

RUN Journal of Cultural Studies
Volume 2, 2018
ISSN: 2659-1383

Dramatic and Spiritual Discourse of Aleibiri Festival Masquerade Dance of Bayelsa People

Sunday Doutimiariye Abraye, PhD

&

Tam Gordon Azorbo, PhD

Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University,
Wilberforce Island, Nigeria

Abstract

Impersonation on stage is the work of an actor in plays or improvisational work. Mimesis comprising gesture, sound et cetera is an age-long tradition of performing stories convincingly to an audience. In Aleibiri federated community, the mask bearer is a dual personality of actor and spirit being. The annual Masquerade performance is a cleansing rite to appease the gods, usher in the New Year and renews the collective aspirations of the people. The annual celebration draws huge audience participation in performative capacities, being an avenue of spiritual healing for people with various forms of affliction believed to be caused by the gods. This paper, therefore, examines the mimetic art in traditional African performance, interrogates the mutual roles of the mask bearers, priests, and the role of the audience. Using qualitative analysis, the study provides insight into the socio-cultural and religious impact of this performer-audience experience. Findings indicate that the Aleibiri festival audience provides the driving force for spectatorship and performance on which the highly revered spiritual cleansing depends.

Key words: Festival, Performance, Audience, Masquerade, healing.

Introduction

Traditional African Festival drama is exemplified in indigenous African performances, which originate from the culture of the people, at the same time, it is a reflection of the occupations of the African people. These festival performances can take the form of songs, drama, choral renditions and moonlight games, and they project the thought pattern of the African man. The African people compose their events into dramatic art forms that they use to celebrate the many festivals that span the annual seasons of the people. Amankulor quoted in Anigala defines festival as "a periodic or occasional celebration, merry-making

or feast day of special significance in the cultural calendar of the celebrants" (17). Anigala further posits:

Festivals are regular features in traditional African societies. They derive their origin from the cultural and religious practices of the people. They are organised around nature forces, deities, divinities, supernatural events, myths and legends. The experience of the African-both spiritual and the physical-usually galvanize into art forms and festivals. These are usually performed at specific periods of the year to sustain the society spiritually and regulate its moral and social life (17).

It is a known fact that the dramatist draws his work material from the society, and the African society is a fertile ground for indigenous creative artists. Anigala avers that, "drama derives its life from the society. The activities from which it derives its source materials revolve around man's interaction with his environment."(18). The African's relationship with the natural and supernatural forces surrounding him forms the basis of his out-look in life. This is why the origin of African traditional drama is traced to the many religious rites, festivals and rituals that are occasioned by events like birth, death and marriage.

Duruaku compartmentalized some of the sources of African traditional festival drama into religious rituals, mime and festivals. He argues that African drama emerged from the belief of the African that he needs to appease the gods so as to have the gods on his side in his day-to-day endeavours. The Africans use dance, invocations, chants, poetry, etc to draw the attention of the gods to his plight (17). This position of Duruaku represents the status quo of the gods in Izon land. In the Izon worldview, the gods play a dominant role in their relationship with man. Before the advent of Christianity, the Izon man believed that the gods determined every misfortune and since they lived in riverine environments, their gods were mostly associated with water creatures. Their masks are representations of fishes and other water creatures like crocodiles. They believe in Mermaids, which they call *mammywaters*.

The society fires the imagination of the artiste who weaves his daily experiences into dramatic works. Krama, gives credence to this contention when he observes that "African traditional theatre is an expression of the people, institutions and experience of the African society" (3). Africans till today are looking for innovative forms of

worship through libations, invocations or performances. These performances can take the shape of masquerade dances, ritual dance performances or festivals. Clark, one of the champions of traditional drama, establishes a parallel between the origin of drama in Africa and the other continents. He argues that just as European drama developed from rites connected with Dionysus so also can Nigerian drama be traced to religious, magical and festival ceremonies. Clark asserts:

We have drawn extensively upon that well-worn handbook because we believe that as the roots of European drama go back to the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysius so are the origins of Nigerian drama likely to be found in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the Yoruba, the *egwugwu* and *mmo* masques of the Ibo, and the *Owu* and *Oru* water masquerades of the Ijaws (58).

