

## The Playing Aesthetics of Ebiran Ekuechi *Facekuerade* Festival

Sunday Enessi Ododo

*Department of Creative Arts,  
University of Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria*

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### Abstract

This essay examines the playing aesthetic features in Ekuechi *facekuerade* festival of the Ebira of Kogi State in Nigeria. The festival is interrogated from the view of participant-audience with sustained interpretation of its performance form. Defining what constitutes 'playing' within African performance sensibilities, the dynamics of Ekuechi festival and its artistic qualities as theatrical product become the key ingredients used for examining the playing aesthetics of this festival. The essay identifies the following as playing aesthetics: the playing space, the arts of singing, dancing and dramatizing with other supernumerary actions. It concludes that these artistic elements stand out as the primary coordinating aesthetic forces of the performative design of the Ekuechi event.

### Introduction

*Facekuerade* is a notion that is conceptualised around the fact that across cultures in Nigeria, and indeed Africa, evidence abounds of masquerades that do not don masks but are still expressly called masquerades. Some examples can be found in Yorubaland, such as the *Oloolu* of Ibadan and *Jenju* of Abeokuta. Others that exist in Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria include *Okelekele* masquerade of Ekinrin-Ade in Kogi State; *Melemuku* masquerade of Oyo town, *Atupa* of Ilora, both of Oyo state; *Olukotun* masquerade of Ede, *Komenle* of Agba and *Akereburu* of Owu all in Osun state. Reacting to the Ebira maskless stock, Husaini (1991:148) actually questions the application of the word masquerade 'since not all masqueraders use masks.' The star masquerade performer at Ekuechi festival, *Ekur'rahu* (Night Singing

Masquerade), does not wear mask as well as *Akatapa* (Jester) and *Ekuechi* (feet stamping Masquerade). The *Ekuechi* (Rubbish Heap Masquerade) and *Ekuechi* (Soothsaying Masquerade) that perform during the day fully masked in Echane festival also participate in Ekuechi maskless. The absence of masks notwithstanding, they are all still referred to as masquerades. From all the foregoing, it can be conjectured that the concepts of mask in masquerading art transcends the physical object of concealment. Night (darkness), voice disguise, pseudonyms and fear have become potent masking factors that sometimes de-emphasise the use of proper mask, the root word for masquerades. 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 has informed my own term and concept of 'Facekuerade'. The words Face, Masquerade and Ekuechi, all contribute to the formation of the Face – Eku – rade. The organising keyword of the new word is Eku which accounts for why the word is not spelt as Facekuerade. *Facekuerade* therefore refers to a performance masquerade character without 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. The awe and mysticism that surrounds these unmasked beings as masquerades are the disguising elements of the piercing sound of *izeyin* (jingling small bells pleated on the chest of *Ekuechi*) and *ireha* (metal waist rattles worn by *Ekuechi*; see Figs. 1 and 2), guttural voice, tongue-twisted renditions, esoteric chants and weird sounds verbally produced by *Agadagidi* (stick-carrying masquerade) and some participant-audience. All these elements help to heighten the masking reality of the *facekuerade* characters. *Ekuechi*, being the star actor of the Ekuechi event, forms the epicentre of the *facekuerade* concept. *Ekuechi* is a composite actor who wears ancestral face; speaks, sings, dances and acts in that spirit. The respect that the custodian of *Ekuechi* attracts also signifies that his character as *Ekuechi* is taken far beyond his real self.

Because of the ancestral connotations, his utterances during the Ekuechi event are taken seriously because of the general caution people now take in approaching whatever they do, knowing that the ancestors have human agencies that can chastise them for their iniquities during Ekuechi performance. It is in this sense that the Ekuechi Festival has been perceived as a facekuerade performance.



