

Gender Ambiguity and Iconic Paradox in Ebiran Ekuechi *Facekuerade* Ritualization

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Abstract

Ritualization, with its interpretative semiotic connotations is a useful tool of discourse for explaining gender ambiguity and iconic paradox in Ekuechi celebration because of its analytical capacity. Ekuechi ritualization is considered essentially as a cultural action devoid of any serious religious semantics and syntax, and within the social milieu of the Ebira society. This paper uses ritual studies and semiotic theory to essentially interrogate gender role and the masking concept of Ekuechi festival performance. It also argues that from this standpoint of the need to rethink the Ekuechi event as an engaging ritualization capable of transforming social contexts, performance realities and as well as mediating structures of social systems.

Introduction

Ekuechi festival of the Ebira Tao of Kogi State in Nigeria is a 'ritualization' anchored on ancestral celebration and interaction which I have theorized elsewhere as *facekuerade* (2008: 284-308). The *facekuerade* concept evolved out of the fact that across cultures in Nigeria evidence abounds of masquerades that do not don masks but are expressly called masquerades. Reacting to the Ebira maskless stock, Husaini actually questions the application of the word masquerade 'since not all masqueraders use masks' (1991:148). The star masquerade actor at the Ekuechi festival, *Ekur'rahu* (Night Singing Masquerade), does not wear mask as well as *Akatapa* (Jesting Masquerade) and *Ekur'ahete* (Feet Stamping Masquerade). The *Ekur'echichi* (Rubbish Heap Masquerade) and *Ekur'Okise* (Soothsaying Masquerade) that perform during the day fully masked in Echane festival

of the Ebira also participate in Ekuechi maskless. The absence of masks notwithstanding, they are all still referred to as masquerades. This is because the mysticism that surrounds the masquerading art reinforces the image of a masquerade character without a mask. It is for these reasons I believe that the use of the term masquerade for a performer without a mask has to be revisited. This is precisely what informed my own term and concept of '*facekuerade*'. The words face, masquerade and Ekuechi, all contribute to the formation of the word Face – Eku – rade. The organizing key of the new word is Eku which accounts for why the word is not spelt as facekuerade.¹ *Facekuerade*, therefore, refers to a performance masquerade character without a mask. Even though his audience encounters him face to face, the spiritual essence of the masquerade character is not devalued. He is still revered and held in high esteem. Within the framework of Ekuechi 'masquerade' ensemble, all the participating 'masquerade' characters without masks essentially project the *facekuerade* essence. *Eku'rahu*, being the star actor of the Ekuechi event, forms the epicentre of the *facekuerade* concept.

Bell first articulated the need to rethink the concept of ritual and 'proposes that so-called ritual activities be removed from their isolated position as special paradigmatic acts and restored to the context of social activity in general' (1992: 7). Further, she states:

I propose a focus on 'ritualization' as a strategic *way* of acting and then turn to explore how and why this way of acting differentiates itself from other practices. When analyzed as ritualization, acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures (1992: 7-8).

By the above submission, Bell suggests that 'ritual' is not a thing, but 'ritualizing' is a practice with specific social and religious objectives. In other words, ritual is a scientific ordinance while ritualization is the artistic outcome to which majority can respond to. Ritualization, therefore, empowers us to examine the manner people ritualize rather than the product of their constructive process. Earlier, Geertz's 'emic and etic

¹ For detailed morphological analysis of the word formation and the theorization of the *facekuerade* concept, please see S.E. Ododo, '*Facekuerade*' Theatre: A Performance Model from the Playing and Technical Aesthetics of Ebira-Ekuechi Festival in Nigeria, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Ilorin: Department of the Performing Arts University of Ilorin, 2004: 29-31.

perspectives' of ritual pointed towards a similar direction of exploring the 'possibility of grasping the actor's point of view' (1966: 5). Shuji echoes Bell's position while problematizing the theories of symbol for investigation, and concludes that 'it is necessary to rethink the concept of rule in ritual action' (2000: 48). All of these arguments provide the platform on which 'ritualization' stands to concretely capture the performative essence of ritual process as a culturally strategic way of acting. Kreinath affirms these positions and introduces the semiotic concept of index as a valuable tool for understanding the 'complexity of the performance of ritual actions, and to focus on what ritual performers are actually doing with, in and through their respective actions' (2005: 104). He maintains further that this semiotic concept 'allows one to theorize the pragmatics of ritual action and to avoid introducing problems into the study of ritual that are extrinsic to them, such as semantics and syntax of religion and language' (2005:104). It is from this standpoint of rethinking that Ekuechi event is interrogated and theorized into *facekuerade* as an engaging ritualizing action capable of transforming events and performance realities and mediating structures of social systems.

