aesthetics, traditional performances, costumes, African drama.

Introduction

There is convincing evidence of the existence of dramatic aesthetics or elements in African traditional performances. The performances involve music, dances, chants, speech/dialogue, spectacles, and so on. These aesthetics of drama and theatre are embedded in the domain of traditional festivals and religious rituals which are all forms of indigenous performing art generally referred to as traditional drama. However, there have been long- running debates among both Western and African literary scholars and critics about these African concept of traditional drama. This study surveys the performance tradition, critically analysing these controversies surrounding the views of scholars on the question of what constitutes drama in the context of Nigerian traditional performances.

Background

Over the years, several arguments have been put forward by scholars as to what constitutes drama in the context of Nigerian traditional performances. This controversy arose as a result of Aristotle's concept of drama with its emphasis on imitation, plot, dialogue, conflict, etc. Based on the Aristotelian concept,

Finnegan (1970), contends that drama did not exist in Africa before colonisation. According to her, what existed in Africa could be described as merely "certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena." Her stance created a division among Nigerian dramatic scholars on the definition of African traditional drama. Some of them oppose her while others align with her totally or with some modifications. Consequently, there evolved two contentious schools of thought regarding how African drama should be conceptualised, namely the evolutionists and the relativists.

According to Ogunbiyi (1981), the evolutionist school of thought founded by Michael Echeruo contends that "the traditional festivals are not drama but rituals." It posits that these festivals emphasise songs and dances with little or no attention to plot and dialogue and, therefore, lack the merit and features of drama. This school of thought further insists that until a festival or ritual is forced to yield its story, the dramatic content will remain an integral part of the ritual. Echeruo in his argument maintains that there must be a story to be enacted or imitated for a performance to be classified as drama (cited in Ogunbiyi, 1981, p. 7).

Kalu Uka cited in Ogunbiyi (1981,p.7) also dismisses the claim that African drama does exist. He states that "what is usually called drama is not yet drama but contains potentials which African drama can draw from with increasing returns." The general view of this school of thought, therefore, is that for any performance to be classified as drama, it must contain elements of imitation of an action and a story to be enacted or re-enacted. They conclude that the ritual festival in Africa must conform to the Aristotelian concept of the plot as the soul of drama before it could be considered as drama.

On the other hand,the relativist school, spearheaded by Ossie Enekwe, believes that the drama of a people should be assessed based on the cultural ideology of that people. In their separate interrogations of Echeruo's argument and basic assumptions, Emmanuel Obiechina and Ossie Enekwe extended the debate on the nature of Igbo theatre. Contending that Africa had a culture and a history different from the Greek, Obiechina, as cited in Isidore (2005, p.88), "refutes as illogical the consideration of the Greek paradigm as a universal model." His submission according to Isidore is that

"Igbo/African ritual festivals are in no further need of evolution, being already authentic drama, though understandably differentiated from classical Greek drama." Interrogating the assumption that the conventions of the European theatre are universally applicable, Obiechina(cited in Isidore,(2005) wonders why the Greek parameter should be used as a model in the evaluation of drama in Nigeria.

On the other hand, Enekwe (1981) argues that drama does not even have to evolve from myth since history or any other form of activity could equally offer material and structure for drama. In other words, drama exists in African traditional oral literature.

The concept of African traditional drama

All aspects of oral literature involve one form of performance or the other. The storyteller performs the story, and the poet also performs the poetic art but the degree of performance of each genre varies and is not comparable to the traditional dramatic performances. According to Iwuchukwu(2009), drama as an art form thrives on performance because it involves the imitation of an action, an enactment or a re-enactment of a story in life-like situations. These

dramas are generally referred to as festivals in the communities where they are seen as means of appeasing the gods/deities and the ancestors.