Clark's use of *Owu* and *Oru* in the above quote encapsulates the Aleibiri man's belief in the magical powers of the masquerades. The *Owu* is the Izon word for masquerade while *Oru* means the gods. It is the magical powers the people believe that the masquerades are endowed with from gods of the rivers that draw them to the annual masquerade performances.

Ogunba also argues in the existence of drama in Africa and states that there are two dramatic forms in Africa. He propounded his theory of drama based on the concept of festival drama in 1966. He opines that "there are two types of theatre in Nigeria; the first type is indigenous to the country and derives from local traditional festivals. The second type is foreign and is mainly borrowed from Europe" (30). Among what he classified as the first type is the *Osu* in *Owu*, Ijebu. This he presents as a paradigm for Kings' Festivals in most West African societies. This argument is based on the premise that there is a loosely connected string of events that contain a historical military event that is mimed. Ogunba here again seems to be responding to Finnegan's assertion that there is no plot in African drama.

Dramatic forms in Africa evolved from different sources and are characterized by the dominant features of the activities they originated from. The dramatic forms that evolved from rituals cannot shed all the ritual features "inherent" in them. So is the case with the other sources of African drama. The African people celebrate different festivals to

mark different events in their lives and in their societies. The people's love for pleasure and entertainment is neatly built into their devotion and ecstasy during religious worship, so masquerades in the African society serve the dual purpose of meeting the religious needs of the people, as well as serving as a means of entertainment. It is these festival events that provide the materials from which the African dramatist crafts his work. Kofoworola notes:

Drama does not develop from the abstract. Its true essence lies in the dramatic actions, which have filled an artistic vacuum; drama is action, the action produced out of human worldviews. The action is an artistic reproduction of what is perceived in the mind...a people's Religion, myths, folklore, manners and attitudes (Anigala 18).

Since the understanding is that theatre or drama does not develop from the abstract, what provides material for dramatic work is the society from which it emerges.

The chief priest in the community represents the people of the community in his supplications to the god. The priest, in presenting anything to the gods, does so on behalf of all the citizens of the community; *mien ene awqu ama kon epere femene eyei ama ee. (Izon Language)* "This is what your children have brought for your consumption". This is done in the presence of the community people who form the audience and it is accepted by the people that the Chief priest is speaking for the whole community. Whatever pronouncement the priest makes to the gods on behalf of the community is binding on all the people, because he is their representative. No one will be able to extricate him or herself from such a statement as long as he or she is from that community. This brings to the fore the importance of the audience in such African festival performances. If the audience is not there present, the essence of any offering to the god is not valued. It is along these lines Ukala notes that the priest is a performer:

Role players in African rituals and festivals cannot be rightly called actors in this current Western sense. For example, they do not memorize and deliver already written lines; the roles they play are determined not by their talent and theatre training, but by their birth, status age or vocation; they do not put on their act,

which may be once a year, for money or fame, rather their performance is rooted in religion and worship. However, it provides entertainment as well as palpable social and material benefits for their communities (77).

These rituals and rites are believed to be efficacious in the religious parlance. It is interesting to note that the same processes are repeated in the market square as entertainment during festival occasions. The point here is that, to the African, there is only a tiny line between what is considered religious and what is seen as theatre. Krama agrees with the above and succinctly notes:

These theatrical forms are still tied to ceremonies of worship and in context of origin. These forms, which range from rites of passage and propitiation serve dual purposes, they serve the gods as well as entertain the community (11).

This is why the *Owu* dance (Masquerade dance) of the Aleibiri community is a religious dance that is used for the cleansing of the community at the beginning of the New Year, particularly January. However, it can still be used to entertain a visiting personality at any other time of the year. The important thing to note at this point is that the masquerades do not lose their efficacy even if they are used for social occasions. This is because what happens in the annual masquerade festival arena is different from what happens in the social arena. It is believed that the masquerades draw their efficacy from the ancestors and gods of the community during the annual festivals.

The African society links every happening to a spiritual source. Masquerade performances and other African festive performance are not considered as a game of pretence. Again Hagher posits:

The African traditional stage as a theatrical event was complete and self-sufficient to the outside observer but to the committed observer, its completeness was through spiritual powers willfully attributed to it by the audience, or, and performers. The experience of this type of theatre leads the audience and performers into a shared spiritual realm (8).

