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Eurocentric(ism) and Folk(ism) in Edegborode Festival Performance.¹

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Abstract

This article explores the Edegborode Annual Festival Performance of Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria, as one of the dramatic performances in Africa, with the possibility of defining the festival as a contemporary folk drama using Sam Ukala's *Folkism eight (8) Laws of Aesthetic Response*. Adopting traditional African performances into modern African folk drama is a challenge. I adopt the qualitative methods of research in collecting and analysing data on the festival. My aim is to examine and measure the number of Eurocentric dramatic elements like plot, character(isation), music, song, performance arena (stage), and the audience in the Edegborode Annual Festival Performance, and how these aesthetics fit into modern African folk drama using Folkism. The study shows that the Edegborode festival performance provides entertainment to its audience. Also, its ability to attract local tourists within Delta State adds economic value to community development. Most importantly, when subjected to the aesthetics of Folkism, the Edegborode annual festival is viable source material for modern folk drama.

Introduction

The Akata Benue Fishing Festival, the Eyo Festival of Lagos, the Argungun Fishing Festival in northern Nigeria, the Calabar Carnival, the Igbo New Yam Festival, the Osun Osogbo Festival of the Osun people, the Egungun Festival in

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several Yoruba communities, the Tigbotigboti Facekuerade² performance of the Okwejeba people of Delta State, and many others are a few of the modern and traditional festivals in Nigeria. The spectacles presented in each of these festival performances, the entertainment, and the economic value are exciting. Despite the many benefits these festivals present, some theatre scholars argue that they are still in their ritual form and until the element of mimetics becomes obvious, they do not qualify to be called drama, therefore, dousing the desire in some playwrights to recreate these festivals into modern Nigerian folk drama. The question African scholars are asking is, what makes a real drama? If these festival performances do not qualify as drama, what can be done to make them qualify? Does the eight laws propounded by Sam Ukala's in his theory of folkism efficient in recreating African festival performances into modern folk drama? My examination of the Edegborode Annual Festival as having the potential of a modern African folk drama using Eurocentric(ism) and Folk(ism) is based on these eight laws.

Drama is a unique tool to explore and with which to express human feelings. It is an essential form of behaviour in all cultures and fundamental human activity. Eurocentrists believe that drama is human's imitation of the action of their fellow human. It is the imitation of an action that is complete. While this Eurocentric idea of drama has changed slightly over the years, scholars still discuss its tenets when talking about what makes the best drama. Though, known today in Africa, Asia, and other continents of the world as Eurocentric, it has major elements on which drama of any race and style could be built (only when the Eurocentric idea is not adhered to as sacrosanct). Although the western idea of drama does not totally fit into African festival performances, some of its elements are still relevant. If drama means the elegant imitation of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation of the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital elements in such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime, then, there is drama in plenty of Nigerian traditional festival performances (Clark, 60-62).

From the African world view, imitation is strictly a re-enactment of their past experiences- in times of war or an encounter with some supernatural beings. According to Austin Anigala, African festival performances are community oriented. This means that the traditional African performance is a communal activity- it is created from the beliefs and customs of the people. The themes of the performance and the production element are dependent on the festival being celebrated (Anigala, 21). The meaning of Anigala's statement is that since performances in Africa are created from the communal life of the Africans, it is an

² Maskless characters conceived and perceived as masquerades (see Sunday Ododo (2008)

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imitation of the way of life of Africans who have passed on. These performances though evolve from rituals containing dramatic elements capable of future development into full-bodied folk drama. This ideology has made some scholars like Ruth Finnegan (1970) advocate for their transition from their ritualistic state to a more dramatic form. Relevant elements or features suggested by Eurocentric scholars to be the basics of creating any dramatic action from the society are plot, theme, character, dialogue, music/-rhythm, and spectacle. The audience, dance, mime, magic, and the performance venue, are also very important elements in traditional African performances. Suspense, conflict, and conflict resolution as well as exposition are elements that must be present in the plot. When these elements are present in any performance, traditional or otherwise, such performance meets the requirement of what constitutes a true drama-folk drama.