Fig. 1: Izeyin: Small Jingling Bells

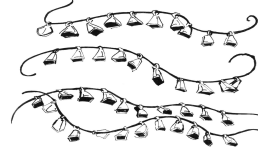


Fig. 2: Ireha: Metal Waist Rattles  
(gongs)

In Ebiraland of Kogi State of Nigeria Ekuechi is a very popular festival. Its popularity essentially derives from its organising capacity of numerous art forms of the Ebira and its engaging aesthetic import. As an annual celebration that comes up between November and early January, the festival is dedicated to venerate Ebira ancestors, take stock of the expiring year and usher in a new one. The high point of the festival is a musical performance involving Eku'rahu (a night maskless masquerade) that engages in meta-critical narration of philosophies as well as interpretation of cosmologies to humanize the society mainly in songs with choric essences.

The concern of this essay however is not the ritualistic context and the overall aesthetic bearing of Ekuechi, but rather an examination of the core playing aesthetic features of the performance design of the Ekuechi event.

Play and performance are words the Ebira use in an overlapping and inextricable manner. Performance can be equated to Aahe in Ebira. Aahe means 'play' or 'playing'. It is in aahe that other performative arts of singing, dancing and dramatizing are implied. When an Ebira says menere'ahe (I'm going to watch play) it could be any of the three performance arts because in each concept (music, dance or drama), the other two are expressively present; distinction is rarely made amongst them. It is in this stream of thought that Ebira's integrative concept of the performance idiom is to be located. Ahe (song) and Eze (dance) are key registers of aahe. In this sense, aahe is seen as performance on a larger scale or even music and drama (theatre). Ebira language observes word economy provoking polysemy (many layers of meaning). One word could mean two, three or more things depending on the context of usage. Echeruo tries to resolve a similar riddle within the Igbo cosmology by arguing that

The Igbo word for play and games is *egwu*. But *i-gwu-egwu* is to engage in play, *not* to participate in games. The word *egwu* also means frolic, entertainment, as in *egwu-na-ami*: literally, play and laughter. But although *egwu* is non-work, it always operates within the *context of performance*. Indeed, performance is the very definition of play. Hence, a performance of a

festival sequence or of a musical/dance arrangement is preeminently referred to as *egwu*... *Egwu* is performance: the combination in discrete but otherwise erratic sequences, of acts from disparate areas of experience, are made to belong together. (1994:151)

Amankulor (1989:45) adds that "*Okonko* or *Mmonwu* performances...are freely described as *egwu* (play)" but that the "context of play here embodies both the serious and the pleasurable and not-so-serious." The hallmark of all these submissions within the Igbo cultural milieu is that the word play encapsulates the conventions (rules) and the educative and entertainment values inherent in any performative experience.

The Yoruba and Hausa languages also express similar ideas. *Ere* is play of all sorts, while *iran* is viewing or spectating in Yoruba. In Hausa, *Wasa* is play, but its broader theatrical connotation as 'playing' is encapsulated in *Wasa kwaio kwaio*. These are also within the context of this discourse. The similarity these notions share with the Ebiraland concept of playing, as performance is apparent. *Aahe*, *egwu*, *ere* and *wasa* convey the same understanding in the four different cultural contexts. What is to be understood from this discovery is that the African idea of 'play' has a wider absorbent capacity for other performative arts. It is also a closer reflection of the context of Ekuechi performance. All of these add up to give scholarly vent to Turner's (1979:80-81) position that ethnographies should not only be read but performed to make the teaching and learning of anthropology more fun-filled. He concludes that "the "playing" of ethnography is genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise", which also further clarifies our position that "'play' has a wider absorbent capacity for other performative arts" above.

### **The Playing Aesthetics of Ekuechi**

Echeruo (1994:139) correctly observes that 'African festival drama' espouses 'the principle of expressionism as the vehicle for their dianoia'.<sup>1</sup> Ekuechi is not an exception. As an expressionist performance event, it thrives significantly on icons, codes and unspoken conventions. These are vehicles for meaning generation and signification.

What constitute playing aesthetics in this essay are essentially the artistic resources that project the performative refinement and dexterity of the player as he expresses his art within a tempo-spatial framework. In this context, the playing space, the arts of singing, dancing and dramatizing with other supernumerary actions are discussed as playing aesthetic tools of the Ekuechi *facekuerade* performance.