Ritualization as a concept with its interpretative semiotic connotations, therefore, becomes a useful tool of discourse for explaining gender ambiguity and iconic paradox in Ekuechi celebration because of its analytical capacity. Ekuechi ritualization is consequently considered essentially as a cultural action devoid of any serious religious semantics and syntax, and within the social milieu of the Ebira society. This paper therefore essentially interrogates gender role and the masking concept of Ekuechi festival performance.

The Ekuechi festival ritualization entails the celebration of myth, legend, and traditional social events. The Ekuechi design itself is foregrounded in the chthonic because of the ancestors that manifest from 'the dead' as *facekuerades* to foster fraternal and spiritual relationship with 'the living' during the festival. It is observed annually by the Ebira to mark the end of the year and to usher in a new one. The festival performance is a two-day/night affair with a preceding eve (*Unehe*). Six key districts in Ebiraland (Okehi, Adavi, Eika, Okene, Okengwe, and Eganyi) are allotted different performance dates within the months of November to early January by the Chief Priest (*Ozumi*) of Masquerade temple (*Ireba eku*) through traditional divination process. Even though women have covert roles in Ekuechi performance, the overt and core roles are handled by men. It is essentially a male festival from which women are overtly excluded. The *facekuerade* performers (*Ekur'rahu*), who are also all male, are instituted on clannish basis as the ancestral harbingers of each clan.

The artistic performance is in three phases, with a procession between each phase that pays homage to elders and key figures in the society. Gifts ranging from money to material items (like clothing, food-stuff, and furniture) are often given to the performers (*Ekur'rahu*) during this period.

On the performance day, the first phase starts from an *inori* or shrine of the spirit cult, 'which is credited with special powers to protect the lives of those devoted to it' (Ehusani, 1991: 183). *Ori* (spirit cult) is also a mediating divinity between man and *Ohomorihi* (the Supreme God). *Ekur'rahus'* main purposes of coming to the shrine are to pray and to conjure and solicit for assistance from God, mother earth, anchor men and women with mystic powers. The procession to the *inori* from the 'emerging grove' of the *facekuerade* could last for thirty minutes or so, depending on the distance between the two spots and the agility of the custodian of the *facekuerade*. Usually, because of the multitude of people involved, the procession is usually prolonged.

On arrival at *Inori*, esoteric power is invoked and the channel of communication with God and unseen spiritual forces is established through ritual invocation. It is a ritualization that is directed at acquiring spiritual energy, achieving spiritual alignment with the ancestors and securing spiritual connection to the creative centre of the universe governed by the Muses. This exercise is an enabling adventure in self-attuning with the divine centre where the three spiritual entities of *Ohomorihi*, *Ori* and *Ete* (Mother Earth) commune, in order to perform effectively. As Low correctly observes:

[A]n invocation is like a ticket for a train: if you can't find the train, there isn't much point in having the ticket. Opening the Gates gets you to the doorstep of magical consciousness, but it is the invocation which gets you onto the train and propels you to the right place. It isn't something that 'just happens' unless you have a natural aptitude for the aspect of *consciousness* you are invoking (1998: 8).

Establishing communication linkage to the divine centre is therefore paramount because without it, the *facekuerade* performer may have a bad outing.

The ritualization proceeds by first securing absolute silence at the shrine. This is achieved by the striking of big metal gongs (*use*), which compel utter silence when struck because of their metaphysical strength. With this silence, certain propitiation rites are performed which mainly involve the breaking of kola nuts (*ireful*) and pouring of a libation of palm oil mixed with salt (*ohinae*) on a designated spot. These ritual substances

are elements that signify good life and fulfilled aspirations. This is followed by a long rendition of praise chants. These chants are rendered to eulogise God, mother earth, gods, elders, women, men, young and old, Ododo and Obaji (the forerunners of the *Ekú* masquerade cult). The whole chant is rendered in a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion. This goes on until the creative feat gathers momentum and crescendos, crystallizing into a stylized dance to which others join to mark the end of the praise chant. More songs are rendered for about one to two hours before the performance in the *inori* ends. Next begins an intermission procession that takes *Ekú'rahus* round the community to greet and sing fresh melodies to their supporters, before they retire to their respective platforms to commence the next phase of performance.