Edegborode Community/Annual Festival Performance

Edegborode is one of the several Okpe villages in Sapele Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The people of Edegborode are farmers, fishermen, and traders. They are like all other Okpe people in every respect; the only distinguishing factor is the fact that “they have a set of annual festivals, ranging from youth play to very complicated adult performance, which is celebrated separately from all other Okpe general festivals” (Kenneth Eni, 2011: 26). The festival has the attention of the ‘Iben’, the river god, with the eldest man in the community as its chief priest.

A few months before the annual festival, an organising committee is set up. The committee coordinates the activity of the performance as well as the assurance of the safety of the participants. Like any theatre production, the rehearsal period is of utmost importance to the success of the performances. The rehearsals take place in a sacred grove. At the rehearsal stage, only initiates are allowed to see and take part. The rehearsal period is a rigorous one that stretches from two to three months or more as the case may be.

The presentation follows the rehearsals. The presentation takes place in a public arena, and it stretches from morning to evening. The morning is the introductory part of the festival. The afternoon is the middle while the evening is the conclusion of the performance. The performance usually takes place on the 25th of December with a repeat performance a week later on the 1st of January. These dates are chosen to align with the festive occasions of Christmas and New Year’s day when many indigenes usually resident outside the community would have travelled home, therefore ensuring a greater participation and more audience. The morning performance features the Agbakara (Crocodile) and the Oloda (Shark) Masquerades. All are symbols of the gods that live in the water. This set of masquerades dramatizes the struggle for food between the Oloda and the Agbakara in the water. After a heavy downpour, the father Oloda comes out with his family to look for food. After feeding on the smaller fish in the river, Oloda

prepares to return home. The conflict begins at this point. The Agbakara who is also hungry comes out with his family. Because there is not much food remaining in the water for him and his family, he decides to feed on Oloda and his family. A fight ensues and by chance, Oloda manages to escape, with his family, from the clench of the Agbakara. Oloda is a very aggressive masquerade. Because of the nature of Oloda to always care for and protect his wife and children, no one dares to go near any of the Oloda masquerades.

The second part of the performance is the dramatisation of forces that live in the water, which in agreement with other land forces, bestow on man potent effects to fight evil forces. This aspect of the performance is performed with songs. Eloda (Eloda plural; Oloda, singular) Masquerade come out of the grove, led by Obo (chief priest). They move to the Agwele (shrine) where the chief priest pours libation to the gods imploring them to guide the performance to a successful ending. Before this, the Masquerade moves to the performing arena. It is an initiate that fences the performing area with fresh palm leaves. This is to prevent any unclean person from crossing the performance area and to ward off evil charms. An unclean person means a man who slept with a woman the previous night or a woman who is under her menstrual period. First, Obo dances around blowing the white Orhe (native chalk) he is holding while reciting incantations. The audience, being part of the performance, sings:

Damu-Urhoró

Ijoro-ebome'e

Damu-Urhoró

"I will spur the giver of wealth and children to action with my ritual song"

As the audience sings this song, the masquerades take their turn to dance and entertain the audience. At this juncture, Obo returns to the stage, this time singing more fiercely:

Solo: Avbaiforahamero' bara

All: Never.

Solo: Ebesihio' tore merobara-a

All: Utiro...

Solo: you can never see blood when you cut a snail

All; Never

Solo: You can never get blood when you pound the earth

All: Never.

As this song is in progress, Obo and one of the masquerades demonstrate the potency of traditional medicine. Obo begins by asking for bottles from the audience which he breaks on a mat. Obo then lies on the broken bottle with his belly while the masquerades jump on his back, dancing violently without Obo

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sustaining any injury. Following the display of his medical dexterity, Obo and his apprentice take their exit while the masquerades follow in the order of father, mother, and son.

It is pertinent to note that Obo is also the choric leader or master singer for the festival. After the afternoon performance, there is an interlude. At this point, men who wore the mask in their youth come out to dance, showing off their dancing skills and mimicking how they used to do it. The intervals also serve as a break period in which visitors and guests exchange pleasantries and refreshments.