Masquerade performance and audience participation of the Aleibiri people

The festival drama in Aleibiri community started as an annual masquerade festival performance. Daunemughan of Aleibiri community who died at the age of 100 years in 2014 could not say exactly when the masquerade tradition started in the town. He, however, acknowledged the existence of the masquerade festival; which he claims he grew up to meet. According to Daunemughan, the festival paraded such masquerades as Angapele, Asapele, Gbapele, Oguberi, Agbalakoko and Amasinghan. The masquerade festival is celebrated at the beginning of the New Year and it is a cleansing rite that is carried out in the community to purge members of the community of their iniquities in the outgoing year.

The masquerade tradition is said to have started among the seaside settlers in Izon land known and referred to as the Tobu people. These communities, found along the seashore like Aghoro, Ogulagha, Age and Sokubulou, started practicing the masquerade festival long before the Aleibiri people. According to Daunemugha, these communities saw water creatures performing masked dances on the sand banks that surround their communities and it is these performances that were imitated in a bid to pacify the water creatures in times of trouble. This is so because the Izon man believes that, since his environment is made up of creeks and rivers, the forces that control the environment most likely live in the waters, hence their belief in "mammy-water" or Mermaids (water spirit) and other aquatic deities. It was from these seaside communities that the masquerade tradition was gradually passed on to other parts of Izon land.

Masquerade performances are believed to be the physical representations of the deities they represent. The masks are carved to specifications believed to have been shown to the owners of the individual masks or to dedicated members of the masquerade cult in the case of communally owned masks. In a particular masquerade festival session, about forty different masquerades could be on display but their scheduled appearances are, three masquerades in the morning and four masquerades in the evening.

Masquerades are also enacted in the community to ward off sicknesses like epidemics, or that the people believe are caused by the gods. The audience members who believe that the masquerades could cure these sicknesses often times lay down on the way of the masquerades and ask to be touched by the masquerade with the

machete the masquerade is carrying. Parents of sick children whose illnesses may be of different kinds would take their children to a masquerade to perform the ceremonial cleansing. This, they believe, would ward off the sicknesses. In Aleibiri community this act of healing seems to create a bond between the worshippers/visitors/audience and the masquerade performance. Some of the masquerades are considered by the masquerade cult as first class masquerades and people come from far and near to worship these first class masquerades like Angalape, Oguberi, Asapele, Gbapele, Agbalakoko and Amasinghan. Some of the masks are communally owned. These masks are centrally kept in the shrine of the major deity of the community, while others are owned by individuals in the community and are kept in their personal shrines. Some of the masks that are owned by the Aleibiri community are Angalapele, Asapele and Deinja, while masks like Boubouyo, Aseiperemor are owned by individuals.

Mughan of Aleibiri town in an interview with on the 16th of August 2008 explained that the major reason why masquerades performed in Aleibiri community was to cleanse the town of evil spirits. He contended that this is the more reason why the festival is celebrated at the beginning of the year. Both Mughan and Daunemughan agreed that some of the masquerades were, however, performed to entertain the audience. Some masquerades that perform solely to entertain are Afi, Asiaperemor, Kurupen-owuGbapele and Amasinghan. These masquerades do not carry whips nor do they carry any sharp or dangerous weapons like the machete that is carried by the big masquerades such as Angalapele, Oguberi et cetera. Another area of interest in the masquerade tradition is the individual vow making. An individual who has a problem can make a pledge to the masquerade and if the need of the person is realized it is assumed that the masquerade has fulfilled the person's request. Consequently, the masquerade is honoured with the item that was pledged. In like manner the whole community can also make a vow, which they redeem as at when due. The relationship shared by the masquerade and the worshipping audience is such that if the masquerade festival is not celebrated such audience members feel vulnerable as if their source of protection has been withdrawn from them until such a time that the festival is performed.

Role of Music in Aleibiri Masquerade Festival

Music according to the African worldview originated from different sources. Idolor supports this position when he postulates that music can be categorized into:

Divine and human sources. These sources may have been philosophized from the various functions and uses (religious and social) into which music has been subjected by man. Some schools of thought hold that the art of music was in existence before the emergence of man; like the music of the spheres; while others say it was divinely inspired, like the Igbegbe Akama-ghwe of Okpeland (1).