The second phase takes place on a booth stage made of wide platforms (*uta*) built high enough for all to see the singing *facekuerade* characters in action. This is where an all-night long performance with mammoth audience takes place. Virtuosity in singing and artistry in dancing are displayed. These are moments of artistic-splendour when the muses of creativity are believed to be in total control. At such moments, the *facekuerade* is seen ingeniously to combine several intricate dance steps in a most arresting manner that provokes the participant-audience to spontaneously join the performance with limitless proxemic navigations, and indicative of artistic freedom. Generally, *Ekú'rahus* render songs in praise of *Ohomorihi ovaraka hiduma, odogodo onuvoza ometu* (God Almighty, the most high), as well as worthy personalities to the individual musicians, especially those who have given them one level of assistance or the other. They also curse and vilify those they consider morally depraved, evil and obstructive to the progress of the society.

The final phase, which is the grand finale, takes place during the early hours of the morning in the market square, which is wide enough to accommodate all the singing *facekuerades* participating in the festival and their numerous coordinating supporters. Every *facekuerade* has a designated spot with expansive platforms for this important artistic exhibition. This is the climax of the performance where the performances of all the *facekuerades* are assessed and judged. Even though there is no appointed team of assessors, it is very easy for all present to reach a consensus on who the winner is, judging from what they see and hear around them in terms of artistry and aesthetics of performance.²

² Traditionally the ordinary audience is also competent to engage in skilled evaluative assessment, which explains why the choice of a winner is by general consensus.

Artistically, the grand finale is the most interesting of all the phases. In the morning, many of those who could not make it to the night event troop out to the market square. The atmosphere is usually charged with artistic rivalry, as bands of procession move from one end of the square to another. This is why it is not an event for teenagers and weaklings. Only highly provocative and energizing songs are arranged and rendered at this moment. All the groups attempt to out-sing one another because this is the decisive moment. When eventually a winner is acclaimed, the opponents' pride stands deflated. For the acclaimed winner, to be overjoyous can expectedly attract distasteful reaction from the opponents. At the end of the festival, many expectedly lose their voices for many days. What agitates one's mind though, is the obvious attempt by every group to out-do the other artistically for no prescribed prize. This competitive zeal is an index of the significance and premium the Ebira people place on pride, honour and personal integrity, as found in most other cultures. Among the Kalabari, for instance, 'the success or failure of the masker' causes 'pride or shame to his kin or house'. Also, in Nembe, 'an unsuccessful dancer would indeed shame his close kin' (1967: 150).

Taken together, the performative structure of the Ekuechi *facekuerade* event graphically presented above is a transformative ritualization that is value-based because the performative experience energizes the corporate psyche of the people with fresh spirit and vigour, making them ready to wade through the challenges of the New Year. This is how, in Monica Wilson's view, 'rituals reveal values at their deepest level...men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expressions is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed' (1969: 6), which ultimately pave the way to 'an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies' (1969: 6).

Ekuechi ritualization is a male-dominated event which women are forbidden to watch or participate in, but have covert roles that are tangential to the festive essence of Ekuechi. Their exclusion is essentially to prevent them from encountering maskless masquerades in their ancestral manifestations. This paper, therefore, interrogates the origin story of Ekuechi and the vital space women occupy in it as well as their iconic significance in the performance design of the festival. This effort is essentially to contribute on the contemporary discussion on women and gender ambiguity from the perspective of the Ebira.

Origin Traditions of Ekuechi

Generally in Africa, theories of autochthonous origins for masquerades are often propounded through oral traditions as Horton (1963: 94-114),

Adedeji (1969) and Njaka (1974) demonstrated in recording the myths that established the origin of masquerades in Kalabari, Yoruba and Igbo cultures in Nigeria respectively. The Ebira example is not too different.

There are few accounts of how the *Ekuechi* concept and tradition started. However, there are only minimal differences in these accounts. Generally, *Ireba Ekuechi* (masquerade cult) was believed to have been formed under the divine instruction of God to check the excesses of women, apart from serving as a medium of ancestral contact. Ebira myth has it that after creating man and woman as husband and wife, one day God sent for the man but he was too busy to honour the call. Instead, he requested his wife to heed God's call on his behalf. God gave her *irakwo* (an egg-like object that contains the secrets of life and has the capacity to manifest supernatural powers) for her husband. Having discovered its contents and fascinated by them, she concealed it in her uterus to gain time to decide on what to do. She later swallowed it without delivering it to her husband. She thereafter became quite powerful, performing supernatural feats like turning into any animal and changing back to human being. She could instantly grow wings to fly around in astral travels, and also was capable of all sorts of mysterious transformations. Her husband became envious of her powers. In sympathy, God enabled the husband to create the *Ekuechi* masquerade cult from which women membership is strongly discouraged, as a counterforce to the powers the women possess. Corroborating the notion of *Ekuechi* as a counterforce on witchcraft, the Adeika of Eika, the traditional Chief of Eika clan in Ebiraland, in an interview recorded by Shamoos Adeiza and transmitted on the Nigerian Television Authority, submits that:

