

African Traditional Drama: The Igbo-Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

Igbo people have been entertaining themselves with dramatic performances before the white man came to their environment to sojourn. Their performances include ritual activities at their places of worship which are today the re-enactments of the initial effort to relate with God by their ancestors. Other dramatic performances of theirs are masquerade performances, traditional music and dance, folklore sessions especially at moonlight nights, festivals, wrestling contests and outing ceremonies. All these aspects of their dramatic culture are not in line with the Eurocentric tradition. As a result, Europeans and highly Europeanized Africans do not accept them as drama as a result of which they mean that Africa had no traditional drama prior to the arrival of Europeans in Africa. It is untrue because so far the culture of a people satisfies the needs of the people, that culture is not only independent but also complete unto itself. This paper that takes a look at different aspects of African drama with respect to the Igbo culture is a study made on survey research. The paper is divided into the introduction, the body and the conclusion.

Keywords: Igbo people, traditional drama, masquerade performances, folklore sessions, dramatic culture.

INTRODUCTION

Various peoples of the world have time of enjoying life in their culture. Depending on the culture, there are similarities and differences among the shows of the peoples. By and by, a people have their spectacular performances for entertaining themselves. The performances are dramatic because they are planned and rehearsed for future dates at agreed venues and performers put on costumes to mimic ideas and characters. Such performances, according to Mbiti (1975:10), include “praying, making sacrifices and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs and so on”. Further, he states that it is when people “sing, dance, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event”.

From the pre-colonial period till date, Igbo people work a lot in their farms as they are mostly engaged in agriculture. Their own agriculture has been unmechanized so they spend much energy on manual labour. This is why they never had time to enjoy themselves during the rainy season. They faced their work from clearing the bush to cultivating and harvesting. But when the farming season comes to an end, that is from the beginning of the dry season, say October, Igbo people have much time to spend. They also have plenty to eat as they would be harvesting their crops. It is from that time that they begin to celebrate festivals. They start the enjoyments with new yam festivals to thank God for the good yields of their crops and pray Him to give them long life to see the same festival the following year. Orji (1999:58) states that the worst during the planting season was the scarcity of food which hit the people so when it is time of performances one could “imagine in what

state of joy the people would find themselves”. As the dry season advances, various Igbo communities begin to celebrate different festivals in honour of various deities. The spectacular performances of people and masquerades at various village squares are always manual. In addition to the periodic performances, traditional religious worships, Afa divination poetry renditions, blessing of kola nuts etc that have dramatic qualities contribute to the entertainment of the people.

It is known that some people with some Eurocentric views do not project some of these performances as drama. Those that discard these performances are very much subjective because for research works to be true situations of the studied issues the researcher should be open-minded to accept facts. Ruth Finnegan’s reservation in accepting the dramatic performances of Africans as what they are made her describe them as “dramatic and quasidramatic phenomena” (Echeruo 1981:136). If the dramatic performances of Greek classical culture originated from ritual performances in honour of gods, Dionysus and Apollon, why would the ritual performances of Igbo gods, nay all the gods in Africa, be rejected.

One principle of culture states that no culture is inferior to the other so far it can solve its problem within its environment. As Greeks are entertained with religious ritual performances in their land so are Africans entertained with the ritual performances of African gods, the Igbo people inclusive. So Africans, Igbo people in particular, have various dramatic performances in their tradition. Those performances originated from African environment. They are very

much independent of external influences. Such performances are rituals, masquerades and masquerading, music and dance, wrestling, outing ceremonies and festivals. Nkala (1990:7) supports the existence of African traditional drama: "That traditional African Drama exists is not in question. The battle line according to him is whether what exists as African play can pass the test of euro-centric minds".

Ritual Performances

Ritual performances are the African people's means of expressing their relationships with their Maker by worshipping at the shrines of various deities. The performances involve praying with kola nuts. In doing this, the ritual performers thank God for keeping them alive, enabling them achieve many successes like begetting children, having good health, recording bumper harvests etc. In doing this, the performer invites various gods and various deities to eat kola nuts. After the blessing of the kola nuts, the performer breaks them and drops a lobe to the deity to eat first before each of the persons there could take his or hers. Okodo (2009:84 & 85) states that the ritual begins with a signification of purity and well being by administering the white clay.