There is no realistic masquerade performance without music in Izon land. Music is celebrated by both the masquerades and the audience. The Izon man sees music as a wonderful gift from God with which they express themselves and capture the interest of the people around them.

Music plays a very important role in the masquerade tradition. The orchestra seems to be a main aspect of the masquerade performance. The orchestra provides the music that the mask dancers respond to. There are two types of audience in the masquerade performance arena; the participating audience who form part of the masquerade procession, and the one that is known as the general audience that do not normally come too close to the masquerades. However both types of audiences enjoy and partake in dancing to the rhythmic and scintillating music that the orchestra provides. The orchestra does not only provide music, it also serves as the means of communication in the arena. It is with musical beat that the lead drummer speaks to the masquerades. He tells them to come out to entertain the audience or go back to their seats. He tells them in drum language to be more aggressive or pursue the general audience and even instructs them to pay respect to elders in the arena. If the masquerade is coming too close to the orchestra stand or seems like harassing an elderly member of the audience, the lead drummer can instruct or control it with the beat to retreat. The sound goes thus; *Zin Zin Tugben*, meaning retreat.

And also, if the masquerade is considered not to be aggressive enough the lead drummer can signal the masquerade with the beat to be more aggressive. The drum for aggression goes thus: *Pagha Pagha kitua*, meaning more aggressive. The drummer recommends more

aggression whenever he feels that the masquerade is becoming weak and ineffective. So, the lead drummer and his talking drum serves as the means of communication with the masquerades in the performance arena. We must note that in the masquerade performance there are two types of talking drums relaying messages alternately in the arena. When the masquerades are dancing, it is the "Akuwa-ozu", a set of four drums arranged in front of a little fire, that serves as the talking drum but when the masquerades are not dancing the function of communicating with the audience passes on to the Opu-ozu, a single big drum. What is communicated at this point with drum beat is mostly the appellations of the elders seated in the masquerade arena with the elders acknowledging their titles as they are sung out in drum language.

Duration of the Masquerade Festival

The masquerade festival lasts for seven days but the seven days are divided into two sets of three days each, with a day in between serving as an intermission. The day of intermission is set aside by the community to enable the people to replenish their stock of foods since it is forbidden to go to the forest to collect foodstuff or any other thing during the period of the masquerade festival. In the morning of the first day of the masquerades' festival, and the subsequent days to come with the exception of the intermission day, the masquerades are divided into what the community terms, big and small. The masquerade grade that visits the town square in the morning hour from 8am to midday brandishes whips that they mercilessly used on anybody they see. The masquerades are worn or carried by youngsters who chase people about and dance to entertain the people at the same time until about 12 O'clock. This set of masquerades return to the shrine while the evening set replaces them. These are the big masquerades; followed by acolyte and small masquerades that form a support team replace on cue to replace the active set. The relationship between the audience and the masquerades in the morning session has its challenges because of the audience comprises mostly young people.

The evening masquerades are heralded by a set of processional dances that informs the community of the particular masquerade that will be featuring that evening. If it is Angalapele, the procession will warn the people of the peculiar characteristics of Angalapele and so is the case with every other masquerade of the day. This is necessary

because some of the masquerades are more violent in nature and parents have to be warned to keep their children away from the masquerades. There is a leader among the set of masquerades, guarded by people from the participating audience. The duty of this group of persons is to prevent the masquerade from becoming too violent or destructive. The original idea is for one person to help restrain the masquerade with a rope that is tied round the waist of the masquerade while others assist him in case, he feels like going to ease himself or the masquerade heads straight for the river. To prevent the masquerade from going into the river is very important because of the belief among the Izon people that the masks are representation of water spirits and as such if a mask bearer is allowed to go into water and the mask is submerged, the person bearing the mask will not come out again. In other words, the person will drown and his corpse will not be found, as he is believed to have gone to the world of the water spirits.

Financing of the Masquerade Festival

The masquerade festival is financed by the community from the money collected as fees from visitors who fish in the communally owned streams. It is complemented by fees from strangers who settle in the raffia tapping forest belonging to the community to tap raffia palms to produce gin. Fees are also collected from canoe carvers in the bush. At other times, where such tenement monies are not enough, the community tasks those who are interested in the festival to raise the needed fund. Sometimes, individuals who are interested donate money to augment sponsorship of the festival. The State government sometimes provides funding for some aspects of the festival like the Amasinghan love boat performance that heralds the beginning of the masquerade festival.