Eika is the senior clan in Ebiraland and Ekuechi originated from them. The real origin of the festival is a traditional secret and I wonder whether I should reveal it. Well, well, I will... Ekuechi originated from necessity, for when witchcraft crept into Ebiraland it was the women who reigned supreme in the cruel craft and they cheated us men by it. Many people were being killed by them especially men. In retaliation, we men also set up the *Ekuechi* cult to dread the women. Women are made to believe that *Ekuechis* who perform during Ekuechi are ancestor spirits raised from the dead to come and admonish, warn and punish evildoers in their songs and ritual (1994).

The seriousness with which witches (*opochi*) are derided for their evil deeds further forced the Ebira society to invoke certain sanctions on witches. Picton records, for instance, that

[F]rom the point of view of individual women, open accusation of witchcraft did no-one any good at all: indeed the consequences, once upon a time, were terrible; for the convicted *opoci* would be hacked to pieces. I was given several accounts of this, all more or less as follows: 'If someone died saying that such-and-such a woman was the witch who was killing him or her, the elders would gather at *orere* (a village meeting place, used for masked performance, as well as for meetings of elders). The woman would be brought, and the elders would question her. They would ask if she was the one that killed the deceased, and she would answer 'no', the elders would ask her if there was ever a time she had quarrelled with the deceased; and if she answered 'yes' they would condemn her. Five *ekuecici* would come and remove their masks. The singing of everyone present would drown her cries of *oza v' eku ni*, masquerade are people. Four of the *ekuecici* would hold her, each taking a limb, while the fifth cut her into pieces with a cutlass. The body would be buried at the cross roads and a *Dracaena*-palm planted over the grave'. I have no idea how often this happened, nor do I know the last time (1997: 352).

My attempt to crosscheck the above story revealed that punishments were meted out to those confirmed to be witches with terrible conduct. Punishment ranged from banishment from the community to outright execution. The Ohindase, for instance, confirms in an interview that:

Any woman that performs anything that is too terrible like continuous death of prominent and promising individuals in a household is usually handed over to Eku to eliminate. First, a confirmation ritual is performed to ascertain that truly the suspected woman is guilty. Once certain, the elders invite her and hand her over to masquerades who then lead her to a far place for elimination. This practice served as a security mechanism to check the excessive powers of women through supernatural means³ (2003).

Ibrahim further corroborates this position by revealing that 'the masquerade executed recalcitrant women (witches)'. (2000: 12) This form of punishment is certainly a practice lost to civilization because my research could not establish any known such cases in the last six decades. This

³ Ohidanse of Okengwe is Mr. Stephen E. B. Bello. He is the Chief Priest of Okengwe District in Okene Local Government Area. The interview was conducted in 2003.

new development connotes that every society reinvents her cultural values and social system to be in tune with globally accepted social norms.

The tremendous power women wield and their feared capacity as witches has therefore been positioned as the key reasons why the menfolk instituted the masquerade art and logically exclude female overt participation in the night performance of *Ekur'rahu*. According to Ogunba,

in many African cultures women are not admitted into the secrets of the masking art; indeed, they are often the favourite target of masking and satirical ridicule, the assumption being that they live a more poetical life than their menfolk, have secret powers, are more of spirits than human beings, and therefore an object of fear or veneration (1978: 24).

A more encompassing conceptual thought on this phenomenon of female exclusion from masquerade cults resides in the African traditional understanding that women are feeble-minded and cannot keep secrets. Also, because

[T]hey are also mysterious and sometimes unclean. They cannot therefore approach these ancestral manifestations, whose character is diametrically opposed to their own. Any meeting between them would have adverse effects on both parties. Much harm would come to the women and masquerades would lose something of their virtue (Nzekwu, 1981: 132).