In the evening, another story is dramatized. It is about wicked villagers and their inhuman treatment of an old man. This play begins with the entrance of an old man who goes to the elders of a village begging them to allow him to fall a tree, which is very close to the community so that he can use it to carve a canoe for his fishing occupation. The elders refuse to inform the stranger that Okuyaye, the dreaded fairy, lives on the tree. They accept money, drinks, and customary kola nuts from the old man before permitting him to go ahead and cut the tree. On the first attempt, the fairy Okuyaye brutalizes him. He reports the encounter with Okuyaye to the elders who dismiss his story and ask him to go ahead with felling the tree. On his second and third attempts, the same thing happens to him. Frustrated, he goes back to the elders, asking for a refund of his money but the elders refuse and drive him away. He leaves dejected but not before placing a curse on the village. The old man's curse becomes effective later when Okuyaye becomes uncontrollable, flogging and chasing the village's women on their way to the farm. As the village becomes unsafe for them, they abandon the village to look for a new settlement. The entire three-act play is presented amid dialogue with songs accompanied by the music produced by traditional drums.

Eurocentric(ism), Folk(ism) and the Edegborode Annual Festival Performance

From the above, Edegborode Annual Festival performance has elements of modern dramatic composition. These elements which include the existence of plot, characters, costume, music/ dance, performance arena, and audience, would make the possibility of recreating the performance into modern African Folk Drama. Below, I examine each dramatic element/ aesthetics of the festival performance beginning with the plot.

The plot is the structure and shaping of events in an orderly arrangement to elicit some response from the audience. The plot is also known as the story or the various happenings in the play. Plot refers to the action. Theodore Hatlen in Emeka Nwabueze (2003: 23) opines that: Plot varied from the tightly knit, simple structure of Greek tragedy to the loose episodes of medieval drama, bonded together by theme, to the complicated action of the Elizabethans, to the naturalist attempt to avoid all semblance of structure in slice-of-life plays, and finally to the contemporary experiments in expressionistic, absurd and epic drama that have

little regard for disciplined construction. Based on this premise that the plot may be disjointed and not necessarily in a linear format, Austine Anigala states that story that forms the plot of African festival performances is focused on the life experiences of the people. In the presentation of these life experiences, the story may or may not unfold in a linear progression but may be infused with other stories or actions which may seem unrelated, yet they are effectively incorporated to achieve the desired dramatic effect (Anigala, 2006: 29). The plot structure or story in the Edegborode annual festival falls within the category described by Anigala. The stories that have been told during the festival are three. The struggle between Agbakara and Oloda, the display of the potency of traditional medicine, and the legendary story surrounding an old man, the Okuyaye tree, and the villagers. Although the stories presented are different, the story plot structure rightly falls into the Eurocentric definition of drama as having a beginning middle, and end (logos, prologos, and denouement). The beginning act which takes place in the morning is the introductory act. The middle act takes place in the afternoon while the third act which takes place in the evening is the concluding act or the denouement. Like in the early Grecian festival in Athens, where the attic trilogies were presented, the interlude between each act is taken as recreation and refreshment in which visitors make friends and are entertained while the actors change into new costumes in preparation for the next act. This festival under discussion has a similar feature. At the end of every act or performance, there is room for the actors to change into new costumes, especially after the afternoon act. The interlude which proceeds the last act also serves as a break period in which visitors and guests exchange pleasantries and refreshments.

The performance is dramatic, there was exposition, and the story was organised with a beginning, middle, and end. There is also conflict which was the internal or external struggle between the opposing forces, ideas, or interests that created the dramatic tension or suspense which was a feeling of uncertainty as to the outcome, used to build interest and excitement on the part of the festival audience. In the first act, Oloda comes out with his family to look for food. After feeding on the smaller fishes in the river, Oloda prepares to return home. It is at this point the conflict begins. Agbakara who is also hungry comes out and is ready to feed on Oloda. A fight ensues and Oloda escapes from the grip of Agbakara, with his family.

Act two starts when the masquerade comes out of the grove, led by Obo (chief priest). They move to the Agwele (shrine) where the chief priest pours libation to the gods imploring them to guide the performance to a successful ending. Before this, the Masquerade moves to the performing arena to perform. Obo and one of the masquerades demonstrate the potency of traditional medicine. This is the middle of the performance. Audience suspense comes in when Obo begins by asking for bottles from the audience which he breaks on a mat, performing

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violently on top of the bottles without being injured. The end follows the display of his prowess. Obo and his apprentice exit while the masquerades follow.