## Playing Space

A space is meaningless until a meaning is attached to it. The same space can invoke similar or different meaning for people of different cultural backgrounds because of cultural biases in space interpretation. The import of this submission is that space scarcely manifests ideas on its own other than that ascribed to it by the people. Space transforms by what people 'write' on it or the 'lore' people attach to it (Schechner 1988:155). Spatial entity therefore has direct relevance to human reality because it is human beings that generate ideas, which govern space interpretation and how the space must be related to. The theatre as a reflection of that reality is rooted in the organisation of space which is essentially the domain of scenographic conception. This is where the multidimensional meanings that space generates are ordered towards a goal, deploying production elements with proxemic significance.

Space occupies a vital position within the Ebira cosmology because it is an organising force for the people's socio-economic and spiritual engagements. It is a circus of several activities with a plenitude of meaning. Space is free and accessible to everyone, divinities, spirits, witches, wizards and other supernatural forces. Usually located at the heart of the town, spaces like crossroads, playgrounds, open-air markets, streets, motor parks, and village/town squares, even in their ordinariness, assume ritual and social significance during Ekuechi. Ekuechi being an overlapping years (a time when two years meet) event, social functions ranging from wedding ceremonies to fund raising activities are fixed to take place during this period and mostly at the public spaces mentioned above, to attract most indigenes of Ebira home. Here, a number of economic activities also take place; apart from normal trading transactions, goods and services are hawked on the streets to motor-parks (another mini market for travellers), playgrounds, village squares, etc.

The crossroads is of particular significance to the Ebira because some deities and spirits are believed to reside here and other ritual spaces. It is for this reason that sacrifices are often offered and dumped at the crossroads, market places, village squares and so on. Divinities being a mediating medium between man and God Almighty, all supplications are taken to where they are believed to inhabit. This thought also explains why all *Ekuechi* situate their *Ori* in any of these spaces. During Ekuechi night, all spiritual elements converge to partake in the event. Ebira folklore has it for instance that during one Ekuechi celebration, at the *Ori* performance of a particular *Ekuechi*, a participant leaned on a wall of one of the houses around only to feel the succulence of a female breast. This was interpreted to be the presence of a witch, which is generally invisible to ordinary eyes. So many other

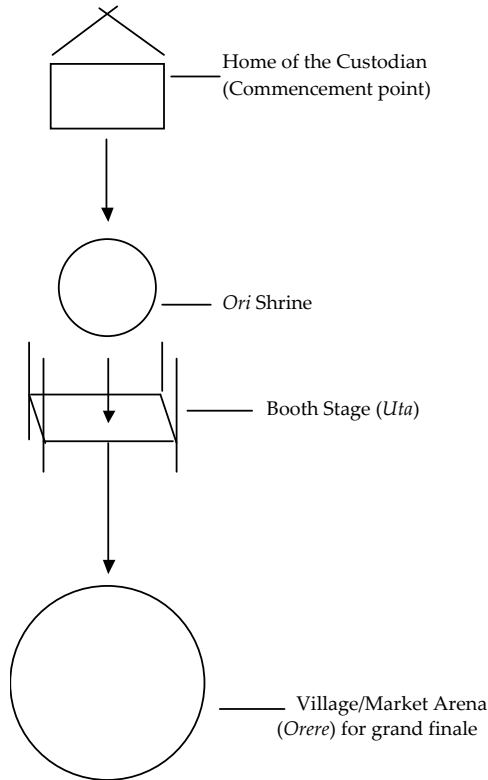
unseen forces also exist. These unseen elements and the living participants of Ekuechi have to contest and negotiate for this dreadful space. Some mysterious occurrences like sudden falls or a stampede during Ekuechi are sometimes attributed to the contest for space between these two elements. These contests further energise the intensity of performance of the Ekuechi event. This energised contest-space becomes the 'transitional gulf', that 'inchoate matrix of death and becoming'; the 'universal womb' Soyinka (1976:142-143) refers to. It is a similar gulf that the *Ekue'rahu* and other *facekuerade* personages go into, in mediation between the Ebira and the metaphysical forces, acting on behalf of the community. *Ekue'rahu* thus becomes the 'ritual actor' that shines to the community 'the residual energies from the protagonist's excursion into the realm of cosmic will which...charges the community with new strength for action' (Soyinka 1976:34) because he is the essence of this ritual performance. According to Soyinka,