Women's association with witchcraft, misfortune, pollution and impurity is not peculiar to the Ebira alone. In Sierra Leone, the Ode-lay masked performers of Freetown 'protect the maskers from witches' by dusting their costumes with special medicinal substance (Nunley, 1987: 14). Also, the Franciscan monks of the Thirteenth Century considered women to be 'the head of sin, a weapon of the devil, mother of guilt, corruption of the ancient'. (1977: 31) In New Zealand, there is the general belief among the Maoris that when a woman 'enters the area in which a sacred boat is being built, the sea worthiness of the boat is affected and it cannot be launched. The presence of a profane being serves to remove the divine blessing'. (Caillouis, 1959: 42-45) Even though some cultures celebrate the menstrual cycle, many see it as an unclean aspect of women which has the ability to neutralize serious and sanctimonious ritual process.

The Ebira commemorate the menstrual cycle too but only as an authentication index for womanhood, as observed during rites of passage

for a young girl crossing over to womanhood. Because of its reproductive connotations, the Ebira see the first menstrual experience as what actually announces a female into womanhood and the resultant celebration in the rites of passage with prayers for sustenance and ultimate fruitful reproduction when the time is ripe. Thus a young girl of twelve years old who has gone through menstrual rites of passage qualifies to be called a woman, while an older female, of say thirty years old, who has not gone through the experience, is still regarded to be a girl and therefore denied certain benefits reserved for women in the society. Outside this perspective, the menstrual cycle has no association with divine matters among the Ebira and as such considered impervious to ritual processes. Sometimes, for certain ritual observances, one is strongly advised to avoid any carnal relationship with women no matter their state of purity. Many Ebira women are aware of this belief and the resultant injunctions, therefore, sometimes they take advantage of the situation to taunt men, test their strength of character and ability to resist seductive advances in such a sanctimonious state. All these make obvious women's dreaded capacity and underline why they are feared and distanced from sacred matters.

However, in some cultures, it has been established that women masking traditions exist. In Angola, for instance, there are the *Ganguela* female masquerades (*facekuerades*) that do not don masks. Their faces are sometimes painted but not executed to conceal or transform their identity. Some species of female masquerades is also to be found in Kabompo district of Zambia (Guimiot, 1998: 9). The Sande association masks offer a unique illustration of women as masked performers in Liberia and Sierra Leone by the Mende, Vai, Sherbro and Gola communities. (See d'Azevedo, 1973; Jedrej, 1976; Jedrej, 1986; Phillips, 1978) In Nigeria, apart from some conventional female masquerades like the popular Gelede, the Bereke of Ijumu in Kogi state, Sagore and Ilebi female masquerades of Oyo town in Oyo state, a somewhat masking ambivalence occurs in some cultures where women deny men access to women masquerade performances. Bettelheim records that among the Ejagham of Cross River State, masquerade is not all about masking but unmasked mystic powers that is equally potent as masked essence. The women of the Ekpa-Atu association in the area 'use their nakedness' to 'affect male potency in the same way that men's masquerade can affect women fertility' (Bettelheim, 1976: 49). This rare phenomenon occurs in the threatening naked dance in the night when anonymity does not depend on the wearing of mask. Relying on oral account by Atabo Oko, Amali writes that 'from the Yoruba Iludun-Ekiti of Ondo State comes the strange report of an existing women's sacred society which is not seen by men. When they

appear at night for performance, men run into hiding... behind their doors throughout the night' (1992: 59).

In modern times, women are beginning to pick up information here and there on the secrets of masquerading without being participants. However, men do not have as much knowledge of witchcraft as women have of masquerading art. Even though Osadebe, using the Igbo masquerade art as a reference point, has remarked that, 'since the women understand the basic background of the *mmanwu*, what was truly guarded, or rather upheld, was the women's lack of the right to publicly discuss the *mmanwu*' (1981: 107). But in Ebira society, it is not just the public right of discussion that is withdrawn, but also the right to the conscious quest for knowledge. The mysticism surrounding the *Ekú* (masquerade) cult is still intact; and previous attempts to neutralize it on religious account have always met with stiff mystic and physical opposition from custodians and a cross-section of Ebira people who believe strongly in the inviolability of such cultural practices.

According to oral and several written accounts (sourced from orality), Obaji and Ododo, sons of Itaaazi, were said to be the progenitors of *Ekú*. These were two brothers who constantly antagonized each other on account of age seniority. But the eldership was generally conceded to Obaji in most narrative accounts, and Ododo was not pleased. One day, Obaji took ill and was about to die. His brother, Ododo, said he would not like Obaji to be his elder here on earth and again maintain the same position in the great beyond (*Idaneku*). Ododo then pretended to take on his dying brother's identity by committing suicide. When Obaji died, Ododo put on the costumes of *Ekú* and the women were made to believe that Ododo rose from the dead. So, Obaji became the eldest of the living, while Ododo became the eldest of the dead in the world beyond. *Adega*, a prophesying masquerade character who specializes in the chants of historical events, myths and legends, gave a similar account in his 1983 annual Echane festival performance:

Ozi Ododo vana si ozi Obaji dosi mo nyi ehi ni
Ijo ozi Obaji vaso ka yo ozi Ododo
Ka ani ewun ma ze ada anini
Do ozi Ododo va se so ka ine hi ni
Do Ododo ka Obaji ana vo zoku yoni ehononi
Dore vana ve ozoku idaneku yo ni
Di Ododo wusu ni
Da hure Eku ni
Ihe gwo eta ani do Obaji oni re wu suni. (1983)

Ododo's son took Obaji's daughter for a concubine
When Obaji's daughter told Ododo's son of her father's illness,
Ododo's son went home to relay the information
Ododo in envy opined that Obaji who is his elder brother in the human
world
Will again become the eldest in the world beyond (*Idaneku*).
Therefore, Ododo passed on before Obaji.
His Children made *Ekuechi* out of him.
The third day, Obaji also passed on.⁴

Another account holds that Ododo did not actually commit suicide but that he only donned the masquerade costumes at his supposed funeral, as he was never publicly interred. But it is not clear how the mask character was later reconciled with Ododo's living identity. What remains constant however is the continued association of Ododo and Obaji with the *Ekuechi* phenomenon either as progenitors or reformers, and the fact that among other things, it was primarily instituted as a counterforce to witchcraft, the secret and terrifying domain of women.

The Iconography of Ekuechi Ritualization

Perhaps the key icon in most masquerade performances is the mask, (when masking is achieved through facial painting or distortion, the masking is not iconic; and *Ekuechi* does not even make up) but this is absent in *Ekuechi* ritualization. Paradoxically, it is the mnemonic value of the mask that contextualizes and defines *Ekuechi*. The *actual absence* and the *virtual presence* of the mask in *Ekuechi* are what Picton describes as a redefinition occasioned by 'common knowledge about events and performers' (1990a: 183). Another point to note is the absence of another vital icon in *Ekuechi* celebration – the female. The important space women occupy in Ebiran cosmology has been established in this paper. They are the repositories of *Irakwo* (witchcraft), an elemental equipoise to *Ekuechi* (masquerade). They also weave *Ekuechi*'s costume, clean the surrounding household and prepare the inner chamber in readiness to receive visiting ancestors; they prepare the feast with which the ancestors are hospitably received, yet their *presence* is denied because of the *absence* of the mask to prevent them from outright encounter with the *facekuerades* that are

⁴ The translation is mine. Versions of the Ododo and Obaji story as the founders of *Ekuechi* were recorded in N.A Office File in 1946, E. Lannert, 'Ekuechi of Igbirra,' *Nigeria Magazine* 80 (1964) 14-15, and Husaini (1991: 103).

maskless. Picton on another platform reasons that this ambivalence is designed to sustain the 'trickery, even deceit and certainly play-acting' involved in *Ekuechi* (masquerade) (1988: 66, 75) – 'a matter of dramatic pretence' that establishes overt (male) pretence in response to covert (female) reality' (1992: 80). Picton's position can be regarded as an argument of academic convenience for dramatic appropriation and scholarly discourse, otherwise, the *Ekuechi* phenomenon is not just a question of wilful suspension of disbelief for women but a force that commands unusual sensibility. The name alone can cause stampede and create commotion. Picton actually conveys this sense when he posits that 'the powers of *ekuechi* drive women indoors confining them physically and metaphysically' (1989: 88). He concludes in another related context, that 'evidently, whatever else *ekuechi* might be, it is a word with the power to move people' (1990b: 87). *Ekuechi*, both in concept and performance ritualization, is a mystique that converges and diverges crowd; it concentrates and disperses people, it flavours and frightens, it treats and threatens; on the whole, *Ekuechi* galvanizes and dispels action.

The critical question is; does the absence of the mask completely deny female involvement in *Ekuechi* ritualization? Just as the ancestral essence finds expression in *Ekuechi*'s performance in the absence of a major icon of the mask, so is the female essence foregrounded in unseen reality. Feminine presence and involvement in *Ekuechi* ritualization can be put into perspective via their participatory level in the ritual design and performance.