According to Duruaku (2003,p. 11), "traditional drama refers to indigenous performing art forms that have not been corrupted by modernisation over the years." The festivals which combine dances, songs, music, chants, speech/dialogue, spectacle, and so on,are examples of traditional drama. While some performance forms such as religious rituals, comedies, storytelling enactment, as suggested above, may or may not have all these elements, each possesses the central feature of drama known as mimesis. Duruaku captures the participatory activities of the audience in traditional African drama thus:

The audience in traditional African drama participates in the performance through chants, verbal responses, ululation, chorusing, and in physical sharing of performance space etc, with the primary performers. In a dance sequence during a festival, for instance, spectators can at intervals

exchange pleasantries with the performers, and even invade the dancing space, etc. The audience performer relationship is therefore close in the traditional African drama setting and merry-making is central to the entire activity. (Duruaku, 2003,p.11).

Drama may have evolved from imitation of action (mimesis)since humans are essentially mimetic in nature. He likes to be "someone else," if only to suggest a wish or an ability to be creative. During ritual performances and communal interactions at festivals, traditional drama evolves. Indeed, festivals, more than any other communal activity, is prevalent in Nigeria. They are usually characterised by masquerading, singing, dancing and merry- making. Some of the festivals within which drama may be found include the Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals of Ossissa people, the Igwe festival of the Binis and Ika people, the Ishe festival of the Ewulu people, Ukpalabor festival of Ukwani people, and so on. Corroborating this position, Awhefeada (2011 p.286) submits that "traditional drama remains a forte from which modern Nigeria drama continues to spring."Similarly, Idogho and

Osuya (2020), also posit that "the ingredients of drama as propounded by Aristotle is the acclaimed parameter for judging what qualifies to or not be drama abound in African festival drama."

A brief history of Ossissa community

Ossissa is a large community in Ndokwa-East Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. It is situated along Ogwashi-Uku/Kwale road. It has boundaries with Nsukwa, Isheagu, Abala-Uno, Obikwele, Afor and Ugili-Amai. Among various historical claims, Ossissa is said to have been founded by Ezechima, one of the sons of the Oba of Benin. Another historical source traces the origin of Ossissa to Igala in the present Kogi State, Nigeria. According to Nwanze (2000, p.105), "contacts through wars and trade with the Edo (Benin) and Idah (Kogi) perhaps accounted for these established mythological links." With these contacts, cultural assimilation from both cultural areas did occur. Ossissa has a compact settlement pattern and an organised political system. They speak the Ukwuani dialect of the Igbo language and worship "Chukwu" the Supreme Being. Ossissa people also believe in ancestral worship. They believe that the ancestral spirits rule from the spirit world, from where they maintain their relationship

with the living. Ossissa people also worship the Ifejioku, the yam spirit for whom there is a yearly festival. The spirit is represented by a symbolic sculptural

anthropomorphic pot referred to as the Ifejioku terracotta (Nwanze, 2000, p.105). Ossissa people are basically farmers, they cultivate such crops as cassava, yam, plantain and melon.

Ossissa traditional festivals

A festival is a periodic feast, a celebration of an event. It includes forms of entertainment and performances which are often held at a particular time of the year. Festival could be seen as that chain of activities, celebrations, ceremonies, food, drinks and rituals, which marks the continuity of culture in an environment, (Okafor cited in Udensi et al, 2020, p.205). African festival theatre brings together ideas, actions and aesthetics which are partly sacred and partly secular. There are two major festivals in Ossissa, the Ikenge and the Ifejioku festivals.

Ikenge Festival

The Ikenge (or Ikenga, as it is called among the Aniocha people of Delta State and most other Igbo communities in Eastern Nigeria, symbolises the right arm of achievement. Used in certain contexts,

it refers to the god of goodluck. Explaining this concept in Igbo cosmology, Izuegbu (2003, p.39) notes:

Ikenga is a cult object of the Igbo-speaking peoples to which traditionally is attributed success or good fortune in the professions or in life generally. It is also closely associated with the right arm with which a man hacks his way through life. Ikenge could therefore be briefly described as the Igbo god of achievement.

For example, if a woman sold the items she took to the market at an extra ordinarily high price, it is believed that her Ikenge was quite awake on that market day. If a hunter killed an animal of high value such as the buffalo or the bush pig, it is also said that his Ikenge accompanied him to the hunt. The same is said of a fisherman after a good catch. Yet, this could not be said of a hunter, who narrowly escaped being killed by a lion in the bush or a traveller that survived an accident (Izuegbu, 2003).