The actor in ritual drama...prepares mentally and physically for his disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin, experiences the transitional inchoate matrix of death and being. Such an actor in the role of the protagonist becomes the unresisting mouthpiece of the community god, uttering sounds, which he barely comprehends, but which are reflections of the awesome glimpse of that transitional gulf, the seething cauldron of the dark world. (1976:30)

Soyinka's explanation suffices, for *Ekue'rahu* prepares laboriously both mentally and physically for the Ekuechi event. The great insights embodied in his songs that are often thought to transcend human capacity makes him the mouthpiece of the Ebira god. That multitude of people gather annually to listen to the *Ekue'rahu* and participate effectively in the highly engaging ritual process of the Ekuechi event signifies the support he gets to challenge the chthonic realm and return with remedies for human problems. Just as he goes through the ordeal of challenge, so is the multitude of people anxious and pitched between fears and hopes for the 'affirmation of the communal self' (Soyinka 1976:42). The festival performance thus becomes a potent force through which the Ebira concretise and apprehend these supernatural forces. Like Soyinka's ritual framework, Ekuechi is a theatre of celebration, cleansing and intensive dance sequences, which are sustained by esoteric language, episodic ordering of events, song and music as a veritable channel of 'emotional and moral interaction between performers and audience' (Obafemi 2001:147).

All these are some of the reasons why the Ebira worldview perceives the ritual spaces as unifying centres that bring a multitude of people together

within their physical and metaphysical realities. With this background, the aesthetics of space in Ekuechi *facekuerade* performance can be discussed from two main but related perspectives of procession and staging using Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3: Procession and Staging**

Essentially, the *Ekuechi* performance starts as a procession from the home of the custodian to the *Ori* shrine, where the first phase of the performance is held and dedicated to God, Mother earth, *Ori*, women, men, children, young and old. The *facekuerade* ensemble proceeds from here through the neighbourhood to the mini-square, where a booth stage is erected for arena staging to mark the second phase of performance. Another procession takes the ensemble to the main village/market square (*Orere*) for the grand finale after which they also recess home. The entire concept can be regarded as processional staging because the movement from one performance point to another is also realised in performance with its own creative attributes, which include dancing, singing, flamboyant air of exhibitionism and general

fanfare. Some situations exist where the home of the custodian, the *Inori* and the arena that houses the booth stage are located within the same vicinity. Achewuru Anavehi provides such example. For him, the three are all in Idoji Street of Okene town in Kogi State. His home is less than a quarter of a kilometre from *Ori Agana (Inori)*, while the arena (booth stage) is located at a major highway (that links Benin City) midpoint between the two. In other words, the *Ekurahu* leaves his home and bypasses the booth stage at the arena to the *Ori Agana*. After the *Inori* performance, he starts an intermission procession to the neighbourhood to pay homage to key people in the community and in turn receive gifts. He returns to the arena for the second phase of his performance at the end of which he also engages in another round of intermission procession to cover more areas before the grand finale at *inorere* i.e the *Ohu Bariki* (Bariki Central Market Square in Okene). He finally leads a recession home to Idoji after the grand finale.

In both the procession and arena staging, *Ekurahu* maintains close affinity with the participants who are constantly shifting grounds for one another for robust engagement with the *Ekurahu* at the centre of action. Performance space is mobile. There is no rigid formation and no one is completely aloof throughout the performance. This is why I have adopted the term participant-audience. Even those that perch on trees and stand on top of the surrounding storey houses to watch, seize auspicious moments to be part of the choric effects and dance too. Sometimes a number of people leave these positions to join the main performance arena. Everyone has something to do at any given point depending on their location at the performance arena. Those at the centre of action, i.e. on the booth stage and the immediate ring of people formed round it are ever active. Apart from the Anchor Men that remain active throughout, the pool is constantly refurbished with fresh artistic vigour as those who have had enough of participation recede for others to have their shares. The dynamics of the performance is so intense that all the participant-audience members often discover themselves in a different location other than the ones through which they joined the performance. They are so absorbed into the Ekuechi performance because it strikes a communal chord “which evokes for” them their “actual realities as well as fantasies: secular and sacred, temporal and spiritual”.