At an *inori*, *Ekuechi* starts the *Ekuechi* performance with a ritual invocation targeted at three main elemental entities for spiritual and creative support and sustenance. These are *Ohomorihi* (God Almighty), *Ete* (Mother Earth) and *Enyene* (Women of immense means and divine sight). These three entities are the critical ritual tripod on which the success of the festival or otherwise rests. God is seen in this context as the ultimate source of all creative ingenuity; Mother Earth is the source material for human creation and also home for the demised; Women with their wondrous spiritual strength have the ability to place or remove obstacles in/from the creative furnaces of the performers. As such, they must all be revered and invoked before the commencement of *Ekuechi* ritualizing proceedings. Of all the three, women's involvement, even though mainly convert, has tangible value that performers and audience can easily respond to. For instance, *Ekuechi* must, of necessity, involve certain classes of women in the performance design for spiritual support. Two groups of women suffice here:

(i) The *Epahi* (the cultus) who are invisible but a potent spiritual force that defends the life and creative ability of the performer from being

snuffed out or corrupted. At some difficult moments (when for instance an *Ekue'rahu* may not find his voice again or loses stability as a result of evil attack from the spiritual network of other competing *facekuerades*) this class of women is brought in physically on stage under the protective custody of some henchmen to resolve the crises. Besides such physical interventions, these women are constantly navigating the performance atmosphere, believed to be inhabited by witches and wizards with diabolic intentions, to ward off any impending danger that can impede the *Ekue'rahu's* performance. The presence of the witches is normally invisible to participants except to the men who also have special powers to discern spiritual entities. When Picton records that, 'strong women are there only you don't see them' (1988: 75), it is this level of female participation in the Ekuechi event that is being described.

(ii) The second class of women is the *Onokus*. *Onokus* are similar to *nnemmanwu* in the Igbo society (Onitsha and some Awka towns especially). *Nnemmanwu* are women inducted into masquerade participation. According to Osadebe (1981: 46), citing Henderson (1972: 351), *nnemmanwu* (mother of the incarnate dead) are women so inducted because they had raised successful sons. This is done only after they have passed menopause. In spite of this, 'these "mothers" were not permitted to embody or escort the ancestral figures, except to observe the preparation of the figures in the *okwulc mmuo* (secret room of the dead)'. (Henderson, 1972: 351) In Ebiraland, *onokus* are women born under very special circumstances. Whenever an *Onoku* is born, whether at home or at the maternity, a multitude of small hymenopteran insects such as soldier ants (*ijija*) or snakes appear mysteriously around the mother and the child to welcome her arrival. They do no harm to the baby, the mother or anyone for that matter. This sign indexes and symbolizes the birth of an *Onoku*. They are predestined and super-human. After some time, the insects disappear on their own volition. Later in life, at about age fifteen and above, proper initiation rites are performed for the *Onoku*.

Usually dressed in white attire with traditional accessories such as beads (neck and wrists), white and red feathers respectively from chicken and Violet Plantain Eater (fixed underneath their headscarf), beaded gourd, and hand fan, the *Onoku* gives spiritual support to masquerades by prescribing some sacrifices and rites to be observed to avert imminent danger. (1997e: 362-364)

The *Onokus* are often physically present throughout the Ekuechi proceedings, dancing and rendering praise chants of the performer to bolster the performance mood. This physicality with all its esoteric paraphernalia is also iconic of the energies of women and the underlining resource base that they provide for man's self-fulfilment. This notion explains why

every *Eku'rahu* pays glowing tributes to the coterie of women supporters, the female *cultus* and womanhood generally. It is risky for any *Eku'rahu* not to be at peace with these women because once they withdraw their effective protection, the performer is open to dangerous darts from opposing and competitive camps with no shield to ward off the darts. The gamut of spiritual network in Ekuechi ritualization is dense and palpable. The activities at this spiritual realm give vent to the physical nuances exhibited in the ritualizing process and the power base of women is the anchorage.

Another gender ambiguity and iconic paradox of female participation in the Ekuechi ritualization manifests in the super-numeric activities of *Akatapa facekuerades* who are conceived as co-wives to exchange feminine banters full of comic innuendoes, make jests and create fun but performed by men as women. The essence is to add pleasure and excitement to the performance design. Using a spider's cocoon as voice mediation with amplifying effect, *Akatapa facekuerades* explore the nagging and quarrelsome nature of most co-wives in African traditional setting to satirize erring individuals or group of people in the society. They move in groups to the homesteads of such people to vent out their invectives, which often include satirical banters on thieves, adulterers, fornicators, rapists, drunkards, corrupt politicians, the indolent, and other vices and topical issues in the society. In their hands, words are mightier than swords. As evident in most theatrical models, the bitterest pills (biting messages) are often coated with sweet emblems (comic elements) and administered in impacting dosage. This is the exact function that the *Akatapa's* performance serves in the Ekuechi design.