Costuming the Masquerade Festival

Costume is another important aspect of traditional African festival drama in performance. The costumes used by the various masks vary according to the notion initiated by their founding fathers. The names given to the masquerades and their colouring influence the type of costumes the masks used in Aleibiri. A mask like "Deinja" an adulteration of the English word Danger, is costumed in red while Angalapele, another mask, whose name literally means "cutting charcoal" is costumed in black. This is the case with very many other masks with regard to costumes. Another feature about costumes in the

masquerade performance is that the audience uses the costume to easily identify the particular masquerade that is approaching them. This quick identification of the particular masquerade is important to the audience as this help them to react appropriately by either taking to his heels or remaining where they are to welcome the masquerade. This is so because masquerades like Angapele, Oguberi and Deinja that are aggressive and carry machetes are very dangerous. If they catch up with an audience member who is not a member of the cult, there is likelihood that the person will go home with an injury. As such, if a masquerade is seen clothed in red or black, the best action for the audience member to take is to run for cover. But if the costume is white, most often the masquerade is a peaceful one and so audience member can relax and enjoy the entertainment provided by the masquerade.

Conclusion

Masquerading in Aleibiri community is an artistic experience with all the elements of a dramatic performance that entertains such that brings succour to the people willing to start a fresh year free of worries. The role-play of all participants, masquerade, priests and people arguably established the masquerade performance as a true African theatre. The audience-performer relationship is equally established highlighting the socio-cultural and religious implications of this relationship. It is also noted that the finances that are required for the festival are sourced from various areas such as contributions from members, donations from interested individuals and sometimes the Bayelsa State government. Special funding for the costumes is also important for inspiring audience reaction as they serve while differentiating the masquerades from a distance. This identification helps to caution the audience on which masquerade to avoid. Some of the big masquerades carry machetes, which they use freely on any unfortunate audience member they outrun. Besides entertaining the audience, Aleibiri community cleanses their society of the evil of the outgoing year. This belief is sustained in many societies, which has enabled the tradition to thrive over time in many African communities such as Aleibiri.

Works Cited

- Amankulor, Jas. "Festival Theatre in Traditional African Society: An Igbo Case Study". *Readings in African Humanities: Traditional and Modern Culture*, ed, E. Ihekweazu, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985. Print.
- Anderson G. Martha, and Peek M. Philip. *Ways of the Rivers: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*. South Sea International Press, Ltd. 2002. Print.
- Anigala, Austine. *Traditional African Festival Drama in Performance*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2006. Print.
- Benham, Martin, and Clive Wake. *African Theatre Today*. Bath, Pitman, 1976. Print.
- Clark, John Pepper. *The Ozidi Saga*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
- Clive, Kramallami. *African Traditional Theatre and Drama: Themes and Perspectives*. Port Harcourt: Akpokem International, 2006. Print.
- Duruaku, A.B.C. *A Handbook of Drama and Theatre*. Owerri: Colon Concepts Ltd., 1997. Print.
- Emiemokumo, Augustine. "Traditions of origin of Izon masks and Masquarade Festivals". *Abalabala: A Journal of Bayelsa State Council for Arts and Culture*, 2003. Vol. 1: 42-47. Print.
- Enekwe, Ossie Onuora. *Igbo Mask: The Oneness of Ritual Theatre*. Lagos: Department of Culture, Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, 1987. Print.
- Hagher, Iyorwuese. *The Kwagh-hir Theatre: A Metaphor of Resistance*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2003. Print.
- Munghan, Warri. Oral Interview. Aleibiri Town, 16th August 2008.
- Saleh Tony, Choo. "From Ritual To Theatre: The Example of The MadaGlu-Kyu (Dance Of Death) Performance" Lagos, Nigeria Magazine Vol.58 Nos.3 and 4. pp.14-26, 1990. Print.
- Schechner, Richard. "From Ritual to Theatre and Back", in *Ritual, Play and Performance* (eds), Richard Schechner and Mady Schuman. New York: Seabury Press, 1976. Print.