(Amankulor, 1989:56)

The entire setting, being an open-air arrangement, can accommodate over four thousand people. There is no formal scenic consideration; the surrounding houses and trees become the expansive scenic background with their own unique contours. A pleasant picture emerges as all these houses and trees are transformed into sitting and standing auditoria elements for

better viewing and participation. The picture that emerges is that of an amphitheatre neatly housing a multitude of people or a stadium with several layers of overhead sitting positions. This arrangement is also a natural answer to sightline problems (see Fig. 4).

This kind of theatre setting that has part of the audience watching (looking down) the performance on the booth stage from above (roof tops, upstairs and trees), and the participant-audience on the ground level watching (looking up) from below emphasises the godlike perspective of the key player (*Ekue'rahu*). This is reminiscent of how the Greek actor was perceived (Barnet, Burto, Ferris and Rabkin 2001:7). With the heavens above, *Ekue'rahu* is equilibrated by a similar action of watching from above (heavens) and below (earth). Taken together suggests the integration of the heavenly and earthly beings communing to enliven a shared spiritual experience. The arrangement further symbolises the Ebiran worldview of a society that operates under divine laws and human norms.



Fig. 4: *Ekue'rahu* Playing Setting

The equilibrated star actor in the midst of multitude of people as background conveys the value Ebiran places on human beings above materialism. This belief in the sacrosanctity of humanity is expressed in the name or word **Ozovehe** (the human person is life or man is the essence of humanity). George Ehusani in an Afro-Christian theorization that is also titled *Ozovehe* decries the erosion of humanism through exaggerated materialism and sub humanism. He concludes that 'Humanity needs a new set of values, capable

of turning the world around, and of restoring our spiritual, social and environmental equilibrium' (Ehusani 1991:2). It is also to be noted that a similar idea nurtured and sustained the Noh drama in Japan, starting from the 14th century with its anchorage on Buddhism that also preaches non-attachment to material things (Barnet et al 2001:165). Let us now examine the aesthetics of music and songs within the context of performance.

## **Music and Songs**

Music is an integral part of Ekuechi festival as found in most other African festivals. In fact, it is the pivot around which other activities in the festival revolve. Songs rendered during this festival are always very rich in entertainment, instructional and philosophical values. These songs touch numerous subject matters but they mainly explore social and political themes, while using historical hindsight and philosophical insights to navigate the traditional and moral sensibilities of Epira people. Some songs are satirical with the capacity to enforce social control. They chide and chastise known wrong doers in the society. The latitude of commentaries in these songs is not limited to local issues alone but also preoccupied with national and international matters. The satirical, pedagogical and philosophical nature of these songs projects the core essence of the festival, which focuses on moral uprightness, equity and social justice, aimed at social transformation. Drawing from a personal experience of Ovasarki's performance (an *Ekue'rahu*) in the late sixties, Picton observed that his songs covered the following topics:

invocation of support from 'his women', praise of his supporters and of his own artistry, ridicule of people with sexual difficulties (the impotent man, the woman 'with no hole', etc.), criticism of particular individuals (never named directly, though common knowledge informed by gossip usually seemed sufficient for people in the audience to identify whoever it was: liars, thieves, politicians abusing their position for personal gain, brothers who quarrelled, people who neglected their aged parents, harlots...), comment upon novel customs (changes in the bridewealth system, the practice of slaughtering a ram by Muslims at the birth of a child – after all the child cannot eat the ram!), word play, philosophical comment. (1988:68)

These are the common features of the thematic contents of *Ekue'rahu's* songs. The songs themselves, as I shall soon disclose,

consist of short verses, usually of three or four 'lines' (i.e. discrete units of poetic/melodic form, each often repeated before proceeding to the next), though towards the end of a series of songs each tends to have a two line

form with a snapper melody; these are the 'songs for walking with', and are sung by the gang of supporters of *eku* as it moves from one location to another. (Picton 1988:67)