With all its comic values, *Akatapa's* performance appropriates womanhood to a universal refinement stable from which humanity can find redemption and release from all its foibles. In addition, that women are the nexus of the satirical strips, which are part of the core functional index of the Ekuechi ritualization for social control, further emphasizes the female gender as an important component of the Ekuechi ritualizing process.

At a more serious plane, the *Akatapa* actually engages in dialogue with the women separated from him by the closed doors. The woman's verbal contribution to this dialogue is very minimal as most affirmative responses are articulated in one beat palm claps. She speaks only when she wants to make a vow in return for the prophetic utterances of the *Akatapa* concerning her situation. The voice, though still mediated by the spider's cocoon, is suitably solemn. This engagement demonstrates that the *Akatapa* has the dual ability to entertain and prophesy; the two cardinal functions of the Ekuechi ritualization.

Another interesting dimension is that some heads of families come to engage the services of some of the *Akatapa facekuerades* to stage-manage ancestral injunction in order to resolve family impasses at home. These heads would have sufficiently briefed the *Akatapa* on the nature of the impasses with specific instructions on what to tell the woman at home behind closed doors. This approach is usually adopted to secure domestic harmony and tranquilize an offended or nagging wife at home. The *Akatapa* comes and calls the woman of the house who replies by clapping from her room. *Akatapa* gains her confidence by reviewing for her the prevailing situation in the family and proceeds to give her cautionary prescription for peace to ensue. To really ensure her full cooperation, she could be given a catalogue of good tidings God has in stock for the family if only she gives peace a chance. If she continues to harry, these fortunes would be denied. Most niggling wives are known to have reviewed their behaviour after such stage-managed interventions. For services rendered, *Akatapa* receives money both ways, from the man who solicited for the service and the wife who feels relieved. She opens her door slightly, while the *Akatapa* goes into hiding, and throws out her gift of money. When her door is shut back, *Akatapa* returns to collect the money.

Considered differently, women's invisible participation could be seen as an assigned role in the performative design of Ekuechi. As obtains in theatre practice, no one is expected to abandon his/her role regardless of what he/she thinks of it. To discard one's role in Ekuechi is to tilt the balance of cosmic harmony. Nevertheless, the Ekuechi event fortifies itself against such abandonment and also has the mechanism of reconstructing itself for continuity of performance. For instance, when a woman violates her role by taking a wrong cue to appear on the performance arena, the chthonic realm reacts with death strike – either instant death of the body and soul or 'death' to the woman's psychic system, disabling her from recounting what she has seen. However, what is compelling is the philosophy that hones the understanding and acceptance of the women folk that *Ekur'rahu*, and indeed other *facekuerade* characters are sacred. Women also know that their role does not include direct contact with these characters.

Conclusion

All considered, women's covert participation in Ekuechi ritualization remains a critical core in the performance design. Their energies and functional space in cultural matters in Ebiraland are vital quantities in the scale of balance that sustains equity and justice amongst the people.

Ekuechi, therefore, exudes a performative design that extols inherent communicative codes that make it accessible and delightful. The name 'Ekuechi' conjures for Ebira a sensibility of transportation and mingling with their ancestors; other iconographic deployment like gong strikes, vocal contortions, impulsive stampedes, waving and intimate association of some hand props (fans, brooms, and baskets), hand-clapping, feet-stamping, the songs, *akatapa's* invectives and banters, poetic invocation, chants, drumming, whistling, fluting, and horn trumpeting, all creatively integrate to establish an engaging aesthetic convention.

The ritualizing essence of Ekuechi is firmly rooted in the fact that it is not an enactment but a celebration of a living experience with an existence foregrounded in the chthonic. To enact is to imitate or recreate from a body of previous knowledge, while the 'celebration of a living experience' is an action that constantly draws from a people's cosmic view of life presenting a unique experience each time the action is produced. As a co-ordination of the temporal and spiritual essences, Ekuechi breathes a life of its own and maintains organic structure. Functionally, therefore, Ekuechi anticipates Schechner's definition of social and aesthetic drama (1988: 171-172). In both, transformation of participants and transformation of the consciousness of the audience are respectively achieved and substantiated because ritualization is a corporate cultural activity with a web of complex dynamics that are at once engaging and transformative. Relying on the above axiom, I perceive Ekuechi as a socio-aesthetic performative ritualization that can sustain contemporary theatre utility and the equilibrating force of women in a social fabric that must be carefully tailored.

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