The next performance is the slaughtering of animals which their blood is used in washing the sins of the people. The blood is sprinkled upon the idols of the deities. The blood atones for their sins and also quenches the thirst of the deities. One other thing the performer does is to sacrifice cooked food to the deities before everybody would eat anything. Palm wine as well is first of all sacrificed to the deities before anybody could taste it. It is this expression of the relationship between God and man that has been noted to be dramatic because it imitates the life of man. Rotimi (1981:77) has since noted this imitating characteristic:

Some African ritual ceremonies reveal instances of imitation either of an experience in life or of the behaviour patterns of some power. Others merely re-present certain powers without the mimetic impulse to recreate the ways and details of those powers.

Many other authorities agree with Rotimi (1981). They include Ogunbiyi (1981:3) that states: "The primitive root of that tradition must be sought in the numerous religious rituals" in various Nigerian communities. Enekwe (1981:151) is not left out among those that observe drama in traditional ritual performances. He describes it as; "Elsewhere, I argued against Echeruo's opinion that myth is the soul of drama, pointing out that drama does not have to evolve from myth, and that it contains elements of myth, the myth is not used for itself but rather, for social restructuring" so ritual performances are aspects of drama when the sacredness is removed,

that is entertainment, corrections of societal ills, education of the people and portrayal of the culture of the environment.

Mmanwu Display

Mmanwu, that is the masquerade, is one major aspect of Igbo traditional drama. The masquerade is ordinarily the representation of the ancestors in the human world. The masquerade operates as the ancestor and so has the protection of manipulating man as a source of entertainment, social controller, religious reflector etc. Nwabueze (2002:45) supports the above claim:

In the earliest period of Igbo history, the ancestors were consulted through divination, but later their physical presence became necessary when rituals were evolved. The need for physical representation of the ancestor created the necessity to devise ways of representing the physical presence of the ancestral spirit. It was this situation that led to the evolution of the masquerade as a dramatic character.

Nwabueze (2003:45) says that it is an aspect of Igbo drama in the sense that it displays various theatrical performances for the audience at the village square. The gigantic masquerades like *Ijele*, *Akwunechenyi*, *Agboghommo* and other gracious ones that do not whip people create attractive sights that people leave whatever they do to watch such masquerades. They are always in spectacular regalia and dance to music. The music could be played by other masquerades or human beings. Masquerades like this make their outings annually, especially during festivals. Masquerade performances are described as dramatic due to certain reasons. The masquerades have costumes as dramatists do and their performances are scheduled at certain dates, periods of time and venues, just as dramatists perform in theatres, masquerades perform at village squares or arenas specially marked out by the people. They have their own costume room and green room combined in *oda*. *Oda* is a make-shift shelter for housing the masquerade. It goes out of it and returns into it after the performance.

Amankulor (1982) and Ogunba (1978) in Nwabueze (2005:83) argue that the masquerade drama does not have enough lines to build up adequate plots of its plays. But it is pertinent to remark that many performances have the sing-and-refrain activities between some masquerades like *Atumma* or other singer masquerades on the one hand and their followers on the other. Even when there are not many lines for the masquerades' performances, the dramatic styles take the shapes of dancing to music sung and played for them. In addition, they mime a lot. The old mother masquerades demonstrate their

ages, while the maiden masquerades demonstrate pride and the sense of selectivity of husbands whereas the young male ones portray energy as their fathers control their household with jealous guards against the public glare at their wives.

Various scholars acknowledge the existence of masquerade dramatic performances. They include Ugonna (1981:495) that states that “the term *mmanwu*, is generally used in two different senses either as a general concept for all forms of plays involving masking or as sacred mask drama, in which traditionally concerned masked spirits perform various dramatic activities with speeches and dialogues, on an open air arena or stage”.