In all these aesthetic considerations of songs, free-flowing poetry, proverbs, rhetorics and elevated thoughts serve as striking colours with which they are painted on canvas for us to appreciate and digest. In the process, history is recorded as contemporaneous issues attract commentary in a way similar to Finnegan's (1970:273) observation that 'songs can be used to report and comment on current affairs for political, for propaganda and to reflect and mould public opinion.' Apart from these, songs reflect on Ebiraland people's way of life. As found in most cultures, songs are veritable media through which the people relate to many aspects of life. Feelings and emotions are expressed through songs. These songs capture their hopes, aspirations, and bear testimonies to their history, aesthetics and morality. It can therefore be deduced that it is in songs that the theatrical potentials of the Ebiraland can be assessed. The delivery process of these songs, especially in the Ekuechi event, galvanizes intense theatrical actions.

Traditional drum sets are the basic musical instruments used in Eku'rahu performance. These can be grouped into Membranophone, Idiophone and Aerophone. The membranophonal instruments include, Ijabana or Obene (single headed bowl drum; Omele in Yoruba), Ugogoyin (Hour-glass talking drum), Okanga Obanyin/Oweyi (cylindrical skin covered talking drum, master/small) and Anuva (a skin-covered pot drum with earthenware base). It is usually played as part of the musical orchestra, but there are moments when only the Anuva is played for better appreciation. It is played with some metal rattles on fingers and wrists. Played at night, the sound is capable of reaching out to people within a radius of half a kilometre. It is also believed to have ritual and mystical imports. In the family of idiophones are to be found Ayiha (gourd rattles or sekere), Use (iron gong; it could be twin gong), Agidibo (wooden slit instrument) and Izeyin (jingling small bells).

The aerophone instruments used include Opanyin (horn trumpet) and Okokoro (wooden flute), which are occasionally blown. The entire musical orchestra produces good melodies that most times pulsate with intense and arresting rhythms.

## **Dance**

Apart from establishing the festive mood of the event, music is also used uniquely to provoke and challenge the singing *facekuerade* into an all-consuming dance feat by the master drummer, depending on how the

performance unfolds. When hard-hitting songs are rendered, for instance, and the participant-audience are incensed, the master drummer heightens the euphoria by rolling out electrifying rhythms that provides 'form' and 'ecstasy' that Mary Wigman predicates dance upon: 'without ecstasy there is no dance. Without form there is no dance' (1933:32). A process of rhythmic negotiation ensues between the drummers and the dancers. This could last for fifteen minutes, with each of them (dancers and drummers) drawing themselves 'beyond the limits' of their skills 'to underscore their superior knowledge' (Drewal 1992:7). The rhythmic patterns and tempo of the instruments are modulated and orchestrated with the clapping of hands by the participant-audience resulting in a vivacious excitement for the audience. This is when everybody present is at their best in dancing as the dance jig of the singing *facekuerade* instinctively stimulates others to express themselves in fanciful free style approximation of the dance being performed by the *Ekur'rahu*. The intimate conceptual and formal relationships that exist between music and dance in Africa is further exemplified by this performance format.

The dances present a picture of a choreographed or rehearsed dance. There could be as many as ten different movements variously expressed in groups and through individuals. A brief description of the dance done by the singing *facekuerade* suffices here. It involves the jerking of shoulders up and down, inward and outward, curving of the chest on which the jingling bells (*Izeyin*) are tied. Along with the twisting and wriggling of waist, with layers of metal rattles (*ireha*), the paraphernalia produce soft strident and hard melodious sounds respectively, but in strict rhythmical synchronisation with the drumming. It also involves stylised movements of the legs and hands, which are beautifully varied as the drumming dictates.

It is true that dance is not the main focus of *Ekur'rahu* performance, but it is significant to the total aesthetic package of the performance. How well an *Ekur'rahu* does in dance, as with other performative arts, depends largely on the artistic ingenuity and dexterity of the custodian. While some performances could be thin on dance, others could be very rich and flamboyant. Avereho Okene and Okevere Iduka, for instance, attained their popularity as *Ekur'rahu* in Ekuechi because of their distinguished and stylised dance art. Avereho even took his to an intriguing level of isolating about three to five *Izeyin* (small bells) and dance with them without any sound from the others. It was like isolating five strands of hair on one's head and dance with them without moving your head. It is therefore erroneous to assert that 'singing eku do no more than rhythmic shaking of the body' as Adinoyi-Ojo (1996:235) has done.