The Ikenge festival is a very important festival in Ossissa community. It is usually celebrated in late May or early June after the planting season. The feast,

therefore, in the words of Izuegbu "is intended to wake up the god of good luck from slumber, as it were" (Izuegbu, 2003, p.39). However, since life in traditional society is a continuum – comprising the living and the ancestors or living dead, the festival also reminds the people of Ossissa of the valour of their forebears. The celebration involves making sacrifices to the ancestral spirits to intercede with the Almighty God for the fecundity of the farms and crop seedlings.

Ikenge sacrifices/rituals

In Ossissa community, farm tools are taken to the Ikenge shrine where domestic animals and birds (mostly goats and fowls) are offered and slaughtered to appease the ancestral spirits, believing that such sacrifices would usher in the desired bountiful and prosperous farm harvests. A ritual is an honest act that follows a particular pattern, performed for a particular effect (result) and in accordance with the tradition. The concept of ritual is often viewed from a religious perspective. This hinges on the belief that humans incessantly crave to relate with their ancestors, deities and ultimately the supernatural being. This craving, in the words of Nwanaju (2013, p.1) "lies in man's appreciation of his

helplessness thus relying on supernatural help for virtually all he does and needs.”

In the past when, some times the seasons failed to take their usual course or when a calamity struck the community, people believed that the gods had been offended in one way or the other. As a result, they then devise means of atoning for their sins and/or appeasing the gods.

Sometimes, this appeasement is conducted only once but at other times it becomes a regular form of ceremony for the community. When it becomes a regular occurrence following a definite pattern to achieve a specific result, it becomes a ritual. So a ritual is a continuous practice of a group of people either to satisfy custom or cause certain things to happen or sometimes celebrated in honour or appreciation of some deities or gods. It is a kind of rite that is performed faithfully, a re-enactment that looks like drama but different from drama in its Eurocentric sense because of intent. When the intent is simply to entertain, it is drama and the audience are made up of human beings. But if the intent is to achieve a particular result and the audience is a supernatural being, it is ritual (Iwuchukwu, 2009, p. 51).

The audience refers to the people to whom the message is directed, and the priest is the medium through which the message is relayed, and the suppliants are the actors. Rituals have to do with the transformation of belief into action through enactment. Masquerades and other forms of dances are displayed during the Ikenga festival.

Masquerades

Masquerades are a major part of the culture of Ukwuani people. In most traditional African societies, masquerades are seen as gods or heroic ancestors. They take different forms and there are many varieties depending on the region, the purpose, the content and the pattern. They are usually masked figures of various kinds. A mask is a covering or a disguise used to transform the identity of the individual or the wearer into that of another character. So, there is an element of impersonation. In traditional African societies, we can identify different types of masks according to their functions based on the areas of the body covered. Thus, we have head masks, face masks and body masks.



Performing Masquerades during the Ikenga festival in Ossissa

SOURCE: Izuegbu (2003)



The Ukpalabor Masquerade of Utagba-uno

SOURCE: Chukwusa (2014)

The Ifejioku Festival of Ossissa People

According to Nwanze (2012,p.2), "the Ifejioku sculptural terracotta of Ossissa is a symbolic image representing the yam god-Ifejioku." She claims that the pieces convey very little of the impression they give in their actual place of use. Chief Michael Uyabeme, the Onotu-Uku of Umueleke Ossissa in an interview with the present researcher, explains that the Ifejioku festival (new yam festival) of Ossissa is celebrated to thank the god of harvest or pay homage to him for a good harvest of crops especially yam which is considered to be the king of all farm crops in Ossissa as well as in most Igbo communities. One of the indices for assessing a man's wealth is the number

of yam tubers he has in his barn (Eze and Ituma, 2020,p.125). Indeed, the importance of yam in the economic and social life of the Igbo-speaking communities guaranteed the religious prominence of Ifejioku in most of these communities. Because of the importance attached to the cultivation of yam, outstanding and prominent yam farmers are conferred with the title-of *Ogbu-Iji*. The Ifejioku festival is celebrated with the cooking, eating and sharing of meals made of pounded, roasted or boiled yam among friends, relations, families and well-wishers. During the Ifejioku festival, indigenes do not, as a matter of policy, eat any meal prepared with cassava such as (*fufu*).