Act three begins with the entrance of an old man who goes to the elders of a village begging them to allow him to cut a tree, which is very close to the community, so that he can use it to carve a canoe for his fishing occupation. The elders refuse to inform the stranger that Okuyaye, the dreaded fairy, lives in the tree. They accept money, drinks, and the customary kola nuts from the old man and grant him permission to cut the tree. This creates suspense in the audience as they wonder what would happen to the old man. The suspense continues to the moment when Okuyaye brutalises him for attempting to destroy his place of dwelling. The middle of the performance also includes the elder's refusal to refund to the stranger the money he paid for the tree. The old man's curse on the land and Okuyaye's uncontrolled flogging and chasing of the women in the community from their farms to the moment the entire community abandoned their original settlement climax the third act

Further, the performance has individual character with distinctive traits. The characters are both humans and spirits. The character's imitative ability especially those imitating the spirits convince the audience that a larger-than-life character has been presented. The characters imitate the actions of others which they do not perform in real life. The masquerade in the Edegborode Annual Festival performance is a dramatic character. Their imitative art of impersonation of others, presumably 'pretending' to be spirits is the very heart of a dramatic mystery. For character realisation, Anigala and Adelugba assert that the element of possession is needed. Clarks calls the element of possession a state of transformation. Anigala further explains the state of transformation to be: The personality exchange that takes place during the performance. Thus, the performer loses every trace of his original self and is completely enveloped in his new role where he is lost to the world around him but is conscious of the rules of the game (Clark, 1981: 123; Anigala, 2006: 32). This perfectly fits into the Edegborode festival performance.

There are several characters represented in the festival. They include Agbakara and Oloda. These two water creatures are symbolic of gods that inhabit the water which nurtures the main occupation of the Edegborode people. Another spirit being is Okuyaye. Except for Okuyaye, the spirit beings are represented by different masquerades and their children. Masquerades of the performance are specifically selected because of their strength to mimic the spirit creatures they represent. Agbakara seems to have more strength. The individuals playing these spirit roles are expected to be clean and free of blood guilt and sexual immorality. Other human characters are also present in the performance. Characters like Obo (usually the oldest man in the community. If he is not physically fit at the time of the performance, someone else preferably the community chief priest plays the role), and his apprentice, usually a young boy,

and the stranger, usually a middle-aged man. Various elders and community people are also included among the characters.

The costumes used in the performance are elaborate. The masquerades carry head masks that are the totem of the god or gods they represent. These totems are highly conventionalised and are easily recognised by members of the audience. Since the masquerades are believed to have come from the water, beauty is one of their attributes. The costumes are made of light cotton or silk material with more heavy velveteen material tucked in from the waist down to the knee. Their legs are painted white which connotes invisibility with traditional Akwa tied to the legs to produce a jingling sound as the masquerades move about. To be able to distinguish masquerades in terms of the father, mother, and child, colour is properly manipulated. The males are costumed in grey, connoting old age; the females are costumed in green which connotes fertility; while the child is costumed in yellow which connotes youthfulness.

Music and dance are also major elements in the annual festival performance. Women, girls, and youth of the community make up the choric force and they are an integral part of the performance. These improve the communication level of the performance and are a major source of entertainment for the audience. Dances usually follow swiftly at the raise of a song. Thus, using their body, dance reproduces the passions and actions of the people and expresses their collective emotion to teach a religious rite and to entertain. The music and dances also foster the enactment of the legendary Okuyaye story. Most of the songs, besides, serving as entertainment and enjoyment for the audience, elevate the spiritual strength of the performer into performing extraordinarily. It is a medium for transporting the performer through his thought to another world where he meets face to face with higher beings. At the high point of the masquerade dance, the drummers dare not miss the rhythm of the drum or else he receives strokes of the cane by the dancing masquerade. From the very first act to the last there is the presence of music and dance. This entertains and enables members of the audience to appreciate the performance. The first music that introduces the performance reminds the audience of the need to be generous and that abundant blessings including wealth and children await the generous ones. The second music helps the audience to appreciate traditional medicine, to trust in them, and to use them for protection and cure. Thus, the music, songs, and dances were significant in the festival performance. Also, a set of drums was used to produce music during the festival. They include: Agba, Izui-Igede (mother drum), Omi-Igede (child drum or possibly minor drum), Abese, and Ekpe. All the dance movements and the gestures in the performance are dedicated to the Odje-Igede. A good display of dancing skill is crowned with the women cheering "I----Iye".