## Play-within-Play and Role-Playing

Another playing aesthetic element approximates play-within-play with role-playing that occurs during the intermission session of the Ekuechi performance when the participant-audience engages in a low scale re-enactment of the *Ekue'rahu's* playing. Roles are intuitively shared out to facilitate the enactment and critical discussion of the burning issues raised by the *facekuerade*.

## Aesthetic Supernumeraries

Outside the centre stage, a number of interesting activities and para-theatrical entertainment take place with their own unique aesthetic additives. I call them aesthetic supernumeraries because they are value-added dimension to the Ekuechi performance, being that they are not essentially part of the performance design but created to add pleasure and excitement. These activities happen at the outer ring of the performance arena without causing any embarrassing distraction from the main event.

Some of these activities involve the *Akatapa facekuerades*. They engage in dialogue and exchange of banter that are full of comic innuendoes. *Akatapa*, like the Igbo Onu-ka-mma masquerade, provides ample entertainment while also conveying pungent messages with satirical scurrility. In their hands, words are mightier than swords. They entertain those who have temporarily withdrawn from the performance arena to relax before they resume active participation again.

Another interesting dimension is that some people come to engage the services of some of the *Akatapa facekuerades* to stage-manage ancestral injunction of resolving a family impasse at home. They would have sufficiently briefed the *Akatapa* on the impasse with specific instructions on what to tell the woman at home behind closed doors. This approach is usually adopted to put a nagging wife in check. The *Akatapa* comes and calls the woman of the house who replies by clapping from her locked up room. *Akatapa* gains her confidence by reviewing for her the prevailing situation in the family and proceeds to caution her against nagging her husband. To really intimidate or subdue her, she could be told for instance that she stands to lose a fortune God has arranged to bless the family with in the new season if she continues to nag. Most nagging wives are known to have reviewed their behaviour after such stage-managed interventions. For services rendered, *Akatapa* receives money both ways, from the man and the wife who slightly opens her door, 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.

## Conclusion

I have in this essay examined the playing aesthetic features in Ekuechi *facekuerade* festival of the Ebira of Kogi State in Nigeria, using theatrical dynamics as the analytical tools. The core aesthetic elements identified are the playing space, music and songs, dance, play-within-play and role-playing, and aesthetic supernumeraries. These are useful keynotes in the interrogation and reinvention of traditional theatrical pieces for modern performance design. This new design should extol the important space the participant-audience occupies in Ekuechi, which is a significant highpoint in this essay; the audience as part of performance design and a critical adjunct to the unveiling of the plot structure.

Viewed altogether, the aesthetic contents of *Ekue'rahu* performance are artistically vibrant and theatrically compelling. Even though *Ekue'rahu* is the chief actor, all the other members that constitute the participant-audience are part of the Ekuechi cast with vital roles that give the performance its overall aesthetic outlook. However, music, songs, dance, movements, costume and props stand out as the primary coordinating aesthetic forces of the performative realities of the Ekuechi event.

## Note

1. The word, *dianoia*, is not original with Echeruo, in fact, the word, and the associated terms, *mythos* and *mimesis*, were the standard stock of archetypal criticism in the 60's and early 70's, and was initiated in its modern usage by Northrop Frye. The term had great currency in Plato and the Greeks; and later in Christian theological and exegetical thinking. The best source for further information on 'dianoia' as used in the context of this study is Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Essentially, the term is used to distinguish *MYTHOS* (the story as narrative = plot) from *DIANOIA* (the thinking behind the narrative, the spirit/heart of the matter = theme) and *MIMESIS* (representation/presentation, including the apparent imitation or copying of action). It is in this sense that Echeruo argues about *mimesis* in Africa and distinguishes it from other forms (e.g. modern Western) of artistic imitation. He contends that ritual and drama are not synonymous, although there are dramatic features in rituals, just as there are ritual elements in drama.

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