One of the notable traditions of the Ossissa people is the offering of certain

harvested crops to the family head as a mark of honour and support to such a family head, who is no longer strong enough to farm and fend for himself due to old age. In the same vein, if a good and professional hunter happened to catch a big animal such as the buffalo or bush pig, he is required by custom to present the animal to the Okpala-uku, the eldest man in the community who would bless him in return.

One major event that takes place during the new yam festival in Ossissa and among the Igbo-speaking communities in Nigeria is the wrestling event, which takes place at the village square. Young men, dressed in traditional wrestling attires, engage one another in categories of bouts, supported with native drums, flutes and songs to praise, applaud and motivate the contestants, (Chukwusa, 2014,p.107).

Ossissa festivals as drama

In a festival performance, it is possible that the elements or features which are characteristic of drama are fully or partially present. But the absence of one or more of these features does not make any festival lose its dramatic orientation. Ossissa festivals, for example, belong to the group that do not have all the

elements of drama present in them. However, most of the performance features inherent in Ossissa festivals are, to a large extent, dramatic and these are aptly manifested in the activities of the Ikenga and Ifejioku festivals.

Dramatic Aesthetics of Ossissa Festivals *Music and Dance*

Music, according to Yamma (2016,p.94), is "a key artistic substance that encompasses all elements/aesthetics such as dialogue, rhythm, tempo, and character's thematic pre-occupations." Most traditional performances are embedded in music and dance. However, music and dance are, on their own, also forms of traditional performances. Some dances contain some re-enactment of stories and they are used to foster a sense of solidarity in the community. A good example is the Ossissa war dance and Egwu Amala dance drama.

Dance is usually accompanied by music. In traditional Nigerian society, dance is a form of entertainment during festivals and other traditional ceremonies and rites. Some dances are for mere entertainment while many of them are a re-enactment of feasts/incidents or used to communicate or promote dramatic intention. It can be either an individual or

group activity, spontaneous or conforming to a pre-conceived design or bound by tradition. Like other branches of art, it may be closely associated with religion, magic rites or superstition.

Dance involves music. So, both are inseparable. Dance includes mime, gymnastics and structures orchestrated by music. In oral literature, some forms of dance are drama. Dance drama is very common in the traditional society. The Egwu Amala of Ossissa is a good example. Dance is also one of the elements which make the Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals dramatic. During these festivals, different kinds of dances are rendered. One of such dances is the Ikenge procession dance.



Ikenge Procession dance in Ossissa (1995)



Ikenge procession dance

In Ossissa community, the Ikenge procession dance is called *Igba Ogene Ikenge*. During the procession dance, various groups parade their occupational tools, singing and dancing through major streets. The celebrants are costumed in various shades and colours, with their faces painted in either white or black colour to portray what they truly represent. The dancers are usually excited as they are moved by the rhythm of the drums. Under such a high spirit of ecstasy, some dancers could go berserk, revelling and basking in the euphoria of the drum-beat and African trumpet sounds. This indeed is dance drama.



Egwu Amala Cultural Display during Ikenge Festival in Ossissa

SOURCE: Chukwusa (2014)

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Audience

The audience, which is one of the characteristic features of drama, in Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals is open to the participants and interested onlookers. The participants in this case are those who form the chorus and chant the songs. They are mainly indigenes of Ossissa who know how to chant the songs. The interested onlookers are those who merely come to watch the performance and enjoy the entertainment. In Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals today, there is audience participation. But it is expressed in the chanting of songs and dancing.

Costumes and make-ups

Costumes and make-ups are essential features of dramatic production. The term 'costume' is originally used to designate the fashions and habits of figures in paintings and sculptures, but today we have stage costumes. The term refers to the clothes worn by people from a particular place or during a particular historical period, the clothes worn by actors in a play or film/movie, or worn by somebody to make them look like something or someone else.