The performance arena is a prominent aspect contributing to the success of the performance. There is no raised stage on which the festival performance takes

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place. Both actors and audience remain on the same plane. The performance starts from the Efi and moves down to the main performance ground. A semi-circle is formed with the drummers completing the circle. The circle-like arena has an opening (at least two) in between the audience where performers go in and out of the arena. However, as the performer moves, the audience move, and so also the arena. No seats are provided, but individuals are allowed to bring seats for themselves from their various houses. However, the elders are placed close to the drummers and a canopy is raised to cover them from the heat of the December sun.

Prominently, the Edegborode festival has an active participative audience. Every member of the audience gives the actors support by clapping their hands in appreciation for the complete actualization of the performance. Some members of the audience participate by joining in the choral songs and dancing when the performance moves them. There are also passive audience members who stop only at the level of imaginative participation. There are also the critical members of the audience who have watched several groups perform at various times. This set of audience compares the ongoing performance with past performances they have watched. While some keep their judgment to themselves, others share theirs. Therefore, the performer spends a lot of time preparing for the show. This is in harmony with Amankulor quoted in Anigala that the audience is so central to traditional performances that without them so much time would not be spent by communities in the artistic preparation phase of the festivals (Anigala, 2006: 27).

In the quest to link the divide between classical drama, theatre, and African folk play and performances, Sam Ukala came up with the theory of Folkism. Ukala's theory is hinged on the premise of basing literary plays on the history and customs of native African people, as well as performing them in harmony with the aesthetics of African folktale, symphony, and presentation for easy identification by the host culture. To accomplish this aim, Ukala postulates eight laws which are: 1. the law of opening; 2. the law of joint performance; 3. the law of creativity, free enactment, and responsibility; 4. the law of judgment; 5. the law of protest against suspense; 6. the law of expression of the emotions; 7. the law of ego projection; and 8. the law of closing.

Much like African folk plays and performances (Edegborode Annual Festival), Ukala's first law would technically remind the audience of the story about to be told beginning with a song. Because the festival audience already knows the song, they are excited and moved to join in singing and dancing. Thus, this technique arrests the audience's attention. In his second law of joint performance, rehearsed members of the performance crew are stationed in between the audience invited to the show. Ukala calls this group Members of Audience (MOA). They act out their roles from among the original audience asking and answering questions posed by the other actors performing. To stop the linear presentation of traditional Eurocentric performance where directors and actors would have to

follow sacrosanct what is in the script, Ukala presents creativity, free enactment, and responsibility as an aesthetic law which gives everyone involved in the performance from the director to the actors the freedom to creatively add their interpretation and experience to better the performance. Laws 4 to 7, Ukala hands over criticism to the audience. The audience judges whether the performance is good or bad and then gives their verdict as the performance is on. In explaining these laws, he says that they

concern(s) the audience's evaluation of the narrator's abilities and the character's conduct; the audience's questions and comments; their free expression of emotions of grief, pleasure, scorn, fear, and sympathy; and their idiosyncratic interjections aimed at attracting attention to themselves as potential narrators respectively (Ukala, 1993: 25).

As for the eighth law, the narrator whom most times had introduced the performance also closes it in the same way. It is a technique to bring out the moral lessons of the story as is the case in traditional folktales. Ukala drew this performance aesthetics from Nigerian traditional folk performances like the Edegborode festival (folk) performance.

Conclusion

My ethnographic study of the Edegborode festival performance reveals that African theatre (performance) is the combination of the dual elements of celebration and participation involving the coming together of many aspects of the theatre such as music, poetry, dance, acting, miming, masking as well as singing. It is therefore evident from what I have discussed in this article that the content and conflict dramatized in the Edegborode festival are apt, rich, and varied in content. The discussion also shows that Eurocentric dramatic elements and conventions abound in the performance. It is also possible to develop this festival drama into a more dramatic folk play using the Folkism aesthetics forms.

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