Further, Ugonna (1981:53) observes that “the development of *Mmanwu* drama among the Igbo further illustrates how widespread and well developed, in its own realistic way, is the indigenous African dramatic tradition”.

Amankulor (1986:53) not only acknowledges the existence of the masquerade drama of the Igbo people but also states that there are peculiarities to the masquerade drama against human drama. He elaborates thus:

The supernatural and mythic characters, in their own actions, must portray traits which are strange and not ostensibly human. Their patterns of speech, movement, and other behaviour are required to match that which can only be experienced in the nightmare or dream state rather than reproduce ritual human behaviour. Their guttural voice projections, side to side and front to back movements and uncanny behaviour are meant to accentuate their supernatural existence which their masks aptly demonstrate.

Anagudo-Agu (2008:460) studies the night masquerade and concludes that it is dramatic. He describes the night masquerade and its activities thus:

Take *Ayaka* for instance, composed of strong men armed with spears and medicine, they come out at night at about 11.00 p. m. and disappear again before dawn. They summersault in the air, climb trees, beat drums and sing in disguised voices from heights in order to create the impression of being air-borne ghosts.

Traditional Music and Dance

Another aspect of African Drama is traditional music and dance. This alone, that is without masquerades, constitutes dramatic performances. It starts with a group decision to own a dancing troupe. The decision is followed with efforts. The group chooses a dance

and enters into an agreement with the trainer group. Their payments are normally an agreed amount of money, a goat, a cock, some tubers of yam, palm wine, beer and mineral water as well as food. The trainer group arrives to teach the learning group within four days. If the groups live nearby, there would be no need for lodging. At the end of the training within the four days, the trainer group visits the learning group on invitations, to clarify any aspect the learners find difficult.

At the end of the training, the learners would conduct an outing ceremony. The members of the new dancing troupe would put on their costumes and make-up to beautify themselves. They normally perform to thrill their guests who would spray money on them. After the performance they would feed their guests and call for donations. Music and dance are dramatic because of the use of costumes, performing on the appointed date, time and venue. People find them thrilling, so they leave their engagements to watch the presentation of new music and dance. Apart from the presentation occasion, the group continues to perform on various public occasions like marriage ceremonies, opening new houses, birthday parties, death ceremonies etc.

Nkala (1990:13) accepts music and dance as aspects of drama. He exemplifies with *Ekpe* music and dance which uses choric groups, costumes, make-up and props in “a free-for-all-night of dancing and rehearsals for drummers, dancers, chorus leader and then choric groups”.

Hunting Performance

Hunting is an occupation in all parts of the world. People earn their living from it because people make money from the sales of their games. People pay high for particular wild animals they have appetites for. Hunting is not an easy thing because it involves high risks in which hunters lose their lives. Nneke (2011:15) observes same and defines a hunter “as that man who has courage, endurance, bravery, readiness as well as a creative mind of hunting animals in the forest using arms”. Hunters shoot their colleagues by mistake. In addition, ferocious wild animals like lions, hyenas etc. kill hunters. Apart from the occupational purpose of hunting, it has some aesthetic implications for it has artistic value. In the Igboland of Nigeria, hunters have dramatic performance known as *Egbenuoba* Performance. This comprises songs, miming and dance. Hunters sing songs as they assemble for expeditions. They perform fully on occasions which may be their feasts, community festivals or funeral rites of their members or great men who could be war heroes.

Some hunting chants are:

- {i} *Egbenuoba ebugo nwa Okoye o*
Onye dili obi
Na o ya-egbu anu

Ejemme ejeya
Translated:
Egbenuoba has killed the son of Okoye o
Whoever is patient
Will kill a game
Ejemme ejeya

This song is popular in Abatete, Idemili North Local Government Area, Anambra State of Nigeria. This song is used in encouraging hunters to be patient and work hard for they would eventually kill games. One may struggle for a long time without achieving any goal. In the song, hunters are told not despair.