Costumes play a major role in Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals of Ossissa people. During

these festivals, various forms of costumes are used. For instance, during the Ikenge procession dance, various groups parade their occupational tools, singing and dancing through major streets, costumed in various shades and colours with their faces painted in different colours to portray what they seek to represent. But the common feature of the precisionists is the native white chalk that is rubbed on their foreheads. Make-up disguise is spectacular about traditional drama. This disguise gives the actor a new identity. Make-up could also be seen as a dramatic exposition. Ossissa festivals are rich in make-up disguise, all of which appeals to the power of attracting a large audience.



Ikenge celebrants in different costumes

Source: Online image

Stage

In the western sense of the dramatic tradition, a stage is a raised platform for

performance. But African scholars of traditional drama contend that anywhere that is suitable for any display could serve as a stage. The Ikenga and Ifejioku festivals of Ossissa, for instance, take place at different locations of the town. However, most of the activities take place at the community square. The people usually form a wide circle with the interested onlookers on one side of the arena and the drummers on the other.



A typical festival arena in Nigeria. Spectators watch freely and may ululate as masquerades dance by. The performance space is large enough to accommodate several masquerades at the same time.

SOURCE: Duruaku (1997)

Dialogue

Dialogue refers to a conversation between two or more persons. This could be done through the spoken word or

carried out through mime, which involves the enactment of various situations and mannerisms that have to be expressed through singing, gestures and body movement. When these actions are performed, they relate a particular message to the audience without the spoken word.

Gestures are hand or head movements, which could relate a message to the other person to whom the gesture is directed. This acts as a kind of communication link, which is made from the normal conversation that occurs between characters in drama. The message is got and they communicate with one another without talking, as each move has a purpose or meaning attached to it. Examples of this could be found in Ossissa traditional festivals and rituals. Other forms of dialogue include incantations, exhortations and invocations made in the form of prayers or chants to the ancestors. This could be a sort of earnest request, a speech made to the ancestors by the Chief Priest or Okpala-uku asking for the favour of the ancestral spirits.



Ikenga Festival (1995) Okpala Serving the gods)
SOURCE: Chukwusa (2014)

The importance of festivals in Nigeria

The importance of festivals in the Nigerian traditional societies cannot be over-emphasised. Festivals are a way of showcasing the country's rich cultural heritage as well as various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Festivals uphold and promote solidarity and collective consciousness among a particular people. Festivals are characterised by collective euphoria where the sacred and the profane are interwoven. Usually, there is a suspension of the rules and norms of ordinary life.

They are characterised by non-work posture. Leisure is the central element in festivals. So people look forward to festivals as a period of enjoyment and relaxation. There is usually a gradual change of occupational activities. Many festivals take place during the period of 'rest' for the people when there is less work to be done on the farms. Festivals provide a forum for entertainment and recreation for the people (Nwachukwu 2009,p,50)

Festivals encourage unity and the spirit of oneness among the people as they relate and commune together in one accord. Festivals also offer people the opportunity to celebrate with members of different families and communities as well as a means of preservation of a people's culture. Festivals in whichever community they are celebrated, teach the younger generations as well as remind the older ones the way of their fathers and the overall culture of the people. Festivals also celebrate bravery and physical prowess. This could be highly stimulating as people (both old and young) often find themselves wishing they could perform the acts celebrated, and in some cases attempting the deeds that gave rise to the celebration witnessed..(Ejiodu (2004,p,64)

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it has been shown that oral literature manifests itself in three genres of literature namely prose which may include narratives, myths, legends, folk tales, proverbs and riddles, and so on; poetry which includes all expressions of thought or feelings in rhythmic language – songs, chants, incantations, etc.; and drama which includes festivals, rituals, ancestor worship, masquerades, carnivals etc.

We have also observed that traditional African drama and theatre are embedded

in performances, such as rituals, festivals, storytelling, masquerades, poetry composed performances, music/dance, puppet shows and many other forms of performances. For drama to exist, there must be an element of imitation of an action. Other features to be considered include the audience, costumes, stage and dialogue. All these are present in Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals. The paper insists that a unified plot structure should not be considered obligatory in dramatic performance. In light of the dramatic features of Ikenge and Ifejioku festivals of Ossissa people, the paper concludes that these festivals can be seen as complete drama just like any other Western drama.

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