(2) This is a dirge sung by a dead hunter's wife:

Di m Diegbenu
Di m eehee
Di m Diegbenu
Di m
Bia huru egbe
Di m ji egburu m anu
Di m Diegbenu Di m
Unu huru egbe?
Di m ji egburu m anu
Ka o di n'uko
Di m Digebenu
Di m
Igba m anaghi eri
Ihe mmadu
Chezoo onye ahu
Onye gburu oke anu
Fekwaa nru
Ka o goro nka
Ka anyi lotawa n'ulo.(Nneke, 2011:36-37).
Translated
My husband the hunter
My husband eehee
My husband
Come and see the gun
Used in killing games for me
My husband the hunter
My husband
Have you seen the gun?
On the rafter
My husband the hunter
My husband
My drum doesn't eat
Someone's thing
And forget the person
Who kills great animals
Paid tribute
To buy old age
Let's return to the house.

Hunters demonstrate dramatically as they chant. They dramatize how they shoot animals. Their chants are occasion-tagged. This can be observed from the two chants used above as examples. The hunting performance is always interesting and people troop to the venues hunters' performances to watch them.

Folklore Sessions

Igbo people enjoy folklore sessions at the end of the day's work, especially during the dry season when they have less work in the farm. Dry season is also good for rains would not disrupt the sessions. The sessions could be held in village squares or people's compounds. The best time for them is after supper. It is sweeter at moonlight night. Children attend their chores in order to be free when the time comes. When it is time, the earliest attendants would sing some signature tunes to inform those that had not arrived. The session is normally for children but it is not a taboo for adults. While children enjoy games of physical exertion, adults tell stories and guide them. Children enjoy games like Fire on the Mountain, relay races, *Akpankoro* Game, hide and seek game etc.

Okodo (2007:37) is of the view that folklore sessions are dramatic performances. He states it clearly well:

The coming together of people for games may not be in the night since they have no electricity in their local communities. But whenever the moon light is available everybody including the young and the old people male and female coverage on different places to play. Their play may include various dramatic performances.

Festivals

In Igboland, there are various traditional festivals and anniversaries of installations of traditional rulers. In a community, there would be up to four festivals that are celebrated annually. Festivals are mostly celebrated at the time of plenty. That is during the dry season when the people are yet to begin planting crops. The festivals are normally celebrated in honour of different deities.

The festivals have seasons and the chief priests of the deities and some other traditional authorities gather to schedule dates of the festivals. When the dates are announced, people began to make preparations of keeping the shrines of respective deities clean. They also repaint the idols and buy the items for the sacrifice. They would include fowls, goats or cows, kola nuts, food items and palm wine as the case may be. On the appointed date, the chief priest officiates at the shrine. He normally prays with kola nuts and beseeches God for good things through the mediator of the deities and ancestors in question. After offering prayers, he would drop a piece of kola nut to the deity before people would eat theirs. After, he would immolate the animal of sacrifice. The blood of the animal would be sprinkled on the idols. Later the meat of the animal would be used in cooking a meal. It is the eating of the food that brings the ritual to an end.

The next stage is the social one. Within the community, everybody is in the festive mood. The people normally cook delicious dishes and invite guests from different places. The hosts entertain their guests who offer gifts to them. The community is made colourful with whipping masquerades that chase people from place to place. People do not mind the fear of being whipped by the masquerades because they come from far and near to watch them.

Nwankwo (1977:87) not only accepts that festivals are dramatic but also catches the picture of the dramatic scene of Eze Nri's celebration of the anniversary of his installation:

The Eze Nri is the embodiment of his predecessors, with his offices dramatizing the history of Nri ritual, political and economic control over a large portion of Igboland. It is drama because of its representation through actors of persons and events. Content and plot are traditional usage, in the specialized palace scenery. Music and dance is divided by dialogue. This drama pre-existed the coming of European theatre".

Wrestling Competitions

Apart from the need for physical exercises, wrestling has some dramatic contributions to Igbo society. Wrestling at the community level has a season. It is done during the time of resting from farm work. Two villages normally compete by fielding in a contestant each. People come to watch wrestling contests at the village squares. The wrestlers normally put on costumes of shorts and bangles of animal skin on their hands.

On the appointed date, time and venue, spectators fill up the arena. There is always the wrestling music which keeps everybody company until the wrestling begins. Each of the wrestlers is led into the arena by his supporters. One of the wrestlers should challenge the other by presenting the open palm of his right hand. If his opponent shakes him, it means he had accepted the challenge. Then they will wrestle until one floors the other. The first person to floor the other becomes the winner. The winner is normally shown by raising his right hand up. The victorious group jubilates. The group lifts the winner shoulder high as its members move from place to place singing their victory. This dramatic performance is practised in various Igbo communities. Nwankwo (1977:87) admits it was organized in Nri: "In the past wrestling matches were organized every Eke in front of the palace to honour of the Eze's past communal ancestors", that is during the Aro festival. Achebe (1958.3) portrays vividly, the wrestling contest of Okonkwo and Amalinze the Cat in which the former defeated the latter in the tradition of Igbo people as

he exemplifies with Umuofia. And Emecheta (1980:70-74) shows how Nduka of Igbuno Village and Okei of Akpei Village wrestled. The latter floored the former. She catches the dramatic aspects: "The Igbuno dancers came and sang round the circle, they demonstrated their beautiful bodies and their agility". When the drums boomed, Nduka (one of the wrestlers) "jumped into the circle, ran fast round it, and dropped his cloak in the entire as a challenge to the Akpei people" (p.71).

Outing Ceremonies

Outing ceremonies of various individuals or groups that achieved some success are dramatic. The kinds of achievement that necessitate outing ceremonies include taking titles, age grade naming ceremonies and maidens outing ceremonies. Outing ceremonies are scheduled. The dates, time and venues are made known to invites. At the venues, the hosts make shades or set canopies, arrange seats, place public address system, and perform their shows. They keep music groups that make their occasion lively, if they do not have their own dancing troupe. They parade the arena with their supporters. In the case of the age grade, the immediate senior age grade to the new one names the new one. When the new age grade is named there is ovation. The next thing is to entertain guests with food and drinks. The guests, whether individuals or groups, donate some money to them. The social enjoyment could continue with the members of the age grade dancing to the traditional music being played for them. They portray their happiness in achieving their success after suffering for years to attain that level.

CONCLUSION

One has now seen that there are so many aspects of Igbo tradition that are very much dramatic. These aspects are dramatic in their own rights because they are all re-enactments of events that took place in the past and are performed periodically. The original people involved in the events have died and gone. These aspects are dramatic because those that performed them are mere actors who emulate the first performers of each event. The first performers were sacred and acted unplanned or unarranged. Some of the events were accidental because they saw the needs for their actions and would not have seen through the tunnel that those acts of theirs would for ever be remembered and re-enacted. The aspects are also dramatic because they have their lines and plots that are peculiar to themselves. The plots which may mostly involve miming are understood by the audience. In some cases like music and dance, the lines and plots are very much detailed as various songs referring to different human endeavours are referred to. It is in the same vein that the dance patterns change from one song to the other. Other dramatic qualities of these aspects of tradition are the preparations involved. The performances of these

aspects are not accidental. They are arranged. There are rehearsals or training of performers for immediate performances. Some of the performances are carried out on the bases of rehearsals done in the past and stored for future performances.

The performances are prepared with dates, periods of time scheduled and venues. The audience knows all these pieces of information and attends with the hope of watching the performances accordingly. At the venues, their rooms for changing costumes for example, traditional rulers at the anniversaries of their installations walk round the arena on more than one occasion and in each case they put on different regalia.

From all the dramatic qualities observed in the conclusion above, one strongly believes that Igbo people, nay Africans, have aspects of tradition that are dramatic. No matter how much Euro-centric mentality adversely described them as non-dramatic, the fact remains that there are aspects of African traditional drama.

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